
*A Study of Condolences in Iraqi Arabic with
Reference to English*

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1. Introduction:

Politeness is an interdisciplinary phenomenon. Recent years have witnessed a "mammoth-like" increase in the number of publications dealing with this phenomenon (Mazid, 2006: 76). There is a vast literature on politeness in almost every culture now; Watts says that "he has a bibliography [on politeness] that contains roughly 1.200 titles, and it is growing week by week" (Watts, 2003: XI cited in Leech, 2005: 2). However, all these studies emphasized that the notion of politeness is hard to capture. People seem to be able to judge whether an act or an utterance is polite or not, but to define "politeness" as Kallia (2004: 146) observes, is a complicated matter; especially when we consider that perception of politeness changes through time and varies from culture to culture, then the complexity of the matter starts to become obvious.

As such, politeness has an inevitable role in human communication. In fact, it is not sufficient to master the phonology, syntax, lexis and morphology as a mark of communicative competence. The basic discourse rules or conversational routines of any language are highly essential (Akindede, 2007: 1). These routines or politeness formulas as

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Ferguson calls them can be defined as "brief bits of ritualized verbal exchange ... which people use on appropriate occasions, without much in the way of referential meaning but with considerable importance as part of the basic framework of personal interaction" (Ferguson, 1983: 65). This definition encapsulates four basic elements of politeness formulas: their formulaic nature, situational appropriacy, low semantic load and their role in mediating norms of social behaviour.

The analysis of the politeness formulas has typically focused on those that are performed regularly in daily life, such as apologies, requests, refusals, compliments and responses to compliments, complaints, gratitude, advice and invitations.

Investigation into how these formulas are realized in various cultures is extremely useful for speakers wishing to accomplish a wide range of communicative interactions smoothly and successfully in a culture that is not their own. In fact, languages cannot be meaningfully studied in isolation from context and culture. According to Lakoff, "it is futile to set linguistic behaviour apart from other forms of human behaviour" (Lakoff, 1973: 303).

On the other hand, the formula of condolence has not been fully explored yet. Fortunately, most speakers are not often called upon to express sympathy at somebody's death. For that very reason, outsiders to a given culture may not know what is appropriate to say. Even native speakers often confess to feeling uncomfortable and even at a loss for words when being confronted with another's bereavement. This is compounded by the fact that bad news may be announced

without prior indication, leaving the speaker with no time to prepare.

1.1 The Problem:

Most of the analysis of polite speech acts has concentrated on certain social verbal events like: compliments, offers, invitations, requests, refusals, congratulation, etc. Very little research has been done on condolences, despite its importance on certain occasions. This is evident from the very little literature on this subject, which may be due to its bad connotation.

In fact, bereavement is a time when people may be particularly vulnerable and weak. Because of this, failure to express condolences concerning any occasion in the right way may damage personal relationships especially if the expression of sympathy is perceived as insensitive, careless or inadequate. For this reason, the study of the formula of condolences is vital and necessary.

1.2 Aims of The Study:

The present study is an attempt to make a linguistic presentation to the concept of condolences in appropriate way, since there is somehow lack of information in this concern. The study is also intended to describe the linguistic forms of condolences in Iraqi Arabic (IA); and to see how it is used and manifested in IA specifically. The variability of patterns with regard to context is to be accounted for in addition to the pragmatic and social functions of this formula.

Since all cultures seem to share the concept of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Leech, 1983) and to express it in a certain linguistic and very often non-verbal way and since politeness derives from different norms and values that are culturally bound (2009, internet 3: 2), linguistic routines manifest themselves differently in different cultures. Thus, it is our aim in this research to investigate the effect of the cultural norms and values of Iraqi community on condolences.

1.3 The Hypotheses:

This study is intended to validate the following hypotheses:

1. Condolences have diverse linguistic forms to be manifested. Some of them are recursive in nature while others are elaborated forms.
2. Condolences are affected to a great extent by the Islamic culture and particularly by our belief in fate. This is expected to be revealed by the extensive use of religious words and phrases.
3. It is expected to find some ritualized phrases and statements.
4. Condolences are affected by certain sociolinguistic variables like sex, age and education.
5. Condolences have certain pragmatic and social functions in Iraqi Arabic.

1.4 Data Collection:

Researchers in the area of Arabic politeness formulas have employed various methods of collecting linguistic data. Some have used native- speaker introspection (Al-Nasser, 1993; Hassanain, 1994) and others have used personal observations cross-checked to greater or lesser extent by native- speakers (Ferguson, 1967).

The present study basically adopts an ethnographic method pioneered in this area by Manes & Wolfson (1980). But since tape-recording is not acceptable in relation to the topic of the research, the data have been written down as accurately as possible and with considerable immediacy the exact words used in expressing condolences. They were collected by the researcher herself, in addition to the introspection and help of some friends and colleagues who are also native speakers of IA from within their own local circle of family and friends. We have tried to collect as varied sample as possible. Condolence expressions were taken from condolence occasions observed or participated in. The interlocutors from different ages and sexes.

2. Concept of Condolences:

Condolences are formal expressions of sympathy offered to people after the death of a member of the family or a friend or a loved one (2009, internet, 1: 1). Condolences phrases are designed to convey sympathy for the bereaved person. Many people are aware that it is hard to give a condolence phrase without sounding slightly clichéd. But as a

general rule, the emotion behind the phrase is often more important than the wording itself (Ibid.).

Expressions of joy are easily found, but this fountain of feeling being chilled by grief, by the undeserved misfortune, leaves the sympathizer in the perplexity as to what to say and how to say it (Benham, 1891: 4). The question here is whether words can measure the depth, the height, the immensity and the bitterness of that grief, and what we can say that will not seem unfeeling.

Ancient philosophers and modern poets who have dwelt at length on this occasion have finally come to the conclusion that "all words seem meaningless, the thoughts which fill our minds fail to frame words that will comfort, and yet the simple and unpremeditated words are best", (Ibid).

Generally speaking, classical stock condolence phrases include things like "sorry for your loss", "please accept our deepest sympathy" etc. these condolence phrases are neutral enough to be appreciated for almost anyone regardless of religious beliefs. Accordingly, one might consider the religious beliefs of the bereaved person who composes condolence phrases. For people who believe in a concept of heaven and hell, one may want to reference the idea that he believes the deceased is in heaven. Phrases such as "may God comfort you" and other reference to religious belief should be tailored to specific religions. In fact, differences in language and culture may cause understanding or communicative problems. Hayajneh (2009: 6) explains that there are many areas where the notion of a separation between language and culture cannot be maintained. He insists on studying the

cultural aspects of the language (beliefs, norms, traditions, religions, characteristic of community) and learning the appropriate expressions for each particular cultural occasion in order to avoid faults and embarrassment.

Moreover, it is appropriate to reference the condition of the deceased in condolence phrases. Condolence phrases to survivors of someone who died from a lingering illness might include a note of appreciation that the pain and difficulty are over as in "I was sorry to learn of your mother's death, but I am glad to hear that her suffering has come to an end". (2009, Internet 2:1). If one is really struggling to come up with condolence phrases which sound right, it is also perfectly reasonable to say "words alone cannot express my sympathy" or "I can not imagine the grief of losing your child / partner / etc. However, recipients of condolence greetings usually aren't looking for sparkling originality, just a sincere expression of emotion would be fair. (Ibid.).

2.1 Condolences From a Semantic and Pragmatic Point of View:

According to the speech act theory, condolences typically belong to the expressive class. The expressives have the function of expressing the speaker's psychological attitude specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content (Searle, 1979: 15).

Semantically, condolences have a social meaning which refers to the use of language so as to establish and regulate social relations and to maintain social roles (Mwihaki, 2004: 133). This type of language use is alternatively described as

social or phatic communication (see Lyons, 1981). In fact, the notion of phatic communication emphasizes experiences of a social fellow and the participation in social linguistic rituals.

In phatic communication, condolences have little information value, but instead they play an essential role in oiling the wheels of social discourse on certain occasions. Social meaning, hence is communicated through ritualistic use of language (Mwihaki, 2004: 133).

Condolences are not just expressions of sympathy; they are also acts of encouragement in the face of adversity. Phatic communication, which is expressed in the form of condolences, is elicited by occurrences that call for the sharing of expressions or at least a show of empathy. The essential function of the social meaning lies in the emotive purpose of the utterance (Mwihaki, 2004: 134).

2.2 Related Literature and Model of Analysis:

The concept of politeness has been part of linguistics since the late 1970s but it was the publication of Brown & Levinson's famous politeness book, in 1978 that established this issue as one of the main areas of pragmatic theory, a novelty that emphasized the importance of this concept (Sifianou, 1992). The investigation of the routine formulas has typically focused on these speech act that are very recursive in everyday language. Such routines include among others how greetings, compliments, invitations, and the like are given, interpreted and responded (see: Coulmas, 1981; Golato, 2002; Trosberg, 1995; Baidoo and Koranteng, 2008 and many others). Comparatively, little work has been carried out on

condolences. In the following, the major studies on condolences will be examined.

Emery has investigated in (2000) three categories of politeness formulas in Omani Arabic under the headings of greeting and parting routines, congratulating and condoling. He was after rules, structure and use of these formulas. However, the major part of his study has been devoted to greetings leaving only a little section to deal with condolences.

On the other hand, Lorraine (2002), has dealt with the same subject from a different point of view. According to him, death is a biological event, and the ways in which we make sense of it are shaped by the social discourses of the world in which we live. A narrative and social constructionist therapeutic approach opens new practices of conversation with those who are dying or bereaved. These practices emphasize the ongoing story of relationship. From this perspective, grief becomes an evolving and creative opportunity for story development rather than an unpleased task to be worked through as quickly as possible.

While Elwood (2004) examines differences in responding to condolences between American's responding in English and Japanese's responding in English. He found that the two situations of condolence (among other situations) that he gave, revealed a variety of differences in the use of a semantic formula.

Another study on condolences is that of Bernan (2008) in which he has reported empirical research into public books of condolence. Bernan has suggested that not only do condolence books provide historical record of the way

contemporary society mourns, but also that they reflect attempts to language loss in way that can be used to evaluate the extent of society's engagement with death. In so doing, he has pointed to ways in which condolence expressions oscillate between, conservative structures of meaning and contemporary "structure of feeling". Furthermore, he suggested that condolence books may provide a useful social platform for the social expression of grief.

Making use of the previous studies and other studies on politeness formulas, an eclectic model has been created for the analysis of the data upon which this study is based.

3. Data Analysis:

In Iraqi culture, an exchange on the occasion of condolence consists of a minimum of two moves but can vary in length depending on the degree of familiarity of the speakers. In fact, the examination of data has revealed five prevalent patterns of response:

3.1 Acknowledgement of Death:

This category includes certain interjection like: "لا" (No) or "لا يابا لا" (lit: no, father, no) meaning (don't say that) or "الله اكبر" (God is greatest) which is somehow equivalent to the English phrase "Oh, my God". Wierzbicka (1986) notes that interjections like those mentioned above contain the following information:

- I realize something bad is happening.
- I wouldn't have expected that.

- I feel something bad because of that.

However, as Wierzbicka notes, while many interjections appear to encode an emotion, it is difficult to put a name to the emotion with any degree of certainty. Moreover, the nonverbal responses normally accompany the verbal ones in such circumstances.

3.2 Expression of Sympathy:

It can be considered the core of the speech act, that is, it is the semantic formula that was most prevalent in most situations and in few cases this semantic formula formed the entire expression of condolence, although it was more common for the responses to be formed out of a combination of two or more semantic formulas. The most common expression of sympathy is "لامع الأسف" (No, that is very unfortunate). The formula itself "أنا أسف" (I am sorry) is used mainly by educated people and in formal places. In fact, there are many different realizations of this formula like: "قلبي معاك" (my heart is with you) and "والله احنا حيل انقهرنا" (I swear, it grieves us a lot). Again these utterances depend to a great extent on the variables of education and sex. Females generally tend to use words of strong emotion. This is supported by other studies like that of Coats (1986) or Holmes (1985, 1997 and Emery, 2000). In fact, there are two basic Iraqi patterns for expressions of sympathy: a statement of regret that the death has happened and a representation of the current situation.

3.3 Offer of Assistance:

It refers to any attempts to make the speaker's burden lighter. Such offers can be general like: "ممکن أساعدك بشي؟" (Is there anything I can do)" or "قلي أشون أساعدك" (Tell me how I can help you) or more specific ones, like "تحتاج سيارتي؟" (Do you need my car?). However, Iraqi speakers generally tend to offer general offers.

3.4 Future – Oriented Remarks:

These usually take the form of words of encouragement or practical advice, like: "قولي يا الله ولا تقهغين نفسك" (depend on Allah and don't grieve) or "أنا أقول لازم تغير جو" (You should do something for a change). Here the speaker is trying to convince the hearer not to stay in the same mood. "لا تعمل هاكذ" (Don't do this to yourself, think about your health). Most of the responses take the imperative form with varying levels of politeness.

3.5 Expression of Concern:

The last semantic formula "expression of concern" relates to showing care for the well-being of the speaker or his/her family and includes questions like: "أشونك هسة؟" (How are you now?), "لازم تهتم بصحتك" (you must take care of yourself) and "دير بالك على والدتك" (Take care of your mother) said when the father dies.

In addition to these five semantic formulas, there was a wide range of other expressions that did not fit any general

category. Responses that may not fit into any of the five semantic formulas consist of the following:

- [A] An expression of Empathy which includes statements like "والله يابا اعرف شعورك" (I swear dear, I know how you feel).
- [B] Showing similar experience "ما حاجة تحكي نفس الظروف اللي مرينا بيها" (There is no need to speak (to tell), we have experienced the same).
- [C] Statements of not knowing. Sometimes respondents mention explicitly that they hadn't known about the death.
- [D] Statements of lacking words. We have observed that respondents sometimes suffer from lacking appropriate words for the occasion, saying things like: "والله ما اعرف أش" "أقول" (By God, I don't know what to say).
- [E] Related Questions. These are very frequent in that respondents inquire about the funeral or way of the death.
- [F] related Comments. These include comments such as that it is impossible to know what the bereaved feels or a prayer for mercy on the deceased.
- [G] Expression of surprise. Iraqis sometimes use some expressions which indicate surprise for the unexpected news. Like: "لا يابا لا اشعثكي" (Oh, no what are you saying?) or "مستحيل ما اصدق" (impossible, I cannot believe it!!).

Finally, it has been noticed also that sometimes the respondents say nothing, showing their support non-verbally.

4. Discussion:

The purpose of greetings expressed on the occasion of bereavement is threefold: to share the grief of the bereaved and express solidarity, to emphasize the transitory nature of life on this earth and to give encouragement. (Emery, 2000; Akibdele, 2007). Condolences are used as a vehicle for the social expression of grief, they enable a range of communications, helping to bridge the gap between the living and dead, as well as between the immediately bereaved and the wider community-in- mourning (Bernan, 2008: 1). They can never provide access to the full and complex range of emotions experienced following bereavement. They do, however, provide an insight into the intimacy and immediacy of emotions provoked by loss.

In fact, most of the condolence expressions illustrate the profound sense of meaning with which particular referents of loss have been invested. Thus quite routinely, public mourning of the kind discussed here is not just the reaction to the loss of a loved person (s) but it, as Bernan says: "trigger for emotions associated with a series of other losses". Here condolence messages provide clues both to a sense of what has been lost, as well as to the social identity of those moved to mourn these events.

Examining the data and following the patterns established in the other functions of discourse, it is possible to distinguish a group of common expressions used by both men and women, as well as these favoured by one or the other sex and age group. In expressing condolence, young women

appear to be more innovative than young men, the former favouring the imported "البقية بحياتك" (the deceased will continue to live through you (with permutation response) "حياتك الباقية" (may your life be perpetuated) while the latter tends to be more conservative, often using the same expressions as their elders. This highlights the importance of the sex variable on the use of such routines. This is confirmed by other studies like Field, Hockey & Small, 1997; Stroebe, 1998, who suggest that the burden of emotional responsibility and expression of grief following bereavement is plainly gendered.

The present research, although not originally conceived as an investigation into women's speech, clearly, shows that older women favour vernacular Iraqi condolence more than younger women. In fact, they tend to use elaborated forms of condolences. While young women who are mostly educated tend to use short forms.

Among older speakers, men tend to emphasize communal solidarity with such expressions as "المصاب واحد" (we are all grieved) and "عظم الله اجركم" (May God increase your reward) with the characteristic Iraqi response "البقاء والدوام" (only God is immortal). Other common expressions of engagement are "الله يصبركم" (May God give you patience) and "شد حيلك" (Be strong) with a simple reply such as "الشدة على الله" (strength is derived from God).

Traditional standard Arabic formulas such as "إنا لله وإنا إليه راجعون" (we belong to Allah and to him we return) and "لا حول ولا قوة إلا بالله" (there is no power or strength but through the help of Allah) are commonly heard on such occasion, used

mainly by men, who refer to the inevitability of fate in the expression "هذا ما قدر الله" (This was decreed by Allah). Here, the depth of religious content and engagement take a variety of shapes and forms, ranging from the frequent appellation to the more sensitive citation of the holy Qura'an. Berger (1973) has famously referred to the ways in which religion offers a "sacred canopy" from the fear of death, whereas Malinowski (1962) has suggested that death is itself the origin and source of religious belief.

Bentetahila & Davies (1989), on the other hand, have confirmed our findings in that they have noticed that there is a remarkable difference between English and Arabic formulas. This difference lies in the frequency in Arabic of formulas containing religious references, where the functionally corresponding formulas in English contain no such reference. (Ibid: 100).

Nevertheless, the most common response is the formula "الله يرحمه" (let the mercy of Allah be upon him) which can be used by women and men of different ages.

5. Conclusion:

Condolence expressions provide a range of insights into the ways in which contemporary society approaches the topic of death. At both a general and specific level, the researcher has sought to demonstrate how language at once constrains but also contains a range of shared meanings upon which communication and community depend.

The study demonstrates the relatively narrow range of words available in time of loss and the ways in which

emotions triggered by personal loss are attend by the attempts to language them. Also at the same time it evolves new forms and styles of expression that are simultaneously related and reflective to the principal referent of loss.

In fact, the analysis of responses of Iraqi speakers to situations of condolence reveals a variety of differences in the use of semantic formulas. Five basic patterns of response seem to be the most common. These are acknowledgement of death, expressions of sympathy, offer of assistance, future-oriented remarks and expressions of concern. In addition to these five patterns of response, there are other minor ones like: expressions of sympathy, sharing similar experience, statements of not knowing, statements of lacking words, expressions of surprise, related questions and comments.

Moreover, it has been observed that there is a close connection between the verbal and non-verbal reactions. This is due to the fact that Iraqi people cannot be cold in response to such events.

This study highlights the great effect of the Islamic culture on Iraqi people, in that they believe that death is a matter of fate and it is judged by God as there is no way to deny it or escape from it. This is clear from their extensive use (especially the old people) of some religious statements and citations of the holy Qura'an.

The study has also attempted to show how the language of condolence relies upon certain variables namely: age, sex, and education. Old people tend to use ritualized phrases and some "imported forms" while young people try to express their support in simple direct words. Females, on the other hand,

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tend to use emotionally charged supportive phrases which are longer than those of men (especially old females).

Finally, it has been noticed that education affects offering condolences also, in that educated people tend to use direct formal semantic formula instead of paraphrasing it or using other realizations of it.

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دراسة تعابير المواساة في العربية العراقية مع الإشارة إلى الإنكليزية

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المستخلص

تشكل تعابير التعازي جزءاً من التواصل (التفاعل) اليومي على الرغم من أنها قليلة الاستخدام في الحياة اليومية قياساً بكثير من أفعال الكلام الأخرى كتعابير الاعتذار والطلب أو الرفض مثلاً. ولهذا السبب فإننا نرى ضرورة دراسة هذه التعابير وتحليلها في اللغة العربية. وعلى هذا الأساس فقد حاولنا أن نتحقق عن كيفية استخدامها من قبل العراقيين. تفترض الدراسة بان العراقيين يستخدمون أنماطاً متنوعة في التعبير عن التعزية وان هذه التعابير تتأثر بحضارة البلد وثقافته. تم إثبات هذه الفرضيات بشكل واضح حيث أن العراقيين يميلون إلى استخدام تعابير متنوعة من التعازي وفقاً للسياق ولمتغيرات أخرى مثل العمر والجنس والتعليم. كذلك ظهر جلياً من خلال التحليل التأثير الكبير للدين الإسلامي في هذه التعابير.

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