Honorific Expressions in Arabic and English with Reference to other Languages

Hashim Sa'doon Saleem Al-Ni'aymi
University of Tikreet
College of Education
Dept. of English

Abstract

Honorifics have currently occupied an important position within the domain of socio-pragmatic studies of language and within the theories of communication.

The basic aim of this paper is concerned with identifying the points of similarity and difference between honorifics in Modern Standard Arabic and English with regard to structure. It also aims at giving a brief account of the term honorifics and how are honorific expressions realized in both languages. It is hypothesized that the structure of honorifics in Modern Standard Arabic is different from that in English.

1. The Concept of Honorifics:

Honorifics are derived from outputs of politeness strategies where these directly or indirectly convey a status deferential between speaker and addressee or referent, where they indirectly convey such a status deferential, as in French Tu / Vous pronouns do via the general strategy of pluralizing in order to impersonalize (Brown and Levinson 1978: 183).
Honorific Expressions in Arabic and English with Reference to other Languages

Hashim Sa’doon Saleem Al-Ni’aymi

Honorifics have been defined as “politeness formulas in a particular language which may be specific affixes, words, or sentence structure” (Richard et al., 1985: 131). Languages which have a complex system of honorifics are, for instance, Japanese, Mudurese (a language of Eastern Java), Hindi, and Arabic; English, on the other hand, has no complex system of honorifics, but there are few cases of compound honorifics; e.g. professor doctor, dear sir, etc. (ibid.: 131).

Irvine (1995: 1) points out that “linguistic honorifics are forms of speech that signal social deference, through conventionalized understandings of some aspects, of the form-meaning relationship”.

From this brief account of the concept of honorifics, we may define it as linguistic or non-linguistic means or device that can function to convey social deference or respect influenced by the dimension of power and solidarity.

Honorifics are grammatical forms utilized in speaking to express social superiority. The part of speech affected is different from one language to another, and the honorifics may be distinguishable from simply very polite forms used in formal address. In many languages they affect the pronouns: in French, ‘Vous’ is used rather than ‘Tu’; in Arabic, we use the pronoun ‘أنتم’ rather than the familiar one ‘أنت’ in addressing a single person. Honorifics seem most highly developed in certain oriental languages, such as Japanese and Korean (The New Encyclopedia Britannica 1980: 115).

Crystal (1987:99) mentions that many languages make use of a special set of grammatical contrasts, in which different degrees of
politeness are expressed, according to the mutual status of the participants. This set is often called ‘honorific system’ of that language.

Agha (1994: 294) claims that the use of honorifics in all communities is governed by the social status of persons to whom deference is paid, but it is also sensitive to interactional variables. With regard to status, the general norm: the higher the status, the greater the degree of deference.

Farghal and Shakir (1994:240) view social honorifics “as the encoding of social information in human interaction. Such information is manifest in the use of pronouns and titles of address”.

The view of honorifics as directed indexes of context seems unable to account for the complexity and diversity of actual uses of honorifics adequately. For example, the treatment of honorifics as status difference markers cannot explain their reciprocal use, despite the fact that honorifics are generally used by a person of a higher status to a person of a lower status; this treatment in addition to that, must assume that in the non-reciprocal use of honorifics not only honorific form but also non-honorific forms are markers of status differences. On the other hand, the treatment of honorifics as markers of non-intimate relationships cannot account for the non-reciprocal use of honorifics, because it must assume that two individuals perceive the same relationship differently as non-intimate vs. intimate (Okamoto 1999: 53-54).

2. Categories of Honorifics:

Levinson (1983: 90 – 91) points out that honorifics can be divided into two main types. The first type is called ‘relational’
which is more important than the second one and mainly concerned with the socially deictic information in languages of the world. Within this relational system of honorifics, three subcategories are distinguished; they are addressee honorifics, referent honorifics and by-stander honorifics. The second type of honorifics in Levinson’s typology is called ‘absolute’ honorifics which express the relationship between the speaker and the setting through formality levels. Absolute honorifics are categorized into ‘authorized speakers’ and ‘authorized recipients’ according to the perspectives of the speakers and recipients.

2.1 Addressee Honorifics:

Addressee honorifics, as Comrie, (1976) argues, refer to the relationship between the speaker and the hearer.

Brown and Levinson (1987: 276) point out that addressee honorifics are direct encodings of the speaker-addressee relationship, independent of the referential content of the utterance. Sifianou (1992: 57) mentions that this category of honorifics expresses respect to the addressees by choosing particular linguistic items or forms, without directly referring to them. By way of illustration, it is quite possible in South East Asian languages such as Korean, Javanese and Japanese, to use the linguistic alternate of ‘soup’ in a sentence such as, ‘The soup is hot’ in order to express respect to the addressee without directly referring to him / her. It has generally been noted in such languages that whatever is said is not socio-linguistically marked as appropriate for only particular kinds of addressees. Besides, it has been pointed out that the broad spectrum of speech levels of the South East Asian languages are essentially complex
amalgams of referent and addressee honorifics (cf Levinson, 1983:90) As a matter of fact, it seems that there is an overlap between addressee honorifics and referent honorifics. However addressee honorifics empirically seem very much less in number than referent honorifics. South East Asian languages are the predominant source of addressee honorifics.

2.2 Referent Honorifics:

Referent honorifics are those expressions which are used to convey speaker’s respect to persons or things actually referred to (Sifianou, 1992:57). In this sense, they are the relational honorifics which express the relations held between the speaker and the referent (cf Levinson 1983:90). Brown and Gilman’s (1960) Tu/Vous pronouns distinction in singular pronouns of address is considered as a form of referent honorifics that give respect directly to the hearer (cf Levinson 1983: 90 and Brown and Levinson 1987: 181).

Besides, other referent honorifics may indirectly express respect to the addressee. In English the second member of pairs like Snuggs / Dr Snuggs, eat/dine, man/gentleman, give/bestow, book/volume and so on encode greater respect to the person, activity or thing than others. By using these referent honorifics about something related to the hearer, the speaker as a matter of fact expresses respect to him (Brown and Levinson 1987: 181). In Japanese, it seems that referent honorifics are sensitive in-group membership. For example, in a Japanese store a salesman addressing a customer cannot refer to boss with honorifics because these honorifics are used for out-group members (Yamanashi 1974:
765). In addition, Kuno (1973), cited in Brown and Levinson (1987: 181), points out that “there are also in-built group references in the Japanese verbs of giving and receiving”.

2.3 By-stander Honorifics:

By-stander honorifics are a relational type of honorifics which express the relationship between the speaker and the by-stander (Levinson 1983: 90). These honorifics include those cases in which a different set of expressions are utilized in the presence of certain by-standers. In Australian Aboriginal communities, a special speech style, called ‘mother-in-law’ language, is avoided in the presence of certain by-standers, while it is employed by every one when the presence of certain by-standers necessitates the use of special verbal and non-verbal behaviours (Sifianou 1992: 57).

2.4 Absolute Honorifics:

These sets of honorifics refer to the relationship between speaker (and perhaps other participants) and setting (or social activity). What is important here is the distinction between formality and informality which colours the relationship between the participants’ roles and situations. As a matter of fact, there are certain forms which are particularly reserved for certain speakers and other forms which are reserved for certain recipients. The first sets of forms are used by ‘authorized speakers’, for example the form of the first person pronoun is specifically reserved for the use of the Japanese Emperor. The second set of forms is particularly
received by ‘authorized recipients’ (cf Levinson 1983: 91 and Fillmore 1971).

Farghal and Shakir (1994: 241) view that the absolute social honorifics are certain forms reserved for authorized speakers and recipients. For example, in Arabic the use of the first person plural (نحن) ‘we’ by the king of Jordan in royal ordinances is an absolute honorific exclusively restricted to him as the only authorized speaker who can speak on behalf of his people, while the use of titles of address, such as ‘Your Honour’, ‘His Majesty’, ‘Professor’, etc. are absolute social honorifics requiring authorized recipients for whom these titles are reserved. Furthermore, absolute social honorifics may be expanded to cover many phenomena that are primarily used for social aims such as greetings e.g. (مرحباً – صباح) and politeness markers e.g. (لطفاً) among others. Such examples of social honorifics should be remarked as non-authorized in nature, i.e., they do not require authorized speakers and recipients.

3. Honorifics and Politeness:

Honorifics seem to be independent of the notion of politeness in a number of important points:

Two main trends demonstrate that the measures of politeness cross-cut the measures of honorification and vise versa. The first trend is represented by Hijirada and Sohn (1986: 367) who note that the same honorific expression may be polite in certain contexts, but impolite in other contexts. Their study is based on the comparison of honorific phenomena across English, Japanese and Korean. The second trend is led by Hwang (1990: 48) who finds out that Korean utterances are generally categorized respectively as: deferential and
Honorific Expressions in Arabic and English with Reference to other Languages
Hashim Sa'doon Saleem Al-Ni'aymi

polite, deferential but impolite, non-deferential but polite and non-deferential and impolite.

1- Politeness strategies seem and tend to be open-ended in number and variety. This has been very clear in the pioneering work of Brown and Levinson (1987: 227). However, the same is not true with respect to honorific forms and expressions. It has been observed that honorific forms and expressions belong to delimited repertoires in any language. And therefore they are close-ended in number and variety (cf Agha 1994: 228).

2- On one hand, politeness is usually conceived of as an inherent aspect of speaker-addressee relationships. On the other hand, honorific systems express deference to a number of role categories (e.g. addressee, referent, by-stander, etc.). Besides, deference as conveyed via honorifics is not always expressed from the speaker’s perspective (Agha 1994: 288; cf Anderson 1993; and Errington 1988).

3- Scholars who deal with politeness theories and principles, have made attempts to conceptualize the pragmatic force of politeness in terms of the degrees of violation from the Gricean cooperative principles maxims. Meanwhile, it has obviously observed that in languages which have elaborate honorific registers, there are no utterances which may be considered pragmatically neutral from a culture-internal perspective. Therefore, in these languages, any act of speaking is virtually valuable for social consequentiality in a fashion immensely more transparent to native speakers of those languages than in languages which lack such elaborate system of honorific register. This idea has been very clear in the research of
Matsumoto (1989). He points out that even in the case of a typically information – bearing sentence such as “Today is Friday” all of the variant forms have a direct and inevitable social consequentiality (also cf Agha, 1994: 288).

Finally, politeness is conceived of as a communicative effect brought about by a language-user’s comportment in a particular social interaction. Hence, it belongs to utterance meaning. Honorifics are conceived of as a convention of linguistic form. Therefore, they belong to sentence meaning (cf Irvine, 1995: 2).

4. Arabic – English Honorifics:

Although the basic concept of honorifics may be universal, they are realized differently in many languages especially if different cultures are involved. However, Arabic honorifics are more complicated than the English ones. This can be supported by the fact that we are influenced so much by the tradition of our religion. Our religion has dictated certain orders for us that we cannot overlook and one of these orders is the fact that we should show more respect for people who are different from us in status. Arabic and English honorific expressions can have different forms, they are presented as follows:

1. First name preceded by
   a. Title, such as
   1. السيد محمد
   2. السست خديجة
   3. الدكتور علي

   b. Kinship term, such as
English, on the other hand, seems to use this form absolutely, for example:

a. Mr. John
b. Mrs. Brown
c. Dr. Suzan

Yet, in comparing the two languages, we notice that instead of using TFN (title plus first name) English uses TLN (title plus last name). The English form is widely used in formal encounters.

2. Kinship term alone, such as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>عمة</td>
<td>Uncle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>خالة</td>
<td>Aunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>أبي</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ابنتي</td>
<td>Sister</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can have a similar case in English, for instance:

Uncle   aunt
Father  mother
Brother sister
Son     daughter

3. Title alone, such as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>سيدة</td>
<td>Sir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>أستاذ</td>
<td>Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>حاج</td>
<td>Sheikh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can extend this form to include titles of professions such as:

- دكتور: سعادة الرئيس، سمو الأمير، صاحب السمو، ولي العهد، سعادة الوزير، سعادة العلماء، Sheikh
It is worth mentioning that these expressions are concerned with males rather than females.

This form is so clear in English, for example Sir, Mrs., Miss., Madam, Your Excellency, Mr. President, Senator, Mr. Chairman, Professor, Dr. for PhD (Brown and Ford, 1964: 236).

4. Teknonyms

This term means that a person is called the father (mother) of his(her) first child.

1. أبو حسن
2. أم رعد

English, unlike Arabic, seems to have no such a form.

5. Conclusion:

Honorifics in Modern Standard Arabic, like those in English, are affected by the social distance of participants and their cultures. They may also refer to the social class to which speakers and addressees belong.

The most common forms of honorifics are the title or kinship term plus first name, kinship term alone, titles alone, and teknonyms. We notice that, in most cases, English uses TLN instead of TFN, especially in formal encounters. This may lead to misunderstanding for both Arabic and English speakers. As far as Arabic speakers are concerned, they will think in hearing TLN English that speakers are referring to the first name and this will lead to a problem in asking about a particular person. This problem is doubled in addressing a female such as 'Mrs. John', since Arabic speakers expect female title to be followed by a female name, e.g. 'Mrs. Suzan'. Conversely, this can be applied to English speakers.
who are also assumed to misinterpret the message of Arabic speakers in asking about a specific person. The teknonym form has no place in English. This obliges the English speakers to familiarize themselves with it, and for the Arabic speakers to get rid of it whenever they encounter English contexts.

6. References:
Comrie, B. (1976): “Linguistic Politeness Axes: Speaker-Addressee, Speaker-Referent, Speaker – By – Stander”. In:


