

Iraqi EFL Learners' Awareness of Offensive Language in Religious Debates

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ادراك الطلبة العراقيين من متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية للغة الهجومية في الجدل القراني

الخلاصة

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية الى تقصي اداء بعض الطلبة العراقيين من متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية في تقييم اللغة الهجومية في نموذج لنص جدلي في القران بهدف تحري الاليات التي يتبعها المتعلمين في تمييز الرسائل العدائية في المحتوى اللغوي. ويبدو ان المتعلمين لم يتمكنوا من الاستفادة من الخزين الادراكي المعرفي خاصتهم والمتعلق بسياق نموذج الجدل قيد البحث وانهم اعتمدوا على المؤشرات اللغوية الصريحة اكثر من السياق في تقييمهم للمدخل اللغوي وهذا مؤشر على امكانية فشلهم في استيعاب الرسائل التواصلية اذا ماكانوا جزءا من مواقف تفاعلية تحكمها قواعد الادراك الثقافي الخاص باللغة الهدف.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الطلبة العراقيين من متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية، اللغة الهجومية، وجهة، سياق، تقييم، رسالة لغوية

Abstract

This paper is intended to investigate some of the Iraqi EFL learners' evaluation of offensive language in a sample of a religious debate to get insights about learners' mechanisms in recognizing the aggressive messages in the linguistic content. It seems that learners were unable to employ their cognitive knowledge of the context of the debate and they were guided by the linguistic markers rather than the contextual factors in their evaluation of the linguistic input; which hints at their expected failure in perceiving the communicative messages when they involve in situations governed by the norms of the cultural cognition of the target language.

Keywords:

EFL learners, offensive language, face, context, evaluation, linguistic message**1. Introduction**

Since the time of politeness theory (1987) the emphasis of research work was on that concept as an essential tool in keeping human communication effective and cooperative. However, this trend of work has changed with the awareness that human communication system involves both cooperative behaviours and offensive ones and that a full understanding of language as a communication system requires the study of the two phenomena. In 1996, Culpeper presented a model of offensive language which he termed impoliteness drawing on politeness theory. He dealt with the concept, its strategies, purposes throughout his publications across long years of investigation. According to Culpeper:

“Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviors occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires and /or beliefs about social organization, including, in particular, how one person’s or a group’s identities are mediated by others in interaction. Situated behaviours are viewed negatively – considered ‘impolite’ – when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be. Such behaviors always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence. Various factors can exacerbate how offensive an impolite behavior is taken to be, including for example whether one understands a behavior to be strongly intentional or not. (2011:23)”

The perception of linguistic messages can diverge due to several factors which include the addressee’s recognition which means that language is a reactive and relative system of interactive communication (Lucy:1992) and the offensive language is part of that system (Culpeper,2013). Differences in background knowledge, cultural schema, power distance, social interactional needs can highly affect the production and perception of the linguistic messages because these factors direct the recipient’s attention towards certain aspects of the situation, modulating their thinking in a way that interacts with all these factors and causing certain kind of understanding and interpretation Accordingly, this paper aims at investigating

Iraqi EFL learners' Evaluation of some messages delivered in some reported debates mentioned in the Holly Quran to bring out the criteria they follow in determining the level of aggressiveness that the participants in some reported debate show against each others.

2. Face and Offensive language

The concept of face is central to evaluation of the linguistic message as a polite or impolite depending on whether it affects the recipient positively or negatively. According to Spencer-Oatey face falls into three categories. Quality face is defined in terms of the value that individuals claim for themselves. it is related to the qualities that are personal to the individual and his self-esteem while social face is related to the public value that an individual has and the social identity defines him (Spencer,2002). Social face also involves the role ascribed to the individual by his social group as a leader or a religious figure, etc. (spencer 2005). The third category of face is the relational face which is identified in terms of individuals relationships whether they are close to each other not, whether they are equal or unequal in their obligations and rights (spencer 2007) actually these categories of face can be interrelated (spencer 2008); that is one category can be on stage while the other face component(s) remain at the background within the context of communication.

Evaluating a message then is related to face which is a pragmatic phenomenon where the background context, the interacting participants, their relations, cultural and cognitive factors all play role. Accordingly, speech acts as manifestation of pragmatic context are often one way of causing offence. Thus, the present paper classifies the kinds of speech acts involved in the debate under consideration and the kind of face it attacks; benefitting from resources in this field some of which are Leech (1983), Searle (1995), Bousfield(2008) and others. This is done to provide the reference point according to which the learners' evaluation is graded as accurate or inaccurate.

3. Research Focus

The study aims at showing the evaluation of the EFL learners of the offensive language in religious debates and what makes it different from the categories imposed on them by the linguistic formula posited by Culpeper's' theory of offensive

language. Such a kind of investigation is expected to externalize the set of factors that can activate the Learners' thinking towards certain assessment of language input; which can pave the way to a better understanding of the Learners' perceptions across various contexts of communication.

4. Methodology

In light of the research focus mentioned above the study adopts analysis at two folds. The first one involves foregrounding the perlocutionary effect of offensive language as a direct sort of communication arisen between the debaters' reported debate at some point in the past while the second stage of analysis deals with the EFL learners' evaluation of the offensive language or impoliteness as a reported form. These two area of focus allow a sort of comparison between direct impoliteness and the reported one which may highlight a number of differences between the two in terms of illocutionary forces perceived by the EFL learners' as audience and the actual debaters in the context at issue.

4.1. Data Collection

The study intends to illustrate the linguistic patterns of offensive language in the religious debates between prophets and their opponents. It intends to list the speech acts employed by debaters to offend each other. A qualitative discourse analysis utilizing Culpeper's classifications (1996 and 2011) of impoliteness are adopted to categorize the acts and their Perlocutionary effect. The data to be analyzed consist of the verses of Al-Qur'an which narrate the debate between Moses, the prophet of God, and Pharaoh, the tyrant of that time and the highest power in the state. He was also the person who adopted Moses' upbringing when the latter was a child. The debate occurs in Surah AShuara chapter 26, verses (16-29).

4.2 Procedure

A group of 50 Iraqi EFL postgraduates from different Iraqi universities were asked to give their own evaluation (offensive/ inoffensive) of the exchanges they read. This is intended to determine through realistic responses of the participants the

perlocutionary effect of the impolite exchanges on a third person (one who is out of the debate and not one of the debaters). It is assumed that the participants' evaluation may involve a shift in the perlocutionary effect of that message from causing some offence to causing no offense at all. To gauge this notion about the perlocutionary effect of the messages at issue, the debate exchanges and their functions were summarized to highlight why they are examples of offensive languages between the debaters, of course in light of Culpeper's strategies. Then the EFL learners' point of view of the same messages are sought and recorded to figure out what elements guides the learners' responses.

4.3. Data Analysis

This section involves three subsections represented by an explanation of the context related to the debate at issue, followed by a summary of data abstracted from the debate, and then a discussion of the results.

4.3.1 Illustration of the Context Underlying the Debate Exchanges

The debate is between Moses and Pharaoh. Pharaoh is the tyrant who ruled Egypt and the Quran tells that the foretellers portended (through investigating the earlier sacred texts of prophets who preceded Moses) that a boy from children of Israel (people that were ruled by Pharaoh) would kill Pharaoh and change the religion of Egypt. As a reaction to this prophecy, Pharaoh started to kill every newly born male kid but Moses survived because his mother put him in a box and threw it to the river which carried Moses to the palace of Pharaoh. Pharaoh's wife, who was barren, convinced Pharaoh to adopt Moses as their own kid saying that he would help Pharaoh in ruling Egypt and keeping it safe from any attack. Hence, Moses grew up in Pharaoh's House till he became a young strong man. He, then, run away from Pharaoh's men when he, mistakenly, killed a man from the public in a quarrel. On leaving the tyrant's palace, Moses received the order of God through the archangel Gabriel to go back to Pharaoh and invite him to worship God and send his people (Children of Israel) with Moses. Moses was afraid of being killed so he asked God to send Aaron, Moses' brother, with him. If one of them was killed by Pharaoh the

other one will take the responsibility of guiding people to God worshipping. God responded to Moses request and He said to Moses and Aaron:

“Go to Pharaoh and say, ‘We have been sent By the Lord and Cherisher Of the Worlds ;”

“(Pharaoh) said : Did we not Cherish thee as a child Among us, and didst thou not Stay in our midst Many years of thy life .(And thou didst a deed Of thine which (thou knowest) Thou didst, and thou art An ungrateful (wretch) ! ”.

The implicative impoliteness is used in Moses ‘exchange which reads: **“We have been sent By the Lord and Cherisher of the Worlds”** and it is context- driven. The prevalent belief at that time was Pharaoh is the absolute powerful who should be obeyed by all people. This traditional belief relevant to the highest power is violated as it is implied, through this part of the debate, that Pharaoh is only an entity in the extended worlds that are governed by the power of Moses’ Lord (. The use of “the Lord of the worlds” rather than the Lord of the World (the singular form of worlds) is a sort of a message intensifier. It puts more emphasis on the minute power of Pharaoh who ruled only a group of people in some area on the earth as compared to the power of Moses’ Lord who controls all the worlds in this endless universe (indirect quality attack). By declaring that they are the messengers of God, Moses and Aaron implicitly negate Pharaoh’s assumed Lordship and denied his claimed divine figure (there is indirect attack to Pharaoh’s divine face). Moreover, Moses did not use the word ‘God’ in this stage of the debate as he intended to keep the divine face attack at the background to unmask Pharaoh in public before shooting his false spiritual image.

Moses and Aaron attribute themselves to the absolute power of God indicating the cut between them and Pharaoh. The act of declaring in this exchange has the perlocutionary effect of denying. Their exchange involves a relational face attack (Moses and Aron disassociate themselves from Pharaoh by calling themselves ‘the messengers of the Lord’. Though this expression has a spiritual meaning, the whole

turn does not bring the divine face attack to the frontage as nothing related to the concept of worship has been aroused at this stage of the debate.

"Send with us the Children of Israel." The offence caused by this command is due to the fact that it is an order directed from someone in a low position (according to the general knowledge adopted at that time and according to Pharaoh) to an addressee in a high position. The command gives rise to a social face attack (the Israel People shouldn't be under your leadership anymore, and you have to set them free from your control). Pharaoh's social esteem as the head of the state has been attacked by commanding him to liberalize the Israel people from his tyrannical system to feel freedom with Moses and Aaron. The use of 'us' deepens the new leadership concept aimed at by Moses (there is a new leader to the public, this is a social face attack). However, other face components are also touched by both the contextual environment and the linguistic context of this utterance. Sending some one away means to put him at a far distance which implies a sort of a gap in the relation with that person. Hence, the whole utterance hints at a relational face attack. In addition to the employment of 'send', the use of **"the Children of Israel."** rather than 'the people, or public' rooted the idea of disassociation with Pharaoh (they are no longer his people) and this intensifies the relational face attack at the background.

"Did we not Cherish thee as a child Among us, and didst thou not Stay in our midst Many years of thy life"

Pharaoh used a figurative question to insult Moses. He intended to direct Moses and the audience attention to an earlier context when Moses was adopted and brought up for years in Pharaoh's palace. This question asserts the truth of a past event known for both the debaters and the audience witnessing the debate. The question has the illocutionary force of (informing) and it has the perlocutionary effect of insulting. This particular expression is a reactive response to Moses' declared disassociation to Pharaoh by attributing himself to God. Pharaoh ensured the opposite when telling that Moses owed to him. His insult is intensified by using an indirect negative form of a question about something known for all.

“ And thou didst a deed Of thine which (thou knowest) Thou didst, and thou art An ungrateful (wretch) ! ”

Pharaoh continued his insulting by refereeing to a murder committed by Moses when he was young to show that the latter couldn't claim the divine leadership as he is a murderer. Pharaoh created a loaded attack on Moses social face (by distorting his image in the presence of his people and hinting that he is a killer of his people not a savior as he claims. This attack is ended by stating that Moses was ungrateful (a quality attack employed to intensify the earlier social attack). The occurrence of the quality attack at the tail of this exchange parallelizes its being at the background as compared to the social face attack because contextually speaking it describes Moses' action in relation to his social community represented by Pharaoh and his people (Moses is ungrateful to his lord 'Pharaoh' and his people by killing one of the public)

Moses confessed his fault indicating that he did it showing that **“At that time he was under the influence of fear, and he had fled from him. Now he is serving Allah, the Lord of the Worlds. He has no fear: he is a messenger.”** (Yusif, :1059). Then, Moses exclaimed to degrade the pharaoh's claimed favor by attacking his quality face through referring to the way he enslaved people:

“ And this is the favour With which thou dost Reproach me,—that thou Hast enslaved the Children Of Israel ! ”.

Pharaoh started to attack the divine face of Moses by asking figuratively about the God of Moses which made the latter responded by attacking the social face of Pharaoh declaring that God is highest being of all:

“. (Moses) said : “ The Lord And Cherisher of the heavens And the earth, and all between,—If ye want to be Quite sure.”1060

After Moses several declaration Pharaoh used offensive message to insult and scare Moses.

4.3.2. Summarization of Data Input

The tables below summarize the speech acts employed by the debaters to offend each other; in addition to the face attack related to each offence. The column on the

right side of the tables recorded the calculated percentage of the EFL learners' responses to the question (Do you think that this turn involves aggressiveness or offensive language?). The responses fall into two categories either offensive or inoffensive as it is shown below:

Table (1): A sample of pragmatic analysis of Pharaoh's Utterances and Learners' Evaluation

Pharaoh's Utterances	Speech Act	Perlocutionary Effect	Face attack involved	EFL Learners' Evaluation of the level of Aggressiveness	
				offensive	Inoffensive
"18. Pharaoh) said : " Did we not Cherish thee as a child Among us, and didst thou not Stay in our midst Many years of thy life ?"	informing	insulting	relational face	50%	50%
"19.(“ And thou didst a deed Of thine which (thou knowest) Thou didst, and thou art An ungrateful (wretch) ! ”	informing	insulting	social face	75%	25%
"23. Pharaoh said : “ And what Is the ‘ Lord and Cherisher Of the Worlds ’ ? ”	questioning	denying	Divine face	10%	90%
"25. (Pharaoh) said to those Around : “ Do ye not listen (To what he says) ? ”	questioning	humiliating	Social face	34%	56%
"27. (Pharaoh) said : “ Truly Your apostle who has been Sent to you is A veritable madman ! ”	declaring	insulting	Quality face	100%	0%
"29. (Pharaoh) said : “ If thou Dost put forward any god Other than me, I will Certainly put thee in prison ! ”	threatening	scaring	Quality face	100%	0%

Moses' Utterances	Speech Act	Perlocutionary Effect	Face attack	EFL Learners' Evaluation of the level of Aggressiveness	
				offensive	inoffensive
"16. We have been sent By the Lord and Cherisher Of the Worlds ;"	declaring	affirming	Relational face	12%	88%
"17. send with us the Children of Israel."	commanding	degrading	Social Face	25%	75%
"20. Moses : " I did it Then, when I was In error."	declaring	affirming	relational face	15%	85%
"21." So I fled from you (all) When I feared you ; But my Lord has (since) Invested me with judgment (And wisdom) and appointed me As one of the apostles."	declaring	informing	relational face	34%	66%
"22. " And this is the favour With which thou dost Reproach me,— that thou Hast enslaved the Children Of Israel ! "	Exclaiming	degrading	quality face	37%	63%
"24. (Moses) said : " The Lord And Cherisher of the heavens And the earth, and all between,— If ye want to be Quite sure."	declaring	informing	Social face	0%	100%
"26. (Moses) said : " Your Lord And the Lord of your fathers From the beginning ! "	declaring	informing	Social face	0%	100%
"28. (Moses) said : " Lord of the East And the West, and all between ! If ye only had sense ! "	declaring	informing	Social face	0%	100%

Table (2): A sample of pragmatic analysis of Moses' Utterances and Learners' Evaluation

4.3.3. Discussion of the Results

Starting with Moses' utterances, it seems that the majority of the learners think that they were inoffensive. The Learners share the evaluation that verses (24, 26, and 28) do not in any way communicate any level of aggressiveness; while verses (16, 20, and 75) are judged to come next on the scale of absence of offence. The least percentage of learners that deny negative Perlocutionary effect of Moses utterance falls within

the sixteenths; which is still percentage comparing to percentages recorded for the non –offensive property attributed to the Holly verses. The Learners are thought to be focusing on the linguistic content of the message regardless of the contextual background and the cultural factors which govern the communication between someone who claimed to be the Lord and one of his servants. This perspective is supported by the fact that learners do not think that there is any harm can be caused by praising Allah and describing his authority. However, it is noticed that expression like” **I fled from you.....and my Lord has since invested me” directly show the inferiority of Pharaoh in comparison to the Lord; with the contrast between ‘favor’ and “enslaved” foregrounds the aggressiveness to the learners’ mind.**

By the same token, some vocabularies are themselves loaded with unfriendly meanings that make the learner lean towards classifying their relevant utterances as having negative content as it is the case with “ungrateful” in 19, “madman” in 27, “prison” in 29. These vocabulary rates up the percentages of their utterances. The least percentage is that belong to verse 23 where only 10% viewed that Pharaoh ’s question is offensive; while those who evaluate verse 18 as offensive show the same percentage of those who judge it as inoffensive.

The Learners’ responses indicates clearly that in spite of the fact that they have background knowledge of the debate’s details as it is part of their religious cognition, they do not show a common vision about these details. When comparing their responses to the pragmatic functions of the linguistic realizations of impoliteness, it turns apparent that they break off from their mental knowledge of the debaters and their motives, the power distance that separates them, the moral order that governs their context of communication. They focus on vocabularies and exclude the influence of metalinguistic factors which impose concepts that goes beyond the literal meanings of the individual words.

Lack of involvement in the context of the linguistic expression means that the learners’ face is kept safe and untouched; which inhibits the impact of the notion of face and its relevant consequences and guides the learners to deal with linguistic input as fixed entity rather than a dynamic one. Although the whole debate is sensitive to the learners’ divine face, being outside that debate and offering its details in a language other than the original language of the verses affect the spirit of the situation and perhaps cause the learners to deal with the text as a pure linguistic entity

that they evaluate the messages in a prescriptive way failing to make use of the cognitive knowledge they have about their relevant context and the cultural and moral matters that impose conceptual value on the linguistic content.

5. Conclusions

Investigation Iraqi EFL learners' evaluation of the offensive language in a sample of religious debate extracted from the Holly Quran highlights the poor ability of some learners in terms of perceiving the text at issue accurately. Although the debate to be evaluated is a part of the cultural and religious cognition of the EFL learners participating in this study, that cognition was not enough to enable some of them of touching the pragmatic power of the exchanges between the debaters when the debate is transferred to the target language. This outcome can be attributed to some EFL learners' unawareness of the role of background knowledge in the process of meaning construction and they view the text as a static entity which is canned in words and sentences. It seems that a number of the EFL learners have the belief that transferring the text from its original language to the target one involves leaving its context and dealing with the surface level regardless of the conceptual level underlying words, their structural relations, and the social and cultural factors that govern them. In fact, missing the pragmatic value of a linguistic message related to the EFL learners' own culture ensures that they are going to develop unsuccessful experience when confronted with messages whose conceptual value is patterned by the cognition of the target language. This calls for more emphasis on the pragmatic and conceptual dimensions in EFL classes.

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