



COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES OF ARAB LEARNERS OF ENGLISH RESULTING FROM CULTURE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND ARABIC COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on communication challenges Arab learners of English face speaking with native English speakers. As a topic the subject of efficient communication between native and non-native English speakers remains alarmingly present among Saudi students of English. The study based on examining three speakers including two Saudi students and a native speaker of English. The purpose behind the experiment was to analyze conversational problems experienced by the speech participants. Material used included recordings of a five-minute-conversation. The conversation processed in English, which was a casual talk between participants who were familiar to each other. The conversation was spontaneous where spontaneity of the participants talking can be noticed in their style during the conversation. The study concluded that in terms of intonation, English native speaker used rising tone less and more frequently than Arab speakers of English. The English speaker uttered speech in low pitch, whereas Arab-English speakers used more rising tone to indicate speech aspect. The study is not representative enough using small sample, it provides information about the communication problems of Arab learners of English triggered by culture and language differences between English Arab communities.

Keywords: *Language Challenges, Linguistic Variation, Discourse Analysis, Intonation*

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INTRODUCTION

Language is what separates humans from other living species on this planet. Humans use a language to verbally communicate knowledge, beliefs and feelings, etc. Brook (1958:12) defines language as "a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols". According to Hornby (1995:662), language is the systematic expression of thoughts and feelings by using sounds, words and conventional symbols. Arguably, communication is highly important in linguistics, but there are prevailing challenges, especially when a conversation is conducted in a language that is foreign to the speakers. In an English environment, challenges emerge in the communication process, which takes place between speakers descending from different cultural backgrounds. In this situation, communication would only be achieved if listeners and speakers are familiar with the language that is being used in the same region. This would happen because new bonds are being made due to the fact that speech participants can communicate and exchange ideas and feelings easily with native speakers of a language, in spite of they come from different cultural backgrounds.

People from the Arab setting are not immune to the challenges affecting other persons from non-English speaking cultures (Malcolm 2009). Some of the problems experienced by Arab persons in English countries include learning and residing in a diverse culture, learning and communicating while trying to develop proficiency of English language and understand the corrective discourse.

This study addresses communication challenges which occur between speech participants descending from different language backgrounds. Specifically, it focuses on challenges Arab learners of English face when they communicate with people of different language and culture backgrounds. The study attempts to allow deep understanding of the topic to give insights into this issue.

1. BACKGROUND

The subject of efficiently communicating between native and non-native English speakers (non-NES) has remained alarmingly present for faculty in all parts of the world (Robertson and Jung 2006). This is because of the challenges that have emanated from such endeavors. Whenever two people from different cultures meet and would like to start a conversation, the probability that they will understand each other is dependent on factors such as culture, which brings forth the issue of language. According to Csizer and Dornyei (2005), culture has a

big role to play in the attainment of effective communication. Cultural backgrounds dictate how people react to certain words, phrases or expressions. However, spoken language requires less effort in comparison to the challenges of written language. Understanding of each is the major purpose for building a meaningful conversation (Bosanac, 2009:4). In the time of excluding the conversation or spoken language from the entire actualization, it observes that it is more complicated than any types of written texts.

When examining spoken text and the context in which it occurs, there are many other factors that come into play. For example, a spoken conversation might be recorded on a tape recorder and the background noise, even though do not constitute part of the 'text' per se, they play a crucial part when analyzing the situational context, culture, and speaker's attitude. Furthermore, conversation differs from other communication technologies and this depends on the availability channels such as audio, video and so on. Grammar and vocabulary, paralinguistic signs and cultural conventions should be considered in any conversational situation (Bosanac, 2009:4). According to Robertson and Jung (2006) without a proper understanding of the variations in cultural perspective, persons from the Arab nations will continue to encounter numerous challenges. Therefore, mechanisms have to be established in order to prepare both Arab and Australian authorities on the need to converse in any given language. There have to be measures, which aim at engaging people from different cultures in order to have a clear understanding of the other person's culture. This would greatly prepare people to accept others from regions such as Australia, in order to tackle the challenges holistically and achieve efficiency whenever communicating.

Further, the male speech has features which differ from the female speech. Gender plays a greater role in determining language features such as form, topic, style, and the use. For example, studies have indicated that men and women differ in many topics they talk about and men refer more often to quantitative concepts such as time, space, numbers physical movements and objects. Jong (1977) illustrated that communication between genders is frustrating as both genders place varying levels of importance on tone, topic, inflection, form, style and use of language.

Generational differences exist in the phenomenon of language, of special phonetic expressions and linguistic codes. An examination of generational changes in language is evidence that the



phenomenon of language evolves over time. There are a number of methods for conducting a conversation and it differs from one society to another. Therefore, the culture and the style of life in a society affect the structure of conversation. The clearest feature in any conversation is its interactive nature, where speakers take turns to converse. The first speaker speaks and the second one listens and replies, and this is known as responding turn, which can be expressed linguistically (response) or non-linguistically (feedback). Furthermore, the pattern of silence should be taken in any conversation, particularly among people who do not know each other. People in this case start to engage in 'small talk' in order to interrupt the quiet. For instance, when the person travels long distance by train or bus and they require to breach the silence by saying few words about whether "it is a nice weather today", or something similar. These rules in building conversation vary among cultures, sometimes silence is acceptable or speaking with, unknown person is not acceptable or extremely strange. There are other rules of conversation such as interrupting someone to speak and how the speaker interrupts and when. This is variable from one civilization to another, even in using expressions to interrupt so, for instance, "sorry to disturb you but...".

Trudgill (2000) presented that conversations are consisting of structured sequences of different types of utterance. These are known as "adjacency pairs" which describe the conversation flow and how the conversations can be segmented into pairs of exchanges that are connected although they are uttered by different speakers. To make it more clear, any statements or questions which produced by speaker they require and expect responses either agreement, disagreement, direct or indirect answer. "Adjacency pairs" are significant for the conversations and for any sort of communication because they grant cohesion to the discourse. Moreover, ellipses are the other features of conversation. Sometimes the speakers omitted some linguistic features while taking and make interpretation of the conversation as well as the connection between question and answer, for example, "...could you please lend me the book?" And the response "I haven't read yet". Therefore, the knowledge of the person and the knowledge of the world as well are required for holding the conversation together. These features of conversation are made the conversations more structured, organized, and non-random sequences of utterances. According to the language that the speakers use during the conversation, it will be varied

and this depends not only on the social characteristics but also on the social context. Thus, the linguistic varieties based on the situations and the purposes of the conversation.

Burton (1980) stated that conversation will exist and be reliant upon all relevant factors in the environment, social conventions and the shared experience of the participants, and the situation is, and must be, a vague notion, where utterances may well be open to various styles of interpretation from different individuals. Therefore, the style and the type of language that are used in the conversation depend on the matter as well as the topic shifts. Werth (1981), in term of conversation analysis, illustrated that understanding and conceptualizing the conversation, according to the social situations is a significant issue in analyzing any conversation. In other words, it is fundamental to consider the social interactional nature of talk, social rules and the role of performance. Furthermore, analyzing conversation requires the investigation of a larger bit of relevant conversations, this providing systematic, rather than just qualitative, insight into the varying patterns of social organization lived and constructed by people in their speech. Conversation and second language conversation (L2) is a crucial issue in this project because the current project deals with a conversation of native speaker of English and the speakers of non-native speakers and how the non-native speakers communicate in the other language.

2. AIM AND RATIONAL

This study is important because of the challenges that have continued to be manifested and experienced whenever two or more people from different cultural backgrounds meet and wish to start a conversation. Furthermore, it is important for the Arab students who study in Australia because it indicates the style of conversation and how it differs from the Arabic language and English language. Communication would not be attained if the two parties are not in a position to understand what the other says or means of their actions. The prevailing misconceptions regarding the intellectual capabilities of persons from the Arab region makes the interaction problem bigger and this can explain why the augmented need to determine the discourse strategies in linguistics between an Arabic person and an Australian native speaker. The current project will analyze a conversation between Arab speakers and an Australian native speaker applying the theory explained above, including the mechanism of cohesion and the grammatical functions that the speakers use as well as the differences in the style of speaking to the participants. The conversation about



this project is a casual conversation. Moreover, the project takes the following points under consideration:

- (i) The discourse strategies to the speakers or participants follow to engage themselves in the communication, especially for those who communicate in a language other than their mother tongue (Arab Speaker);
- (ii) The impact of culture and social factors on the conversational style; and
- (iii) The influence of the use of second language on speakers' knowledge about the topic.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been some comparative research works carried out to study the various discourse strategies of Arabic and English languages. However, there is a gap in the existing literature and studies. Differences between the native English speaker and the Arabic speaker could also prevail in their conversations. These differences can be profoundly manifest in the use of semantics. The use of semantics can also be determined by the difference in ranks or age between the two speakers (Feghali 1997). According to Hazel and Ayres (2000), cultural perspectives are usually portrayed in fixed and monolithic terms. There are indications that the cases of Arabs in Australia are also viewed from the same perspective. Arabs are portrayed in reductionist terms by the media discourse in Australia and this has significant effects on the lives of such students. According to Gumperz (2002), there are various differences in the way such persons conduct their cultural activities. Some of these persons are ardent observant Muslims, whereby they obediently and passionately attend all prayer sessions. However, there are other persons from the same region, who cannot be said to hold similar ardent behaviors. There are indications that some people become reluctant to interact and integrate with other cultural groupings other than their own, while others have no problem interacting and integrating with other cultural groupings. It can, thus, be seen that the cultural perspectives said to affect Arab individuals in foreign countries should not be made holistically, but should be done from an individual perspective, since every individual is unique. There are varying approaches used in patterns of communication for Asian individuals. Individuals from the Asian community tend to apply self-select turn-taking behavior rarely compared to such individuals as those from the English community (Hazel and Ayres 2000).

During the communication process between the Arabic speaker and English speakers, other differences in conversations can emerge, especially in regard to nonverbal communication. While the "OK" sign is considered in a polite way to the English speakers, it may be translated otherwise by the Arabic speaker to mean a different thing. According to Albirini, Benmamoun, and Saadah (2011), the use of this sign may be taken to mean an evil eye sign, and can thus ignite confrontations, yet the English speaker uses it with no ill intention.

Additionally, there may be differences in the pronunciation of English monosyllabic words by the Arabic speaker. Arabic persons tend to pronounce such monosyllabic words as 'is', 'am', and 'are' loudly with principal stress when used in conversational speech (Albirini, Benmamoun, and Saadah 2011). The English speaker may also find out that the Arabic speaker is pronouncing some words with citation stress, whereas such words get weak stress in the English language. For example, He's is produced as He is with augmentation citation stress. These differences emanate from the variations in culture and linguistic frameworks existing between the two languages.

4. METHOD USED

Material of the study comprises sound recordings of five minute conversation. The conversation processed in English, which was a casual talk between participants who already know each other well. The conversation was spontaneous where spontaneity of the participants talking can be noticed in their style during the conversation. The conversation took place among three participants. Participants include two Arab speakers (Refer as S2, S3) and a native speaker of English from Australia (Refer as S1). As mentioned before, S1 and S2 unaware that the conversation was recorded during the most part of the conversation while S3 was aware but did not show any clear signs which may influence on the speakers behaviours. S2 and S3 are MA students at UNSW and both of them are Arabic speakers, while S1 who is an Australian English speaker is working as a supervisor of the building. Furthermore, all of them are male and they have different ages. The common attributes of S2 and S3 are: age about 26, mother tongue, and dialects, while S1 is about 55 years old. Two of the participants were not aware of recorded conversation till the end of the conversation. Therefore, the conversation achieved by natural way with no significant influence on the conversational movement and on the participants' behavior. In addition to this, the participants gave



their permission to use the conversation and the recording to achieve the project's purposes. The length of recording was about eight minutes from the beginning to the end. The recording was made by the iPhone 5 sound recorder which placed in the middle of small table where the participants sit in order to guarantee a high quality of recording, because the conversation took place outdoors with a lot of background noise such as speech of other people. In the current project, the author follows the conversation analysis approach (CA) in exploring the conversation in order to describe conversation in a way that builds upon the way it is taken up by the participants, who are communicating in it, because the material is recorded and the author wants to study the participants' understanding and responding to one another turn-taking with focusing on how sequences of actions are generated. In addition to this, the conversation about this project is a casual conversation which may reflect how the social interactions occur. This can be achieved by considering the adjacency pairs, grammatical features, and the turn-taking.

5. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This section deals with the analysis and interpretation of the information obtained from the sampled transcript based on the recorded casual conversation between the three participants. The obtained information has been analyzed descriptively with the help of transcription. All the responses produced by the English and the non-native English speakers are analyzed on the basis of the analytical strategies such as the turn-taking, overlapping, grammatical categories, knowledge of the topic and so forth. As this study is comparative in nature, both the grammatical and supra-segmental features used by Arabi-English is compared and contrasted with those that were used by the native English speakers. The comparison and contrast are made on the basis of the different speech delivery characteristics between the speakers who built a conversation in the informal discourse situation. Thus, this part mainly consists of four areas: turn taking in interaction, overlapping, understanding the topic and grammatical feature, namely, tense and aspects used by the Native Speakers of English and Arabic-English speakers.

As is seen in the transcript (see appendix) the native English speaker faced some difficulties in understanding Arabic-accented English due to incorrect pronunciation. An example can be seen in the line 7 where the second speaker uttered the word 'virus' which seems to sound like 'fire' to an English speaker. As result of the lack of proper

pronunciation, the first speaker is struggling to understand his counter speaker till further on in the discourse. Similarly, there is some misunderstanding of the content of conversation. This can be justified from the responses given in line 1 and 27 representing "Are they friendly?" and "Should we account?" respectively which are misunderstood and responded differently.

Adjacency pair, as the feature of conversational analysis, can be easily noticed in the transcript. In line 80, the second Arabi-English speaker asks the yes/no question to the first speaker. Here, the lines 80 and 82 and 63 and 64 can be kept in the pairs since these pairs are ordered, that is, they are the recognizable pair of question-answer, and thus, it is recognized that a yes/no question should be followed by a specific pair of responses: either 'yes' or 'no'. This sort of interrogative should not be followed by other utterances, for example. Similarly, there are some instances of overlapping which are indicated by using the standard convention of a left-hand square brackets in the given transcript. The overlap made by the Arabi-English speakers in the transcript can be exerted from the lines 65 and 66 in which the utterances 'oh wow' and 'that's great' overlap the end part of the utterance 'she did master complete' made by the English speaker. Throughout the transcription of the casual conversation, it can be clearly noticed that the Arabi-English speakers seem more failure to orienting the rules of turn-taking in conversation as they are found to be overlapping more in the recording.

A further considerable discourse analysis can also be made by the grammatical and supra-segmental features used in the transcript. As compared to English speakers, the Arabi-English speakers were found to be using rising tone more frequently. Here in the recording, the English speaker has, in contrast, articulated most of the utterances with low pitch that makes the recording inaudible. However, the Arabi-English speakers seemed to converse with having the appropriate pause in the course of producing the utterances. Instead, none of the speakers did use breathiness noticeably during the whole act. But laughter is found to be used by the Arabi-English speakers.

In respect to the grammatical feature, the Arab-English speaker failed to construct the question in appropriate tense aspect. For instance, in lines 80 and 88, the second speaker articulated 'you enjoyed?' and 'did you went to the Easter Show?' instead of "Did you enjoy?" and 'Did you go to the Easter Show?' respectively. The utterance 'Its comes from camels' can further be considered that shows



the Arabic-English speaker lacks the knowledge of subject-verb agreement.

CONCLUSION

Some of the major findings of this study are carried out after analyzing and interpreting the information recorded in the transcript. The analysis and interpretation of the information has been made by using a simple conversational analysis technique. The analysis has been made in terms of the dynamics of turn-taking and characteristic of speech delivery. Besides, comparison of the tense aspect is also made on the basis of the speakers' knowledge. On the basis of the analysis and interpretation of the collected data, the major findings of this present study, some recommendations are summarized in the subsequent description.

In respect of intonation, the English native speaker used rising toneless more frequently than Arab speakers of English. This shows that the English speaker uttered the speech in low pitch, whereas the Arab-English speakers used more rising tone in order to focus on the particular aspect of speech. The English native speaker was found to be more polite in the relationship with the stranger. However, this aspect is not clearly seen in the recording. But the way he conversed indicates he is more polite.

Although this research work is not exhaustive, it will, provide the information about the discourse strategies in English language. So, here the claim cannot be made that the present study is sufficient enough to find out all the foundations of discourse analysis. Overall, this study can be considered as a great effort in the field of conversational analysis.

This research work facilitates the teachers to create different sorts of dialogues between friends, teachers and students, doctors and patients, etc., that require the strategies of speech delivery. Therefore, it is important for both the language teachers and the learners. Without linguistic knowledge of language, one cannot teach the language properly. This research work gives linguistic knowledge to the teachers who have a keen interest in teaching the English language.

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APPENDIX TRANSCRIPT

- (1) S1: ↓ Are they friendly?
- (2) (.)
- (3) S2: e.Ah ! He (0.2) called
(0.4) my father (0.5) two days ago.
Something like
- (4) this.
- (5) (.)
- (6) S1: °yeah °
- (7) (.)
- (8) S2: he was pree:ty good but he
talked about some ↑ fires. (0.2).
- (9) Saudi Arabia. (0.2), if you hear about it.
- (10) (.)
- (11) S1: ↑ Bush fires? =
- (12) S2: No. No. fi:res.
- (13) (.)
- (14) S3: VIRUS, (.) you know.
- (15) (0.2)
- (16) S2: it's a ↑ virus.
- (17) (.)
- (18) S3: it's a co:rrona:: (0.2). Have you
heard something about this?
- (19) (0.3)
- (20) S2: it's a ↑ virus in the air. (0.2). They
said its come from ca:mels. (21) (0.2)
may be.
- (21) (0.6)
- (22) S1: °yeah °
- (23) (0.2)



(24) S2: there is some (0.2) fertilities (guess)
for Saudi Arabia (guess)

(25) (.)

(26) S1: should account?

(27) (0.2)

(28) S2: Its comes from ca:mels (0.2),
transferred to human.

(29) (.)

(30) S1: Oh, ↑ really::? [just =

(31) S2: = [yeah

(32) S3: = [yeah

(33) (.)

(34) S1: yeah

(35) (0.2)

(36) Its vi:rus. But you not sure about this. (.)
it really come from ca:mels or not, (0.2)
yeah [just=

(37) S3: = [it's a big diseases in the
world nowadays. (.) Around one
hundred people died.

(38) (.)

(39) S1 : Oh=

(40) S3: yeah

(41) S2: and (.) its gonna be big issue,
because you know HATCH? (0.6) The
Hatch in holiday ↑Ma:kka

(42) (0.2)

(43) °that's right.°

(44) S2: its gonna to be around. (0.2), may
be (0.8) four months from now
something like this (0.2), yeah, so (.) in
bigger virus like this. (.) it is ea:sy to
transfer the di:seases from betwee:n
people.

(45) (0.2)

(46) °su:re°

(47) S1: (.)

(48) S2: so () they should be they work in it
now. () they gonna be an[ti

(49) (0.8)

(50) S1:
[()

(51) (.)

(52) S3: Am::

(53) (.)

(54) S2: yes, how's your meeting today got a
last night with your daughter?

(55) ()

(56) S1: °Oh good°, ()

(57) (.)

(58) S2: Oh really? Where she was?

(59) (.)

(60) ↓ she was north territory.

(61) (0.2)

(62) S2: Ok (.) she is married ↑already?=
(63) S1: No.no. she did [master complete

(64) S2: [oh, wow!

(65) S3: [that's great

(66) (.)

(67) S2: I thought, ()

(68) (.)

(69) S1: °she was working in child
protection°

(70) (.)

(71) S2: Oh

(72) (.)

(73) S1: ()

(74) (.)

(75) S2: so, she is (.), she often come Sydney
to ↑see you.

(76) (.)

(77) S1: ↓ yes, yes. Just (), two weeks, () .
because she has three daughter

(78) (0.2)

(79) S2: did you went to easter show?

(80) (0.4)

(81) S1: no. no.

(82) (.)

(83) S2: why you because already experience
now. Me no.

(84) (0.2)

(85) S3: I went, (0.2). I went there.

(86) (.)

(87) S1: You enjoyed?

(88) (.)

(89) S3: Yeah I hahahahaha