

The Intonation of Requesting in Arabic

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1. Introduction:

A request is an act of asking for something politely. The word "rajaa'n" and its derivatives: "arraja", "arjuu(k)", "yurja"...etc, is an important marker of polite requests in Arabic. A request without this word may make it less like a request and perhaps less courteous and less polite.

This paper aims at studying the meaning of "rajaa'n" in the light of its intonation. In other words how request utterances with "rajaa'n" are realized intonationally and how intonation adds an important dimension to the meaning of these request utterances.

2. Some Aspects of the Grammar and Meaning of "rajaa'n":

"Rajaa'n" can occur in initial and final positions in utterances. e.g.

1.(Rajaa'n) iftahil baab(rajaa'n).(Please) open the door(please).

It can also occur alone as an isolated utterance. e.g.

2. Rajaa'n.(please)

It also occurs with interrogative and imperative in addition to declarative utterances. e.g.

3.(Rajaa'n) man kataba hatha(rajaa'n)?(please) who wrote this (please)?

4. (Rajaa'n) la tatakallam(rajaa'n).(please) Do not talk(please).

5.(Rajaa'n) almubarat bada'at(rajaa'n).(please) The match started(please).

It can also occur with moodless sentences. e.g.

6.(Rajaa'n) al-huduu'(rajaa'n).(please) Quiet(please).

So, "rajaa'n" is only loosely connected to the sentence. "Rajaa'n" also has certain semantic or pragmatic constraints

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which restrict its occurrence. It can only occur with utterances that can be interpreted as requests. It can not occur, for example, with promises, commands or threats. Furthermore, rajaa'n seems to have no function but to help in maintaining conversation and adds to the meaning of politeness or that of the attitude of the speaker.

Conversation, especially that which uses polite language, employs certain politeness markers, among them "rajaa'n", which can be used alone like other words "na'am", "shukran", "aasif", "min fathlik",...etc which are originally elliptical forms of more elaborated expressions.

In examining the meaning and the way of using 'rajaa'n', one has to examine the concept of politeness as well. Normal conversation or interaction requires that speakers pay attention to the notion of face.^(*)(negative or positive), and how they manage to minimize offence, for example, as little as possible, because a request may offend the hearer and his face, and that, of course, depends on the context in which it is uttered.

The use of 'rajaa'n' is one of the ways in which a request is mitigated. This will give the listener the chance to choose to reply in away of softening the force of the requests, especially if they are in the form of imperatives. By the use of rajaa'n the force of the command will be reduced to that of a request. The use of the interrogative forms is perhaps a more common form of rajaa'n requests with a less risk of threatening face.

3. Rajaa'n and Intonation:

Rajaa'n is a very common word in daily use. Before describing its intonation one has to decide whether it is intonationally independent or not. Rajaa'n can be both integrated in the tone unit or it can take the form of a separated tone unit. As a matter of fact it is the only word uttered sometimes.

But one is faced with the problem of identifying a tone unit. It is "something of a circular business(Cruttenden, 1997:

^(*) See: G. Leech, 1983: 107; J. May, 1993: 70-74; A. Trosborg, 1995: 25.

29)^(*) which involves some attitudinal and grammatical factors. For example, 'arjuuk' with a rising tone in 'arjuuk ithhab' usually comes in one tone group, whereas 'arjuuk' with a falling or falling-rising tones is likely to be perceived as an independent tone unit.

The statement already stated above is a gross one because in dealing with intonation and its meaning there are other numerous factors that are taken into consideration such as pitch, loudness, voice quality, in addition to the type of words which accompany 'rajaa'n' in an utterance and which of these words are stressed or accentuated.

These and other factors work together in a complex way to achieve what may be called the tone of voice(see: D. Crystal, 1969: 83). In this study, the major reference is to pitch: the range between higher and lower in a speaker's voice and how it is related to the context of situation and to the conversation going on(cf: MB. Al-Azzawi, 2002: 45).

4. Methodology of the Work:

This study follows the British system of nuclear tones: Fall(∩), rise(∪), level(—), fall-rise(v), and rise-fall(Λ) which constitute the basis of intonation, and also tone groups which have boundaries and divide an utterance into tone units. This study is corpus-based: it uses a corpus of actually occurring spoken Modern Standard Arabic(henceforth MSA) utterances.

These utterances are perceptually and auditorily analyzed. Perceptual analysis is sometimes criticized as being subjective or impressionistic as it depends on the ear. But though instrumental analysis constitutes a scientific advance, it only analyses one dimension and is itself subjectively interpreted(see: Crystal, 1969:13).

The data comprises recordings of actually occurring extracts of utterances recorded over time from Arabic satellite TV channels, and from previously recorded M. A. examining committees.

^(*) See also: A. Ladd, 1998: 10; D. Brazil et al., 1980: 45; P. Roach, 1983: 124; D. Crystal, 1969:

In the analysis, all the occurrences of the word "rajaa'n" or its derivatives are extracted. They resulted in 53 occurrences in the data. Some of these occurrences consisted solely of the word / utterance "rajaa'n". Then they are categorized according to their formal, functional and contextual factors. They are categorized according to whether they are declarative, interrogative, imperative or single separate occurrences as tone units and according to whether their position is initial or final. Then through repeated listening the type of nuclear tone used with "rajaa'n" is determined.

5. The Analysis:

It is noticed that 'rajaa'n' and its derivations enjoy free distribution and that there are hardly any restrictions on their occurrences with sentence types: interrogative, declarative, and imperative. They also occur in isolation as utterances and that they occur initially or finally. As far as positions are concerned, it is noticed that 'rajaa'n' comes mostly initially with commands while with requests, it favours final position.

6. The Occurrence with Requests:

All the rajaa'n examples extracted from the data are requests which take the form of either requests or mitigated commands. The indirect requests that occur with 'rajaa'n' in the data are mostly interrogatives of the form:

7. laakin ma huwas su'aal rajaa'n?(But what is the question please?)
8. bayyen kayfa ya'mal rajaa'n.(Show how it works please?)
9. qultu: hal 'indaka jawaab rajaa'n?(I said do you have an answer please?)
10. ya'ni mumkin mithaal rajaa'n?(I mean can you "give" an example please?)
11. ayyu safha rajaa'n?(Which page please?)
12. hal thakartahu rajaa'n(Did you mention it please?)

Other less frequent forms are declaratives and elliptical. They are shown below:

13. ana as'alu su'aalan waahidan rajaa'n(I only ask one question please)
14. ana uriidu seven rajaa'n(I want Seven up please)
15. uriidu 'an aqra' thaalika rajaa'n(I want to read that please)
16. uhibbu 'an 'ara thaalika rajaa'n(I like to see that please)
17. Ali intabih rajaa'n(Ali pay attention please)
18. 'antum rajaa'n(You please)
19. haa'ulaa' rajaa'n(Those please)

Apart from that, the most common form of rajaa'n requests are interrogative constructions: question word questions and yes-no questions. The latter are mostly with first or second persons subjects(see examples 9, 10 and 12).

As can be seen from these yes-no question examples of requests, they are some kind of appeal to the learner's ability to comply, or perhaps the hearer has to comply to some kind of socially accepted imposition like what happens in examining graduate students by senior professors where the student has no choice but to comply. But in all cases, the examples in the data are of benefit to the hearer.

7. Mitigated Commands:

The other type of utterances occurring with 'rajaa'n' is the command. There are(23) examples occurring in the data.

20. arajaa' la taquula haatha(Please do not say this)
21. arjuuk 'adam almuqaata'a(Please do not interrupt)
22. qulaha thaamiyatan arjuuk(Say it again please)
23. jurgal intibaah huna(Please pay attention here)
24. rajaa'n huduu'(Please, quiet)
25. arrajaa' arrajaa' alhuduu'

Beside these there are about six more occurrences of 'rajaa'n' and its derivatives in the data that occur alone. They constitute a complete tone unit, though some of them, especially those in final position seem separated from the surrounding utterance by explicitly marked pauses.

8. The Intonation of 'Rajaa'n':

In the data, the intonation patterns of 'rajaa'n' and its derivatives are largely related to their position in the utterance and to the position of the utterance in the whole discourse. The

utterances containing 'rajaa'n' are analysed to show which type of tone is assigned to them.

In initial position(almost all commands); rajaa'n is always stressed. It is realized with a high level tone in a few instances and in the others it is realized with a falling tone, a rising tone or a falling-rising one.

26. rajaa'n intabih huna(Please pay attention here)

27. arrajaa' huduu'(Please quiet)

28. rajaa' huduu'(Please quiet)

29. arraja'a' ghalqul baab(Please close the door)

30. arj'uuk ya allah(Please my God)

31. raja^va'n lahtha(Please a moment)

32. raja^van(Please)

In final position there are numerous examples of 'rajaa'n' being realized by a rising or a falling-rising one. There are also a few occurrences of rajaa'n with a falling tone or being unstressed as a tail and part of the falling tone.

33. 'Mumkin tanta'therni raj^vaa'n?(Can you wait for me please?)

34. la 'ahad 'yadkhul raj^vaa'n.(No one enters please)

35. la tata'kallam raj^vaa'n.(Do not talk please)

36. Nuriid hu'duu' rajaa'n.(We want quiet)

In examples similar to the ones above of rajaa'n in final position, there are cases where 'rajaa'n' seems more independent prosodically and it sounds more like a separate utterance than an integrated part of the utterance.

The function of intonation for 'rajaa'n' as an isolated utterance is either a positive response to an offer or an answer to a request for permission. For the positive response to an offer, there are some examples with a rise on 'rajaa'n' and others with a fall-rise. These types of tones on 'rajaa'n' give the impression of warm feelings unlike the fall which gives the impression of no feeling or uninvolved. As for the positive response to give impression, they all ended with a fall.

9. The Intonation of Isolated 'rajaa'n':

Most of the rajaa'n occurrences as complete or isolated utterances are rather different or disparate in function. As mentioned above, rajaa'n was categorized as a final utterance,

but was found to be prosodically separate from the surrounding speech. It is preceded and followed by pauses and it also carries a nuclear fall, e.g.

37. la 'yajib an tu'jib 'huna, raja'a'n, 'faqat 'isma'(You shouldn't answer here, please, just listen)

38. 'ibni 'yuunis, arju'uk, 'isma' 'jayyidan(My son Younis, please, listen well)

In the example that follows, 'rajaa'n' carries a fall-rise and the voice continues higher towards the end of the tone unit: la aħad yata'kallam, raj^vaa'n(No one speaks please).

Other examples of isolated 'rajaa'n' are also clearly associated with an earlier request, e.g.

39. - 'Mumkin 'waraqa 'naktub alayha?

- Ta'fththal

- rajaa'n

Rajaa'n here being realized as the tail of the previous rising tone with a level tone. The example above is a request. The response to it was 'bitta'kiid'.

Although 'rajaa'n' is detached from the utterance 'mumkin waraqa naktub 'alayha?', it is prosodically integrated in it being realized as the tail of the previous rising tone.

'Rajaa'n'; as an isolated utterance has a number of functions such as concern, astonishment, scorn or ridicule or routine interaction respectively:

40. la 'taqul 'shaya'n arju'uk(Do not say anything please)

41. la ta'khuthha raj'aa'n lia'nnaha jadiida(Do not take it please because it is new)

42. maa haathaa? Arju'uk(What is this? Please)

43. a. I'maad la yu'riid 'haathaa(Imad does not want this)

b. 'na'am u'riid. u'riid 'shaya'n qa'liila(Yes I want. I want a bit)

c. raja'a'n(Please)

d. rajaa'n(Please)

Here, 'rajaa'n' in 43.c repeats the request. The fall-rise on it is used when the addressee has not completed(Knowles, 1987: 191). The second rajaa'n is uttered with a level tone by a young man to express a familiar routine to him.

10. Summary and Findings:

From the discussion above, the following observations can be made about 'rajaa'n' and its intonation.

Rajaa'n occurs with requests and with commands. Requests containing rajaa'n mostly refer to ability and mostly come final in the utterance. With commands 'rajaa'n' comes mostly initially. When 'rajaa'n' occurs alone as an isolated utterance, its meaning depends in part on the type of intonation used. In final position, rajaa'n may carry a falling, a rising or a falling-rising tone. It may also occur as a tail when it is unstressed and continues the type of tone of the preceding nuclear syllable. Rajaa'n is an appeal to the hearer to comply with the request as acceptable, inviting the hearer to accept it.

Clearly, the intonation of requests adds a further important dimension to the meanings in context. These meanings need to be taken into account when necessary to show to what extent such utterances are polite.

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تنعيم صيغة الطلب في العربية

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الطلب هو فعل من افعال السؤال المهدب فكلمة "رجاءاً" ومشتقاتها "الرجاء" و"أرجوك" و"يُرجى"...الخ. هي واسمات مهمة للطلبات المهدبة في العربية. حيث أن الطلب بدون إحدى هذه الكلمات ربما لايجعل من الطلب طلباً، أو ربما يحيله اقل تأديباً.

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة معنى "رجاءاً" على ضوء تنعيمها. بعبارة أخرى ندرس كيفية تنعيم كلمات الرجاء وكيف أن التنعيم يُضيف بعداً مهماً إلى معاني ألفاظ الطلب.

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