# Some Thoughts on Greetings in English and Arabic

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**Abstract**

The present study examines the main points of differences in the subject of greetings between the English language and the Arabic language. From the review of the related literature on greetings in both languages, it is found that Arabic greeting formulas are more elaborate than the English greetings, because of the differences in the social customs and the Arabic traditions and the Arabic culture. It is also found that Arabic greetings carry a religious meaning basing on the Islamic principle of "*the same or more so*", which might lead to untranslatable loopholes when rendered in English.

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## بعض الافكار عن التحية في اللغتين العربية والانكليزية

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**المستخلص**

تستطلع الدراسة الحالية نقاط الاختلاف الرئيسية بين اللغتين العربية والانكليزية بخصوص موضوع التحية ، ومن خلال مراجعة تراث الموضوع في اللغتين وجد ان مفردات التحية في اللغة العربية اكثر تفصيلاً وسعةً من اللغة الانكليزية بسبب الاختلاف في الاعراف الاجتماعية و التقاليد و الثقافة . وقد وجد ايضاً ان تعابير التحية العربية تحمل في طياتها معناً دينياً مبنياً على المبدئ القرآني "ردُ السلام بمثله او بأحسن منه". أن هذه الصبغة الدينية قد تؤدي الى مصاعب عند ترجمة هذه التعابير الى اللغة الانكليزية.

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## 1- Introduction:

There is a wide spread evidence that greetings are an important part of the communicative competence necessary for being a member of any speech community. They are often of the first verbal routines learned by children and certainly one of the first topics introduced in foreign language classes. They are also of great interest to analysts of social interaction, who see them as establishing the conditions for social encounters". (Duranti, 2009:188).

Greetings are related to the phatic function of the language, which is equally important from a sociolinguistic perspective as other functions, because these utterances show solidarity and empathy with others. Holmes (1992)

The phatic function of language is used for establishing or maintaining social contact rather than for exchanging information or ideas. (Crystal, 2003:346)

Greetings (*e.g. hi, hello, how are you* ، السلام عليكم ، مرحبا ، اهلاً وسهلاً) can be defined as "the general rituals used at the beginning of any encounter", they exist in all languages, but their content is highly culture-specific, that is why, they vary enormously from language to language.

The present study aims at showing differences in greeting formulas between English and Arabic from a linguistic and sociolinguistic perspective. It also provides examples of greeting patterns in both languages.

The reasercher has drawn her thoughts about greetings in English and Arabic from the following resources:

1- The related literature in both languages (English and Arabic).
2- The previous research studies in the field.

3- Her own speech community.
4- Internet surfing about British life and culture.

 2- **Review of Literature**:
Greetings or verbal formulas or meeting rituals are examples of what Malinowski has called phatic communion. Malinowski was the first anthropologists who introduced the concept of phatic communion (phatic from Greek *phatos,* 'spoken') and defines it as"[…] a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words". (1923: 315)
Malinowski presents the view that phatic communion does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas:

> phatic communion serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas … phatic communion brings savage and civilized alike into the pleasant atmosphere of polite , social intercourse.(ibid: 315)

 Moreover, Malinowski believes that words in phatic communion are not used to convey meaning:
> Are words used in phatic communion used to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not! They fulfil a social function and that is their principle aim, but they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener. Once again we may say that language does not function here as a means of transmission of thought. (ibid: 315)

Malinowski's view about the meaning and function of phatic communion is adopted by so many scholars:
Turner (1973:212) states that "phatic communion does not express semantic information and phatic language is designed more to accommodate and acknowledge a hearer than to carry a message".
Turner (ibid) believes that "the usefulness of phatic language is to assert one's belonging to a community. In a foreign country we are less distressed by an ability to satisfy wants than by the sense of strangeness that comes from being unable to make any contact with people near you".
Hudson (1980:109) thinks that "phatic communion is the kind of chitchat that people engage in simply in order to show that they recognize each other's presence".
 According to Holmes (1992: 27) "the phatic function is important from a sociolinguistic perspective like other functions, phatic communication conveys an effective or social message rather than a referential one".
On the basis of previous views, the following mentioned scholars have derived their opinions about greetings:
Searls (1996:64-5) views that:
> 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.

Goffman the originator of "face-work", suggests that "a greeting is needed to show that the relation which existed at the end of the last encounter is still unchanged, inspite of the

separation, and that the farewell is needed in order to sum up the effect of the encounter upon the relationship and show that the participants may eccept of one another when they next meet". (Cited in Hudson 1980:132)

Goffman (1971:107) expresses the opinion that "greetings mark the transition to a condition of increased access and farewells to a state of decreased access". (Cited in Ferguson, 1981: 21)

Firth (1972: 1) defines greeting and parting behaviour in their social sense as "recognition of an encounter … as socially acceptable", "the recognition that the encounter has been acceptable". (Cited in Ferguson, 1981:29)

Turner (1973:209) thinks that "solicitous inquiries about health or comments about weather, designed more to put a hearer at ease than to convey information,  no special grammatical form marks this phatic use of language either, though some lexical items, greetings especially and words such as (*please*), and (*thank you*), normally have phatic function".

Turner (ibid: 210) states that "greetings represent a typical instance of phatic language. These very often take the form of an inquiry about the hearer's health and well-being  (*e.g. how do you do, how are you, how is it going*), or announce a speaker's presence (*colloquial French suis-la*), or his awareness of a hearer (*Mori tena koe and variants, literally "there you are"*), or use special otherwise meaningless words (*hello, or informal Italian ciao*), or preserve a religious flavours (*southern German Grüss Gott*),  or simply  wish the  hearer well ( *good  day  and  variants*). The religious  flavour is (historically) in English (*good by)*. Alternatively a hope to see the hearer again is expressed in the informal (*see you later*), or (*be seeing you*), a special written form of greeting is the Christmas card".

Fergusons (1981:147) maintains that "politeness formulas are semantically non-referential and important for their presence or absence on the appropriate occasion rather than for exact meaning carried by their constituent parts".

Hudson (1980:247) states that "some linguistic items have no function except a social one. Obvious examples are greetings, farewells, politeness signals (*sorry, please, thank you)*…. Surely the very fundamental idea is that a word is a sign which combines a form with a meaning or function demands that any word must have at least some function as part of its linguistic definition".

Hudson (ibid:133) states that " none of the greetings and farewells really expresses a claim about how the world is , nor  even a claim about how the speaker feels, so truth and sincerity do not really count            ( in contrast with a sentence like *I'm pleased to meet you or I hope you have a good journey* ). Nevertheless the rituals are critically important and have to be performed in the finest detail if we are to avoid embarrassment, offence or ridicule".

 According to Allan (1986:12) "the function of verbal formulas is to communicate co-operative attitude, not to trade information. The meet-and-speak convention is strong in most, if not all cultures, because greetings attend to H's face wants (or by reciprocation, to S's face wants too); thus a person who says nothing on meeting another will be thought unfriendly, unco-operative, and even drawn rude" .

Holmes (1992:275) points out that "phatic utterances express solidarity and empathy with others (*e.g. hi, how are you, lovely day isn't it)*. And it is one of the functions of speech".

Schottman (1995:489) defines greetings as "the essential oil of encounters of all types and reassuring confirmation of human sociability and special order".

 Holmes (1992:295) says that "greeting formulas universally serve an effective function of establishing non-threatening contact and rapport, but their precise content is clearly culture-specific".

Concerning the universality of greetings, Ferguson (1981:21) states that "the use of interpersonal routines such as greetings and thanks is examined as a universal phenomenon of

human languages, related in some way to the widespread greeting behaviour of animals"…, "all speech communities have such formulas, although their character and the incidence of their use may vary from one society to another".

Ferguson (ibid: 21) points out that "in parts of Africa whole languages may be evaluated in terms of the greeting patterns".

Ferguson (ibid: 21) suggests that "the structure of politeness formulas varies in constituency and intensity in correlation with a number of social dimensions as:
    a- Length of time elapsed since previous encounter.
    b- Distance between communicators.
    c- Number of individuals in the relevant groups.
    d- Relative social status of the communicators.

However, Ferguson believes that "the nature and the amount of the variations is not predictable in any universal sense, for example, in some human societies, the superior initiates the greeting (*e.g. Moroccan Arabic*) in others the inferior does so (*e.g. Gonja*), and in still others the social dominance differentiation is more complex (*e.g. American English*), but what is universal is the correlation between the structure of formulas and the social (or sociotemporal, sociospatial) dimensions".

In the same stream, Hudson (1980:133) believes that "the length of a greeting is generally propositional to the length of time since the last meeting (i.e. a greeting to a friend last seen ten years ago will be longer than one to a friend seen yesterday) and to the importance of the relationship (i.e. a friend will receive a longer greeting than a mere acquaintance). Hudson thinks that "Coffman's explanation for the role of greetings might lead us to expect that there will only be the briefest of greeting, or none at all, where no previous relation has existed and this seems to be the case: witness the lack of greetings when people approach strangers to ask for information. Similarly we might predict (correctly) that longer greetings will be used when people are less certain of their relations, and therefore need more reassurance".

### 3-Some Patterns of Greeting in Arabic:
The patterns here include religious, formal, and informal examples. They are derived from the Iraqi speech community, ((G) refers to greeting and (PR) to possible response):
G: السلام عليكم Asslamu alaykum.                              (Religious)
    [Peace be upon you]
PR: وعليكم السلام Wa alaykum asslam.
    [And peace be upon you]
PR: وعليكم السلام ورحمة الله Wa alaykum asslam wa rahmatu Allah.
    [And peace and Allah's mercy be upon you]
PR: وعليكم السلام ورحمة الله وبركاته Wa alaykum assalam wa rahmtu Allahi wa     barakatuh.
    [And peace and Allah's mercy and blessings be upon you]
G: مرحبا Marhaba                                          (Formal)
    [Hello]
PR: مرحبا Marhaba.
    [Hello]
PR: أهلاً Ahlan.
    [You are welcome]
PR: أهلاً وسهلاً Ahlan wa sahlan
    [You are most welcome]
G: صباح الخير Sabah al-khair                                (Formal and Informal)
    [Good morning]
 PR: صباح النور Sabah in-nuur

[Good morning]

PR: صباح ألانوار Sabah al-anuar.
   [Morning of lights i.e. good morning]

PR: صباح الخيرات Sabah al-khairat
   [Morning of goodnesses i.e. good morning]

PR: أهلاً صباح الخير Ahlan sabah alkhair.
   [Welcome and good morning]

PR: أهلاً وسهلاً Ahlan wa sahlan
   [You are most welcome]

G: صبحكم الله بالخير Sabahkum Allah bilkhair                              (Religious)
   [May Allah give you a good morning]

PR: صبحكم الله بالخير Sabhkum Allah bilkhair
   [May Allah give you a good morning]

G: مساء الخير Massa' al-khair                              (Formal and Informal)
   [Good evening]

PR: مساء النور Massa' in-nuur
   [Good evening]

PR: مساء الانوار Massa' al-anuar
   [Evening of lights i.e. good evening]

PR: مساء الخيرات Massa' al-khairat
   [Evening of goodnesses i.e. good evening]

PR: أهلاً مساء الخير Ahlan massa' alkhair.
   [Welcome and good evening]

PR: أهلاً وسهلاً Ahlan wa sahlan
   [You are most welcome]

G: مساكم الله بالخير Masaakum Allah bilkhair.                              (Religious)
   [May Allah give you a good evening]

PR: مساكم الله بالخير Masaakum Allah bilkhair.
   [May Allah give you a good evening]

G: شلونك علي shlawnak Ali?                              (Informal)
   (Ali can be replaced by (abo + name) father of+ name)
   [How are you Ali?]

PR: أهلا، ياهلا، مئة هلا ، شلونك علي Ahlan or ya hala, or miat hala shlawnak inta?
   [Welcome, oh+ welcome, a hundred welcomes, how are you?]


4- **Some Patterns of Greeting in English:**
   The patterns here include formal and informal examples, ((G) refers to greeting and
(P) to response):

G: *How do you do?*                              (Formal)
R: *How do you do?*

G: *How are you?*                              (Formal)
R: *I am fine thank you and you.*

G: *Nice to meet you.*                              (Formal)
R: *Nice to meet you too.*

G: *Delighted to meet you*                              (Formal)
R: *Delighted to meet you too.*

G: *Pleased to meet you.*                              (Formal)
R: *Pleased to meet you too.*

G: *Glad to meet you.*                              (Formal)
R: *Glad to meet you too.*

G: *Good morning.*                                      (Formal)
R: *Good morning.*
G: *Good afternoon.*                                    (Formal)
R: *Good afternoon.*
G: *Good evening.*                                      (Formal)
R: *Good evening.*
G: *Morning.*                                           (Informal)
R: *Morning.*
G: *Afternoon.*                                         (Informal)
R: *Afternoon.*
G: *Evening.*                                           (Informal)
R: *Evening.*
G: *Hello.*                                             (Informal)
R: *Hello.*
G: *Hi.*                                                (Informal)
R: *Hi.*
G: *How's you?*                                         (Informal)
R: *fine, thanks. You ?*

### 5- **The main Differences between the English language and the Arabic language:**

The review of the related literature concerning the subject in both languages has revealed the following main points of differences:

### 5.1- **Elaboration:**

"Greetings in many languages are far more elaborate than in English (e.g. Arabic, Indonesian, Igbo)". Saville-Troike (2003:11)

"Compared to English, Arabic has a much more inventory of phatic communion expressions". Al-Qinai (2011:33)

One reason for elaboration of greetings or phatic expressions in Arabic is culture. Holmes (1992:308) states that "greetings gain their meaning from the culture they are derived from and their precise content is culture- specific". Al-Qinai (2011: 31) believes that "what might be appropriate in one language might not be so in another language since phatic rituals are informed by cultural conventions and social customs".

Al-Qinai (ibid: 32) states that:

> The initial greetings are more elaborate in Arabic with questions ranging from the health of the addressee, the wellbeing and where abouts of his sons, brothers, family, friends and acquaintances, his job and even the address of his current residence. Similar questions about the health of the addressee or some private family matters are repeated out of context at intervals in the middle of a conversation in order to fill pauses, mark a topical shift or simply as a gambit to keep the communication channel open. Translating such semantically 'redundant' phatic interrogatives would sound awkward in English and they will definitely be culturally marked as Arab interactants tend to use the seemingly superfluous phatics to develop solidarity more readily than English speakers. This is probably why Arabic good byes tend to end with phrases while one word is enough in English.

Saville-Troike (2003:36) explains when to use such phatic interrogatives by the English speakers:

Non-native English speakers of English often complain that native speakers do not really care about the state of their health when they ask "how are you?". The non- natives are not recognizing that this question part of the greeting routine, which by nature has no meaning apart from its phatic function in communication. If English speakers really want to know how someone is feeling, they repeat the question after the routine is completed, or they mark the question with a contrastive intonation to indicate it is for information and not part of the routine.

Hudson (1980:132) maintains that "although greetings and farewells (presumably) exist in all languages, close translations for them are often hard to find, because they are vary enormously from language to language (and even between dialects)".

According to Al-Qinai (2011:33), the issue of cultural disparity does not entail automatic lead to untranslatability, and it is possible to find functional equivalents:

Compared to English, Arabic has a much more inventory of phatic communion expressions. However, this does not entail that the issue of cultural disparity will automatically lead to untranslatability.  Rather, it is possible to find functional equivalents even though the length of the target rendition may not match that of the source text. Generally speaking, the majority of phatic expressions in Arabic is cast in phrases rather than single words. Some of these expressions originate in the standard 'classical' version of Arabic while a good number are formulated in the colloquial(s).

"Understanding routines requires shared cultural knowledge because they are generally metaphoric in nature and must be interpreted at a non-literal level". Saville-Troike (2003:36)

## 5.2 - Religious Flavour:

Ferguson (1981:27) (in his study of the Syrian greetings) states that "many Arabic exchanges of greetings follow the principle of **"the same or more so"**, thus common informal (*hello*) of Syrian Arabic is (*marhaba* مرحبا) [original meaning welcome], and the responses most often heard are, in increased order of frequency (*marhaba, marhabten, mit marhaba, and marahib*) (*i.e. hello, two hollos, a hundered hellos, hellos*). This principle of response received endorsement in the Holly Koran itself".

The response principle of **"the same or more so"** comes from the Holly Koran and the Islamic teachings. There are many verses in the Holly Koran talk about greetings and farewells, but this principle originates from the following verse:

When a courteous greeting is offered to you, meet it with a greeting still more courteous or at least of equal courtesy. (Surratt An-Nesa, verse 86)

The clearest example of greeting formulas in Arabic which preserve a religious flavour and responded to according to the foregoing mentioned principle of **"the same or more so",**  is the formula of (*assalam alaykum* السلام عليكم ) [peace be upon you], which can be responded to in one of the following responses :

- Wa alaykum asslam.
  [And peace be upon you]
- Wa alaykum asslam wa rahmatu Allah .
  [And peace and Allah's mercy be upon you]
- Wa alaykum assalam alaykum wa rahmtu Allahi         wa barakatuh.
  [And peace and Allah's mercy and blessings be upon you]

Ferguson (1981:27) admits that "unlike our English (*good morning*), the Syrian Arabic (*good morning* صباح الخير) has an array of responses exemplifying **"the same or more so"** principle. Two commonly responses are (*mit sabah*) (*100 mornings*), (*sabah al khairat*), the

plural of the formula. Other good mornings which are appropriate as responses but not as initiators are presumably felt to be stronger include (*sabah nnur* صباح النـور) [morning of light] which is one of the commonest of all responses, and morning of flowers of various kinds, used between familiar as expressions of goodwill an humour (*e.g. sabah lward* صباح الورد) [morning of roses], and (*sabah lfull* صباح الفل) [morning of jasmin]".

Ferguson (ibid: 28) believes that *"the same or more so"* principle is distinct from the *"you too"* kind of response which is familiar to us and used in many speech communities".

Ferguson (ibid: 32) maintains that "many Syrian Arabic politeness formulas are wholly or partially classical Arabic in form just like proverbs".

It is worthy saying that from the review of the related literature on greetings, it is found that, the only used religious greeting formula in English is (*good bye*). Hudson (1980:133) states that "some of the greetings and farewells formulas are made up of ordinary words used to in fairly ordinary ways (*e.g. happy Easter*), but others are opaque without etymological help (*e.g. good bye)* from God be with you, ( *bye*) is even more opaque, of course".

Turner (1973: 210) says that "the English good bye (*historically: god be with you*) preserves a religious flavour".

Al-Qinai (2011:33) states that "Arabic phatic formulas tend to be permeated with religious nuances that constitute untranslatable loopholes when rendered in English where functionally corresponding formulas do not contain such references. Translators, therefore, tend to render verbatim translation or alternatively simplify the source language by using superordinate terms in the absence of equivalent hyponyms in the target language. For example, the simple greeting word *"hello"* can be rendered as (*assalam alaykum* السلام علیكم )[peace be upon you] or (*Allah bilkhair* الله بالخیر) [by Allah's grace] in the Iraqi and Kuwaiti dialects".

Furthermore, Al-Qinai (ibid:30) gives translations for (*assalam alaykum wa rahmtu Allahi wabarakatuh* السلام علیكم ورحمة الله وبركاتـه) [ may peace, the grace and blessings of Allah be upon you], and (*Allah bilkhair* الله بالخیر) [by Allah's grace] in other contexts, "for example, a participants in a conference held in an Arab locale may open his presentation by this traditional formal greeting , an interpreter would rather render the greeting as (*good morning*) or ( *good afternoon/ evening*) lest the literal translation of the original carries some unintended religious nuance, while (*Allah bilkhair*) would rather be rendered as(*hello*) or (*hi*) for the same reason mentioned under (*assalam alaykum wa rahmtu Allahi wa barakatuh*)".

### 5.3- **Phatic Gestures:**
Phatic gestures differ in both languages according to social customs, genders, and religious matters:

Hudson (1980:138) believes that "non-verbal behavior also helps to mark the structure of the interaction", and that "it is just as clearly patterned as verbal behavior". He states that "in Britain hand-shaking seems to be used to show that the relation is being given a fresh start, rather than a sign of intimacy. Thus, it is used to patch up quarrels between friends or when one is introduced to a stranger or to anyone not seen for a long time".

While, Hand-shaking between similar genders especially men preserve a religious flavor in the Arab society. And it is a sign of intimacy and respect.

Hudson (ibid:139) states the "in Britain, when greeting a group of people the non-verbal behavior is generally restricted to an occasional nod to some individuals in the group and the verbal greeting is directed to the group as a whole".

While, in an Arab society, the non-verbal and the verbal greeting behaviors are both used separately towards each individual in the group.

Only between relatives or friends (of opposite gender) who have not seen each other for a long time, Kisses and embraces can be performed in an English society. (Wikipedia)

Al-Qinai (2011: 35-6) explains that "gender differences are also present in performing proxemics in an Arab society. While embraces are common between females they are not allowed between a veiled women and a man unless they are closely related. Similarly, a man may not shake hands with a veiled female unless she takes the initiative by extending her arm. Any misinterpretation of proxemics can easily lead to embarrassing situations that may affect the progress of a conversational routine".

Al-Qinai (ibid) states that "greeting embraces and kisses (on cheek or nose) among males done more frequently in an Arab society even if the period of absence is as short as two or three days. Sometimes embraces are performed twice within the same session, both upon greeting and leave taking. Fine differences also exist between tribal Bedouins who prefer to kiss one cheek only and urban dwellers who alternate between two cheeks. Nose kissing is performed where the recipient is older in age or higher in state".

## 6-    Conclusions:

1-Every language has greeting formulas convenient for its social purposes. These formulas make differences between languages. Thus the need to make good feeling towards others, remove hostility, being polite, showing respect, empathy, and solidarity submitting to the Islamic teachings, the Arabic cultural conventions and the social customs, in this respect, makes the Arabic greeting formulas deeper, more elaborate, and more sophisticated than the English ones.

2-Compared to English, Arabic has a much more inventory of greeting expressions, that is why they are more elaborate.

3- Arabic greeting formulas might be repeated all over the conversation, especially if the meeting is happened after a long time as months or years. Whilst in English repeating such formulas would sound odd and would be regarded as redundant. While, if English speakers really want to know how someone is feeling, they repeat the question of "how are you" after the routine is completed, or they mark the question with a contrastive intonation to indicate it is for information and not part of the greeting routine. Because English speakers regard this question part of the greeting routine, which by nature has no meaning apart from its phatic function in communication.

4-The Arabic greeting rituals carry a religious meaning basin on the koranic principle of 'the same or more so'. This religious flavour might constitute untranslatable loopholes when translated into English.

5-Phatic gestures differ in both languages according to social customs, genders, and religious matters.

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