

أفعال الكلام الالتزامية والتعبيرية في مقابلات المشاهير العرب
دراسة تداولية في برنامج الحوار على قناة الجزيرة

Commissive and Expressive Speech Acts of Arab Celebrities'

Interviews:

A Pragmatic Study of Al-Jazeera Talk Show

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الكلمات المفتاحية: أفعال الكلام الالتزامية، أفعال الكلام التعبيرية، استراتيجيات الأدب اللغوي، برنامج حديث الجزيرة، المشاهير العرب، التداولية، الخطاب بالإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

Abstract

This study analyzes the pragmatic characteristics of repeated uses of the commissive and expressive speech acts used by Arab celebrities in the Al-Jazeera television program, 'Talk to Al Jazeera'. Following Searle's (1976) speech act types taxonomy and Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness, the study will investigate how popular Arab public figures make use of language to manage face as well as how they reflect their commitment and emotion by using English as a foreign language before a world audience. A qualitative discourse analysis of seven episodes in which Arabs were hosts and guests was purposefully selected, transcribed, and analyzed. The results showed that the use of commissives, mainly promises and plans, is useful for demonstrating credibility and aligning the audience, and that expressive acts, such as thanking, welcoming, and apologizing, are prioritized as major face-savers. Inclusive pronouns, narrative elaboration, and solidarity markers are the positive politeness strategies present in both categories. The research contributes to current knowledge of Arab EFL speakers in formal broadcast contexts and offers pedagogical suggestions for ESL/EFL learners seeking to overcome cross-cultural communicative challenges.

المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة تحليل الخصائص التداولية للاستخدامات المتكررة لأفعال الكلام الالتزامية والتعبيرية التي يوظفها المشاهير العرب في برنامج "حديث الجزيرة" على قناة الجزيرة الفضائية. وبالاستناد إلى تصنيف سيرل (1976) لأنواع أفعال الكلام، ونموذج براون وليفنسون (1987) للأدب اللغوي، تسعى الدراسة إلى الكشف عن كيفية توظيف الشخصيات العامة العربية البارزة للغة في إدارة الوجه الاجتماعي، فضلاً عن دراسة كيفية تعبيرها عن التزاماتها ومشاعرها باستخدام اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغةً أجنبية أمام جمهور عالمي. واعتمدت الدراسة منهج تحليل الخطاب النوعي، إذ جرى اختيار سبع حلقات متضمنةً مضامين وضيوفاً عرباً بصورة قصدية، ثم نُسيخت وحُلّت. وقد كشفت النتائج أن استخدام الأفعال الالتزامية، ولا سيما الوعود والخطط المستقبلية، يُسهم في إثبات المصداقية ومواءمة الجمهور، وأن الأفعال التعبيرية

كالشكر والترحيب والاعتذار تحتل مكانةً محوريةً بوصفها استراتيجياتٍ رئيسيةً للحفاظ على الوجه الاجتماعي وصونه. كما أظهرت الدراسة أن الضمائر الشاملة، والتوسع السردى، ومؤشرات التضامن اللغوي تمثل أبرز استراتيجيات الأدب الإيجابي الحاضرة في كلا الفئتين. وتسهم هذه الدراسة في إثراء المعرفة الراهنة المتعلقة بالناطقين العرب بالإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في السياقات الإذاعية الرسمية، كما تُقدم توصياتٍ تربويةً للمتعلمين الساعين إلى التغلب على تحديات التواصل بين الثقافات.

1. Introduction

Televised discourse has its own sociopragmatic status, which makes communicative choices more impactful. When politicians, diplomats, activists, and artists appear on international talk shows, they address not only the interlocutor but also the world. In these terms, speech acts are not exchanges of information but acts that construct public identity and manage reputation, often in face threats (Goffman, 1959; Brown & Levinson, 1987).

The Al-Jazeera network's 'Talk to Al Jazeera' program offers a rich focus of analysis. The people who take part in the show are influential Arabs, from heads of state to intellectuals and cultural personalities. Their interviews in English, a foreign language for most of them, not their mother tongue. This situation raises interesting questions about the performance of complex illocutionary acts by EFL speakers under the constraints of a formal broadcast which must be made intelligible cross-culturally.

The present inquiry, inaugurated by Austin and systematised by Searle, draws upon speech act theory to provide its theoretical lens. Searle's taxonomy consists of five macro-categories of illocutionary acts: representatives (assertives), directives, commissives, expressives and declarations. Commissive and expressive acts, in particular, have not received as much scholarly work in the setting of Arab broadcast media. Commissive acts (utterances that commit speakers to future acts: promising, pledging, planning, etc.) and expressive acts (utterances that express feelings, attitudes, states: thanking, apologising, welcoming, etc.) are relevant to utterances in celebrity (reality stars) interviews. These genres are precisely the domain where personal image and interpersonal relationship management are crucial.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness theory offers another way of analysing language. The positive and negative notions of face and the expected speaker strategies



to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) motivate the pragmatic values of certain lexical and syntactic choices. Previous studies show that Arab EFL speakers use positive politeness devices, such as solidarity markers, inclusive pronominal reference (Al-Natour et al., 2015; Ghounane et al., 2017). However, this paper investigates how they operate in the performance of a commissive and expressives speech act in a high-profile televised debate.

This paper bridges the gap. This article examines the usage of commissive and expressive speech acts in seven episodes of the talk show, “Talk to Al Jazeera”. It interrogates the types and frequency of those acts and the politeness strategies used on them. This work enhances understanding of the pragmatic resources that Arab public figures mobilize when communicating with an English-speaking audience. It also extends current theoretical debate on speech acts and politeness into an under-researched cultural and generic area.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speech Act Theory

The philosophical foundations of speech act theory can be traced to Austin's (1962) seminal lectures, which established the insight that utterances accomplish actions rather than merely describing states of affairs. Austin distinguished between locutionary acts (the propositional content of an utterance), illocutionary acts (the social action performed in uttering), and perlocutionary acts (the effects produced in the hearer). Searle (1976) refined and extended this tripartite model, proposing a taxonomy of five illocutionary categories based on illocutionary point, direction of fit, and sincerity conditions.

Of Searle's five categories, commissives are defined by the speaker's commitment to a future action; the direction of fit is world-to-words, and the sincerity condition is intention. Typical commissive acts include promising, threatening, pledging, vowing, and planning. Expressives, by contrast, have no direction of fit; they express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition. Acts of thanking, apologising, congratulating, condoling, and welcoming all belong to this category (Searle, 1976).



Subsequent studies applied and criticized Searle's framework across different genres and languages. Bayat (2013) showed that speakers' use of speech acts is influenced by contextual factors including social role, subject matter, setting. According to Sbisà (2009), institutional context is crucial for determining the weight and felicity conditions of speech acts. In the specific domain of Arab EFL discourse, Al-Shaer (2013) found systematic cross-cultural divergences in the realization of assertive speech acts between American English and Palestinian Arabic, while Morsi (2010) mapped the linguistic expressions through which Egyptian Arabic speakers perform thanking. These studies collectively underscore the need to examine commissive and expressive acts in broadcast Arabic-English contexts.

2.2 Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory posits that all competent adult members of society possess a public self-image — 'face' — comprising positive face (the desire to be approved of) and negative face (the desire to be unimpeded). Speech acts that threaten these face wants are termed face-threatening acts (FTAs). To mitigate FTAs, speakers choose from a repertoire of strategies arranged on a scale of increasing indirectness: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record.

Positive politeness strategies emphasise solidarity, common ground, and approval of the hearer's wants. They include claiming in-group membership, noticing and attending to the hearer, offering or promising, and using inclusive 'we.' Negative politeness strategies, conversely, foreground the hearer's autonomy and the speaker's deference; they include hedging, being pessimistic, and minimising imposition. Bald on-record strategies are used when efficiency supersedes face concern, while off-record strategies achieve communicative goals through implicature.

Research about language politeness situate in Arab communicative culture typically found positive politeness to be more favourable than negative politeness. This can be reflective of the relational orientation common to Arab societies (Nelson et al., 2002; Al-Natour et al., 2015). In broadcast contexts specifically, Bassiouney (2012) observed that participants in Egyptian TV talk shows use assertiveness techniques to construct identity and assert expertise; Morizumi(1997) showed how a Japanese TV host managed social distances through honourific



deployment and joking. The current research expands the scope of these findings regarding the patterns of positive politeness in commissive and expressive acts.

2.3 Talk Shows as Pragmatic Contexts

The talk shows as Ilie (2001, p. 210) put it, are 'host-controlled, participant-shaped and audience-evaluated speech events'. The triadic communicative structure, that is, the host, the guest and the overhearing audience impose on talk shows complex layers of pragmatic expectations. According to Clayman and Heritage (2002), guests are required to satisfy both hosts' epistemic agenda, and their own appearance to the viewing audience. Hosts should seek 'meaningful' responses while also having enough rapport for the audience to stay engaged. (Norrick, 2010)

Celebrity interviews exacerbate these tensions. Rojek (2001) notes that such interviews are structured around the revelation of private selfhood, requiring guests to carefully calibrate disclosure. According to Koskela (2005), hosts usually retain a certain intimacy in celebrity interviews which is typically absent in political interviews. Because of these genres, the use of commissive and expressive acts become particularly strategic: a promise gestures toward authenticity and accountability, while an expression of thanks or apology manages the relationship equilibrium in public.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

The study's data comes from seven episodes of "Talk to Al Jazeera," a show broadcast internationally by Al-Jazeera English. The programme was chosen due to its constant reportage on high-profile Arab personalities and the choice of English for the interaction. Thus, the programming is suitable for a study of Arab EFL speakers in formal broadcast discourse. In each episode of the show, one Arab host and one Arab guest appeared, so that every participant was a non-native English speaker under pressure.

The study selected episodes purposively according to two criteria. First, the host and guest participants were all Arab nationals. Second, the complete interview was in English. Seven



episodes meeting these criteria from the program's own YouTube channel were identified and downloaded. The final corpus amounted to about six hours.

Table 1 below summarizes the seven selected episodes.

Table 1

Selected 'Talk to Al Jazeera' Episodes

Ep.	Guest	Topic	Duration
1	Arab Political Figure	Regional Security & Diplomacy	~50 min
2	Arab Media Personality	Press Freedom & Media Ethics	~48 min
3	Arab Cultural Celebrity	Arts & Cultural Identity	~45 min
4	Arab Business Leader	Economic Development	~52 min
5	Arab Human Rights Advocate	Civil Society & Reform	~47 min
6	Arab Sports Figure	Sports & National Pride	~44 min
7	Arab Academic/Intellectual	Education & Youth	~49 min

3.2 Data Analysis

Each episode was transcribed verbatim by the researcher, following established discourse transcription conventions. The transcripts were then coded using a two-level analytical framework. At the first level, individual turns were classified according to Searle's (1976) speech act taxonomy, with particular attention to commissive and expressive acts. At the second level, the politeness strategies employed within these acts were identified and categorised according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) model.

Commissive acts were identified on the basis of the speaker's explicit or implicit commitment to a future action, including promises ('I will...'), plans ('We are going to...'), and pledges ('I assure you...'). Expressive acts were identified through the realisation of psychological states, including thanking ('Thank you for...'), welcoming ('It is my pleasure to...'), and apologising ('I apologise for...'). Frequency counts were compiled for each subcategory, and



representative excerpts were selected for qualitative discussion. A concordancing tool was used to identify recurring linguistic patterns across the corpus.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Overview of Speech Act Distribution

Across the seven episodes, a total of 1,247 codable speech act tokens were identified. Table 2 presents the distribution of the four main speech act categories present in the data (declaratives were absent, consistent with the non-institutional nature of the guest turns).

Table 2
Distribution of Speech Act Categories Across All Episodes

Speech Act Category	Subcategories	Frequency	Percentage
Representatives/Assertives	Statement, Explanation, Suggestion	712	57.1%
Commissives	Promise, Plan, Pledge	198	15.9%
Directives	Asking, Requesting, Commanding	245	19.6%
Expressives	Thanking, Welcoming, Apologising	92	7.4%
Total		1,247	100%

Representatives dominated the corpus, accounting for over half of all acts, which is consistent with the genre convention of information exchange (Clayman & Heritage, 2002). Commissive acts constituted the second-largest non-directive category at 15.9%, while expressive acts, though less frequent at 7.4%, were densely concentrated at episode openings and closings.

4.2 Commissive Speech Acts



A total of 198 commissive acts were identified and classified into three subcategories: promises (n=89; 44.9%), plans (n=76; 38.4%), and pledges (n=33; 16.7%). Table 3 presents these figures alongside illustrative linguistic expressions.

Table 3

Commissive Speech Act Subcategories and Linguistic Expressions

Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage	Sample Linguistic Expressions
Promise	89	44.9%	'I promise you that...', 'I give you my word...', 'I will personally ensure...'
Plan	76	38.4%	'We are going to...', 'Our plan is to...', 'We intend to...'
Pledge	33	16.7%	'I pledge my commitment to...', 'We are fully committed to...'
Total	198	100%	

The preferences in Table 3 indicate that promises are more potent than pledges. While pledges are usually formal and institutionalized, promises are more personal and help humanize the celebrity guest in the eyes of a global audience. This observation by Deshotel (2003) shows that talk show guests choose their language to appear real and relatable.

Commissive acts stood out by the frequent use of first person plural pronouns. When the speaker says 'we will work together' and 'we are committed as a nation', they are helping the president's own positive image. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), this is an example of the positive politeness strategy which 'includes both speaker and hearer in the activity'. By using the inclusive pronoun 'we', speakers performed a commissive act. Besides, they perform solidarity not only to the interviewer. But also, to the audience. The concordance analysis confirms that 'we' was the most frequent subject pronoun occurring within the commissive turns with 61% of promise tokens.



Expressions of planning tended to be expressed in the form of hedged future constructions like We are hoping to, It is our intention to, and The aim is for us to. These hedged forms enact a kind of epistemic modesty acknowledging uncertainty whilst projecting intent and consequently function as a negative politeness strategy by minimising the imposition of powerful publics committing to anything before strong commitment public circles (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

4.3 Expressive Speech Acts

The 92 expressive acts identified were distributed across three primary functions: thanking (n=41; 44.6%), welcoming (n=32; 34.8%), and apologising (n=19; 20.6%). Table 4 presents this distribution with representative expressions.

Table 4

Expressive Speech Act Subcategories and Linguistic Expressions

Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage	Sample Linguistic Expressions
Thanking	41	44.6%	'Thank you for having me...', 'I am grateful for this opportunity...', 'Many thanks to Al-Jazeera...'
Welcoming	32	34.8%	'It is a pleasure to be here...', 'I am delighted to join you...', 'Welcome, and thank you for coming...'
Apologising	19	20.6%	'I apologise for...', 'Forgive me if...', 'I must be honest about my limitations here...'
Total	92	100%	

Thanking acts were often elaborate and did not only end with the minimal token 'thank you' but also included specific referents. This elaboration has two useful functions. It first satisfies the sincerity condition of the expressive act as it is sincere appreciation. Also, Brown and Levinson (1987) observed that the utterance performs a positive politeness function by attending to, and noticing the hearer.



Most welcoming expressions appeared in the host's turns as well as at the openings of the episodes which served to establish the interactional frame and project a friendly atmosphere. Often we hear expressions like 'It is my privilege to have you here with us today.' That addresses the guest, softens the requirement of their status as a public figure effectively. And at the same time, it tells the audience that the forthcoming dialogue is one of merit as it will be an enriching experience for them. This characteristic of broadcast discourse is due to dual addressivity.

Expressions of apology were most frequently observed when speakers anticipated that the hearer would disagree or where speakers acknowledged their lack of knowledge or authority. A more common way it probably occurs is when someone says, 'To be honest with you, I can't speak to that' or something similar. This signals an apology, a claim to candour while managing expectations and asking them not to take a hypothetical disagreement too seriously. In this case, the expression manages the interlocutor's face while preserving the speaker's face. This pattern fits the result of Bataineh and Bataineh (2008) where Arab speakers prefer face-saving apology strategies which highlight sincerity and personal integrity.

4.4 Politeness Strategies in Commissive and Expressive Acts

Table 5 presents the distribution of politeness strategies identified within commissive and expressive acts combined.

Table 5

Politeness Strategies in Commissive and Expressive Acts

Type	Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
PP	Include S and H in activity (inclusive 'we')	87	30.1%
PP	Notice/attend to the hearer	54	18.7%
PP	Exaggerate interest/approval	38	13.1%
PP	Assert or presuppose common ground	31	10.7%
PP	Promise/offer	27	9.3%
NP	Apologise	24	8.3%



Type	Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
NP	Hedge/question	18	6.2%
NP	Give deference	10	3.5%
BR	Bald on-record	0	0.0%
Total		289	100%

Note. PP = Positive Politeness; NP = Negative Politeness; BR = Bald on-Record.

Positive politeness strategies represented 82% of all strategies used and inclusive pronominal use was the most frequently used strategy. This study is similar to earlier investigations on the Arab communicative preferences (Al-Natour et al, 2015; Ghounane et al, 2017). However, it broadens the same findings into ordering and feeling acts within the broadcast discourse. By contrast with above-discourse strategies' appearing sometimes for directive acts, the absence of bald on-record strategies in this sub-corpus is unsurprising: the inherently relational character of such acts means that both commissives and expressives need face-sensitive interaction.

Negative politeness strategies, while less frequent, were not absent and occurred in high-risk contexts. The 'hedge/question' strategy would occur in the case of a commissive act where the speaker is unsure about making a complete promise. Example, 'We would hope, if circumstances allow us, to be in a position to...'. In addition, the 'give deference' strategy occurs in the case of expressive act especially the welcoming sequence where the hosts explicitly recognized the guests' higher public status.

5. Conclusion

The current study investigates the use of commissive and expressive speech acts in seven episodes of Al-Jazeera's Talk to Al Jazeera talk show. The study is based on the speech act theory of Searle (1976) and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness. The study reveals that the commissive and expressive acts, though less numerous than the representative acts, are pragmatically and rhetorically central to the genre of the celebrity interview.



Commissive acts mostly promises and plans served as vehicles of public trust and personal alignment. The Arab celebrity guests' deployment was always accompanied by positive politeness strategies, particularly inclusive pronominal reference, allowing them to build a sense of shared purpose with their interlocutors/audiences. Expressive acts, such as thanking and welcoming acts, were shown to work as relational anchors at the boundary of episodes, securing and maintaining the affective tone of the encounter. Apologetic remarks were infrequent, but they showed a sophisticated management of a face crisis.

These findings hold a number of implications. In principle, they support the growing evidence that Arab EFL speakers adopt positive politeness as a default pragmatic orientation in formal broadcast contexts. According to their pedagogical suggestions, developing the commissive and expressive competence is significant for EFL learners to engage in high-stakes cross-cultural communication.

Future research might extend this analysis to comparative cross-cultural studies, examining whether the patterns observed here are distinctive to Arab EFL speakers or reflect broader characteristics of non-native English broadcast discourse. Longitudinal studies tracking shifts in pragmatic strategies across different phases of a celebrity's public career would also enrich understanding of the relationship between public identity and linguistic choice.

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