

## *The Pragmatic Functions of Conversational Swearing In Algerian Culture*

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### **-Résumé:**

*Conversational swearing fulfils particular communicative functions that cannot be accomplished by other pragmatic means. The present study investigates the pragmatic functions performed by conversational swearing in naturally occurring interactions in Algerian culture. The analysis has shown that the pragmatic functions of swearing in everyday talk are mainly to express emotions, verbal emphasis and group solidarity. The use of swearing to fulfil these conversational and discursive functions could be an interpretation to the recurrence of swearing in Algerian culture.*

### **-Introduction**

Andersson & Trudgill (1992) define swearing as ‘a type of language use in which expressions refer to something that is taboo and / or stigmatised in culture, or that it should not be interpreted literally or that it can be used to express strong emotions or attitudes’ (Andersson & Trudgill, 1992, p.53). However, according to the precepts of Islam, swearing, in its original and non defective import is defined as “the speech act by which a person binds himself to do or not to do a certain specific physical or juridical act, by invoking the name of God or one of the divine attributes” (Abd el-Jawad, 2000, p.218) In brief, despite the fact that Muslims are warned against the habit of swearing too much, it can be safely claimed that when swearing is put into actual use in Arab societies, speakers tend

to swear by all that is revered and highly valued in their eyes. Accordingly, socio-cultural influences on swearing vary from culture to culture.

### **-Conversational Swearing as Pragmatic Strategy**

Abd el-Jawad (2000: 227) claims that swearing serves a number of communicative functions such as: emphasizing a proposition, inviting, suggesting, intensifying promises and pledges, requesting and entreating, apologizing and complaining, praising and blaming. He also observes that the structure and functions of swearing formulas used by Jordanians show the particularities of the social structure in general, for instance, the values of honour, chastity, dignity, honesty are highly esteemed by almost all interlocutors in the society as ultimate ideals.

Swearing is meant to serve a pragmatic function. It could be classified as a speech particle which is used to validate and give more support and credit to the pragmatic content provided for a particular speech situation. When a person swears, he intends his words to be taken for granted by the addressee. It is as if the speaker communicates to the hearer -via swearing- that he means what he says. It is assumed that the basic form of swearing is intended to serve its 'prototypical functions', which are establishing (1) 'the credibility and truthfulness' of the speaker and the content of the message and (2) offering 'legal and authoritative binding or validity frame for what one says or does'. However, in daily informal contexts, speakers tend to refer to some powerful sources in their life to swear by, not only to confirm what they say (illocutionary force), but also to influence the addressees or hearers to make them accept what is said or done and take it seriously, that is, to have an emotive function (perlocutionary force). It follows then that on the part of the speaker, conversational swearing as a strategy of communicating helps to enhance his self image, and defend

her/him against any presupposed doubt, accusation, or challenges to her/his propositions. (el-Jawad, 2000, p.228)

Swearing is a common practice and an important aspect among Arabs. In Algeria, swearing is a clue to validate an invitation and to save the invitee's face. For the invitee it is difficult to refuse or negotiate an invitation when it is conditioned by a swearing. On the one hand, because he feels his presence desired by the inviter and his face being safe, and on the other hand it is because he cannot decline to achieve any task where the name of God is pronounced. For it could be interpreted as an act of disrespect to God.

### **-The Cultural Aspect of Swearing**

The oath has played an important role in the social life of Arabs throughout history as it has been considered one of the principal and most frequently used means of ascertaining truth. Throughout history, man has been making oaths by many important objects in his life. The original function of oath is to reaffirm and solidify a statement. Thus, sometimes one needs to stress a statement or to emphasize promises in order to convince his audience. Pre-Islamic Arabs, for instance, used to swear by the idols, heads of fathers, swords, etc. The objects sworn by have been extended in contemporary Arab communities to include beside the divine powers, all other important persons, places, actions, creations, creatures, and dominant ideals, themes, etc. Naturally, this will be different from one culture to another.

Furthermore, in the past, people "expressed their commitments by taking the right hands of the other party. This practice remained customary among the Romans, the Arabs and the Hebrews. By taking the hand of the other party, one externalized his commitment and stressed his vows. This act signified that both the parties vowed to stay tied together on the given affair and pledged their right hands on it. It was because

of this custom that the word *yamīn* (literally: right hand) came to denote an oath” (Farāhī, 2008: 39).

Farāhī (2008) claims that the Arabs were characterized by truthfulness and honesty. It was a hallmark of their nature. It was never possible for them to go back on their words, break an oath or dishonour a promise. Whenever they declared someone as their client or protected neighbour, they would not fail to fulfil their commitment. Taking an oath falsely in social matters was a great disgrace and humiliation to their sense of honour and dignity, their natural traits. By taking the hands of one another while making a contract, they intended to express swearing to stake their life and honour on their commitment. In Arabic swearing with /ʔaqsama, ḥalafa<sup>1</sup>/ (both verbs mean to swear, or to take an oath) or, /qasaam<sup>2</sup>, yamiin/ (Nouns) and in /ħlef/ (verb in Algerian Arabic). According to Abd el-Jawad (2000, p.218) the oaths are classified, into 3 categories:

- Judiciary, which are formally taken in the court of law;
- Loyalty, constitutional or office oaths and pledges taken by senior officials when assuming office; and
- Extra-judiciary or conversational oaths that are used routinely by people in their daily interactions.

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<sup>1</sup> *ḥalaf* means to cut apart and to be sharp. It is, therefore, similar to the word *qasam*. A sharp knife is referred to as *sina:n ḥali:f*. A fluent tongue is *lisa:n ḥali:f*. This word has been derived from *ḥalf* (esparto), a plant with sharp thorny leaves. There statement, “*ḥalafa ṣalā ʔamrin*” (He has sworn to do something) is synonymous to “*qaṭaṣa bihi*” (He resolved to do that). This is the root of the term *ḥalaf*, expressive of oath. Just like *qasam*, this word came to be used to express resoluteness and decisiveness in a stance (Farāhī, 2008, p.20)

<sup>2</sup> *Qasam* originally meant breaking off and cutting something apart /qaṭṣ/. We say *qasamtu al-shayṣa* and *qassamtuhū* (I cut it apart/split it). *Qaṭṣ* is used to remove doubt and uncertainty (Farāhī, 2008, p.39)

The first two types have fixed formulas and serve limited functions and are legally binding and committing. However, the third type i.e., conversational swearing is not legally binding in that the person who swears and breaks his oath will not be subject to legal persecution but rather to the divine judgement.

Conversational swearing is a dominant feature of daily conversations and various kinds of interactions in the Arab communities in general and in the Algerian community in particular. It is used to validate all speech acts such as promising, inviting and declining an invitation, complaining, offering and declining an offer, ordering, thanking, apologising, claiming, contracting, and also for congratulating and complimenting (Nelson et al., 1993; Al Khatib, 1994, 1997). In fact, it is safe to claim that through its routine daily use in conversations and human interactions, swearing has evolved into a mechanical routine formula used by speakers to preface most speech acts they perform.

Historically, people used to swear by God, book, messengers, gospel, relatives, and worldly objects. The Romans, for instance, used to swear routinely by the gods. “Their oath asseverative involved invoking the most powerful of the several Roman deities normally Jupiter” (Echols, 1980, p.1). On the other hand, what seems to have been a sacred and religious practice has shifted ‘degeneratively’ (to use Echols, 1980, p.1 terms) since religion ceased to be a central dominant theme in western culture following the weakening of the power of the church in the modern age. Echols (ibid) maintained that “out of the formal and sacred oath asseverative comes inevitably and degeneratively, the oath interjectional, those casual and meaningless emphasisers without real meaning or real power”. Swearing has undergone what may be referred to as ‘semantic derogation’ since it has become associated with

interjectional oaths or the act of using profane and tabooed expressions in daily conversations for cursing, insulting or expressing anger. Hughes (1991: 4) explains another aspect of this decline:

*“Swearing shows a curious convergence of the high and low, the sacred and the profane. From the ‘high’ dualistic perspective, it is language in its most highly charged state, infused with a religious force recognisable in the remote modes of the spell, the charm of the curse, forms seeking to invoke a higher power to change the world, or support the truthfulness of a claim... the ‘lower’ physical faculties of copulation, defecation and urination have come very much to the fore as referents in swearing” (Hughes, 1991: 4)*

He adds that people swear for many reasons and in many forms and he maintains that:

*“Swearing now encompasses so many disparate forms that some broad distinctions need to be made at the outset. We swear by, we swear that (something is so), we swear to (do something), we swear at (somebody or something), and sometimes we swear simply out of exasperation” (Hughes, 1991: 4)*

Generally speaking, swearing in both proto and degenerated senses serves some communicative functions: the former is used for confirmation, affirmation and some sort of moral or legal binding, while the latter may serve as an outlet for human frustrated feelings (Abd el-Jawad, 2000: 221). Contrary to western societies, Algerians as is the case in many Arab countries have kept the original function of swearing or conversation spices as referred to by Abd el-Jawad (2000). This study is concerned with ‘oath taking’ and not the ‘act if using the tabooed, profane, bad, etc’, language forms for

cursing and insulting others or in the expression of anger. Indeed, all face-to-face conversations are conditioned by this speech particle and it is part of their daily transactions. It is a means of establishing the truth in all speech situations and events and between all kinds of interlocutors. Thus, one may swear to confirm a claim one has made, to emphasise a promise one has given, to deny an accusation, to decline an offer or an invitation, or to strengthen a warning.

### **Swearing Expressions Making up**

A number of swearing expressions are used in spoken Arabic in Tlemcen. They are used by all people no matter of their social backgrounds. The following is an analysis of such terms. Data analysis reveals that Tlemcen speakers use plenty of conversational swearing expressions, which draw on almost all objects one can imagine. Using them in oath is seen as an act of honouring and glorifying Allah (God). The analysis of these objects or swearing referents will reveal dominant socio-cultural themes, values, norms, patterns and beliefs of the community under study. The most prominent religious word that composes an essential part in many of swearing is the attribute of God (i.e. the word Allah). Terms as /wallah/ (by God), /wallah əlfadi:m/ (by His Almighty God ). However, other linguistic variants are quite common. The lists of swearing in Table (1.1) are illustrative but by no means complete.

Wallah	(I swear by God)	əlʕadi:m (the Almighty)
		w həd əlxɪ:r (and this wealth/ food)
ha?	(by the truth of)	+ ənnbij/ ərrasu:l (Prophet Muhammad/ the messenger) (PBUH)
ha? jebba:k	(by the truth of the net)	
w ha?	(by the truth of)	+ ərrasu:l (Prophet Muhammad)
		+ əlʕa:həd (the promise)
		+ həd ənnaɣma (this food)
		+ həd əlxɪ:r (this wealth/food)
		+ mħhabtek ʕandi (how much I like/ appreciate you)
w ra:S	(by the head i.e., the honour)	+ wla:di (my children)
fi:k	(for the sake of)	rabbi (God)
dʒabtək	(I ask you by)	
?addemtek dʒa:h	(I request you by the wealth)	
ila thub	(if you like)	
f wdʒeh	(for the sake of the face of)	
w ra:S əa:k elli ra:h fəl?bu:r		(I swear by the head of the one who is in grave (i.e., the dead one))
w əlmleh elli bi:na:tna		(I swear by the salt i.e., sufferings we endured together)

**Table 1.1: list of swearing referents**

From the above data, we find also what could be called pleas where the speaker asks the hearer to do some task for the sake of God or some important religious figure. Certain observations can be stated concerning the vocabulary that are used in the terms of swearing and the formation of such terms in colloquial Arabic of Tlemcen. Many religious words have been used in forming swearing as (Allah, prophet, God). We also observe a phonetic variation, very frequent and distinctive of Algerian Arabic, instead of /wa/ as a swearing particle we find /w/ without the vowel /a/.

A number of social factors play an important role in using such swearing in spoken Arabic in Algeria and Tlemcen in

particular. The most prominent factor is the religious commitment. People who follow the instructions of Allah are strongly aware of the fact that they should not use any term of swearing except the one which includes the word (Allah) because in Islam<sup>1</sup> it is not accepted to swear by the name of any creature. Those who are less devoted to religion would use different terms for swearing in their daily speech. The second factor which also has an effect on choosing the suitable term of swearing is education. The well educated people try not to use expressions as /w ra:S wla:di/ (by the head of my children).

### **Conversational Swearing and Code Switching**

The following Conversation is an extended invitation between two friends, both young and both girls. The relationship between the two interlocutors and the situational context help the achievement of the pragmatic content of the invitation and its change into a genuine one. In fact, we can observe that the interlocutors are good old friends, so that they negotiate the invitation without creating any face-threatening act to both interlocutors. Additionally, the strategy used by the speaker was successful as to help the hearer accept the invitation.

Conversation: young/ young females (friends)

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn Abdil barr (b.368h) –May Allah have mercy upon him- stated in his book *At Tamheed* (p368 cited in Farahi, 2008, p.80 ), “there is a consensus from the ulama that oaths or swearing by other than Allah is detested, prohibited and that it is not permissible for anyone to swear using this type of swearing”. Al Bukhari from ibn Battal (p96-97) said “the Arabs in Al Jahiliya (pre Islamic ignorance) used to swear by their forefathers and their deities. So Allah wanted to remove anything other than him from their hearts so that only his remembrance would remain because he is the truth who is worshipped alone. Therefore the sunnah is making an oath (swearing) by Allah like that which has been narrated by Abu Moussa and others from the prophet (PBUH). Also swearing by other than Allah falls under the same ruling as swearing by one’s forefathers and this along with other similar swearing is not permissible according to the scholars (Al Fuqahaa)”

Context: two girls / friends meet in a cafeteria and one was very glad to meet her friend that day.

A: salut, quelle surprise!

B: wallah c'est use agréable surprise, ça fait vraiment plaisir de te revoir, ça fait comme même cinq ans quant ne c'est pas vu. Kiri:k ! kirihum darkum, ka:mel rahum bxi:r ?

A: tout le monde va bien, merci. adži mʃana rana na:klu des glaces

B: Saħhit, wallah ila fraħt əlli ʃaftek, w ħamdullah əlli ri:k bxi:r, ana nxalli:k, je vois que tu es accompagnée et je ne veux pas te déranger.

A: tu ne déranges pas au contraire, hadu ʃi mes collègues teʃ l'université, rabbi jfarhek, ma: tradha:li:ʃ fi wadži, c'est juste une glace

B: saħħa, ma: jku:n ʃi xa:trek, ʃi ma: tezʃaff

A: salut tout le monde (then she joined the group and sit)

Literal translation

A: Hello, what a surprise!

B: I swear by God, it's a nice surprise! It is a pleasure to meet you again. How are you? How is your family? Is everybody doing well?

A: Everyone is O.K. thank you. Come with us, we're taking some ice cream.

B: Thank you, I swear by Allah that I am very happy to see you again; and praise Allah that you are keeping well, I must leave you, I see that you have some company and I don't want to bother you.

A: You don't bother us at all; on the contrary, these are just university colleagues. May Allah make you happy don't turn it in my face [i.e., don't refuse my invitation], it's just for an ice cream.

B: OK, I'll do whatever you want, just don't get angry at me

A: Hello everybody

Arabic-French code switching is identified in this interaction as a sign of the educational level of the interlocutors and also as a socio-cultural marker of the speech behaviour of educated young Algerians. The opening of the conversation shows that (A) was very happy to meet her friend: *quelle surprise!* (Hello,

what a surprise!) and the hearer's confirmation of her sharing this fact wallah c'est use agréable surprise, ça fait vraiment plaisir de te revoir (I swear by God, it's a nice surprise! It is a pleasure to meet you again). In order to show her happiness (A) invites her friend to join the group and have ice cream with them. Pragmatically, the strategy used by (A) to convince (B) to accept the invitation was adequate and at the same time expresses the speaker goodwill to invite the hearer: [rabbi jfarħek, ma: tradhali:f fi wadʒhi] (May Allah make you happy don't turn it in my face (i.e., don't refuse my invitation).

Generally, the use of French as a so called sophisticated way of inviting shows a lack of sincerity and authenticity of the invitation. Hence, the Algerian traditional strategy of conversational swearing is necessary and vital to give credit to their invitations and to achieve the pragmatic end of inviting which is to convince the invitee to accept the invitation. Marrow and Castleton (2007, p.209) claim that "the loss of the Allah lexicon is a direct loss of culture, identity, sense of self, individuality, and community. It is the demise of cultural diversity and the harbinger of linguistic homogeneity". Thus, the suppression of conversational swearing would be a serious blow when one remembers that Allah and Islam are the basis of Arabic-Islamic identity.

Marrow and Castleton (2007, p.207) stress the fact that the Arabic language is undergoing a reduction in the use of Islamic, Allah-centric expressions, which are being supplanted by simplified forms based on English and French norms. As Ferguson (1983, p.68) has observed, "the profusion of thank yous, good wishes, and the like of Arabic society is being reduced to the models of French and English usage". Algerians switch to Arabic in which they can say what they cannot properly express in French especially when it comes to religious expressions.

## Conclusion

Swearing sheds the light not only on how culturally rooted and important swearing is in Algeria but it also shows the socio-pragmatic functions it serves, that is “backing and adding credit” to any speech act inherent to any speech event in Algerians daily communicative tasks. Another outstanding sociolinguistic pattern in the speech behaviour of educated Algerians in general and in extending invitations in particular is the use of code-switching. As a sign of distinction, educated speakers normally resort to the use of French especially in their daily relationship. Hence, a return to the Algerian traditional strategy of conversational swearing is required to give credit to their invitations and to achieve the pragmatic end of inviting which is to convince the invitee to accept the invitation.

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