ABSTRACT


Student: Mustafa Ali Harb

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

College: Sciences and Humanities

Date: December 2016

Pages: 260

This work, at its heart, is an exploratory attempt to investigate the complex nature of the pervasive, yet underexplored act of disagreement among Arabic speakers in Computer-Mediated Communication. It provides (i) an account of the semantics and pragmatics of the act of disagreement, as performed by Arabic speakers, (ii) a sociolinguistic look into gender differences between Arab males and females in their expression of disagreement and (iii) an examination of the effect of discourse topic on disagreement.

The study drew on a corpus of approximately fifty thousand words in the form of naturally occurring comments/posts compiled over a period of ninety days from a wide array of Arabic Facebook Pages and Groups from three topic areas: (i) religion (REL), (ii) politics (POL) and (iii) society (SOC). The collected data were sorted out to identify examples of disagreement and exclude others, particularly, agreements and off-topic comments. Following a significantly modified version of the taxonomy of disagreement proposed by Muntigl and Turnbull (1998),
major strategies were uncovered and proposed as underlying patterns or themes, governing the pragmatic realization of disagreement among Arabic speakers. A descriptive analysis (i.e., SPSS Cross-tabulations and Chi-Square Tests) was then run to determine which disagreement strategy (or set of strategies) has the highest/lowest statistical frequency in terms of linguistic choices (i.e., lexical categories and syntactic constructions, among others), gender (i.e., male vs. female), and topic (i.e., most controversial, less controversial and least controversial).

The results of this study showed that Computer-Mediated Communication delivered by Arabic speakers is replete with disagreements of various grammatical categories and syntactic constructions. In addition to the four strategies proposed by Muntigl and Turnbull (i.e., IRRELEVANCY CLAIM, CONTRADICTION, COUNTERCLAIM, and CHALLENGE), Arabic speakers utilize six additional discursive strategies to express their disagreements in Computer-Mediated Communication: EXCLAMATION, VERBAL IRONY, ARGUMENT AVIODANCE, MILD SCOLDING, SUPPLICATION, VERBAL ATTACK.

The identified examples of disagreement embody both elements of politeness and impoliteness. Arabic speakers do use both politeness and impoliteness strategies in voicing their disagreement. However, the majority of the strategies were neither polite nor impolite, but rather appropriate (i.e., politic) in the context of disagreement. Statistically significant results were obtained in term of the social variables of gender and topic. Gender was shown to have influenced the subscribers’ level of aggravation, syntax and strategy, but no significant relationship was found between gender and mitigation. Topic was also found to affect the subscribers’ level of mitigation and aggravation as well as choice of disagreement strategy.

The study contributes to cross-cultural pragmatics in identifying the social and cultural norms and beliefs that inform speech act realization and (im)politeness in the Arabic speech
community. It adds to existing scholarship on speech act research by providing empirical data on the realization of disagreements by Arabic speakers in online communication, and it contributes a baseline on Arabic for future contrastive work with other languages to help understand issues in cross-cultural communication, which is significant given the international status of the Arabic language. The study also contributes to speech act and politeness research through the exploration of naturally occurring disagreements carried out by Arabic speakers in Computer-Mediated Communication. Finally, the study proposes two modifications to the theoretical framework of Locher and Watts’ Relational Model by expanding the concept of ‘politic’ behavior and pointing out which of the pragmatic strategies identified can be regarded as polite, politic and impolite/overpolite.