Original Paper

How to Address Your Instructor: An Analysis of Classroom Discourse at Saudi Arabian Universities

Albatool Mohammed Abalkheel[1*]

[1] Assistant Professor of Linguistics, Department of English Language and Translation, College of Arabic Language and Social Studies, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia

[*] Albatool Mohammed Abalkheel, E-mail: a.abalkheel@qu.edu.sa

Abstract

Hofstede's (1986) concept of national culture includes the key dimension of how power distance affects interactions between interlocutors on all levels and settings of a society, including that of the university. An examination of such interactions, including the expected linguistic behaviors of instructors and students, is quite useful, because cultural values and the archetypal roles of instructors and their students tend to shed light on the relationships and general atmosphere of not just the higher education setting, but also of the society as a whole. In the large power distance culture of Saudi Arabia, this concept is examined through an analysis of the different address terms students use in classroom discourse to address their instructors. Since the use of titles is related to classroom interaction, it is affected by power distance. This study investigates and analyzes the discourse of the classroom in Saudi universities to identify titles and address terms used in student-instructor communications. The research found that the terms students employ with instructors include social and academic terms; whereas first and last names were usually avoided. Effects of potential factors are explained in terms of Hofstede's (1986) concept of power distance.

Keywords

address terms, classroom discourse, national culture, power distance, student-instructor relationship

1. Theoretical Background

People communicate with each other to satisfy their fundamental human needs. That communication would be composed of "verbal and non-verbal cues to ventilate [people'] thoughts and feelings" (Al-Ghamdi, 2019, p. 115). Even minimal words have some sort of communicative meanings, such as the Spanish interactional particle "eh" in Mexican Spanish talk as "its production makes next turn

relevant some sort of response from the recipient, i.e., it pursues a response", indicates a movement to a new topic, "works as a next turn repair initiator", and "indicates the absence of an answer and request it" (Carranza, 2019, p. 7).

Part of people's communication is the way they address each other. Linguistically speaking, address terms are formulaic verbal behavioral words used to designate the person being spoken to (i.e., the addressee). They "constitute an important part of verbal behavior through which the behavior, norms and practices of a society can be identified" (Afful, 2006, p. 77). They are used in a variety of ways, in both written discourse and spoken communication for different purposes. Even informal address terms signal different messages. For instance, Parkinson (2020) investigated the use of the terms "guys" and "mate" in a corpus of classroom discourse at a vocational institution in New Zealand and found that these two address terms have different functions. The first one, "guys":

> Was used to attract students' attention, to indicate the start of, end of, or change in task, and to emphasize important content, while 'mate' functioned largely in mitigating face threats and in affective functions, such as encouragement and praise. (Parkinson, 2020, p. 81)

Speaker may address their interlocutors using different address terms, switching from one to another. For instance, a speaker may first use the term "sir" with an addressee, and then "Doctor". Gender, age, social group, and personal relationships affect usage. Among the possible choices people may use are: personal names, pronouns, titles related to occupation, kinship-related terms, religious titles, honorifics (Aliakbari & Toni, 2013), or nicknames (Wardhaugh, 2011). All such terms are related to the linguistic and social system of the given culture and language. "The correct and appropriate use of address terms closely relates to culture" (L. Zhang & Zhang, 2019, p. 243).

Titles and address terms are part "of a complete semantic system having to do with social relationships" (Fasold, 1990, p. 2). While using these terms, people exhibit their social awareness linguistically, and tend to maintain the existing social relationship between addresser and addressee (Artika, 2008), in a similar way of alternating speech acts such refusing a suggestion from a person with a higher social status (Al-Ghamdi & Alrefaee, 2020). Through these choices, we express the degree of intimacy, feeling of respect, solidarity, and/or familiarity between the parties (Pratiwi, 2010; Naeni, 2011; Arini, 2016). These are even used to construct fluid relationships in some situations besides those that create meaning, as found in the case of Japanese drama (Yonezawa, 2019). These linguistic devices sustain social bonds and manage social distance. An interlocutor's failure "to apply an appropriate address term is likely to be perceived as impoliteness, ill-breeding, or even signal the breakdown of social order" (Lee & Shanmuganathan, 2019, p. 199).

Social relationships and linguistic choices adhere to power distance, one of Hofstede's (1986) dimensions of "national culture". Power distance, a measure of the interpersonal power between a superior and a subordinate, refers to "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and [organizations] within a country expect and accept that the power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 98). Several studies have found a correlation between linguistic choices and power distance,

where people from relatively high PD cultures opt for more formal choices (e.g., Bjørge, 2007; Abubaker, 2008). In Saudi Arabia, a country with large power distance, linguistic choices -- including address terms that reflect inequality – can be expected to dominate discourse. Much linguistics research has examined the concept of address terms in different languages from a variety of perspectives (e.g., Seongha, 2019; Yonezawa, 2019; Parkinson, 2020).

However, an examination of address terms in the specific instance of discourse between interlocutors at Saudi universities has not been undertaken. This gap needs to be fulfilled to get an aspect of the culture of the academic society in Saudi universities as expressed by undergraduate students. The best option of having such insight is via observing the language of its people (Dobric, 2018). Therefore, the present study investigates the use of address terms in the communication that occurs between students and instructors at Saudi universities. It is also designed to shed light on whether certain factors affect the use of such terms (e.g., gender, students' academic year, academic rank of instructor, and formality of setting), with an eye toward Hofstede's (1980, 1991, 1997) power dimensions. Gender of instructors was not looked at due to the fact that usually students and instructors in Saudi universities are of the same gender.

2. Methodology

This was a quantitative survey study that involved a 12-question electronic survey that was designed subsequent to the construction of the literature review on the topic. The survey was designed for use with students; it involved a series of questions that asked respondents to choose the title or address term they would use in the given interaction. Once the author completed creating the survey, it was reviewed by three experienced professors of linguistics. Following this, the survey was then translated into Arabic in consultation with three bilingual educators whose first language is Arabic and who speak English fluently. The researcher and these three bilingual educators translated the survey independently and then the researcher incorporated the feedback of the other three into the questionnaires. The link to the electronic survey was disseminated via social media.

2.1 Participants

The study sample comprised 168 Saudi undergraduate students (78 males/90 females). They belong to different universities in Saudi Arabia. Their age ranged from 19-24. These and other demographic details of the survey respondents are presented on Table 1.

2.2 Data Analysis

A quantitative analysis was undertaken to determine the types of address terms students at Saudi universities use when addressing their instructors. The responses of all the participants were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Identified address terms were then summarized and identified. All quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Percentages and standard statistical procedures were used to compare the dependent variable (i.e., address terms) and the independent variables (i.e., gender, students' academic year, academic rank of instructor, and formality of setting).

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Table 1. Demographic Information of Students

Variable	Students	
	Subgroup	N
Gender	Male	78
	Female	90
	Total	168
Academic Level of Student	Freshman	44
	Sophomore	38
	Junior	51
	Senior	35
	Total	168

3. Results and Discussion

By analyzing the survey responses, the researcher was able to determine the range and distribution of address terms employed by students at Saudi universities. The majority of the students who participated in this study (64.88%) indicated their preference to use academic titles, such as "Professor", "Doctor", and "Teacher". The rest of the student respondents (32.73%) preferred using social titles, such as "Mr", "Ms", and "Ma'am", with only a small percentage who preferred using instructors' first or last name (2.97%). There was no significant difference in the use of address terms depending on students' academic year, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Effects of Students' Academic Year

Subgroup	Social Title		Academic Title		First or Last Name	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Freshman	15	34%	29	66%	0	0%
Sophomore	13	34.21%	23	60.52%	2	5%
Junior	14	27.45%	35	68. 60%	2	3.92%
Senior	13	37%	22	62.85%	1	2.85%
Total	55	32.73%	109	64.88%	5	2.97%

However, student gender, academic rank of instructor, and formality of setting significantly affected the types of address terms students use in conversation with instructors. Even though students of both genders preferred using academic titles over social titles and instructors last name, female students indicated their preference to use social titles more than male students (43% and 20.51% respectively). None of those female respondents indicated any preference of using instructors' first or last name (see Table 3).

Table 3. Effects of Students' Gender

	Social Title		Academic Title		First or Last Name	
Subgroup	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Male	16	20.51%	57	73%	5	2.97%
Female	39	43%	51	57%	0	0
Total	55	32%	108	64%	5	2.97%

For academic rank of instructor, it was found that students prefer to use academic address terms in their conversations with instructors with higher academic ranks more than social address terms. For instance, most of the student respondents indicated they prefer to use social titles (67.30%) when addressing teaching assistants (TAs); whereas, just 2.38% of these respondents indicated the use of social titles when addressing professors. In contrast, 30.30% of students prefer to use academic titles when addressing TAs and 97.62% stated they use these titles with professors (see Table 4). None of the students stated a practice of using professors' first name or last name; however, they indicated they sometimes use these as referents – such as when referring to a professor who is not present in casual conversation with a fellow student. In contrast, students were more tolerated with using instructors' first or last names to address lower academic ranks, such as TAs (2.40%).

Table 4. Effects of Instructors' Academic Rank

	Social Title		Academic Title		First or Last Name	
Subgroup	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Teaching Assistant	113	67.30%	51	30.30%	4	2.40%
Lecturer	64	38.32%	103	61.30%	1	0.60%
Assistant Professor	31	18%	137	82%	0	0%
Associate Professor	31	19%	136	81%	0	0%
Professor	4	2.38%	164	97.62	0	0%
Total	244	29%	591	70.40%	5	0.60%

When it came to the type of address terms employed as related to the setting, the findings were that only a small percentage of students (29%) use social titles in formal settings; in these situations, the vast majority (71%) use academic titles. In informal settings, students asserted a higher percentage of preference for using social titles (40%) and a light lower percentage of preference for academic ones (34.40%). Some students (2.97%) indicated that they may use their instructor's first or last name in informal settings (see Table 5).

Table 5. Effects of Formality of Setting

	Social Title		Academic Title		First or Last Name	
Subgroup	**N**	**Percentage**	**N**	**Percentage**	**N**	**Percentage**
Formal setting	49	29%	119	71%	0	0%
Informal setting	68	40%	95	57%	5	2.97%
Total	117	34.40%	214	64%	5	1.50%

This examination of the discourse at Saudi universities bases its identification of the use of these different address terms and titles in Hofstede's dimension of power distance. Saudi Arabia's large power distance is clearly exhibited in the patterns of the study respondents' use of address terms. Certain types of terms emerged from the analysis of the address terms used in discourses at Saudi universities. These included students' use of social titles (e.g., Mr., Mrs., and Ms.) and academic titles (e.g., Professor and Doctor). Saudi university students exhibit and acknowledge instructors' subordinate position by adhering to the high power distance of the overall Saudi culture through different means, including through linguistic choices.

Students' unwillingness to use the first or last names of instructors and their preference for the use of academic titles when addressing instructors, reflect their dependent position to their teachers. This respect for their instructors' greater authority and experience dominates to a degree that causes students to find it almost impossible to employ address terms that essentially place the teacher on their same level – such as by using first names as they would in discourse with fellow students and friends. These linguistic choices acknowledge the differences between the parties, especially in situations with scholars of higher academic rank and in formal settings. This indicates that students at Saudi universities acknowledge their large power distance culture linguistically, as represented by their accurate and proper use of address terms that no doubt arise out of their experience with the greater power distance culture of Saudi Arabia.

5. Conclusion

Titles and address terms employed during discourse at Saudi universities vary depending upon the interlocutors. This study found that the terms students employ with instructors include mainly social and academic terms. Factors that were identified as potentially affecting what address terms are used include: gender, students' year of study, instructors' academic rank, and formality of setting. Interlocutors engaged in discourse in the classrooms of Saudi universities adhere to the norms of Saudi's large power distance culture as reflected in students' linguistic choices when addressing their instructors. Students acknowledge academic differences between themselves and their instructors and express such differences in their use of titles when addressing their instructors. The unwillingness of students to address their instructors by their first names reveals their reluctance to minimize the

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distance between them and to place these superiors on an almost equal level. Such usage of titles and address terms reflects and confirms Hofstede's (1986) concept of power distance. Further research is needed to investigate how instructors address their students at Saudi universities. Such further examinations could also assess whether all interlocutors involved in the Saudi universities discourse adder linguistically to power distance or it is just students who follow this norm.

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