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The role of religion in shaping politeness during greeting encounters in Arabic

A matter of conflict or understanding

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Bouchara, Abdelaziz, Qorchi, Bouchra: The role of religion in shaping politeness during greeting encounters in Arabic. A matter of conflict or understanding, Hamburg, Anchor Academic Publishing 2016

Buch-ISBN: 978-3-96067-055-1
PDF-eBook-ISBN: 978-3-96067-555-6
Druck/Herstellung: Anchor Academic Publishing, Hamburg, 2016

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek:
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Bibliographical Information of the German National Library:
The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography. Detailed bibliographic data can be found at: http://dnb.d-nb.de

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Hermannstal 119k, 22119 Hamburg
http://www.diplomica-verlag.de, Hamburg 2016
Printed in Germany

Abstract

This study investigates, from a cross-cultural pragmatics framework, the motivations and reasons which induce Moroccans in particular, and Arabs in general, to invoke Qur'anic verses and religious lexicons in their daily politeness discourse. By focusing on the speech act of greeting, this study attempts to show that greetings are ordinary day-to-day events, which often encapsulate a lot of different cultural values that may cause misunderstandings. Based on data collected from natural interaction between Arabs and Germans, Arabs seem inclined to show politeness when greeting one another by using religious vocabulary and giving religious praises. In addition, the use of religion as a politeness strategy appears to function as a way of protecting the self-image of both the speaker and the hearer. Furthermore, the findings of this study also reveal that by resorting to the use of this politeness strategy Moroccans seem to reflect their firm belief and the importance they attach to the Qur'an and, more especially, to the question of fate and destiny in Islam. As a result, it is not the linguistic expression itself but rather the pragmatic function of the utterance that seems to determine the use and interpretation of politeness strategies in (Moroccan) Arabic.

Keywords: Speech act of greeting, religious expressions as strategies of politeness, indirectness vs. directness, pragmatic functions, intercultural communication.

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1 Introduction*

Politeness is one of the very important issues in the field of sociolinguistics and pragmatics, as it can be seen in almost every type of our interactions, especially in conversational conflicts. Since the evolving of politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1978), cross-cultural pragmatics has gained the attention of many researchers in this field. They have investigated and compared politeness behavior in different languages and cultures. However, it has been remarked that the Arab society has been far less investigated in cross-cultural and contrastive pragmatics (cf., for example Umar 2004; Al-Khatani 2005). Therefore, this book widens the scope of cross-cultural pragmatics by investigating politeness in (Moroccan) Arabic. In this study we will focus on the behavior of Arab and German speakers with regard to one type of politeness, namely the speech act of greeting. As a community that is claimed to have strong social ties among its members (Ahlawat and Saghal 2010), speakers of Arabic are expected to exhibit differences which distinguish them from speakers of other communities. This study provides one with the opportunity to understand the worldview of Arabic speakers through their speech behavior which is strongly influenced by the Qur'an. The hypothesis the present study puts forward is that religion, as a communication resource, provides Moroccans in particular, and Arabs in general with an opportunity to execute their action without staking their self-image or their interlocutor's. In addition, this study points out the motivations and reasons that induce Muslims to invoke the religious lexicon, along with its pragmatic force, in their communication in everyday life, such as greeting encounters. We consider it appropriate to place this investigation within a cross-cultural pragmatics framework, though Brown and Levinson's politeness theory was necessary for our theoretical approach. Moreover, the findings of this study reveal that Brown and Levinson's theory (1987) can retain its universality, if its notion of face is revised. Finally, the implications of this study for foreign language teaching and cross-cultural training indicate that politeness and face concerns in different cultures should be part of any language teaching and learning process.

Hopefully, besides being informative, especially to scholars from other fields of intercultural communication research, the study should contribute to raising the awareness of sociolinguists in particular with respect to the role which religion plays in shaping politeness in Arabic and to serious confusion and misunderstandings that may come into being, when

* This study is based on a paper published by Bouchara in *Journal of Politeness Research* 2015; 11(1): 71–98.

communicators from different cultural backgrounds cannot identify the pragmatic (implicit or indirect) meaning of their interlocutor's utterance. It should also, as far as attempting to solve problems is concerned, emphasize the need to devise cross-cultural trainings more acutely sensitive to Arab countries, and thus to adopt a more suitable cultural-linguistic approach in foreign language teaching.

2 Moroccan society and how politeness is carried out among (Moroccan) Arabic speakers

Two examples of intercultural communication should serve as a starting point for this study.

First scene

Suppose you work as a German guest lecturer at a Moroccan university and your Moroccan colleague invites you home for dinner. Because you like *couscous* with meat, you eat so much that you leave no room for any further course. Unexpectedly the second course comes, which consists of chicken and French fries. The host offers you a piece of chicken. As you feel you have had enough to eat, you return the offer by saying: "Oh! No, thank you". However, the guest smiles and insists that you eat more. You reply, "No, really. I can't", to which the host responds: "Oh, come on, just a little more". You refuse again, but he still insists that you eat, handing you heartily a piece of chicken. The situation becomes embarrassing.

Second scene

This time you invite a Moroccan colleague in the afternoon to your apartment. After he has taken his seat, you ask him whether he would like to take coffee or tea. He answers, "No, thanks". Because you feel like it, you make yourself a cup of coffee and you ask again if your guest still does not want a cup. Since he apparently seems to reject your offer, you drink your coffee while you talk to him. Your guest is surprised because he does not get anything to drink or eat. He goes home disappointed, but – much worse – your behavior is interpreted as strange, if not disrespectful.

What happens in these two situations? Why do the interactions lead to unpleasant feelings and misunderstandings? In these examples we are dealing with misunderstanding resulting from cross-cultural misinterpretation. Lack of knowledge about cultural communication conventions led to such misunderstanding. In the Moroccan context a guest to whom something is offered is expected not to accept this immediately for fear to appear greedy. On the other hand, the host should try to bring the guest to accept the offer. In fact, Germans generally seem to feel uncomfortable or even angry when the host is so persistent, when they have clearly rejected something. In contrast, Moroccans are more likely to be disappointed when German hosts do not repeat their offer and urge their guest to eat because it is considered ill-mannered and impolite to accept the