



How do Jordanians express their birthday wishes on Facebook?

A sociolinguistic study

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the speech act of congratulations in the Arabic language on the occasion of 'birthday' among young Arab Jordanians who use Facebook to share social life with each other. The data collected is 855 birthday congratulation notes posted by 100 Jordanian Facebook users. The convenience sampling is being used as research methodology through which there are four main categories emerged from the data analysis, namely, Arabic Illocutionary Force Indicating Device' (AIFID), Emotional Statements', (ES), Religious Expressions (RE), and Quotations and Poetic Verses (QPV). Findings revealed that the Jordanian linguistic behaviour and pragmatic norms were profoundly rooted in the social values and religious norms of the Jordanian online speech community. The study concludes with a discussion of important directions for future research, such as examining gender differences in expressing birthday wishes.

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Keywords: birthday wishes; online congratulation; Facebook; Jordanian linguistic behavior

1. Introduction

Facebook as a social media platform makes available abundant data to study the speech acts of individuals in a social network woven by exciting events, culture, topics, etc. The status update is one of Facebook's most widespread features (Buechel and Berger, 2012). It helps Facebook users to share text-based messages about their daily life activities with other users. Posts on Facebook either in the form of comments or status updates can be an important source for scholars interested in studying the features of online discourse and online communication practices.

In routine daily interactions, individuals interact with each other to deliver information, share ideas, express feelings, and keep in touch with those who live near and at a distance. Successful communication requests not only linguistic acquaintance but also an understanding of cultural and social aspects in a specific situation (Gonal, 2015). The use of the particular linguistic expression to carry out certain speech function is governed by the linguistic and social norms of the society (Chaplin, 2015). Therefore, it is normal to expect that the way people interact is impacted by variant aspects involving gender and cultural difference. Searle (1975) claims that speech acts mirror the important values and social of the

target language and determine the rules of language use in a specific speech community. The speech acts display an abundant deal of details about language users and their communities. Wierzbicka (1987, p. 3) elucidates this view when she states "it would not be an exaggeration to say that public life can be conceived as a gigantic network of speech acts".

In this study, accordingly, the speech act framework is applied to these Facebook postings (e.g., posts of birthday wishes) because sharing feelings, problems, and concerns all fall within the scope of 'speech act' (Austin, 2013). According to Vosoughi & Roy (2016), Speech Act Theory is a subfield of pragmatics that examines how words are used not only to present information but also to perform actions. Therefore, the current study aims to observe the speech act of congratulations on the occasion of 'birthday' among young Arab Jordanian Facebookers.

A review of the literature revealed that a great deal of research on speech acts in the Jordanian context has been given on congratulation, but many features of this specific speech act are still under study. For instance, some researchers have tried to explore congratulation strategies used by Jordanian EFL postgraduate students (Al-shboul, 2016). Several studies have been carried out to investigate cross-cultural differences between Jordanian native speakers of Arabic and American English speakers in terms of the realization speech act of congratulations (Bataineh, 2013). However, most of these studies have been conducted conventionally through using a discourse completion test (DCT). This means that these "studies elicit unnatural data because what people would write or say in the imaginary situation is not necessarily what they say in real situations" (Banikalef and Bataineh, 2017 p. 266).

Due to several weaknesses of DCTs which are the most used approaches of data collection in speech act studies, some scholars have turned to collect their data by using corpora. Corpora of transcribed spoken words and utterances are the best tool of research for different research questions in pragmatics (Schmidt and Wörner, 2009). The corpus of the current study was a collection of birthday congratulation notes on Facebook issued by 100 Facebook users who are specifically from Jordan. By using data from social network sites (SNSs), specifically, birthday wishes posted on a Facebook user's wall, the current study attempted to find a new corpus to shed more light on the Jordanian society from a sociolinguistic perspective within Jordanian Arabic language expressions.

1.1. Literature review

Normally in joyful and glad occasions such as weddings, birthdays, or special holidays, individuals express their happy feelings to each other. Similarly, congratulation is a speech act that is classified as a behabitive by Austin (1962) and as an expressive by Searle (1979). Congratulation is defined in the Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (Crawley, 2004 p. 262) as the act of "expressing explicit pleasure to others on their occasions of success or good". Consequently, people need a social context to congratulate such as having a birthday, anniversary, and New Year. In this act, people congratulate each other by saying:

Happy anniversary.

Happy New Year.

Happy birthday.

According to Searle (1969), the act of congratulation is ruled by several principles, for example, the speaker should be happy about the occasion, the occasion should be pleasant, and it has to be related to the hearer. Leech (1983), moreover, considered 'congratulations' as convivial and put them under his approbation maxim.

To begin with the research that almost focuses on congratulations, Al-Khatib (1997) discussed the communicative functions of congratulation and thank-you announcements (CT announcements) in five

Jordanian newspapers. The findings showed that those announcements, which are made to congratulate a couple on their wedding, hold a lot of information far beyond the occasion itself (e.g., the wedding ceremony, the place and time of celebration, the bride and the bridegroom, their families, and their social-economic statuses). The researcher concluded his study with the fact that there is a clear association between CT announcements and some socio-cultural factors such as gender, social and economic status.

Al-Shboul & Huwari (2016), likewise, explored the types of positive politeness strategies in the congratulation speech act used by Jordanian EFL postgraduate students. Data were collected using an adopted version of the discourse completion test by Dastjerdi & Nasri (2013). Findings showed that the most frequent strategies were giving a gift to listeners, exaggeration, and in-group identity marker. The researchers concluded that future research must investigate other types of the congratulation speech act in a real-life situation.

In addition to the above-mentioned studies, there are also few cross-cultural studies that extended their examination to two or more languages. For instance, Bataineh (2013) examined the politeness strategies used to offer congratulations, thanks, and apologies by Jordanian native speakers of Arabic and American native speakers of English. However, the data were collected by using a 9-item Discourse-Completion Task. Responses were then classified into the five super strategies of acknowledging, rejecting/denigrating, ignoring, acknowledging and mitigating, and accepting and returning. The researcher concluded with the fact that religion influenced interactions in Arabic, and expressions with religious content signify politeness in almost all social contexts.

As it has been noticed that most of the studies on the speech act of congratulation in Jordanian context have paid much attention to intralingual or cross-linguistic examination, but none of these studies managed to examine ‘congratulation’ confined to one particular event such as a ‘birthday’. The available information is, therefore, inadequate and offers no more than an incomplete picture of how Arab Jordanians execute this act (birthday wishes) either in the real world or in a virtual medium.

1.2. Research questions

This study, therefore, fills a current gap in the Jordanian sociolinguistic literature by answering the following research questions:

1. What are the birthday congratulation strategies and their frequencies among Jordanian speakers?
2. How does culture affect using birthday congratulation strategies?

2. Method

The data for this study, which were collected from January 2018–December 2019, stem from the Walls of 100 ‘Friends’ of mine, all of whom are native speakers of Arabic. In total, the 100 participants received 855 birthday wishes. Given that all of my 100 participants are Jordanian citizens, where strong privacy rights by law apply, the researcher asked them through private messages on Facebook to give him their permissions to use data from their Facebook Walls for the purposes of his linguistic study on the birthday wishes. All of my participants agreed on collecting their data and using them for the current analysis.

The researcher developed a taxonomy of congratulation strategies (TCSs) based on the sharing posts by the participants. The collected posts of birthday wishes were examined based on their content. Different strategies were elicited from these posts. These strategies are classified into four categories:

1. The religious Expressions (RE): The data showed that many birthday wishes were shared in the form of invocation to Almighty God. (e.g., May Allah blesses you with entire integrity and happiness in life.)

2. Quotations and poetic verses (QPV): This category occurs when the birthday wishes are not originally produced by the speaker. Quotations included Quranic verse, song lyrics and famous quotes. (e.g., Sing to my darling and congratulate her... On her birthday, may she live to be a hundred)
3. The Emotional Statements', (ES): This domain reflects emotional reactions to the birthday occasion and relates to the expression of an emotional state to the receiver (e.g., with your love, I go beyond the tiredness, Happy Birthday my love.
4. Arabic Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (AIFID): This category refers to the statements which directly show the speaker's intended speech act which is congratulation.

3. Results and Discussion

This study attempted to recognize and examine different strategies in birthday congratulation wishes from Facebook among Jordanian speakers. To fulfill this end, 855 birthday congratulation status updates were analyzed carefully. Four categories of moves were elicited from the corpus of Jordanian congratulation wishes from Facebook posts which are discussed earlier in section (3). This means that each collected Facebook post of birthday wishes is assigned to an appropriate category and classified according to the new developed taxonomy ((TCSs).

Table 1. Numbers and frequencies of various strategies of birthday congratulation notes as used by Jordanian Facebook users

	AIFID	RE	QPV	ES	Total
Frequency	250	240	170	195	855
Percentage	29.2%	28.1%	19.9%	22.8%	100

Table 1 show that 29.2% of status updates were constructed with Arabic Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices, followed by the religious expressions (28.1%), emotional statement (22.8%), and Quotations and poetic verses (19.9%). This suggests that AIFID followed by RE was used most frequently, and QPV was used in approximately 19.9% of birthday wishes.

The first category named Arabic Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs refers to the statements which directly indicate the speakers' intended speech act of expressing birthday wishes to the recipient. The (IFID) was "Happy Birthday" in English or "عيد ميلاد سعيد" in Arabic. This category reflects direct and short notes of birthday wishes to the receiver. The high frequency of this category could be attributed to the fact that language as a tool for communication performs three forces, one of which being the "illocutionary force of language". This force is described by Austin (2013) as 'illocutionary acts performed through linguistic utterances' and as 'part of what a speaker means by the utterance, part of what he or she intends to convey by making it'. The researcher notes that emoticons and smiley faces were highly used in this category. This may be the case because emoticons give a visual representation of what the speaker wants to say. Consider the following examples:

1. " عيد ميلاد سعيد 🎉 "

(Happy birthday to you)

2. " عيد امبارك صديقي ❤️ "

(Happy Blessed Birthday my friend)

The second most frequent category is “Religious Expressions”. Through using these expressions, the speaker asks for God’s Blessing for the listener. This category sometimes overlaps with blessing wishes in the Jordanian context through examples such as:

"ان شاء الله السعادة ما تفارقك على طول عمرك كله صديقي العزيز"

(My prayer on your birthday is for you to be forever happy my dear friend)

Jordanian speakers usually preferred to share their birthday congratulation wishes firstly by sugaring their listeners via numerous religious words and gentle expressions and then using the “AIFID” which was at the core of their statements followed by “Emotional Expressions”. Of course, this combination of strategies is not permanent and can be easily varied based upon contextual factors and speakers’ relationship, for instance, if the speakers were very close, the speaker used “Emotional Expression” in a combination with a short “religious expression” note. The data revealed that many of the religious expressions were shared in the form of invocation to Almighty God. This is to say that this category was used frequently when the user requested for something from Almighty God. This can be seen in the following examples:

"عيد ميلاد سعيد حبيبي يا رب يطول بعمرك ويعطيك الصحة والعافية والرزق"

(Happy Birthday my love, may Allah bless you and keep you forever, and may Him grant you health, wellness, and livelihood)

In this post of birthday wishes, the speaker makes du`a (invocation) to her partner on the occasion of his birthday. Invoking Allah’s (God’s) name in Jordanian Arabic is a common conversation feature in most types of speech acts in general, and congratulations, in particular.

These linguistic behaviours are deeply rooted in the Jordanian speech community shaped by religious orientations dating back to the early centuries of the Islamic era. Data showed that the speaker preferred to use the category of AIFID in combination with a ‘Religious Expressions’ which always appears in the form of making supplication, for example:

"نصف السعادة أُمي ونصفها الآخر دعوه منها يا رب لا تحرمني منها كل عام انت بالف خير"

(Half of the pleasure is my mother and the other half is her supplication, O’Allah don’t forbid me from her, Each year, you are fine, and happy birthday to you)

In this note of birthday wishes, there are three strategies, the first referring to “half of the pleasure is my mother and the other half is her supplication,” which is an Emotional Expression, the second referring to “O’Allah don’t forbid me from her, Each year, you are fine” which is a “Religious Expressions”, the third referring to “happy birthday to you” which is an AIFID. Invoking God is a common linguistic speech act in the Jordanians’ linguistic repertoire. The cultural significance of these linguistic items is in some ways untranslatable. They are very likely that by using such culture-specific expressions the speaker frequently expresses emotional attitudes that cannot be translated into another language.

As noted in Table 1, the third most frequent category is the ‘Emotional Statements’. This category reflects emotional reactions on the occasion of a birthday and relates to the expression of an emotional state to the receiver. It is, therefore, relatively frequent in the construction of birthday wishes, comprising 22.8% of the data sample (n= 195). This category was used to express feeling toward the receiver. Therefore, most of birthday wishes in this category were usually colored by love expressions. More specifically, the participants inclined to use more emotional expressions to build their birthday wishes such as “حبيبي” (my darling), “روحي” (my soulmate). The findings also showed that most of the birthday wishes within this category were posted mainly by members of the family or closely connected people (e.g. close friends or members of the extended family, with whom the relationship is close and good). The following examples bear witness to the wide use of this category:

"كل عام وأنا أحبك عيد ميلاد سعيد ياروحي"
(Every year I love you happy birthday my soul)

كل عام وانت بخير وعافيه ياقلبي

(Every year you are fine, you are my heart)

"كل عام وانت حبيبي وكل عام ونحن نحتفل سوا العمر كله"
(Every year you are my lover and every year we celebrate together)

كل عام و أنت نظري

(Every year you are my eyesight)

The fourth category that appeared in the data is using quotations and poetic verses in posting birthday wishes. Through this strategy, the speaker quotes a lovely piece of literature and dedicates it to the listener. Author (2017) claim that quotations achieve the same functions as a self-produced language in online communication such as expressing the user's psychological and emotional state. A content analysis of the current study found that this category accounting for 19.9%. This could be a piece of evidence that emerges from this body of work on how online communication patterns are deeply related to the socio-cultural background of the participants. A total of 170 birthday wishes were constructed by sharing quotation or poetic verses. The following example illustrates the use of this category:

غنوا لحبيبي وقدموا له التهاني... في عيد ميلاده عساها مية عام.... افرح حبيبي واطلب أغلى الأمانى..... الليلة يا عمري تناديك "الأحلام"

(Sing to my darling and congratulate her... On her birthday, may she live to be a hundred.... Be a happy dear and ask for the most precious wishes..... Tonight the dreams are calling to you).

This note of birthday wishes is part of a song by a Saudi Arabian singer; his name is Abdel Majid Abdallah. This user might find these lyrics fit his current mood and put it up on his friend's wall to share his emotional state with her. In this example, the Facebook user shares these romantic quotations as a way to say that he is completely, intensely in love. Gross & John (2003) confirm that individuals have an overwhelming need to share their emotional experiences with others. Thus, the verbalization of emotion can achieve a socio-affective need through drawing attention, affection, and social support.

اه ياسيدتي لو كان الامر بيدي اذا لصنعت سنة لكي وحدكي"... "كل عام وانتي حبيبي كل عام وانا حبيبيك

(May you always be my beloved. May I always be your beloved.... Oh my lady if it's up to me, I would have invented a year specially for you)

This status update is part of a song by an Iraqi singer; his name is Kazem Al-Saher. Although an emotional experience begins as an internal private process, it often leads to the social sharing of emotions with others (Settanni & Marengo, 2015). This might be specifically true for using songs or poetic verses because they are not originally produced by the Facebook users in particular who would feel ashamed or embarrassed by expressing their feelings in public to their Facebook partners. Through using song verses, the Facebook users have the ability and the audacity to express their feelings in public without arousing the social concerns that may come from attempting to share utterance originally produced by the speaker in conservative culture as in the case of Jordan. These findings are consistent with previous studies which found that individuals prefer to share quotations that are said by famous people, particularly ones that everyone will recognize (Banikalef & Rababah, 2018).

5. Conclusions

This study attempted to recognize and analyze different strategies in birthday congratulation wishes on Facebook among Jordanian Facebook users. 855 birthday congratulation status updates were collected and analyzed carefully. Four categories of birthday wishes were extracted from the corpus, namely, Arabic Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (AIFID), the Emotional Statements' (ES), Quotations and Poetic Verses (QPV), and the Religious Expressions (RE).

Findings showed that 29.2% of birthday wishes were constructed with AIFID, followed by religious expressions (28.1%), emotional statements, (22.8%), and quotations and poetic verses (19.9%). Other studies have supported these findings, concluding that online speech acts of congratulation were mostly constructed through AIFID strategy (Al-Shboul and Huwari, 2016; Jahangard, Khanlarzade and Latifi, 2016). These findings clearly indicate that the cultural norms and religious background profoundly rooted in all participants can strongly affect their linguistic choices in their native language.

Findings showed that the expressions of birthday wishes in the Jordanian speech community are strongly associated with Islam. It has been found that the Jordanian linguistic behaviour and pragmatic norms are profoundly rooted in the cultural and religious beliefs of the Jordanian speech community. That is to say, the different forms of birthday wishes derive their sociocultural importance not only from the participants' religious background but also from other social and cultural factors. A considerable number of birthday wishes were embodied the name of Allah to give them a sense of credibility.

Finally, it is important to notice that this research has just scratched the surface of the speech acts of birthday wishes; other research could use other methods or techniques in collecting the data in the natural conversation. Moreover, the number of birthday notes used in the analysis are considered limited to generalizing the results about Jordanian Facebook users. The type of occasion used in the current study are personal occasion, so further research should observe offering congratulation on public occasions such as New Year, national day, Ramadhan, Eid al-Adha, and Eid al-Fitr by Jordanians. However, the findings of the current study can help individuals from different cultures and languages to correctly communicate at a level of minimum pragmatic misunderstanding and embarrassment. There is a hope that this study will help material developers and EFL teachers to be more notice of such culture-specific expressions which are important to successful Arabic language learning and the development of communicatively competent learners in the Arabic language.

6. Ethics Committee Approval

The author confirms that ethical approval was obtained from Jadara University (Approval Date: 012/1/2021)

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Ürdünlüler doğum günü dileklerini Facebook'ta nasıl ifade ediyor?

Sosyolinguistik bir çalışma

Bu çalışma, Facebook'u sosyal hayatı birbirleriyle paylaşmak için kullanan genç Arap Ürdünlüler arasında 'doğum günü' vesilesiyle Arapça'daki tebrik konuşma eylemini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Toplanan veriler, 100 Ürdünlü Facebook kullanıcısı tarafından gönderilen 855 doğum günü tebrik notudur. Elverişli örnekleme, veri analizinden dört ana kategorinin ortaya çıktığı, yani Arapça Illocutionary Force Indicating Device '(AIFID), Duygusal İfadeler', (ES), Dini İfadeler (RE) ve Alıntılar olmak üzere dört ana kategorinin ortaya çıktığı bir araştırma yöntemi olarak kullanılmaktadır. ve Şiirsel Ayetler (QPV). Bulgular, Ürdün dilsel davranışının ve pragmatik normların, Ürdünlü çevrimiçi konuşma topluluğunun sosyal değerlerine ve dini normlarına derinlemesine kök saldıgını ortaya koydu. Çalışma, doğum günü dileklerini ifade etmede cinsiyet farklılıklarını incelemek gibi gelecekteki araştırmalar için önemli yönlerin tartışılmasıyla sona eriyor.

Anahtar sözcükler: doğum günü dilekleri; çevrimiçi tebrik; Facebook; Ürdün dilsel davranış

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