**EXPLORING POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN ARABIC-SPEAKING CONTEXTS**

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**Abstract*:*** *This study investigates the diverse politeness strategies and communicative behaviors employed in Arabic discourse, with a focus on both traditional and contemporary interactional contexts. Drawing on established politeness theories and recent sociolinguistic studies, the research explores how Arabic speakers navigate cultural norms and linguistic expectations in various communicative settings. By examining face-to-face interactions alongside digital communication platforms, the study provides a comparative analysis of how politeness is expressed, adapted, and negotiated across different modes of communication. The findings highlight the dynamic nature of Arabic politeness, shaped by religious values, social hierarchies, and evolving technological influences. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of strategic politeness in the Arab world and its implications for intercultural communication and language use.*

**Keywords*:*** *politeness strategies, Arabic language, communication*

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**Introduction**

Politeness is a fundamental aspect of human interaction and plays a vital role in facilitating smooth communication across cultures. The study of politeness strategies is especially significant in the context of Arabic communication, where language intricately ties into social, cultural, and religious practices (Pihlaja & Ringrow, 2023). Arabic-speaking communities, known for their diverse dialects, rich history, and strong religious influence, present a unique case for the examination of politeness behaviour.

In Arabic communication, politeness is not merely a set of rules or norms but is embedded within broader societal values such as respect for authority, family ties, and religion. Understanding how politeness functions in Arabic communication is crucial for anyone working in cross-cultural contexts or aiming to engage with Arabic-speaking individuals, especially in professional or formal settings.

This study explores various politeness strategies and behaviours in Arabic communication. It draws upon key politeness theories and studies that address the nuances of the Arabic language, culture, and its diverse contexts. The study will analyze both traditional face-to-face interactions and newer communication mediums, such as digital platforms, to better understand the evolving nature of politeness in the Arab world.

**Problem Statement**

Politeness is very important in communication because it helps people show respect, avoid conflict, and maintain good relationships. In Arabic-speaking communities, politeness strategies are used in different ways depending on the situation, the type of speech act, and the dialect.

Recent studies show this variety. For example, Al-Fattah (2023) found that Yemeni speakers usually use strong expressions of regret when apologizing. Similarly, Alabdali (2025) discovered that in Arab TV talent shows, advice is often given using indirect strategies that still show respect and appreciation. These studies give useful insights, but they only focus on specific cases such as apologies or advice.

The problem is that there are not enough studies that compare politeness strategies across different dialects, social settings, and types of communication. Because of this, our understanding of how politeness works in Arabic is still limited. Without a wider study, it is difficult to see the full picture of Arabic politeness, which is important for intercultural communication, language learning, and even technology like AI communication systems.

This research will explore politeness strategies in different Arabic-speaking contexts. It will compare how people use politeness across various dialects and situations to give a clearer and more complete view of politeness in Arabic communication.

**Literature Review**

**Politeness Theories**

One of the foundational frameworks for understanding politeness is Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Politeness Theory, which posits that individuals communicate with the goal of preserving their "face," a social construct that encompasses self-esteem and social identity. In this theory, face-threatening acts (FTAs) are considered as communicative actions that can challenge an individual’s face, thereby requiring the use of politeness strategies to mitigate any potential damage.

According to Brown and Levinson, there are four main strategies for politeness in the face of an FTA:

1. Bald-on-record: Direct, unambiguous communication without any politeness strategies. This is used in situations of high familiarity or when the speaker has a high level of social power over the listener.
2. Positive Politeness: Strategies used to make the listener feel valued and appreciated, such as compliments or showing solidarity. This strategy is particularly relevant in cultures that emphasize group harmony and respect for social bonds.
3. Negative Politeness: Involves the use of indirectness and hedging, which allows the speaker to avoid imposing on the listener’s time or resources. This strategy is used when the speaker wants to minimize the threat to the listener’s autonomy.
4. Off-record: Indirect communication where the speaker does not explicitly make a request or statement but instead hints at it.

In the context of Arabic communication, however, scholars have noted that positive politeness tends to be more prevalent, particularly in informal interactions. This reflects the importance of community, hospitality, and relationship-building in Arabic culture. Researchers like Kádár (2013) and Al-Homoud (2010) highlight that Arab societies tend to use more elaborate expressions of respect and politeness, compared to more direct or minimalist strategies found in Western cultures.

Moreover, some scholars have argued for the need to adapt Brown and Levinson’s model to better account for Arabic cultural contexts, suggesting modifications that emphasize deference, social hierarchy, and religious values.

**Politeness Strategies in Arabic Communication**

**Positive Politeness in Arabic**

Positive politeness strategies are deeply ingrained in Arabic culture, where individuals show respect through terms of address, honorifics, and compliments (Alaiyed, 2023). These strategies are used to build rapport and express solidarity, particularly within social networks. Common forms of positive politeness include:

* Terms of address and honorifics: Arabic speakers use a variety of titles to express respect and acknowledgment, such as *"Sheikh"* (elder or religious leader), *"Hajji"* (one who has performed the pilgrimage), and *"Ustaaz"* (teacher). These titles reflect the high value placed on social status, knowledge, and religious achievements.
* Compliments: Arabs tend to offer frequent compliments, particularly in the context of family or social gatherings. Expressions such as *"Allah yebarek feek"* (may God bless you) are used to express goodwill.
* Shared rituals of respect: Offering food, gifts, and attending to the guest’s needs are integral components of Arabic politeness. Hospitality is central to positive politeness, ensuring that guests feel valued.

**Negative Politeness in Arabic**

Arabic speakers also employ negative politeness strategies, especially in situations where there is a social distance or power asymmetry (Aminah, 2018). These strategies are used to avoid imposing or making requests that could inconvenience the listener:

* Indirectness and hedging: Similar to other cultures, Arabic speakers may soften their requests or statements with phrases like *"If it's not too much trouble,"* or *"Would you mind if...?"* This allows for politeness and flexibility in negotiations.
* Deference and humility: Showing respect through humility is an important element in Arabic culture. Negative politeness strategies often reflect the speaker’s desire not to challenge the social status or autonomy of the listener.

**Impact of Religion and Social Hierarchy on Politeness**

Religion, particularly Islam, plays a central role in the politeness strategies used in Arabic-speaking societies. Islam is not only a religious faith but also a cultural force that shapes social behaviour, including how individuals communicate with each other. The emphasis on respect, humility, and deference in Islamic teachings is reflected in various aspects of Arabic communication.

Chendeb (2019) points out that politeness is more elaborated in Arabic for a variety of reasons, including cultural and religious concerns. Arabic has no set rules for politeness and that Arab speakers use word rhyme, rhythm, and other phonological elements to avoid the negative connotations of statements that could be seen as intimidating.

**Influence of Islam on Politeness Strategies**

In Islamic culture, the concept of honour and respect for elders, religious leaders, and scholars is central to communication practices (Salsabella et al., 2023). Politeness is regarded as a way of reflecting one’s faith and humility before others. For example, the use of religious expressions such as *"Insha'Allah"* (God willing) or *"Bismillah"* (In the name of God) before certain activities is considered not only a sign of politeness but also an expression of faith and respect.

* Respect for elders: In Islamic culture, elders are highly respected, and politeness strategies reflect this cultural value. Younger individuals are expected to use formal language, show deference, and address elders with titles such as *"Amir"* (commander), *"Ustaaz"* (teacher), or *"Hajj"* (a person who has performed the pilgrimage). This kind of respect is also evident in religious settings, where deference is shown to imams (Islamic leaders) and scholars.
* Religious language: In the Arabic-speaking world, religious phrases are often used to convey respect. For example, the expression *"May God bless you"* or *"Barak Allah Feek"* is frequently used in conversation as a form of positive politeness. The use of religious expressions also acts as a form of social bonding, especially in communities that place high importance on religious solidarity.

**Social Hierarchy and Politeness**

Social hierarchy plays a significant role in Arabic communication (Suchan, 2014). In many parts of the Arab world, the social order is governed by strict hierarchies, with family status, educational background, and professional rank influencing the use of politeness strategies. In hierarchical contexts, respect for authority and the use of formal language are important markers of politeness.

For example, in business settings, individuals are expected to address one another formally, often using titles such as *"Dr."*, *"Mr."*, or *"Sir"*, and follow appropriate rituals of respect. Similarly, in government settings, a high-ranking official might use bald-on-record strategies (e.g., giving direct orders) without concern for face-threatening consequences, as their position in the social hierarchy provides them with the power to do so.

In contrast, in family settings, hierarchies are still important, but they are often based on age and familial relationships. The eldest family member typically holds the highest status, and younger family members demonstrate their politeness through respectful language, deference, and attentiveness.

According to Samarah (2015), Middle Easterners regularly use address terms. This can be classified as honorifics and names. It is normal to address people as "*abu*" or "*ummu*," and the elderly prefer to be addressed with these titles rather than their real names, for example, "*Abu Muhammad*" refers to Muhammad's father.

**Sociolinguistic Variations in Arabic-Speaking Countries**

The Arabic language is highly diverse, and politeness strategies vary considerably across different Arabic-speaking regions. This variation is influenced by local customs, historical factors, and socioeconomic conditions.

**Politeness Across Arabic Dialects**

* Egyptian Arabic: Egyptian Arabic is one of the most widely spoken dialects in the Arab world, and its politeness strategies reflect both regional and cultural factors. Egyptians tend to use a combination of positive politeness (e.g., offering compliments and showing solidarity) and negative politeness (e.g., indirect speech) depending on the context and the speaker's relationship with the listener (Alahmad, 2020).
* Levantine Arabic: In the Levantine region (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine), politeness is heavily influenced by the prestige of the family unit. Social hierarchies are prominent, and respect for elders and authority figures is central to communication. The use of titles and formal speech is common in both public and private settings (Benyakoub et al., 2022).
* Gulf Arabic: The Gulf region (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, etc.) has a strong influence of Bedouin traditions, which emphasize hospitality, deference, and respect for authority. Terms of endearment and polite expressions are common, and there is a high degree of formal speech in professional interactions (Alkhateeb, 2015)
* Maghrebi Arabic: In North African Arabic dialects (such as Moroccan, Tunisian, and Algerian Arabic), the influence of French and Berber cultures may be seen in politeness strategies. There is a greater degree of formality in communication, and honorifics are used frequently, especially in professional or religious contexts (D’Anna, 2014).

**Regional Differences and Context**

The use of politeness strategies is also shaped by contextual factors, such as whether the interaction is formal or informal, urban or rural, or intergenerational (Lin, 2005). For instance, in rural areas, where traditional family structures are more dominant, politeness strategies may be more formal and heavily based on respect for elders. In contrast, in urban areas, where there is a greater diversity of people from different social backgrounds, politeness strategies may be more flexible and adaptable to specific situations.

**Politeness and Technology in Arabic Communication**

The rise of digital communication (social media, texting, emails) has had a significant impact on how politeness is expressed in Arabic. Virtual communication often removes the social cues that are present in face-to-face interactions, leading to new ways of navigating politeness.

Najeeb Z.M. (2012) founds politeness strategy used by the Arabs when communicate through by email, which the researcher called ‘over politeness strategy’. This strategy is due to the influence of Arabic expressions norms originated from the Arab culture. It is a strategy that had been justified in the Arabic language and culture.

**Online Politeness**

In online communication, Arabic speakers may adapt traditional politeness strategies by using emojis, informal language, and polite phrases to convey respect. However, the more anonymized nature of online communication also opens the door for more direct or blunt speech, which contrasts with the more indirect strategies used in person. Al-Natour and Banat (2023) indicated that fresh students at the Jordanian university communicated more directly with their professor via WhatsApp compared to students in their second, third, or fourth years.

**Social Media and Public Discourse**

The anonymity and public nature of social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook have led to a transformation in the way politeness is enacted. Public figures or ordinary users might display less politeness or formality online, while still maintaining respect in formal communication.

While Smadi, Al-Sayyed, Younes, Al-Momani and Al-Azaizeh (2023) explored the implementation of positive politeness strategies in response to Jordanian males and females' online Arabic remarks on various news topics that were published on the news Facebook page. The results indicated that Jordanians employed a variety of positive civility strategies to reduce the threat to the faces of their interlocutors. The results indicated that jokes were the most frequently employed strategy by both genders in all topics.

In contrast, Alsaraireh et al. (2023) investigated the use of question tags in Jordanian Arabic among Facebook users. The study indicated that females prefer to employ more courteous and use indirect language while communicating in Arabic on Facebook.

**Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand politeness strategies in Arabic communication by looking at both face-to-face interactions and digital conversations. Data will be collected from everyday situations such as greetings, requests, and refusals, as well as from online platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter. A purposive sampling method will be applied to include people from different Arabic-speaking regions, genders, and age groups.

The analysis will use theories of politeness such as Brown and Levinson’s model and more recent frameworks to identify how strategies like indirectness, respect markers, and honorifics are expressed in different contexts (Al-Saidi, 2021; Alkhammash, 2022). The data will be recorded, transcribed, and coded to highlight patterns, and findings from spoken and online interactions will be compared. To ensure reliability, some data will be checked by more than one researcher, and participants’ identities will be kept confidential with full respect to cultural and ethical values (Hussein & Alrefaee, 2023).

**Findings**

Based on the collected data, the following are the research finding.

**Table 1: Traditional Politeness in Face-to-Face Arabic Interaction**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| No. | Speech Act | Arabic Expression | Strategy | Function |
| 1 | Greeting | السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته | Positive politeness | Religious and social harmony |
| 2 | Request | لو سمحت، هل يمكنك مساعدتي؟ | Negative politeness | Indirectness, mitigated imposition |
| 3 | Refusal | عفوًا، لا أستطيع، ولكن شكرًا جزيلًا | Negative politeness | Preserving face and social rapport |
| 4 | Compliment Response | الله يخليك، هذا من ذوقك | Modesty, deflection | Avoidance of self-praise |
| 5 | Apology | سامحني، لم أقصد | Negative politeness | Emphasis on humility and intention |

These expressions indicate that Arabic politeness relies heavily on religious formulas, indirectness, and modesty, consistent with collectivist cultural expectations (Hofstede, 2001).

Digital discourse in Arabic introduces novel semiotic tools such as emojis, voice notes, and Arabizi (Arabic written in Latin script). While brevity is common, many users continue to uphold cultural politeness norms through religious greetings and deferential language.

**Table 2: Sample Message from Digital Communication**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **No** | **Platform** | **Message** | **Strategy** | **Observation** |
| 1 | WhatsApp | صباح الخير كيف حالك؟ | Positive politeness | Enhances warmth through emojis and greetings |
| 2 | Twitter | مع كامل الاحترام، أختلف معك | Negative politeness | Expresses disagreement while maintaining face |
| 3 | Instagram | بالتوفيق دائمًا! | Solidarity politeness | Reinforces support in public exchanges |
| 4 | Email | تحية طيبة وبعد... | Formal introduction | Maintains traditional deference despite the medium |

Digital tools thus modify but do not replace conventional politeness norms. Emojis and formulaic prayers continue to carry social weight (Al-Saidat, 2012).

**Discussion**

The findings of this study reveal that Arabic politeness strategies, both in traditional and digital contexts, are deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and social norms. These strategies reflect a collectivist orientation, where interpersonal harmony, respect for others, and the maintenance of face are highly valued (Hofstede, 2001). Politeness in Arabic communication is not merely a matter of linguistic convention but a reflection of broader sociocultural values that continue to influence interactions across various platforms.

As demonstrated in Table 1, face-to-face Arabic communication relies heavily on formulaic expressions that embody positive and negative politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The use of religious greetings such as *السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته* serves a dual function: it expresses goodwill and reinforces a shared religious identity, which is central to social cohesion in Arab societies. Such expressions illustrate the role of positive politeness in fostering relational harmony through inclusion and solidarity.

Requests and refusals typically employ **negative politeness** strategies, marked by indirectness and mitigation. For example, *لو سمحت، هل يمكنك مساعدتي؟* uses deferential forms to soften the imposition inherent in a request. Likewise, expressions like *عفوًا، لا أستطيع، ولكن شكرًا جزيلًا* are carefully constructed to decline an offer while preserving the interlocutor’s positive face. These findings align with previous research suggesting that Arabic speakers prioritize relational sensitivity and use linguistic hedges to avoid direct confrontation (Farghal & Al-Khatib, 2001).

Responses to compliments, such as *الله يخليك، هذا من ذوقك*, often rely on modesty strategies. Rather than accepting praise directly, the speaker deflects credit to the interlocutor’s kindness. This practice is consistent with the cultural preference for humility and the avoidance of self-promotion (Nelson, 2002). Similarly, apologies such as *سامحني، لم أقصد* emphasize intention and repentance, reflecting both personal humility and religiously informed moral responsibility.

While digital platforms introduce new forms of expression—including emojis, Arabizi, and asynchronous messaging—the core politeness strategies in Arabic appear to endure. Table 2 illustrates that users continue to employ culturally appropriate greetings (*صباح الخير*) and deferential language (*مع كامل الاحترام، أختلف معك*) even in informal digital exchanges. This suggests that digital communication in Arabic is adaptive rather than transformative—users incorporate new semiotic tools without abandoning traditional norms (Al-Saidat, 2012).

Moreover, the use of solidarity expressions such as *بالتوفيق دائمًا!* on social media platforms like Instagram reflects an ongoing emphasis on group cohesion and positive affect. Emails retain formal openings (*تحية طيبة وبعد...*) that mirror the rhetorical structures of face-to-face interaction, indicating that written digital discourse in Arabic maintains high levels of formality, particularly in professional or academic settings (Farghal & Shakir, 1994).

The integration of emojis and visual markers adds a new layer to politeness performance, enhancing emotional expression without substituting verbal politeness markers. Emojis often reinforce the intended tone of a message, serving as paralinguistic cues that align with the speaker’s relational goals.

**Conclusion**

This research has provided an overview of the various politeness strategies and behaviors that characterize Arabic communication. From the positive politeness strategies grounded in honorifics, compliments, and solidarity, to the more negative politeness strategies that involve indirectness and hedging, Arabic communication is shaped by a rich set of cultural, religious, and social factors.

Understanding the role of gender, religion, social hierarchy, and regional variation is crucial for interpreting the nuanced ways in which politeness is conveyed in Arabic-speaking contexts. With the rise of digital communication, politeness strategies continue to evolve, reflecting the dynamic nature of the Arabic-speaking world.

Future research could explore the cross-cultural comparison of politeness strategies between Arabic and other languages, as well as the impact of globalization on digital politeness in Arabic-speaking communities.

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