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ARABIC FORMS OF ADDRESS: SOCIOLINGUISTIC OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Representing an important interface that reflects the relationship between language and society, forms of address provide significant sociolinguistic information about the interlocutors' relationship, and the socio-cultural contexts. The present article aims at identifying some types of Arabic address forms (mainly kinship terms and teknonyms) that may be used in different socio-cultural contexts and the factors that affect them. It is also aimed at finding some evidence of the fact that Arabic forms of address are derived from Islamic teachings and Prophetic traditions. For this purpose, one hundred and eleven of the Prophet Muhammad's hadiths have been analysed. The data was also collected from multiple Arabic studies and books on titles, names, and teknonyms by Arab scholars, and through ethnographic observation as well. Admitting the fact that the Arabic language is the root of different Arabic dialects, such as the Syrian, Palestinian, and Jordanian ones, we focus, in this study, on Standard Arabic language in an attempt to find out some general features of the forms of address typical of the Arab world, though we admit that every dialect has its own specificity in terms of addressing others and needs special study. The findings show that although Arabic forms of address share some universal features with other languages, they display many culture specific peculiarities, which are pre-determined by culture and cultural values. The paper contributes to our understanding of Arabic address forms in different social contexts and may be applied in the classes of second language teaching and intercultural communication.

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Keywords: Forms of address, Arabic language, cultural values, kinship terms, teknonyms.



1. Introduction

The world is witnessing increased intercultural contact due to the tendency of studying abroad, technology advancement, immigration and so on. Ignoring any communicative norms of 'addressing other people by those who are not native speakers could lead to embarrassment. Therefore, knowing strategies or ways that people employ to communicate, initiate a conversation, or address each other is one of the most prominent difficulties that one may face in intercultural communication. Defined as expressions or words used to point out certain relations between people, or to show the identity difference, position and social status (Yule, 2006), forms of address, also called 'terms of address', represent a significant subject for researchers in the sociolinguistics field that focuses on the study of the relationship between language and society. Sociolinguistics, in addition, is concerned with shedding light on the reason why people use different strategies while speaking in different sociocultural contexts and how social factors, such as class, age, gender, social status, etc. affect the language (Holmes, 1992). This means that forms of address usage varies depending on the previously mentioned social factors since the communicative behaviour of a group of people is influenced by the attitudes and knowledge they share.

The present paper tackles the task of analysing some Arabic forms of address, and demonstrating that Arabic language shares some universal features with other languages but still has some unique ones. The motivation for writing this article comes from the fact that it could explain how the choice of Arabic address forms changes in different contexts and how it is affected by factors such as age, gender, social status etc. In addition, no analysis of Standard Arabic address forms has been conducted before. While analysing forms of address, it is worthwhile taking into consideration some cultural variables, such as power distance index and social distance, as stated in Hofstede's cultural dimension theory (1984, 1991) because culture has a significant impact on communication. Thus, we find ourselves obliged to identify the peculiarities of address forms usage in the Arabic language and find their cultural roots.

2. Problem Statement

The topic of forms of address is a very important research subject that has attracted many scholars (e.g. Afful 2006a, Braun 1988, Clyne 2009, Clyne, Norrby & Warren 2009, Dickey 1997, Keshavarz 2001, Larina & Suryanarayan 2013, Leech 1999, Norrby & Wide 2015, Oyetade 1995, Wierzbicka 2016) to study and coin definitions. As seen by Dickey (1997), address forms are the linguistic reference of a speaker in order to refer to his/her interlocutor. Another definition indicates that forms of address are a way to start a conversation because they designate interlocutors [Braun, 1988:7]. Nevertheless, we can say that it is not always the case since meanings of some address forms may be lexically and literally different from the real characteristics of the addressee. In other words, Arab teenagers, and young adults, for example, are expected to use fictive family forms of address like *uncle*, and *aunt* while talking to old people who are not their relatives as a sign of respect. The same is observed in many other cultures (cf. Larina & Suryanarayan 2013).

Moreover, forms of address were defined by Oyetade (1995) as the expressions or words that we employ in face-to-face encounter, dyadic and interactive ones to talk to the addressee while the conversation is still ongoing. This leads us to another definition: address forms are linguistic expressions used by a

speaker to designate his/her addressee in a face-to-face-situation [Afful, 2006b]. A similar definition is offered by Keshavarz (2001) who defines forms of address as linguistic forms for addressing that a speaker uses to pay other people's attention or to refer to them in a conversation.

As seen by Parkinson (1985), forms of address can be loosely defined as the words which we choose in a communicative event to refer to an addressee of that event. These words, address forms, convey social information and the form of an utterance encodes referential meaning in addition to accurate social information, i.e. information on how the speaker thinks of the nature of the relationship between him/her and the addressee. Furthermore, forms of address represent a significant part of the verbal behaviour that identifies a given society's norms, behaviours, and practices (Afful, 2006a).

Referring to kinship terms of address, Wierzbicka(2016) points out that the lexical semantics of these terms is important for cultural anthropology because their meanings are 'the most reliable guides to how speakers of a particular language conceptualize their social relationships'.

Forms of address indicate and reflect some characteristics of the social context of culture. In other words, they explain the complexity of social relationships among interlocutors, and the language - society relationship, helping sociolinguists understand how these relationships are constructed (Keshavars, 2001, Morford 1997).

3. Research Questions

In the present paper, we attempt to answer the following questions:

- What are the main categories of address forms in the Standard Arabic language?
- In what social contexts are address forms used and what social information do they provide?
- What culture specific features do the Arabic forms of address possess?
- Why are Arabic kinship terms often used in non-kinship relations and what is their pragmatic meaning and function?
- How are teknonyms formed and what cultural values do they evidence?
- What cultural values predetermine the choice of address forms in a particular social context?
- What are the latest trends in the sphere of address forms in the Standard Arabic language?

4. Purpose of the Study

The present article aims at conducting a sociolinguistic analysis of Arabic address forms to identify some types of them (mainly kinship terms and teknonyms) that may be used in different social contexts and the factors that affect them. Through this analysis, we wanted to obtain some information of how speakers of the Arabic language conceptualize their social relationships and identify themselves.

It is also aimed at finding some evidence of the fact that Arabic forms of address are derived from Islamic teachings and Prophetic traditions, which illustrate interrelation between language, culture and society.

5. Research Methods and Data collection

The present article is based on qualitative research. The data for the analysis was drawn, mainly, from primary sources on forms of address and some secondary sources were also consulted. It was collected from one hundred and eleven of the Prophet Muhammad's hadiths, one poem, multiple Arabic studies and books on titles, names, and teknonyms by Arab scholars, and through ethnographic observation as well.

Braun's categorization scheme of address forms (1988) was adapted to accommodate Arabic forms of address. We attribute the adaptation to the fact that some peculiarities in Arabic, such as fictive teknonyms had to be added. Our suggested version of the scheme is: (1) kinship terms, (2) teknonyms, (3) titles, (4) endearment forms of address, (5) personal names. It should be noted that some other categories could be added. In this study, we mainly focus on kinship terms and teknonyms or teknonymy, which is a practice, found in several cultures including the Arab one, which refers to parents by the names of their children,

Since different Arabic dialects such as the Syrian, Palestinian, and Jordanian ones stem from the Arabic language, we focus here on the Standard Arabic language in an attempt to find out some general features of the address forms typical of the Arabic speaking world. However, we admit that every dialect has its own specific address forms and needs special study.

To explain culture specific features of Arabic forms of address, we draw on Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory [1984, 1991], Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1987, Leech 2014), and Intercultural Pragmatics (Kecskés, 2014, Wierzbicka, 1991/2003).

Furthermore, elaborate studies on kinship terms and teknonyms were surveyed very carefully to infer the purpose, how and when these Arabic forms of address are employed. Conversations and dialogues, taken from historic studies as well as ethnographic observation were analysed, nevertheless, we believe that more detailed analyses on gender and age at least need to be conducted.

6. Findings

Many scholars have put forward different categorizations of address forms, such as Aliakbari & Tony in Persian (2008), Afful in Ghana (2006a), Parkinson in Egyptian Arabic (1985), and Mehrotra in Hindi (2009). However, we suggest the following classification of Arabic forms of address based on Braun's classification (1988) with some adaptations: (1) kinship terms, (2) teknonyms, (3) titles, (4) endearment forms of address, (5) personal names. It should be noted that our classification is not to be considered complete as other categories could also be added but it is not possible to discuss everything in one article. As it has been mentioned in this study we mainly focus on kinship terms and teknonyms.

6.1. Kinship terms

Kinship forms of address in Arabic culture do not function within the family circle only, but also within the circle of acquaintances and strangers; they are called in the latter case a fictive use of kin terms.

6.1.1. Family Circle/ in-group circle

Kin-type terms are used to define the relationships of family members like *father, mother, brother, sister*, and so on. Arabs value relationships and hierarchy within the family and society as well since their culture is of large power distance, i.e. calling parents by their names would be seen as a violation of the norm. This tradition is rooted in history:

- (1) A man asked the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) about the rights that fathers have over their children. One of the rights mentioned by the Prophet was that sons or daughters should not call their fathers by their names. It should be noted that the same applies to mothers [Al Athari, 1999].

Since aunts, uncles, and grandparents enjoy a higher rank than younger family members, they are not expected to be called by their names either. Grandfathers are addressed using the address form *Jadi* (lit. my grandfather), and grandmothers are addressed as *Jadati* (lit. my grandmother) without first names or teknonyms. Usually, an uncle, the father's brother, is called *Ammi* (lit. my paternal uncle), and an uncle, who is the mother's brother, is called *Khali* (lit. my maternal uncle) without mentioning the first name or the teknonym. An aunt, who is the father's sister, is usually addressed as *Amati* (my paternal aunt) and an aunt, who is the mother's sister, is addressed as *Khalati* (my maternal aunt) without mentioning the first name or the teknonym. However, it is possible to address uncles and aunts using *Ammi, Ammati, Khali, and Khalati* plus the teknonym or the first name but usually teknonym is preferred over the first name. Sisters and brothers address each other using first names whether they are younger or older, especially if they are not married or do not have teknonyms.

6.1.2. Stranger vs Acquaintance Circle

Kinship terms can be used to address strangers. The form depends on the age and gender factors. If the addressee is of the same generation with the speaker, the terms *Akh* (lit. brother) and *Ukht* (lit. sister) are used consequently. For example, *YaAkh/ YaAkhi* (lit. oh brother/ oh my brother) for males, and *Ya Ukht/ Ya Ukhti* (lit. oh sister/ oh my sister) for females (Al Qariri, 2012). Erstwhile, when someone knew that a specific person (the addressee) was a member of a tribe that was 'Modar tribe' for example, he/she addressed him, the addressee, as '*Ya Akha Modar*' (lit. oh brother of Modar) (Al Tabari, 1994).

Older strangers or acquaintances are expected to be addressed as *Abi* (lit. my father), *Umi* (lit. my mother), *Khalati* (lit. my maternal aunt), *Ammati* (lit. my paternal aunt), *Khali* (lit. my maternal uncle), *Ammi* (lit. my paternal uncle), and so on due to *we-orientation* (Larina et al. 2017) and the large power distance in the Arab culture in which age and gender have their own values. In other words, older people have a higher rank in the Arab culture, i.e. respecting them is obligatory. For instance:

- (2) An old man came to speak to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) but the people there were hesitant to give him a room to sit. Then, the Prophet reacted by saying they do not belong to our group (society) those who have no mercy on our young people and do not respect the elderly (Al Tarmethi, 1292).

Addressing older people by kinship terms in Arabic culture means showing respect. It is worthwhile mentioning that addressing an older male as *Abi* (lit. my father), though it is not common, sounds more polite and shows more closeness than using the address form *Ammi* (lit. my paternal uncle). The same applies to the address forms *Umi* (lit. my mother) and *Ammati* (lit. my paternal aunt).

6.2. Teknonyms

Teknonymy is a practice of referring to parents by the names of their children. The term was coined by Edward Burnett Tylor, an anthropologist, in one of his papers in 1889 (Lee & Harvey 1973). Teknonym's equivalent in the Arabic language is '*Kunya*'. However, the concept of *Kunya* is broader than the suggested usage of the English term '*teknonym*', i.e. *kunya*, which is another culture specific form of address widely used in the Arabic language, is the reference to a person by the names of their sons, daughters, brothers, fathers, and mothers. In other words, by using teknonyms, the speaker refers to the addressee by their son's, daughter's, sister's, brother's, mother's, or father's name. For example, a person called *Muhammad* who has a son named *Ali* is addressed *Abu Ali* (lit. father of Ali). The same refers to women, i.e. Ali's mother, whose name is Leila, can be called *Um Ali* (lit. mother of Ali).

The concept of *Kunya* illustrates that Arabic culture belongs to *we-culture* (Larina & Ozyumenko 2016, Larina et al. 2017) and Arabs prefer to identify themselves through other people demonstrating their belonging to the group. Thus, this term of address besides naming the person indicates his/her relations with others and his/her place in the social net. Comparing *Abu Ali* and *Mr Smith*, Griffin (2010) argues that a teknonym may be a better match for how an individual is conceptualized than their personal name is.

Usually, the elder son's name is used as part of the teknonym, and in case the addressee does not have any sons, the elder daughter's name can be used. This means that addressing someone using teknonyms is the addressee's choice, i.e. it is not usual for the speaker to choose any name of the addressee's children to teknonymise him/her. However, there is no problem if the speaker chooses another teknonym as long as the addressee is not offended by it. For instance, one companion of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), *Uthman Ibn Affan* (lit. Uthman, the son of Affan), had three teknonyms: *Abu Amr* (lit. father of Amr), *Abu Abdullah* (lit. father of Abdullah), and *Abu Leila* (father of Leila). If a person has 5 children, a speaker has 5 potential ways of creating a teknonym though this is not a norm. Furthermore, there is no specific age for people to be teknonymised; people can be teknonymised while they are young and before having children though teknonyms are usually used after having the first child.

In the situation when the addressee has no children, the addressee can be teknonymised by his father's name, or a teknonym of a well-known person who has the same first name as the addressee's, or any other teknonym that the addressee desires. Thus, in order to classify teknonyms in Arabic usage of address forms, we suggest the following categories: *true teknonyms* and *fictive teknonyms*.

6.2.1. True teknonyms

We suggest the term *true teknonyms* because they reveal the actual concept father, mother, son, daughter, brother or sister and distinguish them from the *fictive teknonyms*. For instance, if a man named *Ahmad* and his wife's name is *Amenah* have a child, whose name is *Amr*, people who are close enough to Ahmad and Amenah may call Ahmad as *Abu Amr* (lit. Amr's father) and Amenah as *Um Amr* (Amr's mother) but in formal contexts Ahmad and Amnah should be addressed by their full names, i.e. the first name, father's name and family name. Arabic true teknonyms like 'Abu X' (father of X) and 'Um X' (mother of X) are usually formed by the elder son's name. If the elder child is a female, her name can be used for the teknonym too. An example from our data:

- (3) A companion of the Prophet Muhammad was teknonymised as '*Abu Umamah*' because his elder child was a female whose name was *Umamah*. Similarly, another companion was teknonymised as '*Abu Ruqayah*' since his elder daughter's name was *Ruqayah* (Al Akwaa, 1978).

As we have mentioned above, Arabic teknonyms can refer to the addressee by their brother's, father's, sister's or mother's name (Jabbar, 2012). Good examples are *UkhtAli* (lit. Sister of Ali), and *IbnMariem* (Lit. Mary's son), and '*Bent Omran*' (lit. Omran's daughter).

6.2.2. Fictive teknonyms

We suggest the term *fictive teknonym* to indicate that teknonyms can be used for people who have no children yet, which is achieved by one of the following ways:

- a) *Teknonyms of well-known people who have the same name of the parent*

Men whose names are *Muhammad* can be addressed as *Abu Al Qasim* (Qasim is the name of the Prophet Muhammad's son) and those, whose names are *Ibrahim* (Abraham), can be addressed as *AbuIshaq* (father of Ishaq or Isaac in English; Isaac is the son of Abraham and Sarah, mentioned in the Old Testament) (Al Akwaa, 1978).

- b) *Father's name*

Those who have no sons or daughters can be addressed by their father's name. If an individual's name is *Hussein* and his father is *Ali*, people can address him as *AbuAli* (lit. Ali's father), though he is not Ali's father but Ali's son. Nevertheless, there is some logic in this kind of teknonyms, as the first child is expected to be named by the grandparent's name (Al Akwaa, 1978).

- c) *The individual's choice*

Any person can choose a teknonym that he/she likes to be addressed with if he/she has no sons or daughters yet. For instance, if a man likes to be addressed as *AbuYasir* (lit. Yasir's Father), he can ask other people to address him that way (Darrar, 2003).

6.2.3. Sociopragmatic aspect of teknonyms

Teknonyms are inherent components of Arab culture and one of its characteristics. They show we-orientation and we-identity of Arabs who mainly identify themselves through their children. This also shows that children are among the most important values in Arab culture and the fact of having sons and daughters deserves respect. Hence, we may suggest that the main pragmatic functions of teknonyms are to show closeness and respect.

Despite the widespread use, teknonyms have some contextual limitations. They are usually used among peers, and they can be used by a person of a higher social status to a person of a lower one, not from a lower social status to a higher one. This can be observed if we investigate the following two events:

- (4) Between 646 and 705, a group of people was at the palace of Amir al-Mu'minin (lit. Leader or Prince of the Faithful), Abd Al Malek Ibn Marwan. One man of the group mentioned his brother using teknonymy (my brother, Abu Bakr, did so and so). Consequently, some men criticized him and said, "How dare you teknonymise that way in our leader's presence!" The

man was expected to say his brother's first name, *Ibn* (lit. son of), the father's name, *Ibn* (lit. son of), the grandfather's name, the tribe and the family name.

- (5) A similar event took place in 805 when a man, Abu Muhammad Al Yazidi, started bragging after winning a debate over his opponent, Al Kesae, in the presence of the fifth Abbasid Caliph, Harun Al Rashid. The winner said, "*I am Abu Muhammad*", but one of the audience scolded him for teknonymising himself in such a situation and the caliph said that he prefers Al Kesae to the winner though Al Kesae lost the debate because the winner was impolite (Jubeir, 2015).

We can infer from these two events that in formal situations, full names are the norm. It is interesting to note that full names in the old times were composed of the first name with reference to the father's and grandfather's names, the family and tribe names and could contain from 5 to 10 words though there was no limitation on the full name at those times. Good examples are *Ahmad Ibn Al Hussein Ibn Al Hasan Ibn Abd Al Samad Al Jafi Al Kindi* and *Omar Ibn Al Khattab Al Adawi Al Qurashi*.

In our time full names are much shorter, they are mainly composed of the first name, father's name, and the family name in addition to the grandfather's name sometimes.

Arabs, in the old times, used teknonyms as forms of address mainly for three main purposes:

1. to avoid undesirable titles,
2. to honour the addressee,
3. to substitute the personal name by the tekronym (Jubeir, 2015).

Arabs are well known for being proud of their lineage such as fathers, sons, brothers, uncles and so on since the pre-Islamic era; this was apparent in their poems. Teknonyms represent the best way to show this lineage; mentioning the first name only deprives the Arabs of their pride and the honour brought by their lineage that is why it would sound impolite. On the other hand, it seems that undesired titles such as *Al-Jahiz* (lit. bug-eyed person), which was the title of a very well-known Arab prose writer and author of literary works, were common in the old times, which paves the way for the teknonyms to be a great means of avoiding such titles. However, some Arab scholars believe that teknonyms such as 'father of X' before having a child were used to express optimism by which Arabs hoped to live and see their own children. Therefore, using first names only made Arabs feel that they have no children or they might not live to see them. This might explain why teknonyms were preferred over first names.

It is interesting to note that Arabs have teknonymised animals to refer to a whole species, to honour, or highlight specific characteristics of the animal teknonymised, e.g. they refer to the donkey as *Abu Saber* (lit. father of Saber (Saber is a name that means *patient*)). Donkeys are well known for endurance and patience, which inspired the Arabs to choose such a way of reference. Similar examples can be *Abu Al Husain* (lit. the father of small stronghold) for foxes because of the design of their dens that resembles strongholds in terms of having more than one passage, *Abu Yakthan* (lit. Yakthan's father (Yakthan means alert and not sleep)) for Roosters due to the fact that roosters wake up early, *Um Amer* (lit. Amer's mother) for hyenas, and *Abu Al Hareth* (lit. Father of Hareth) for lions (Jubeir, 2015).

7. Discussion and Conclusions

In this study we aimed at exploring the address forms used in Standard Arabic language along with some factors that explain them. Nevertheless, we admit the fact that every dialect has its peculiarities and needs special study.

The present article offers an attempt to examine how Arabic forms of address are influenced by the context, some social variables, and the interlocutors' relationships with each other as well as cultural values. It indicates that Arabic forms of address, as any forms of address in other languages, abide by the rules of sociolinguistics that determine the right usage under the right conditions (Holmes, 1992). The communicative behaviour of Arabic address forms is generally linked to some characteristics that are associated with interlocutors (speaker and addressee), their relationship, and context.

The findings also show that although Arabic forms of address share some universal features with other languages, they still exhibit some peculiarities which are pre-determined by culture and cultural values, such as the use of kinship terms and teknonyms. The use of kinship terms addressing those who are not family members as well as identification of an individual through his/her relatives embedded in teknonyms indicate that Arabs belong to we-culture and are characterized by we-identity. Our results confirm the fact that being polite in Arabic culture is showing closeness and respect to those who are older. Thus the style of communication (Larina, 2015) is characterised by intimacy and at the same time status orientation.

The results of the study show that the Arabic language constitutes a particularly clear example of the entwining of cultural values and linguistic forms and paying close attention to forms of address is a very good way to see this in relation to hierarchy, lineage and the importance accorded to having children.

The study is of a limited nature. It gives just a general overview of some Arabic forms of address. Other categories should be also taken into consideration with more detailed analyses on gender, age and specific social contexts. Nevertheless, the study contributes to sociolinguistics and cultural anthropology as it gives new data showing the impact of social and cultural context on language and helps understand how the social relationships are constructed. The findings enable to understand the communicative behaviour related to Arabic forms of address and can be applied to enhance intercultural communicative competence of the learners of the Arabic language.

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