

There is More to it Than Meets the Eye: An Intercultural Study of Religious Speech Acts between Jordanian and American Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of religious utterances in everyday speech by Jordanian university students and those of U. S. university students. This study tries to compare and contrast the frequency of religious speech by Jordanian and American students in order to show cross-cultural similarities and variations, and to foreground connections among linguistic, cultural, and religious subtexts. The researchers contend that people, from various cultural paradigms, need to re-envision and reformulate their methods of interaction, both locally and globally. The study took place at IUP (Indiana University of Pennsylvania). Five Jordanian students and five American students are selected from various fields of study and specializations. They are mostly acquaintances who expressed their willingness to help with this study. The researchers conducted ten personal interviews with all the participants, and each interview lasted about 30 minutes. The researchers chose to audio record the interviews because all the participants signed a consent form and thus gave us the permission to do so. All the participants are IUP students; most of them are undergraduate students, but three of them are doing graduate studies at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Not only did the researchers hand each participant a copy of the questionnaire, but they also explained the

questions to them and ascertained that they fully understood each question. The participants were presented with the same exact questions to see how they respond to these situations, and the researchers interpreted their responses and have come up with conclusions about the integration of religious language in the parameters of everyday speech used by U.S. and Jordanian students. Basically, the data collected delineates similarities and differences between respondents from both cultures and features intersections between religiously marked language and everyday speech.

Keywords: Religious words, Pragmatics, Cultural differences, Multicultural, Multilingual, Speech acts, Illocutionary, truth value

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This current study is highly stimulated by several instances of miscommunication between people belonging to two far-reaching cultures, and as observers, the researchers noticed that such cultural variations can cause confusions and render mistranslations, not only on the individual levels, but also on international and cultural ones. This study stresses the importance of rising above reductive dichotomies and dualisms provoked by miscommunications or mistranslations of simple everyday speeches which maybe falsely marked as religious, since their illocutionary force may blur their truth value. The researchers hope to raise more awareness and draw more attention to the merit of diversity in order to bridge the hiatus between speakers of different languages and ones who belong to distinct cultural and religious milieus.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Questions

This research paper outlines the myriad cases in which Jordanians and Americans use religious language, and the cases in which they call on God and say prayers and when they merely use this language as a cliché, one that is void of religious insinuations. Thus, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the primary cases in which religious utterances are used by Jordanian male and female students and their American counterparts?
2. What are the differences and similarities between the strategies used by American and Jordanian university respondents?
3. Does the use of religiously marked language entail that the speaker is religious or it is just the culture that shapes how people respond to certain situations?
4. What are the dynamics and urges that espouse and nourish such pervasiveness of marked language in some cultures?

1.3 Limitations

The limitations of this study include the following:

- 1) The respondents are from only two nationalities—U. S. and Jordan.
- 2) There are only ten participants.
- 3) The subjects are all IUP students.
- 4) The study is restricted to one academic institution: IUP.
- 5) The subjects' ages range from 18-35.
- 6) The interviews are audio recorded.

2. Review of the Literature

The goal of this study is to investigate the influence of language and how language is shaped and governed by culture. One cannot fully appreciate language in isolation from culture and vice-versa. Grasping a language is not only central to grasp the culture but also the people of the culture. This strategy can encapsulate both personal and international levels. Michel Foucault asserts that people generate diverse modes of discourse that are “controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its power and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” (“Discourse on Language,” 150). He comments that Western discourse relies heavily on “rules of exclusion” or binary oppositions concerning what is favored and what should be discarded and even stigmatized.

The utilization of religiously marked phrases and utterances by U. S. and Jordanian male and female university students can vary and even contradict in a number of ways. This objective will be accomplished by setting a theoretical parameter about speech acts theory and by interviewing people from both cultures and presenting them with the same exact questions and finally exploring how they respond to these situations.

Further, deciphering the depth of meaning intended by speakers from various cultures has become central in our global village in which all humans are hugely linked because of technological advances and the communication revolution. The ubiquity of high-speed Internet, international banking, cell phones, faxes, and digital photography have indeed profoundly transformed our globe and shrunk it to a small, interconnected hub. For instance, people can easily interact these days in spite of geographical barriers because the Internet has transcended the geographical and cultural gaps. Thus, technological advancements have transformed and redefined our concerns, values, intercommunication with others, and thus generated novel exigencies to better appreciate the speech of others.

David Harvey, one of the most celebrated social theorists of the past 60 years, addresses the impact of capitalism, materialism, and modernization on people’s way of life, practices, values, traditions, and specifics. His influential book *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989) touches upon many social, cultural, and economic issues in present-day “postmodern” societies and provides for a constructive discussion of the main arguments of postmodern theory. It manifests the impact of “the compression of time and space” throughout various phases of development in postmodern societies. According to Harvey, the pervasiveness of technological inventions have created new values and specifics and altered the way people perceive the world around them. Hence, modernization has become a global phenomenon, one that has profoundly influenced people’s way of life regardless of who they are or to which culture or country they belong.

Harvey argues that the far-flung parts of the world are becoming economically and culturally much alike. From this perspective, common global values and norms about conduct, speech, consumption standards, and cultural practices are spreading everywhere. In this sense, globalization refers to the cultural and linguistic “shrinking of the world” because of revolutionary changes in communication and transportation technologies. So a new world in

which “all that is solid melts into air” is created (Harvey, 1989). Indeed, technology nowadays mobilizes around the globe in the twinkling of an eye; goods can be shipped over great distances at a relatively low cost, and cultural icons represented by products such as McDonald's, Starbucks, KFC, Subway, Burger King, among other, are widely disseminated. Consequently, a new world transcending deep-seated ossifications of space and time has emerged.

Harvey's argument is problematic because, in its hypothetical exertion to melt nations into one harmonized universal hub, it eliminates diversity and devours weaker cultures and erases historical eras into a megalith. It is true that the world has shrunk and people from remote poles can easily communicate and correspond with each other. Still, we do not live in a homogeneous world, one that reaches for interconnectedness and mutual respect and rejects the polarization of cultures. On the contrary, globalization, embedded in dynamics of erasure and cooptation, has broadened the chasm between nations in terms of East and West and underdeveloped and developed, denigrating the former component of the dichotomy. This reductive separation is proven by real-life situations and historical facts which attest to the many atrocities, devastating wars, ethnic cleansings, collective punishments, and occupation in the name of religious and cultural dyads, not to mention the relentless vilification of the other as threatening and barbaric.

2.1 Pragmatics and the Speech Act Theory

Pragmatics, as defined by Yule (2013), is the study of meaning and the use of natural language in communication. It is the study of the relations between languages and their users. In other words, pragmatics is the study of the meaning that a speaker wants to convey through an utterance in a particular context.

Generally speaking, speech act theory, one of the main components of the field of pragmatics intending to study linguistic phenomena, is a performed action via an utterance. It usually focuses on the illocutionary influence of utterances rather than on their truth value. However, no utterance exists in a vacuum, and all speech can be considered to have illocutionary effects. Speech act theory was firstly proposed by Austin (1975) and developed later by Searle (1976). They both state that language is not only used to inform or describe things but also to do things, to perform things etc.

2.2 Why do We Care?

It is important to point here that language is the most effective means of communication, and thus it is fundamental to human societies. Language shapes and colors humans' perception of the world around them. Without it, hatred and dubiousness will dominate people's relationships. This not only applies to human relations in one society, but also to international ties. Also, translation has always been crucial in bringing the world together and promoting common denominators since human beings, regardless of culture and religion, have a lot in common.

2.3 Obstacles to Overcome

A study on various forms of speech acts used by Jordanian and U. S. university students will need to take such issues as history, culture, and religion into consideration. These intricate and even interwoven issues cannot be tackled in one research paper. Yet, this study proffers insights into such strategies in more depth, especially that the researchers have not come across a single study that deals with the same issue.

3. Study (Interview) Sample

Ten male and female students from a range of fields were invited to participate in this study of speech acts used by U. S. versus Jordanian university students. The researchers contacted all the participants via WhatsApp and requested them to participate in the study. There are freshmen, sophomores, seniors, and graduate male and female respondents in this study. Five of the participants are Jordanian students who came to IUP to finish their graduate and/or undergraduate degrees and return to their country. It is important to point out that the Jordanian students come from diverse backgrounds: Three of them come from the rural parts of Jordan, and two come from the cities. The other five students are U. S. citizens from various states—two are from Pennsylvania; two are from Ohio; and the last one is from New Jersey.

The researchers chose to hold one-on-one interviews with the participants in order to ensure the validity of their answers and to confirm that they consider the questions in depth and give sincere answers. As agreed with the participants, their names will not be disclosed.

3.1 Data Collection

The data was collected in April 2018. Each participant was interviewed independently in a one-on-one interview setting. Each participant was presented with eight questions. The interview questions are devised in order to elicit participants' actual, not model, reactions to these situations, so they were encouraged to give their sincere answers and feedback. These questions include.

1. What is your response when someone greets you by saying, "How are you"?
2. What would you say if a friend invited you to his or her wedding party?
3. What would you say when you come across two people who are about to fistfight?
4. What would you say if your professor advises you to work harder on your project in order to boost your grade?
5. What would you say to someone who lost a family member? How to give respect or condolences?
6. What is your favorite response to someone congratulating you on your success, saying "Congratulations"?

7. What would you say when someone sneezes in your vicinity?
8. What is your favorite way of greeting someone?

Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The researchers used Arabic with the Jordanian respondents and English with the U. S. ones. Thus, the researchers decoded (translated) the responses of the Jordanian partakers. The questions were not only distributed to the participants in writing but also verbally interpreted to them. The first set of interviews with the Jordanian participants lasted approximately 150 minutes. Then, the researchers administered the other five interviews with the U. S. respondents. These interviews also lasted approximately 150 minutes. All the interviews took place in similar atmospheres and settings to guarantee that all participants are fairly treated.

3.2 Data Analysis

The ten interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researchers set forth their goals while closely listening to the recordings, and they went through the answers of the participants three times, and transcribed the responses. The first reading of the transcripts traced points of convergence in the participants' answers. In the second reading, the researchers specified points of convergence. In the third and last perusal, the researchers analyzed the embodiment of religious discourse, which inscribes a special niche in respect to culture, and what the respondents really mean when they incorporate religious terminology in their everyday speech. Further, the ten participants were allowed to add any comments or reflections on what they exactly mean, and they were encouraged to share any observations that might improve the accuracy of this study. Each participant is assigned two letters as a pseudonym in order to identify him or her as a subject of the study.

3.3 Comments on Procedures

The one-to-one interview process provided a quintessential atmosphere for participants to speak openly without any pressure, allowing the researchers to solicit unequivocal answers from the participants. The researchers paraphrased and repeated some of the answers to clear up any confusion. These audio-recorded, face-to-face interviews, with their verbal and nonverbal qualities (i.e. body language and facial expressions), added to the accuracy and authenticity of the study.

4. Findings

The study will try to answer the following questions:

1. What are the cases in which respondents from both cultures use religious speech?
2. What are the different strategies used by participants from both cultures?
3. What are the cultural differences of the respondents?
4. What is the impact of religion on respondents from both cultures?
5. Does religiously marked language necessarily express faith in God?

The findings were analyzed and encoded based on topics within the transcripts.

4.1 Case Study

M.R.

M.R. is from Irbid, Jordan, and is working on his B.A. He said that he would simply say, "Thank God," if someone asks how he is doing. He added, "Sometimes I say, "Thank God. How are you? God willing, you and your family members are enjoying very good health." He added that regardless of the person asking him how he is doing, he would always begin with "Thank God." When he was asked what he would say if a friend invited him to his wedding party, M.R. replied that he would say, "Congratulations, God willing. May God bless your marriage and bless you with extremely righteous children and give you much happiness. God willing, I will be the first to show up at the party." When asked about his favorite way of greeting someone, he said that "God's peace and blessing be upon you" is his most common way regardless of the time or the nature of his bond with the person. When he sees two people who are about to fight, he said, "I feel obligated to prevent or break the fight. I would say, "Guys, send peace and blessing upon Prophet Mohammed."

B.H.

B.H., who is from a village in Jordan, indicated that she usually remains silent after she sneezes, and she doesn't say excuse me. But when someone says, "God bless you," she added that she would respond by saying, "May God reward you and me!" When her professor advises her to work harder on her project, she would tell her professor, "God willing, I will do my best in the next project." When she comes across two people who are about to engage in a fistfight, B.H. said that she would try to run away from them. She added that it is shameful in Jordanian culture for women to get involved in such matters. When asked how she would give her respect or condolences to a friend who lost a family member, B.H. responded that she would say, "May God multiply your reward and God rest him in peace!" About her best way of greeting people, she said that she would usually use the phrase "God's peace and blessing be upon you!"

S.K.

S.K, who is from Kittanning, Pennsylvania and working on a Master's degree, was asked how she would respond to "How are you?" She said she would say, "Not too bad." She added that sometimes she says, "I cannot be better or cannot complain. Sometimes I say good or fine." When asked about her favorite way of greeting someone, she said that it depends on the time of the day and on my relationship with the person, but, in general, her favorite way of greeting is "what is up?" When she sneezes, she says, "Excuse me," but when someone sneezes and the person is in her vicinity, she says, "God bless you!" For a friend who lost a family member, S.K. would pay condolences saying, "I am sorry for your loss." For two men who are about to fight, she said that she would try to break the fight.

K.R.

K.R, who is from Columbus, Ohio and is working on a B.A., was required to respond to the same questions in the same setting. He said that he would say, "I am *very* sorry for your loss," to give respect after someone's death. He said that he usually says "excuse us" whenever he sneezes. He added that he learned that when he was 3 years old in the daycare, and it has become part of his unconscious that he says it whether there are people around or not. Regarding his favorite way to greet others, he said, "I like to use hello for the most part." When he sees two people who are about to fight, he would ask the guys to break it. When a friend invites him to his wedding party, K.R. would thank his friend for the invitation: "Thank you for inviting me. I really appreciate it. I will be more than happy to be there."

5. Discussion

Ten university students—five Jordanians and five Americans—were asked eight questions to describe their most common speech acts and how they respond to certain situations. Certainly, people from diverse cultural, geographical, and religious paradigms and backgrounds perceive the world in various ways. The respondents share a lot in common, but the degree and the method of the speech act vary from one person to another. Jordanian respondents tend to use more religiously marked language, and they are also inclined to use more intensifiers such as *very*, *so*, *extremely*, *profoundly*, *terribly*, etc. From the data collected, the researchers noticed that American and Jordanian respondents have various strategies of speech acts and are likely to approach many situations in mixed ways.

The study shows that 100% of the Jordanian respondents use religiously marked language in their everyday speech. However, this seemingly religious language does not necessarily entail a religious belief or sense. Rather, such religious utterances are cultural—those who articulate them are almost always unmindful of the religious meaning embedded in them. For instance, when someone asks two men who are about to fight to send peace and blessings upon Prophet Mohammed, this is, by no means, a prayer. The phrase is basically a request asking them not to fight. It is the same way when Jordanian respondents greet others: 100% of them prefer "God's peace and blessings be upon you" to greet others. However, the speakers' illocutionary intentions reveal that they do not think of a prayer or an act of worship, although the utterance implies religious connotations. The phrase is simply the equivalent of the English greeting "hello," one that does not conjure a religious implication or sense. It can be best translated as Hi, Hello, or Greetings. A literal translation of the phrase could be confusing, and it may make people from other cultures think of it as an act of worship or as a prayer, which is not really the case.

From interviews with five American respondents, it can be seen that only 10% of the American respondents use utterances with a religious truth value. The researchers noticed that all the respondents (100%) respond by saying "God bless you" when someone sneezes near them. This is the only instance in which all the American respondents think of "God bless you" is a prayer—the illocutionary and truth value suggest the same meaning. Again, it is the culture that moulds how people converse and interact with one another. Still, when Jordanian respondents sneeze, they say "thank God," and here it is used in a religious sense. The American respondents say "excuse me" when they sneeze, and they think of it as a

common act of courtesy. The Jordanian respondents explained that they say, "Thank God" because it is believed in Jordanian Islamic culture that a person's heart stops when they sneeze, so people thank God for bringing them back to life. The American respondents expressed exactly the same religious philosophy and that this prayer is supposed to protect them from otherwise certain death.

It is true that the mode in Jordan is secular, but the Islamic faith and the Holy Quran constitute the essence of Jordanian culture. The impact of the Quran, which was orally revealed to Prophet Mohammed, is immense on Jordanian culture. Even the Muslims who do not practice their religion or do not believe in God still use the same religiously marked language for their everyday exchanges. As can be seen from the responses to a question about giving respect after the death of someone, the majority of the Jordanian respondents use "May God multiply your reward," which essentially means "My sincerest condolences," not may God multiply your reward. From the interviews, it was found that the American respondents do not use religious language for the same situation, but their phrase—"I am sorry for your loss"—conveys a similar meaning.

According to the respondents, religiously marked language should not presuppose that the speaker is religious. Rather, people inherit such forms of speech from their family or the society in which they live albeit bring aware of the religious marks comprised in their language. Our dealings with the Jordanian respondents demonstrated that they do not usually think of religion when they utter religiously marked phrases. From the study, we can see that Jordanian respondents can use the utterance "God's peace and blessings be upon you" to greet all people at any time. It is like one-size-fits-all. English does not have a similar salutation, one that suits all people and all situations. It can be seen from the interviews that an overwhelming percentage of the respondents—100 % of Jordanian respondents and 100 % of American ones—are unaware of the religious nuances entailed in their speeches when translated or interpreted literally. In other words, the respondents utter their speeches without thinking of the religious sense embedded in their speeches. Thus, this is a point of convergence among all respondents; it shows that people are mostly unconscious of the depth and nuance of their speeches or exchanges until the meaning is translated or explained to them. Then, they become more careful with what they say.

The findings of the interviews indicate that there are also gender-based discrepancies between the female and male participants and culture-based between female participants from both cultures. On the one hand, all the female American participants stated that they would try to stop a fight about to erupt between two men. On the other hand, all the female Jordanian participants affirmed that they would run away from the place where a fight may erupt. It is clear that gender plays a role here. From the interviews, it was found out that Jordanian participants' responses included a number of intensifiers, and this has to do with Arabic culture in which people frequently use hyperboles—they do not usually mean what they say. Exaggeration is part and parcel of the making of Arabic culture, and this is deeply reflected in people's daily verbal exchanges.

Finally, language remains, first and foremost, the most efficient means of communication. Our research emphasizes the fact that culture defines and characterizes people's linguistic identity and the fact that pragmatic sensitivity is crucial in bridging divides and celebrating common denominators among human beings. Jordanian and American respondents basically transmit similar messages, but the means is different, so the illocutionary meaning is more important than truth value. The finding illustrates that there is only one speech act, used by all respondent, whose illocutionary force and truth value match, and this is when people sneeze and others say, "God bless you." Respondents from both cultures clarified that they use this utterance because they believe that God protected the sneezer from an otherwise certain death.

6. Conclusion

This study is useful to anyone reading it, as it will entice readers to think about their speech acts and also how people from other cultures may interpret them. It will also make people in our multicultural, multilingual world more considerate of the ways and strategies of people belonging to other backgrounds. Thus, this study broadens and promotes a sense of acceptance and respect among people from a variety of systems. The significance of this study can also be extended and applied to international relations, as language can bring divergent and even belligerent cultures closer together.

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