Persian Cultural Schema of *Ghesmat* (Fate): The Role of Age and Education

Salva Shirinbakhsh (Corresponding author)
Graduate candidate of TEFL
University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran
E-mail: Salva_shirinb@yahoo.com

Abbass Eslamirasekh
Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics
University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran
E-mail: Abbasseslamirasekh@yahoo.com

Mansoor Tavakoli
Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics
University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran
E-mail: Mr.tavakoli14@gmail.com

This study was completed at the University of Isfahan and supported by the Office of Graduate Studies as part of thesis fulfillment for a master degree in TEFL.

Abstract

Ghesmat (roughly could be translated as 'fate') is one of the ancient cultural schemas among the Persians. This study explores the schema of *ghesmat* in the lives of Persian speakers as reflected in their language use among people with different age and educational level. Having introduced the schema of *ghesmat* in Persian, data was collected by giving a discourse completion test (DCT) to the participants of the study who were randomly chosen. The results of the analysis of data revealed that Persians instantiated the cultural schema of *ghesmat* in different contextual circumstances of their lives. In addition, the use of this cultural schema was different among people with different age and education. It seemed young educated Persian speakers drew least on the schema whereas old uneducated ones mostly favored *ghesmat* schema. Finally the study discussed about the possible pattern for the distribution of cultural schemas.

Keywords: Schema, Cultural schema, Ghesmat, Fate, Persian language

1. Introduction

Some social scientists consider language as the keystone of culture. Without language, they maintain, culture would not be possible. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture; it reflects culture. In the broadest sense, language is the symbolic representation of a people, and it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking (Brown, 2000:177).

Furthermore, Wierzbicka (1997:5) mentioned 'there is a close link between the life of a society and the lexicon of the language spoken by it. This fact not only applies to material culture but also to people's values, ideals, attitudes and to their world view'. It seems that words containing culture-specific concepts both "reflect" or "shape" ways of thinking of society and an individual. Culture-specific words are called to "conceptual tools" that reflect a society's past experience of doing and thinking about things in certain ways and they help to perpetuate these ways. Whorf's main thesis that "we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages" and that "we cut nature up codified in the patterns of our language", gives way to the conception that "a mode of thinking, a distinctive type of reaction, gets itself established, in the course of a complex historical

development, as typical, as normal" in a large speech community and therefore, language can be, as Sapir (1949) mentioned, a guide to "social reality".

In the sense of a historically transmitted system of "conceptions" and "attitudes", language and in particular vocabulary could be considered as the best evidence of the reality of culture. As Sapir put "vocabulary is a very sensitive index of the culture of a people". In a language, some words can be studies as focal points around which entire cultural domains are organized. By exploring these focal points in depth, it is possible to show the general organizing principles which lend structure and coherence to a cultural domain as a whole, and which often have an explanatory power extending across a number of domains (Wierzbicka, 1997:16). A key word such as *ghesmat* in Persian can lead us to the communities' cultural attitudes, values and expectations embodied in the mind of all speech community and therefore in their schemas.

1.1 Schema and culture

In the 19th century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, developed the concept of schema. It was initially introduced into psychology and education through the work of Bartlett (1932). He considered schemas as the abstract mental structures of knowledge stored in the long term memory that represent one's understanding of the world. It was made clear that human behavior relies heavily on past experiences and the background knowledge of one's mind. Rumelhart (1980:35) defined schemas as "building blocks of cognition"; they are" units into which knowledge is stored". He maintained that schemas are like plays, which "can be played by different actors at different times without changing the essential nature of the play". He further likened schema to informal and private theories that we develop about the universe and its components, objects, events or situations. The schema theory believes that people do not observe any reality straight, however through a perceptual framework. A schema can be called the perceptual framework that people use to make sense of the globe around them. Furthermore, when schemas are considered at a group level as they emerge through the group's collective knowledge and thought, schemas are called *cultural schemas* (e.g. Malcolm and Sharifian 2002; Sharifian 2008a, Rice 1980). Cultural schemas are emergent properties of the interactions between the members of a cultural group across time and space which enable them to think in one mind; they are used as one of the properties of the cognition of a community heterogeneously distributed across the members of a cultural group (Sharifian, 2008b). One of such schemas is called *ghesmat* (fate) in Persian language.

Literally, *ghesmat* means 'apportion and distribution' (Mackenzie,1971) and this schema in general holds the view that the actions and events in each individual's life are determined by God's will or some forces beyond men's control. The origin of this schema could be sought in Zarvanism, a 4th century religion emphasizing the deity of time and the belief that events are fixed in advance and human beings just had to follow them. It is the belief that holds the life of all creatures has already been predetermined and follows their predetermined destiny written by Zarvan and deviation from it is not possible.

By converting the Persian to Islam, Zarvanism got a new coloring. The belief in the god of time, Zarvan, was altered to that of Allah. As a result *ghesmat* was considered as God's will and it found a divine root in the justification of events in everyday life of people. By referring to this schema, the Persians acknowledge that there is an almighty power who knows what is best for each individual to happen at that moment since men are ignorant of the fact that what may seem unpleasant at first may be for their benefit in the end.

The rest of this paper elaborates on an empirical attempt that was carried out to further explore the Persian cultural schema of *ghesmat*. Using a Discourse Completion Test, the data was collected to examine the degree to which the responses to DCT items reflect this cultural schema. The responses then were analyzed through ANOVA to determine the role of age and education on them. The following section is on the methodology that was employed in the study.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research hypothesis

The present study aims at investigating the cultural schema of *ghesmat* among Persian speakers. It tries to answer the following hypothesis:

- There is no relationship between the factor of age and the use of *ghesmat* schema among the Persian.

2.2 Participants

Participants were both male and female (12 males and 28 females) in two major age groups, 20-30 (young group) and 50-60 (old group) as well as two major educational levels, people who possessed a university degree i.e. university degree and those who didn't i.e. non-university degree. They participated in the study on a voluntary basis.

2.3 Instrument

A nine item Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was composed in Persian to replicate the communicative events in which the Persian speakers would most likely employ the schema of *ghesmat.* Although DCT has been criticized as a research method (Yuan 2001), it is still beneficial in creating a controlled environment for research and in collecting a large amount of data in a relatively short period of time (Golato 2003). The nine scenarios in the DCT included a variety of situations such as marriage, getting a visa, finding a job, buying a house, saving from death or accident and meeting your friend unexpectedly. Each item described a situation and asked participants to imagine themselves in the given situations and write down their most probable responses. DCT was checked and verified for its authenticity by employing a pilot study on several Persian speakers. It starts by asking some demographic questions about age, gender and educational level of the participants.

2.4 Procedure

Participants who voluntarily took part in the study were asked to complete the Persian DCT. They were given adequate time to complete the DCT at their own pace. To understand to what extend the factors age and education have influenced the responses an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was carried out.

3. Results and analysis

3.1 Qualitative analysis

Having compared Persian responses in the four groups, they were analyzed in terms of the degree they reflect the schema of *ghesmat*. The following section presents separate analyses for each item of the DCT in a qualitative way to show how the cultural schema informs the speech act of justification among people with different age and educational level. In the following section, there is a qualitative analysis of the data obtained from different situations:

Item 1

You had expected your marriage to happen. But right one day before wedding the marriage was cancelled. Now you are upset about it. Your friend asks: why it turned out like this?

- You: ……

The analysis of item one showed that sixteen responses justified the event by assigning it to God and his will. This included responses such as below:

a) Shâyad ghesmat nabood va Khodâ intor khâstØ.
‘Perhaps it wasn’t *ghesmat* and God wanted it this way’.

Some put it more briefly and use the Persian formula *Ghesmat na-bood* which means ‘it was not *ghesmat*’ and some attributed it to God’s prudence. Also, fourteen respondents expressed their reasons for cancellation of the wedding:

a) *Khânevâde ash râ dost na-dâsht-am*.
‘I didn’t like his family’

b) Chon be ham etemâd na-dâsht-im.
‘Because we didn’t trust each other’.

Item 2

One of your close friends succeeded to get a scholarship from a university abroad. But the embassy didn’t grant a visa on time and your friend lost the scholarship. S/he is very sad about it. She/he complains to you about why it happened. You want to calm her/him down:

- You : ……

The responses to this item could be divided in two categories: *ghesmat* and effort. Eighteen respondents believed in God's will and wisdom. Some of their responses were as following:

a) In ke âkhar-e donyâ ni-st. Shâyad khodâ na-khâst-e va salâh-et-o darin did-e ke na-r-i.
‘It’s not the end of the world. Perhaps it was God’s will and He saw your prudence in not going’.

b) Shâyad salâh-e to darin bode va mogheyat behtar-i barâyat pish biyâd.
‘Perhaps this was the best for you and you may come up with a better situation’.

Several used the formulaic expression *be maslahat na-bode* or *Hatman hekmat-i tosh bode* which respectively roughly means ‘it wasn’t prudence’ and ‘certainly there was some wisdom in that’. Eight participants encouraged the speaker to try again or ensured him/her that there would be better opportunities in future. Interestingly, four participants had a collective view of *ghesmat* and effort:

c) *Hatman ghesmat na-bod-e in dafe ber-i. Az talâsh-e dobâre nâ omid na-sh-o, man ham barât ârezo-ye movafaghiyat mi-kon-am.*
'Definitely it wasn't *ghesmat* you go this time. Don't despair of trying again. I wish you success'.

Item 3

Even though there are months you have been searching for a job and you have agreed to do a low paid job, there is no job available. In one of these days when you are going to an interview for a job with the payment of 100 dollars a month of which you are sure to be admitted, you ought to sacrifice the whole day for the sake of helping a stranger. So, you lost the interview of which you were 99% sure to win. The next day, the stranger calls you and introduces himself as the manager of a reputable company and suggests you work for his company with the base pay of 500 dollars a month. After these events, your friend asks:

- You said that there was no job available, how could you find such a good job in this big company?
- You: ……

The responses to the above item included twenty five cases of *ghesmat* schema and also the use of the formula *ghesmat bood* 'it was *ghesmat*' or '*khâste khodâ bod* 'it was God's will'. In addition, several believed their good deed was paid off by God:

a) *Be yek nafar komak kard-am va khodâ ham komak-am kard tâ in shoghl-o peida konam*
'I helped some body and God helped me to find the job'.

Also, five respondents attributed the success in getting the job to chance: *shânsi* 'by chance' or *shâns âvordam* 'I was lucky')

Item 4

You love a house in a town and long for buying it so you offer to buy it. But you are informed the landlord is selling the house to someone else with a much higher price. You regretted not being able to buy the house. Three days later, the landlord calls you and says he is discouraged to sell the house to that person and he wants you to have the house. You buy the house immediately. Having listened to your story, your friend says: how you finally got the house?

- You: ……

Twenty two responses to the above item gave the credit to *ghesmat* and the other responses considered it as the case of chance:

a) *Shâns âvord-am dige.*
'I was lucky or what?'.

It should be noted that the notion of chance and *ghesmat* differs in the cultural sphere of Persian community. Although they both may refer to the same notion, i.e. forces beyond human control, Persian treat them separately. The concept of *ghesmat* is believed to be more divinely oriented and is the indicator of God's will in the affairs, however, chance seems to be a worldly concept and implies that events could happen without any major control; it is considered as the result of a series of causes and effects in which human role in the outcome is minor.

Item 5

Your brother/sister wanted to go on a trip with a couple of his/her friends. On the day of leaving, s/he got sick and couldn't accompany his/her friends. After a couple of days your brother/sister was informed that his/her friends had a terrible car accident and were killed. Your brother/sister is very sad to hear the sudden news and brood over the death of his/her friends. You want to soothe him/her:

- You : ……

Almost all the responses (twenty six cases) considered *ghesmat* as the explanation of this event. Some of their responses were as follow:

a) *Barây-e dost-ât intor maghadar shode ke dar râh-e mosâferat koshte shav-an.*
'It was determined for your friends to get killed in the trip'.
b) *Ghesmat bode. Khodâ na-khâste bâ-hâsh-on be-r-i.*
'It was *ghesmat*. God didn't want you to go with them'.

Four respondents expressed their feelings in this situation (e.g., *khosh hâlam ke to zende ee* 'I'm happy that you are alive or *khosh hâlam ke to bâ ânhâ narafri* 'I'm happy you didn't go with them).

Item 6

You and your cousin are discussing the possibility of one of your relative's wedding. Your cousin says: "I really don't know how this whole thing will end, if they would marry or not".

- You: ……

Most of the responses to the above item included the use of *ghesmat* expressions such as the following:

a) *Harchi ghesmat bâshe hamoon mishe.*
'Whatever is *ghesmat* will happen'.

b) *Harchi maslahat bâshe hamoon mishe.*
'Whatever is God's prudence that would happen'.

Some responses (nine cases) also included a wish for the happy ending of the marriage which accompanied God's will in their words:

c) *Enshâ'lâ ke khoshbakht mishan.*
'If it be the will of God, they would live happily'.

Item 7

In a two way road a truck deviates and causes a horrible accident by heading into your car. A lot of damage is made to the car. Indeed nothing is left from it. When people pull you out of the car, nobody could believe you are still alive. But you get home safe after spending a day in hospital. Having listened to you, your friend asks: how come you could escape from death?

- You: ……

The Persian responses to the above item could be categorized in two groups: *ghesmat* and chance. Twenty one participants referred to *ghesmat* schema in this event; two of the respondents quoted some Persian proverbs to convey this schema:

a) Khodâ sango kenâre shishe negah midâre, gharâr nabode hâlâ bemiram.
'God keeps the stone beside the glass safely; I was not supposed to die then'.

b) Vâghean dorost-e ke mi-g-an tâ khodâ na-khâd barg az derakht ne-mi-riz-e.
'It is truly said if God doesn't want a leaf to fall, it doesn't'.

And nine respondents agreed to the role of chance for the explanation of this situation:

c) Shâns âvordam.
'I was lucky'.

Item 8

You've faced a problem in your job and remember your old friend was an expert in that field. But you have lost track of him/her for many years and you know that finding him/ her is impossible. One day on your way home you meet your old friend on street. After greeting and talking about your problem, what you would say regarding the cause of this visit:

- You: ……

Among the responses, fifteen used the formulaic expression *ghesmat bood to ro bebinam* 'it was *ghesmat* to meet you) and seven respondents believed in God's will in this event:

a) *Khâste Khodâ bood man to ro be-bin-am.*
'It was God's will to meet you'.

The rest of the responses reflect chance as the cause of the meeting in their responses. Some of their responses are as follow:

b) Shâns âvord-am didamet.
'I'm lucky to meet you'.

c) Ajab shânsi!
'What a chance!'.

Item 9

You fall asleep in an airport and miss your flight. Two days later you hear that the plane crashed and lots of passengers lost their lives. Having listened to you, your friend says: how come you are alive now?

- You: ……

Among the responses to the DCT, there were ten cases of the use of the formula *ghesmat bood bemonam* ' it was *ghesmat* I live'. The responses were mostly (twenty three cases) in favor of *ghesmat* schema:

a) Bebin khodâ cheghadr dost-am dâsht-e, man ke az hekmat-esh sar dar ne-mi-yar-am.
'Look, how God loves me, I don't figure out His wisdom'.

Four respondents expressed their idea in terms of chance:

b) Shâns âvord-am ke khâb-am bord.

'I was lucky that I stayed asleep'.

And some found their sleep as the main cause of their being alive:

c) *Chon khâb-am borde bod, zende mond-am.*
'Because of fell asleep, I am alive.

3.2 Quantitative analysis

As illustrated in table1, two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the DCT questionnaire data was calculated in order to establish if there was a relationship between age, education and the use of *ghesmat* schema among Persian people. The resulting p-value for both age and educational level is calculated as .000 which is less than the alpha of .5. So, there is a statistically significant main effect for both age and educational level. As a result, the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, there is a significant difference between young and old people in drawing on the schema of *ghesmat*, also there is a significant difference between educated and uneducated participants in using the schema of *ghesmat*.

To indicate the relative magnitude of the differences between the means of the groups, effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's formula (Cohen, 1988). As it is showed the effect size for age and education respectively are .488 and .343. Using Cohen's criterion, they can be classified as large effect size. Moreover, since the effect size of age is much more than the education's it can be inferred that the differences in age influence the use of *ghesmat* schema more than the differences in educational level. That is, the independent variable of age has more impact on the use of *ghesmat* than the independent variable of education.

Additionally, Levene's statistic was employed to meet the assumption of variance homogeneity. Levene's test of homogeneity was .365 which was greater than the alpha .05. Therefore it was not significant at the 0.05 level; as a result, the ANOVA assumption that variances were equal across groups was met. These results are depicted in table below:

To get a better understanding of the relationship between variables, graph 1 was illustrated. As it shows the lowest point belongs to young participants with university degree and the highest one belongs to old participants who didn't enter university. It can be inferred that young educated people tend to use the schema of *ghesmat* less than the other groups whereas old uneducated people have a tendency to use it most:

4. Summary and conclusion

The data on justifying the events in DCT is presented in a summary fashion in table 2:

It can be seen that the explanations of these scenarios by Persian speakers largely are informed by the schema of *ghesmat*. The consideration of *ghesmat* as the common and the most frequent justification for the situations explained in the DCT reveals that this schema has been implanted in the mind of Persian speakers to a great extend. However, regarding the effect of age and education, it seems young and educated people are the group who tends to use the schema at least whereas the old uneducated people are the group who mostly favors the use of *ghesmat* schema in their talks. An important pattern that emerges from the analysis of data is that the cultural schemas apparently were not imprinted in the minds of speakers of a speech community to the same degree. In fact the responses were reflective of several degrees of internalization of the schema by people in different age and educational levels. This finding confirms to what Sharifian (2003) has called 'heterogeneously distributed fashion 'of cultural schemas across the minds of people in a society. That is people draw on the cultural schemas to a variety of degrees in different time and place. However, with regard to the effect of age and education on the instantiation of schemas among participants of the study, it seems there might be a *harmony in the heart of heterogeneously* distributed pattern of schemas among the people of a society. It could be inferred that there might be some patterns among people with some shared characteristics in their use of cultural schemas. However, further studies are needed to examine this notion.

The present paper is hoped to be a contribution to intercultural studies by introducing the cultural schema of *ghesmat* among Persian speakers. Cultural schemas provide frameworks for understanding the thoughts and viewpoints of different nations. The findings of this study suggest that Persian speakers instantiate, in varying degrees, the Persian cultural schema of *ghesmat* in their justification and interpretation of events. This observation calls for more research to be carried out on cultural schemas and international communication to enhance what Sharifian (2005) called *meta-cultural competence* in language learners and even in native speakers to improve intercultural communication.

References

Bartlett, F.C. (1932). *Remembering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brown, H.D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. New York, NY: Pearson Education.

Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences* (second edition). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Golato, A. (2003). Studying compliment responses: A comparison of DCTs and recordings of naturally occurring talk. *Applied Linguistics,* 24 (1), 90-121.

Lane, E. W. (1989). *Manners and Customs of the Modern Eygptians*. London: East–West.

Mackenzie, D.N. (1971). *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*. London: Oxford University Press.

Malcolm, I. G. & Sharifian. F. (2002). Aspects of Aboriginal English oral discourse: An application of cultural schema theory. *Discourse Studies,* 4 (2), 169-181.

Rice, G. E. (1980). On cultural schemata. *American Ethnologist,* 7, 152-71.

Rumelhart, D.E. (1980). 'Schemata: The Building Blocks of Cognition', in R.J. Spiro, B. Bruce and W.F. Brewer (eds) *Theoretical Issues in Reading and Comprehension*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Sapir, E. (1949). Selected writings of Edward Sapir in *language, culture and personality.* (D.Mandelbaum, Ed). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sharifian, F. (2003). On cultural conceptualizations. *Journal of Cognition and Culture,* 3(3), 187-207.

Sharifian, F. (2005). The Persian cultural schema of *shekasteh-nafsi*: A study of complement responses in Persian and Anglo-Australian speakers*. Pragmatics and Cognition, 13*(2), 337-361.

Sharifian, F. (2008a). Cultural schemas in L1 and L2 compliment responses: A study of Persian-speaking learners of English. *Journal of Politeness Research, 4*(1), 55-80.

Sharifian, F. (2008b). Distributed, emergent cultural cognition, conceptualisation, and language. In R. M. Frank, R. Dirven, T. Ziemke, & E. Bernandez (eds.) *Body, language, and mind*: *Sociocultural situatedness* (Vol. 2) (pp109-136). Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Wierzbicka, A. (1997). *Understanding Culture Through Their Keywords*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yuan, Y. (2001). An inquiry into empirical pragmatics data-gathering methods: Written DCTs, oral DCTs, field notes, and natural conversations. *Journal of Pragmatics,* 33, 271-292.

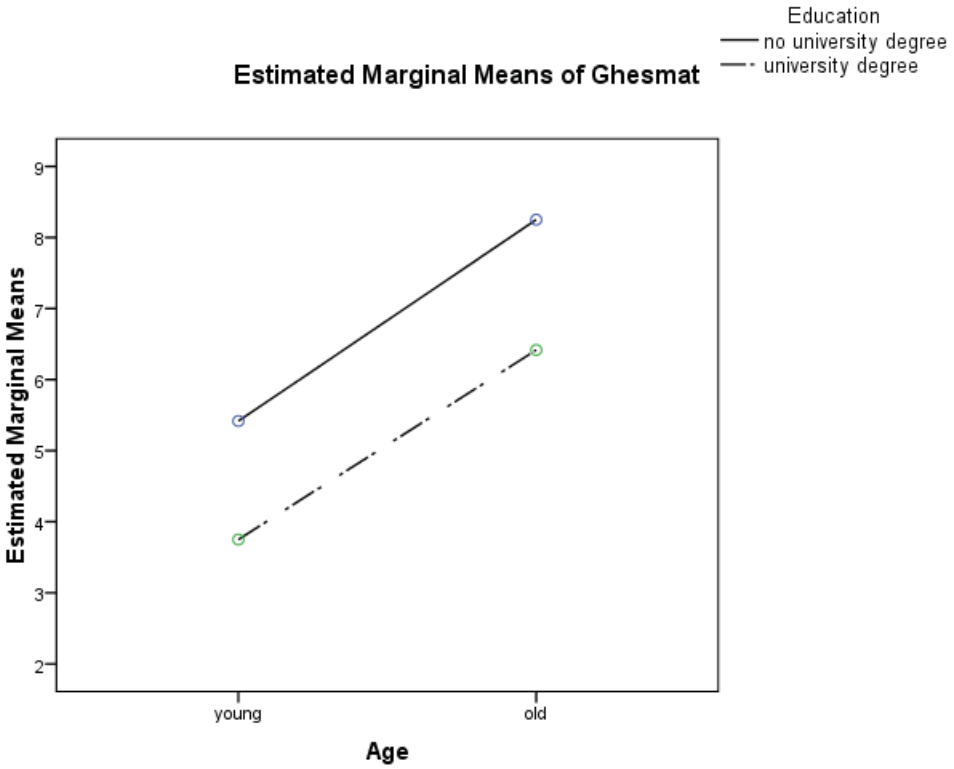
Table 1. The effect of age and education on the use of *ghesmat* schema among Persian speakers

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power
Corrected Model	113.800	3	37.933	17.828	.000	.598	53.483	1.000
Intercept	1345.600	1	1345.600	632.397	.000	.946	632.397	1.000
Education	40.000	1	40.000	18.799	.000	.343	18.799	.988
Age	72.900	1	72.900	34.261	.000	.488	34.261	1.000
Education * Age	.900	1	.900	.423	.520	.012	.423	.097
Error	76.600	36	2.128					
Total	1536.000	40						
Corrected Total	190.400	39						

Table 2. Summary of DCT data

Item s	Scenarios	Persian Responses
1	Marriage cancellation	*Ghesmat* (26)* Reason (24)
2	Failing to get a visa	*Ghesmat* (18) Effort (17) *Ghesmat* +effort (5)
3	Finding a job	*Ghesmat* (35) Chance (5)
4	Buying a house	*Ghesmat* (26) Chance (9) Law of attraction (5)
5	Saving from death	*Ghesmat* (33) Expressing emotion (4) Chance (3)
6	Possibility of marriage	*Ghesmat* (27) Wish + *ghesmat*(9) Condition (4)
7	Being safe after a car accident	*Ghesmat* (31) Chance (9)
8	Meeting your friend unexpectedly	*Ghesmat* (26) Chance (10) Law of attraction (4)
9	Saving from a flight crash	*Ghesmat* (39) Chance (7) Reason (3)

* Number of responses



Graph 1. The use of *ghesmat* schema among Persian speakers

 ISSN 1916-9655 E-ISSN 1916-9663