

## Interrogative Sentences as Indirect Speech Acts in Arabic and English: A Contrastive Study

**Hussein Awad Ibrahim, Siham Mohammed Hasan Alkawwaz**

University of Kufa, Faculty of languages

**Ali Muhammed Ridha Abdulwahid Smesim**

University of Kufa, Faculty of Education

**Abstract:** This study endeavours to provide a contrastive analysis of English and Arabic regarding the use of interrogative sentences as indirect speech acts. It is concerned with offering an account of how similar and different Arabic and English interrogative sentences are with respect to their use as indirect speech acts. Furthermore, this study aims at finding out the extent to which Arabic and English interrogative sentences are used in pragmatics to indicate indirectness.

In this respect, it is hypothesized that both Arabic and English languages indirectly make use of interrogatives to carry out a variety of pragmatic functions. It is also hypothesized that different and various types of interrogative sentences in both English as well as Arabic express different instead of identical speech acts.

Thus, a contrastive analysis of representative examples from both languages has been conducted with a demonstrably successful application of Speech Act Theory as a model of analysis. The study has proved its hypotheses and has shown noticeable differences and similarities between English and Arabic interrogative sentences with respect to the indirect speech acts and functions performed.

**Keywords:** interrogative sentences, indirect speech acts, similar, different, pragmatic functions.

### Section One

#### Introduction

The main problem this study is concerned with is the similarities and differences between Arabic and English with regards to the use of interrogative sentences as indirect speech acts. Furthermore, this study also concerns itself with highlighting the extent to which Speech Act Theory- namely, the use of interrogative forms as indirect speech acts - is applicable to Arabic as compared to English. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no prior investigation of the kind offered by this study- especially of interrogative sentences being used as indirect speech acts in Arabic and English- has been conducted.

Thus, the focus of this paper is to address the following research questions:

- What are the pragmatic functions achieved by the indirect use of interrogative sentences in Arabic and English?
- How are different indirect speech acts fulfilled by a variety of interrogative sentences in both languages?
- What are the main differences and similarities between Arabic and English with respect to the use of interrogative sentences as indirect speech acts?

It is hypothesized that both Arabic and English languages indirectly utilize interrogative sentences for a variety of pragmatic functions. It is also hypothesized that different types of interrogative sentences in both languages perform different indirect speech acts.

This study aims at finding out the extent to which Arabic and English interrogative sentences are used in pragmatics to indicate indirectness. It also aims at discussing and comparing the use of interrogative sentences as indirect speech acts in both languages. Additionally, this study is also aimed to demonstrate applicability of Speech Act Theory to Arabic as compared to English, particularly with regards to the use of indirect speech act.

To test its hypotheses and achieve its objectives, the following procedures have been adopted:

- Presenting a theoretical overview of Speech Acts Theory, namely indirect speech acts of interrogative sentences in English and Arabic.
- Providing a pragma-linguistic study and comparison in the light of Speech Acts Theory, with relevant examples taken from both languages to support the findings and test the hypotheses of the study.
- Drawing conclusions with respect to the differences and similarities between the two languages- Arabic and English- regarding the use of interrogative sentences as indirect speech acts.

## Section Two

### Theoretical Background

Although pragmatics has been defined from different perspectives, it is generally defined as the study of “meaning in use” or “meaning in context” (Thomas, 1995, p. 2). Besides, Yule (1996, p. 3) defines pragmatics as “the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader)”. Thus, pragmatics concerns what is meant by what is said. Moreover, pragmatics is concerned with the study of actual utterances; the study of meaning in use (Lyons, 1977, p. 171). Levinson (1983, p. 32) also adds that pragmatics studies that part of meaning that is not totally truth-conditional with more focus on performance rather than competence.

Levinson (1983, p. 10) maintains that “in pragmatics, Speech Acts Theory remains, along with presupposition and implicature in particular, one of the central phenomena that any general pragmatic theory must account for”. In this respect, pragmatics subsumes such aspects as implicature, deixis, speech acts and the like.

Among all of the general theories that concern themselves with language use, Speech Acts Theory has probably triggered the most widespread interest (Levinson, 1983; Huang, 2007-2012). Austin’s (1962) most well-known work *How to Do Things with Words* originated the theory of Speech Acts, which stood as a true challenge to the formal as well as philosophical views. Austin

(1962) pointed out that language users employ their language to 'do things'. Thus, uttering a sentence such as '*Can you pass the salt?!*' is understood as doing or performing something, which is actually a *request*. In this respect, with every utterance produced, speakers perform a variety of speech acts, such as blaming, complaining or stating an opinion, warning, naming, advising and the like. Besides, Austin's well-known student Searle made significant modifications and further advanced Austin's ideas. Notwithstanding, the main idea or principle of Speech Act Theory is that uttering a sentence is an action that concords with social standards, expectations and conventions (Huang, 2007, p. 93).

## 2.1. Speech Acts

Austin (1962, as cited in Huang 2007, p. 96-104) maintains that actions performed by means of utterances are referred to as speech acts, e.g., apology, promise, complaint and so on so forth. Thus, a speech act is something expressed by a language user that not only provides information, but does an action as well. For instance, depending on the context in which it is said, the same sentence '*I'm here now*' might be regarded as a reassurance, an apology or a warning.

Austin (1962) made an initial distinction between what he called 'performatives' and 'constatives'. He then rejected such a distinction and developed a general theory of speech acts. Austin (1962) believed that every utterance accomplishes a specific act in addition to having whatever meaning it may have. Speech acts are thus defined as actions carried out by utterances, such as naming, requesting, promising, and so forth (Yule, 1996; Huang, 2006).

In his famous book *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin (1962) introduced a distinction with respect to the three acts one simultaneously performs when producing an utterance (see also Thomas, 1995; Grundy, 2008):

1- **Locutionary act** (what is said): this is the basic act of speaking, or producing a meaningful expression e.g., in "*It's me again*" meaning by that the speaker has returned to a place or a situation that s/he was once in.

2- **Illocutionary act** (what is done or what counts as doing): it conveys the kind of purpose the speaker hopes to fulfill or the kind of action they hope to carry out by speaking. Illocutionary acts include things like blaming, apologizing, threatening, and so forth. These functions or actions are also sometimes referred to as the illocutionary force of the speech; for example, the statement "I'm here now" could be interpreted as an apology or a warning.

The most common method of indicating the illocutionary force is by the use of an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID), as termed by Searle (1969). One kind of IFID is an explicit performative such as *promise* or *warn* in *I promise you that ...* or *I warn you that...* besides other types such as stress, intonation, gesture and so on so forth.

3- **Perlocutionary act** (effect): this is principally the effect of what is uttered on the hearer. It is a consequence or a result of speaking and could be either intentional or not. In other words, it is the actual effect or the act that is performed via or as a result of saying something.

Gruber (2014) points out that Austin's (1962) theory builds on the fact that language can oftentimes be utilized actually to perform an action. For instance, for the purpose of baptizing a Christian child, the priest will utter such words as *I baptize you...*, and as a result of uttering these words, the child will get baptized. Similarly, when a very important person names something like a ship at its launch, s/he will say something like *I name this ship The Flying Mansion*, and so it becomes the name of the ship. The verbs in these sentences -*baptize*, *name*- are referred to as

performatives, since they literally and efficiently perform an action (See also Huang, 2007; Yule, 1996).

### 2.1.1. Direct and Indirect Speech Acts

Searle (1979, as cited in Huang, 2007) made the classical distinction between direct and indirect speech acts (see also Thomas, 1995). As Yule (1996, p. 54) points out, a different approach for distinguishing types of speech acts can be made according to structure or form. A direct relationship between a form (declarative, interrogative, and imperative) and a function (statement, question, command, and request) results in a direct speech act. On the other hand, an indirect relationship between form and function leads to an indirect speech act. Phrased differently, when form and function match, the resulting effect is a direct speech act. For example, *The earth is definitely flat* is a declarative utilized to make a statement or assertion, in which case it is functioning as a direct speech act. But when form and function do not match, the resultant effect is an indirect speech act. For example, the question *Can you open the door for me?* is an indirect speech act because it is an interrogative form functioning as a request. Different forms can be employed to achieve the same essential function. For example, the basic function of all the following utterances is a command or a request:

A. *Move out of my way!* B. *You know you are standing in front of me.* C. *Do you have to stand in front me like that?*

Furthermore, one of the commonest kinds of indirect speech acts in English has the form of an interrogative, e.g., using a question like *Could you pass the salt?* as a polite way of requesting someone to pass the salt. Indirect speech acts are typically and almost universally linked with greater politeness in English than direct speech acts (Yule, 1996).

This paper adopts Speech Acts Theory as a theoretical framework for study. Following Searle's (1979) distinction between direct and indirect speech acts, this study is concerned particularly with indirect speech acts and their association with interrogative sentences in Arabic and English.

## Section Three

### 3.1. English Interrogative Sentences as Indirect Speech Acts

When a sentence type is employed to do the speech act conventionally and regularly associated with it, it is deemed as a direct speech act. In this regard, as a direct speech act, the declarative has the illocutionary force of a statement, an interrogative has the illocutionary force of a question, and an imperative has the illocutionary force of a directive (Downing & Locke, 2006).

Every sentence type can accomplish different speech acts in English. When a sentence type performs another function that is not typically associated with it, it is -in this case, considered an indirect speech act. That is, it counts as an act that is distinct or different from the one it typically corresponds to (Downing & Locke, 2006).

Allan (1986, p. 203) explains how English interrogative sentences can be employed for performing different indirect speech acts. In other words, there could be a kind of correspondence between the sentence type (interrogative) and its function (question). In this case, the interrogative form functions as a question. For example, the following sentence can accomplish a direct speech, which is asking:

- *What are you doing?*

In this sentence, the speaker asks the addressee to tell him/her something.

Interrogative sentences in English can be classified according to their form. Their indirect functions will be illustrated with each type. Interrogative sentences in English are mainly divided into the following: Wh- questions, yes-no questions, alternative questions, and tag questions (Allan, 1986).

### 3.1.1. Wh-Questions

A wh-questions starts with what is referred to as a 'wh-element'. According to Leech (2006, p. 125), wh-questions are different from yes-no questions since they permit and expect an open-ended or a huge number of answers. The direct speech act is asking for information. However, wh-questions are also utilized for the purpose of performing indirect speech acts. Eastwood (1994, p. 35) maintains that the context of situation determines the kind of speech act that is performed. For example, the wh-question *Why don't you change your meds?* is used for performing the act of suggestion, rather than seeking information.

### 3.1.2. Yes-no Questions

Eastwood (1994) points out that yes-no questions in English carry out different indirect speech acts like promising, requesting, etc., as shown in the examples below:

1. *Can you please talk a little bit louder?*
2. *Do you want a glass of water?*
3. *Can't you see I am trying to concentrate here?*

In the first sentence, it can be seen that the sentence has an interrogative form; however, it functions as a request to the addressee to speak louder. Yule (1996) maintains that one of the commonest types with regard to indirect speech in English is the interrogative, whereby what is expected is an action rather than an answer. In the second sentence, even though the form is interrogative, the function is an offer. In the third sentence, a complaint is expressed through an interrogative.

### 3.1.3. Alternative Questions

According to Quirk et al. (1985, p. 823) English possesses two kinds of alternative questions. The first one is very much like yes-no questions whereas the second one resembles wh-questions. The illocutionary force in both cases is looking or asking for information, as pointed out in the examples below:

- *Would you like coffee, or tea?*
- *What would you like to have? Coffee or tea?*

### 3.1.4. Tag Questions

Eastwood (1994, p. 39) points out that tag question is another type of interrogative sentences in English, and like other types of interrogatives, it can also express indirect speech acts. For instance, the tag question in *'You haven't got any money, have you?'* expresses a request rather than asking for information. Similarly, in *'They have got an internet connection, don't they? Everybody has internet nowadays.'* the speaker uses such kind of interrogative (tag question) to express her/his surprise at the idea that somebody may have no internet connection.

## Section Four

### 4.1. Arabic Interrogative Sentences as Indirect Speech Acts

Fayad (1995, p. 220) notes that in Arabic, interrogative sentences are typically created by using such particles as *Matha* ماذا, *Mun* من, *Hamza* الهمزة, *Hal* هل, *Ayna* أين, *Kaifa* كيف, *Mata* متى, *Kum* كم, etc. Besides, such interrogatives are classified into three major kinds: yes-no questions, wh-questions and alternative questions. Yes-no questions are formed via the use of the particle called *Hamza* (الهمزة) and *Hal* (هل), whereas wh-questions are formed by using the rest of the interrogative particles.

#### 4.1.1. Yes-no questions in Arabic

Fayad (1995, p. 220) points out that in the Arabic language, yes-no questions are formed via using *Hal* (هل) and *Hamza* (الهمزة). Such questions are answered by *yes* or *no*.

##### 4.1.1.1. 'Hal' هل

This interrogative construction of yes-no questions in Arabic involves using the particle *Hal* هل. This type of construction can be employed to perform a direct speech act, like that of confirming the content of the question, as exemplified in the sentence below:

➤ هل زرت صديقك؟ (Have you visited your friend?)

Interrogative forms involving the use of *Hal* هل might also be used to accomplish indirect speech acts such as command and suspense, as the examples below illustrate respectively:

➤ (هل انت منته؟) (Will you not refrain?.)

➤ (هل أدلكم على تجارة) (Shall I lead you to a bargain...?)

(Ali, 1987, p. 285)

##### 4.1.1.2. 'Hamza' الهمزة

Interrogative sentences involving the use of *Hamza* الهمزة have the illocutionary force of asking for information. This is exemplified in:

➤ 'Has Zaid passed?' أنجح زيد؟

Furthermore, Omar (1994, p. 301) mentions that *Hamza* can be employed to achieve the indirect speech act of affirmation (الإثبات) i.e., to affirm something to the hearer, e.g.

➤ - (الشرح 1) ألم تشرح لك صدرك؟ - Have we not expanded thy breast? -

Thus, yes-no questions can be used for expressing many indirect speech acts. *Hamza* الهمزة can indicate such acts as threatening 'الوعيد' as in:

➤ (ألم تر كيف فعل ربك بعاد) (الفجر 6)

(Seest thou not how thy Lord dealt with the 'Ad people?)

(Ali, 1987, p. 85)

or contempt 'التحقير' as in:

➤ (Isn't this the person you always praise?) هذا الذي تمتدحه دوما؟

#### 4.1.2. Wh-Questions

According to Al-Hashimi (1999, p. 81), a wh-question is a type of interrogative sentence that functions directly to seek information. This type involves the remainder of wh-words like *Mata* متى, *Ayna* أين, *Kaifa* كيف, *Ma* ما and so on, as the examples below illustrate:



- *When will you graduate?* 'متى ستخرج؟'
- *What is meant by globalisation?* 'ما المقصود بالعولمة؟'

In the examples above, the particle متى *Mata* is used to ask about the time of graduation, and the particle ما *Ma* seeks information about globalisation.

Wh-interrogatives, on the other hand, can be employed in performing a variety of indirect speech acts, as illustrated in the following examples:

- ما أنت والتكنولوجيا؟

*How far from technology are you?*

- كيف لي ان اساعد شخصا يرفض كل مساعدة؟

*How can I help someone who refuses any help?*

The particle ما *Ma* in the sentence above conveys the function of contempt التحقير, and the particle كيف *Kaifa* conveys the speech act of impossibility الاستبعاد (Al Samara'ee, 1990).

#### 4.1.3. Alternative Questions

This is the kind of interrogative sentences whereby Hamza الهمزة is used. The speech act expressed via these sentences is that of specification since they have the function of specifying one of the possibilities that are presented in the question, as in the sentence below:

- أ خديجة مسافرة أم سرور؟

*Is Khadija travelling or Suroor?*

The addressee is expected to provide an answer by specifying one of the people presented in the question (Al-Hashimi, 1999, p. 78).

#### 4.1.4. Tag Questions

Aziz (1989, p. 256) states that in Arabic, tag questions possess only one form, which is ليس كذلك؟ 'isn't it?'. Such a question typically has the illocutionary force of confirmation, as clarified by the following example:

- انها في العمل, اليس كذلك؟

*She is at work, isn't she?*

### Section Five

#### Conclusions

The study has found significant (structural and functional) differences between English and Arabic interrogative sentences with respect to the indirect speech acts performed.

Firstly, the two languages differ from one another regarding the indirect speech acts performed by tag questions. In English, tag questions can perform a variety of acts such as surprise, seeking agreement, invitation and so on, while in Arabic they have no function but confirmation.

Secondly, there are noticeable distinctions with regards to yes-no interrogative sentences in Arabic and English as they express a number of different indirect speech acts. In English, they typically perform requests, surprises, suggestions, complaints, offers, and permissions, whereas Arabic yes-no interrogatives perform such indirect speech acts as affirmation, reproachful denial, contempt, satire, and suspense.

Thirdly, wh-interrogative sentences in the two languages do not perform the same indirect speech acts. In English, they regularly perform the indirect speech acts of command, instructions, advice, criticism, surprise, complaint and request, while Arabic interrogatives regularly perform such indirect acts as kindness, negation, exaggeration, irony, and contempt.

Regarding the similarities, it has been demonstrated throughout the whole study that interrogative sentences in Arabic and English express a variety of indirect speech acts. In both languages, the yes-no question type is the most prominent and prevalent type with respect to accomplishing indirect speech acts. It is used in performing the speech acts of exclamations and requesting in both languages. Furthermore, wh-interrogatives also give rise to a number of indirect speech acts in the two languages. Moreover, English and Arabic alternative interrogative sentences are similar to one another since they are normally used in performing indirect speech acts.

## References

1. The Holy Quran.
2. Al-Hashimi, M. (1999). *Jawāhir al-Balāghah fī al-Ma ‘ānī wa al-Bayān wa al-Badī* [The Jewels of Rhetoric in the Science of the Meanings, Eloquence and Rhetorical Figures]. Beirut, Lebanon: al-Maktabah al-‘Aṣrīyah.
3. Ali, A. Y. (trans.). (1987). *Roman Translation of the Holy Qur'an*. Dutsekano: Alh.Sani Muhammad Danjiri.
4. Al-Jarim, Ali and Amin, Mustafa. (n.d.). *Albalagha Alwadhiha: Albayan, Almaany, Albadia* [The clear rhetoric: clarity, the meanings wonders]. London: Dar al-Ma'arif.
5. Al Samara'ee, F. S. (1990). *Ma'ani Al-Nahu*, Vol.4, Baghdad: Dar Al Hikma Press for Printing and Publishing.
6. Austin, J. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
7. Aziz, Yowell (1989) *A Contrastive Grammar of English and Arabic*. Mosul: University of Mosul.
8. Downing, A., & Locke, P. (2006). *English grammar: A university course*. Routledge.
9. Eastwood, John. (1994). *Oxford Guide of English Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
10. Fayad, Suleiman. (1995). *An-nahw Al-Asri* [Modern Grammar]. Cairo: Al-Ahram Center.
11. Grundy, P. (2008). *Doing Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
12. Huang, Y. (2007). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
13. Leech, Geoffrey (2006). *A Glossary of English Grammar*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
14. Levinson, S. (1997). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
15. Omar, Ahmed Al-Mukhtar, Zahran Mustafa Al-Nahas, Abdel-Latif, Mohamed Hamasa. (1994). *An-nahw Al-Asasi* [Basic Syntax]. Kuwait: That Al-Salasil.
16. Searle, John R. (1975). *A Taxonomy of Speech Acts*. In Gunderson, K. (ed.) Minnesota studies in the philosophy of science 9: language, mind and knowledge. 344–69.
17. Searle, John R. (1979). *Expression and meaning: studies in the theory of speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



18. Stubbs, M. (1983). *Discourse Analysis: The Sociolinguistic Analysis of Natural Language*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
19. Thomas, J. A. (1995). *Meaning in interaction: An introduction to pragmatics*. New York: Routledge.
20. Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.