

## A Pragmatic Analysis of Polite Forms in English and Arabic A Contrastive Study

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### الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى اجراء تحليل تداولي لمقتطفات من الكلام المهذب في اللغتين الانكليزية والعربية. تحمل هذه المقتطفات نفس الخصائص والوظائف المتبعة في اللغتين. تتبنى هذه الدراسة الهيكل والنموذج المطروح من قبل براون ولفنسن (١٩٨٣) فيما يتعلق بالاسلوب المهذب والكياسة. وقد توصلت الدراسة الى مايلي: ١- يلتزم النظام السلوكي الانكليزي بالنموذج المطروح من قبل براون ولفنسن فيما لا يلتزم النظام السلوكي العربي بهذا النموذج ٢- يستخدم الانكليز والعرب مزيج متشابه من اساليب التهذيب لمجاملة المستمع والمستمعين ٣- يأخذ النظام الاجتماعي البريطاني العلاقات والمواقف الرسمية وغير الرسمية بنظر الاعتبار بينما لا يأخذ النظام الاجتماعي العربي تلك العلاقات والمواقف بنظر الاعتبار.

### Abstract

This study aims to make a pragmatic analysis of some selected polite forms in English and Arabic. The data for the study consist of a number of exchange unites of discourse which have similar functions in the two languages. The framework for analysis takes into account the model presented by Brown and Levinson (1987). It is noted that English deferential behavior adheres to Brown and Levinson's model of politeness whereas Arabic deferential behavior does not seem to adhere to this model. The results show that both English and Arabic speakers use a combination of politeness strategies to defer to hearers, but the difference lies in the fact that formal and informal situations and kind of relationships play a great role in the British interaction system, whereas no such role is evident in the Arabic interaction system.

## 1 - Introduction:

Politeness has been the subject of research for many linguists, sociolinguists, and anthropologists (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1990; and Gu, 1990). It is noted that there has been little consensus on the nature of politeness and how to describe and explain it cross-linguistically. Fraser (1990: 221), for instance, categorizes linguistic theories of politeness into four views, namely: social-norm view, face – saving view, conversational – maxim view, and conversational – contract view. But, he does not provide full details to these views.

The purpose of the present study is to compare and contrast a few exchange units of discourse in English and Arabic. In order to achieve this comparison, Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of linguistic politeness is adopted. The reason for this adoption is due to the universal features stated in their model. These features, as Brown and Levinson (ibid: 61) postulate, include:

A Model Person, who is a willful fluent speaker of a natural language, and that all competent adult members of a society have Face and Rationality .... Given these assumptions of the universalities of face and rationality , it is intuitively the case that certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face , namely those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and / or of the speaker .

(ibid: 64)

## 2 – Previous Studies:

Following Grice's ideas and expanding his "be polite" maxim, Lakoff (1973: 297) postulates two rules of pragmatic competence, with three sub-maxims under the second rule: Be Clear and Be Polite:

Don't impose (Formal Politeness)

Give options (Informal Politeness)

Make A feel good (Intimate Politeness)

In a later article, Lakoff (1974:45) rewords this model as:

Formality: keep aloof

Deference: give options

Camaraderie: show sympathy

Grice (cited in Lakoff, 1973: 296) and Lakoff (1974:35) imply that their rules apply in order to achieve what the speaker wants to achieve, for instance, an acceptance of a request, imparting a piece of information or a refusal of an offer. Lakoff (1973: 297 – 8) states that in real conversations, politeness considerations disregard any other considerations of truthfulness, directness,

brevity etc., since it is often the case that conversations aim at reaffirming and strengthening relationships, rather than imparting information . Moreover, Lakoff (ibid) argues that different cultures may consider some rules as more important than others.

Leech (1983: 30 ff.) expands Grice's and Lakoff's ideas considerably. He places politeness in the area of interpersonal rhetoric which includes the Co-operative Principle (CP), after Grice, a Politeness Principle (PP) and an Irony Principle (IP). Moreover, leech (ibid) recognizes not all maxims are of equal importance and he assumes that the tact maxim is more powerful than the generosity maxim which is indicative of the fact that politeness is focused more on the other than the self, This fact, according to Leech, may hold true of British society, whereas in Mediterranean societies the generosity maxim takes precedence over the tact maxim.

Another facet of Leech's (1983) model is his construct of relative vs. absolute politeness. According to Leech (ibid: 32), relative politeness refers to politeness in a specific situation, while absolute politeness is inherent in specific actions. He; therefore , claims that some illocutions (e.g. orders) are inherently impolite, while others, like offers, are inherently polite . On the contrary, Fraser (1990: 227) states that there are many instances where this is not the case. For instance, he quotes the example of a teacher ordering a student to put her prize – winning solution on the board for the class, in which case an order loses its inherent impolite value. Any assertion of acts being inherently polite stands on uncertain ground, because perception of politeness can vary enormously across cultures. For instance, in Arabic society, asking strangers questions about personal matters like marital status, occupation or income may be judged as intrusive. Other things being equal, in a British society setting such questions is treated as impolite (ibid). On the contrary, in Persian society, asking such questions is regarded as a polite way of establishing rapport between participants (Beeman, 1986: 105).

Brown and Levinson, on the other hand, base their theory of politeness on Goffman's (1967) notion of face and extend the model to account for politeness in almost all languages. They assume a model person who is a fluent speaker of a natural language and has two features of rationality and face (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61-2). Taken from English folk term they define 'face' as "the public self image that every member wants to claim for himself" consisting of two related aspects: negative face, that is, "the want of every competent adult member that his wants be desirable to at least some members" (ibid). They further contend that these two kinds of face – want give rise to two similar interactive behaviours: Positive Politeness which is redress toward positive face – wants and Negative Politeness which is redress toward negative face – wants.

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According to Brown and Levinson, many acts are imposition on the hearer; hence Face-Threatening Acts (FTA). Since 'face' is so vulnerable, both the speaker and the hearer try to maintain it through several strategies. These are Positive Politeness strategies (PPS), that is, the kind of politeness exercised among friends, Negative Politeness Strategies (NPS), that is, politeness exercised among strangers, Off-Record Strategies (ORS), that is, the excessive use of polite language, and not performing the act at all. In cases that 'efficient communication' is necessary and other things are more important than 'face', speakers go Bald - On - Record (BOR), that is, using the most direct language for the conveyance of information. This is speaking in conformity with Grice's (1975:49) Co-operative Principles (CP). Accordingly, the least polite or (-polite) behaviour occurs when speakers go BOR, and the most polite behaviour occurs when they use ORSs. By using ORS, the speaker performs an act indirectly, so that the illocutionary force is ambiguous. The whole model can be illustrated in the following scale:

- Polite 1- BOR 2- PPS 3- NPS 4- ORS + polite  
(Brown and Levinson, 1987:65)

It is assumed that the greater the risk of face loss involved, the higher numbered strategy will be chosen by a speaker, with number 4 strategy going off - record in committing an FTA, because the risk of face loss is too great. Off - record strategies are classified as a strategy of doing an FTA, but the whole point of doing an FTA off-record is that the speaker cannot be held responsible for doing it. At the same time an indirect FTA provides the addressee with the option to disregard it as an FTA or to initiate a favourable response to the speaker which gives the addressee the opportunity to appear generous (ibid: 71). On the other hand, on - record FTA can be done with or without any regressive action. When the risk of face loss is minimal or non - existent, an FTA can be done without regressive action, whereas FTAs that may result in face loss are usually accompanied by either a regressive action aimed at enhancing either the positive or the negative face of the addressee (ibid). It should be noted that in recent literature the strict ordering of the regressive strategies has been questioned. For instance, Sifianou (1992: 107) states that "the strategy 'don't do the FTA' in a British society is not necessarily the most polite reaction if talk is expected." She also argues that it is not a separate super strategy, but primarily an off - record politeness strategy, which can be positive or negative.

Here it is worth mentioning that a number of writers argue on the accounts that Brown and Levisohn's claim of universality of the notion of face and in particular negative face is irrelevant to their culture. Data from Japanese (Hill et al. 1986) Korean (Clancy, 1989) Polish (Wierzbicka, 1985) and Chinese (Gu, 1990 and Chen, 1992) (cited in Sifianou, 1992; 109) refer to the inability of Brown and Levisohn's model to account for a universal description of

politeness. Gu (1990: 242) (cited in Sifianou, 1992: 109) for example, warns that offering, inviting, and promising in Chinese under ordinary circumstances will not be considered threatening. Another example is what is mentioned in Ide (1989: 231); he argues that the use of honorifics (as opposed to plain forms, such as copulas, verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs) is felt to be more polite than the use of plain forms. Since Japanese is an honorific language, it is impossible for its speakers to form a sentence appropriate to all situations. Even a simple sentence like 'Today is Saturday' will reflect the speaker's and the hearer's statuses and their relationship to each other (Matsumoto, 1989: 208-9) (cited in Ide, 1989: 226). The fact that in honorific languages there are no neutral forms "obliges the speaker to be constantly sensitive to levels of formality in verbalizing actions or things" (Ide, *ibid*: 227).

O'Driscoll (1996:23) states that "it is in the strategy of deference that Brown and Levinson may be accused of a cultural bias born of western liberalism rather than the universality of negative face". Accordingly, deference should be treated under both PPS and NPS for cultures which favour it most.

Fraser and Nolen (1981:98) and Fraser (1990:232) adopt Grice's notion of the Co-operative Principle. According to their own view of politeness as a Conversational Contract (CC), conversation partners are bound by a set of rights and obligations at the beginning of each interaction. In the course of the interaction, this set of rights and obligations may have to be re-adjusted and the contract re-negotiated, resulting in the participants being bound by the new set. It is when participants do not abide by the rules that they are perceived as rude or impolite. He (*ibid*: 233) states that.

Being polite does not involve making the hearer feel good ... nor with making the hearer not feel bad .... It simply involves getting on with the task at hand in light of the terms and conditions of the CC.

However, politeness practices in some societies like Arabic (لوييس: 2005: 362) and Japanese (Chen, 1983) (cited in Ide, 1989:230) indicate that politeness has a strong normative aspect, which is in keeping with the notion of a conversational contract.

### 3 – Politeness in Arabic

Arabic deferential behaviour is influenced by a culturally bound concept called 'mujamilih'; it is described as the active, ritualized realization of differential perceptions of superiority and inferiority in interaction (حسان, 2006:343). This concept is closely related to "western notions of politeness, compliments, propriety, correctness... and status) (Cortazzi, 1993:17). Arabic – English dictionaries assign to this concept a bewildering variety of English glosses such as courtesy, civility , comity , courteous behaviour, ceremony,

البعليكي and (Cowan, 1966: 137 and without date:46; كالوت), compliment, flattery, etc. (2008, 1510).

For politeness purposes, three principal components of interaction are taken into consideration: (1) perception of social ethic (i.e. the habits and traditions, for instance, when a husband in Arabic society (specifically the Iraqi society) talks about his wife, he does not mention her name, instead he uses expressions like *زوجتنا* (our wife), *أهلنا* (our family), *أم الأولاد* (the mother of the children); (2) perception of individual ethic and (3) perception of specific arena of activity (i.e. one might use expressions usually stated from lower to higher status, in this case honorific expressions like the use of plural forms instead of singular ones are preferred (حسان, 2006:346).

Moreover, الوافي (without date:237) states that politeness must not be related to formal/informal situations or types of relationship, he gives an instance of two intimate friends who defer to each other politely in a restaurant over a place to sit. To put it in another way, whether the situation is defined as formal or informal regardless of the type of relationship between individuals, courteous behaviour and respect are considered to be the main principles in social interactions.

الوافي (ibid:238) identifies two principal stylistic devices which form the core of the term 'mujamilih' (1) self-lowering and other-raising forms (especially in colloquial Arabic) (2)- singular versus plural forms used in reference to individuals. Linguistic realization of mujamilih is reflected in lexical substitution in both the verbal and the pronominal system. In the verbal system of the Arabic language, many verbs are neutral with regard to politeness. For instance, instead of saying *تناول الطعام* (تناولوا الطعام) one may use such expressions as *تفضلوا الطعام أو تفضلوا بتناول الطعام*. In the pronominal system, the following honorific expressions are used:

- 1 – plural forms of address e.g. *تفضلوا* instead of *تفضل*.
- 2 – first person plural forms instead of second ones e.g. *يجب ان تقوم انفسنا* instead of *يجب ان تقوموا انفسكم*.
- 3 – third person pronouns instead of second ones e.g. *يتفضل الاستاذ بالكلام* instead of *تفضل استاذ بالكلام*.
- 4 – and other honorifics, e.g. *حضرتكم، حضرتك، جنابكم، جنابك*

Such expressions are used to refer to persons of equal or superior in rank. However, for politeness purposes, one might be referred to by one's title or name rather than the relevant pronoun.

The present study uses naturally occurring data through ethnographic field notes. This overcomes some of the practical and ethical difficulties, but leads to a reliance on memory note taking skills, and selectivity, besides the researcher's ability to note or recall not only words but also contexts. The method used to gather data was participant observation in the sense that the researcher was keen

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to write down any instances of relevant conversation anywhere occurring. The English data were recorded from BBC and other mass media. The present study has engaged in introspection because the researcher, as a native speaker of Arabic, has used his linguistic and cultural competence to reflect on and analyse politeness in Arabic. Introspection, according to Saville-Troike, 1997:176, is "a way of collecting data only about one's own speech community." As such it is an important skill to develop not only for data collection itself but also for finding answers about language and culture from the perspective of both the researcher and the subjects. The researcher has to differentiate between beliefs, values, and behaviours. This exercise in itself will provide information and insights on the group and on the individuals.

**3 - Analysis and Discussion**

In the present study, the most frequent exchange units in the two languages are analysed and contrasted in terms of possessing features of BOR, PPS, NPS, and ORS or not possessing these features.

Example (1): Greetings

Arabic A: كيف صحتكم

B: الحمد لله

English A: How are you?

B: Fine, thanks

Table -1- : Analysis of Example (1)

Language	Speaker	BOR	PPS	NPS	ORS
Arabic	A	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	B	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
English	A	Yes	Yes	No	No
	B	Yes	Yes	No	No

Yes: - adherence to the strategy about

No: - no adherence to the strategy about

Greetings are examples of BOR. For the sake of efficient communication, the speaker has to adhere to Grice's

Co-operative Principle (CP); hence he goes BOR. Greetings can also be regarded as acts with identifiable markers of redress to positive face. This is true for both Arabic and English. The Arabic speaker (A) uses second person plural forms attached to the preceding noun to express his respect to the addressee. Functionally, the two Arabic and English units of discourse are more or less the same in this classification. As shown in table (1) above, one can use the same expression in formal and informal situations and relationships to convey polite behaviour.

Example (2): Offering

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Arabic A: تفضلوا الطعام عسى ان يعجبكم

B: سلمت يداكم

English A: Have some of my lovely biscuits

B: They are so nice, I'd love to

Table -2- Analysis of Example (2)

Language	Speaker	BOR	PPS	NPS	ORS
Arabic	A	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
	B	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
English	A	No	Yes	No	No
	B	No	Yes	No	No

It is noticed that PPS is used in offering situations in both languages, but they seem to be different with regard to NPS and ORS. Generally, English speakers favour PPS, while Arabic speakers use a variety of strategies in these situations.

Example (3): Question and Answer

Arabic A1: (A says something to B)

B: عفوا ، ماذا قلتم ؟

A2: يعيد الكلام

English A1: (A says something to B)

B: what did you say?

A2: I said .....

Table -3- Analysis of Example (3)

Language	Speaker	BOR	PPS	NPS	ORS
Arabic	B	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	A2	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
English	B	Yes	Yes	No	No
	A2	Yes	Yes	No	No

Both Arabic and English speakers/hearers use appropriate expressions in this situation to communicate effectively (i.e. BOR). The two Languages are different with regard to other strategies i.e. NPS and ORS

### Conclusion

It is clear that speakers of different languages exhibit different verbal and non-verbal behaviour in their interactions and the possibilities of misunderstanding are rife when two totally different cultures come into contact with each other. As is clear from the analysis and discussion here, the Arabic and English examples are, to some degrees, different concerning the concept of Politeness. The English examples adhere to the patterning of Brown and Levinson's (1987) model clearly, but the Arabic ones cannot be clearly classified under the categories of PPS and NPS. Moreover, the two languages follow the same strategies regarding BOR and ORS in order to achieve efficient communication. It is also noted that there is an overlap between these strategies in Arabic, i.e. the Arabs tend to use a combination of such strategies to perform an illocutionary act.

Thus such a simple comparison between the two languages reveals that English and Arabic follow the same strategies of BOR, PPS and ORS, but they differ in their use of NPS. This implies that formal/informal situations and the kind of relationships play a great role in the British interaction system whereas no such role is evident in the Arabic interaction system.

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