Face conceptualizations across dialects of Arabic: A variational pragmatic study

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Variational pragmatics explores intra-lingual differences, focusing on pragmatic variation within and across dialects of the same language (Barron and Schneider 2009). As a pluricentric language, Arabic has increasingly garnered scholarly attention regarding pragmatic differences across its diverse national dialects or regional varieties (e.g. Alghazo et al. 2021; El-Dakhs 2021; El-Dakhs and Ahmed 2021; El-Dakhs and Ahmed 2024). Much of this research has focused on differences in the realization of speech acts in production data using elicitation techniques such as discourse completion tests or role plays. While valuable, these methods primarily offer insights into language use within controlled settings, leaving less explored the more nuanced pragmatic variations that occur in natural discourse.

This study investigates the pragmatic concept of "face" across Arabic dialects. Specifically, it compares and contrasts face conceptualizations in different Arabic dialects. While face lexemes do not represent natural language use, they provide valuable insights into the theorization of the concept of face. Following Sifianou (2011: 55) who asserts that ''a theory cannot ignore lay people's notions of lay terms in use'', this study contrasts face lexemes in different Arabic dialects to provide insights into the intra-lingual variation at the level of emic face understandings and use (i.e. face1) in order to contribute to face theory (i.e. face2). To the best of the author's knowledge, few studies have applied a variational pragmatic approach to the concept of face within Arabic dialects.

Due to the challenges in collecting comparable face conceptualization data from speakers of different Arabic dialects through the exclusive use of ethnographic or controlled elicitation techniques, this study adopts an alternative methodology. Barron and Schneider (2009) emphasize that variational pragmatics does not "dictate" specific methods; rather, it

encourages contrasting the different varieties of a language. Accordingly, there are no "best" methods to use in variational pragmatics as the methods would change according to the study's research objectives. In order to contrast face conceptualizations in Arabic dialects, three main methodological tools were used:

a. Qualitative analysis of face lexeme corpora from published works (Labben 2017 on Tunisian Arabic; Lynda 2017 on Algerian Arabic; Almusallam 2022 on Saudi Arabic; Khatib 2024 on Moroccan Arabic; Rumman 2024 on Jordanian Arabic).

b. Native Speaker Judgment Tasks (NSJTs) developed by the researcher to elicit insights into speaker perceptions and conceptualizations of face within different Arabic dialects.

c. Netnographic inquiry which consisted of observing and participating in online discussions involving speakers of different Arabic dialects on Facebook.

The use of these methods allowed the researcher to collect information about face terms and conceptualizations in 16 different Arabic dialects. Data analysis reveals phonological and lexical variation at the level of face-related lexemes. The findings also indicate similarities as well as divergences in how face is conceptualized in the investigated dialects. For instance, despite geographical proximity and a somewhat similar historical background, the use of colors in face lexemes differs between Algerian and Tunisian Arabic. Whereas a red face is a sign of embarrassment or shame in Tunisian Arabic, it can denote pride and honor in the Algerian Arabic example *ħammertalna wʒuːhna* (literally 'you reddened our faces', meaning 'you've honored us'). By investigating the concept of face within different Arabic dialects, this study aims to enrich the field of variational pragmatics and offer an understanding of the cultural and linguistic diversity in the Arabic-speaking world.

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