

Saudi Phatic Communication in Translation: A Cultural and Linguistic Perspective

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Abstract

Adopting a functional approach to translation, this study dives deep into phatic communion expressions, categorizing them in relation to their direct translations in English and identifying culturally equivalent phrases in manual and machine translation. With a newly developed corpus of 157 Saudi Arabic phatic expressions, the study classifies them into eight categories, viz., greetings and rituals, politeness, inquiries about well-being, blessings and good wishes, small talk, acknowledgement and agreement, farewells and departure, and expressions of gratitude and appreciation. The corpus is created from five Arabic language films classified as popular choices on Netflix. The corpus is then translated by 21 final year English Language program students at Shaqra University, KSA, and by Google Translate (GT). Findings show that most frequently phatic expressions are used to express polite and warm introductions, maintaining courteous communication, and for cultural and religious dimensions. Findings also indicate that the Saudi students demonstrated a high degree of communicative translation of the Arabic phatic expressions into English whereas GT output was off the mark and even irrelevant in many instances, making a case for discouraging the use of GT in Saudi translation studies classrooms. The study concludes with pertinent recommendations offering insights that can be useful in fostering understanding and cultural sensitivity among non-Saudis interacting with Saudi individuals, making this study crucial for those in the fields of translation, intercultural communication, and linguistics.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, phatic communication/communion, Saudi culture, translation

1. Introduction

The British Council (2012) defines *phatic communication* as “verbal or non-verbal communication that has a social function, such as to start a conversation, greet someone, or say goodbye, rather than an informative function.” (Par 1). It is important to note that much of phatic communication is culture-specific, and this fact makes it difficult for foreign language learners to recognize phatic communication and respond to it appropriately. Phatic communication may be verbal or non-verbal but always has a social function (Rahardi, 2019). These expressions are fixed and ritualistic, reflecting underlying cultural values and norms. However, their significance transcends that of mere conversational fillers. In the Arab context, especially in Saudi Arabia, the unique cultural landscape characterized by hospitality, warmth, and respect, phatic communication touches all aspects of life (Al-Kenai, 1985). Translating these expressions into English is not a mere lexical activity but a nuanced process fraught with cultural loadings and potential pitfalls. Literal translation often fails to convey the intended meaning of the original Arabic phatic message, or even to find an equivalent counterpart in English (Al-Qinai, 2011).

Phatic communication, often dismissed as inconsequential small talk, has emerged as a central point of research revealing its multifaceted impact on human relationships and social dynamics (Alqinai, 2010). The findings from recent studies emphasize its profound influence on social cohesion, navigating social landscapes, and fostering mental well-being. As we delve deeper into these results, a comprehensive understanding of the significance of phatic communication begins to unfold, challenging traditional perceptions of its trivial nature (Alqinai, 2010; Rahardi, 2019).

One of the pivotal revelations pertains to the role of phatic communication in building and strengthening social bonds (Tien et al., 2023). Contrary to the common perception that small talk is devoid of substance, studies consistently demonstrate its instrumental role in the development of social connections. The seemingly mundane exchanges act as social glue, establishing a foundation of trust and comfort between individuals (Gabriel, 2021). This is particularly evident in the workplace, where casual conversations contribute significantly to team cohesion and overall job satisfaction (Schmitz, 2012). The results suggest that acknowledging and valuing these interactions can enhance the overall quality of relationships, fostering a sense of belonging and camaraderie.

Moreover, the research highlights the strategic function of phatic communication in navigating unfamiliar or ambiguous social contexts (Bytyci, 2009). Small talk serves as a crucial tool for individuals to break the ice, establish common ground, and create a more relaxed

atmosphere (Carver, 2023). In professional settings, where networking and relationship-building are paramount, the ability to engage in effective phatic communication can be a determining factor in career success (Markantonatou et al., 2016). The findings underscore the importance of recognizing small talk not only as a social nicety but as a strategic communication skill that facilitates smoother interactions and fosters positive impressions.

Beyond its immediate social implications, the impact of phatic communication on mental well-being is a noteworthy discovery. Research studies suggest that these seemingly trivial exchanges contribute to an individual's overall sense of happiness and fulfilment (Brailovskaia et al., 2022). Regular, positive social interactions, even of a brief nature, act as a buffer against social isolation and loneliness. This aspect of phatic communication becomes particularly relevant in the context of the growing challenges associated with modern lifestyles, where digital communication often replaces face-to-face interactions. Acknowledging the role of small talk in enhancing mental well-being emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balance between virtual and in-person social interactions.

Statement of the Problem

The direct translation of Arabic phatic communication expressions into English often results in phrases that lack the cultural depth and closeness in meaning to the original. This misalignment can seriously hamper cross-cultural communication. Ramifications of this lacuna can be far reaching in a rapidly globalizing Saudi economic and educational paradigm which sees scores of students moving to the western world every year. But to rectify these, the first step is in preparing a corpus-based analysis of Saudi Arabic phatic communication and verifying the extent of accuracy in their translation using human translators versus Google Translate, which still beats other online free translation apps in the Saudi milieu. This research helps in enhancing the understanding of Saudi phatic communication and its cultural underpinnings. By bridging the linguistic and cultural divide, it aims to foster richer, more nuanced interactions between Saudis and non-Saudis, ensuring respect and appreciation for the depth of Saudi culture. It explores the following questions:

1. What are the categories that phatic communication in Saudi Arabic can be classified into?
2. What is the distribution of phatic expressions across categories?
3. To what extent do the English Google Translate equivalents capture the cultural essence of the Saudi Arabic expressions?

2. Literature Review

The concept of the "phatic" can be understood as a complex web of investigation that can be divided into two distinct meanings: commune phaticity and connection phaticity (Wang et al., 2022). It is less of a singular empirical item. The earlier meaning is only another form of "small talk," which is meant to foster relationships rather than provide knowledge. The degree to which signs are geared towards interpersonal communication is captured by the latter sense. The investigation by Zuckerman (2020) on phatic communication shows that people have complex views regarding the importance of contact all over the world. By considering these ideologies, one may better understand why academics frequently confuse phaticity with communion and help to clarify the key problems of phaticity.

It is believed that phatic interpersonal interaction, also known as "phatic communion," is a type of unspoken speech that people use to establish, preserve, and fortify their social connections with one another (Wang et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the idea of phatic communication, which doesn't require information sharing or a clear goal when used, begs the question of whether it's necessary or beneficial. Binambuni and Mulatsih (2023) aimed to address this problem by demonstrating the importance of phatic communication in informal conversation engagements. This research project attempts to demonstrate how phatic communication, as depicted in the movie "Wonder" (Chbosky, 2017), can serve as a unifying force between people by looking at the life of Auggie, a youngster who has Treacher Collins syndrome.

In another investigation, Rahardi (2022) utilizes a pragmatic approach specific to Indonesian culture to elucidate the triadicities that define phatic functions. The study focuses on the Javanese culture and employs observation techniques to gather and present data, encompassing both conversational and non-verbal modes of communication. Identity analysis is conducted to evaluate and compare data within their respective contexts. The research identifies 15 distinct types of triadic pragmatic meanings in Indonesian phatic operations, including small discourse, kindness, dissatisfaction, saluting, making fun, applauding, expressing regret, avoiding, disagreeing, negating, introducing oneself, requesting, emphasizing, and pointing out. These triadicities illustrate the diverse phatic functions within Javanese culture, contributing to the unique characteristics of the local language.

In order to help students effectively avoid pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication, Rao's (2023) research on pragmatic failure from a cultural point of view attempted to investigate the causes of junior high school students' pragmatic failures from the standpoint of cultural transfer. It also calls teachers' attention to the need for students to develop their pragmatic competence.

At Albaha University in Saudi Arabia, undergraduate EFL students were the subject of Alzahrani's (2023) study, which analyzed the use of pragmatic markers in oral presentations. The findings indicated that Saudi EFL undergraduate students commonly use deference and paraphrase markers in their oral presentations, possibly reflecting Saudi religious and cultural norms. However, the students' speeches lacked coherence, interjections, and pauses. The study emphasized the need to help Saudi Arabian undergraduate EFL students improve their proficiency with pragmatic markers to enhance their oral presentation skills in college and future employment.

Alharbi (2023) delved into the pragmatic analysis of "feminism" in spoken Arabic, examining the perspectives of young male and female Saudi adults in Riyadh. It aimed to illuminate the diverse pragmatic interpretations of feminism in spoken Arabic and explored how young

adults in Riyadh analyze and use the concept differently. The study revealed contrasting perceptions based on gender, with females holding a favorable view and males perceiving it negatively. The researcher attributed this difference to biological, psychological, cultural, and traditional distinctions. Ultimately, the study sought to enhance the understanding of "feminism," benefiting both the Saudi community and the field of pragmatics.

In an era of global interconnection, effective translation has become crucial for smooth cross-cultural communication. Project management and execution have been transformed by translation management systems (TMS), which have completely changed the translation environment. With an emphasis on Saudi Arabia, recent research published by Alsubhi (2024) looks into how translation services and qualified translators feel about integrating and using TMS.

Phatic communion, originating from Malinowski's anthropological studies, has emerged as a fascinating realm of linguistic and cultural exploration. It's those seemingly mundane expressions - greetings, parting words, and social niceties - that form the glue of daily human interaction. While they may seem trivial or routine, these expressions are deeply rooted in the cultural ethos of a society (Alqinai, 2010, 2011; Fadhil, 2022). Arabic cultures, celebrated for their warmth and hospitality, have a rich tapestry of phatic expressions that are both intricate and profound.

Delving into the realm of phatic communication in various cultures reveals their intricate fabric made of societal norms and values. Alqinai (2011) studies the translation of phatic expression in Kuwait. Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2015) highlighted the significance of understanding these ritualistic phrases in fostering successful cross-cultural communication. However, a noticeable gap exists in studies that have focused on translating these expressions from (Saudi) Arabic to English. Often, direct translations fall short, either sounding too formal, overly literal, or simply out of place, thus, becoming a much-needed area of study for the foreign language as well as translation studies learner. This dearth of studies that systematically categorize these expressions, mapping them against their potential English counterparts has prompted the researchers to undertake this task here, a gap that is not just linguistic but also cultural.

3. Methods

Research design

This research adopts a mix of quantitative functional design. It follows the quantitative design in collecting data to answer the first and second questions of the research. Furthermore, the third research question is answered by analyzing the efficacy of translation of Arabic phatic expressions. The data of the study were collected at Shaqra University in the second semester of the academic year 2022/2023.

Participants

21 students in the final year of the English Language Program at Shaqra University participated in the study in addition to translation input over Google Translate (GT). The students were all aged between 21 and 27. So, a convenience sample method is adopted. Consent to participate was sought at the commencement of the study.

Instruments

A phatic communication utterances corpus developed from five popular Arabic movies was used to compare the translation of phatic expressions from Arabic to English in both human and machine modes. A corpus was created using five popular Arabic language films identified by seeking recommendations from amongst the researchers' group of friends and students at the university and collating this data with the IMDb (Internet Movie Database) rating and Netflix. Five of the top-rated films were viewed to form the corpus. These were: 1. "Head to Head" (Najer, 2023) (action drama); 2. "Route 10" (Naeem, 2022) (family drama); 3. "From the Ashes" (Alfahad, 2024) (thriller); 4. "Alkhallat" (Alammari, 2023) (emotional drama); 5. "Aya" (Moufida, 2017) (message). A corpus of 164 instances of phatic communication were identified from the five movies after each film was watched twice so as not to lose on any data. These were duly classified by three Arabic native speakers; seven utterances that faced disagreement in classification between the evaluators were dropped.

The methodology of recording all responses to every expression, even when multiple translations were provided by participants, reflects a commitment to inclusivity and a recognition of the diversity in language use and interpretation. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the potential variations in translation choices made by the final year students.

The researchers' role in evaluating the translation responses adds a layer of expertise to the analysis. Being bilingual and teachers of linguistics and translation studies at Jazan and Shaqra universities, the researchers possess the necessary language proficiency and pedagogical insights to assess the accuracy, cultural appropriateness, and fluency of the translations. This personalized evaluation approach adds depth to the findings, offering a nuanced understanding of the students' translation competence beyond mere quantitative data.

4. Results and Discussion

RQ1: What are the categories that phatic communication in Saudi Arabic can be classified into?

After dropping the redundant responses, the final data comprised 157 instances of Arabic phatic communication totalling eight types or categories of phatic communication summarized below:

Greeting Rituals: This category encompasses various standard greetings exchanged during different times of the day or in specific social contexts, such as "As-salamu alaykum" (Peace be upon you) and its equally standard response, "Wa alaykum as-salam"; farewell expressions like "Ma'a as-salama" (Go^{with} with peace).

Politeness Expressions: Politeness expressions play a significant role in Saudi Arabic phatic communication. These include phrases like "hala" (Hello); Expressions such as "Jazak Allah khair" (May^{ٱللّٰه} Allah reward you with goodness) to show appreciation. and "Shukran" (Thank you).

Inquiries About Well-being: Saudis often engage in exchanging inquiries about each other's well-being and that of their families. Questions like "Aishloonak?" (How are you?); asking about one's health and the health of their family members, with "kayfa al'ahal?" "Uloomak?" "Akhbarak?" (How are you?) are common, as are responses such as "Alhamdulillah" (Praise be to God).

Expressions of Blessings and Good Wishes: Saudi Arabs often exchange blessings and good wishes, especially during religious and social occasions. Phrases such as "Allah yebarek feek" (May Allah bless you) and "Mabrook" (Congratulations) fall into this category.

Small Talk Topics: Phatic communication in Saudi Arabic may involve discussing neutral topics like weather, family, food, and local events, or small talk and expressions used in casual conversation, like "wesh aljedid?" (What's up?) or Afwan "excuse me", or "Allah yes'edk" (May Allah make you happy") as a way to initiate or maintain conversation and build rapport.

Acknowledgment and Agreement: Phatic expressions like "Insha'Allah" (God willing) and "Masha'Allah" (What God has willed) are commonly used to express acknowledgment, agreement, or acceptance; and for confirming understanding or agreement, expressions such as "Na'am/eih" (Yes) or "La" (No) are commonplace.

Farewells and Departure Rituals: Similar to greetings, farewells and departure rituals also form part of phatic communication in Saudi Arabic. Expressions like "Ma'a as-salama" (Goodbye) and "Allah ma'ak" (May God be with you) are examples.

Expressions of Gratitude and Appreciation: Saudis often express gratitude and appreciation for small favors or gestures. Phrases like "Jazak Allah khayran" (May Allah reward you with goodness) are commonly used; for expressing love, care, and concern, phrases like "Ahibbek" (I love you) or "Allah yahfathk" (May Allah protect you) are preferred.

These findings are in line with the previous studies (Coupland, 2003; Fadhil, 2022; Zaman, 2023) which showed that phatic communication plays a crucial role in human interactions by establishing and maintaining social bonds. Recent studies have delved into the outcomes and implications of phatic communication, shedding light on its impact on relationships and social dynamics. Coupland (2003) added that phatic communication participates in fostering a sense of connectedness and belonging among individuals. Fadhil (2022) found that engaging in light, casual conversations, even seemingly trivial exchanges, contributes significantly to the development of social cohesion. Zaman (2023) confirmed that phatic interactions serve as building blocks for stronger interpersonal relationships, creating a foundation of trust and comfort. Moreover, studies have proven that phatic communication serves as a valuable tool in navigating social situations, especially in unfamiliar or ambiguous contexts. This study differs from Rahardi (2022) which listed 15 types of phatic expression in the Indonesian context.

RQ2: What is the distribution of phatic expressions across categories?

All responses were recorded and where there was more than one response to an expression, none were dropped and all recorded against the expression, Table 1.

Table 1. The frequency of phatic expressions across their categories

Category	Frequency	Function
Greetings	37	Importance of polite and warm introductions
Politeness	23	Significance of maintaining courteous communication
Well-being	12	Showing care
Blessings and Good Wishes	17	Maintaining empathy
Small Talk	28	Maintaining conversation
Acknowledgment and Agreement	18	Showing understanding
Farewells	7	Reflecting intimacy or etiquette of departure
Gratitude	15	Showing appreciation

The researchers analyzed the translation responses based on three criteria: accuracy, cultural appropriateness, and fluency. The gathered data provides valuable insights into the translation competence of the final year students in the English Language Program at the specified university, specifically in the context of rendering phatic expressions from the five selected films.

The distribution of phatic expressions across various categories reveals interesting patterns. The highest frequency is observed in the category of greetings, comprising 37 expressions, emphasizing the importance of polite and warm introductions in diverse social settings. Politeness expressions follow closely with 23 instances, showcasing the significance of maintaining courteous communication in the translated output. Inquiries about well-being, blessings, good wishes, small talk topics, acknowledgement and agreement, farewell and departure rituals, as well as expressions of gratitude and appreciation, further contribute to the comprehensive analysis of the students' translation capabilities in handling a diverse array of phatic communication scenarios.

Interestingly, the term 'Allah' showed notable recurrence across the responses (39 times), suggesting a cultural and religious dimension inherent in the phatic expressions analyzed. This finding underscores the importance of religious and cultural sensitivity in translation, especially when dealing with expressions that carry significant meaning and connotations. These findings align with Sofiyanti (2023), who confirmed that the main function of phatic expressions [is] to maintain the social relationship. Therefore, translations that shift the

relationship between the people participating in the communication process are “less acceptable”. In the current study it is noted that many of the Arabic phatic expressions lose their inherent cultural quality (of intimacy) when translated. This loss is more severe when GT is used for translation than when manual translation is undertaken. This finding establishes that translation techniques/media impact the translation quality. Thus, translators should consider the most appropriate technique for the source text. It is found that Newmark's (1998) communicative translation and Nida's (1964) dynamic equivalence can be effective techniques, but not all the time because not all phatic communion stances have equivalent counterparts or similar functionally communicative instances in all languages. The term "Thank you" in English, for example, has been observed to "dynamically" respond to a wide array of phatic Arabic responses. Findings are also supported by previous studies (e.g., Bytyci, 2009; Carver, 2023; Markantonatou et al., 2016).

In conclusion, results focusing on the translation of phatic expressions from selected films, presents a rich source of information. The distribution of expressions across categories, the recurrence of religious terms, and the researchers' personalized evaluation contribute to a holistic understanding of the students' translation competence in handling phatic communication. This study not only sheds light on the students' proficiency but also opens avenues for potential improvements in translation pedagogy and curriculum design within the program.

RQ3: To what extent do the English Google Translate equivalents capture the cultural essence of the Saudi Arabic expressions?

Translations of the 157 Saudi phatic expressions from Google Translate highlight the paradigmatic difference between not only the two languages, but also the two cultures. For one, most of these Arabic phatic expressions have no English equivalents not only because of the nature of the former, but also because of the range of possible expressions in Arabic. For example, the English expression, *God Bless you* (from Google Translate) can be variously expressed in Arabic as *بارك في حلالكم* (may your wealth be multiplied), *أكرمك الله* (May Allah show His generosity to you), *جاد الله عليكم* (May Allah give you from His bounty), *زادكم الله من فضله* (May Allah increase your wealth from His bounty), *أغناكم الله* (May Allah make you rich). In other words, the GT equivalents in English for some stock Arabic phatic expressions are lesser in range. Two, Arabic expressions centre around showing exceptional generosity and respect to the recipient of the message with a great deal of religious linkages as borne out by the occurrence of the word *Allah* as many as 39 times in 157 Arabic expressions. Finally, expletives or taboo words are absent in Arabic phatic expressions in the eight categories identified in this study. Further, GT output of the Arabic expressions is completely off the mark, in fact, using these may lead to total breakdown of communication. Some examples are: *The house is your house* (GT) for *البيت بيتكم*, *Oh, welcome to the rain and the spray* (GT) for *يا هلا بالطش والرش*, and *Hello million* (GT) for *مرحبا مليون*. However, the findings indicate that the study participants performed far better in identifying the English equivalents to the Arabic phatic expressions and exhibited an exceptional cultural sensitivity in their translation. Some examples are: *Honoured to know you* (communicative translation) for *والنعم* versus *And blessings* (GT); *The honour is mine* (communicative translation) for *ما عليك زود* versus *You don't have to supply it* (GT).

These findings deepen the contradiction of the ability of online application to produce good translation. However, previous studies recommend the use of applications like Google Translate (Bin-Hady, 2023; Lee, 2023) and affirmed the necessity to conduct post-editing of such output. Culture-specific terms are more problematic even for translators to render (Bin-Hady et al., 2023; Katan & Taibi, 2021).

5. Conclusion

Phatic communication, often referred to as "small talk" or "social banter," plays a crucial role in human interactions by establishing and maintaining social bonds. Moreover, studies have proven that phatic communication serves as a valuable tool in navigating social situations, especially in unfamiliar or ambiguous contexts. However, it is essential to acknowledge the cultural nuances that shape phatic communication and its outcomes. It is pivotal to consider cultural backgrounds, norms, and expectations when interpreting the results. Cultural variations in the significance and form of small talk may influence the perceived outcomes of phatic communication, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of its role in different social contexts. This is also borne out by the current findings: Literally translating the Arabic phatic expressions into English will not only sound foreign but may even fail to establish the desired social ties. Recent research on phatic communication underscores its importance in establishing social ties, navigating social landscapes, and promoting mental well-being. These findings provide valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of human interaction and emphasize the multifaceted role that seemingly trivial conversations play in shaping our social experiences.

6. Recommendations

The study has produced a comprehensive categorization of Saudi Arabic phatic communication expressions that can be used as an introduction for translation students into the delicate field of translating phatic expressions. Based on the study findings, it is recommended that apart from textual translation, course content should also include exposure to different cultures, especially to those that come in close contact with the Saudi culture. As an extension of this, a dedicated duration of the class time should be allotted to phatic expressions in English as English and Translation programs are very popular in most Saudi universities. A multimodal approach should be adopted to familiarize students with the importance and use of phatic communication, for example by using feature films as they are a rich repertoire of authentic and varied language use.

7. Study Limitations

This study is limited to the phatic communion repertoire in the Saudi culture and how they can be processed in English, whether manually or using GT. Other Arabic cultures, which may or may not correspond exactly to the Saudi context, are not included. However, it is

supposed that the phatic communion dynamics applying to the Saudi context do not vary much from other Arabic countries and, hence, generalizations can be made at least in the Arabic speaker communities.

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Authors contributions

Dr. Salmeen Abdulrahman Abdullah Al-Awaid developed the research methodology, conducted the literature review and revised the first draft. He was also in charge of making the necessary corrections proposed by the review committee. Dr. Abdullah Saleh Aziz Mohammed was responsible for data collection and analysis, and writing the research draft. The entire research was generally done in close collaboration between both authors.

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Competing interests

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No additional data are available.

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