

ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to present a holistic analysis of politeness in Syrian Arabic in its metapragmatic, expressive, and perceptual realizations, as seen in the speech act of apology. The research adopts a multi-perspective approach to the analysis of the data in which politeness is accounted for with reference to both participant and researcher understandings. The main research objectives include sketching out a characterization of politeness in Syrian Arabic and identifying which approach(es) to politeness theory best capture it. In addition to this, the study sets out to investigate the metapragmatics of politeness by examining the core components of the concept of politeness, the moral order(s) that underlie that conception as well as the social factors that influence it. This research also examines the nature of politeness expression in Syrian Arabic through the performance of the apology speech act and seeks to identify how such an expression interacts with social distance and social status. Finally, the study explores perceptions of politeness in four naturally-occurring apologies with the aim of examining potential diversity in perceptions. The study also investigates the correlation between the perceptions of (im)politeness and perceptions of the (in)sincerity of the apologies, on one hand, and the correlation between the (in)sincerity of the apology and the severity of the offense, on the other hand.

In order to collect the data, I designed a multi-method approach that best suits the scope of the dissertation and the range of research questions. For the metapragmatic and the expression of politeness experiments, I collected the data in Syria from ten graduate-level university students, who are native speakers of Syrian Arabic, using a self-report questionnaire and roleplays, respectively. As for the perceptual study, by using three 5-point Likert scales in an online survey, I collected the responses of 77 native Syrian Arabic speaking students, located in different universities around the world.

The results of the metapragmatic study show that politeness in Syrian Arabic is both a verbal and non-verbal behavior, such as showing good manners, having certain personal qualities, and respecting others. Politeness as a concept is also underlain by “other-oriented” and “self-oriented,” motivations, and it can also be evaluated negatively. Additionally, the analysis indicates that, for native speakers of Syrian Arabic, values of equality, consideration for others, respect,

family relations, and social status constitute the moral order they fall onto in their prototypical conceptions of politeness.

As far as the expression of politeness through apologies is concerned, the analysis of four roleplay situations, involving different dyads between friends, classmates, and student/lecturers, showed that expressing politeness is discursive in that it is a co-constructed effort between both speaker and hearer, who evaluate the apologies, and other accompanying speech acts, in context and constantly recycle apologies in accordance with emerging understandings. The results also show that despite such discursivity, the expression of politeness is at least partially conventional; the participants resort to shared understandings of the meanings of certain speech acts in their production/evaluation of each other's inputs.

In relation to the perceptions of politeness, the results of the quantitative data analysis of four naturally-occurring apologies indicated variability in politeness perceptions in only one of the situations. The results obtained from Pearson correlation test also indicates that, in three apology recordings, there is a statistically significant correlation between perceptions of (im)politeness and perceptions of (in)sincerity. The test also confirmed that there is a statistically significant correlation between the sincerity of the apology and the severity of the offense.

The major conclusion in relation to a comprehensive characterization of politeness in Syrian Arabic in its metapragmatic, expressive, and perceptual modes, is that it is best analyzed following third-wave approaches; politeness in Syrian Arabic has both language-specific elements (as argued in second-wave approaches) as well as more universal characteristics (as stipulated in first-wave approaches).