

# Understanding Indirect Request in Persian Language: Salience and Context Effects

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## Abstract

This study is going to consider the factors vital for comprehension. The Graded Salience Hypothesis is the framework for this study. Persian indirect requests will be tested and the relation between different contexts, familiarity level and reading times will be studied. At first, figurative and literal contexts were prepared. A software for measuring reading time in self-paced reading experiments was designed. In the first pretest, participants defined the familiarity of expressions. The second pretest aimed to confirm the sameness of context bias. In the first part of the main test, participants read each indirect request in a figurative context and reading times were recorded. In the second part, participants read each indirect request in a literal context and reading times were recorded. After comparing the reading times, it was concluded that Graded Salience Hypothesis predictions were not confirmed and sometimes, context was a more important factor than salience. Therefore, instead of a parallel process, a semi-serial process was witnessed. Therefore, among Persian Indirect requests, salient meaning in familiar and less familiar figurative expres-

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sions was figurative meaning. In unfamiliar indirect requests, the salient meaning was figurative and literal meaning. Therefore, literal meaning was not salient meaning and this finding challenges the modular-based views.

**Keywords:** figurative language, Graded Salience Hypothesis, indirect request, cognitive linguistics, Giora.

## Introduction

In figurative language, we say something and we mean something else; for example, we say: "it is cold", yet this can be either a statement of the fact or a request. Therefore, it conveys different things in different contexts. For a long time, scientists wondered whether context may affect comprehension and if so, when and how it affects it (Coulson & Kutas, 1998). Research about figurative and literal language has focused on figurative language. Some people assume that the meaning activated initially is the contextually incompatible literal meaning, and adjustment to contextual information occurs later on, and figurative meaning becomes available (Modular View). Others like Bates (1999), Bates and Mac Whinney (1989) and Mac Whinney (1987) believe that context effects are primary and figurative meaning is accessed directly (Direct Access View). Yet some researchers like Giora (2003, p.7) believe that "more salient meanings—coded meanings foremost on our mind due to conventionality, frequency, familiarity, or prototypicality—are accessed faster than and reach sufficient levels of activation before less salient ones" (Graded Salience Hypothesis).

There are disagreements on the time when context comes into play as well. Researchers like Bates and Mac Whinney (1989) suggest that context has a primary effect (Direct Access View). Others like Fodor (1983) assume that context does not have a primary effect (Modular View). Nevertheless, little general work has been conducted on this topic to investigate the factors that have a role in comprehension. Knowledge of what the speaker does not mean would be interesting and important. There is a bulk of research on language comprehension in the literature, including the one proposing the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora, 1997). In a similar vein, the present study aimed to consider the Graded Salience Hypothesis and examine the salience of indirect requests in Persian language.

Such research can define the factors vital in language comprehension to be focused on in linguistic studies. Moreover, the results can be used in second language acquisition, translation, discourse analysis, ambiguity resolution, aesthetic novelty, artificial intelligence and language impairment (Erfaniyan Qon-suli & Sharifi, forthcoming). Therefore, findings of such a study can be used practically.

The Graded Salience Hypothesis uses salience for resolving the conflicts of ideas about literal and figurative language. For most such theorists, provided that there is enough exposure and individual experience, any information can become foremost on our mind to the extent that it resists contextual infor-

mation (see Zajonc, 2000). Therefore, we can suggest possible extensions and implications of the various findings to the quotidian life.

In this respect, the present study aims at answering the following questions:

1. How different are reading times for unfamiliar indirect requests, the space after the indirect request, and the first word of the next sentence (spillover effects), in both figurative and literal contexts?
2. How different are reading times for less familiar indirect requests, the space after the indirect request, and the first word of the next sentence (spillover effects), in both figurative and literal contexts?
3. How different are reading times for familiar indirect requests, the space after the indirect request, and the first word of the next sentence (spillover effects), in both figurative and literal contexts?

The goal of this research, then, is to draw comparisons between two contexts (figurative, literal), 3 classes of indirect requests (familiar vs. unfamiliar vs. less familiar) and reading times (RTs) (long, short, equal).

## Literature Review

The Graded Saliency Hypothesis was first introduced by Giora (1997). She believed that in language comprehension, saliency plays the most important role. She also maintained that salient meanings are conventional, frequent, familiar, or prototype meanings and they are processed first (Giora, 2003). Even rich contexts cannot stop the activation of salient meaning (ibid).

More support for the graded saliency hypothesis comes from Gibbs (1982). His findings showed that compositional meaning in indirect requests take longer to comprehend than their request meaning and context has no role. This proves the predictions of the graded saliency hypothesis. Gibbs (1983) indicated that “participants read conventional indirect requests (Gibbs et al., 1993) faster than the same utterances used literally as questions” (p. 524). In addition, Gibbs (1994) suggested that “the meaning of conventional indirect requests were processed without literal meaning analysis” (p. 89-90).

Peleg et al. (2008) tested the Graded Saliency Hypothesis through two experiments. Experiment 1 showed that the place of target word is important for the operation of a process, whose effects mask lexical effects in final position. Experiment 2 showed that even in the presence of context, lexical access is not changed: it means that salient meanings are activated abruptly and context does not interfere.

Similarly, Erfaniyan Qonsuli et al. (2014) attempted to examine the Graded Saliency hypothesis in Persian language figurative expressions. It was concluded that the salient meaning of familiar and less familiar indirect requests, ironies, and metaphors is their figurative meaning. The salient meaning of unfamiliar indirect requests and ironies was both figurative and literal meaning; however, for unfamiliar metaphors, salient meaning was figurative meaning at first, but after the passage of time, the literal meaning was also activated.

It seems that there is not much work on Graded Salience Hypothesis in indirect requests, and no research has been conducted on languages other than English and Hebrew. Moreover, most of the research on figurative language seems to be limited to other types of figurative language (metaphor, irony and idiom). In the few works on indirect requests, it appears that the results support Graded Salience Hypothesis. Therefore, in this research, we try to challenge Graded Salience Hypothesis in indirect requests in Persian language.

## Theoretical Framework

In this section, the graded salience hypothesis will be discussed. We start this section by providing an overview of figurative meaning/literal meaning. Afterwards, the Graded Salience Hypothesis, the predictions derived from this hypothesis, and different hypotheses related to it will be introduced.

### Literal Meaning/Figurative Meaning

Literal meaning has been defined as linguistic meaning, i.e., as nonfigurative, coded, fully compositional, context-invariant, explicit, and truth conditional meaning (Katz, 1977, cited in Ariel, 2002). Figurative meaning is seen as the opposite side, i.e., as extra linguistic, indirect, inferred, noncompositional, context-dependent, and cancelable meaning (Ariel, 2002).

### Graded Salience Hypothesis

According to the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora, 1997), salient meaning is a foremost meaning and it is the stored meaning in the mind. Giora (2003) believes that:

Stored information is superior to unstored information such as novel information or information inferable from context: while salient information is highly accessible, nonsalient information requires strongly supportive contextual information to become as accessible as salient information. Salience is not an either-or no notion, however. Rather, it admits degrees. The more frequent, familiar, conventional, or prototypical/stereotypical the information in the mind of the individual or in a certain linguistic community, the more salient it is in that mind or among the community members. (p. 89-90)

### Graded Salience Hypothesis Predictions

The Graded Salience Hypothesis has predictions regarding the first phase and the second phase of comprehension. It predicts that in the first phase, salient meaning is activated, regardless of the context. In the second phase, if the salient meaning is in harmony with the context, it will be remained; otherwise, it will be suppressed (Giora, 2003).

### **Familiarity**

Some researchers believe that familiar meaning will be activated quicker (Blasko & Connine, 1993; Gernsbacher, 1984; Hintzman & Curran, 1994). Zajonc (2000) claims that exposure and experience makes a meaning more foremost in our mind. Therefore, salient meaning is a meaning that we are more familiar with.

### **Retention/Suppression Hypothesis**

Meanings that are made available because of their salience may not be retained after their activation if they cannot integrate with contextual information. The salient meaning may be suppressed, if it is not in harmony with the context and will be replaced by the less salient meaning of the word. Some meanings will be retained despite their contextual misfit, either because they are crucial in constructing the intended meaning, or because they are not intrusive, or because they are difficult to suppress due to of their high saliency (Morris & Binder, 2002, cited in Giora, 2003).

### **Spill-over Hypothesis**

Spill-over effects are effects that occur a few words into the next sentence (for the space following the sentence, and for the sentence that follows) (Pexman et al., 2000). Therefore, “difficulties that may spill over downstream thereby increase reading times of the subsequent sentence” (Giora, 2003, p. 83).

### **Figurative Language**

It is believed that there are eight types of figurative language (namely, hyperbole, idiom, indirect request, irony, understatement, metaphor, rhetorical question, and simile) (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993). In figurative expressions, we mean the figurative, not the literal meaning. The figurative expression considered in this article is indirect request.

### **Indirect Request**

Indirect speech act is “a speech act where an indirect relationship exists between the structure and communicative function of an utterance. Indirect request is a kind of indirect speech act; for example, the use of an interrogative not to ask a question, but to make a request; also the use of an affirmative not to state a fact, but to make a request” (Yule, 1996, p. 131); e.g., «It is cold!» means «Close the door!». Despite the various studies conducted, there are few studies on Graded Salience Hypothesis that take indirect requests into account.

### **Self-paced Moving Windows Tool**

This is a reading task, where participants read sentences word-by-word. After pressing the space button, the first word appears in dashes. After every press, a

new word appears and the previous word changes into dashes (Figure. 1). Therefore, the length of sentences and words can be seen, but words can be read one by one. Computers can record the time between presses of the space button as the reading time. This is an imitation of natural reading and recording reading time can be possible. Moving windows is a methodology that indicates where reading is easy or hard for the participant. Difficulties in processing may suggest that a salient and contextually incompatible meaning has been activated initially (Giora, 2003). There are research studies confirming the similarity of the results between natural reading and Moving Windows (Garnsey et al., 1997; Just et al., 1982; Thornton et al., 2000). This tool was used in a number of research studies (e.g., Coulson & Kutas, 1998; Giora, et al., 2007; Giora, et al., 2013; Ivanko & Pexman, 2001; Pexman et al., 2000; Schwoebel et al., 2000) and their findings are consistent with the Graded Salience Hypothesis.

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1 -----
2 Sarah entered the home and left the door open -----
3 -----I told -----
4 -----it is cold

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**Figure 1.** Self-spaced moving windows

## Method

This study attempted to consider the relation among 3 variables including 2 contexts (figurative, literal), 3 types of familiarity level (familiar vs. unfamiliar vs. less familiar) and reading times (long, short, equal).

## Participants

The participants of the study were English translation students of Binaloud Institute of Higher Education. In pretest No. 1, 20 students (aged 18-29, 12 female and 8 male) participated. In pretest No. 2, participants were two groups of 23 (aged 18-27, 24 female and 22 male). In the main test, participants were 20 students (aged 19-29, 11 female and 9 male). Our materials included texts and a software as the instrument.

## Materials

### *Texts*

The materials used were 58 Persian indirect requests collected from naturally occurring conversations, recorded by the authors in random situations (about 60 hours recording) such as the following: « it is cold! » which means «Close the door! ». Figurative and literal contexts were written by the authors (artificial contexts) and approved after pretest 2. e.g.:

*Figurative context:*

«Sarah entered the home and left the door open. I told her: it is cold! »

*Literal context:*

«I was out of the house. After coming back home, I told Sarah "it is cold". »

In addition, two different questionnaires were prepared; in one questionnaire, indirect requests (familiar vs. unfamiliar vs. less familiar) were presented in a literal context and in the other one, indirect requests were presented in a figurative context. In the questionnaires, texts were ordered randomly.

### **Instrument**

As the available computer programs were not in accordance with Persian alphabet, a self-paced Moving Windows program was designed for this experiment. It was a C# (C- SHARP) program, running under any of the forms of Windows. Reading time could be recorded with millisecond accuracy via this software program.

### **Procedure**

In order to collect the required data, two pretests were performed initially. In pretest No. 1, Twenty students from Binaloud Higher Education Institute (Mashad, Iran) who were students of English Translation (12 females and 8 males), aged 18-27, participated for course credit. In the pretest No. 1, participants defined their familiarity level on a scale, where 7 = highly familiar and 1 = entirely unfamiliar. After pretest No. 1, expressions were divided into three groups (familiar, less-familiar, unfamiliar). Then pretest No. 2 was designed to establish that contexts are equally biased. This ensured us that any difference in the experiment results would not be due to context effects. In pretest No. 2, subjects were presented with the contexts and indirect requests. Participants were divided into two groups of 23 (24 female and 22 male, aged 18-27, students of Binaloud Institute of Higher Education, who did not participate in the main experiment, but participated for course credit) with two types of questionnaires, each containing literal and figurative contexts for the indirect requests. One of the questionnaires comprised indirect requests in a figurative context, and the other included indirect requests in a literal context; therefore, participants could read either literal or figurative expressions. We asked participants which meaning came to their mind. One meaning was a literal meaning, and the other one was a figurative meaning of the indirect request. Participants rated their answer on a scale. Then, sentences were selected to be used in the main test that had equally biased contexts. Examples are as follows:

*Figurative context:*

*Sarah entered home and left the door open. I told her: it is cold!*

1                    2                    3                    4                    5                    6                    7

Close the door!

Statement of a fact

*Literal context*

*I was out of house. After coming back home, I told her "it is cold".*

1                    2                    3                    4                    5                    6                    7

Close the door!

Statement of a fact

After pretests No.1 and No. 2, indirect requests were divided into different groups (familiar, less-familiar, unfamiliar) and indirect requests with equally biased contexts were selected. Twenty students from Binaloud Higher Education Institute (Mashad, Iran) (11 female and 9 male), aged 19-29, participated for course credit. Every participant sat with a PC controlled by Windows 7. Sentences were displayed on the screen, using the self-paced moving window (Just et al., 1982) software. Participants were asked to read the paragraphs and answer the yes/no questions by pressing the key. The questions were designed to encourage the subjects to pay attention to the sentences. These questions were simple and the participants could answer them easily. Subjects were presented with two practice paragraphs and after that, the experiment started. The subjects were asked to read in a self-paced manner and word by word. They read each indirect request in the figurative context and the reading time was recorded. In the first part of experiment, participants were presented with the figurative contexts. In this experiment, participants read at their own natural speed and they self-paced their reading. Reading times—i.e., the time between the display of a word and the pressing of a key—and their responses were recorded by the software for indirect requests and for the space and words following the indirect request to test the spill-over effects. The participants were told that their reading time and their accuracy in answering the questions were being collected. We asked them to read sentences and to get a good score on the questions. Furthermore, they were required to read naturally and not to answer the questions before reading the text.

Two month after the first part of the experiment, the second part started. A two-month interval was needed to reduce the backwash effects from the first part of the experiment which included similar indirect requests to the ones used in the first part, except for the different context. In the second stage, the same participants received the same expressions in a literal context.

## Results

In the pretest No.1, a Chi-Square analysis was used and expressions were divided into different groups (familiar, less-familiar, unfamiliar). From among 58 indirect requests, only 51 remained. In pretest No. 2, again a Chi-Square analysis was used and sentences with equally biased contexts were selected, and from among 20 indirect requests, only 16 remained (9 familiar, 6 less familiar, 1 unfamiliar). Participants with an error rate higher than other participants' mean in comprehension questions were decided to be removed. Therefore, 1 out of 20 participants was discarded.

The results indicated that the reading time was longer for unfamiliar indirect requests, the space after the indirect request and the first word of the next sentence (spillover effects), in the figurative context. The mean RT of the target words in the figurative biasing context was 1631.47 and mean RT of the target word in the literal biasing context for unfamiliar target words was 168788. Paired-samples t-Test was used and the significance (sig.) index was  $0.799 > 0.05$ . This indicated that there was not a significant difference in mean RTs of the two contexts.

**Table 1.**  
*Paired t-Test-Unfamiliar Target Word*

M	Sig.	SD
-56.412	.799	897.074

For unfamiliar indirect request-spillover effects, the mean RT of the target words in the figurative biasing context was 544.294, whereas the mean RT of the target words in the literal biasing context was 634.382. The nonparametric Wilcoxon test was used and the significance (sig.) index was  $0.356 > 0.05$ . Therefore, it was concluded that there was not a significant difference in mean RTs of the two contexts.

**Table 2.**  
*Npar Wilcoxon Test-unfamiliar spillover effects*

Z	Sig.
-.923 <sup>a</sup>	.356

The results indicated that RTs for less familiar indirect requests, the space after the indirect request, and the first word of the next sentence (spillover effects) were equal in both figurative and literal contexts. For less familiar indirect request-target words, the mean RT of the target words in the figurative biasing context was 1378.78, while the mean RT of the target words in the literal biasing context was 1603.75. Npar Wilcoxon Test was used and the significance (sig.) index was  $0.002 < 0.05$ . This indicated that there was a significant difference in the mean RTs reported for the two contexts. These findings con-

vince us to conclude that reading target words in the literal biasing context lasted longer than reading target words in the figurative biasing context.

**Table 3.**  
*Npar Wilcoxon Test-less familiar target word*

Z	Sig.
-3.123 <sup>a</sup>	.002

In the same vein, for less familiar indirect request-spillover effects, the mean RT of the target words in the figurative biasing context was 481.044, while that of the literal biasing context was 606.549. Npar Wilcoxon test was employed, and the significance (sig.) index was  $0.000 < 0.05$ . This indicated that there was a significant difference in mean RTs between two contexts, indicating that reading target words in the literal biasing context lasted longer than reading target words in the figurative biasing context.

**Table 4.**  
*Npar Wilcoxon Test- familiar spillover effects*

Z	Sig.
-5.784 <sup>a</sup>	.000

In addition, it was observed that the RTs for familiar indirect requests, the space after the indirect request, and the first word of the next sentence (spillover effects), were shorter in the figurative biasing context. For familiar indirect request-target word, the mean RT of the target words in the figurative biasing context was 1363.80, while the mean RT of the target words in the literal biasing context was 1930.08. Npar Wilcoxon test was used and the significance (sig.) index was found to be  $0.000 < 0.05$ . This indicated that there was a significant difference in mean RTs of the two contexts. These results can lead to the conclusion that reading target words in the literal biasing context lasted longer than reading them in the figurative biasing context.

**Table 5.**  
*Npar Wilcoxon Test-familiar target word*

Z	Sig.
-5.969 <sup>a</sup>	.000

As for familiar indirect request-spillover effects, it was found out that the mean RT of the target words in the figurative biasing context was 537.281, whereas that of the literal biasing context was 836.493. Npar Wilcoxon test was run and the significance (sig.) index was  $0.000 < 0.05$ , suggesting that there was a significant difference in the mean RTs of the two contexts. These results indicated that reading target words in the literal biasing context lasted longer than reading target words in the figurative biasing context.

**Table 6.**  
*Npar Wilcoxon Test-unfamiliar spillover effects*

Z	Sig.
-8.764 <sup>a</sup>	.000

The summary of experimental results is presented in table 7.

**Table 7.**  
*Summary of the Results*

Unfamiliar	Less familiar		Familiar
Spillover effects	Spillover effects	Critical word	Spillover effects
Critical word			Critical word
<b>2#</b>	<b>1#</b>	<b>1#</b>	<b>1*</b>
<b>2#</b>			<b>1*</b>

1- Reading in literal context lasted longer than reading in figurative context

2- Equal RTs for literal and figurative contexts

3- Reading in figurative context lasted longer than reading in literal context

\*= Hypothesis is approved

#= Hypothesis is rejected

## Discussion

For unfamiliar indirect requests, the results showed that for unfamiliar indirect requests, the space after the indirect request, and the first word of the next sentence (spillover effects), the RTs were equal in both figurative inviting and literal inviting contexts. This finding does not confirm the Graded Salience Hypothesis. Moreover, it was viewed that for less familiar indirect requests, the RTs of less familiar indirect requests, the space after the indirect request, and the first word of the next sentence (spillover effects) was longer in the literal biasing context; this finding does not confirm the Graded Salience Hypothesis, either. However, for familiar indirect requests, the results revealed that in accordance with the Graded Salience Hypothesis, the RTs of familiar indirect requests, the space after the indirect request, and the first word of the next sentence (spillover effects) was shorter in the figurative context. Therefore, the findings regarding familiar indirect requests (both target words and spillover effects) verify the Graded Salience Hypothesis.

Nevertheless, less familiar indirect requests were not found to be confirming the Graded Salience Hypothesis as the RTs of less familiar indirect requests, the space after the indirect request, and the first word of the next sentence (spillover effects) was longer in the literal biasing context, which confirms the direct access view. According to the direct access view, in literal contexts, the literal meaning is activated and in figurative contexts, the figurative meaning is activated. It seems that the figurative meaning, not the literal meaning, is salient in less familiar indirect requests. Also, it may be taken to suggest that the context is activated initially.

As for unfamiliar indirect requests, the observations made in the present study did not confirm the Graded Salience Hypothesis, as the RTs for unfamiliar indirect requests, the space after the indirect request and, the first word of the next sentence (spillover effects) were equal in the two contexts. It seems that both the figurative meaning and the literal meaning are salient in unfamiliar indirect requests.

The findings for familiar indirect requests indeed confirmed the results obtained by Gibbs (1983), demonstrating that conventional indirect requests (Gibbs et al., 1993) were read faster than the same utterances used literally as questions. Also, similar results were reported by Gibbs (1994); he showed that the meaning of indirect requests has been processed without any need to literal meaning. The results obtained regarding less familiar indirect requests are not consistent with the findings by Gibbs (1982) as he suggests that the compositional, less conventional question meaning of indirect requests take longer to comprehend than their conventional (request) meaning, regardless of contextual bias.

## Conclusion

The observations made in the present study provided some evidence that confirms the Graded Salience Hypothesis, and some in line with the direct access view. Therefore, the results did not entirely support the Graded Salience Hypothesis in Persian. It was indicated that Graded Salience Hypothesis predictions were not confirmed and sometimes context was a more important factor than salience. Therefore, instead of a parallel process, a semi-serial process was witnessed; however, more research is needed to weigh context strength against meaning salience when processing figurative language.

The findings also reveal that the salient meaning in both familiar and less familiar figurative expressions is the figurative meaning. Furthermore, the salient meaning in the unfamiliar indirect request was found to be both its figurative and literal meaning. This indicates that literal meaning cannot be salient meaning (because of the context effects). This finding challenges the various modular-based views, which assume that the meaning activated initially is the contextually incompatible literal meaning. It is thus advisable to revise the familiarity group and divide the indirect requests into familiar and unfamiliar since familiar and less familiar expressions behaved similarly. It is also recommended that future researchers look more carefully into the effects of gender, age, IQ (Intelligence Quotient), EQ (Emotional Quotient), etc. on figurative language comprehension.

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