Honorific Titles in Arabic with Comparisons to English

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Honorific language is a sociolinguistic phenomenon found cross linguistically which serves a number of functions, dependent on the language. They may be found in the form of titles of address, syntactic structure, and verb morphology. The primary function of honorifics is to establish a hierarchy amongst speakers by designating formality or politeness. In addition, however, honorific language may be manipulated to serves other purposes, such as establish respect, distance, affection or even can be used to mock another. In Arabic, honorifics are an important aspect of the language and culture, which place a high level of importance on respect and relationships between individuals. These varying honorifics, in their meaning and contextual use, can serve as a valuable insight into the values of Arabic culture. In order to master the language, one must also understand the use of honorifics to interact formally with others.

Honorifics use in English is almost entirely reserved for titles of address. Ranging from ‘sir’ to ‘buddy’ to ‘your honor,’ there is an unending number of honorifics terms which may be used in many ways. Despite this, honorific titles are restricted to specific individuals and may be used inappropriately, at the risk of appearing condescending, sarcastic, or merely strange. One would never ask a stranger for directions by addressing them as ‘your majesty’ or refer to their grandmother as ‘dude.’ Also, where English only has one form of ‘you,’ standard Arabic utilizes a formal form of the pronoun, *HaDrtak* or *HaDrtik*; this is also actualized by the suffix –*kum* (Farghal & Shakir 1994). Nonexistent in English, this concept, which denotes a higher status of the addressee, can often be difficult for Arabic learners. Many of the honorific options and uses in Arabic are different from English, creating another difficulty for learners.

In Arabic, there exists a number of titles of address which can be used when speaking to various individuals depending on context. The most frequently used titles of address of kinship terms, honorifics that, in meaning, refer to related individuals. Despite meaning, these honorifics can often be used when addressing strangers (Farghal & Shakir 1994). When referring to strangers, these titles are used as a form of politeness which affirms solidarity between speakers. It should also be noted that when addressing an individual in Arabic the prenominal marker *ya:* is typically used to indicate that speaker is speaking directly to another individual.

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| **Distant Kinship Honorifics** | **Meaning** | **Context** | Used when addressing strangers. |
| *‘ax* | Brother | Male of similar age |
| *‘uxt* | Sister | Female of similar age |
| *xal/xalah* | Maternal uncle/aunt | Older male/female |
| *‘am/’ammih* | Paternal uncle/aunt | Older male/female |
| *jidd/jidda* | Grandfather | Senior male/female |
| *gara:bah* | Relative | - |

The above table contains a short list of distant kinship terms from standard Arabic. In English, kinship terms such as these are very restricted in use, reserved strictly for family and intimate acquaintances. Though used between respective relatives, as well, the use of these kinship terms is acceptable amongst adult strangers with the purpose of establishing politeness and formality between speakers. Often, they are the most appropriate terms when communicating with strangers (Farghal & Shakir 1994). Given this, it would not be uncommon for a young man to be addressed as *ya: ‘ax* on the street in an Arabic country before being asked for directions.

Depending on location, dialectal variations are possible, as well. For example, in the Lebanese television drama “Meryana,” household maids frequently address the matriarch of the household as *ya: sitt*; *sitt* meaning grandmother in the Levantine dialect. This also highlights the use of distant kinship terms between employees and their superiors. In adult to child interactions, however, the methods and term of address vary slightly. While male children will utilize these titles when addressing an adult, the adults will often opt for a more personal honorific. It should also be noted that adults will often withhold the marker *ya:* when addressing children (Farghal & Shakir 1994).

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| **Affectionate Kinship Term** | **Meaning** | **Context** |
| *yammah* | Mother | Intimate or personal relationships. |
| *ya:bah* | Father |
| *jiddo:h* | Grandfather |
| *jiddih* | Grandmother |
| *xa:lo:h/xa:lah* | Maternal uncle/aunt |
| *‘ammoh/’ammih* | Paternal uncle/aunt |
| *xayyoh/xayyih* | Brother/sister |
| *yabni/yabinti* | Son/daughter |

These more intimate kinship terms are found in child–adult interactions, especially *yabni* and *ya binti*, possibly because of the unique nature of adult and child relationships. Female children, however, often use them when addressing strangers. For instance, a young female would address an adult male who is a stranger as *‘ammoh*, likely as a method of establishing distance (Farghal & Shakir 1994). Despite this, use of affectionate kinship terms are typically restricted between family members or close acquaintances. They serve as a method of expressing a close bond between individuals. Throughout dialectal Arabic, it is common for speakers to address those inferior to them, often family, using their own honorific. This can sometimes be referred to as “bipolar kin terms” (Rieschild 1998). For example:

*we:n ‘uxt-ik yammah* –– ‘Where is your sister, son/daughter (lit. mother)’

This example sentence would be spoken by a woman addressing her own children, literally calling them mother with the term *yammah*. In dialectal Arabic, children will often refer to relatives with specific, restricted titles of address, such as those in the following chart (Rieschild 1998):

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| **Dialectal Affectionate Kinship Term** | **Meaning** | **Context** |
| *ba:ba* | Daddy | From children to specific relative. |
| *ma:ma* | Mommy |
| *te:te:* | Grandma |

Referring back to “bipolar kin terms,” it is also common for these to be used in the same manner. A grandmother might frequently refer to her grandchildren as *ya: te:te:*. This practice is uncommon cross linguistically and is often confusing to Arabic learners (Rieschild 1998). In addition to these more personalized and affectionate honorific, there exists another level of intimate titles. These are used in even more restricted circumstances than those discuss thus far and have more severe social ramifications when misused.

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| **Emotional Affectionate Title** | **Meaning** | **Context** |
| ru:Hi | My soul | Between intimate individuals or in certain cases between strangers. |
| Habi:bi | My beloved |
| ‘umri | My age |
| Haya:ti | My life |
| Hubbi | My love |
| ‘yuni | My eyes |

The above terms are much more intimate than those previously mentioned. Terms such as these would be used between intimately involved individuals, similar to their English meaning equivalents. However, in English, it is often socially acceptable for an adult male or female to address an opposite-sex individual as ‘love’ or ‘honey.’ Unlike English, this is considered extremely inappropriate in the Arabic language. An adult male would never address an unknown female as *Haya:ti* or vice versa given the firm boundaries between the sexes in the Arabic speaking world. Instead, these terms are acceptable for same-sex interactions under certain circumstances. In the case of simple requests or polite questions, these terms are used frequently. When used in other contexts, however, they become inappropriate, or unusual (Farghal & Shakir 1994). For example:

*šu bidd-ik ya: ‘yuni* –– What do you want, my eyes?

This would be an appropriate phrase from a store clerk to a customer. However, the following phrase would be considered inappropriate or out of place:

*‘afwan ya: Haya:ti* –– Excuse me, my life!

Being a simple summon for attention, the use of *Haya:ti* in this phrase it out of place and would be immediately noted by the addressee. These terms are also commonly used in adult to child interactions, as well (Farghal & Shkir 1994).

Not all honorific interactions revolve around kinship terms, however. There are other honorifics which are used in religious contexts, some which act similarly to English honorifics, and other more formal titles which a reserved for specific individuals. While creating an all-encompassing list of such titles would be overwhelmingly long, the following chart contain various types of honorifics in relations to those mentioned above.

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| **Honorific** | **Meaning** | **Context** |
| *‘abu-na* | Our Father | Used to address Christian Priests. |
| *Hajj/Hajja* | Pilgrim | Used to address those who can completed the pilgrimage to Mecca. |
| *šeix* | Leader | Used to refer to individuals who are a leader in some aspect, religious or otherwise. |
| *rayyis* | President | Similar to English. |
| *daktur* | Doctor |
| *sayyid* | Sir |
| *‘anise* | Miss |
| *‘ustaz* | Teacher |
| *be:k* | Judge | Similar to English; may be used informally as sir. |
| *‘abu/’umm\_\_\_\_\_\_* | Father/Mother of \_\_\_\_\_ | Used formally to address others. |

The above phrases are non-kinship terms which may be used in every day conversation amongst Arabic speakers. Some are used strictly in religious contexts, such as *‘abu-na*, which is used by Arabic speaking Christians to address priests. *Hajj* and *Hajja* are used to address individuals of Islamic faith who have successfully completed their pilgrimage to Mecca. As this particular title is impossible to determine when interacting with strangers, it is often used formally when addressing older individuals (Rieschild 1998). The term *šeix* is religious in origin, but may be used when addressing any male who is perceived as a leader in some regard. In a study involving student dissertations and emails to superiors, students often used *šeix* when addressing the heads of their departments, for example, take the following example which was used (:

*šeix al-lugawiin* –– ‘“father” of linguistics’

Despite the religious background of the word, it was used here to address a superior.

Other terms, such as the respective Arabic title for president, doctor, sir, miss, etc. are used in the same manner they would be used in English. In Levantine countries, especially Lebanon, however, French terms such as *monsieur* and *mademoiselle* are frequently used due to the history of French presence within the countries (Rieschild 1998). The final term on the chart, *‘abu* or *‘umm \_\_\_* is used when addressing parents of an individual, utilizing either the son’s name or the family name. When addressing a single male, the phrase becomes *‘abu +* family name (Farghal & Shakir 1994).

Honorifics function uniquely in every language; they can serve to establish formality, respect, emotional bonds, or distance. While some words have similar meaning to those found in English, their uses vary, making them difficult to understand for Arabic learners. Honorifics are an important topic in mastering Arabic and the various sociolinguistic factors must also be considered. Misusing honorifics can be interpreted as mere incompetence or, in some cases, highly offensive. Therefore, the study of honorifics and their application in Arabic are vital in the process of acquiring the language.

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