Politeness in Arabic and Yoruba: Personal Pronouns as a Case Study

Abstract

Politeness as social rule which consolidates interpersonal communication and effective interactions in human society exists in all cultures and languages, however, the specific language and communication strategies that are employed to speak in language may not work as well in other languages. One may use a wide range of grammatical structure, have an impressive vocabulary, and be clear in pronunciation that everybody understands. But, for some reason, one may not seem to get the results he/she wants when speaking in a second or foreign language. Perhaps the speaker has not mastered the culture of a target language to the degree of demonstrating linguistic politeness which may render ones speech to be ==too direct==. Using descriptive and contrastive methods, this paper addresses linguistic politeness in using personal pronouns in both Arabic and Yoruba languages; it gives an insight into the similarities and differences that exist in the politeness cultures of the Yoruba and Arabic languages. The study reveals that while both languages have some similarities in subcategories of personal pronouns, the areas of dissimilarity are obvious. A special focus is given to the use of honorific pronoun
.Keywords: Language, Arabic, Yoruba, Culture, Politeness

Introduction

Linguistic politeness encompasses the ways in which language is employed in conversation to show consideration for the feelings and desires of one's interlocutor(s), to create and uphold interpersonal relationships politic behavior'), and to comply with the rules for what society or one's culture considers appropriate behavior. ==An utterance may be grammatically correct and perfect. However one many not get good results in his speech when devoid of politeness; this is because the specific language and communication strategies one employs in his mother language==

==may not be effective in another language==. Consequently, using descriptive method, the present study addresses the issue of politeness in Arabic and Yoruba personal pronouns.

Language and culture are interwoven; neither functions effectively without the other. A child learns the acceptable norms, values, customs and general behavioral patterns of his people through interaction with his cultural environment.[1]Particular languages are associated historically with particular cultures; the languages provide the key to the associated cultures, and especially to their literature; the languages themselves cannot be fully understood except in the context of the cultures in which they are inextricably embedded; subsequently, language and culture are studied together.[2]Language is the primary vehicle of communication; it reflects both the personality of the individual and the culture of the society. It makes possible the growth and transmission of culture, and the continuity of societies, and the effective functioning and control of social group.

Politeness and linguistic honorific forms vary from one language to another due to cultural differences. Some languages employ certain honorific terms; other languages recruit only personal pronouns; other systems have repertoires, large or small, of lexical honorifics; still other systems have honorific particles or affixes. Furthermore, some languages combine different types of politeness tools. In Yoruba culture, old age is ==highly revered and seen== as the custodian not only of wisdom but of the necessary resources (in terms of experience) that command respect. Besides, the fact that a person is older than another by a year or two is already significant from the point of view of who speaks politely to whom.[3]

Indeed, Yoruba language, like any other language, is informed and nourished by the socio-cultural setting in which it functions.[4] This setting, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has not been exploited to bring into focus its possible influence on performance in a foreign language, especially Arabic. The view which we intend to defend in this paper is therefore that, apart from the formal structures of sounds and words, the socio-cultural impact of Yoruba, especially in its personal pronoun usage, is so strong that it would be little surprise if it accounts for a good part of the learner's performance in Arabic.

Typological Classification of Arabic and Yoruba

Typological classification is the classification of languages according to features of phonology, grammar and lexis. Each language has its own grammatical system which makes it different from or similar to the other language. It is of importance, therefore, that we briefly discuss the group of languages which each of Arabic and Yoruba belong to.

Arabic

Arabic, like Hebrew and Aramaic, is a member of the family of languages known as Semitic (*Assaamiyyah*). Semitic languages show a marked degree of similarity in their phonology, morphology, syntax, structural properties and basic lexical stock. The Semitic languages are traditionally divided on the grounds of both their structural properties and geographical provenance into three groups (Holes, C. 1995): Northwestern, Northeastern, and Southwestern. Arabic is considered to be a member of the Southwestern group. Although dialect varieties are used in informal conversations, Classical, and Modern Standard Arabic (fusHa) are considered "the correct, the pure" levels of Arabic. Modern Standard is used for communication in formal situations, It is the variety that is used in reading and writing in Arab society; it is also the official variety used in the Arabic media.[5]

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Yoruba

Yorùbá is a Niger-Congo language, it is one of the principal languages of Nigeria and spoken in a couple of countries in the West African coast. An estimated over 30 million people speak Yorùbá as their mother language in south western Nigeria. Some Yoruba native speakers are also found in the Republics of Benin and Togo. Yorùbá is also spoken by diaspora communities of traders in Cote d'Ivore, Ghana, Senegal and the Gambia, and it used to be a vibrant language in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Outside West Africa, millions of people have Yorùbá language and culture as part of their heritage;. Yorùbá is one of the most extensively researched of all sub-Saharan languages and cultures. Yoruba, a Niger-Congo language, is an important language in the southern part of Nigeria if measured by the number of its speakers. It consists of many dialects; however, the standard form is the dialect of Oyo. This is the form used in educational settings, and Yoruba speakers communicate and write in it.[6]

The Problem of Study

From the above typological analysis of Arabic and Yoruba, it is clear that both languages belong to different families or groups of language. As a result, one would expect each language to maintain its own different characteristics of linguistic and cultural differences.

Research Methodology

The purpose of research is not only to raise question but also to provide answers to our questions. Nevertheless, opinions from secondary sources (textbooks, published papers and public presentation) are useful. Using descriptive and contrastive methods, the study hypothesized that although both languages exhibit linguistic properties for expressing politeness, making politeness is inevitable in Yoruba culture especially when addressing the elderly. Failure to demonstrate may result in rudeness and lack of respect. The main source of the data used in this investigation was based on a systematic presentation of information provided by the relevant semantics and grammar in Arabic and Yoruba.

Pronouns

Pronouns can be defined as lexical items that can be employed instead of nouns; they can get their meaning from the noun phrases for which they substitute. Pronouns rely on syntax and context for their interpretation.[7]Wadsworth. Put differently, a pronoun takes its meaning from the meaning of the noun phrase which is stated previously, and this noun phrase is called the antecedent; the relationship between the pronoun and its antecedent must be plain.[8]

Pronouns *(Dhama'ir),* in Arabic grammar, are conceived as one type of definiteness that is indeclinable *(mabniyya)*; this implies that they do not change their form and are not derived nouns. They are used to replace an explicit noun. The lexical units in this grammatical category are considered to be related to metonymy (al-kinaya) although they are not the metonymy proper; they are used to refer to the first, second, and third persons and/or things. (Al-SuyoTy, 2001, p. 194; Al-'alawy, 1992, p. 516).

Using a pronoun stipulates that the speaker and the addressee know the reference of the pronoun. It means that a speaker uses a pronoun only after knowing that the addressee knows whom

and/or what it refers to. Although, pronouns are small in number, they are considered as structural elements which are used for the purpose of avoiding repetition and confusion.[9] It is worth mentioning that the study focuses only on personal pronouns as means of expressing politeness in both languages.

Personal Pronouns in Arabic and Yoruba

Pronouns are the grammatical category, used to replace a noun or another pronoun. However, the rate at which individual languages exhibit this linguistic category differs from one language to another. For instance, while number distinctions between *singular* and *plural* are the only property of pronoun systems in many languages such as English and Yoruba, some other languages, such as Arabic, exhibit distinctions between *singular*, *dual* and *plural*. Pronouns as a lexical category can be divided into different kinds of subcategories. Besides personal pronouns, there are demonstrative pronouns, relative pronouns, possessive pronouns, interrogative pronouns, and indefinite pronouns (Finegan, 1999). However, the focus of this study is on personal pronouns

Personal pronouns in Arabic are a lot more comprehensive and specific than personal pronoun structures in most languages[10], such as Yoruba and English. In addition to the personal pronouns common in Yoruba and other languages, Arabic makes a gender and number distinction between "you". In addition, as a member of the Semitic family of language, gender is much more central in Arabic, not only in the nominal, but also in the pronominal category; gender forms an essential part of its lexical, syntactical, and morphological structures. "Indeed it is impossible or nearly impossible to engage in a conversation in (Arabic) without constantly referring to one's own sex and that of the interlocutor by means of special grammatical morphemes. The same also holds true when a third person becomes the subject of discussion; information about the person' gender is repeatedly provided by the means of grammatical structures. Not only do Arabic pronouns distinguish between masculine and feminine; adjectives and other modifiers that go along with them must be marked accordingly.

However, the Arabic personal pronouns which are relevant to politeness marking are *antum* (you plural) and *hum* (they/them). In Yoruba however, two personal pronouns mark politeness: *eyin* (you) and *awon* (they). Whereas Arabic exploitation of the personal pronouns for politeness purposes is only at the level of rhetoric, in face-to-face interaction, the Yoruba use of the

personal pronouns provides for politeness both in face-to-face encounters and situations requiring indirect reference to the politeness-worthy. However, the Yoruba exploitation of the personal pronoun for politeness purposes includes the use of the third person plural pronoun to express politeness in favor of the third party. This third party may be physically absent from the scene of speech enactment or may be simply a witness.

Pragmatically speaking, in Yoruba, the first-person pronoun *awa* which means "we" is used to denote the speakers, whether feminine or masculine. In Arabic, the pronoun (*naHnu*) which is a first-person pronoun has a pragmatic function. The gender in Arabic is divided into male and female. The female gender is put in a lower rank. That is why the pronoun, (*naHnu*) is being used to eliminate this kind of discrimination between males and females. The pronoun *(anta)* in Arabic may be used for a pragmatic purpose which is called a 'collaborative *anta*'. It has a reference either to (*anta*) or (*antum*). It is used by people who have socially close relationship, especially when they have the same gender, nationality, kinship, shared value, social career, and continuous communication. It is also used among children, friends, family members, and close colleagues who have the same social rank. It is used to denote people in general such as in commercial advertisement.[11]

Discussion

1. Politeness Conditions in Arabic

All human languages have politeness in common. However, the degree and the methods by which this social phenomenon is presented may be different from language to another based on cultural diversities. What is taken and considered simple in interpersonal communication and cross-cultural interactions may raise problems that may result in accusations and, in fact, may be interpreted as rudeness in some cultures and societies.[12]

In Arabic, politeness and honorifics are coined either morphologically (by pronouns, nouns, and verbs) or lexically (by conventionalized honorific titles). Arabic recruits second person plural pronouns which functions to demonstrate politeness and honorification such as *antum* → you (male/pl.), or by employing third person plural pronoun *hum* → they. These pronouns are usually used to address a king, minister, or an official personality, especially in interviews; therefore these pronouns are context-bound honorific items. These pronouns, in demonstrating politeness, are not gender-bound that is to say the male-ministers or female-ministers and so forth.

Arabic has no system of honorific affixes, it does not rely heavily on morphology to express honorification/politeness, although the second person plural pronoun *antum* is derived from the second person singular pronoun *anta* by adding the pluralization morpheme (m). Such an affix cannot be considered as a system of honorific affixes because the same pronoun *antum* is used to indicate both <mark>honorification and familiarity affixes.</mark>

Not only plural pronouns are used to indicate honorification but also verbs in certain contexts (i.e. addressing a king, a queen, a superior, etc.) They are pluralized by adding the plural morpheme /u/ to indicate present tense and the morpheme /m/ to indicate past tense. The examples below illustrate:

   halta'malūnalaylan → Do you work at night?

   hallazurtumbaladana → Would you visit our country?

Syntax, which is the part of grammar that deals with the position, order and function of words and other larger units in sentences, is very vital in Arabic; hence, it is important to learn syntactic rules. Unconformity with these rules results in wrong sentences and expressions.[13] For instance, Arabic requires word agreement in it structures; failure to master the rules will render Arabic <mark>utterance erroneous also meaningless.</mark>

In every culture, the importance of greetings cannot be underestimated. First impressions in both Arabic and Yoruba societies are crucial, and knowing both the verbal and nonverbal nuances of greeting people is one of the most important aspects of mastering a language. The formal way of greeting someone in Arabic is *'as-salaamu 'alaykum'*. Even though it translates into English as "hello," it literally means "May peace be upon you." Technically, the greetings is directed to many people when referring to one male, the structure appears *'as-salaamu 'alayka'* and *'as-salaamu 'alayki'* for one female. However, when considering Yoruba culture, the first form, *'as-salaamu 'alaykum',* becomes only optional when rendering greetings to the elderly or a boss. In Yoruba, the form of greetings you use depends on whom you are addressing. <mark>For example, "E k'aa-ro" is sad when greeting an elderly in the morning (singular or plural). In addressing an age mate or a junior, the suffix "E" is deleted by just saying "k'aa-ro" which simply means good morning.</mark>

2. Politeness Conditions in Yoruba

Politeness in speech helps in establishing peaceful and harmonious relationship which is inevitable for biological survival since human beings are all interdependent. In the absence of respect and politeness in interpersonal communication all human relations will be destabilized.[14]Yoruba like Japanese language employs elaborate systems that express politeness and honor. In Yoruba society, Speakers must keep in mind their social standing in relation to the person addressed and to the person being discussed. This type of word marker usually appears on pronouns and adjectives and nouns.

There are formalized ways of addressing people in Yoruba society of Nigeria based on the status of the addressees. This has nothing to do with mastering grammar; rather it is culturally and ethically bound. One must think deeply before any utterance and be sure one is within the limit of the ethical standards set by Yoruba culture and society disregarding moral or ethical principles within the society may result in rudeness. It is absolutely childish, unethical, uncultured and indeed rude and disrespectful to employ *iwo* (you, singular of *eyin*) or *ohun* (she/he, singular of *awon*) when referring to an elder, a boss or an important personality

The age of interlocutors is a crucial variable in language choice in Yoruba culture. Observation of the Yoruba society indicates that age is a very crucial factor in general social interaction; indeed, it has a markable bearing on making both verbal and nonverbal cues of deference.[15]Thus, generally, the young are culturally expected to show great deference and respect when interacting with the elderly and the higher the socio-cultural status attained by an addressee, the greater the need to employ politeness strategies.

Yoruba has resources for expressing honorific pronouns, typically used in expressing politeness. For instance, the plural forms of personal pronouns are commonly used to express deference and politeness.

	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st person	Emi	Awon	Awa
2nd person	Iwo	Eyin	Eyin
3rd person	Ohun	Awon	Awon

Interestingly, while modern-day English has forms of the singular or plural, it has no honorific forms addressing elderly persons in interpersonal interactions. Hence, it is easier to sound rude to the elderly when English is selected in interaction than when Yoruba is chosen.[16]

Since the role of language, both as a means of communication and an expression of identity, cannot be underestimated in any interpersonal relationship in the human society, a Yoruba scholar of Arabic, who is elderly in terms of age or position, may not feel comfortable to be addressed in Arabic context with *anta* which simply means (you- singular), especially if the speaker is a Yoruba. As a result of this, caution needs to be exercised by both speakers and addresses since the future of the people living in any society depends largely on their ability to communicate effectively with maximum degree of politeness.[17]

The use of plural personal pronouns to refer to an elderly person may be constantly noticed among Yoruba learners of Arabic. This has nothing to do with mastery of the agreement rules or a lack of theory. It is a notion of *cultural transfer*. In Yoruba society, it is considered as a sign of rudeness, insult, and lack of respect to use a singular pronoun, e.g. *anta/antii* 'you' (singular for male and female), for one's boss, or an elderly person. *Antum /antunna* 'you' (plural for males and females respectively) will be used in many situations by a Yoruba learner of Arabic to refer to one person either in formal or informal situations.[18]

Indeed, the conditions necessary for the use of the Yoruba personal pronouns for politeness purposes include: an upward valuation of the interlocutor's age, socio-professional status, economic power, sex, and aristocratic status all viewed against the back drop of familiarity/non familiarity.

Results

It is obvious from the study that, in human communication, politeness is very important because it is a key point in enhancing interpersonal relationship and communication; it plays an important role in human communication. The study also reveals that while both languages have some similarities in the subcategory of personal pronouns, the areas of dissimilarity are obvious. Arabic and Yoruba exhibit personal pronouns which distinguish between singular and plural; however, the major distinction between Arabic and Yoruba personal pronouns is in terms of number; apart from singular and plural, *dual,* which is used to strictly refer to 'two', is also an indispensable distinction in Arabic. As a result, this has made personal pronouns, in Arabic,

more complex than in Yoruba. However when it comes to issue of politeness, the various pronoun forms, as well as the system of politeness and honorific markers, reflect the prominent role that social-group factors play in Yoruba language. If the person addressed is not within the speaker's age or relationship group, the speaker uses the polite style of speech.

Conclusion

Politeness is one of the major social constraints on <mark>human interaction. It is usually</mark> regarded a as manifestation of human civilization, and it is one of the most effective strategies modulating interpersonal relationships in human communication. In the cultures of both Arabic and Yoruba languages, the issue of politeness is very important. However, the function of politeness is more important in Yoruba than Arabic. Yoruba culture highly cherishes politeness rules especially when interacting with the elderly. In Yoruba society, it is not only through linguistic strategies that politeness is demonstrated; it is also manifested through physical acts, such as prostrations, genuflections and bows.

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