Introduction to the Special Issue

Speech Acts: Research Studies across Languages and Cultures

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Abstract. This paper provides an introduction to the special issue on Speech Acts: Research Studies across Languages and Cultures which features 12 manuscripts on a broad range of topics within the study of inter/cross-cultural pragmatics. It surveys the manuscripts in the issue and situates them in the broader literature on speech acts across-cultures.

Introduction

Pragmatics is the study of language in context and, thus, it is concerned with the meaning(s) of a particular utterance in various social and situational contexts. The basic premise of pragmatics is that mere linguistic knowledge is insufficient for proper interaction among people from different cultures, as an utterance often transcends its literal meaning to one determined by the context in which it is used.

Cross-cultural pragmatics has traditionally aimed to compare and contrast linguistic behaviors across different languages or different national varieties of the same language to understand how social context influences linguistic choices. Intercultural pragmatics, a relatively more recent discipline, is concerned with how people from different cultural backgrounds use, interpret and evaluate language use (Kecskes, 2013).

Culture, notoriously difficult to define (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009), is a central notion in cross-cultural and intercultural pragmatics. Within these disciplines, culture is used

as a "proxy for national boundary", as linguistic patterns of a language of a particular nation are linked to its culture. As such, "cultural knowledge, assumptions, and values influence the contextual assessments of participants, particularly as pertaining to perceptions of rights and obligations in diverse interpersonal and interactional contexts" (McConachy & Spencer-Oatey, 2020, p.393).

Ever since John L. Austin (1962) first introduced Speech Act Theory in his book, *How to Do Things with Words*, to examine actions performed by words, it has sparked growing interest from scholars across the disciplines of pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and discourse Analysis. The underlying premise of this scholarship is that the proper use of speech acts fosters human interaction and, by extension, intercultural understanding.

A plethora of research has been conducted to establish the pragmatic norms for speech act realization strategies across human languages. Amongst the first major projects was the Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), which examined requests and apologies in eight different languages/ language varieties. The series of studies culminated in seminal findings that informed the majority of ensuing research in the field.

Aim and Scope

The call for papers for this Special Issue of the *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* sought manuscripts which report rigorous research on speech acts from a cross-cultural perspective. The Special Issue collates research which is both diverse and eclectic in topic and method by scholars from Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States of America.

In this introductory essay, the guest editors discuss the manuscripts that make up the special issue. They provide a brief outline of the objective, scope and findings of each manuscript in their order of appearance in the issue and conclude with reflections on the research reported in this special issue.

Article Highlights

The research in this Special Issue is predominantly conducted in or on the Arab region. It features a range of applied research on aspects of Speech Act Theory from a cross-cultural perspective. In the paragraphs below, each article is outlined:

1   In their paper, *Request Constructions in Classical Arabic versus Modern Arabic: A Corpus-based Study*, Abbas, Qasim, and Jasim examine differences in request constructions in Classical and Modern Arabic using a web-based corpus tool. The study involves two types of corpora: the King Saud University 46-million-word Corpus of Classical Arabic (KSUCCA) and the10+-billion-word Corpus of the Arabic Web arTen Ten. The findings reveal variation in the occurrence of request constructions and functions in Classical and Modern Arabic.

2   In *How Polite can Impoliteness be? A Jordanian Gendered Perspective*, Bataineh, Bataineh, and Andraws examine perceptions of impoliteness in Jordanian Arabic from a gender perspective, as informed by the work of Culpeper (1996, 2005, 2011), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), and Holmes (1995, 2008, 2013). The sample consisted of a random, equally divided group of 100 male and female speakers of Arabic from different regions of Jordan. A 31-item checklist was designed, checked for validity and reliability, distributed, and collected hand-to-hand. The responses were analyzed and percentages calculated to detect potential similarities and/or differences in the participants' responses. The findings reveal an effect for gender as, despite evident similarities, male and female respondents manifest differences in what they perceive to constitute (im)polite behavior.

3   In his paper, *Effects of Social Power and Distance on the Realization of Requests in Jordanian Bedouin Arabic*, Al-Masaeed examines the potential effect of the variables of social power and distance on the realization of requests. An Oral Discourse Completion Test was used to collect data from 25 young male speakers of Jordanian Bedouin Arabic which were analyzed based on Brown's and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory using the CCSARP coding scheme. The findings reveal a positive relationship between perceptions of (im)politeness and social power and distance.

4   Al-Khatib, in *The Concept of Justice in Islam: A Socio-pragmatic Analysis*, examines the principles of social justice in the Holy Quran and the sayings of Prophet Mohammad as informed by Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory and Leech's (1983) model of politeness. A qualitative content analysis of the data, which comprise 191 Quranic verses and 100 sayings of Prophet Mohammed collected by searching the *Quran SmartSearch* (IslamiCity, 2023) and SUNNA.COM (2023), respectively. The findings show that the most used strategies are *bald-on-record* and *positive politeness*, respectively, whereas the least used is *off record politeness*.

5   Al-Khawaldeh, Abuziad, Mashaqba and Al Huneety, in *A Pragmatic Study on Managing Rapport in Responding to Reprimands in Jordanian Arabic*, examine reprimand responses using a gender lens. The data were collected from 95 Jordanian male and female Arabic-speaking college students using a four-situation discourse completion task (DCT) and analyzed using Allami and Samimi's (2014) coding scheme. The findings reveal that in their exchanges, speakers of Jordanian Arabic adopt either a *rapport-enhancing* perspective, weighing the costs and benefits, or a *rapport-threatening* perspective, asserting autonomy and infringing upon principles of association and involvement.

6   In their *Unleashing Argumentation in Netflix's Docudramas: Illocutionary Pluralism and Multimodal Rhetoric in the Trailer for Queen Cleopatra (2023)*, Hussein and ElMansy attempt to provide an enthymematic interpretation of Netflix's trailer of the controversial docudrama *Queen Cleopatra* through an integrated analysis of semantic-pragmatic and argumentation approaches. The findings reveal that the interplay between cross-modal devices and speech acts enables viewers to form hypotheses and draw inferences on the cinematic discourse they are invited to watch and, thus, to retrieve arguments to support the claim that it is worth watching.

7 In *Investigating Politeness in the Prayers of Prophets: A Quranic Discourse Perspective,* Arifianto, Izzudin, and Mujahidah examine the politeness strategies of expressing reverence and humility before God in the Qur'anic prayers of the Prophets through pragmatic identity and contextual analyses of the utterances. The findings show that several politeness maxims (viz., *tact, approval, modesty*) and two politeness strategies (viz., *on- and off-record*) manifest in the Qur'anic prayers of the prophets.

8 Bataineh, Salman, ALRoumi, Al Jawarneh, Shkour, Okour, and Al-Jamal, in *Negative Politeness Strategies in Jordanian EFL Textbook Dialogs: A Content Analysis of Action Pack 5 through 10,* examine the inclusion of negative politeness strategies in the dialogs of Jordanian EFL fifth- through tenth-grade textbooks through a content analysis informed by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. A seven-step content is conducted (viz., reading a textbook, selecting sample per selected criteria, breaking the text into component units, categorizing data (per Brown and Levinson's (1987) negative politeness taxonomy), coding data, counting frequencies, and analyzing data and drawing connections with existing theories and prior research). The findings reveal that Jordanian *Action Pack* textbooks include more negative politeness strategies in grades 5 and 6 than in grades 7, 8, 9, and 10, with *being indirect* and *using questions to reduce imposition and offense* as the most frequent.

9 El-Dakhs, Ahmed, Alhaqbani, and Alenezi, in *How do Alexandrians and Najdis Apologize? A Variational Pragmatic Study of Arabic,* compare the realization of the speech act of apology in Alexandrian Arabic in Egypt and Najdi Arabic in Saudi Arabia in light of the variables of social dominance, social distance, and gender. The data were collected through a six-situation role-play by an equally divided sample of 120 speakers of Alexandrian Arabic and Najdi Arabic. The data were analyzed in light of Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) model. The findings show that the two groups of respondents adopt similar apology behaviors, showing a strong influence for social dominance, a moderate influence for social distance, and a limited influence for gender.

10 In *Identity Construction and Speech Acts in Ernaux's The Years: A Corpus-based Feminist Stylistic Analysis*, Mahmoud explores the construction of the female identity in Nobel Prize winner Annie Ernaux's *The Years* as compared to the original *Les Années* in terms of the protagonist's use of speech acts. The data analysis is done by means of triangulating three analytical frameworks: Searle's (1969) Theory of Speech Acts, Davies and Harré (1990) Positioning Theory, and Mills' (1995) Framework of Feminist Stylistics. The findings reveal that two types of speech acts, *expressive* and *directive*, are frequently used to highlight the narrator's directions, compliments, and complaints about events and actions and that different positions are assigned to the narrator and protagonist to manifest different constructed identities.

11 Hussein and ElMansy, in *Between Marvel's Cinematic Universe and Instagram Narratives: Multimodal Argumentation in Arab Netizens' Perlocutionary Acts Towards Captain America 4,* examine how Instagram posts function as instances of multimodal argumentation. The data were collected through images from *The Incredible Hulk* Comic Book (1980) and Instagram spoof posts (photos and captions) by Arab Netizens in

November 2022 on the first trailer of *Captain America 4: New World Order* (2024) in response to Marvel Studios' announcement in September 2022. A descriptive qualitative approach is adopted as it describes a particular perspective qualitatively. The findings reveal that spoof Instagram posts are indeed potential instances of multimodal argumentation.

12 In the final paper of this issue, *Examining Speech Acts in Jordanian Advertising: Pragmatic Functions, Linguistic Features, and Rhetorical Devices*, Rababah examines the persuasive speech acts in Jordanian fashion, food, and technology advertisements using Searle's (1979) taxonomy of assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative speech acts. The findings reveal diverse advertising strategies, mainly directives, statements, and demands, are used to advocate for particular client actions, make claims about the quality of products, and guarantee certain outcomes for buyers.
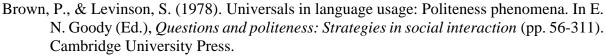
Overall Contributions

The topics of the research in this Special Issue are diverse, which is representative of the type of scholarship in this ever-growing field of research. Some address contemporary topics and use empirical data whereas others address issues related to religion and holy texts. In other words, the research reported herein encompasses analyses pertinent to certain topics on the Holy Quran and discourse of the prophets (viz., Al-Masaeed ; Al-Khatib; Arifianto et al), school textbooks (viz., Ruba Bataineh et al), cross-country comparisons of the use of speech acts (e.g., El-Dakhs et al.), within-country comparisons of the use of speech act (viz., Abbas et al.; Rula Bataineh et al.; Al-Khawaldeh et al.), and speech acts in the media, drama, and advertisements (viz., Hussein & ElMansy; Mahmoud; Rababah).

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