

Phatic Communion: A Cultural Perspective  
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Abstract: Examining the Islamic greeting formula. ?as-salaamu a;alykum, and the responses to it, the paper shows that the form of this phatic expression abounds with semantic information, expressing a variety of meanings. This finding constitutes a strong challenge to the long standing conception of a large number of scholars that phatic language is empty of meaning.

Introduction:

Language fulfills a variety of communicative functions including the phatic function discussed in sociolinguistics and anthropology. This function "involves the use of language as a means of maintaining interpersonal relations." (de Waard and Nida 1986: 26-27). Expressions used to establish such relations involve, interalia, greeting formulas like good morning, good evening and hello.

Malinowski (1923) calls this type of linguistic function "phatic communion" and defines it as a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words". (p.315). Phatic expressions, according to him, do not express meaning; rather they express a social function; they do not come as a "result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener. Once again we may say that language does not function as a means of transmission of thought." (p.315). Malinowski also, maintains that "phatic communion... serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and does not deserve any purpose of communicating ideas." (p.316). Thus, he doubts that phatic expressions express meaning, inquiring "Are words in phatic communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not! They fulfill a social function and that is their principal aim...." (p.316).

This very conception is held by other scholars. Abercrombi (1956: 3- cited in Coupland et al. 1992: 209) states that “the actual sense of the words used in phatic communion matters little”. Likewise, Hudson (1980: 109 – cited in Coupland et al. 1992: 209) views phatic communion as “the kind of chitchat that people engage in simply in order to show that they recognize each other’s presence.” Turner (1973:212-cited in Coupland et al. 1992: 210) maintains that phatic communion does not express semantic information, and that “phatic language.. is designed more to accommodate and acknowledge a hearer than to carry a message”. Fawcett (1984: 47- cited in Coupland et al.1992: 215) says that “it is not that we are not sharing information when we say nice day but it looks as if it may rain soon, but that the informational purpose is rather weak”. In the same line of thinking, Firth (1978: 304) claims that “forms of greeting and parting can be regarded as ‘empty’ as ‘meaningless’... and that the primary factor of importance is not what is said but that something is said”. Last but not least, Leech (1974:48) believes that phatic function of language is “the function of keeping communication lines open, and keeping social relationships in good repair... here the communicative work done by language is at its lightest: it is not so much what one says, but the fact that one says is at all, that matters”. He also says that phatic communion “suffers from the major drawback of being, on the whole, dull and pedestrian.” (p.62). According to him, greetings, farewells and routine polite questions are small – talks, chit – chats, or sweet – nothings; “the words are empty of meaning, in the sense that so long as a conversational hiatus is filled, what one says matters little”. (p.62).

Goffman (1971: 90-cited in Ferguson 1976: 137) states that politeness formulas including greetings, farewells, etc., are “among the most conventionalized and perfunctory doings we engage in and traditionally have been treated by students of modern society as part of the dust of social activity, empty and trivial”.

Dealing with the structure of illocutionary acts and their rules in a speech community, Searle (1969: 64-65) says:

Greetings are a much simpler kind of speech act, but even here some of the distinctions apply. In the utterance of “hello” there is no propositional content and no sincerity condition. The preparatory condition is that the speaker must have just encountered the hearer, and

the essential rule is that the utterance counts as a courteous indication of recognition of the hearer.

It is thus obvious that Searle, like others, believes that phatic expressions do not bear a propositional content and are just indicative of the presence of the hearer/listener.

Ferguson (1976: 147) states that politeness formulas are semantically non-referential and important for their presence or absence on the appropriate occasion rather than for the exact meaning carried by their constituent parts". Finally, Gleason (1980: 26) extrapolates that social routines and politeness formulas are easy to teach, probably because of their lack of deeper meaning".

To sum up, in sociolinguistics, anthropology and semantics, this concept of phatic language as is indicated in the viewpoints of the above mentioned scholars and possibly in those of others is viewed as a function of language whose ultimate goal is to establish and maintain a social relationship, contact or rapport among interlocutors; this function does not have any correspondence to the proposition expressed by the form of the politeness formula itself which is devoid of meaning. The present writer would argue this general consensus that the form of those expressions is empty, meaningless and dull. Based on the Muslim greeting formula ..?as-salaamu 'alaykum "peace be upon you", he will attempt to provide evidence that this form of greeting abounds with meanings.

#### Review of Related Literature

There are very few studies done on greetings in Arabic. Investigating the language of buying and selling at shops in Jordan, El-Hassan (1991: 33-35) discusses the greeting formula ?as-salaamu 'alaykum and its various responses, maintaining that greetings in Arabic express "a social function akin to Malinowski's 'phatic communion'." (p.33). El-Hassan says that greetings in Arabic "serve to reinforce the evidently friendly relationship between the conversants... even if they do not literally mean what they say" (p. 35) and are used "to establish rapport (phatic communion) between the interlocutors, thereby creating an amicable atmosphere for doing business". (p. 37).

Al-Nasser (1993) studies the social functions of greetings and the responses they entail in Iraqi Arabic. One of those greetings formulas that he discusses is 'as-salaamu 'alaykum which, according to him, expresses friendliness and a wish of peace to the interlocutors.

Al-Abdul Halim (1994) conducted a sociolinguistic study on the greeting formulas and related responses which are normally exchanged by Arabic speakers in Jordan. Some of his objectives have been to estimate the frequency of the use of each formula in Jordanian Universities and hospitals and to explore whether the factor of status has any effect on the initiation of the type of the greeting formula being exchanged. Like other Arab researchers, Al-Abdul Halim stresses the point that greetings in Jordanian Arabic serve an important social function, namely, to establish and maintain social contact and rapport among interactants.

Finally, Hassanain (1994:73), studying the implications of Saudi forms of greeting rituals for teaching and learning English, also maintains that "what is important in a greeting situation is the establishment or maintenance of communion and not necessarily the communication of information and / or orientation in a greeting phraseology."

These studies reiterate the same conception presented earlier: phatic language as expressed by Arabic greeting formulas is ultimately intended to establish social relationships among people who, according to those scholars, do not, necessarily, mean what they say. Arabic greetings, in other words, do not communicate ideas.

Based on the Muslim greeting formula, the present writer will attempt to provide evidence that the form of this greeting is a rich source of semantic content. As we have already noted, other writers have emphasized the various linguistic functions or speech acts of greetings; this paper however, will focus on the cultural and religious implications, not functions, of greetings. This focus is viewed as a central contribution to this area since such meanings have not been examined in relation to greeting before.

### Greeting in Jordanian Arabic.

In Jordanian Arabic, greeting formulas and responses are used. These include the following:

- 1) ?as-salaamu 'alaykum Greeting  
the-peace upon+you (pl.)  
"peace be upon you"
- 2) a. wa 'alaykum ?as-salam possible responses  
and + upon + you (pl.) the-peace  
"And peace be upon you".  
b. wa 'alaykum ?as-salaam warahamatu II:h  
and + mercy God  
"And peace and God's mercy be upon you."  
c. wa 'alaykum ?as -salaam warahamatu II :h wabarakaatu  
and+ blessings+His  
"And peace, God's mercy and His blessings be upon you"
- 3) ?as-salaam 'alayk Greeting  
upon + you (sg.)
- 4) a. wa 'alayka s-salaam Possible Responses  
and + upon you (sg.) the peace  
"And peace be upon you."  
b. wa 'alayka s-salaam warahamatu Ila:h (wabarakaatuh)  
c. same as (2) above.
- 5) salaam alayk / alaykum Greeting  
peace
- 6) same as (2) or (4a-b) above. Possible Responses
- 7) Sabaah il-xeir Greeting  
morning the-good  
"Good morning."
- 8) a. sabaah il-xeir Possible Responses  
b. sabaah in-nuur  
the-light  
"Good morning."  
c. ?ahlan/ ?ahlein, (sabaah il-xeir/n-nuur)  
family  
"You are welcome; good morning."
- 9) masa l-xeir Greeting  
Evening / the - good  
"Good evening."

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|--|---------------------------|
| <p>10) a. masa l-xeir /n-nuur<br/>"Good evening."<br/>b. ?ahlan/?ahlein, masa l-xeir/n-nuur<br/>"You are welcome; good evening."<br/>c. yis'id masaak<br/>to make happy evening + your<br/>"Good evening".</p>   | <p>Possible Responses</p> |
| <p>11) marhaba<br/>welcome "Hello"</p>   | <p>Greeting</p>           |
| <p>12) a. ?ahlan wasahlan<br/>family and + plain<br/>"You are welcome."<br/>b. marhaba, (?ahlan wasahlan)<br/>"Hello; you are welcome."<br/>c. maraahib<br/>welcome (pl.)<br/>"You are most welcome."<br/>d. miit/?alf/, etc.,marhaba<br/>hundred/ thousand welcomes<br/>"You are most welcome."</p> | <p>Possible Responses</p> |

These are the greetings and response formulas most widely used by Jordanians. The communicative function of all such formulas which is not the focus of this paper is to establish and maintain social relationships among interlocutors. For more details about the function of these greeting formulas and other derived ones used in Jordan as well as in other Arab countries, see Ferguson (1976), El-Hassan (1991), Al-Nasser (1993), Hassanain (1994), Al-Abdul Halim (1994), El-Yassin and Salih (1955), and Khasawneh (1996). Since the focus of this paper is upon the greeting and response formulas given in (1-6) above, the other formulas are precluded from the present discussion.

Let us now take up the form - meaning relationships of (1-6) above.

#### Meanings of ?as-salaam- Formula

?as-salaam formula (hereafter used for both greeting and response) constitutes a binding social stipulation of the laws and teachings of Islam, the religion of the majority of Arabic speakers. It is the most widely

exchanged ritual by the common faithful Muslims. Interlocutors fairly often feel comfortable and at ease as they exchange it because of the host of assuring cultural and religious meanings expressed in its form.

To begin with, the word *ʔas-salaam*, the key term in this greeting, expresses significant conscious meanings for Muslims. In the first place, it iterates *ʔas – salaam* “peace”, which is one of the ninety nine divine names of Allah the Almighty. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) says:

*ʔinna s-salaama ʔismun minʔ assmaa I llaahi taʔaala wa-da ʔahu fil-ʔardi, fa-fsu s-salaama baynakkum.* (cited in ʔal ʔusaymiy 1985: 15).

“Peace is one of the Almighty’s divine names deeply rooted in the earth; you should, therefore, echo this name among you.”

This holy directive gives a strong foundation for the use of *ʔas-salaam* to remind Muslims of their Creator and Lord whom they should worship and glorify in all instances of their lives.

In the second place/ al-ʔusaymiy (1985:17) maintains that *ʔas-salaam* expresses significant attributes of Allah, including completeness, faultlessness, integrity, soundness and truthfulness.

Peace and security are other meanings inherent in *ʔas-salaam*. The main goal of this greeting is to spread peace and security among people. This is achieved by the greeter’s pronouncement that the greatee will be safe and secure against danger and harm that the former may inflict upon him. Responding with one of the formulas given in (2 or 4) above, the greatee is religiously instructed to return the same wish or even a better one. Interlocutors, thus, wish peace and safety to each other. Thus, theoretically, if these friendly exchanges recur frequently among the community members, then peace will surely predominate accompanied with love and cooperation, both socially and spiritually. The far-reaching implication here is that hostility, passion for power and sensual gratifications, and hatred among individuals and nations would vanish by the magical power of the message intended by this common-place greeting formula, perhaps a far stronger social or legal force than these ones intended to spread and maintain the prevalence of community

security. Thus, if the greeter truly observes the implicit peace message, which is embedded in this formula, he will certainly contribute to the removal of the feelings of oppression, injustice, inequity, suppression and all such unfavorable factors that usually tear up or part human beings.

These implications are corollaries of the prophet's teaching:

?al-muslim man salima l-muslimuuna min lisannih wayadih (?an-nawawiyaa n.d.: 445)

"The Muslim is the one who saves other Muslims from his tongue and hand."

Moreover, the expanded form of the response formula (see 2b,c and 4b above) bears an additional meaning embedded in the word rahma "mercy, compassion". When responding, the greetee returns the greeting by pleading with Allah to have mercy, sympathy, compassion and pity upon the greeter. These words, thus, express compassionate feelings and wishes, mutual understanding, and feelings of love and respect among interlocutors in particular and the society at large. Another possible implicature to be sensed from the expanded formula is humility and modesty. When people exchange greetings in this manner, they tend to express modest attitudes toward each other as if they were guilty for having done some evil or for having committed outrage upon each other. In this respect, El-Yasin and Salih (1995: 143) note that the use of rahma "mercy" may indicate connotations of weakness, need, meekness, and the like. And now people believe that they are all at God's mercy, pleading forgiveness and remission with Him not only in their prayers but also in their greetings because He is the Merciful, the Compassionate.

The last meaning inherent in ?as-salaam formula is implicit in the form barakaatuh "His blessings", which means that the greetee pleads with Allah and the Almighty to bless the greeter. The interlocutors, thus, tend to spiritually enjoy or find pleasure and satisfaction in invoking the blessings of Allah upon them, a motive that will usually lead to personal happiness, success and consent. "Blessings bring in the atmosphere of richness, health, etc." (El-Yasin and Salih 1995: 143).

Before we close this section, a few more issues should be presented. First, the question "Why do Muslims intend to greet each other and respond using the formulas given in (1-6) above?" need be discussed. In addition to the meanings alluded to above, more compelling



motivations for using ?as-salaam formula in (1,3,5) above include the religious conviction that is the greeting of the blessed believers in the Hereafter, guided by Allah's will and mercy to jannaatic n-na 'iim "Gardens of Delight". (?al-'usaymiy 1985: 86). This interpretation is evident in the following two parts of the Quranic verses:

- A) ... watahiyyatuhum fiiha salaamum...  
(Sura Xm, Yunis, Verse 10)  
"And their greeting is peace in Heaven."  
B) ... tahiyyatuhum fiiha salaam  
(Sura XIV, Ibrahim, Verse 23)  
"Their greeting is peace in Heaven."

?al-'usaymiy (1985: 86-87) interprets "their greeting is peace" as follows: Being blessed with their good deeds, God greets those chosen believers with salaam "peace", expressing His pleasure and consent with their winning this acceptance and satisfaction; they in turn greet each other in the same fashion. Thus, when using this greetings, Muslims follow the Quranic teachings and hope that this greeting will be turned to them in more compensatory payment by Allah, the Merciful, in the Hereafter.

This interpretation of the expanded responses in (2,4) above is motivated by the following Quranic verse:

Wa?ida huyyitum bitahayyatin fahayyu bi?ahsani inhaa?aw rudduuhaa ?inna llaha 'ala kulli say?in hasiiban. (Sura IV, ? an-nisaa?, verse 86)

"When you are greeted with a greeting, greet/respond with a better one or return it; Allah takes count of all things."

Thus, as noted by El-Hassan (1991:35), "interlocutors who respond with this extended version are sensitive to the above injunction", whereas Al-Nasser 1993: 16) considers the extended response as a sign of friendliness. The above Quranic- based principle of greeting is echoed in Ferguson's (1976: 143-144) principle of "the same or more so".

A further account of these response formulas follows from another principle which can be formed as "the better the response, the more rewards expected". Muslims believes that ?as-salaam greeting is a commended divine speech act for which Allah will reward them in the Hereafter. ?al-'usaymi (1985:70) reports Prophet Muhammad (peace and

blessings be upon him) saying: for those who say *alaykum* only will receive ten rewards, for those who say *?as- salaamu 'alaykum warahmatu llah* will receive twenty rewards, and for those who say *?as-salaamu 'alaykum warahmatu llaahi wabarakaatuh* will receive thirty rewards. This prophetic saying furnishes an incentive for Muslims to greet each other with *?as-salaam* formula and to extend their returned responses in order to win more rewards or credits ensuing from this pious deed. As a matter of fact, this incentive is explicitly dictated by a more founded principle in the Holy Quran:

Man jaa?a bil hasanati falahu 'asru ?am aalihaa waman jaa? A bis-sayyi? Ati fala yujza ?illa mis laha wahum la yudlamuuna.

(Surah VI, ?al-?an 'aam, Verse 160)

This translated by Pickthall (n.d.: 138) as:

Whose bringeth a good deed will receive tenfold the like thereof, while whose bringeth an ill deed will be rewarded but like thereof; and they will not be wronged.

The second issue is that this Islamic greeting is not time-oriented. It can be used round the hour at any time, in the morning, at noon, in the afternoon, in the evening, and at night. In this respect, it contrasts with the English greetings, good morning, good afternoon, good evening, good night, and good day, which are time-oriented.

The third issue is that familiarity is not a factor in Islamic greeting. The formula is used to greet people whom one knows and does not know alike. Greeting the known and the unknown alike shows the greeter's modesty, love and respect of others. The writer endorses Al-Nasser's (1994:73) observation that "Muslims are required to greet any known and unknown individuals they meet, be they relatives, friends and strangers". Thus one greets all people irrespective of his relation to them.

Finally, the paper should add one more implicature of greeting, perhaps overlooked by other scholars. *?as-salaam* formula constitutes a call to reconciliation between people whom are in bad terms with each other. This social function has its roots in the Prophetic saying:

Waxayrumma llai yabda?u bis-salaam. (?an-nawawiyya n.d.:473:

And + best + you (dual) who begin with+the-peace

"And the best is the one who initiates greetings."

This saying is intended to teach people how to end and eradicate their quarrels and disputes. Accordingly, greeting can be a means of regaining trust and stability among people.

#### Conclusion.

The present article has shown that the form of Islamic greeting formula and its responses is expressive of several meanings. These are the peace attribute of Almighty Allah, peace and security, safety, devotion and piety, mercy and sympathy, humility or meekness, and invocation of Allah's blessings upon human beings. As we have seen, the form of this phatic expression is replete with a variety of meanings. This finding presents very strong evidence against the very long standing conception that phatic language is devoid of meaning. As a matter of fact, when greeting each other, interlocutors actually mean what they say. Thus, for us to be able to appreciate phatic language, we should give due account to the actual sense of the form of phatic words which matters much at least in cultures like the Arabic one which is greatly shaped and dominated by Islam. Finally, the paper has added the function of "call to reconciliation" of phatic language which has not been given by other related studies.

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