Social Context, Values and Cultural Identity: A Method for Assessment of Arab and American Attitude to Politeness

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Abstract

This paper investigated the degree of variance in American and Arab attitude to politeness, as based on social values and beliefs. It was revealed that politeness, whether linguistic or normative, rested on the relevant social values of a given speech community. Politeness was only comprehended in its social context and cultural relevance. In spite of a general framework of universality, politeness was proven to be an expression of the Cultural Identity of the relevant speech community.

Arab respondents differed from their American counterparts mainly in matters related to conservativeness, family ties and obligations as a result of social consensus and hierarchy. American respondents reflected more a culture of individualism. However, there was a reasonably unexpected degree of overlap in the values and beliefs of the two parties. Polite attitudes were a result of such values and their order. Therefore, it was impossible to classify either of the cultures under study as a positive- or a negative-politeness culture.

The linguistic representation of politeness in Arabic relied mainly on fixed forms as opposed to indirect questions in English. This manifested that politeness, despite some level of universality, was both interpreted and practiced differently across cultures and languages. Other relevant issues were also discussed with the respondents interviewed.
Key Words: Arab, American, Social Values, Context, Cultural Identity, Politeness, Pragmatics (Pragma-linguistics, Lingua-pragmatics, Socio-pragmatics), Relevance.

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