

# The Linguistic Behaviour of Mohammed Bin Salman in Response to Biden's Statements Against Saudi Politics

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## Abstract

The political events in the region have been a major cause of the radical reform in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States (US) in recent years. The ties between both are believed to have become further complicated, since the statements through which the current American president, Joe Biden, accused Saudi politics of transgressing human rights. These statements have attracted the attention of the media and questioned the perspective of Saudi politics and the prospective impact on future bilateral cooperation with the U.S. Saudi politicians have never reacted to Biden's behaviour over the media due to the criticality of explicit political speeches on social perception (Seidel,1985), but I argue here that the conservative reactions of Saudi diplomats have been implicitly transferred through the eloquence of verbal language and the implied meaning of non-verbal language. The focus will be on the deportment of the crown prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, upon hosting Joe Biden in the last political summit held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia, U.S., Saudi American relations, Political speech

## 1. Introduction

“Politics is not a science... but an art”, since the motto of Chancellor Bismarck was spoken to the German Reichstag, the field of political science has erupted with myriad expositions aimed at decoding the implications of this statement. Perhaps Bismarck's conceptualization of art was moulded within the confines of the means through which government and officials smartly express views. In this line, Pacho (2014) envisages politics as the sum of ideological beliefs and actions sponsored by officials reflected in the language they use.

The close ties between language and politics were the catalyst for studying what is called political language and discourse (Van Dijk,2002). There is an array of papers dedicated to analysing presidential speeches from a wide range of approaches. The conclusion drawn was

that political language serves to either establish or de-establish relationships with other parties (Safwat,2015). Moreover, Sliverstein (1979), argued that the language of politicians is formed to claim or resist power. These pragmatic features of political speech impose high impact on the public and the media (Ghassemi and Hammatogsha,2019).

Because political language is sensitive, politicians aim to use indirect language that is played with to accomplish their intentions (Abdel-Hadi,2015). Therefore, it was well-documented that political language is characterized by deliberate rhetorical devices that separate individual words from their literal meaning (Arnold,2007). According to Kulo (2009), the extensive use of figurative language (metaphors, metonymies, and analogies) in political speech makes it hard to absorb the intended meaning, except with the aid of the surrounding context. Although the focus of most studies has centred around the verbal modality of political speeches, non-verbal or gestural language has recently been given some attention.

Hand movement is perhaps the most ancient modality of non-verbal language dating back to cave people (Eisler-Mertz, 1999). It is perceived to be the talkative body part that proliferates disparate symbolic functions from feelings, passing to temper, and ending with wishes (Thiel, 1997). Unravelling the secrets of hand movement is complicated stemming from the different classification of hand postures, usually divided into speech related and speech unrelated gestures. According to Ekman and Friesen (1975), the posture of the hands depends entirely on the words and the phrases of the speaker. Furthermore, different gestures can be linked and/or translated into different meanings. In politics, hand movement is the ‘‘soft power’’ of a verbal counterpart to reflect ideology. It has been presumed to be the most secure path through which political emotions, views, and goals are transmitted (Guilbeault, 2017). Given these facts, it is not surprising to claim that hand movement is prevalently utilized to deliver thoughts in political events (Trotta and Guarasci, 2021).

One of the most widely discussed themes in politics is Saudi American ties that date back to a century ago. This long-lasting relationship is attributed to the strategic role of both nations on the global political map. Over the past years, it has been a custom for the rulers of both countries to exchange visits. All American presidents have visited Saudi Arabia from Richard Nixon in 1974 to Donald Trump in 2017. However, Joe Biden’s visit to Saudi Arabia to attend the Gulf Cooperation Council in 2022 has been the one that attracted most international attention. This is due to the fact this visit was arranged at a time of a clash when much tension had arisen between the two regimes (Dorsey, 2020).

Adopting Fairclough’s (1995) proposal of interpreting language as a social entity, this paper aims to linguistically analyse the verbal and non-verbal behaviour of Saudi politicians in reaction to the American diplomats during the visit. It targets the hidden messages that were sent loud and clear which may question the future of Saudi American relations. These messages imply the conservatism of Saudi officials towards current American policy. The next section will be devoted to a succinct overview of the historical relationship between Saudi Arabia and the U.S, in order to keep the track of the reader to what leads us to argue for.

## 2. Historical Alliance

Since the unification of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Saudi Arabia in 1931, the Saudi American relationship has become the most well-built across all domains (Pollack, n.d.). Thousands of treaties have been signed in politics, economics, industry, and education. This has been further boosted with the discovery of Saudi Arabian's main economic driver (oil) in the 1940s. The developing Saudi Arabia, at that time, forced decision makers to recruit American manpower armed with experience and knowledge in oil excavation (Hudhayri, 2021). Moreover, the growing active sectors of health care, aviation, and communication were headed by American officers (Al-Braik, 2007).

Upon the consequence of the Second World War, negotiations between the two parties were held to discuss the American armed forces' request to enter the borders of Saudi Arabia. Eventually, they were permitted to establish an airbase in the southern province of Saudi Arabia to train soldiers for what is known as Burma theatre (Pollack, n.d.). This agreement was further rooted in strategic exchange of interest by which U.S. army forces were allowed to settle in the borders of the kingdom to the benefit of security protection (Kransa, 2022).

The American sweep into Saudi Arabia has pressured the Ministry of Education (MOE), the official educational body in Saudi Arabia, to pass new policy on educational philosophy. In 1958, English language teaching was mandated for the curricula of intermediate and secondary schools (Al-Abdulkader, 1978). This decision was in clear conflict with the traditions of the community members who have always been recognized for a negative attitude towards difference in all its forms. Further, it has been counted as a new era in implementing secular education that defies Islamic norms (Abir, 1988).

The connections between these big nations were further strengthened upon the Gulf War (GW) in 1990. It has been alleged that the American forces were considered to be the shield of Saudi Arabia's internal security against the invasion of the neighbour Saddam Hussain (Jones, 1995). The coalition with Washington as an aftermath of GW has further rooted the presence of American power in the Gulf area.

The bombardment of New York's commercial towers in 11/9 was the beginning of relational instability between the two nations; it was the turning point for the worse. The embroilment of 15 Saudis in the events caused a never-before witnessed attack against Saudi politics in the Western media (Wagemeakers *et al.*, 2012). Some writers ascribe this violence to the freedom given by officials in the country to religious scholars and their hate speech against the "faithless" (Walsh, 2009). However, the situation of American leaders after the attacks was seemingly neutral, claiming that media views by no mean reflect the government stance. The complications continued with the acts of targeting American minorities living in Saudi Arabia by extremists. In 2003, three suicide activities consecutively hit housing complexes built for the benefit of American citizens in both Riyadh and Al-Khobar. The consequence of the attack left 39 dead, most of whom were Americans (BBC News, 2014).

After 2003, in order to redress the mental image and rebuild trust with the U.S, as a leading nation, the Saudi regime has advocated serious initiatives against terrorism, most of which

targeted the educational strategy. First, religious content has come under inspection before public declaration. Further, the schooling curricula were extensively modified with violent materials weeded out and replaced with more tolerant ones emphasizing cultural openness and religious disparity (Mahboob and Elyas, 2014). The most daring decision was providing 100,000 scholarship opportunities to study the English language and culture, primarily in the U.S. (Taylor and Albasri, 2014).

The new era of Saudi Arabia came with appointment of Mohamed Bin Salman the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, specifically when the vigilant youth declared the prospective 2030 strategy for the kingdom, which, on the surface, aims to de-emphasize the role of oil as the sole source of national wealth. However, this strategy has accompanied with a sense of unprecedented social reform across all domains (Kosarova, 2020); several decisions at odds with the religious conservative upbringing of the community have been passed. For example, in mid-2017, Saudi Arabia granted the first permission to open cinema halls after 40 years of banning the film industry in the country (Arab News, 2017). Moreover, teaching musicology has been announced as forming a core subject material in public schools (Hudhayri, 2021) despite music being forbidden in Islamic traditions (for some scholars). However, this was not the whole story.

Women's status in Saudi Arabia has always drawn the attention of human activists. This is associated with the wide belief that Saudi women are deprived of life opportunities compared to their male counterparts (Rajkhan, 2014). The social marginality of women, for some writers, was attributed to the subjugation of women under the guardianship of a male (Littrel and Bertsch, 2013). Therefore, women's quality of life in Saudi Arabia has always been questioned. One of the major arguments against women rights in Saudi Arabia is the restrictions over women's driving. According to Reuters (2018), the persistent detention events of Saudi officials to female driving activist doubts the national plan of social recreation. Suddenly in late 2018, Saudi Arabia announced lifting the ban on women's driving. This decision has been considered to be a step forward for freeing women from social control (Hudit, 2018), resulting in a shock for the conservative community members and much condemnation. Several activists questioned such a decision with the concomitant visit of the 45<sup>th</sup> American president, Donald Trump, to Saudi Arabia, for the sake of negotiating future relations between the two nations (Cordesman, n.d.). Some argue that acts of freeing women has resulted from Saudi politics submitting to external international power (Altohami and Salama, 2019), especially the power of U.S politics. Some went further to consider the social changes in Saudi Arabia as evidence of Trump's policy success (Time, 2020) in a clear indication of the paramount impact of America on Saudi politics.

The inauguration of Joe Biden, the 46<sup>th</sup> American president, was accompanied with a new era of the long Saudi-American relations; an era, that is, for the time, characterized to be critically threatening the future of mutual cooperation. Before the American president was officially named in November 2019, Biden tweeted that Saudi Arabia is accused of violating the legislation of human rights (Picture1).



Picture 1. Biden's tweet against the Saudi Arabian monarchy

In a more radical statement, he accused Saudi Arabia of killing innocents, following the policy of shutting mouths, and prosecuting free opinion (Krasna, 2022). The acute tone of Biden's administration was further evidenced by the statement of the Biden-Harris Campaign which pledged the real intentions of new U.S. policy to end the 'reckless' war in Yemen sponsored by Saudi politics, as they argued. Consequently, the commitment of U.S. politics to accomplish its goals in the 'alleged' peace sentenced them to relinquish sending off and selling armaments to the other party (Arab News, 2022).

Saudi officials dealt quietly with the 'aggressive' language of Biden. However, they exploit their power as the controllers of oil price in the market. The reaction of Saudi Arabia was exemplified in decreasing oil production which has been accompanied with an acute soar in petroleum price to the level of 4\$ per gallon in the U.S. This exaggerated increase of oil prices has involuntarily caused Biden to utilize 50 million from the U.S. oil reservoir, in a real threat to the U.S. economy (Krasna, 2022). This economic crisis has led Biden to raise calls for Saudi diplomats to increase proportions of oil production. The political atmosphere became even worse with the missile attacks orchestrated by Houthi militias against an oil pumping station in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (Aljazeera, 2022). The economic and political tensions have necessitated an urgent table to negotiate steps towards peace, which has recently taken place in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The bilateral meeting of both leaders has resulted in different decisions regarding debated topics in the region.

What concerns us in this paper is the verbal and the non-verbal behaviour of Saudi leaders, and the way they react to Biden and his companion. For a linguist, the acts of Saudi politicians seem to be hidden messages implying disapproval of the current U.S. regime. Further, they reflect the instability of the ties between both nations and suspect the future of the 70-decade coalition. The next section will present our arguments that led us to think of Saudi condemnation against Biden's administration, focusing on both verbal and gestural language.

### 3. Analysis

This study adopts the descriptive qualitative approach, which is according to Palmer and Boderston (2006), put the cultural context into the heart of the researched phenomena. However, cultural context is insufficient to understand social realities without being supplied by a linguistic context as well. Yule (2010) stated that the implicit meaning of language is the product of fusing both contexts. Therefore, a thorough understanding of meaning cannot be reached without linking the socio-cultural context to the linguistic one. The arguments will be presented in three points detailed in the next few sub-sections. It is worth mentioning that these points are tackled from a linguistic perspective and may not necessarily reflect the reality or the views of others.

#### 3.1 *Fist of Resistance*

The concept of greeting is hardly defined, yet it composes an essential role in communication (Duranti, 1997). Further, a greeting is intentionally used to symbolically fill the position of a conversation preface disregarding the social context (O'Neil, 2006). Therefore, there is no communicative act which lacks a greeting. There is nearly consensus in pragmatics that a greeting is a linguistic act which is culturally-specific (Pinto, 2008). In other words, the style of greeting varies in accordance with cultural background. For example, in English-speaking countries, greeting is expressed linguistically using simple words and/or phrases (Isalm, 2018). The greeting styles in the Gulf states, however, have varied manifestations. The most prevalent is an act of hand shaking with a gestural move (de Froideville and Verheul, 2016), including nose touching, hugging, hand plumping, to name a few.

The social significance of greetings goes far beyond simple words produced or hand actions. It has been always believed that greetings reveal myriad socio-political stances. According to Nilsson *et al* (2020), the form of greeting adopted by a person signifies his attitudes, perception, and beliefs regarding the interlocutor. Additionally, it also signals power, unity, and intimacy between parties (Hudson, 1996).

Tracing the greeting style of Mohammed Bin Salman to Biden reveals that Bin Salman did not only break the cultural greeting of Gulf nations, but also the international protocol of greeting (de Froideville and Verheul, 2016). The way Bin Salman greeted Biden with the fist (Picture 2) has widely overwhelmed the media with questions of surprise. This act of greeting sends serious messages to the other party. Reviewing the symbolic meaning of a fist in politics would make the picture purer.



Picture 2. The questioned fist greeting of Bin Salman to Biden

Source:

<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/17/politics/joe-biden-fist-bump-mbs-mohammed-bin-salman-white-house/index.html>

The signified meaning of a fist in a political context has been extensively discussed in the literature. An early appearance of fist image was used by African workers to symbolize the power of rebellion and protest in reaction to the oppression of capitalism (Renshaw, 1968). Since then, the use of the fist image has been recurrently replicated with different meanings. In the Weimar Republic and upon the control of Nazis in 1920, the financial suffocation, higher rate of de-employment, and inflation led to the emergence of extremist parties, namely the Socialist workers and the Communists. According to Simmons (2000), each party invented his own chants and signs that represent the perspective of the members. Again, the fist sign was used by the left party to emphasize opposition and a clash of views with the other. In the near past, Tess Asplund, a European-African activist has attracted the attention of media platforms. This was due to her action of protestation against 300 neo-Nazis in Sweden. Tess has never expressed her rebill verbally or aggressively, but rather with a fist directed to the sky (Kofi *et al*, 2018). The extensive reappearance of a fist in the instable activities of movements and strikes has led philosophers in the field to associate it with a negative meaning of resistance, refusal, and dissatisfaction (Cushing, 2006).

Now, the argument is rather clear! Probably, the implied meaning behind using the fist by Bin Salman is to refuse or “struggle” with the views sponsored by the U.S. government although some have argued that a fist greeting is more hygienic in the era of Covid-19. This, however, can be refuted by mentioning the way Bin Salman greeted Al-Sisi and the ruler of Oman during the same summit by hand shaking and hugging which reflects a sense of agreement and intimacy (Pictures 3 and 4).



Picture 3. Bin Salman's cultural greeting to Al-Sisi with hugging

Source: <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2643207>



Picture 4. Bin Salman's cultural greeting to the envoy of Oman with hugging

Source:

<https://m.akhbarelyom.com/news/newdetails/3822983/1/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%86-%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%A8-%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D9%88%D8%B2>

### 3.2 "We Are Arabs"

Since the adoption of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) in the field of sociolinguistics, it has always been referred to as an exposition of the linguistic behaviour of speakers in the midst of conversation (Gallois *et al*, 2005). One of the maxims underlined within CAT is the fact that the linguistic choice of a speaker reflects his social stance towards the hearer. Particularly, much attention was given to the two pillars of CAT, namely speech convergence and speech divergence.



According to Holmes (2013), speech convergence is the act of the speaker in the context of social distance with the hearer by adapting the language spoken to that of the interlocutor. This may include the accent, the dialect, or the whole linguistic code. In contrast, speech divergence is the intentional neglect of the language preference of the hearer by the speaker which is thought to signify some sort of maintaining social boundaries (Mirzaiyan *et al.*, 2010).

The acts of speech convergence and divergence have been widely traced in presidential discourse to signal either intimacy or distance. For instance, speech convergence has been subtly used in the political speech of Anwar Al-Sadat. It has been well-known for Al-Sadat to ignore his Arabism in official speeches delivered to the public (Spolsky, 1998); instead, he has always aimed to address the public using the casual dialect of the community members themselves. Perhaps his choice of the “*Saedi*” dialect of Sohaj while addressing them was intended to mean social solidarity with the group members. This subtle act of playing with emotions has also been analysed in the speech of Barack Obama upon his visit to Egypt in 2009. The addressee heard Obama converging to Arabic language in the beginning of his speech greeting the audience with the Islamic tradition of “*Al-salamo alaikum*”. Moreover, he supported the objective goals of his speech by referring back to Quranic verses articulated in Arabic. According to Obaid and Fahad (2012), Obama’s acts of Arabizing his speech was a vital example of functionalizing the language to stress the value of U.S. Islamic minorities for his administration.

Conversely, Trump’s criticism of George Bush in light of the latter switching to Spanish in a broadcasted interview can be explained in terms of speech divergence. Trump’s standing against using the Spanish language has been linked to his resentment for “Latinos” illegal acts of migration (Jones *et al.*, 2019). Clearly his statement “We are in America” in response to Bush’s Spanish style portrays social discordance with the Latino ethnic group.

Close inspection of Bin Salman’s formal speech in Jeddah upon the visit of the American mission can be considered an example of speech divergence signifying socio-political boundaries, particularly his choice of classical Arabic to present his words. Bin Salman opted to use Arabic language defying the international tradition, which asserts the status of the English language as a lingua franca in formal settings (Melitz, 2018). Further, Bin Salman’s intentional act of using Arabic can be argued to exclude American diplomats from the linguistic context. First, an American was the only envoy attending the summit with a native language other than Arabic. Secondly, the literature abounds with discussing the impact of using two different non-shared languages in political speech. Lack of equivalences and mismatch of cultural implication between the spoken and the heard language, make political context complicated, in terms of reflecting the intended meaning, which therefore affects comprehension (Sarosi-Mardirosz, 2014). Bin Salman’s acts of conversing in Arabic, however, cannot be attributed, for example, to a lack of proficiency in English. It is well known that Saudi politicians undergo intensive training in foreign languages, including English, as part of their professional preparation (Al-Ghamdi and Al-Sadaat, 2002). Additionally, Mohammed Bin Salman himself has recurrently appeared on different T.V. broadcasts where he spoke fluent English.

### 3.3 Second-Class Hosting

It is assumed that the protocol of receiving presidents and hosting diplomats is subject to different norms imposed by the national court for the reception delegation of each country (de Froideville and Verheul, 2016). Although we do not have scientific sources dedicated to shedding light on the protocol adopted in Saudi Arabia, comparing the reception of Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia in 2017 to Biden's visit in 2022 reveals how lukewarm the latter was. In 2017, Trump stepped into Saudi Arabia with a big dancing-festival. Understanding the psychological meaning of dancing signifies how valuable Trump was for the Saudi regime. Dancing has always been connotatively meant to express positivity of emotions (Burger *et al*, 2013). In Saudi Arabia, the traditional form of dancing with swords "Al-Arda", which was used upon receiving Trump, has particularly important implications in Saudi culture. According to Adra (2002), "Al-Arda" is a non-verbal form of communication that speaks of joy, respect, and warm welcome. Also, inviting Trump to partake in the dancing "Al-Arda" has had an interesting metaphoric meaning. This stems from the socio-psychological essence of cultural transmission. It has been stated that immersing foreigners into the practice of local culture symbolizes affinity or affiliation (Mahasneh and Bashayreh, 2021). Picture 5 below shows a part of Trump's ceremonial hosting.



Picture 5. Trump participating in "Al-Arda" with king Salman as part of his reception in Saudi Arabia

Source:

<https://m.al-sharq.com/article/20/05/2017/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%88-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A8-%D9%8A%D8%A4%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%B5%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9>

Conversely, the recent hosting of Biden was quiet with no hustle seeming to reference his unwelcome statements against Saudi Arabia. Our argument is based on the claim made by Nardulli (2002) that "Al-Arda" has always been used by Saudi kings and highly ranked

officials while receiving American presidents as a credo to imply the intricate relations between both parties. This tradition was entirely absent upon the official events of hosting Joe Biden. Moreover, it might be the first time ever that an American president has visited Saudi Arabia without being received by the most highly ranked politicians, namely the king and/or the crown prince. Instead, he was greeted by the Saudi ambassador to Washington, Reema Bint Bandar (Picture 6). This could be accounted not to reflect the status of the president Biden as the head of one of the biggest nations today. If we want to make the comparison even worse, the envoys of less influential countries in the region have been personally hosted by Mohammed Bin Salman himself during the summit in question or at different events, which hints at the ideal protocol of hosting privileged guests.



Picture 6. Joe Biden hosted by Reema Bint Bandar at Jeddah airport

Source: <https://www.aremnews.com/news/arab-world/saudi-arabia/2392881>

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has linguistically inspected the verbal and non-verbal behaviour of Saudi politicians, especially Mohammed Bin Salman upon hosting the American president Joe Biden in the last Jeddah's summit, considering the recent tension between the two nations (Dorsey, 2020). The argument made here was that the acts of Bin Salman silently reveal negligence and refutations for the policy of Biden's administration in reaction to the ties of his regime with Saudi Arabia. The author exemplified three points to demonstrate his argument. (1): Bin Salman's fist greeting to Biden was linked to the pragmatic meaning of eradication and resistance of this image in politics. (2): Bin Salman's breaking of the international law of using English in formal domains and departing from the sociolinguistic norms of saving the face of the hearer was used as a signal to eliminate Biden and his companions from the linguistic scene during his speech. (3): Finally, comparing the official hosting of both Trump in 2017 and Biden in 2022, in light of the cultural understanding of ceremony in Saudi Arabia was claimed to express a conflict of views between the two regimes. Although the analysis given here may sound reasonable from the linguistic aspect, it could be further demonstrated with other studies which link it directly to the literature of the history of Saudi protocol for hosting guests.

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