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A contrastive study of Arabic and Persian formulas against the evil eye used by women

Ana Ramajo Cuesta^a *, Saloomeh Yousefian^b

^a Paris-Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates P.O Box 38044

^b Antonio de Nebrija University C/Pirineos 55, 28040 Madrid, Spain

Abstract

In Islamic societies, there exists the belief that a compliment can attract the 'evil eye' unless it's accompanied by expressions that invoke God's protection. The purpose of this research is to analyze the use of these expressions and to conduct a contrastive study of Arabic and Persian formulas against the evil eye.

In this research, the importance of these expressions and the use of courtesy formulas in responses to compliments about appearance and possessions are analyzed. Participants of the research are: 10 female native speakers of Arabic (between 19 and 24 years old) and 10 female native speakers of Persian (between 27 and 40 years old). Women were chosen in the study as they use more frequently formulas that invoke God's protection. All of them claimed to believe in the evil eye.

Participants are requested to view two short videos in which the characters are talking about their appearance and possessions. Once they watch the videos, they recreate the dialogues in their own languages. The researchers analyze the use of formulas against the evil eye and the compliments responses and conduct a comparative study of the use of these formulas in Arabic and Persian.

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* Ana Ramajo Cuesta Tel.: +971- 551354757

E-mail address: anitaramajo@yahoo.es

1. Introduction

In Islamic societies, “it is an important cultural pattern that compliments or words of praise should be accompanied by a deferential reference to God. Without the reference to God, such statements (...) are taken as bad omens which bring misfortune” (Harell, Abu Talib and Carroll, 2003:352). The only way to ensure the person receiving the compliment is not being envied is to use religious formulas as *Mašaallah* “Will/ May God protect you”. Migdadi et al. (2010) examine the communicative functions of the Arabic religious formula *Mašaallah*. In their study, the researchers find out that it is used as an invocation, a compliment, an expression of gladness, an expression of modesty, a marker of sarcasm, a mitigating device and a conversational backchannel.

In the present research, we will study the use of *Mašaallah* as a compliment intensifier or compliment and as ‘protective invocation’. As Migdadi et al (2010: 485) point out “the first and prototypical use of *Mašaallah* is as a protective invocation that is used upon seeing or observing personally or socially valued things, such as wealth, beauty, offspring, and social achievements, so as to guard them from vanishing”. Moreover, *Mašaallah* is also a compliment intensifier that is used in compliment topics, including appearance, skill, possession and personality.

Iranians regard the evil eye as a power in some eyes to bring evil to whatever they look upon. These eyes are variously described as *chashmsur*, “the salty eye”, *chashm zakhm*, “the eye that wounds” and *chashm tang*, “the narrow eye” (Donaldson, 1992; Sharifian, 2012). The influence of the religious scripture (Quran) is apparent, but it should also be noted that the evil eye is found in the ancient Iranian Zoroastrian Literature. In both colloquial and formal discourses, the use of verbal and religious formulas in order to avoid such danger is truly enchanted. Their ordinary conversations are interspersed with “*Mašaallah*” and “*Inšaallaah*”, “What God wills” and “If God wills”. These expressions are used to protect themselves against the evil that may lie behind a remark of appreciation or admiration. They are also written and worn by anyone who thinks he has fallen under the spell of evil, or they are read repeatedly until the effects of the evil eye are removed (Donaldson, 1992).

Sharifian (2012) focuses on the case of *cheshm* ‘eye’ in Persian, a body-part term that is predominantly associated with emotions, including love, envy and greed. The analysis of some Persian expressions that are associated with the body-part term ‘eye’ reveal significant semantic or pragmatic differences with the connotation of ‘eye’ in other languages such as English. As Sharifian reveals, these expressions used in different concepts such as envy and the evil eye seem to be originated from a historical- cultural- religious conceptualization.

On the other hand Afghari and Karimnia (2011) study the hedging formulas, such as swear words, which Iranians use in order to be polite and save their “face” in the society. Swear words are the appropriate expressions that reflect the value systems of individuals and keep ones face in natural conversations. As Afghari and Karimnia remark, in Persian the hedges, such as *Mašaallah*, have a positive politeness function, as we can see in the example below:

- ماشاالله! چشم کف پات، چه خوشتیپ شدی

- May God protect you! May I be the humblest to you! How handsome you’ve become! (2. Teheran, Iran).

As we have seen, the use of *Mašaallah* in between Persian speakers is to protect the interlocutor from the evil eye on the one hand, and to save their face from a threat on the other.

2. Purpose of the study and research participants

The purpose of the study is analyzing the use of expressions against the ‘evil eye’ in Arabic and Persian and observing the use of courtesy formulas in compliment responses. The independent variable of the study is ‘origin’.

Research participants are as follows:

- 10 Female native speakers of Arabic¹ between 19 and 24 years old

- 10 Female native speakers of Persian² between 27 and 40 years old

Two muted videos³ were the data collection instruments. Participants were requested to view them and recreate the dialogues between the characters that appear in the videos. Once the data was collected, the researchers faithfully transliterated the Persian and Arabic text into a word document. No changes were introduced.

3. Data analysis

By virtue of their membership in a particular community, individuals learn the skills necessary for everyday social interaction. There are many automatic patterns in the structure of conversation, and these automatic sequences consist of a first and a second part, produced by different speakers. These sequences make different value systems which are reflected in speech acts (Yousefvand, 2010: 91). This study explores the religious-formulaic expressions, which are part of the discourse conventions of Arabic and Persian speech that are recognized by their communicative effects within culturally ritualized use.

An important aspect of speech acts in Arabic and Persian is the significant use of religious- formulaic expressions as politeness mechanisms. This phenomenon is considered unique and relates only to these two languages (Morrow and Castleton, 2007:202; Alharbi and Alhajmi, 2008:117; Anssari, 2011:106).

In this study, we make a comparative analysis of the use of Maašaallah “May/will God protect you” as a formulaic expression in the mentioned languages.

3.1 Female native speakers of Arabic

In Arabic, formulaic expressions are frequently used when accepting a compliment (Ramajo Cuesta 2012; Farghal and Haggan 2006; Farghal and Al-Khatib 2001; Nelson et al. 1996). Formulaic sentences and expressions against the ‘evil eye’ are commonly used in Arabic and can be found in all Arabic dialects (Ramajo Cuesta, 2013).

In the present study, Maašaallah “May God protects you” was frequently used, both in compliments on physical appearance and possessions as shown in the tables below:

Table 1: Use of Maašaallah in compliments on physical appearance in Arabic

Example	Translation
نعيمًا! قصيتي شعر ج؟ إي! حلو؟ ما شاء الله وايد حلو افتارري خلنا نشوف حلو شعر ج ما شاء الله. ما شاء الله عليج محلوة!	-May you enjoy it (<i>na'imān</i>), did you cut your hair? -Yes! Is it nice? <i>Maašaallah!</i> It is so nice, turn around! Let us see! (1.Bahrain) Nice hair <i>maašaallah</i> (2.United Arab Emirates) <i>Maašaallah</i> you look so gorgeous (1.United Arab Emirates)
أشوفج وايد ضعفانة ما شاء الله ب : هيه ما شاء الله ألسا محلوة وايد! وايد مناسبة القصة	I Can see that you lost so much weight <i>maašaallah</i> (4.United Arab Emirates) <i>Maašaallah</i> Elsa you look prettier! Your haircut really suits you. (4.United Arab Emirates)
ب : ماشاء الله اليبسا! شو هالحلاة! أ : هيه صدق شو هالحلاة.	- <i>Maašaallah</i> you look beautiful Elisa - Yes she really does. (7.United Arab Emirates)

Table 2: Use of Maašaallah in compliments on possessions in Arabic

Example	Translation
ما شاء الله الشنطة حلوة! لونها واجد حلو! من وين خذتها ما شاء الله وايد حلوة شنطتج! ب : مشكورة, عيونج الحلوة هل سلسلة و التراجي اشحلوهم عليج ما شاء الله ما شاء الله, عليج وشغابج وايد حلوين	<i>Maašaallah</i> your bag, it's so nice! Where did you get it from? (1.Oman) - <i>Maašaallah</i> the bag is gorgeous - Thank you, your eyes are the beautiful ones (2.United Arab Emirates) -And this necklace and these earrings, they look so good on you, <i>Maašaallah</i> (1.Bahrain) <i>Maašaallah</i> , your necklace and earrings are very

ما شاء الله وايد حلو عليج الفستان. والتراشي بعد.	nice.(4.United Arab Emirates) <i>Maašaallah</i> The dress looks so nice on you and the earrings too!(5.United Arab Emirates)
ما شاء الله شغابج بعد حلو والعقد بعد	- <i>Maašaallah</i> , your necklace and earrings are beautiful! (3.United Arab Emirates)
ما شاء الله عجيني فستانك من فين اشترتي؟	- <i>Maašaallah</i> I love this dress, from where did you get it from? (1.Saudi Arabia)

Formulaic courtesy expressions were also found. Translating these formulas is a difficult task. That is specially the case of **نايماً** “blissful” which is commonly used in the Arab world to ‘compliment’ someone when taking a bath, shaving or having a haircut. Translation of the formula is challenging as there is not an equivalent expression in English or a courtesy formula to compliment in such occasions. We have translated **نايماً** as “may you enjoy it”. The respond to this expression is **الله ينعم عليك** that could be translated as “God bless you”.

عيونك الحلوة “your eyes are the beautiful ones” is frequently used in Arabic when responding to compliments on physical appearance and belongings. **عليك بالعافية** “may you wear it with health” is used when complimenting someone about his/her new clothes or accessorizes. When receiving a compliment on belongings, it is common to offer the complimented object to the person who gives the compliment and wish him/her good health.

Table 3: Examples of formulaic expressions in Arabic

Expression	Example
نايماً May you enjoy it	نعيماً! قصيتي شعرج؟ May you enjoy it! Did you cut your hair?(1.Bahrain) ج : شو رايمك في شعري ؟ قصيته ! أ : مشاء الله وايد حلو ! ب : نعيماً ج : الله ينعم عليج -What do you think about my hair? I cut it! - <i>Maašaallah</i> it's very nice - May you enjoy it! - God bless you (3. United Arab Emirates). أ : حلو شعرج , نعيماً ج : الله ينعم عليج - Your hair is nice, <i>Na'imān</i> (may you enjoy it) - God bless you (6. United Arab Emirates).
عيونك الحلوة Your eyes are the beautiful ones	هل سلسلة و التراجي اشلوهم عليج ما شاء الله عيونج الحلوة يا حبيبة قلبي -And this necklace and these earrings, they look so good on you, <i>Maašaallah</i> -Your eyes are the beautiful ones my sweetheart (1.Bahrain). هالفستان الحلو ب : عيونج الحلوة حبيبتني -What a beautiful dress! -Your eyes are the beautiful ones my love (3. United Arab Emirates.) ب : هيه حتى فستانج حلو من وين ؟ أ : شكرا عيونج الحلوة, أنا ماخذتته كله من هل محل بس في اسبانيا - Yeah, even your dress is nice, from where? - Thank you, your eyes are the beautiful ones. I got it from this shop but in Spain (4. United Arab Emirates). ب : الله شو هالقصة الحلوة ! ج : هيه شقتي امس قصيت شعري أ : ما شاء الله وايد حلوة

واصل
يفداج
ما يغلى عليج/ما تغلى عليج
it's yours

ج : عيونج الحلوين حبيبيتي
- Hi! What a nice haircut!
- See? I cut it yesterday
- *Maašaallah* it is very nice.
-Your eyes are the beautiful ones (7. United Arab Emirates).
أقولج شنطتج اتجنن!
ب : أو شكرا ! واصل حبيبيتي, ماخذتنها في التنزيلات من دبي مول بس وايد حابتنها. وايد عملية وشكلها راقى

Your bag is gorgeous!
- Oh thank you! it is yours my dear
I've got it on sale from Dubai Mall but I really like it, it is very practical and it looks elegant (4. United Arab Emirates).

-وايد حلو كواتشيش. محلوه
-حياتي يفداج! عيونج الحلوه
-Your earrings are pretty, you look so good.
-They're yours! Your eyes are the pretty one (2. United Arab Emirates).

يه يه يه إيش هل شنطة الحلوة؟ عليج بالعافية
ما تغلى عليج حبيبيتي الله يعافيج

-Wow, what is this lovely bag? May you wear it with health
- It's yours (it is not expensive for you) darling, may God give your health (1.Bahrain)

عليك بالعافية
May you wear it with health

Maašaallah I love your dress, may you wear it with health (1.Saudi Arabia)

أ : أوه مشاء الله خذتيها الشنطة ؟
ب : هيه أمس ريلي يابلي اياها
أ : وايد حلوة, عليج بالعافية
ب : الله يعافيج

- Oh! *Maašaallah*, did you buy a bag?
- Yes, yesterday my husband bought it for me
- Very nice, wear it with health
- May God give your health
(3. United Arab Emirates).

يه يه يه إيش هل شنطة الحلوة؟ عليج بالعافية

-Wow, what is this lovely bag? May you wear it with health (1.Bahrain)

ما شاء الله عجبني فستانك
، ليس العافية

شو هالشنطة الحلوة
(...)
أ : هيه ما شاء الله جميلة, مليون العافية.
ب : الله يعافيج حبيبيتي

-What a nice bag!
(...)
- *Maašaallah* is beautiful, may you wear it with health.
- May God give your health darling (7. United Arab Emirates).

3.2 Female native speakers of Persian

In Persian using formulaic and religious expressions in order to avoid the danger of the “Evil eye” is strongly present (Donaldson, 1992; Akbari, 2002; Sharifian, 2012). The use of the mentioned expressions are more entrenched when giving or receiving a compliment and they are considered as politeness strategies in order to save the face (Sharifian 2012).

In this study, we observe basically the use of Maašaallah “May/will God protect you” in situations of giving compliments on someone’s appearance or possessions as presented in the tables below:

Table 4: Use of Maašaallah in compliments on physical appearance in Persian

Example	Translation
موهات چه خوب شده ماشاالله، چی کار کردی؟ تیره کردی؟	What have you done to your hair? Have you changed it to dark? It’s very beautiful Maašaallah! (1. Tehran, Iran)
چقدر خوشگل شدی ماشاالله، این مدل ابرو خیلی بهت میاد. همیشه همینجوری بردار.	You look awesome Maašaallah! This new model of your eyebrows suits you a lot! Don’t change it! (7. Isfahan, Iran)
وای چند کیلو لاغر کردی؟ مثل مانکن ها شدی ماشاالله!	Oh my God! You have lost a lot of weight! You seem like models Maašaallah! (3. Tehran, Iran)
به به! عجب رنگ موی قشنگی، خیلی جذاب تر شدی ماشاالله!	Wow! What a nice color of your hair! You look much more attractive Maašaallah! (2. Tehran, Iran)

Table 5: Use of Maašaallah in compliments on possessions in Persian

Example	Translation
سلام خوشگلم چطوری؟ چه لباس قشنگی ماشاالله! تازه خریدی؟	Hi, my Darling, how are you? What a nice dress Maašaallah! Is it new? (3. Tehran, Iran)
کیفت چه خوشگله، جدیده؟ عجب لباس شیکی ماشاالله!	Your bag is very beautiful! It’s new, isn’t it? And what an elegant dress, Maašaallah! (9. Tehran, Iran)
چقدر این شلوار بهت میاد ماشاالله!	These pants suit you a lot, Maašaallah! (5. Tehran, Iran)
گردنبندت طلا سفیده؟ خیلی زیباس ماشاالله!	Is your necklace white gold? It’s very pretty Maašaallah! (10. Tehran, Iran)

Apart from Maašaallah, there exist some other formulaic expressions that are used with almost the same meaning in order to avoid the “Evil eye”. In the present study we have seen expressions such as “I touch the wood” and “چشم شور نیست” “My eyes are not salty”. In Arabic we found the expression “عيني باردة عليك” “my eye is cold on you”. The adjective cold is used against the “fire” and the “heat” that causes envy.

Although the literal translation can’t express the real meaning of such expressions in other languages and pragmatic contexts, they are all used for the same aim. These expressions are used when giving a compliment and not receiving it. In table 6 we can see five different expressions in their corresponding contexts:

Table 6: Examples of formulaic expressions in Persian

Expression	Example
I touch the Wood!!	بزنم به چوب/تخته! بزنم به چوب خیلی جذاب تر شدی!

My eyes on the palm of your feet!! چشم کف پات	I touch the Wood, you look much more attractive! (4. Isfahan, Iran) چشم کف پات عجب هیکلی داری دختر!
You have to burn Esfand for yourself! برای خودت اسفند دود کن!	My eyes on the palm of your feet! What a nice body you have my dear! (2. Isfahan, Iran) از وقتی لاغر کردی خیلی جیگر تر شدی ماشاءالله، برای خودت اسفند دود کن!
My eyes are not salty!! چشم شور نیست!	Since you have lost weight you look much prettier Maašaallah! You have to burn Esfand for yourself! (6. Tehran, Iran) عجب گردنبنده زیبای، چشم شور نیست، نگران نباش!
I hope the envious get blind!! چشم حسود کور!	Wow! What a beautiful necklace! Don't worry, my eyes are not salty! (8. Isfahan, Iran) تو هرروز خوشگل تر و جوون تر میشی، چشم حسود کور شه! You seem more gorgeous and young day after day, I hope the envious get blind! (1. Tehran, Iran)

All these formulaic expressions can be used for both physical appearance and belongings compliments. As we can see in example 3, to burn Esfand (incense) is traditionally a way to protect against “the evil eye” by its sound, smoke and smell. In Arab countries Bakhoor (incense) is also used for protection. All these expressions refer to the “eye” not like the body part that facilitates the view, but as a significant pragmatic implication that is associated with “envy” and its negative effects.

Although the compliments are positive speech acts that express friendship and sympathy, there are times that they are produced joined by face-threatening acts (Yousefvand, 2010). In order to avoid this threat, in Persian there exist some formulaic expressions that are employed when responding to compliments. In table 7, we can see some of the expressions that are used as a response to ones that were observed in the previous table:

Table 7: Response to compliments by formulaic expressions in Persian

Expression	Example
Your eyes see beautiful!! چشمات قشنگ می بینن!	A: بزم به چوب خیلی جذاب تر شدی! I touch the Wood, you look much more attractive! B: چشمات قشنگ! چشمات قشنگ! می بینن! (4. Isfahan, Iran)
You haven't seen yourself in the mirror! خودتو تو آینه ندیدی!	A: چشم کف پات عجب هیکلی داری دختر! My eyes on the palm of your feet! What a nice body you have my friend! B: You haven't seen yourself in the mirror! خودتو تو آینه ندیدی! (2. Isfahan, Iran)
Not like yours!! به پای مال تو نمی رسه!	A: کیفیت چه خوشگله، جدیده؟ عجب لباس شیک می ماشاءالله! Your bag is very beautiful! It's new, isn't it? And what an elegant dress, Maašaallah! B: Not like yours! به پای مال تو نمی رسه! (9. Tehran, Iran)
You can have it; your value is much more! قابل تو رو نداره!	A: عجب گردنبنده زیبای، چشم شور نیست، نگران نباش! Wow! What a beautiful necklace! Don't worry, my eyes are not salty! B: You can have it; your value is much more! قابل تو رو نداره! (8. Isfahan, Iran)

These formulas are used as a response to a formulaic expression against “the evil eye” on the one hand, and to mitigate the threat to the face on the other.

4. Conclusions

Although compliments might be seen as face-flattering acts, in Islamic societies it is believed that they could attract the ‘evil eye’. Results of data analysis show the importance of using protective expressions when complimenting in Persian and Arabic. The “eye” is a pragmatic element in both cultures. In Persian, it is believed that “the salty eye” brings evil and therefore the expression چشم شور نیست “my eyes are not salty” is used for protection. In Arabic, the formula عيني باردة عليك “my eye is cold on you” is used against the fire and heat that the evil causes.

The present work also shows two important characteristics of Islamic notion of “face”: in common with Brown and Levinson (1983), Islamic face is realized and negotiated through specific verbal behaviors, which have a direct influence on speakers’ face. However, unlike in Brown and Levinson theory, the Islamic countries are a collectivist community in which an individual operates with consideration towards both his/hers and others’ face simultaneously (Goffman 1967), as we can see in the extracts analysis and the examples.

As a conclusion, the present study confirms that language and culture are closely related and the act of complimenting and responses need to be understood in the corresponding cultural and pragmatic code, considering the beliefs and values of each speech community and therefore, they cannot be interpreted apart from social and cultural context. Results of the study show the need of conducting research in different languages and cultures in order to analyze new politeness models.

Notes

* Research participants were from Saudi Arabia (Jeddah), Oman (Salalah), Bahrain (Riffa) and the UAE (Abu Dhabi). The data was collected at Paris-Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi.

²Research participants were from Teheran and Isfahan. The independent variable is “origin”, the impact of “age” and “level of education” was not analyzed in the study.

³Unlike the DCTs, where participants can only use a single response, short videos enable students to a creative freedom and allow researchers to collect real language samples.

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