

## **Politeness Strategies in Arabic Culture with Reference to Eulogy**

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### ***Abstract***

*The present paper discusses an important subject in pragmatics: politeness strategies with reference to Arabic. At the beginning, it sheds the light upon some basic cultural facts which are necessary for everyday social interaction. Arab people have a set of verbal and non-verbal actions which should be respected by native citizens and foreigners as well. If a person violates these norms, this will lead to unsuccessful communication. These involve polite behavior towards adults, women, neighbours and strangers. The second part of the paper concentrates on one literary genre in Arabic i.e. 'praise'. Arab Poets pay great attention to praise because of the reward they get from kings and leaders. The study focuses on the impact of praise to maintain politeness in social communication. It concludes that Arab poets use images from their culture such as courage, generosity and nature to describe their kings. They resort to positive politeness through making reference to the superiority and high prestige of kings.*

**Keywords:** *politeness strategies, positive politeness, negative politeness, and Eulogy*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Politeness is 'one of the constraints on human interaction, whose purpose is to consider others "feelings, establish levels of mutual comfort, and promote rapport" (Hill et al., 1986: 349). People need to be acquainted with their social native behaviour in order to be accepted as partners in the society. According to Watts (2003:41), politeness is equivalent to good manners because it does not reflect one's character since it is only a superficial form of behavior. Moreover, politeness can be understood with reference to: (1) "The union between the character of an individual and his external actions" i.e. the language of an individual, (2) "The ability to please others through one's external

actions (e.g. through one's language usage)", (3) "The natural attribute of a 'good' character", and (4) "A socially acquired state of mind that is adjudged to have reached a state of being 'polished' and of thereby being in conformity with a set of socially accepted forms of behavior (ibid; 39)".

According to Yule (2010: 135), politeness is interpreted "As showing awareness and consideration of another person's face". Face has a technical connotation which refers to the social sensitive role of speaker/hearer. The term was originally derived from Arabic folklore 'to save one's face' i.e. "to protect the individual's personality from shame and disgrace". Arabs tend to avoid certain behaviours because they bring embarrassment and humiliation to their character.

Brown and Levinson (1978: 66) assume that any individual has two types of face: positive and negative. Positive face means that the person need to be connected , to belong , to be a member of the group while negative face means that the person need to be independent and free from outside interference. The positive face of an individual is reflected in his / her desire to be cooperative with others, while the negative face is reflected in his / her freedom to act without imposition from others (Thomas, 1995:169).

Politeness strategies therefore aim at supporting or enhancing the addressee's positive face and avoiding transgression or imposition (negative face) (Watts, 2003: 80). People should maintain every participant's face and reduce face-threatening to a minimum. Brown and Levinson (1978:69) distinguish five categories of Face Saving Activity as shown in figure (1);

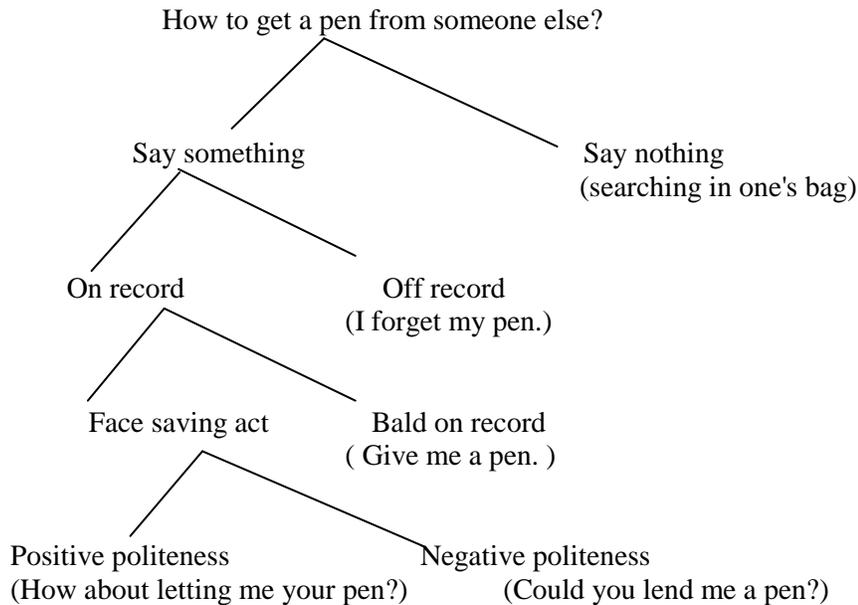


Figure 1; Face-Saving Activity (Adopted from Yule; 1996; 66)

The speaker, in the above example, has two options either to perform the face saving act or to keep silent. The speaker may avoid the face saving act when the size of threat is too much. He may resort to nonverbal behaviour in order to show the need of something through searching in one's bag. When the speaker decides to perform the face threatening act, he / she has four possibilities: The first is the 'off record' category in which the speaker provides a statement which has an implicit meaning of request 'I forget my pen'. This category has the least degree of imposition on the hearer because the speaker uses an indirect form of request. The other three possibilities are expressed under the general category of 'on record'. The first option is to perform the face threatening act (bald on record) through adopting the imperative utterance ' Give me a pen'. This imperative form has a threat to the positive face of the hearer because it implies an authority of the speaker. The other choice is to perform the face saving act 'on-record' through using negative politeness by saying ' Could you lend me a open?' or to use the utmost polite form 'positive politeness' by saying ' How about letting me use your pen?'

Pragmatically speaking, any written text has two important techniques which may lead to the performance of an utterance politely. These involve the choice of linguistic expressions which mitigate the ambivalent sense of other interlocutors. The second involves conversational etiquette which has three maxims: do not shout, pay attention to what your interlocutor is saying and do not interrupt the speaker. Communicative politeness can be best expressed through paying attention to linguistic as well as nonlinguistic gestures i.e. when a speaker touches his hat and says 'Morning!' ( Reiter , 2000 : 4-5 ).

Brown and Levinson (1978: 79) design a scale to evaluate the degree of politeness performed by a speaker in a specific situation. There are three culturally dependent variables which range in degree of imposition from one culture to another:

- (1) the social distance between the speaker and hearer (D),
- (2) the relative power between the participants (P) ,
- (3) the absolute ranking of impositions in a particular culture (R).

## **2. LAKOFF'S THEORY OF POLITENESS**

Lakoff's theory is regarded as a modification of Grice's cooperative principle. She (1973: 305) suggests that the theory of politeness encompasses two branches: be clear (rules of conversation) and be polite (rules of politeness). For her, any utterance can be interpreted properly or evaluated as pragmatically appropriate when these rules work together. Lakoff (1979) suggests that politeness of utterances ranges from formal politeness (don't impose), through informal politeness (give options) and finally to intimate politeness (make A feel good). The following diagram explicates these points clearly:

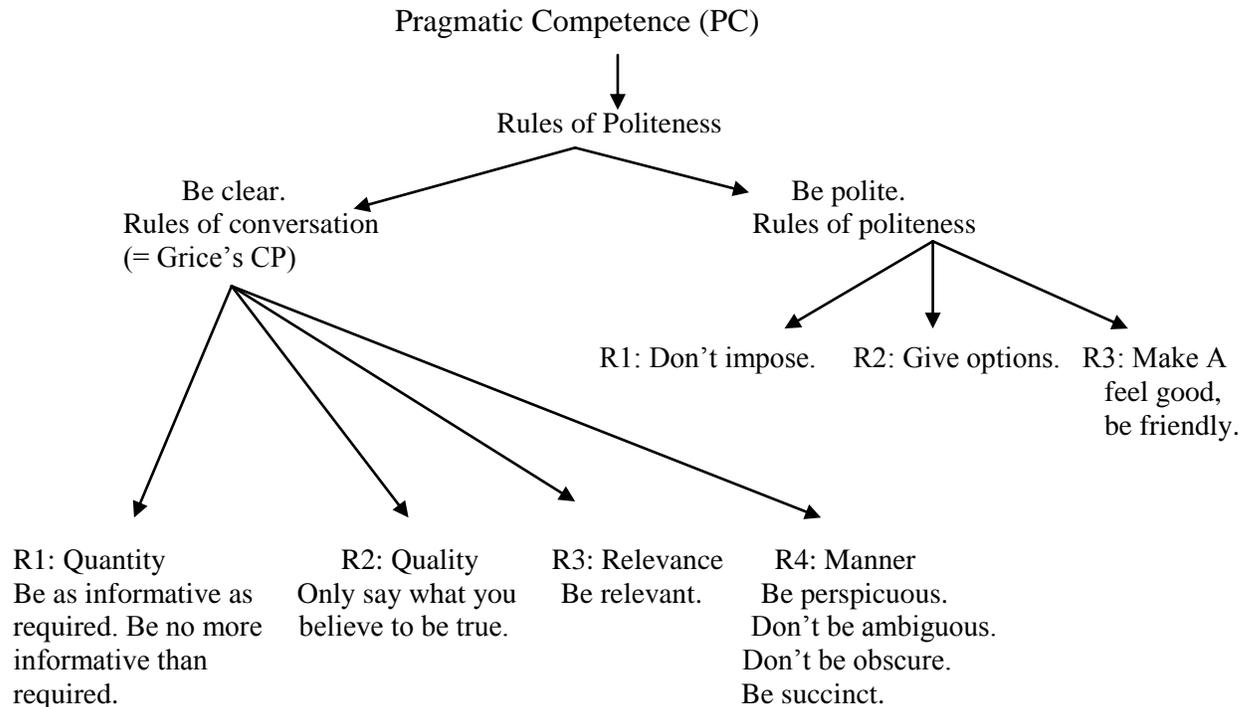


Figure 2: Pragmatic Competence (Adopted from Watts, 2003: 60)

### 3. FORMULAIC LINGUISTIC AND NON-LINGUISTIC TECHNIQUES

Politeness, then, is not something inherent but constituted through interactional relationship and social standards shared by the community. Thus, all nations have teachers, handbooks of etiquette to help people acquire polite skills. The speaker may have numerous techniques in order to increase the sense of politeness. These involve linguistic and non-linguistic techniques which are known by the community.

Watts (2003: 1) recommends that a person can be more polite if he uses less direct statements or he uses language which displays respect towards others. He states that "we might give examples such as 'language which contains respectful forms of address like sir or madam', 'language that displays certain "polite" formulaic utterances like please, thank you, excuse me or sorry', or even 'elegantly expressed language'" (ibid: 2).

Brown and Levinson (1987: 245) recommend that there are two negative politeness cultures, the Japanese and the British because both cultures use conventionally indirect and off-record strategies in requesting. English people show a marked preference for intensifying 'I'm sorry' with a whole range of adverbs (e.g. dreadfully) because they focus on the addressee's negative face. Hall (2005: 117) emphasizes that English people have two common strategies in their exchange:

- (1) A preference for negative rather than positive politeness strategies which is expressed through personal reference.

Debby : Hi, Masato.

Masato : Hi , Debby. How's it going?

Debby : I'm ok. How are you doing?

Masato : Pretty good. Listen, have you heard about the new Thai restaurant over on University Avenue?

Debby : Do you mean The Bangkok?

Masato : That's the one. A bunch of us are going over there for dinner tomorrow night. How about coming with us?

(Richards et. al. 2005 : 44 )

English people, as in the example above, usually adopt indirect statement of request which is more polite than direct one. The speaker respects the negative face of other interlocutors through avoiding direct imposition. In other words, he gives optional choice to the addressee by saying " How's it going " and " How about coming with us?"

In the same situation, Arabs may be more direct because they depend on positive politeness in their speech. For example, when they ask about the health of someone or about his family, they use direct expressions by saying " شلون صحتك " , " شلون العائلة الكريمة " or " شلون العيال ". The speaker highly respects the positive face of the addressee through being cooperative and indulged with their social matters.

- (2) A preference of off-record politeness represented by indirectness of speech which requires the hearer to draw appropriate inferences.

Marlene : I'm out of paper ! Where's the copy paper?

( Richards et. al. 2005 18 )

The speaker, in this example, adopts off-record strategy because he does not directly ask for papers by saying " I need some paper , please ". Instead, he gives an opportunity to the addressee to make inference.

On the contrary, Arabs use more direct statements in case of request. They may adopt bald on record strategy by saying ' لازم تجي ويانه ' (you are obliged to come with us) or ' لاسبوع الجاي زواج اخي وضروري تجي ' (my brother gets married next week and you should come.) These examples show that Arabs use bald on record strategy in request and offer because they want to show generosity to other people.

#### **4. POLITENESS OF SOME ARABIC SOCIAL ETIQUETTE**

In the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010: etiquette), the word etiquette is defined as "the formal rules of correct or polite behaviour in society or among members of a particular profession." Watts (2003: 1) illustrates that English people have the following assumptions about someone who behaves well;

We might make statements like ‘He always shows a lot of respect towards his superiors’, or ‘She’s always very helpful and obliging’, or ‘She speaks really well’, or ‘He always opens doors for the ladies or helps them on with their coats’, etc. Some people feel that polite behaviour is equivalent to socially ‘correct’ or appropriate behaviour; others consider it to be the hallmark of the cultivated man or woman.

For each culture, there are set of standards and attributes which are socially recognized by people. So any person should behave in a reasonable manner according to the public norms of the society. Nydell (2006: 63–64) mentions a number of etiquettes and social perspectives which should be respected by Arabs in every day communication. Both speaker and addressee need to take care of these socially accepted norms; otherwise there will be misunderstanding and inconvenient text recognition.

#### **a. Generosity**

People take care of generosity to the extent that any person who violates this concept will be ashamed. Contrariwise, the person who is generous will be described as “distinguished, noble-minded, noble-hearted, honorable, respectable” (Nydell, 2006: 56). Moreover, he (ibid) emphasizes that:

For Arabs, hospitality lies at the heart of who we are. How well one treats his guests is a direct measurement of what kind of a person she or he is. Hospitality is among the most highly admired of virtues. Indeed, families judge themselves and each other according to the amount of generosity they bestow upon their guests when they entertain. Whether one’s guests are relatives, friends, neighbors, or relative strangers, they are welcomed into the home and to the dinner table with much the same kindness and generosity.

(Fromkin, 1989: 306)

Generosity to guests is essential for reputation. It is a serious insult to call someone stingy or inhospitable. Arabs are willing to help a foreigner, again, because they take on the role of host. If you ask directions, some people may insist on accompanying you to your destination". This extreme sense of generosity does not have the same implications in the Western societies as people may only say “Welcome to my country” (Nydell, 2006: 56). Arab people are obliged to show generosity to their guests by repeating the expressions 'حياكم الله' and 'اهلا ومرحبا' (you are mostly welcomed). The speaker (the host) repeats these expressions continuously in order to protect his positive face from shame. The only way to save his positive face from threatening is by using expressions of welcome and greeting. Hospitality extends to the public sphere. When strangers ask for directions, people show generosity to accompany them to their places. Nydell (ibid: 57) narrates his own experience in the Arab countries:

In Tunis, Cairo, Beirut, and Amman I have asked for directions and been escorted to my destination though in each instance it was a long walk and a considerable inconvenience for my guide. When thanking someone for such a favor, you will hear the response, “No thanks are needed for a duty.”

### **b. Titles and Address Terms**

Arabs are also fond of titles and address terms more than English people. Arab people view these titles as obligatory in everyday talk because dropping them may be misunderstood as insulting. In this regard, Nydell (2006: 40) states that;

"Anyone with an M.D. or Ph.D. degree must be addressed as “Dr.” (“Duktor” for a man, “Duktora” for a woman). It is important to find out any titles a person may have; omitting the title can be insulting. “Sheikh” is a respectful title for a wealthy, influential, or elderly man. Government ministers are called “Ma’ali,” and senior officials are given the honorary title “Sa’ada” before their other titles and name."

As an example, some Iraqi political personalities may oblige news reporters and commentators to add numerous titles and scientific ranks. These descriptions have very important role in Arabic. When someone forgets these address terms, the positive face of other interlocutors may be threatened. On one occasion, one of my relatives whom I used to call him by name "Yousif" got angry after his graduation from a private college of pharmacy because I did not say to him Doctor Yousif.

### **c. Proper and Mannerly Behaviour**

It is important to sit properly in the attendance of adults or strangers. People are not allowed to slouch or drape their legs when talking with someone. Arabs, unlike English people, are not allowed to cross their legs on tables during speech. This behaviour is regarded as impolite because it threatens the negative face of other interlocutors.

Arabs regard directing and moving the shoe in the presence of other interlocutors as insulting. They regard any person who does this unrespectable. Moreover, the addressee's negative face will be threatened by other attendants. So, people may criticize him or even they may insult him by improper expressions such 'احترم الكاعدين' (respect the attendants).

### **d. Shaking of Hands**

Arabs usually shake hands when meeting or saying good-bye to someone. However, shaking hands with women is not binding in the Arabic culture because this social behavior is disallowed by Islamic principles. In face to face interaction, Arab people shake hands as a symbol of affection. When shaking hands lasts for a long time, this may reflect the intimate and close relationship between one person and another. Shaking hands is very essential for a successful performance of greeting. In terms of Arabic

traditions, we need to shake hands continually in order to have polite greetings; otherwise greeting may be misfired.

#### **e. Successful Greeting**

Men deliberately stand when an elderly or high-ranking person enters or leaves a room. Women, also, stand when a man (her husband or father) enters the room. People usually say ' اهلا ومرحبا ' (you are welcomed) while standing in order to show respect. These social behaviours are very necessary for successful performance of greeting. When people stand in front of strangers or close relatives, this may strengthen the positive face of the speaker. Also, their negative face will be protected from threat of other interlocutors.

Arab people usually invite relatives or strangers to their homes. The guest expects the owner of the house to greet him by the formulaic expressions ' الله بالخير ' (May Allah bless you) after sitting down. If the owner of the house does not say ' الله بالخير ' to his guest, he may interpret this behavior as showing insult to other interlocutors because their positive face will be threatened.

#### **f. The Age of Speaker and Hearer**

Arabs allow elderly people to start speaking in the attendance of young people as part of the concept of politeness. People allow high personalities and adults to sit in front positions not in the back seats. So, the owners of the house should leave enough space to guests. According to the Arabic traditions, the owners of the house or owner of the invitation should leave their seats if there is no vacancy. This behaviour may avoid threatening to the negative face of both interlocutors (the guest and the host).

#### **g. Saying Good-bye**

Arab people take care of departure so they accompany their guests to the outer gate, or to their car, or at least to the elevator in high buildings. When they say good-by to guests or visitors, the hosts should join them outside the house. These non-verbal acts are highly institutionalized by people and should be respected by every person in the community. This attitude is regarded polite because it strengthens the positive face of the guest i.e. the positive face of the speaker can be threatened when he fails to do that.

#### **h. Modesty**

Arabs should behave properly with women. If you behave with much familiarity toward women, you will be misunderstood that you have low moral standards. The concept of women forms part of honour so any misbehavior may lead to negative consequences in everyday communication (Nydell, 2006: 44).

#### **i. Social Distance**

Arabs have another important perspective about social distance because they interpret closeness and touching other partners as intimate relation. On the other hand, Western

people leave remote distance between interlocutors in everyday talk. When Arabs and Westerners meet they continually shift positions because Arabs try to approach their partners while Westerner people move away trying to maintain a comfortable distance (Nydell, *ibid*: 36).

#### j. The Evil Eye

Arabs have a common belief in the evil eye (often just called “the eye”). A person can be harmed with envy (an evil eye) so he can get rid of bad omen by offering blessings and invocations. Sometimes, they keep Quran verses or ornamentation called (the seven eyes protection) on front doors to get rid of envy. When they buy new houses or cars, they may put henna just to get protection from the evil eye. People are careful even in their speech; they should not use expressions which imply envy to others. For example, when someone buys a new house or a new car, you should start your congratulation by saying 'بليہ حسد' (without envy). This statement may express politeness because it protects the negative face of the speaker. If a person does not say this statement, his negative face may be threatened by other interlocutors. The owner of the house may reply by unrespectable sentence 'عينه ما توكع بالكاع' (his evil eye is harmful).

### 5. POLITENESS IN ARABIC EULOGY

The term 'المدح' (eulogy) means praise of someone who has good attributes and lovely character. On the other hand, the term 'الذم' (dispraise) means mentioning the bad attributes or immoral qualities of someone ( الجوهري , بلا تاريخ : 162- 192 ).

There are two constructions which make reference to the intended person by using either 'نعم' (the best) or 'بنس' (the worst). We can mention the good attributes of someone by saying 'نعم الرجل علي' (the best man is Ali) and 'بنس الرجل ابو جهل' (the worst man is abu-Jahal). In order to praise someone, people need to mention the good attributes, virtues, morals, generosity, and excellent qualities. In the Arabic culture, people resort to praise in order to capture some material properties. For example, poets usually praise kings and rich people for the sake of money (المصري , 1985 : 252). The present study concentrates on politeness strategies with reference to praise in Arabic literature. The following are some poetic extracts:

(1) النَّابِغَةُ الدُّبِّيَانِيُّ يمدح النعمان بن المنذر:  
فَاتِّكَ شَمْسٌ وَالْمُلُوكُ كَوَاكِبٌ ... إِذَا طَلَعَتْ لَمْ يَبْدُ مِنْهُنَّ كَوَاكِبُ  
( الجارم وامين , بلا تاريخ : ج 1 , ص 65 )

You are the sun but other kings are planets .....when the sun rises others disappear.

According to politeness strategy, the poet describes the king by utmost attributes. He compares the king to the brightness of the sun when surrounded by planets. The poet, An-Naabiq, resorts to exaggeration in order to get the loyalty of the king. He protects his positive face through describing the king an-Nu'man with good qualities. In Arabic literature, this linguistic technique of expressing reverence and benevolence to high

ranked personalities is widely used. The poet uses simile as a literary technique in order to maintain high reverence and politeness to the positive face of the king an-Nu'maan.

(2) قال ابن النبيه من قصيدة يمدح بها الخليفة الناصر لدين الله:  
واللَّيْلُ تجري الدَّراري في مجرّته ... كالرّوض تطفو على نهرٍ أزهرة.  
( الجارم و امين , بلا تاريخ : ج 1 , ص 62 )

You are the galaxy at night ..... You are the paradise with flowers on the river.

This poetic verse has politeness for the leader Sallahaddin who liberates Palestine from Jewish. In Arabic traditions, people highly respect this historical personality for his adventure and intelligence. The poet adopts two symbolic figures: the galaxy and paradise. He adopts off record politeness through using indirect statements of reverence. The poet uses a literary device 'simile' between the leader Sallahaddin and stars or paradise. Pragmatically speaking, the poet was successful in this description because he uses polite forms which strengthen the positive face of the leader.

(3) قال كعب بن زهير رضي الله عنه في مدح الرسول صلى الله عليه وسلم :  
إنّ الرّسولَ نُورٌ يُستضاءُ به ... وصارمٌ من سيوفِ اللهِ مسلولٌ  
( الجارم و امين , بلا تاريخ : ج 1 , ص 98 )

The Prophet is the light on earth ..... and the sword ready at the battal.

The poet, Ka'b bin Zuhair, describes the personality of the prophet Mohammad (PBUH). He intentionally uses positive politeness through comparing the Prophet Mohammad to brightness and lightening. The other polite picture is when he compares the Prophet with the sword. These two pictures are complementary because the first represents peace while the second represents power. The poet uses positive politeness through describing the prophet with the utmost attributes and qualities. He adheres to two important variables of politeness: power and distance. Arab poets feel proud of power and courage so they describe their good personalities with these attributes.

( 4 ) وقال المتنبي في مدح كافر :  
إنّ في ثوبك الذي المجد فيه... لضياء يّزري بكلّ ضياءِ  
( الجارم و امين , بلا تاريخ : ج 1 , ص 147 )

Your cloak is so shining with glory .... that its light shines every where.

Al-Mutanabi is regarded as one of the brilliant and intelligent Arab poets because he can maneuver in his description. In the preceding verse , the poet concentrates on the description of Kafoor's cloak which has glory and brightness. The poet never describes the morals or courage of Kafoor because he wants to say implicitly that Kafoor doesn't deserve these attributes. Al-Mutanabi describes the cloak of Kafoor properly but indirectly he aims at insulting this leader. This line overtly has politeness but covertly implies insult. This technique is unique for Al-Mutanabi and forms part of his genius knowledge.

(5) وقال المتنبي وقد اعتزمت سيف الدولة سقرًا :  
أين أزمعت أيهذا الهمام؟ ... نحن نبت الربى وأنت الغمام  
( الجارم وامين , بلا تاريخ : ج 1 , ص 31 )

Where shall you go our brave leader? We are the plants and you the clouds.

In this extract, al-Mutanabi uses a very polite form through adopting positive face. He describes the king by very sensitive and good attributes which gratify his personality. He compares the departure of the king with the movement of the clouds. The existence of clouds is a symbol of creation and flourishing of earth. Al-Mutanabi compares the departure of the king with the death of earth and plants. The poet preserves the positive face of the king through listing all his good attributes. Also, he uses exaggeration through observing two variables of politeness: power and rank. The poet uses polite forms and respectable statements because the king has power and social status.

## 6. POLITENESS IN ARABIC OXYMORON

The term oxymoron refers to " a phrase that combines two words that seem to be the opposite of each other, for example a deafening silence" ( Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010 : oxymoron ). Arab poets are fond of oxymoron as a literary device in order to show their aptitude and cleverness in writing. In this case, the poet mentions two contradictory pictures in order to strengthen the positive values of people. He may praise someone by using a negative picture and excluding the good attributes of his personality as shown below:

( 1 ) قال صفى الدين الحلبي :  
لا عيب فيهم سوى أن النزيل بهم ... يسلو عن الأهل والأوطان والحشم  
( الجارم وامين , بلا تاريخ : ج 1 , ص 336 )

They have no drawbacks .... but only a foreigner may forget his relatives.

The preceding extract has an oxymoron of two different pictures: positive and negative. The poet mentions the only defect in them but he gives good attributes of those people i.e. the visitor forgets his nation and his country. In a real sense, these attributes are not defects but advantage. The poet implicitly states that those people have a good nature because they are real neighbours. He intentionally respects the politeness strategies in his description because he gives only the good attributes of people.

( 2 ) كقول النابغة الذبياني  
( ولا عيب فيهم غير أن سيوفهم ... بهن فلول من قراع الكتائب )  
( القزويني , 1998 : ج 1 , ص 346 )

They have no drawbacks ... but their swords are some how broken of fighting.

The preceding example has oxymoron because the poet describes the swords as broken. He illustrates that those people fight in battles for this reason their swords are broken. In reality, Arabs view this behavior as a symbol of courage. The poet maintains the

politeness strategies in Arabic culture because he adopts very polite forms which are necessary to strengthen the positive face of the interlocutors. These techniques are important in Arabic because they enforce the social bonds of the society.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The present study concludes that politeness has a cultural specific indication. It shows that Arab people have some politeness principles which are necessary for successful performance of speech. These principles of politeness vary from one culture to another so what might be polite in one culture may not be true in another. The study shows that there are some cultural traditions which are necessary for successful communication of speech. When people misbehave in performance of these verbal or non-verbal messages, there will be impolite actions either by the speaker or addressee. Arab people differ from English people in the realization of politeness. They may use symbols of courage, generosity as metonymy for their leaders. Also, they may use the figure of sword and eagle in order to describe their kings with good attributes.

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