



تعليم  
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# **Polite Expressions in English and Arabic Daily Communication**

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## **Abstract**

It is a truism that politeness is a universal phenomenon. However, it is manifested and realized differently in various languages. Respecting others or showing care and concern is reflected in languages use. This correlates with cultural variations and other contextual factors. This study investigates some polite expressions that are used in Arabic and English daily communicative contexts to find out differences and similarities between both languages, in this regard. These expressions share the same functions in both languages. The Arabic data are collected from naturally occurring real life interactions while the English ones are quoted from some English movies as they are expected to mimic real life interactions. Observations, selectivity and note-taking are utilized to collect the data. It is hypothesized that some differences exist between the two languages under scrutiny. The study concludes that both English and Arabic speakers adhere to politeness to defer to hearers, but directness and positive strategies are preferred in the Arabic data. It is hoped that this study is valuable to those interested in contrastive studies and translation.

**Keywords:** politeness, contrastive studies, daily language

## 1. Introduction

Politeness is a commonsense phenomenon. Recent years have witnessed an immense increase in the number of publications dealing it. However, studies on politeness in terms of two different societies in the spoken context is relatively rare, to the best of the researcher's knowledge. This study aims at investigating a number of polite expressions in two societies (i.e. Arabic and English) that are assumed to have similar functions in daily communicative interactions to find out differences and similarities between the two languages. It is hypothesized that politeness expressions used in the Arabic context is different from that of the English one due to the different nature of the two societies and language users. It is limited to the spoken polite expressions collected by the researcher during the time of writing the research. However, paralinguistic features are not within the scope of this study.

To achieve the aims of the research and verify its hypothesis, the following procedures are set up: scrutinizing the relevant literature on politeness theories in both languages, collecting the data by means of observations and note taking to investigate similarities and the differences. The analytical framework of the data utilizes items from two models of politeness: Brown and Levinson (1987) and Lakoff (1937, 1974). Such kinds of contrastive studies is assumed to be of value to those interested in translation.

## 1. Politeness

People communicate via language. Their speech is not only supposed to convey information and certain meanings, but also it needs to be polite. Harmonious interactions are cultural phenomena. The notion of politeness has been a major concern for linguists since the 1970s (Ogiermann, 2009: 2). The argument is that human beings learn to be polite by a process of socialization. A linguistic point of view establishes a theory that identifies the polite language used by people to indicate their refined behaviour. The use of Tu/Vous, for instance, shows the manifestation of this notion in the French language.

Politeness has been a focus of research for many linguists, sociolinguists, and anthropologists (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1990; Gu, 1990; among others). Research in



politeness has been in two directions. The first is represented by the concept of the universality of politeness which is headed by Brown and Levinson (1987), Leech (1983) and many others. This approach assumes a universal set of acts the involve consideration of the interlocutors' wants and desires.

The second approach is the cross- cultural one which focuses on the cultural differences in expressing politeness to others. The famous advocates of this approach are Blum-Kulka and colleagues (1989), Gu (1990), among others. According to Verschueren (1999: 45), politeness has become a cover term in pragmatics in terms of the choices made in language use that preserve the face of interlocutors.

## 2.1 Theories of Politeness

Piles of studies, books and articles have been written on this notion. Many linguists have designed theories that specify the strategies used to avoid conflicts or construct cooperative interactions, as Ellen (2001: 21) and Watts (2003:47) maintain.

The most famous theory is that of Brown and Levinson (1987) which consists of two parts. The first part is the fundamental theory about the nature of politeness and how it functions in interaction whereas the second is a list of positive and negative politeness strategies. Their theory subsumes a model person who is a fluent speaker of a natural language with two features: rationality and face. Their notion of face is built on Goffman's (1967) concept of face which the public self-image of and its wants are positive or negative. The first is the individual's desire to be approved of and supported by others whereas the second is the desire of not being imposed on (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 66). As such, positive politeness strategies are designed for the positive face while the negative ones are designed for the second.

One interesting theory of politeness is that of Lakoff (1973, 1974) where politeness is viewed from the conversational maxims. Politeness is a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange. In association with Grice's maxims, Lakoff sets two rules for the pragmatic competence of being polite (1973:297):

1. Be clear
2. Be polite

The second rule has three sub-maxims:

1. Don't impose (Formal Politeness)
2. Give options (Informal Politeness)
3. Make hearer feel good (Intimate Politeness)

The rationale of Lakoff's (1973: 297- 8) justification is that in real conversations, politeness considerations disregard other considerations of directness and truthfulness and so on. Lakoff (1974:45) then rephrases this model as follows:

1. Formality: keep aloof
2. Deference: give options
3. Camaraderie: show sympathy

Since Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory can be applied on any spoken or written material, it can be utilized in this work. As such, items from these two models are chosen to be the model of analysis in this study for both kinds of data.

#### 4. Politeness in Arabic

Arabic deferential behaviour is influenced by a culturally bound concept which is called '*mujamela*'. It is described as the active, ritual realization of differential perceptions of superiority and inferiority in interaction ( 2006, حسان : 343). Arabic- English dictionaries assign to this concept a bewildering variety of English glosses such as courtesy, civility, comity, compliment, flattery (Noori, 2013: الوافي : 79 (no date: 237) avers that courteous behaviour and respect are regarded to be the basic principles in social interactions as far as politeness is concerned. The type of the relationship between interlocutors, in this respect, is not the main issue.

The linguistic realization of politeness or '*mujamela*' in Arabic is highly reflected in the lexical choices and lexical substitution in terms of the verbal and the pronominal system especially in the equal or superior rank. For example, you may use the word ( حضرتك ) when you talk to your boss or you may use جنابكم or you may opt not to use any. This illustrates the lexical choice that reflects politeness in interactions. One may say to his teacher:

- تفضلوا استاذ هذا هو الكتاب الذي سألتكم عنه

Here, the student uses the plural form to indicate respecting his teacher. A teacher may say to his students in class:

-يجب ان ندرس جيدا للامتحان القادم لكي نحصل على درجات عالية

Here, the teacher is polite with his student as long as he uses the inclusive 'we' including himself with the students and instead of using the imperative form saying:

-ادرسوا جيدا للامتحان القادم

It is crucial to think of politeness in terms of the different cultures and contexts in societies. One reason for that is the issue of translation 1997 (286): (عزيز, 2006). In this regard, three components are taken into consideration:

1. Perception of social ethics (habits and traditions of society). An example can be when the husband calls his wife as (الاولاد أم) or (الاهل) and he does not mention her name.
2. Perception of individual ethics
3. Perception of specific arena of activity. One might use expressions usually stated from lower to higher. Honorific expressions or the use of plural forms rather than the singular ones are preferred (حسن, 2006: 346).

## 5. Data, Analysis and Discussion

The method used to collect the data is observation and note-taking. This lies within the ethnographical approach. Instances of conversational exchanges are written down by the researcher prior and during working on this study to represent the Arabic data. The English data are quoted from some English movies as they are said to echo everyday interactions. All contextual factors are kept in mind and written down as they highly affect the choice of words as far as politeness is concerned. For example, if we are with a group of friends, we may say:

- Give/pass me the salt If we are with strangers, a more formal strategy is used to ask for the salt: - Would you please pass me the salt?

The second example is longer and thus flouts the quantity maxims of Grice, but it is said to be more polite. The following discussion utilizes the concepts of the above mentioned models of politeness to look through the data collected for this purpose. The basic apparatus is Lakoff's (1974) work but more explanations are added in accordance with Brown and Levinson's (1987) model to enhance the analysis.



## 5.1 Imposition

Here are some examples that represent this rule which says if you impose on your interlocutors, you are judged as impolite. These examples are noted in a context where two university teachers are talking to each other and another one wants to ask one of them about the time and place of the seminar before he goes to his lecture. All interlocutors are from the same rank (all teachers). The first is a not to be considered as a polite utterance. The speaker interrupts the two professors suddenly to impose his question. The next one is said to be polite since the word 'apologize' has been used prior speaking which is counted as an endeavor of not imposing on them. The interruption in the third example is said to be polite as well. Here are the three instances:

- متى يعقد السمينار و في اي قاعة؟
- اعتذر عن المقاطعة، متى يعقد السمينار؟
- أخشى الازعاج عن المقاطعة متى واين يعقد السمينار؟

In the following examples, imposition is not realized via these utterances:

- هل تسمح ب اخذ هذا القلم لحظة؟
- عذرًا اعطني هذا القلم ل اوقع الورقة

These are instances taken from a context where the secretary asks two teachers to sign a notification. The first teacher uses the 'question form' in the first instance to minimize the imposition whereas the polite form of عذر ( in the second does this task. In the coming examples, the imperative forms are supposed to polite:

- أدخل أدخل، ي جب ان تدخل، لايمكنك المجئ والبقاء على الباب

In these examples, the imperative sentence which is regarded as imposing on the hearer is acceptable in the Arabic society. These two examples are taken from an exchange between two friends. The first comes to give the other the screwdriver he borrowed yesterday. The host asks him to come in and he gives him some sweets. The host then says:

- لكل ال م زيد م ن ال ح لوى خذ ، خذ

He uses the imperative form to ask him to have some more sweets that are usually given to visitors in the Iraqi society. This imposition is interpreted in terms of generosity where the host insists on his friend to enter his house first and stay for a while and eats some more cookies or sweets. In this example, the positive strategy is realized by indicating that hearer's wants

are taken into account by speaker, as Brown and Levisohn postulate (1987: 107).

## 5.2 Giving options

In the following example, a brother visits his sister in her house, she asks:

هل أحضر لك كأساً من العصير الطازج، أم تفضل كوباً من الشاي؟

This kind of giving options is said to be polite as it shows taking the needs and desires of hearer into account. It is worthy to take the intimacy between the two speakers in this context. This option in choice reflects generosity that stems from the desire to let the brother has what he prefers to have. In terms of Brown and Levisohn's (1987) model, noticing the positive face has been triggered because such an utterance fall within the third strategy of positive politeness of fulfilling hearer's wants that is realized by the understanding sub-strategy (ibid.: 107).

## 5.3 Making hearer feels good

A considerable number of expressions has been noted to fall under this category. All forms of address do not function as vocatives only; they are positive politeness strategies that associate the addressee and addresser in a commonality. For example:

- أهلاً أهلاً بأم فلان  
- تفضل آل علة التي طلبتها، يا عم  
- تفضل لي يا حجة

In all these instances, politeness is interpreted in terms of making the hearer feels good. Calling a lady by the name of her son sends a message of respect and highlights her status as a mother in society. On the contrary, calling her by her own name neglects this meaningful feeling of motherhood in a woman's life.

Some special instances have been recorded under a peculiar classification. In our society, expressions like:

سألتم تيداكم، رحم الله والديك، أعانك الله، احسن الله إليك

show politeness, respect and care for the interlocutor by asking Allah to bestow mercy or safety on the hearer. All words of good wishes or compliments in everyday conversations fall within the realm of politeness as they represent positive politeness strategies towards the hearer. They notice, intensify or attend to hearer's wants, needs and interests (Brown and



Levinson, 1987: 107). Expressions like: Happy new year, Thinking of you, God bless you, Hope you the best of luck, Be safe, I like your tie/bag, among others are of this kind of politeness. Two more examples need to be considered to scrutinize the purpose of this paper in terms of translation:

1. One example is used by cell phones company to achieve the same function. In Arabic, you hear the following sentence when the person you call do not answer the phone for any reason:

a. المشترك لا يرد حاول الاتصال في وقت لاحق

While in English, you may hear this one:

b. *The customer is not available now. Try again later.*

In the Arabic one, one may feel that he is disrespected when he hears the above mentioned sentence while in the second one you do not get the same feeling. You feel that the called person do not want to answer your call deliberately and he is excused in the English version. The same applies on the next example:

2. In video games, two different sentences appear on the screen

a. *The game is over when (you lose the game)*

b. *You win (when you win the game).*

## 6. Conclusions

1. It seems that the universal phenomenon of politeness manifests itself in both languages. However, it is differently realized in both cultures which indicates that it is a culturally- specific concept.
2. Politeness in English has been described in some elaborated models while, in Arabic, it has no such comprehensive models to characterize it thoroughly.
3. What might seem as rude in English is accepted in Arabic and moreover it is counted as preferred.
4. Arabs adhere more to positive politeness as they address others opting for imposition and giving no choice.
5. Directness is used more in the Arabic data while indirectness features the English data.
6. The religious aspect abounds obviously in the Arabic data rather than the English.

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