

A Socio-Pragmatic Analysis of Condolences among Egyptian and English- Speaking Users of Facebook

Amal Awad Shaaban Hussein ^(*)

Abstract

The present study investigates some condoling comments given by Egyptian and English- speaking users of Facebook, examining the effect of culture on the way people offer condolences to one another. Using participant observation, 200 (100 Egyptian Arabic and 100 English) naturally occurring condolence speech acts are collected from Facebook obituary status updates. The study seeks to investigate the frequently used semantic strategies, syntactic, and lexical aspects that distinguish Egyptian and English condoling comments on Facebook. Furthermore, other aspects that differentiate between Egyptian Arabic (EA) and English condoling comments on Facebook are examined. The results also shed light on how cultural norms and politeness might affect the way Egyptians and English- speaking users of Facebook give condolences. New categories are added to the previous models to create a semantic classification that fits and covers the data of the study. In order to address the objectives of the study, quantitative as well as qualitative analyses are carried out. Results of the study proved that Egyptians condole each other using religious consolations, whereas English speakers use direct and apologetic condolences. The study highlights the great effect of the Islamic culture on Egyptians. Finally, the study concludes that using different politeness strategies to accomplish face wants and avoid face threats when giving condolences differ from one culture to another.

Keywords: Condolence Speech Act, Facebook, Cross-Cultural Analysis, Politeness

(*) This paper is part of an MA. thesis entitled: "A Socio-Pragmatic Analysis of Condolences among Egyptian and English- Speaking Users of Facebook". Supervised by Prof. Bahaa-eddin M. Mazid- Faculty of Languages – Sohag University & Prof. Samir A. Abdel- Naim - Faculty of Arts, Sohag University.

1. Introduction

Condolences, according to Speech Act Theory, belong to the expressive class. This class aims at expressing the speaker's psychological attitude (Searle, 1976). Thus, when offering condolences, the speaker expresses sorrow and sympathy at the news of someone's death. Choosing the right expressions when giving condolences may seem difficult for many people, as they struggle with how to express sympathy. Non- native speakers of a specific language may not know how to condole a native speaker of this language. If people use the target language according to their cultural- norms, they may be perceived as impolite, unfriendly, weird or even ridiculous (Bentahila and Davis, 1989). Condolences can be considered, according to Bentahila and Davis' (1989) description, “culturally prescribed clichés” (p. 103).

1.1. Objectives

The main objective of the present study is to make a cross-cultural comparison between Egyptian Arabic (EA) and English condoling comments on Facebook. The two languages' semantic, syntactic and lexical aspects are investigated. Moreover, the use of emoticons and photo comments are explored in the data. Furthermore, the frequency of each aspect is calculated. The study also aims to explore how the socio-cultural norms and politeness determine the way Egyptians and English- speaking users on Facebook offer condolences.

1.2. Questions

1. What are the frequently used semantic strategies by Egyptian and English-speaking users of Facebook when giving condolences?
2. What are the sentence types used by Egyptian and English-speaking users of Facebook when they comment on an obituary status update?
3. What are the lexical aspects that distinguish Egyptian and English condoling comments on Facebook?
4. What are other aspects that differentiate between the EA and English condoling comments on Facebook?
5. How might cultural norms and Politeness affect the way Egyptians and English-speaking users of Facebook give condolences?

1.3. Significance

The analysis of the observed data resulted in the introduction of new condoling strategies which add to the previous models introduced by Elwood, 2004; Farnia, 2011; Samavarchi & Allami, 2012; and Moghadam & Pishghadam, 2013.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the field of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis through the application of different linguistic theories to investigate authentic situations in Computer-Mediated Communication environments. It would benefit learners of both English and EA languages in that they will be familiar with the way native speakers of each language offer condolences. In socio-pragmatics, knowledge of this contrast is not only a significant contribution to the study of pragmatics; it is also of practical

help to people in regular contact with Egyptian and/ or English speakers. This can help learners avoid saying something during a condolence routine that may sound inappropriate to speakers of these two languages. The classification presented in this study can function as a model for researchers to compare condolences in other cultures. Moreover, this study presents a better understanding of both the EA and English linguistic and cultural aspects.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Condolences within One Culture

Farnia (2011) investigated the strategies used by Iranian native speakers of Farsi when responding to an obituary note. Data were collected from the comments posted to an obituary for the late Khosro Shakibaei, a famous actor in Iran who passed away in 2008. Two hundred comments were analyzed to describe the strategies used in expressing condolences. Results showed that Farsi speakers used the following strategies from the most frequently to the least frequently when they responded to the obituary note: expressions of regret and grief, expressions of positive feelings and compliments about the deceased, praying for God's mercy and forgiveness for the deceased, using poems and proverbs, and using expressions of condolence.

Ethnic variations of condolences written via SMS by Malaysians were studied by Kuang (2015). Data consisted of 36 SMS written in English. The sample consisted of 47% Chinese, 33% Malays and 20% Indians. Results showed that Chinese writers showed sympathy and hope, Malay writers expressed apologies, and Indian writers used religious

statements. Furthermore, the analysis showed that Malaysian SMS condolences were composed of an average of 27 words with a total of 13 expressive functions. Kuang concluded that cultural differences exist in the way people give condolences.

2.2. Cross-Cultural Condolences

A cross-cultural study by Elwood (2004) investigated differences in expressing condolences between Americans and Japanese. Data were collected using a written discourse completion test (DCT). Participants were asked to respond to two different situations related to the death of a grandmother and a pet dog. Accordingly, five patterns were found in the responses to the two condolence situations in her study: acknowledgement of the death, expression of sympathy, offer of assistance, future-oriented remarks, and expression of concern. The results revealed a diversity of differences in the use of semantic formulas between Americans and Japanese. There was also a significant difference in the way participants responded to the first situation; and the second one. Accordingly, Elwood concluded that findings for one kind of condolence situation cannot be generalized to all situations of the same kind.

Lotfollahi and Eslami-Rasekh (2011) studied the cross-cultural differences in the realization patterns of condolence speech act between English and Persian. The study also focused on the effect of social distance on condoling strategies in different situations. A discourse completion test consisting of four situations was given to eighty Iranian EFL students. The collected data was coded based on Elwood's (2004)

semantic formula with some modifications. The analysis of data revealed that offering of condolences by Iranians, as a Muslim community, is carried out through religious strategies which are different from what was found in the English data. Moreover, the study proved that social distance has a significant effect on the way people express their condolences.

2.3 Condolences in Computer-Mediated Communications

In a study on Facebook, Al-Shboul and Maros (2013) investigated the speech act of condolences in Jordanian Arabic. Data were collected from comments on an obituary status update on a deceased Jordanian actor in 2011. Based on 678 posted comments, these researchers were able to identify seven major strategies, namely: praying for God's mercy and forgiveness for the deceased, reciting Quranic verses, enumerating the virtues of the deceased, expressing shock and grief, offering condolences, realizing death is a natural part of life and using proverbs and sayings. Findings indicate that the majority of condolences in Jordanian comments are related to faith and religious beliefs.

Hidaya (2016) examined expressions of condolences in Algerian Arabic, in contrast with the ones used by English speakers. Data were collected from comments on a profile picture update indicating the state of mourning on Facebook. Since that researcher is a native speaker of Algerian Arabic, she used her knowledge to extract data. The study adopts a descriptive methodology. Hidaya relied on Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) and Murad's (2013) models of categorization with some modifications. Results showed that people's

perception of death and life is shaped by their cultural-religious beliefs. Furthermore, Algerians avoid using emotive language as they express their feelings directly, unlike English speakers who often use self-referring expressions.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1. Speech Act Theory

In 1955, Speech Act Theory was first founded by J. L. Austin, a British philosopher of languages, and further developed by the American philosopher J.R. Searle. Austin's theory was expressed in lectures held at Harvard University. Most of Austin's work was published posthumously as *How to Do Things with Words* in 1962. In Speech Act Theory, Austin considered language as a sort of action rather than a medium to convey information. His theory has illuminated the ability of language to do other things than describe reality. Austin's work was contrary to the traditional attitudes to language that prevailed during his time.

3.2. Condolences as Speech Acts and their Functions

According to the taxonomy of speech acts provided by Austin (1962), condolences are one of the speech acts of *behabitives*. He states that *behabitives* concern social behaviour and attitudes towards the addressee. Searle (1976) states that condolences belong to the class of *expressives*; they express the psychological state of the speaker.

3.3. Politeness

Since the late 1970s, different politeness theories have been introduced within pragmatics to explain how people should interact. The most influential and comprehensive theories were proposed by Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1978/1987), and Leech (1983). Most of these theories were influenced by Grice's (1975) Co-operative Principles (CP) and his Maxims of Conversation.

Lakoff (1975, p. 64) defines politeness as a behaviour that has been “developed by societies to reduce friction in personal communication”. She further adds that “to be polite is saying the socially correct thing” (1975, p.53). Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 1) deal with politeness “as a complex system for softening face threats”. Their definition of politeness depends on ‘face theory’ which is introduced by Goffman (1967). Leech (1983, p. 19) defines politeness as “strategic conflict avoidance” that “can be measured in terms of the degree of effort put into the avoidance of a conflict situation”, i. e, the ability of participants to interact in a comfortable and harmonious atmosphere.

4. Methodology

Naturally- occurring data represent the corpus of the study. Farahat (2009) states that naturally- occurring data is collected through "observing people's behaviour in authentic situations" (p.48). The ethnographic method of participant observation is used to collect such naturally-occurring data. Participant observation is defined as "a way of collecting data in naturalistic settings by ethnographers who observe and/or take

part in the common and uncommon activities of the people being studied" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002, p. 2).

The models and strategies of the previous studies, Elwood, 2004; Farnia, 2011; Samavarchi & Allami, 2012; Pishghadam & Moghadam, 2013, that investigated the speech act of condolence were taken into consideration. However, new categories were added to create a semantic classification that fits and covers the data of the study. The following are the semantic classification of both EA and English condolences that resulted from coding the collected data.

Semantic classification of EA condolences

- 1-Religious consolation
- 2- Direct condolence/sympathy
- 3- Enumerating the merits of the deceased
- 4- Expression of shock/ sorrow
- 5- Related questions

Semantic classification of English condolences

- 1- Direct condolence/ sympathy
- 2- Apology
- 3- Religious consolation
- 4- Enumerating the merits of the deceased
- 5- Missing the deceased
- 6- Expressing shock and sorrow
- 7- Remembering shared memories

5- Results and Discussion

Results showed that the most frequently occurring strategy by Egyptian users on Facebook, whether Muslims or Christians, was the *religious consolations* strategy. Egyptian data showed

that (86.8%) of the used strategies contained religious prayers directed to the deceased and his/her family. Since using religious prayers and expressions is a part and parcel of the Egyptian society, due to the strong belief in the Almighty God and fate, the religious expressions used in this strategy are unique to the Egyptian society and do not have counterparts in the English culture, except for asking God to let the deceased's soul rest in peace.

Examples of the religious consolation strategy in the EA data:

"ربنا يصبركم"

'May God grant you patience.'

"أنا لله و إنا اليه راجعون"

'We belong to God and to Him we shall return.'

Considering the English data, the results of the current study showed that the most frequently occurring strategy was the *direct condolence/sympathy* strategy. Out of the 100 collected English comments, 50 (27%) comments contained direct explicit condolence and/or sympathy. Moreover, the *apology* strategy occurred in 43 (23.2%) comments. The condoler expresses his/her sorrow by apologizing for hearing these sad news. This strategy distinguished the English data, as it was not found in the EA data. Thus, English condolences on Facebook can be described as direct and apologetic, whereas EA condolences are religious. English data showed variation in the frequency of the condoling strategies, whereas EA data was almost dominated by one strategy, namely the religious consolations strategy.

Examples of the direct condolence and apology strategies in the English data:

My sympathy to the family members"

"condolences"

"Heartfelt sympathies to all."

"Sorry for the family's loss."

"So sorry to hear of x's passing."

"I am so sorry."

Results showed that the most frequently used sentence type, in both EA and English data, was the declarative condoling sentence. According to Martínez (2012) declarative constructions, due to their compatibility with the semantics of expressive acts, are more preferred in the performance of condolences; they allow speakers to express their feelings using a statement.

Furthermore, condolers of the two languages showed a tendency toward using compound and elaborated condolences. This can be interpreted according to the Politeness Principles' sympathy maxim (Leech, 1983). The condoler tries to prove that he/ she sympathizes with the bereaved and that his/her emotions are genuine by giving high value to the bereaved's feelings.

Results of EA data showed that 90% of the collected comments contained implicit condolences, whereas 10% contained explicit condolences. However, implicit condolences in the English data appeared in 50% of the collected comments. Most condolences are implicit because they express sympathy indirectly. According to Leech (1983) using indirect speech acts would be more polite as it is considered a negative

politeness strategy. The variance in the frequency of the Egyptian and English implicit condolences can be interpreted due to the fact that Western culture values directness of expression, whereas Eastern culture emphasizes subtlety (Lam, 2017).

English subjects showed a tendency toward using intensifiers when commenting on obituary status updates. They used the intensifiers "very", "so", and "really" to strengthen and emphasize their feelings of sympathy and sadness. Thus, the condoler follows the Sympathy Maxim (Leech, 1983) by exaggerating his/her feelings of sympathy. Moreover, English data also contained interjections used by the subjects of the study to express their feelings of shock after hearing the news of someone's death. "Ooooh" and "OMG" are the two interjections found in the English data.

English subjects showed a preference for using emoticons to express their sympathy and sadness while commenting on obituary status updates. Data showed that 29% of the comments contained emoticons to reveal sadness and sympathy. Moreover, many English comments contained more than one type of emoticon. However, Egyptians did not show a preference for using emoticons in condolences on Facebook. Such difference between Egyptian and English use of emoticons can be interpreted because cultures have norms that govern emotional expression. Western cultures are individualistic cultures, therefore, they tend to express their emotions freely, however, Eastern cultures are collectivists thus they tend to hold back and show fewer emotions. Such social norms keep the tact of each culture (Katka, 2011).

References

- Al-Shboul, Y. & Maros, M. (2013). Condolences strategies by Jordanians to an obituary status update on Facebook. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*, 13, 151-162.
- Austin, J. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bentahila, A. & Davis, E. (1989). Culture and language use: A problem for foreign language teaching. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 27(2): 99-112.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1978). Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. In E. Goody (Ed.), *Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction* (pp. 56-310). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- DeWalt, K. & DeWalt, B. (2002). *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Elwood, K. (2004). "I'm so sorry": A cross-cultural analysis of expressions of condolence. *The Cultural Review, Waseda Commercial Studies Association (Bulletin of Universities and Institutes)*, 24, 101-126.
- Farahat, S. (2009). *Politeness Phenomena in Palestinian Arabic and Australian English: A Cross-Cultural Study of Contemporary Plays* (doctoral dissertation). Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Australian Catholic University.
- Farnia, M. (2011). 'May God Forgive His Sins': Iranian Strategies in Response to an Obituary Note. *Komunikacija I Kultura Online*. 2(2), 315-323.
- Hidaya, M. (2016). Expressions of condolence in Algerian Arabic: with reference to English. Yarmouk University.

- Katka. (2011, November 9). How do culture and gender affect expressing emotions? [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://psychkatka.blogspot.com/2011/11/how-do-culture-and-gender-affect.html>
- Kuang, C. (2015). Functions of Malaysian Condolences Written in Text Messages. *Pertanika Journal of Social Science and Humanities*. 23. 1-19.
- Lakoff, R. (1973). The logic of politeness: or, minding your P's and Q's. In C. Corum, T. Cedric Smith-Stark, and A. Weiser (Eds.), *Papers from the 9th Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society* (pp. 292-305). Chicago, IL: Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Lam, L. (2017, November 24). Cultural Differences between East and West: A Linguistic Perspective [Blog post].
- Leech, G. (1983) *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Lotfollahi, B. & Eslami-Rasekh, A. (2011). The speech act of condolence in Persian and English: A cross-cultural study. *Journal of Studies in Literature and Language*, 3 (3), pp. 139-145.
- Martínez, N. (2012). A constructional approach to condolences. *Journal of English Studies*. 10. 7-24.
- Moghadam, M. & Pishghadam, R. (2013). Investigating condolence responses in English and Persian. *International journal of research studies in language learning*, 2(1), 39-47.
- Samavarchi, L. & Allami, H. (2012). Giving Condolences by Persian EFL Learners: A Contrastive Sociopragmatic Study. *International Journal of English Linguistics*. 2(2), 71-78.
- Searle, J. (1976). A Classification of Illocutionary Acts. *Language in Society*, 5(1), 1-23.