The Use of Kuwaiti Arabic Address Terms as Politeness Strategies in Podcasts

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Abstract: This paper explores the use of male Kuwaiti Arabic (K.A.) address terms in Kuwaiti podcasts through the lens of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. Specifically, the study analyzed how different terms correspond to different politeness strategies. This was achieved by listing common male address terms in K.A. and counting instances of their usage in discourse. The analysis of three long-form public interactions showed how K.A. face-work is managed in naturalistic, high-stakes conversations. The findings suggested that address terms function as flexible social resources where politeness qualities emerge from contextual information like timing and repetition in Kuwaiti Arabic podcasts.

Keywords: Politeness Theory, Face-work, Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs), Social Deixis, Naturalistic Discourse.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the use of Kuwaiti male address terms in a Kuwaiti podcast through the lens of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. Kuwaiti Arabic (KA) address terms carry a considerable amount of pragmatic information, and the mere choice of term is enough to constitute a face-saving or face threatening act. The research question: "To which of Brown and Levinson's five politeness strategies do different Kuwaiti male terms of address correspond?" Using a popular Kuwaiti podcast, this paper studies which terms speakers use and how, to determine which of the politeness strategies that are employed during KA discourse. Common Kuwaiti address terms are listed, counted and designated as politeness strategies.

Theoretical Background: Politeness Theory

To understand the pragmatics of different address terms in KA, this paper observes discourse through the lens of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness. "Politeness Theory" is a pragmatic framework that explains how speakers manage interpersonal relations and social meaning through use of language. This theory assumes that both speakers and listeners have a so-called "Face." Face, in the theory's context, is the speaker's perceived public self-image. Brown and Levinson posit that individuals manage face in linguistic interactions. (Brown and Levinson, 1987). People have two "faces": Positive face, which is the desire to be approved of and valued, and negative face, which is desire for autonomy and freedom from

imposition. Any speech act that risks damaging the hearer or speaker's face is a known as a face-threatening act. Speakers therefore strategically select linguistic forms through politeness strategies. The theory puts forth multiple strategies, listed below:

1. Positive politeness: Speech acts that emphasize solidarity and/or familiarity.
2. Negative politeness: Speech acts that express deference, respect, or social distance.
3. Bald on-record: Clear, direct speech acts.
4. Off-record: Speech acts that are given through hints; unclear and meant to be pragmatically decoded.
5. Avoiding the face-threatening act: Avoiding the speech act entirely, which is a valid way of managing "faces".

Theoretical Background: Address Terms

The following section focuses on the types and definitions of common KA address terms, which were identified and used in this study of a Kuwaiti podcast.

Teknonyms: Teknonyms are defined as terms of address for people by the name of their children (Lee and Harvey, 1973).

Teknonyms represent a major component of the Arabic address term system, both in Standardized Arabic and many of its dialects (Aba-Alalaa, 2015; AbuAmsha, 2010; Al-Husseini *et al.*, 2015; Al-Qudah, 2017; Braun, 1988; Farghal and Shakir, 1994; Khalil and Larina, 2018;

Parkinson, 1985; Yassin. 1977) They are culturally entrenched forms of address in Arabic, whereby individuals are typically referred to by reference to their children using "Abu X" (for male adressees) or "Umm X" (for female addressees). (Larina *et al*., 2018).

This practice is by no means unique to the Arabic language. Teknonyms are used in Madagascar (Bloch, 2006), Korea (Ahn, 2017), Indonesia (Winarnita and Herriman, 2012), Cameroon (Connell *et al*., 2021), and Nigeria (Akindele, 1990).

Arabic, particularly Kuwaiti Arabic, has expecially dynamic teknonymy. It has many teknonym types and uses, with many different sociolinguistic and cultural implications and uses. This paper identifies and typologizes four distinct kinds of male teknonyms used in the Kuwaiti Arabic dialect. Arabic, particularly KA, has a particularly rich set of adress terms, in no small part to due its different forms of teknonymy (Yassin, 1978). Drawing on Yassin's sociolinguistic dissertations and peer-reviewed literature on KA and Arabic address terms, this paper articulates: (1) biological teknonyms, (2) standardized/built-in teknonyms, (3) reverse teknonyms and (4) honorary teknonyms.

1. Biological Teknonym

This is the prototypical male teknonym: a man is addressed by reference to his first-born e.g., Abu Khalid for a man whos oldest child's name is Khalid. (Yassin, 1978) In the event the man has a daughter instead, the man would be adressed by reference to his first-born daughter. (Larina, 2018)

2. Reverse Teknonym

In this form, a son is addressed using a teknonym referencing his father (e.g., a male named Bader, whose father is Khalid, may be addressed as Abu Khalid). (Larina 2018)

3. Standardized / Predetermined Teknonym

A standardized teknonym is a cultural naming convention whereby a given name is associated with a culturally-mapped teknonym independent of parenthood. Yassin gave the example of the Arabic name Abdelmohsen. That name has a culturally pre-determined nickname: Abu Barrak. The nickname stands even though Abdelmohsen may not have any child, let alone one called Barrak. KA has many of these pre-determined nicknames. (Yassin 1978).

Some other arabic dialects include this teknonym form, but not with a list of common teknonyms like in KA. Rather they are religious references, like "Abu Qasem" for the name "Mohammad", in reference to the Islamic prophet's son. (Larina 2018)

4. Honorary Teknonym

Teknonyms assigned or self-assiged without reference to the addressee's children, in the case where he doesn't have children. (Larina, 2018). For example, a childless man by the name of Talal may opt to go by the name Abu Othman, even though he has no child and his father's name is not Othman.

We make a distiction between a nickname in KA that may use the word "abu" and true KA honoroary teknonyms. While analyzing KA, Yassin described "A nickname based on the individual behaviour or personal attributes of a person is considered the true nickname, as it has nothing to do with an individual's personal name, but describes some individual feature of behaviour characteristic of an addressee". (Yassin 1978).

In a contrastive study of English and Arabic kinship terms, Al-Husseini and Al-Sahlany wrote:

"Arabs tend to use the terms 'Abu' and 'Um' in metaphorical contexts to call certain names of animals, things or people in order to avoid the explicit meaning of such names or to express a sense of humor or scorn or sometimes courage towards these names." (Al-Husseini and Al-Sahlany, 2010)

In this sense, the KA nickname "Abu Janjifa" - traslated "Father of Cards"- would denote a man well-known for playing cards.

- **Fictive Kinship Terms**

Familial titles, when used to refer to non-relatives, are called "fictive kinship terms". Kinship terms are defined as "category words by means of which an individual is taught to recognize the significant groupings in the social structure into which [the individual] belongs." (Leach, 1958) In KA, male terms like "uncle" or "son" are used to refer to significantly older or younger males, respectively.

- **Honorifics**

These are linguistic forms that typically express deference or mark high esteem toward another person, most typically a person of perceived superior social standing. (Brown, 2020) They can be their own standalone terms, and in some languages they are inflectional forms affixed to verbs or nouns. In KA, honorifics are usually terms that replace the Arabic pronoun "you" in order to sound less direct.

METHODOLOGY

This project's research method was a qualitative discourse analysis supplemented by frequency data of address term types. The popular and critically-acclaimed Kuwaiti podcast Bedoon Waraq was used for data collection. Podcasts are apt choice for this study because they contain spontaneous speech, real pragmatic choices, and clear audio-visual interaction between speakers. In

addition, this podcast is local, contemporary and has a male Kuwaiti host. These factors, particularly when the guest is also Kuwaiti, make the discourse a rich, highly appropriate data source for linguistic analysis.

First, a list of common KA address terms was created. These adress terms are common and their use was expected in the course of a natural KA podcast conversation. The list outlined five distinct adress terms:
1. Teknonyms
2. Fictive kinship terms
3. Bare first name
4. Official titles
5. Honorifics

Secondly, instances where speakers use address terms directly were counted, and their category (one of the five mentioned above) was noted. Thirdly, the politeness strategy of each use was analyzed. Many factors were considered in this step, including topic seriousness, ages, social status and professions.

Speaker Profiles
To better understand the social context of interactions during the podcast, below is brief introduction of the speakers featured in the study. All ages were at the time of filming the episode in question.

- Host: The host is a Kuwaiti man named Faisal AlAgel. Faisal is the 31-year-old CEO of Sard Group, a media and communications company. He is the host of "Bedoon Waraq", one of the most popular Arabic podcasts today.
- Guest 1: Dr. Abdullah AlNafisi, former member of the Kuwaiti parliament and professor emeritus at Kuwait University. Dr. AlNafisi holds a doctorate in political science from Cambridge and is 80 years old. He is known for his outspoken political commentary and has published several books on international affairs.
- Guest 2: Khaled AlMuthafar: A 27-year-old male Kuwaiti actor and longtime friend of the host. His work on screen and on the stage is well-known at the local level in Kuwait.
- Guest 3: Marzouq AlGhanim: former speaker of the Kuwaiti National Assembly. AlGhanim earned a B.Sc. in mechanical engineering from Seattle University and worked for Boubyan Petrochemical Company before being elected to the National Assembly in 2006, and later elected speaker in 2013. He is 55 years old.

Findings: Guest 1

Address Term	Host to Guest 1	Guest 1 to Host
Teknonym	0	0
Fictive kinship term	3	0
Bare First Name	0	15
Official Title	11	0
Honorifics	0	0

Analysis: Guest 1 to Host

Dr. AlNafisi exclusively used the bare first name to refer to the host over the course of 90 minutes. It was used across the board: during political discussion, jokes and compliments. This was to be expected; the guest socially "outranks" the host in practically every category. First, he is older, which grants him more respect in Kuwaiti society. Secondly, he holds a higher academic degree in the field of discussion (political science). Finally, he is the actual guest on the podcast, already marking him as a subject or person of interest.

The informal, simple use of a first name when speaking to an adult on-air may seem devoid of any outward respect. However, politeness theory and its distinction between two different forms of respect could reveal a different insight when taking Kuwaiti culture into account. In Kuwait, it is extremely common for a much older man to refer to a younger man by a fictive kinship term (*son*, for example). The fact that a more decorated, much older, more famous man is referring to the host by their first name saves the hearer's face by employing negative politeness. The use of that address term, as opposed to a loving but potentially diminutive fictive kinship term, highlights the hearer's autonomy and individuality; some of the only social traits that can be salvaged in this particular context.

Analysis: Host to Guest 1

The host referred to the guest using the official title of "Doctor" 11 out of 14 references. This was expected, and it employs negative politeness; it played to hearer's negative face by respecting his autonomy and avoiding prolonged familiarity. It minimized personal alignment, and kept a respectful social distance between the two, in this case the social distance being the difference in experience and knowledge. The 11 times the host used the official title came entirely during the course political discussion, which was over an hour long.

It wasn't positive politeness because the title did not bring the two socially closer to each other. It wasn't bald on record because the title was used to manage face, whereas the on-record would forgo that entirely. It wasn't off record because the term was very targeted and obviously was referring to the guest in this context. There were no hints made in an attempt to mitigate a potential face-threatening act.

The fictive kinship term arose three out of 14 times. It employed positive politeness. It plays to hearer's positive face by showing closeness and warmth. It was not negative politeness because it actually very quickly lessened the social distance between the two. It wasn't bald on record because it did have a softening aspect to it (*uncle* is a term of general respect in Kuwait for someone older). It wasn't off-record because there was no delay or vagueness in the term.

What is most interesting is *when* the term was used. The fictive kinship terms were only used during the introduction and conclusion. During the introduction, first salutations were extended, and the host used a fictive kinship term (*my uncle*) to say hello to the much older professor. It was also used in the beginning when the host offered the guest a bottle of water. The terms set a tone of personal trust and acklowledgment and social closeness, likely to break the ice and soften the expected furthering of the social distance when the conversation turned professional. If the guest's title was used throughout, and negative politness dominated, the whole conversation may come off as too stiff and professional. Instead, the pragmatic choice to explicitly lead with a kinship term seemed to allow the younger host to later get serious and contentious with someone who highly outranks him. Indeed, the same ficive kinship term was used at the very end when the host concluded the dicussion and gave the guest the final thanks.

Findings: Guest 2

Address Term	Host to Guest 2	Guest 2 to Host
Teknonym	3	0
Fictive kinship term	0	1
Bare First Name	0	9
Official Title	0	0
Honorifics	0	0

Analysis: Host to Guest 2

The host refered to the guest, Khaled, exlusively using his teknonym. Given that they are friends, close in age and that the nature of the conversation was not serious, this suggests attempts at negative politeness. The teknonym is used even when the power dynamic is equal. He is a host, and in an attempt to maintain a friendly but professional conversation, it makes more sense to avoid consistently flaunting the friendship between the two. Two close friends on air may come off as too casual for a podcast of this nature. Naturally, the teknonym marked the guest's autonomy. Teknonym use wasn't using the bald on-record strategy because the guest's name is Khaled Al Muthafar, and the teknonym doesn't use neither the first or last name. It wasn't using the off-record strategy because the same teknonym was used to unmistakably refer to the only other person in the room; the guest. Use of the adress term automatically implies that the 'opting out' politeness strategy was not used. Finally, the use of the teknonym wasn't positive politeness because it did not show approval and warmth in this context; because the two were already friends.

Analysis: Guest 2 to Host

The guest referred to the host using the bare first name 9 times out of 10 total uses. The bare first name was used very casually, always with a smile on the guest's face. Seeing as they are long time friends and that the beginning of the podcast included almost a full minute of loud laughter and joking and friendly jabbing, this adress term was likely using the bald on-record strategy. This strategy is the most direct, and has zero softening or hedging. Terms that use this use strategy are often used in heirarchies (e.g. boss to employee), during danger or urgency, or among very close friends. In this case, the bare-first name is used among close male friends as a way of saying "Face management is secondary; we're all friends here". The host never corrected or requested a change in terms, and the guest did not comment on how the host refered to him using a teknonym.

It wasn't positive politeness because it did not play to the hearer's need to be included and approved of. It wasn't negative politness because it did nothing to highlight the listener's autonomy or freedom. It wasn't indirect because it was very clear to whom the speaker was referring.

The one time a different term was used came at the end. The fictive kinship term "brother" was used by the guest at the end when he was thanking the host for having him on. This is a clear use of **positive politeness**, as the term "brother" communicates warmth, closeness and solidarity. A friendly reminder from the guest that he is socially close to and on explicitly good terms with the host was an apt way to end a conversation that didn't have the host activley managing face for a whole hour.

Findings: Guest 3

Address Term	Host to Guest 3	Guest 3 to Host
Teknonym	27	17
Fictive kinship term	0	1
Bare First Name	0	0
Official Title	0	0
Honorifics	0	0

Analysis: Host to Guest 3

The host only used the teknonym to adress the guest, Marzouq AlGhanim. Given the context, this term was likely employing positive politeness. By calling him by his teknonym, he appealed to the guest's positive face by showing closeness that was not established prior to their meeting.

It was not negative politeness; because using a term of social solidarity such as the teknonym in this context didn't do anything to signifiy a respect for personal space and choice. The hearer outranks the speaker in both age and status. It was not bald on-record, because the speaker never called the guest by just his first or last name. At one point in the episode, the host was telling a hypothetical anecdote. In this anecdote, the host referred to the guest as "Marzouq". He paused the story for a moment to actually apologize to the quest, then went back to tell the story. The host's immediate apology for using the bare first name, even in a fictional story, strongly suggests that using the first name is wildly impolite.

It was not-off record, since the use of the teknonym was clear and consistent and direct throughout the conversation, even during moments where the host interupted or corrected the guest.

Analysis: Guest 3 to Host

The guest referred to the host 18 times, 17 of which were by teknonym. Because of the difference in social and institutional power, the use of the teknonym softens the obvious hierarchy mismatch, shows approachability, and doesn't come off as authoritarian. All this suggests that the address term is being used as a positive politeness strategy.

It would not be negative politeness, because it doesn't acknowlege the social distance between the two. It would not be bald on record, because that would include the use of the host's first name. That would have been acceptable, given his status, but could come off as too diminutive, which a politician on the air might not want to do. It is not an off-record strategy, because no hints were made instead of using the host's name.

The guest referred to the host 18 times, 17 of which were by teknonym. The one term out of 18 that wasn't a teknonym came at the very end of the 4-hour conversation; the guest finally referred to the host as "brother". This term employed also employed positive politeness, but in a different way than the first. While the positive politeness of the teknoyms allowed the host to have interactional freedom by letting the guest seem less distant and more approachable, the positive politeness of the fictive kinship term was a clear attempt at showing solidarity. In fact, it was used when the guest was thanking the young host for spearheading what the guest called and "important" program that is "beneficial to the community" and a "testament to our pioneering youth". It was used as a positive complement, and ended things very warmly.

Limitations of the Study

While the sample size is low (the total hours of naturalistic discourse analysed was 7.5), this brief look into Kuwaiti pragmatics through Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is an introduction into a linguistic world rich with unique address terms and dynamic pragmatic implications. Many more hours of discourse need to be studied.

Another limitation of this study is the inherent difficulty of recording instances of the politeness strategy known as "not making the face threatening act". It is hard to quantify the number of times adress terms were actively *avoided* in the course of conversation.

CONCLUSION

Three K.A. podcasts were analyzed for their use of address terms, which where classified, counted and designated a corresponding politeness strategy under Brown and Levinson's theory.

Findings revealed that address terms did not employ one specific politeness strategy solely based on their type. The same terms were used to employ different strategies, even in the same discourse. Negative politeness, for example, was seen expressed using teknonyms, official titles, as well as the bare first name.

Appropriate face-management through address terms depended heavily on context.

Several factors, such as age, power, familiarity, and subject matter dictated address term choice. This shows that the pragmatic norm in Kuwait is not simply to select one proper term for one person per conversation. Address term choices were also fluid, changing within the same conversation when the same speaker is conversing with the same hearer.

Additionally, speakers used certain terms for meta-conversational purposes. A speaker would use a particular address term at the very beginning of the podcast to explicitly establish a certain social paradigm (such as deference to an elder), but then consistently use a different term throughout the middle, content-heavy part of the podcast. This explicit show of deference allowed the temporary suspension of some socio-cultural expectations in the conversation that followed, where a younger speaker had the freedom to consistently question, interrupt, or critique a hearer who socially outranks him. Interestingly, this strategy also included using the first address term once again at the very end of the conversation, to re-establish the social paradigm initially set, and to clarify that any crossed social boundaries only occurred in the spirit of a certain type of interaction, such as a political interview.

In Kuwaiti Arabic podcast discourse, address terms function as flexible social resources where politeness traits emerge from contextual information like timing and repetition. This supports the post-Brown and Levinson notions of address terms being not inherently polite or impolite. The analysis of long-form public interactions showed how Kuwaiti Arabic face-work is tactically managed in naturalistic, sometimes high-stakes public conversations.

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