



## TA'ĀROF

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**TA'ĀROF**, an Arabic term (lit. 'becoming acquainted') used in Persian to define a nearly untranslatable concept encompassing a broad complex of behaviors in Iranian life that mark and underscore differences in social status. Laurence Loeb glosses it as "compliment, ceremony, offer, present" (1969). William Beeman defines it as "the active, ritualized realization of differential status in interaction." (1976, p. 312; 1986, 1988, 2001). It underscores and preserves the integrity of culturally defined status roles as it is carried out in the life of every Iranian every day in thousands of different ways. Iranian youth cry in despair at its pervasiveness, but they are powerless against it, and practice it themselves even while complaining about it.

*Ta'ārof* has both a linguistic and a social behavioral component. Linguistic *ta'ārof* involves two kinds of language phenomena. One aspect has to do with word choice. Iran is a hierarchical society, and social hierarchy is marked linguistically by using vocabulary that emphasizes the higher status of the other person, while denigrating one's own status. Many common Persian verbs have corresponding "other raising" and "self lowering" forms.

The system is very elaborate, and it is not possible to provide a comprehensive description here. William K. Archer and Forough Al-Zaman Minou-Archer, William Beeman (1986), John Boyle, Michael Hillman, Mohammad Jazayery, Yahya Modaressi and Paul Sprachman all provide partial descriptions of *ta'ārof*. The verb "to give" (*dādan*) provides a good example of the functioning of the system:



Neutral form	<i>Dādan</i>
Other-raising (describing one's own action toward the other)	<i>taqdim kardan</i> (lit. to offer)
Self-lowering (describing the other's action toward one's self)	<i>marḥamat kardan</i> (lit. to do a "mercy"), <i>moḥabbat kardan</i> (lit. to do a kindness), <i>lotf kardan</i> (lit. to do a favor)

More deference can be shown by substituting the verb "*farmudan*" (lit. to command) for "*kardan*" in the self lowering forms.

Pronouns are similarly marked for status.

Pronoun Description	First Person singular	Second Person singular
Neutral form	<i>man</i>	<i>to</i> (intimate), <i>šomā</i> (polite, formal)
Self lowering	<i>banda</i> (lit. bondsman), <i>nowkar</i> (lit. servant), <i>čāker</i> (lit. servant)	
Other raising		<i>janāb-e 'āli</i> , (lit. excellency) <i>sarkār</i> (used mainly in addressing women; lit. head of affairs) <i>ḥazrat-e 'āli</i> (lit. highness)

The second linguistic dimension of discourse has to do with polite and deferential general discourse. Iranian discourse routinely uses phrases that emphasize the low, dependent, or even servile status of the speaker, and the exalted status of the addressee, such as *qorbān-e šomā* (lit. your self-sacrificer), used as a routine departure phrase, or closing to a letter. There is no exhaustive list of these expressions. They are limited only by the imagination of the speaker. Some people are extremely skilled at this kind of discourse, and provide *ta'arof* that rings true and sincere. Indeed, there are definitely people to whom this kind of language is due, such as revered teachers, parents, intellectuals, and leaders. Others are clearly using this language to flatter or deceive. The ambiguity in this language is part of its charm, contributing a distinct flavor to Iranian interactions.

The other area of *ta'arof* has to do with social gestures that provide courtesy and hospitality to others. Simple gestures such as allowing another person to go first through a doorway or seating someone in a place of honor are



common examples of everyday *ta'ārof*. However, *ta'ārof* can be much more elaborate. Extravagant offers of service or hospitality are labeled as *ta'ārof* in everyday discourse. Similarly refusing hospitality or favors is labeled as *ta'ārof*. When a generous gesture is offered and the recipient demurs, he or she is often told “please don’t do *ta'ārof*.” Since hospitality and generosity are deeply ingrained in Iranian society, it is often difficult to discern genuine from insincere offers. Sometimes it is a win-win situation. If the recipient accepts, the giver feels pride. If the recipient succeeds in refusing, the giver feels happy that he or she made the gesture. *Ta'ārof* can verge on aggressive behavior as participants try to outdo each other in their generosity. Needless to say, *ta'ārof* is an important social lubricant in Iran, and when everyone is practicing it, social life can be pleasant, and discord can be suppressed under a veil of politesse.

These actions are universal in Iranian culture, whatever the religious, ethnic, or linguistic community of the participants. Laurence Loeb (1969) provides examples for the Iranian Jewish community. His observations apply equally to Zoroastrian and Christian communities. Azari Turks, Kurds, Baluchis, and tribal peoples are equally famous for their hospitality and use of *ta'ārof* in their own languages, though they may lack the elaborate vocabulary for “other raising” and “self lowering” found in Persian.

The dynamics of deferential language and polite behavior embodied in *ta'ārof* are widespread in the cultures of the world. If Iran is to be differentiated from Japan (Seward), Indonesia (Errington) or the Wolof of Senegal (Irvine) among others, it is in the extensive use of *ta'ārof* for strategic dealing in Iran. While much *ta'ārof* is utterly sincere, it is possible by “getting the lower hand” as a behavioral and rhetorical strategy to compel others to acquiesce to one’s wishes. Essentially, one uses this strategy to invoke noblesse oblige in the other person, making it difficult for them to refuse requests.

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