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

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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.

Keywords: Formulas Against The Evil Eye, Female Native Speakers of Arabic and Persian, Compliment Responses, Formulaic Expressions;

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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:

- مَا الشَّا له الله! چشمش کف پات، چه خوشش بشی
- 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 (Yousevand, 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>نعيم؟ ؟ فعل علی؟</td>
<td>-May you enjoy it (na’iman), did you cut your hair?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>؟ فعل علی؟</td>
<td>-Yes! Is it nice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ما شاء الله وادل حلوة افراح</td>
<td>Maašaallah! It is so nice, turn around! Let us see!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>حلوة شعرش ما شاء الله</td>
<td>(1.Bahrain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>لماشاه الله علیه محلة!</td>
<td>Nice hair maašaallah (2.United Arab Emirates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>مْآَجْوَةْ وادل صعفنة ما شاء الله</td>
<td>Maašaallah you look so gorgeous (1.United Arab Emirates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ما شاء الله</td>
<td>I can see that you lost so much weight maašaallah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ب ؟ هي ما شاء الله ألس محلة وادل</td>
<td>(4.United Arab Emirates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>لإ لمسة القصة</td>
<td>Maašaallah Elsa you look prettier! Your haircut really suits you. (4.United Arab Emirates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ب ؟ هي ما شاء الله اليساوي وهلاله؟</td>
<td>- Maašaallah you look beautiful Elisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>أ ؟ هي مسيرة حو هلاله.</td>
<td>- Yes she really does. (7.United Arab Emirates)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>مآَجْوَةْ الله الشنتجة حلوة؟ لو نه واخد حلوت من ويب ظن؟ها</td>
<td>Maašaallah your bag, it’s so nice! Where did you get it from? (1.Oman)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ما شاء الله وادل حلوة الشنتجة!</td>
<td>-Maašaallah the bag is gorgeous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ب ؟ مركلة. عجيج الحلوة</td>
<td>-Thank you, your eyes are the beautiful ones (2.United Arab Emirates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>هل سلسة وترنمج اشحوهم علیه وما شاء الله</td>
<td>And this necklace and these earrings, they look so good on you, Maašaallah (1.Bahrain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ما شاء الله علیه وشغف وادل حلوت</td>
<td>Maašaallah, your necklace and earrings are very</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Formulaic courtesy expressions were also found. Translating these formulas is a difficult task. That is specially the case of “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 نايمَا as “may you enjoy it”. The respond to this expression is مَآشًاالله that could be translated as “God bless you”.

Table 3: Examples of formulaic expressions in Arabic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>نايمَا: قصئتي شرح؟</td>
<td>مَآشًاالله The dress looks so nice on you and the earrings too! (5. United Arab Emirates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-May you enjoy it! Did you cut your hair? (1. Bahrain)</td>
<td>-Mَآشًاالله, your necklace and earrings are beautiful! (3. United Arab Emirates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ج : شو راكب في شعر؟ قصئته؟</td>
<td>-Mَآشًاالله I love this dress, from where did you get it from? (1. Saudi Arabia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>أ : مِشاهِ الله وادي حلوك</td>
<td>ما شاء الله شاغيك بعد حلوه والعقد بعد</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ب : نعيمًا</td>
<td>ما شاء الله أجبني فستاك من قَبَل عشري؟</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

-What do you think about my hair? I cut it!
- May you enjoy it!
- God bless you (3. United Arab Emirates).
- أ : حلوك شرح، نعيمًا | - الله يهنِع عَلِيكَ - Your hair is nice, Na’iman (may you enjoy it)
- God bless you (6. United Arab Emirates).
| ج : الله يهنِع عَلِيكَ | - Your hair is nice, Na’iman (may you enjoy it)
| - And this necklace and these earrings, they look so good on you, Mَآشًاالله |
| هل سلسلة وأنتراه ما شاه الله مَآشًاالله | - Your eyes are the beautiful ones my sweetheart (1. Bahrain).

-What a beautiful dress!
- Your eyes are the beautiful ones my love (3. United Arab Emirates.)
- ب : هيِهِ حِينِ فسْتَانَةِ حلوِهِ مِنْ وَهَنُ؟ |
| أ : شكرًا مَآشًاالله. أنا ماتختله كلهَ مِهِ حلوِهِ فِي إسبانيا |
| - 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). | - الله شو هافَلَصَةِ الحلَوَةِ |
| ج : هيِهِ شَطِبَي انِسَ قسَيَتِ شعري | - الله وَأَيْدِ حَلَوَة |
| أ : ما شاء الله وَأَيْدِ حَلَوَة |

عِيَونَكِ الحَلَوَة “your eyes are the beautiful ones” is frequently used in Arabic when responding to compliments on physical appearance and belongings. مَآشًاالله “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.
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).

Your earrings are pretty, you look so good.
- They’re yours! Your eyes are the pretty one (2. United Arab Emirates).

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)

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

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).

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>چقدر خوشگل شدی مانده؟ من ذلک بیمه‌ی می‌بینم. همیشه همیشه بردار.</td>
<td>You look awesome Maašaallah! This new model of your eyebrows suits you a lot! Don’t change it! (7. Isfahan, Iran)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>عجب رنگ موی شنیدی، خیلی جذاب تر شدی مانده!</td>
<td>Wow! What a nice color of your hair! You look much more attractive Maašaallah! (2. Tehran, Iran)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>سلام خوشگل چطوری؟ چه لباس فشنگیمانته؟ اینه خریدی؟</td>
<td>Hi, my Darling, how are you? What a nice dress Maašaallah! Is it new? (3. Tehran, Iran)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>کیفته چه خوشگلی، جدیدی؟ عجب لباس شیکی مانده!</td>
<td>Your bag is very beautiful! It’s new, isn’t it? And what an elegant dress, Maašaallah! (9. Tehran, Iran)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>چقدر این شلوار بیمه‌ی مانده!</td>
<td>These pants suit you a lot, Maašaallah! (5. Tehran, Iran)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>گردنبندت طلا سفیدی؟ خیلی زیبایی مانده!</td>
<td>Is your necklace white gold? It’s very pretty Maašaallah! (10. Tehran, Iran)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 “بزنم به چوب بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب” “I touch the wood” and “My eyes are not salty”. In Arabic we found the expression- عیني باردة علیک “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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| بزنم به چوب/ بزنم به چوب/ بزنم به چوب/ بزنم به چوب/ بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چوب/ اینه بزنم به چو...
My eyes on the palm of your feet! You look much more attractive! (4. Isfahan, Iran)

You have to burn Esfand for yourself!

My eyes are not salty!

I hope the envious get blind!

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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Your eyes see beautiful!! | جشنم کف پات عجب هیکلی جذاب تر شدید!  
A: I touch the Wood, you look much more attractive! |
| You haven’t seen yourself in the mirror! | خودتو تو آیینه ندیدی!  
A: 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! ندیدی! |
| Not like yours!! | یه پای مال تو نمی رسمه!  
A: Your bag is very beautiful! It’s new, isn’t it? And what an elegant dress, Maašaallah!  
B: Not like yours! یه پای مال تو نمی رسمه! |
| You can have it; your value is much more! | قائل تو رو نداره!  
A: Wow! What a beautiful necklace! Don’t worry, my eyes are not salty!  
B: You can have it; your value is much more! ندارم! |

Table 7: Response to compliments by formulaic expressions in Persian
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 “my eyes are not salty” is used for protection. In Arabic, the formula “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
*R 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.

2 Research 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.

3 Unlike 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.

References


