

Polite Requests in English and Arabic: A Comparative Study

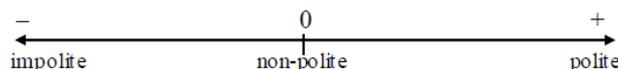
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Abstract—The study of polite requests has received a great deal of attention by Linguists. However, to the best of our knowledge, no work has been conducted on a comparative level of polite requests from English into Arabic. Polite requests performances pose a problem for requestees and translators. In fact, they are context bound. Once the requester requests something by producing an utterance, he/she will perform three acts, namely locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. So, the translator does not know which act should be translated, unless he/she is aware of the intention of the requester. Expressing polite requests in English and Arabic are not identical. Politeness has been viewed as the result of a conversational contact by participants of speech event in an effort to maintain socio-communicative verbal interaction conflict-free. Politeness is then nothing, but a set of constraints on verbal behaviour. This study aims at specifying five different patterns of direct polite requests, rendering these patterns from English into Arabic to see how they are realized, and showing the most effective methods for translating these polite requests. In order to achieve the above mentioned aims, the study hypothesizes that: (1) there is no one-to-one correspondence between the structures of polite requests in English and Arabic. (2) polite markers of requests in English are lesser than these markers in Arabic, (3) the superficial forms of polite requests in English and Arabic are not identical, yet, they can be translated. It has come to the findings that polite markers which give the utterances the force of polite requests in Arabic are more than those in English.

Index Terms—polite requests, speech acts, English-Arabic comparison.

I. INTRODUCTION

Kummer (1992) argues that politeness has been regarded as a diplomatic strategy of communication (p. 325). Ide et al. (1992) point out that “politeness itself is a neutral concept, which we use as the label for a scale ranging from plus – through zero – to minus politeness (p. 281). Thus “polite” refers to plus-valued politeness whereas, “impolite” means minus-valued politeness and “non-polite” works the neutral or zero valued centre of the scale. This can be represented by the following figure:



A figure representing scale of politeness (Ide et al, 1992)

Thomas (1995) points out that the concept of politeness is misinterpreted with cumbersome frequency: pragmatics is blamed for holding favourably disposed opinions with regard to people’s behaviour. Indeed, the term “politeness” and the way it is used in everyday interaction stimulates such misinterpretation (p.178). Mey (1993) defines politeness as a pragmatic mechanism in which a variety of structures work together according to the speaker’s intention of achieving smooth communication (p.23).

II. POLITE REQUESTS AS SPEECH ACTS

A request is a speech act whereby a requester conveys to a requestee that he/she wants the requestee to perform an act which is for the benefit of the requester (Trosborg, 1995, p. 187). The act may be a request for an object, an action or some kind of service, etc. Or it can be a request for information. The desired act is to occur after the utterance, either in the immediate future or at some later stage (Edmondson-House, 1981, p. 99). Thus polite requests can be characterized as pre-event (for further details, see Blum-Kulka et al, 1989, p. 150; 1990, p. 259; and Gu, 1990, p. 240).

- Request as an Impositive Act:

When the requester wants someone to do him/her a favour, this is generally at the cost of the requestee. The requester imposes on the requestee in some way when asking for goods or services (Trosborg, 1995, p. 187). Haverkate (1984) argues that impositive speech acts are described as speech acts performed by the speaker to influence the intentional perform, primarily for the benefit of the requester, the action directly specified or indirectly suggested by the

proposition (p. 107). Haverkate (1984 and 1988) says that the degree with which the requester intrudes on the requestee called degree of imposition, may vary from small favour to demanding acts (ps. 107, 385). (cf. Trosborg, 1995, p. 188).

- Request as a Face Threatening Act:

Trosborg (1995) states that the request is by definition a face-threatening act (FTA). The requester who makes a request attempts to exercise power over. So he/she threatens the requestee's negative face by indicating that he/she does not intend to refrain from impeding the requestee's freedom of action. The requester also runs the risk of losing face him/herself, as the requestee may choose to refuse to comply with his/her wishes (p. 188).

- Request and other Impositive Speech Acts:

Trosborg (1995) remarks that in a request, the act to be performed is solely advantageous to the requester and, normally, at the cost of the requestee. The proposition "benefit to requester", "cost to requestee" are decisive when comparing requests to other acts in which the requester attempts to exert his/her influence on the requestee (p.188) (see also Haverkate, 1979, p. 56, 1984, p. 94 and 1988, p. 390).

In contrast, the speech act of suggesting is defined as being advantageous to both speaker and hearer, and if the act to be performed is exclusively for the benefit of the hearer, it is an example of giving advice, or warning (Al-Sulaimaan, 1997, p. 139). The latter act is potentially imposed on the hearer to prevent him/her from a state of affairs which is clearly contrary to his/her interests. Fraser (1985) says that in a speech act of threatening, the speaker indicates to the hearer that he/she will instigate sanctions against the hearer unless he/she complies with the speaker's wishes. There is no clear-cut border between the illocutionary acts under investigation. What is a request may be presented as a suggestion or even as a piece of advice or instruction, a warning or a threat (p.44). Thus a desire on the part of the speaker to have the car cleaned may have the following forms:

1. Would you mind cleaning the car? (request)
2. Wouldn't it be an idea to clean the car? (suggestion)
3. I think you'd better clean the car. (advice)
4. If you don't clean the car, no one will buy it (warning).
5. If you don't clean the car, you'll be heavily punished (threatening).

Having believed that the act specified by the proposition is in the interest of the hearer, the speaker may attempt to diminish the degree of imposition. He/she can use the strategic device of presenting his/her own interest as being advantageous to both speaker and hearer. Nevertheless, a speaker may present his/her advice, warning, etc. as a request, e.g.

-You must have a day off/ study and prepare yourself for the examination.

Thus, presenting as his/her own concern what is beneficial for the hearer (cf. Edmonson-House, 1981, p. 124; Trosborg, 1995, p. 189 and Al-Sulaimaan, 1997, p. 140).

III. POLITE REQUESTS IN ENGLISH

A. Syntactic Realization

The main rule of a request is to bring the requestee to the awareness that some action is desired of him, but there are various ways in which this action can be achieved (Sadock, 1974, p. 74). These ways are as follows:

1. The Imperative Sentence Types:

Realization of request by the imperative sentence-type can have the following forms:

1. Hand me your papers. (A teacher to his students)
2. Don't open the door. (A mother to her children in a cold day)
3. Do stay for lunch. (A host to his guest)
4. Be quiet. (An elder brother to his younger brothers and sisters)
5. You are to be back before 8 o'clock in the evening. (A father to his son).
6. Let's go for swimming. (A friend to his classmates)
7. Somebody do something to solve the problem. (A requester requests someone for help)
8. Have a rest. (A person to his friend after a hard work)
9. Put this suitcase up there for me. (A lady to a passenger)
10. Wait a minute, if you want me to lend you some money. (Someone believes that his friend is in need of some money)

For further examples, see (Quirk et al., 1972, p. 402; Jacobson, 1977, p. 314 and Haycraft and Lee, 1982, p. 42).

From what has been mentioned so far, one can come to the conclusion that all the above types of requests are issued to make a requestee do something for the requester.

There are some factors that affect such types of requests. First, intonation, the marks of which are already placed to show where the contour changes. Second, the social situational contexts in which these utterances are produced and the status of the speaker and his requestee. These two factors make the imperative sentence types realized as the act of requesting (Hussein, 1984, p. 64). From a pragmatic point of view, an imperative request is "tactless" in that "it risks disobedience" as compared to the relatively indirect realization of request by interrogative and declarative sentence types (see Leech, 1977, p. 119; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 221).

2. The Interrogative Sentence-types:

Requests can be realized by using interrogative sentence types. But these types do not begin with a modal auxiliary (cf. Sadock, 1974, p. 113). They are either Yes/No questions or Wh-questions. The following examples are illustrative:

- (1) Have you got a car?
- (2) Do you have an extra copybook?
- (3) Do you have some petrol?
- (4) Why don't you clean the car?

A close inspection of the above examples reveals that utterance (1) has a question force; utterance (2) requesting a copy-book; utterance (3) entails a request for some petrol; whereas utterance (4) has the illocutionary force of requesting for cleaning the car (cf. Leech, 1983, p. 119 and Hussein, 1984, p. 66).

3. *The Declarative Sentence-types:*

Requests can be realized by using declarative sentence-types. The following examples are illustrative:

- (1) I am terribly thirsty. (A request for some water)
- (2) This tea needs some sugar. (A request for some sugar)
- (3) It is very hot in here. (A request for opening the door or switching the air-cooler on)
- (4) You won't tell the boss, will you? (A request for not telling the boss)

In utterance (4) the tag-question has been used to confirm what is said in the first part of the utterance and its function is to make the request more tactful (Leech, 1983, p. 119).

4. *Modal Auxiliaries:*

Austin (1962) says that modal auxiliaries can be used for expressing the speech act of requesting. These modal verbs can be classified under "deontic modality" (ps. 4-7). The following examples represent different realizations of this type of polite requests:

- (1) Could you tell me the time?
- (2) Can you pass the sugar?
- (3) Will you get me a chair?
- (4) May I borrow your book?
- (5) Would you help me?
- (6) You might make less noise.
- (7) Wouldn't you pass the salt?

A close examination of the above examples, reveals that the requester requests his requestee to do him something. Using the modal auxiliary verb "can" means that the requester is asking whether his requestee is able to do the action. While using "will" means that the requester is asking whether his requestee is willing to get him a chair. Using the past tense form "would" or "could" means the requester makes his request more tactful and more polite, whereas the negative question makes the request more persuasive (Palmer, 1981, p. 168).

B. *Lexical Realization*

Polite requests can be realized by means of lexical items. These lexical items can be associated explicitly or implicitly with the speech act of requesting (Hussein, 1984, p. 73). Those lexical items are of different types, namely verbs, adjectives, adverbs and nouns.

With regard to their lexical meanings, they can be classified into two categories, namely explicit lexical request-items, and implicit lexical request-items (Clark and Schunk, 1980, p. 112 and Hussein, 1984, p. 73). In what follows we will focus on the lexical verbs only simply because they mark the type of request whether it is explicit or implicit.

1. *Verbs: The First Category*

Certain verbs like "appeal", "ask", "favour", "like", "mind", "oblige", "request", "want" can be used for realizing polite requests (Swan, 1982, p. 386). These examples are illustrative:

- (1) Can I appeal to you for help?
- (2) I ask you to clean the car.
- (3) Will you favour us with a very nice song?
- (4) I would like to see this film.
- (5) Would you mind closing the window?
- (6) Could you oblige me with a cigarette?
- (7) I request you to send some books of pragmatics.
- (8) I want two nice shirts.
- (9) I wish you would stop smoking.

In utterance (1) the lexical verb "appeal" is used to express a "direct request" in which the speaker asks strongly for something. In utterance (2) the lexical verb "ask" does not signify that a given utterance is a request, but also serves as the name of the performed action (Palmer, 1981, p. 67). In utterance (3) the lexical verb in which the verb "favour" carries the idea of request explicitly. In utterance (4) the verb "like" is used to mean "want" or "wish" particularly in polite requests (cf. Zandvoort, 1957, p. 77 and Swan, 1982, p. 363). In utterance (5) the lexical verb "mind" is used in the expression "would you mind" to express a polite request (Swan, 1982, p. 386 and Hussein, 1984, p. 81). In utterance (6) the lexical verb "oblige" has been used explicitly to realize the speech act of requesting (Hornby, 1976, p. 197). In utterance (7) the speaker explicitly uses the lexical verb "request" for the realization of a polite request. An utterance

like this is called an explicit request (Austin, 1962, p. 81). In utterances (8) and (9) the lexical verbs “want” and “wish” have been used to express request explicitly. Taking into consideration the social context and the speaker’s intention, one can say that they have the illocutionary force of requesting. Otherwise, they may just express a wish or hope (cf. Hussein, 1984, p. 84).

2. Verbs: The Second Category

There is another type of lexical verbs such as “appreciate”, “thank”, “trouble”, and “wonder” that can be used for marking polite requests. The following examples are interesting:

- (1) I would appreciate your help.
- (2) I will thank you for the offer.
- (3) Could I trouble you to pass the sugar?
- (4) I wonder if you wouldn’t mind dropping me home?

A careful look at the above examples, one can say that: in utterance (1) the lexical verb “appreciate” is implicitly associated with the act of requesting. While in utterance (2) the lexical verb “thank” is implicitly used to request something forcefully or widely when it expresses the meaning to be pleased with someone for something. In utterance (3), the lexical verb “trouble” realizes a polite request in an indirect way and simultaneously it is used in polite requests to mean “to cause inconvenience to someone”. In utterance (4) the lexical verb “wonder” is associated with the act of requesting. It expresses a tentative request and it is often said in a statement form (Ockenden, 1972, p. 30).

IV. POLITE REQUESTS IN ARABIC

Arab rhetoricians have focused on conditions of “الأمر” meaning “order”. These conditions are as follows:

1. Authority on the part of the speaker.
2. Obligation on the part of the addressee.
3. Temporal action, which means that “الأمر” requires an action that should be fulfilled at the present time or in the future.
4. Frequency which means that “الأمر” is directed to someone to do something, e.g. “أفتح” means “open”. As such, if this “الأمر” is said twice or more, its content will not be affected in the sense that the continuity of the action is implicit in the imperative verb (Al-Awsi, 1982, p. 80). Necessity and obligation are; therefore, implied in expressing “الأمر” (Al-Sakkaki, 1937, p. 152). “الالتماس” meaning “request” is to be realized by the forms of “الأمر” when these forms are uttered in an appropriate social context and with the proper intonation so as to exclude the two governing factors of “الأمر”, namely authority and obligation (cf. Hussein, 1984, p. 104).

From what has been said so far, one can set some conditions for “الالتماس”. They are as follows:

- 1- The action should be temporal. This means that “الالتماس” requires an action that should be achieved at the present time or in the future.
- 2- Frequency which means that “الالتماس” is directed to someone to do something for the benefit of the speaker.

Though the kind of the performative act which has the implication of anticipation is called the act of “soliciting” meaning “الترجي” (Haruun, 1959: 49) it is treated as “الالتماس”. In the realization of this request, the particles, “لعل” meaning “if only would that...”, “عسى” meaning “may be that...” are used to indicate the meaning of anticipating good things. On this basis, the particle “ليت” meaning “would that...”, which is normally used to express the act of wishing “تمني”, can also be used in the realization of “request” in the sense that a speaker wants his addressee to perform the proposition expressed in the predicate of “ليت” (Haruun, 1959, p. 49).

“الالتماس” meaning “request” is treated as an illocutionary act which is governed by certain pragmatic rules as compared to the rules that govern, for instance, the illocutionary act of commanding. On the syntactic level, the classification of sentences as “أمرية” meaning “imperative”, “استفهامية” meaning “interrogative” and “خبرية” meaning “declarative” cannot be compared to realize polite requests. The problem is with the intonation and/or social context in which “الالتماس” is used. For instance, the textual value of “الالتماس” like “أعطني الكتاب من فضلك” meaning “Give me the book, please” is matched by the value of the following formally different utterances.

- (1) الجو لطيف خارج الغرفة (The weather is nice outside the room)
- (2) هلا تلطفت/ تفضلت بفتح النافذة (Would you be kind enough to open the window?)

It is to be noted that the act of requesting in utterance (2) is realized by a certain lexical item which is “تلطفت” أو “تفضلت” (be kind enough), used as an interrogative sentence type preceded by the particle “هلا” (Hussein, 1984, p. 106).

With regard to the distribution of some lexical items used in the realization of request in Arabic. The following examples are illustrative:

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| (3) رجاء أعطني الكتاب | (Please give me the book.) |
| (4) أعطني الكتاب رجاء | (Give me the book, please.) |
| (5) أعطني رجاء الكتاب | (Please, give me the book.) |

These utterances show that the lexical item “رجاء” can be used initially, finally and medially.

In Arabic verbs like “التمس” meaning “request”, “أطلب” meaning “ask”, “أريد” meaning “want”, “أود” meaning “would like”, “أفضل” meaning “prefer” can be also used as polite requests. Examples:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| (6) التمس منك أن تبقى هنا | (I request you to stay here.) |
| (7) أطلب منك أن تبقى هنا | (I ask you to stay here.) |

One can adopt both semantic translation and communicative translation to convey the illocutionary force of the sentence under analysis, but with varying degrees and different polite constructions and markers. These polite markers are: "أتمانع".

TL Text:

أتمانع لو غادرت مبكراً.

VI. CONCLUSION

Translation has been viewed in the present study as a performance of polite requests, because the ultimate goal of translation is the conveyance of both the content of the message (proposition) and the force of the message (the intention of the requester). No doubt, a translator tackles both locutionary and illocutionary act, i.e., the superficial form of the utterance and its function and intention. Nevertheless, speech acts confirm the essential roles in which intention of the requester, his utterance, superficial form and function are interwoven within a context of situation, and all together can be successfully conveyed to the TL. This study has revealed that polite markers which give the utterances the force of polite requests in Arabic are more than those in English. For instance, the English polite marker "please" has been realized in Arabic as "لطف", "رجاء", "معدرة", "أرجو", etc. The Arabic realizations of the polite requests have reflected a high degree of translatability in expressing the illocutionary force of the requests under investigation.

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