

**Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation**

# **A Multi-perspective Analysis of Politeness in Syrian Arabic**

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## **I. Main objectives of the dissertation**

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate politeness in Syrian Arabic in a holistic manner by focusing on its three manifestations; metapragmatic, expressive, and perceptual. The dissertation approaches politeness in Syrian Arabic through the lens of the apology speech act. Politeness research, which has developed significantly over three waves of research (Kádár 2017), is characterized by the unified aim of studying politeness as a linguistic, social, and cultural phenomenon. However, despite this common aim, each wave of politeness research is characterized by a focus on one aspect of politeness to the negligence of others. Whereas first-wave, classical approaches to politeness such as Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1987) focus predominantly on the linguistic production/expression of politeness in decontextualized utterances (Eelen 2001), second-wave, discursive approaches (Watts 2003; Mills 2005; Locher 2006) are mainly concerned with the analysis of speakers' metapragmatic conceptions of politeness and their evaluations/perceptions of it. By contrast, third-wave approaches (Kádár and Haugh 2013) argue that any examination of politeness must be attempted with reference to all three manifestations, if a clear picture of politeness facts in any language/culture is to be obtained. Following third-wave approaches, by studying politeness in a comprehensive way, this research attempts to bridge a gap in the literature which, as I already mentioned, is characterized by focus on only certain aspect(s) of politeness but not all three aspects. Moreover, this dissertation focuses on Syrian Arabic, which to the best of my knowledge, has not been explored in relation to politeness before. Thus, the dissertation contributes novel findings to the field of pragmatics in general and politeness in particular by tackling a language variety that has received no attention in the literature.

## **II. Theoretical background**

In Chapter 2 of the dissertation, I present a critical overview of the way politeness has been discussed in various approaches over the past few decades. In Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, politeness was seen as a set of strategies aimed at mitigating face-threats that different speech acts (requests, apologies, offers, disagreements, criticism, etc.) can cause in order to maintain harmony. The focus was on examining how politeness is linguistically produced/expressed by the speaker and was taken to be an inherent value of decontextualized speech acts. The assumption was that politeness strategies are universally applicable and that politeness should be theorized on the

macro-level. However, little attention was given to the role of the hearer or the context beyond the variables of power, distance, and the ranking of the imposition of the face-threatening act (FTA).

In the discursive approaches to politeness (Watts 2003; Locher 2006; Locher and Watts (2008), a universal theory of politeness was rejected in favor of micro-level analyses of politeness in local contexts, and politeness was no longer seen as the property of decontextualized utterances. Instead, the focus of analysis was shifted to the way in which politeness meanings are discursively negotiated and defined by members of a given speech community. Most importantly, the discursivists emphasized the social aspects of politeness and the study of politeness from the perspective of lay users (first-order politeness) as distinguished from politeness as a scientific concept as seen from the perspective of scientists (second-order politeness) (Watts et al. 2005). Further insights about the nature of politeness were offered. Politeness is not only a matter of linguistic production but subsumes other dimensions and processes; lay members of society label each other's behaviors as polite or impolite and often make observations about what counts as polite or impolite more generally. Thus, Eelen (2001) concludes, politeness is expressive, evaluative, and metapragmatic. Evaluations of politeness, both as a negative and positive behavior, arise in relation to what participants think is appropriate in a given context (Locher and Watts 2008).

However, it was not until third-wave models of politeness that a working definition of politeness and a principled account of the processes that give rise to evaluations of politeness were proposed. In Kádár and Haugh's (2013) model, politeness is a social practice the evaluations of which stem from participants' shared recognition of the social meanings of recurring actions and speech acts. Evaluations of politeness arise when others' behaviors fall in line with members' expectations about what sort of behaviors are appropriate in a specific context. Violations of such expectations result in others' behaviors being evaluated as impolite. The sum of these expectations makes up the moral order that is the backbone of (im)politeness evaluations in different social groups. Kádár and Haugh's (2013) model also offers a more fine-grained conceptualization of the first/second-order politeness distinction. Kádár and Haugh (2013) show that a comprehensive study of politeness must take heed of multiple loci of understanding; participant and meta-participant understandings, emic/etic understandings, lay members' observations, and lay members' conceptualizations. A survey of the relevant literature (Chang and Haugh 2011; Fukushima and

Haugh 2014) shows that Kádár and Haugh's (2013) framework is a powerful model that offers a comprehensive and complex treatment of politeness and allows for a synthesis of both participant and analyst roles in the process of analyzing politeness. Most importantly, the multiple level of analyses offered in this model, which incorporate evaluations of both insiders to a speech community (emic perspectives) and outsiders (etic perspective) as well as anchoring the moral order to different sets of norms relative to which perspective is taken paves the way for examining politeness not only on the micro/narrow level but also on a wider/macro level.

I argue that Kádár and Haugh's (2013) model is best suited for examining metapragmatic and evaluative politeness in this dissertation and that another framework, Grainger's (2018) neo-Brown and Levinson model, is useful for analyzing the expression of politeness. Grainger's (2018) framework fits in well with third-wave approaches in general and Kádár and Haugh's (2013) model in particular in that it also combines the respective roles of the participants and the analyst in examining politeness. Moreover, Grainger (2018) advocates the examination of politeness both on the micro-level and the macro-level by emphasizing the importance of taking into consideration interlocking layers of linguistic, social, and cultural contexts in accounting for the way politeness is understood and used by both speaker and hearer. The advantage of this framework is that it retains the classical notions of face, politeness strategies, speech acts, and social variables and uses them in a modified and flexible manner in line with the view of politeness as dynamic and co-constructed (Haugh 2007). Based on the respective merits of Kádár and Haugh's (2013) model and Grainger's (2018) neo-Brown and Levinson (2018) framework, the analysis of the data in this dissertation is couched in these two frameworks.

As this dissertation aims to explore politeness in Syrian Arabic through the apology speech act, in Chapter 3, I present a detailed overview of this speech act and the different approaches to analyzing its manifestations and functions. In particular, I argue at the beginning of the chapter that the analysis of the apology speech act in the dissertation is best tackled with reference to both interactional typologies (Edmondson 1981; Edmondson and House 1981) and taxonomy-based approaches (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). Interactional typologies allow us to capture how speech acts are negotiated in the unfolding interaction, but they fail to address the speech act of apology in sufficient depth, especially when it comes to the role of social factors in shaping its production and interpretation. Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) taxonomy presents a detailed account of apology

strategies and their interaction with social variables such as power, distance, and the degree of the severity of the offense.

The chapter also sheds light on some definitions of apologies in early research on speech act taxonomies. Apologies are defined as remedial exchanges in which the speaker admits offense (Goffman 1971), speech acts that placate the hearer (Edmondson and House 1981), set things right (Olshtain and Cohen 1983), or as compensatory speech acts that address a past offense (Bergman and Kasper 1993). I go on to show that such definitions are restrictive and overly simplified as they merely deal with apologies as post-event speech acts and ignore the more nuanced and interactional nature of apologies. The second part of the chapter is devoted to exploring a more contemporary view of the function of apologies, as presented by Deutschmann's (2003) corpus-based study. Deutschmann (2003) explains that apologies have several functions according to their type. Prototypical apologies involve a real or virtual offense that an offender admits to having made and in which the offended is perceived as having been affected by this offense. Other apology types include formulaic apologies in which the offense is minimal such as in the case of apologizing for social gaffes. Formulaic apologies can have an added function in which, among other possible functions, the apology prefaces a request. Finally, there are face-attack apologies where apologies are not remedial actions at all, but are actually used "before or after premeditated attacks on a hearer's positive face needs" (Deutschmann 2003: 74).

The most important aim of this chapter, however, is to show that apologies and politeness are intuitively related both in function and production; in the classical approaches to politeness, apologies were seen as inherently polite speech acts the use of which seeks comity (Leech 1983: 106), which is in line with the way the function of politeness itself was conceived in the classical theories. Additionally, as also shown in the chapter, contemporary analyses of the function and production of apologies fit in well with modern approaches to politeness. As shown by Robinson's (2004) and Rieger's (2017) studies, apologies are discursive speech acts that span multiple turns and give rise to different response types. Moreover, their function is not restricted to restoring balance and addressing offense but could be used, for example, to extend condolences (Robinson 2004: 319). This line of argumentation is reminiscent of discursive approaches to politeness that reject static analyses of politeness and highlight the discursivity and negotiability of politeness as a verbal and non-verbal behavior (Locher 2006).

In the last section of Chapter 3, I review some politeness and speech act studies on Arabic dialects such as Jordanian Arabic (Al-Adaileh 2007; Batainhe and Batainheh 2008), Sudanese Arabic (Nureddeen 2008), Tunisian Arabic (Jebahi 2011), Libyan Arabic (Grainger et al. 2015; Kerkam 2015; Asswae 2018), Iraqi Arabic (Ahmed 2017), and Syrian Arabic (Hodeib 2019). This review shows that research on Arabic dialects in relation to both politeness and apologies remains fairly limited. Most importantly, most research is couched in classical analyses of politeness and taxonomy-based approaches to speech acts. Only a handful of studies to date (Grainger et al. 2015; Kerkam 2015; Asswae 2018, for instance) have taken an explicitly first-order approach to examining speech acts and politeness. Thus, this dissertation also seeks to bridge a gap in the literature by addressing politeness in Syrian Arabic from the perspective of users and in a holistic manner.

Based on this detailed review of the literature in Chapters 2 and 3, I formulated a number research questions and sub-questions, which can be grouped in four main blocks; One overarching research question that forms the essence of this dissertation, the examination of politeness in Syrian Arabic, and three groups of questions, each devoted to exploring one aspect of politeness; metapragmatic, expressive, and perceptual. The research questions are as follows:

Q 1: What are the main characteristics of politeness in Syrian Arabic in its metapragmatic, expressive, and evaluative form, as analyzed in the apology speech act?

Q 2: What are native speakers' conceptualizations of politeness in Syrian Arabic, as seen in the range of linguistic labels they use to talk about it?

Q 2.1: What are the core components that make up the participants' conceptualization of politeness as native speakers of Syrian Arabic?

Q 2.2: What is the nature of the moral order that underlies the participants' emic perspectives on politeness?

Q 3: How do native speakers of Syrian Arabic express politeness in their production of the speech act of apology? What role do the social factors of distance and status play in the expression of politeness?

Q 4: What are the participants' perceptions of the politeness of four naturally-occurring apologies? Is there a correlation between (im)politeness perceptions and contextual factors such as the (in)sincerity of the apology and the severity of the offense?

In connection to Research Question 4, two hypotheses are made:

Hypothesis A: there is a correlation between the severity of the offense and (in)sincerity of the apology.

Hypothesis B: there is a correlation between the perceived (in)sincerity of the apology and its perceived (im)politeness.

### **III. Research methods**

In order to answer the above-mentioned research questions, I followed a multi-method approach to collecting the data in which each method is designed to elicit the best data type in relation to the research questions. A triangulation of research methods (Clark and Bangerter 2004; Jucker 2009) not only ensures the reliability and validity of the collected data but allows me to obtain a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of politeness. Thus, for each of the three experiments in this dissertation, a different data collection method was used as follows:

1) To examine the metapragmatic dimension of politeness, I used a three-item self-report questionnaire which was administered face-to-face to ten native speaking MA students at Al-Baath University in Homs, Syria. The questionnaire aimed to elicit the participants' prototypical views of politeness in general and in relation to personal experiences more particularly. The questionnaire was also used to identify whether the participants associate politeness with formal or informal contexts.

2) For the study of the expression/production of politeness, I asked the ten participants who filled in the questionnaire in the metapragmatic study to participate again in recording four apology roleplay situations. Each roleplay situation incorporated two roles, with different combinations of the contextual factors of power and distance. The first roleplay situation involved an apology between two friends (-P/-D). In the second situation, the apology was extended from one classmate to another (-P/+D). Situations three and four involved a student and a university professor (+P/+D).

Whereas in situation three the student is the issuer of the apology, in situation four it is the other way round. Each situation was recorded twice over two days, and the result was 40 recordings.

3) To assess the participants' perceptions of politeness, using Google Forms, I designed an online survey which contained four naturally-occurring apologies. The survey was administered to 77 Syrian native speaking students enrolled in different universities in Syria, Europe, and Asia. To elicit the participants' perceptions of the politeness and the sincerity of the apology as well as the severity of the offense in each situation, the participants were presented with three 5-point Likert scales designed to target each of the afore-mentioned perceptual dimensions. The participants were asked to rate the apologies from 1 (very impolite/very insincere/very offensive) to 5 (very polite, very sincere, very mild). The reliability and internal consistency of the survey was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, the values of which ranged from 0.63 to 0.86 in all four recordings showing the reliability and high reliability of the instrument.

#### **IV. Research findings**

The main findings of my research are given below:

1. The characteristics of politeness in Syrian Arabic subscribe to both discursive and classical analyses of politeness. On the one hand, as it is a mixture of verbal and non-verbal behavior, is discursively produced, and is perceived to be a negative behavior in certain contexts, politeness in Syrian Arabic lends itself to second-wave theorization. On the other hand, the analysis of the data has shown that politeness is a strategic, intentional, and goal-oriented behavior; it is not only other-oriented but is self-oriented and aimed at presenting oneself in a better light. This is in line with Brown and Levinson's (1987) view of politeness.

2. The participants' prototypical notions of politeness which include notions of respect, good manners, and refraining from using inappropriate language fit in well with the inventory of core politeness conceptions identified in other languages and cultures such as English, Spanish, and Japanese (Haugh 2004; Kádár and Haugh 2013). This lends support to the claim that core politeness notions and values are universally shared (Haugh 2004).

3. The core moral values that underlie the participants' conceptualization of politeness are respect, reciprocity, and concern for others. Moreover, as far as context is concerned, the findings show



that politeness is not associated with any particular context but that it is expressed and deployed differently according to the formality or informality of the context.

4. The analysis of the roleplay data showed that the expression of politeness is discursive and co-constructed between speaker and hearer as proposed in Kádár and Haugh's (2013) and Grainger's (2018) frameworks. However, despite it being discursive, evidence suggests that the expression of politeness in this dissertation is not idiosyncratic; it depends on both the speaker's and the hearer's shared knowledge of the conventional social meanings associated with certain speech acts such as complaints and criticism. In a way, then, data on the expression of politeness do not support discursivists' claim that meanings of politeness are never fixed.

5. As far as the role of social factors in the expression of politeness is concerned, the analysis of the roleplay data showed that, in line with Grainger's (2018) claim, the social factors of distance and status do not have a fixed, a priori value. Rather, they are used in a flexible manner to negotiate a successful apology and in the overall expression of politeness. However, the data also suggest that the participants were aware of the role of social status in their performance of roleplay situations three and four (involving a university professor) which is evidence by their shifted style towards the more formal.

6. In the perceptual study, in which I aimed to examine whether the participants' evaluations of the (im)politeness of four apologies will converge or diverge, the results showed that there was variability in perceptions only in one recording. Most importantly, variability in perceptions of (im)politeness was closely connected to variability in perceptions of (in)sincerity. The overall conclusion is that perceptions of politeness are related to perceptions of (in)sincerity, as suggested by Chang and Hauhg (2011).

All in all, the main conclusion to be drawn from the findings presented above is that politeness in Syrian Arabic has both language-specific and universal aspects. On the one hand, the language-specific dimension relates to the way the participants evaluate the role of family relations and social status in assessing the need for politeness in certain contexts. On the other hand, the core components of politeness in Syrian Arabic which revolve around respect, consideration, and good manners have been attested in other languages such as Japanese and English (Kádár and Haugh 2013), Spanish and American English (Barros-Garica and Terkourafi 2014), Hebrew (Blum-Kulka

2005), and Libyan Arabic and British English (Kerkam 2015), which supports the view that politeness concepts may be universally shared (Haugh 2004). Overall, then, politeness in Syrian Arabic lends itself to analyses both on the micro-level and the macro-level. Therefore, I argue that politeness facts in Syrian Arabic are best captured using third-wave politeness concepts and theoretical apparatus. Most importantly, towards the end of the dissertation, I argued that the analysis of politeness on the macro-level should not be abandoned, as emphasized in Terkourafi (2005) and Kádár (2017).

At the end of the dissertation, I address some of the limitations of my research. Firstly, the small number of participants in the expressive and metapragmatic studies makes any generalization of the findings untenable. Also in relation to the participants, their homogenous backgrounds as university students in all three experiments might have influenced their conceptions, production, and perceptions of politeness, which also raises the need for taking the conclusions drawn in this dissertation with caution. Secondly, the roleplay data in Chapter 6 cannot be considered an accurate reflection of the production of politeness in Syrian Arabic but rather as reflecting a prototypical view of how it is expressed. Additionally, the qualitative analysis of the data in Chapters 5 and 6 decreases the objectivity of the results. Finally, despite my efforts to take the perspectives of both user and analyst into consideration in the analysis of the data, the dissertation, overall, would have benefitted from taking the perspective of the speakers/apologizers themselves in the perceptual study. Not only would their first-order opinions offer more perspective on the observed variability of perceptions in the study, but they would also shed more light on the speakers' underlying values and how they evaluate the (im)politeness of an apology in relation to (in)sincerity and the severity of offense.

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#### Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (4)

1. **Hodeib, C.:** An overview of research methods in speech acts and politeness: The case for triangulation.  
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2. **Hodeib, C.:** Variability in perceptions of (im)politeness in Syrian Arabic: The observers' perspective.  
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3. **Hodeib, C.:** On the discursive expression of politeness in Syrian Arabic: The case of apologies.  
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### List of other publications

Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

5. **Hodeib, C.:** The Sociopragmatics of Attitude Datives in Levantine Arabic.

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1. **Hodeib, C.:** An overview of research methods in speech acts and politeness: The case for triangulation.  
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**A közlő folyóiratok összesített impakt faktora (az értekezés alapjául szolgáló közleményekre): 0**

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Debrecen, 2022.02.01.



