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ON THE SYNONYMOUS REPETITION OF THE GREETING QUESTIONS IN SOUTH IRAQI ARABIC: A SOCIOPRAGMATIC STUDY

For many years now, the interest of linguistic research in greeting behaviors is growing exponentially (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1977, Bach & Harnish 1979, Berg 1991, Ebsworth, Bodman & Carpenter 1996, Duranti 1992a, 1997, Bustorf 2005, among many others). There is, however, common agreement that greeting patterns differ markedly from culture to culture. South Iraqi Arabic (henceforth in this paper SIA) shows a variety of greeting patterns, but unfortunately no considerable research has so far been dedicated to the traditional greeting behavior in this area of the *gilit* dialects. For sociolinguistic reasons, greetings in spoken SIA differ radically in length and intensity from all other dialect areas of Iraq. Length and intensity of greetings, especially among people of the same sex, can be seen by the repetitive exchange of the synonymous greeting patterns. The aim of this paper is to examine some aspects of the sociolinguistic behavior of the synonymous repetition of greetings in SIA, paying special attention to the nonredundancy of such repetitive exchange of social greetings. The data come from the observation of people's conversations in the southern *gilit* dialect area as well as from recordings of some dialogues of public and private gathering in some houses of influential people such as tribal shaikhs and well-known religious authorities.

Keywords: Iraqi Arabic, *gilit* dialects, greeting, synonymous repetition, haptics, *šlōnak*-sentences.

1. Introduction

Historically, the area of the *gilit* dialects has always been marked by religious pluralism and diversity of deeply rooted Semitic and non-semitic cultures. Thus, various cultural and religious impacts radically affect the people's life in all its stages and aspects. In their everyday be-

havior, people from different cultures and religious backgrounds in this dialect area use several ways to show reciprocal respect for each other's habits, practices, social values and deep closeness to their religious and cultural convictions.

Depending on occasion and context, there are a number of different ways to express respect and pleasure when people in this multicultural and multiconfessional society meet each other. In this regard, greeting patterns seem to be the most important form of interpersonal and social communication. Greeting behaviors come in all colors in SIA, ranging from haptics such as handshaking, cheek kissing, shoulder kissing, hugging, hand and feet kissing, to static verbal communication. This paper discusses for the first time the widely used stylistic device of synonymous repetition associated with greetings. I would first like to give an overview on the common traditional greeting behaviors in this southern area, paying special attention to the discussion of haptic gestures in greetings.

2. Haptic behaviors in greetings

Spoken SIA exhibits a range of forms of haptic social greetings which can be broadly divided into two main groups according to their frequency of use in people's everyday life: core and periphery. In general, both groups are characterized by being tactile so that touching and other physical contacts such as kissing, hugging, handshaking etc. are increasingly common. There are, however, several strict conventional rules apply to the various aspects of greeting behavior whether core or periphery, haptic or static. This section gives a survey of some widely used haptic gestures associated with the core and periphery greetings in the southern *gilit* dialect area.

2.1. Core greeting forms

Handshaking is a core greeting form in the region of the *gilit* dialects. Using the right hand is the norm between people of the same sex. In view of the fact that the vast majority of people in this region are Muslims, body contact, including shaking hands, with the opposite sex is absolutely proscribed. In addition, when encountering more than one person, shaking hands must start on the right, even though that man on the right is younger. On the contrary, starting the handshaking with the person on the left side or giving the left hand is absolutely unacceptable for sociolinguistic reasons. Specifically mentionable here is that when

handshaking, it is considered breach of the etiquette of greeting to pull hands away too quickly. A careful handshaking and reciprocating the same amount of hand pressure received from the other person's hand signify the depth of relationship or friendship.

Handraising is a core greeting gesture which can be performed by raising the right hand when greeting people at distance. In the majority of cases, a south Iraqi does not suffice with the raising of his hand but he extends the greeting verbally, the other person must return the greeting by doing the same. There are, however, further rules apply for this traditional greeting gesture. If, for instance, passing by a man, the younger party should start the greeting; in case of passing by a group of persons, the one who walks towards the group should typically initiate the greeting, regardless of age. But it is possible that sometimes the person stops and shakes hands, kisses, or hugs each one of this group; in that case there will be no turning aside, and it is especially important not to leave the group before greeting this person.

Cheek kissing is a core greeting mode among people of the same sex and it is very common in the southern *gilit* dialect area. People in this region start left cheek first and then right, they sometimes suffice with a double kiss on the left cheek. The amount of kisses usually depends on several criteria such as the degree of relationship or friendship, time of the last meeting (long time, short time), the place from which the person comes (nearby, far-off) etc. When coming from a far place, or when the people in this region have not seen each other long time ago, the number of kisses is usually three, otherwise one kiss is customary.

2.2. Peripheral greeting forms

Shoulder kissing is a widely used periphery greeting style in the farthest southern of the *gilit* dialect area. It is the local greeting in the region bordering Kuwait and in some parts of the *gilit* dialect area near Nassiriya (southern Iraq). There are also some rules that must be followed when performing shoulder kissing: Kissing shoulders is usually initiated by younger men, doing the opposite is socially unacceptable. It is normally done only once, and, in most cases, shoulder kissing can be performed in conjunction with a kiss on the cheek, a clasp of the right hand, and extending the left hand to the right shoulder. On the contrary, people of the same age usually do not perform shoulder kissing, but they suffice with a cheek kiss and a light clasp on the right shoulder.

Hand and feet kissing is done only rarely or occasionally to show respect to righteous and elderly people such as kissing the hand of the parents. Customarily young people should kiss the hands of the elderly.

It is done once, but it is socially permissible to kiss the hand more than one time. However, it is controversial whether such behavior permissible according to the Islamic law. The opinions break up here: While some scholars permit such greeting behavior on occasions, many are almost always against it.

It is well concluded that greetings come in all colors in spoken SIA, a fact which augments the beauty of the diversity of the southern population. As a general rule, all these actions must be carried out in standing position. Therefore, one must rise to greet people, because it is considered antipathy to perform these actions when sitting, a fact which may invite countermeasures.

3. The synonymous repetition of the greeting questions

As shown in section (2), nonverbal greetings in SIA are characterized primarily by being always intensive and effusive in nature. In fact, such intensity is not only restricted to the aforementioned haptic gestures, but it also applies to the verbal greeting behaviors associated with the nonverbal communication. In this regard, synonymous repetitions of greeting questions are the most noticeable verbal mean for expressing intensity and depth of intimacy among people in this dialect area.

šlōnak?¹ in example (1) below is the typical near-universal greeting question that people routinely use to greet each other. It normally appears at the beginning of a social encounter, although it may not always be the first word that is exchanged among people. That is, people could begin their encounter with normal talk before performing a *šlōnak*-greeting. However, due to the effusive manner of greetings in spoken SIA, people usually will not suffice with saying this expression once, they rather tend to produce amplification by repeating the same expression accompanied by other words to add more emphasis to the greeting questions. In example (2) the word *ba'ad* (again) is used to give emphasis on the greeting expression *šlōnak*.

- 1) *šlōnak*?
"How are you?"
- 2) *šlōnak? šlōnak ba'ad*?
"How are you? How are you (again)?"

The expression *šlōnak?* in example (1) can be called a *canonical greeting pattern* from which all other *šlōnak*-sentences below are derived.

¹ The transliteration system of Hans Wehr's Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic will be employed throughout this paper.

However, instead of repeating *šlōnak?* twice, i.e. *šlōnak? šlōnak?*, people use the word *baʿad* in example (2) to avoid any repetition of the same expression. For this reason in particular, I consider *baʿad* as an intensifier, because the greeting sentence *šlōnak?* will be less intense without it. In addition, the word ordering of the sentence in (2) can freely scramble, so that it can undergo postposing and preposing without changing the meaning of the sentence in question.

There are, however, other words used for such an emphasis on greeting questions. The most important of these is the word *zīn* (good). Adding this word to the canonical greeting pattern *šlōnak?* displays intensity of close friendship or relationship among people. Unlike the greeting question *šlōnak baʿad?*, the expression *šlōnak zīn?* cannot readily freely scramble. That is, because we are dealing here with two functionally different words: The word *baʿad* can be considered a *real greeting intensifier* as its meaning pragmatically predictable, whether preposed or postposed.

The word *zīn*, in contrast, is less predictable because it can appear in contexts other than greeting questions. The word *zīn* in (3b) is interpretable either as an answer (A) to a previously asked *šlōnak*-question (Q) as in (3a) or as a synonymous repetition of the greeting question *šlōnak?* as in (3b). Example (3b) is unacceptable, because *zīn* is an unreal intensifier, hence unpredictable, which must not precede the canonical greeting pattern *šlōnak*.

3a) Q: *šlōnak?*

A: *zīn*.

3b) **zīn?* *šlōnak?*

“Good? How are you?”

Often enough, one hears a lot of people use the extremely intensive greeting question in (4). The canonical greeting question *šlōnak?* is repeated twice, each time with a different word suffixed to it.

4) *šlōnak? šlōnak zīn? šlōnak baʿad?*

“How are you? How are you (good)? How are you (again)?”

An answer to these greeting questions is highly predictable, namely a repetitive exchange of a part or all these greeting questions in (4), although they could almost be preceded by other local greetings, which vary according to dialect area. The following are examples of highly predictable questions (Q) and answers (A) during greetings in some places of the southern *gilit* dialect area. Local greetings are identified by brackets.

Nassiriya

Q: (salāmun'laikum/'llāh iss'ādak/ilguua) šlōnak? šlōnak zīn?
šlōnak ba'ad?

(Other local greetings) How are you? How are you (good)?
How are you (again)?

A: (wa 'laikum assalām/hala/'lḥamdulillāh/gauua ḥīlak), inta
šlōnak? šlōnak zīn? šlōnak ba'ad?

(Other local greetings) How are you? How are you (good)?
How are you (again)?

Basra

Q: (salāmun'laikum, hayyāk 'llāh) šlōnak? šlōnak zīn? šlōnak ba'ad?
(Other local greetings) How are you? How are you (good)?
How are you (again)?

A: (wa 'laikum assalām, hala), inta šlōnak? šlōnak zīn? šlōnak
ba'ad?

(Other local greetings) How are you? How are you (good)?
How are you (again)?

Misaan

Q: (salāmun'laikum, 'llāh iss'ādak,) šlōnak? šlōnak zīn? šlōnak
ba'ad?

(Other local greetings) How are you? How are you (good)?
How are you (again)?

A: (wa 'laikum assalām, hala), inta šlōnak? šlōnak ba'ad? šlōnak
zīn?

(Other local greetings) How are you? How are you (good)?
How are you (again)?

Due to the fact that the vast majority of people here still hang on their repetitive greeting tradition, an encounter between two peoples does usually not end up by the two, rather they start by themselves and they might end up by the whole family (nuclear and extended) and others. Building on this, one may hear the following greeting questions:

(Other local greetings) How are you? How are you (good)? How are you (again)? How is the family doing? How are the children doing? How are Ali and Mohammad (children's names from the nuclear family) doing? How is your father doing? How is your mother doing? How are you all? How are the whole Arabs² there (extended family)?...

² Arabs means in this context the extended family, i.e. the whole village or even the whole tribe of the person greeted.

In addition, one sometimes encounters instances where the greeting questions *šlōnak?* *šlōnak ba'ad?* *šlōnak zīn?* are repeated consecutively at a single encounter. I would like to call that *framing greeting questions*, because it is arranged in a way that they usually surround the normal talk that fills the big gap between the first and the second set of *šlōnak*-sentences. The following is a recorded telephone conversation with a man from the southern *gilit* dialect area. Normal talk is indicated by italics:

(Other local greetings) How are you? How are you (good)? How are you (again)? How is the family doing? How are the children doing? *What about your job-seeking? It is very hard to get a suitable job these days, isn't it? I was everywhere, but in vain...* How are you? How are you (good)? How are you (again)?

Following (Duranti 1997) I consider the delayed greeting questions in the just mentioned example as an *information-seeking strategy*. That is, the inserted normal talk often comprises sentences which express *suffering, complaining or an emotion* with certain purposes (as it is the case in the even-mentioned example). The goal of the questioner behind the subsequent synonymous repeating of the *šlōnak*-sentences is to feel the pulse of the other party and his possible reaction towards such expression of suffering, complaining or emotion.

Another function of such framing greeting questions is to eliminate the silence barriers when two people from this region have nothing left to say to each other. Typical for the south Iraqi culture as a whole is that it is disrespectful when guest and host keep silence on a visit. But such silence can usually be ended by repeating the *šlōnak*-sentences *šlōnak?* *šlōnak ba'ad?* *šlōnak zīn?* The other party will most likely repeat the same *šlōnak*-sentences above with minor additions and changes. Note that, in contrast to the situation in haptic greeting behaviors, cross-sex verbal greeting is permitted inside and outside house, and can be repeated as many times as the participants wish.

5. Conclusion

The southern *gilit* dialects show a variety of greeting forms in which touching and non-touching gestures are used. As has been shown above, these gestures are characterized by being haptic and intensive in nature. Haptic behaviors in greetings can be seen by the moving body language associated with the verbal greetings. The most important characteristic feature of the verbal greetings is the synonymous repetition of the same

or a part of the greeting to add emphasis to the greeting. Considerable emphasis has been given to the canonical greeting question *šlōnak* which can be repeated several times to derive more emphatic greeting questions. The *šlōnak*-greeting questions are multifunctional, its use depends on the situation and the goal behind such repeated greeting questions.

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