PRAGMATICS OF THE EVIL EYE IN EGYPTIAN ARABIC*

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This paper reports on a speech act study analyzing Egyptians' responses to compliments interpreted as invocations of the evil eye, which is believed to be an external destructive power motivated by envy. The communicative strategies used as responses represent an exemplary case of the parallel between language use and cultural practices, as each responding strategy corresponds to a cultural practice believed to ward off the evil eye in terms of motivation and function. Although the responding strategies investigated in this study are motivated by a culture-specific belief system, their distribution follows from what seems to be universal patterns of gender communication and power relations. The asymmetric discourse patterns for males and females in contexts of small and large social distance are evident, as the female participants used more face-threatening strategies than did the males in large social-distance contexts, and the reverse pattern was true for the contexts of small social distance.

The destructive power of the evil eye ‘el-hassad’ is a belief of central importance to the daily lives of many Egyptians and Arabs, who believe that it is invoked when others express admiration toward their valuable possessions or family members in a way that indicates envy. Ghosh 1983 and Wikan 1996 distinguish between jealousy ghira and invoking the evil eye by interpreting jealousy as wishing to obtain an item similar to that of others, whereas invoking the evil eye is wishing others to lose the object of admiration or have it damaged. The consequences of being a victim of the evil eye could range from failing a test to having fatal car crashes (Blackman 1968; Early 1993). This paper reports on a speech-act study analyzing Egyptians’ responses to compliments that have potential interpretations as invocations of the evil eye in an attempt to describe and account for these responses.

Spooner (in Ghosh 1983) distinguishes between witchcraft and the evil eye; witchcraft is considered an extraordinary and willful phenomenon, whereas invoking the evil eye is thought to be an everyday unwilled act. Those who invoke the evil eye seem to have no control over it, and may not even be conscious of why or how they perform such evil deeds (Fakhouri 1984). Blackman 1968 asserts that the fear of the evil eye is a real terror for the Egyptian villager from infancy to old age. Also, Ghosh (1983:82) notes that,
The fear of envy [hassad] and of being thought envious regulates an enormous area of village life. There are certain paths in the village that people try to avoid, at the cost of long detours, for they lead past the houses of those known to be envious.

In fact, it is not just villagers who hold this belief, as Egyptians from most walks of life profess confidence in the power of the evil eye and take the practices related to it as a matter of course (Starrett 1995).

Walking down an Egyptian street one would encounter numerous semiotic manifestations of the belief in the evil eye. Cars carry bumper stickers of open palms¹, doors have sheep-blood prints of open palms, and many people carry blue pebbles and jewelry with religious formulas inscribed on them, believing that they have the power to ward off the evil eye (Wikan 1980). In Lane’s 1966 posthumously published edition, he provides a detailed account of the practices that Egyptians believed ward off the evil eye as he witnessed them in 1850. He describes the palm prints that represent a religious formula, the blue beads that are used to deflect the beholder’s attention, and the fasuxa, which refers to marring the appearance of valuable objects, e.g., by hanging an old shoe, so that the viewers would find it ugly and the evil eye would not be invoked. Interestingly, there are linguistic correlates to these practices as discussed below.

Lane 1966 also reports that uttering religious formulas such as masha'allah ‘This is what God has willed’, alhumma šalli ūnnabi ‘May God bless the Prophet’ and allhu akbar ‘God is great’, is the only way to assure the recipient of a compliment that no envy was involved. These linguistic formulas and practices have undergone little change in the past 150 years. Fakhouri 1984 and Blackman 1968 provide descriptions of the evil eye practices in the Nile Delta and Upper Egypt noting that compliments and favorable comments are very likely to be perceived as invocations, except when the specific religious formulas mentioned earlier are attached to the compliments (also see Nelson, El-Bakary, & Al-Batal 1993).

Most of the studies that have dealt with the evil-eye belief system stem from an anthropological research background with little attention paid to its effects on language use. The religious formulas that accompany compliments are often listed with little, if any, elaboration on the metamessages behind them (see Hussein 1995). However, most of the few speech-act studies that investigated Egyptian Arabic, or Arabic in general, overlooked the concept of the evil eye, and the ones that mention it have left out the social contexts that encompass it. Nelson, A. Batal, & Echols 1996 compared Egyptians’ and Americans’ complimenting strategies and pointed out how the belief in the evil eye affects the formulation of utterances intended as compliments and their responses. Yet, the responding strategies to utterances interpreted as an invocation, which are the focus of the present study, were not described.
Method
This study examines the different compliment-responding strategies used by speakers of Egyptian Arabic, or more specifically Cairene Arabic, to ward off the evil eye. The dependent variable is the frequency of occurrence for responding strategies, and the independent variables are the compliment-recipient's gender as well as the perceived social distance between the interlocutors. Social distance refers to the extent to which a speaker identifies with his/her addressee (Hudson, Detmer, & Brown 1995). The social-distance variable has two levels: small social distance (SSD) (e.g., friends, colleagues, etc.) and large social distance (LSD) (e.g., complete strangers, acquaintances, etc.). Social class and status were not considered in this study, since it is assumed that an individual whose compliment is interpreted as an invocation the evil eye is perceived to be at a lower status than that of the recipient with regard to the attribute of the compliment (Early 1993).

Subjects
The participants in this study were 40 native speakers of Egyptian Arabic whose ages ranged between 25 to 36 years of age with a mean of 31. The sample included twenty males and twenty females, all of whom are professionals with university degrees, mostly teachers of English as a foreign language in Egyptian public schools. The participants represent the upper middle class in major cities like Cairo, and all of them admitted that they strongly believe in the evil eye.

Stimuli
The stimuli included a set of open-ended oral discourse-completion test (DCT) items designed according to the guidelines provided by Hudson et. al. 1995. The DCT items were presented and responded to during informal interviews that lasted for approximately an hour each. Every interview included twelve situations that involved invocations of the evil eye as the implicature of a compliment. Six of these situations took place in contexts in which the social distance between the speaker and the addressee was small, while the other six situations involved large social distance. The gender of the speaker was always the same as that of the interviewee. The situations comprising the stimuli had been elicited by asking 15 other participants to relate the most recent incidents that led them to believe that someone was invoking the evil eye against them in the form of a compliment. Only when two informants reported similar encounters in terms of the focus of the compliment and social distance was the speech event chosen as an item for the current study.

All the interviews took the form of a casual conversation started by asking the participant to give an account of the last time he/she encountered a situation that involved a verbal invocation of the evil eye. Then, the DCT items were presented in the form of role play. During the interviews the participants were encouraged to reflect and provide metapragmatic insight into their responses. The interviews were tape-recorded, fully transcribed following Grundy's 1995 guide-
Results

The analysis of the data is based on the frequency counts for the responding strategies that occurred during the interviews. Many of the participants used more than one responding strategy depending on the level of directness they wanted to achieve, which in turn correlates with the perceived directness of the invocation implicated by the compliment. For example, when a compliment called for a direct response, usually one strategy was used, e.g., using religious formulas or confrontation, whereas a less direct invocation usually elicited a series of indirect strategies, such as complaining, evasion, and humor. The overall distribution of responding strategies is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

The most frequently-used strategy is complaining about the focus of the compliment, which comprises 34% of all the responses (see Figure 1). For example, in one situation a participant was complimented on purchasing a new car, and the response was: ‘It looks nice, but the engine is rather faulty and it consumes a lot of gas.’ This response, which is not necessarily truthful, aims to show that the focus of the compliment is not worth envy and hence the evil eye is believed to be warded off in a manner similar to the fasuxa mentioned earlier. Moreover, the act of uttering a complaint maintains social harmony and equality of status between the interlocutors by denying one’s higher status with regard to the focus of the compliment in a nonconfrontational or face-threatening manner.

The use of complaints as a compliment-responding strategy is clearly marked by gender and social distance. In contexts that involved small social distance, the female participants used this strategy in only 11.5% of their responses, whereas the males used it in 29.6% of responses in the same contexts (see Figure 2). Interestingly, in contexts of large social distance, the females used it 41.1% of the time,
while the males used it in only 19.1%. The pattern of distribution for complaints suggests that Egyptian males tend to avoid face-threatening strategies in LSD contexts, whereas the females prefer to avoid such strategies in SSD contexts.

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**Figure 2:** Distribution of responding strategies in SSD contexts

The second-most frequently-used strategy is to respond with yet another compliment with the same focus as the received compliment. For example, when complimented on his computer skills by a co-worker, a male participant responded with ‘God bless you, but this is nothing compared to your skills.’ The religious formula, which is a form of expressing gratitude, indicates the addressee’s acceptance of the compliment. Interestingly, expressions of gratitude occurred only when an addressee used a compliment as a responding strategy. The purpose of this strategy, similar to complaining, is to establish solidarity and social harmony. That is, the complaint affirms that the recipient of the compliment is not superior to the complimenter with regard to the focus of the compliment, whereas the compliment asserts equality by assigning high status to the addressee, and hence eliminates inequality that is the motivation for the invocation.

The pattern of distribution for the use of compliments as a responding strategy is similar to that of complaining. In LSD contexts the male participants used compliments in 14.6% of their responses, whereas the females used it in only 7.8%. On the other hand, in SSD contexts the males used it in only 7.6% of their responses while the females used it in 19.2%. The general pattern is that the females tend to use face-saving strategies in SSD contexts more frequently than in LSD contexts, and the reverse is true for the male participants.

Another non-confrontational strategy is evasion, which occurred in 10.5% of all the responses in which the recipient of the compliment denies the uniqueness of the focus by drawing generalizations. For example, a female participant responded to a compliment given by a neighbor on her being nominated for a training program in the U.S. with ‘There is nothing special about it because everybody gets nominated sooner or later.’ Such responses, which are also not necessarily truthful, aim to deflect the focus of the compliment and hence evade the envy component in the compliment. It seems that Egyptian males’ use of this strategy is not determined by social distance, since they used it in 15.3% of SSD contexts and in 16.8% of LSD contexts. However, the females’ patterns of use are clearly socially stratified, as they used it in only 9.6% of SSD contexts and 19.6% of LSD contexts.
Humor is another face-saving strategy occurring as frequently as in 10.5% of all responses. In this strategy the recipient ridicules the focus of the compliment to achieve a humorous effect. For example, when a male participant was complimented by a complete stranger on his physical fitness, he responded with ‘Sure, yesterday I was fighting with that wrestler guy, Hogan. I beat the life out of him. He is in the hospital now, next to the two guys who tried to rescue him.’ The motivation for such responses is to eliminate the envy component of the compliment via the humorous effect without violating Grice’s quality maxim or demeaning oneself or the focus of the compliment. In other words the use of humor is a protective strategy and at the same time one that avoids confrontation.

The use of humor as a compliment-responding strategy is clearly socially stratified, since the female participants never used it in contexts of LSD, yet they used it in 19.2% of their responses in SSD contexts. On the other hand, the male participants employed this strategy in 23.5% of their responses in contexts of LSD and 5.4% in SSD contexts. One male participant commented on the distribution of males’ use of humor that it is more appropriate in LSD contexts and less so in the SSD ones, because the giver of the compliment is likely to be offended in the latter type of contexts.

Confrontation is an aggressive and face-threatening strategy that is used when the compliment is perceived as a direct invocation of the evil eye. For example, when a male participant was complimented on his success in business, his response was ‘Stop invoking the evil eye. Have mercy! And if you look at what I have I will do the same to you. You had better cut it short.’ The giver of the compliment, having experienced such a loss of face, is expected to refrain from further invocations at the potential cost of breaking the relationship. The patterns of distribution for this strategy are the exact opposite of the face-saving ones, as the male participants in this study used it 18.6% of the time in SSD contexts and 5.6% in LSD contexts, whereas the females resorted to this strategy in only 1.9% of SSD contexts and in 9.8% of contexts characterized as LSD.

Formulaic utterances are characteristic responses to such compliments, and it is these formulas that are usually listed in anthropological accounts of the evil-eye
beliefs. However, these formulas fall into two main categories, religious and secular formulas, and each category has a different function and distribution. Religious formulas are utterances that are either citations from the Quran or that involve the mentioning of God, such as allahu akbar. In such responses, the recipient of the compliment seeks God's protection against the evil eye and the giver of the compliment, and hence they are considered face-threatening and confrontational responses.

Using religious formulas is the confrontational strategy most frequently employed in contexts in which the recipient would usually avoid such strategies. For example, the male participants, who generally avoid face-threatening strategies in LSD contexts, used it 14.6% of the time, compared to 5.6% for confrontation, and 7.6% in SSD contexts. The female participants followed an asymmetric pattern, as they used it only 3.9% of the time in LSD contexts and 15.3% in SSD contexts, in which they generally use nontargeting strategies, i.e., it is their most frequently-used face-threatening strategy in SSD contexts. The use of religious formulas to cause an addressee loss of face is justified since the speaker seeks to make use of divine powers rather than personal power, as in confrontation.

Secular formulas are formulaic utterances that are believed to ward off the evil eye; however, they do not involve direct mentioning of God. Secular formulas aim to 'indirectly remind the addressee that the compliment he/she gave might cause harm to the addressee', as reported by a female participant. In other words, the use of secular formulas is a less direct and face-threatening strategy than the use of religious formulas. Such formulas can be used to achieve two levels of indirectness: (a) a relatively more direct level by uttering them, and (b) a less direct one by embedding them within other utterances.

The most commonly-used secular formula was the xamsa, the number 'five' in Arabic, which represents the open palm discussed earlier. For example, when complimented on the stability of her marriage, a female participant responded directly with xamsa fi wesh el8adeween 'five in the face of the enemies'. In this response, the addressee avoided using the second person pronoun to avoid offending the giver of the compliment. An example of embedded secular formulas is the response of a female participant to a compliment on the academic success of her son, as she said, 'Poor boy! He gets up at five in the morning to school, and after school he goes for his tutoring sessions. He take five sessions a week, and he does not come home before five in the evening. Then he prays, he prays five times a day, and studies for five hours before he goes to bed.' Again, most of these propositions are not necessarily truthful. Generally speaking, the female participants used these formulas more frequently than did the males in all contexts. The males used it only 2.1% of the time in contexts of SSD, and 1.1% in LSD contexts, whereas the females used them as frequently as 9.6% of the time in SSD contexts and 5.8% in LSD contexts.

The least frequently-used compliment-responding strategy is remodeling, by which the recipient repeats the compliment, yet attaching the religious formula
that should have been used in the first place. The repetition indicates the acceptance of the compliment, and the formula wards off the evil eye and reminds the addressee that the formula should have been used. For example, a female participant responded to a compliment on the cleverness of her daughter by saying mashallah әәleeha шатра 'This is what God has willed. She is clever'. Interestingly, this strategy was never used by the male participants, whereas the females used it almost equally in both SSD and LSD contexts.

Discussion

The analysis of the data revealed various compliment-responding strategies that are employed in different contexts. However, it is necessary to note that such strategies are used only when the addressee interprets the compliment as an invocation of the evil eye. Otherwise, different strategies, such as expressing gratitude or praying for the giver of the compliment would be used (see Nelson et. al., 1996). Responding strategies help the addressee recognize how the compliment was interpreted, and hence allow for the use of repair strategies such as the use of the formula әллаhumә la hassad meaning 'God be my witness, no invocation is intended', among several others.

The distribution of the above-mentioned responding strategies suggests that they follow from what seems to be universal patterns of interpersonal communication, in general, and gender communication, in particular, despite the fact that the belief system that motivates their use is culture-specific. For example, the general tendency for the use of humor in LSD contexts is that it is the males rather than the females who would employ it (Tannen 1994; Arliss 1991), which, at least to an extent, explains why the female participants in the present study never used humor in such contexts. Moreover, humor has the potential effect of reducing the social distance between the interlocutors, which is a consequence that would not be favored by the females in this study in LSD contexts. In other words, although the purpose of using humor as a responding strategy is to inhibit the invocation and at the same time save the addressee's face rather than simply achieve a humorous effect, the pattern of its use follows what is claimed to be a universal pattern.

Moreover, whenever humor was used, the subject of the humor was always the recipient, or the focus of the compliment, rather than the addressee or some other foci. Studies on humor in Western societies suggest that using self-disparaging humor reflects status, since 'high status individuals can risk putting themselves down and probably enjoy an increase in status by demonstrating their wit and generosity' (Arliss 1991:70). This claim corresponds to the assumption that the recipient of such compliments is viewed as being of a higher status than that of the complimenter with regard to the focus of the compliment. Therefore, in LSD contexts, men use humor to maintain status as well as to inhibit the invocation, while in SSD contexts, they assume such status, and when this assumed status is threatened by virtue of the invocation implicated in the compliment, a face-threatening response is expected.
Holmes 1995 studied Americans’ responses to compliments, and concluded that they are usually perceived as face-threatening acts, because the recipients, especially women, are obliged by social norms to appreciate it and at the same time to show modesty. The same applies in the Egyptian context, but the recipient is under more pressure to protect him/herself against the evil eye, and hence a choice has to be made regarding which strategy to use, depending on the perceived social distance between the interlocutors. The responding strategies fall into two main categories: face-threatening strategies (e.g., confrontation and uttering religious formulas) and face-saving strategies (e.g., complaining and humor). The motivation behind the use of face-saving strategies is to maintain social harmony and equality that are threatened by the compliment, since these social values are cherished in high-context cultures in general (Hofstede 1980). Unlike face-saving strategies, the face-threatening ones risk causing the complimenter embarrassment and loss of face, which is justified as being a communicative defense mechanism.

There seems to be an overwhelming agreement among researchers of language and gender that females tend to be more polite than males especially in LSD contexts (Romaine 1999, Holmes 1995, and McElhinny 1997), where politeness is defined as involving use of indirect speech acts and avoiding face-threatening ones (Levinson 1997). This pattern is believed to correlate with power relations between men and women, assuming that females occupy a subordinate status in most societies (Whitney 1991). However, that claim does not necessarily hold for the pattern of politeness observed in this study. Both the males and females used the two types of strategies; however, there is an asymmetry in the patterns of use. The females used more face-saving strategies in SSD contexts than in LSD contexts, and the males used more face-threatening strategies in SSD contexts than in LSD ones.

The asymmetric pattern of politeness can be attributed to the interaction between gender, power relations, and reflexive face, i.e., when a speaker causes an addressee loss of face, the speaker also loses face depending on the perceived power of the interlocutors; a culture-specific concept. Therefore, in LSD contexts, males maintain their face and vie for status and power by avoiding causing their addressees loss of face, whereas in SSD contexts, they assume such status. Because of social norms, females are not encouraged to vie for power in LSD contexts, and therefore, they have more freedom to use aggressive speech acts in threatening encounters, such as suspected compliments, whereas in SSD contexts, they compete for status, which others might take for granted, by using face-saving discourse strategies. The choice of a responding strategy seems to have yet another function, viz. communicating the speaker’s gender. For example, the participants’ metapragmatic responses indicate that the males resisted using re-modeling and secular formulas, because they are perceived as typical of female speech, whereas the females reported that they would not use humor in LSD contexts because it is men’s speech.

The distribution of the responding strategies indicates that the participants have variable preferences for adhering to Grice’s maxims of the Cooperative
Principle (Grice 1975). For example, when a speaker uses a complaint, evasive comment, or an embedded secular formula, the utterance is usually untruthful. However, these utterances are not produced or interpreted as ill-intended lies, since the speaker’s intent is to evade the invocation and save the addressee’s face rather than deceive others. In other words, the speaker does not adhere to the quality maxim in order to maintain the manner maxim. Also, the use of complaints and embedded secular formulas requires violating a strict interpretation of Grice’s quantity maxim, as the speaker provides more information than expected to deflect the invocation. Therefore, in responding to a suspected compliment, a speaker is willing to violate Grice’s maxims, assuming that the addressee will interpret them as intended and hence refrain from further ill-formed compliments.

Conclusion

The responding strategies investigated in this paper provide an exemplary case of the interaction between cultural beliefs and language use, as the parallel between them and the cultural practices related to the same belief system is striking. For example, responding with a complaint has the same function as marring the appearance of a valuable item, using religious formulas is similar to inscribing them on the objects of admiration, and the use of secular formulas is similar to the palm prints. At the same time, the distribution of these strategies provides insight into the universal patterns of gender communication and the motives behind them, such as power relations and status. In other words, responding to a compliment is not a matter of saying ‘thank you’, but involves making choices based on one’s beliefs about the social structure and the world.

NOTE

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