

A List of Syrian Arabic politeness formulae

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0.1 Introduction

In the different dialects of Arabic there are highly developed systems of polite phrases to be used in various situations.¹ Many of these phrases have one specific appropriate response. Knowing these phrases, in what situations they are used, and how to properly respond to them, is an important part of Arabic communicative competence. For native speakers this is simply part of language and it isn't given much thought. When, for example, someone says *na^cīman* to you after you have had a shower you just automatically reply *alla yin^cam ^caleyk*. For the non-native speaker like myself, recognizing and learning these phrases can be challenging. I hope this post may be of some help.

Not giving the proper response to a politeness phrase can often lead to awkward social situations or is simply rude. As one scholar explains, these formulaic responses

signify an addressee's acceptance of the phrase to which they respond, thus serving as an indication that communications of concern, kindness, or other positive emotion has been successful, or that a social obligation has been properly fulfilled and is appreciated (Stewart 1996).

Thus not properly responding, even if it because you as a non-native speaker does not know the answer, is a social mishap and one of the of the parties either have to save the situation, by diverting attention from the event or call out what has just happened and explain the situation, or someone might get uncomfortable offended.

A short anecdote may serve to illustrate this. One of the first people I got to know during my stay in Damascus always ended our telephone conversations by asking me if I wanted something (*biddak šī?*). I found this a bit odd, as if I was a costumer in his shop, and in my confusion typically answered something like “no, thanks” (*lā, sukrān*). There was always something awkward about these

¹There are also fixed *impolite* responses to common phrases. For a fascinating and entertaining description of such responses in Egyptian Arabic, see Stewart (1997).

exchanges. It was only later that I discovered that this was a formulaic phrase and that I was supposed to answer “your well-being” (*salāmtak*). When I tried this the first time I could proudly confirm that the conversation ended smoothly and that I had arisen to the occasion as a well functional social human being.

This formula (– *biddak šī?* – *salāmtak*) is only one of the couple of dozens or so phrases and responses that are in common use. Keeping track of all of them can be a daunting task for the language learner. A trick I figured out was that the response *alla yixallik* ‘May God keep you safe’ is an acceptable response in most situations, even if there is another response that is more suited for that situation (Cf. Stewart 1996:162).

Many formulaic responses include a repetition of the root of the main word in the phrase that it is a response to, producing a wordplay. This means that often the same response is used for several different initial phrases that all include words with the same root. For example, to all of the phrases *yislam idēk* ‘thanks’, *sallim ʿala X* ‘give my regard to X’, and *trūḥ u-tarjaʿ bi-salāma* ‘may you leave and return in peace’, all including a word on the root *SLM*, the appropriate response is *alla yisallimak* ‘May God preserve you’. (See Ferguson 1997 and Stewart 1996 for further discussion.)

0.2 The list

The following list includes 28 politeness formulae as used by speakers from the Damascus area. I have only included phrases that I have heard in use, and the list thus has a bias to situations where a non-Arab male may find himself. The list is though by no means complete, but I do believe it includes the most common phrases. Native speaker informants were consulted in a few cases where I was not certain of the form of the formula.

The phrases are given in Arabic script and then in EALL transcription (Reichmut 2006) as pronounced in Damascene Arabic. The translations provided are fairly literal. Many of the expressions have no or only partial equivalent in English anyways, and the humorous effect of literal translation was sometimes hard to resist. Each phrase is followed by its appropriate response. Note that the Arabic text is the wrong way around relative to the reading direction, with the initial phrase to the left and its response to the right. Some are followed by brief comments.

Forward slash indicates alternative responses.

Parentheses indicate optional extensions to responses.

Square brackets indicate clarifications in the translation.

0.3 Greetings

0.3.0.1 General greetings

)	(
<i>as-salāmu ʿalaykum</i>	<i>wa-ʿalaykum salām</i>	<i>(wa-rahmatu allāhi wa-barakātuh)</i>	
Peace be upon you	And upon you peace	(and God's greace and his blessings)	

Islamic greeting signalling high degree of formality or allegiance to Islam. The pronoun *-kum* (3mpl) is invariable in the phrase and in its response.

	/	/	/	
<i>marḥaba</i>	<i>ahlan</i>	<i>/ marḥabatēn</i>	<i>/ mūt marḥaba</i>	<i>/ hi</i>
Hello	Hello	/ Two <i>marḥabas</i>	/ a hunderd <i>marḥabas</i>	/ hi

0.3.0.2 Greeting before noon

<i>ṣabāḥ al-xēr</i>	<i>ṣabāḥ an-nūr/ṣabāḥ al-full</i>
Morning of fortune	Morning of light/Morning of rose

Xēr does not easily lend itself to translation. Wehr, the standard Arabic-English lexicon, translates it as “good thing, blessing; wealth, property; — good, benefit, interest, advantage; welfare; charity.”

0.3.0.3 Greeting after noon

<i>masāʾ al-xēr</i>	<i>masāʾ an-nūr</i>
Evening of fortune	Evening of light

0.3.0.4 Welcoming

	/
<i>ahla wa-sahla</i>	<i>ahlan fīk / ahlēn</i>
Welcome	Welcome to you/Two welcomes

Also general filler in pauses in polite conversation.

XXXX

<i>nawwartu</i>	<i>bi-wujūdikum</i>
You have enlightened us	With your presence

0.3.0.5 When being introduced to someone

<i>tašarrafna</i>	<i>yazīdak aš-šaraf</i>
We are honored	May he increase your honor

0.3.1 Parting

0.3.1.1 General good-byes

<i>maʿa salāma</i>	<i>alla maʿak</i>
With peace	May God be with you

<i>biddak šī?</i>) (
	<i>(.ā biddī illa) salāmtak</i>
Do you want something?	(I don't want anything but) your wellbeing

Said before the actual goodbye to signal the end of the conversation.

0.3.1.2 Parting before sleep

/

tuṣbiḥw-
ʿala inta
xēr bi-
xēr
/
min
ahlu
/
min
ahl
il-
xēr
Wake And
up you
in are
fortunate well
/
of
the
its
people
ple
/
of
the
people
ple
of
fortune

0.3.1.3 Parting from someone you have met for the first time

<i>furṣa saʿīda</i>	<i>u-ʿana asʿad</i>
Happy occasion	And I am happier

0.3.2 Phrases for special occasions

0.3.2.1 Good wishes on annual holiday

<i>ʿīd mubārak</i>	<i>alla yibārik fik</i>
Blessed festival	May God bless you

<i>kull ʿām w-anta bi-xēr</i>	<i>w-anta bi-xēr</i>
May you be well all year	And may you be well

0.3.2.2 To someone in grief (at funeral (ʿaza))

<i>al-ʿiwāḍ bi-salāmtak</i>	<i>alla yisallimak</i>
May you be compensated with well-being	May God preserve you

<i>al-ʿumr illak</i>	<i>tʿiš</i>
The lifetime to you	May you live

0.3.2.3 To someone departing on a journey

<i>trūḥ u-tarjaʿ bi-salāma</i>	<i>allah yisallimak</i>
Leave and return in peace	May God preserve you

0.3.2.4 To someone returning from a journey

<i>al-ḥamdu li-llāh ʿala s-salāma</i>	<i>alla yisallimak</i>
God be praised for your wellbeing	May God preserve you

0.3.3 Phrases for not so special occasions

0.3.3.1 Thanks

<i>yislam īdēk</i>	<i>alla yisallimak</i>
May [God] preserve your hands	May God preserve you

0.3.3.2 To someone who has cut their hair, shaved, or have had a shower or bath

naʿīman aḷḷa yinʿam ʿalēk
 Gracefully May God bestow grace upon you.

0.3.3.3 To someone who has performed the prayer (*ṣalāt*)

taqabbal aḷḷa minni u-minnak
 May God accept From me and from you

0.3.3.4 Asking someone to be patient or to calm down

ṣalli ʿa-n-nabi aḷḷa yiṣalli ʿa-n-nabi
 Pray for the Prophet May God pray for the Prophet

0.3.3.5 Asking someone to pass a greeting

sallim ʿala X aḷḷa yisallimak / byūṣal / ṣār ʿindu
 Give my regars X May God preserve you / It will arrive / He got it

0.3.3.6 To host after finishing meal

dāyima ṣaḥḥa
 [May you] always [have food] [I wish you] Health

0.3.3.7 To someone who is or will be eating or drinking

ṣaḥḥa / ṣaḥḥatēn ʿala ʿalbak
 Health / Two healths On your heart

ṣaḥḥa is also used to politely decline drink or food offered to you.

0.3.3.8 To someone who is working or exerting themselves

<i>aḷla ya^cṭīk al-^cāfiya</i>	<i>aḷla yi^cāfīk</i>
May God give you vigor	May God invogorate you

0.3.3.9 To someone who has acquired an item (as a gift or through purchase)

<i>mabrūk</i>	<i>aḷla yibārīk fīk</i>
Blessed	May God bless you

0.3.3.10 On hearing of the addressee's ill health

<i>salamtak</i>	<i>aḷla yisallimak</i>
Your health	May God preserve you

0.3.3.11 On hearing that the addressee has children

<i>aḷla yixallī-lak iyyāhum</i>	<i>aḷla yixallīk</i>
May God preserve them for you	May God keep you safe

0.4 References

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