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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Politeness in the English Translation of Arabic Speech Acts in the novel *The Bamboo Stalk***

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the translation of politeness strategies from Arabic into English in Saud Alsanousi's novel, "The Bamboo Stalk (2015)". Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, the study analyzes how Arabic speech acts, specifically requests, apologies, and formulaic expressions are adapted to fit English-language norms. A qualitative analysis of key examples reveals a systematic pattern: Arabic collectivist, honor-based, and religiously inflected politeness is frequently rendered through English strategies that prioritize individualism, autonomy, and secular deference. Positive politeness shifts to negative politeness, bald-on-record commands are softened, and off-record indirectness is often made explicit. While pragmatic equivalence is largely preserved, the cultural motivations and emotional weight of the original politeness are shifted. The article argues that these shifts constitute a form of cultural negotiation, positioning the translator as a mediator between divergent social ideologies. Thus, the translation of politeness in "The Bamboo Stalk" not only reflects but also embodies the novel's central theme of hybrid identity.

**KEYWORDS**

Politeness theory, Arabic-English translation, speech acts, cultural pragmatics, domestication, foreignization

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**1. Introduction**

Translation is rarely a neutral act of lexical substitution. It is, more often, a negotiation of cultural values embedded in linguistic form. This negotiation is clearly reflected in the domain of politeness, which is the subtle management of face, hierarchy, and social distance through speech acts. Saud Alsanousi's novel "The Bamboo Stalk (2012)" that explores themes of identity, migration, and cultural belonging is deeply rooted in the pragmatics of Gulf Arabic communication. Jonathan Wright's (2015) English translation, therefore, faced the challenge of making this highly contextualized discourse accessible to a Western readership.

This article investigates how Wright's translation handles the cultural complexities embedded in Arabic politeness. Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) typology of politeness strategies i.e. positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record, it analyzes the translation of a selected sample of key Arabic speech acts. The discussion draws on Blum-Kulka's (1987) cross-cultural speech act theory and Venuti's (1995) concepts of domestication and foreignization to demonstrate how English politeness norms reshape the social dynamics of the original text. The central argument is that while Wright successfully preserves pragmatic intent, his translation systematically transforms the ideological bases of Arabic politeness by shifting from collectivist honor to individualist autonomy, from religious humility to secular sincerity, and from ritualized warmth to pragmatic efficiency. In doing so, the translation itself becomes a performance of the novel's central theme, that is, the negotiation of identity across cultural boundaries.

## 2. Review of Literature

There are several studies that have examined politeness strategies though from different perspectives. Al-Hamzi et al. (2024) examines how utterances containing politeness address markers are translated from Arabic into English. Analyzing Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*, it finds that socio-cultural norms, context, and power dynamics are crucial for selecting appropriate politeness expressions in the target language. It emphasizes the need for translators to deeply understand both languages and cultures to maintain accuracy and cultural resonance. Al-Maamari (2025) examines in her dissertation the translation of politeness strategies in literary works from English into Arabic. The study focuses on the significant challenges faced by translators when rendering politeness expressions from English into Arabic by evaluating and recognizing politeness as a significant challenge. The research investigates theories of politeness, highlights difficulties in translating it within literary contexts, and explores politeness strategies in both languages. It ultimately proposes alternative translations when existing ones are deemed unsuitable. Another study by Ida Kusuma Dewi et al (2024) examines the translation of politeness in directive speech acts within children's storybooks, focusing on parent-child interactions. The study analyzed five children's books in English and their Indonesian translations using content analysis based on Brown & Levinson's politeness theory. The findings reveal that parents in the target text (TT) sound more polite than in the source text (ST), reflecting Indonesian cultural norms emphasizing nurturing parents. The TT also displays a greater number of positive politeness sub-strategies using in-group identity markers. These findings highlight the importance of cultural context in translating politeness strategies in children's literature.

Dzamiashvili & Nakhutsrishvili (2025) explores *Politeness Strategies in A Linguistic and Cultural Comparison in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice and its Georgian Translation*. The study uses a contrastive pragmatics approach to examine how politeness strategies are expressed in English and their realization in the Georgian translation. It focuses on speech acts like requests, refusals, and apologies. The findings reveal that while both cultures value harmony, English achieves this through indirectness and emotional distance, whereas Georgian favors expressiveness and directness within social boundaries, highlighting the translator's role as a cultural bridge. This present study examines the translation of politeness strategies from Arabic into English in Saud Alsanousi's novel, "The Bamboo Stalk (2015)". Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, it analyzes how Arabic speech acts, specifically requests, apologies, and formulaic expressions are adapted to fit English-language norms.

## 3. Theoretical Framework: Politeness and Translation

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory provides a foundational framework for this study. A central feature of their theory is the concept of "face", that is, the public self-image that individuals seek to maintain. They distinguish between positive face, which is the desire to be liked, approved of, and included and negative face, which is the desire to be free from imposition. To manage face-threatening acts (FTAs), speakers use four primary strategies:

- **Bald on-record:** direct communication without mitigation.
- **Positive politeness:** strategies that appeal to solidarity, shared identity, and in-group membership.
- **Negative politeness:** strategies that minimize imposition through hedging, apology, and deference.
- **Off-record:** indirect or ambiguous expressions that allow the hearer to infer the intended meaning.

While Brown and Levinson argue for the universality of these strategies, their linguistic realization is highly culture-specific. As Blum-Kulka (1987, p. 131) points out, "the level of directness appropriate in one language may be perceived as impolite in another." This creates a central challenge for translation. The translator must balance pragmatic equivalence (House, 1997) with cultural acceptability (Nida, 1964). This is a task that often requires strategic adaptation rather than literal transfer.

Venuti's (1995) concepts of domestication and foreignization offer a useful framework for understanding these adaptations. Domestication involves translating in a transparent, fluent style that minimizes the foreignness of the source text, prioritizing target-language norms. Foreignization, by contrast, seeks to maintain the linguistic and cultural distinctiveness of the original, often by deviating from target-language conventions. As this analysis will show, Wright's translation of politeness in "The Bamboo Stalk" leans heavily towards domestication, though with important subtleties.

## 4. Arabic Politeness in "The Bamboo Stalk"

Arabic politeness functions within a social framework that is collectivist, hierarchical, and characterized by religious reference. Speech acts are often dense with formulaic expressions that perform cultural work beyond their literal meaning. Common features include:

- Religious formulas: "والله" (wallah\*, by God), "الله يطول بعمرك" (Allah yṭawwil 'umrak\*, may God prolong your life), "إن شاء الله" (in shā' allāh\*, God willing).
- Kinship address terms: "يا وليدي" (\*yā walīdī\*, my little son), "يا عمّي" (yā 'ammī\*, my uncle), which convey both affection and hierarchical positioning.
- Collective moral reference: "عيب علينا" ('ayb 'alaynā, it is a shame for us), which invokes shared honor and communal responsibility.

In this system, face is not primarily a matter of individual autonomy but of belonging and moral standing within a community. Politeness strategies are designed to maintain social cohesion, show deference to hierarchy, and express humility before both God and others.

Alsanousi's characters, particularly within the Kuwaiti family, constantly negotiate these norms. The novel's protagonist, José (later Isa), negotiates these linguistic expectations as part of his hybrid Filipino-Kuwaiti identity. His struggle to perform politeness appropriately through language makes politeness a thematic as well as a pragmatic concern. This lends to the translation of these strategies particular significance.

## 5. Methodology

This study adopts the qualitative analytical method and procedures to examine how politeness strategies are rendered in the English translation of a selected sample Arabic speech acts in Saud Alsanousi's novel *The Bamboo Stalk* (2012), which was translated into English by Jonathan Wright (2015). The analysis focuses on identifying, comparing, and critically evaluating the translation of these speech acts in light of politeness theory.

## 5. Analysis

This section analyzes a selection of speech acts from "The Bamboo Stalk", comparing their Arabic rendering with Wright's English translation. The analysis is organized according to Brown and Levinson's strategy types.

### 5.1 Positive Face Strategies

Consider the following greeting:

Arabic: "السلام عليكم يا أم جوزاف، شلونج اليوم؟"

Literal: "Peace be upon you, Umm Joseph. How are you today?"

English: "Hello, Umm Joseph. How are you?"

In Arabic, "السلام عليكم" (al-salām 'alaykum) is a ritual expression that reinforces religious solidarity and community membership. Wright's translation replaces it with "Hello", which is a neutral greeting that does not perform such cultural work. Occasionally, Wright retains the literal "Peace be upon you," but such instances are rare. This choice of "hello" illustrates domestication (Venuti, 1995) where the translator prioritizes naturalness in English over the preservation of a culturally specific ritual.

Similarly, address terms shift in translation. The phrase "يا وليدي" (\*yā walīdī\*, my little son) frequently becomes "my boy" or is omitted entirely. While both expressions convey affection, "my boy" in English can imply hierarchy or condescension rather than warmth. The positive politeness of in-group identity in Arabic thus becomes, in English, a more neutral or individualist tone. This reflects a deeper cultural difference where Arabic politeness prioritizes inclusion within a respectful hierarchy, while English politeness favors egalitarian familiarity.

### 5.2 Negative Face Strategies

Refusals and apologies offer particularly revealing examples:

Arabic: "والله ما أقدر، سامحني."

Literal: "By God, I cannot. Forgive me."

English: "I'm sorry, I really can't."

The Arabic utterance uses two face-saving devices, that is, a religious oath that emphasizes sincerity and a direct request for forgiveness that acknowledges the imposition. Wright's translation keeps the apology "I'm sorry" and adds a hedge "really", but

it omits both the religious invocation and the appeal for forgiveness. The result is a shift from divine accountability to psychological sincerity. The negative politeness function, minimizing imposition remains but its moral basis changes.

A similar shift occurs with blessings:

Arabic: "الله يطوّل بعمرک يا عمّي."

Literal: "May God prolong your life, my uncle."

English: "Thank you, uncle."

Here, a formulaic blessing that expresses gratitude while invoking divine favor becomes a simple expression of thanks. The English reader receives politeness, but the religious depth in the act, which implies elevation of the addressee's face through reference to God is lost. The shift from off-record blessing to negative politeness gratitude is a shift from religious reverence to secular courtesy.

### **5.3 Bald-on-Record Directness**

Not all strategies require significant adaptation. Commands between intimates, such as Arabic: "روح نام." ("Go to bed.") or Arabic: "اسکت!" ("Be quiet!") are translated directly. In both languages, hierarchical relationships (parent-child, superior-subordinate) allow bald-on-record speech. These cases demonstrate pragmatic equivalence. The translator preserves the original face dynamics because both linguistic systems permit directness in intimate contexts. This supports Brown and Levinson's claim of universality, however, the translator must carefully judge whether directness conforms to target norms.

### **5.4 Off-Record Indirectness**

Arabic frequently relies on indirect hints to perform requests or criticism:

Arabic: "البيت مو نظيف اليوم." ("The house isn't very clean today.")

Implicature: You should clean it.

Wright translates this literally maintaining the source implicature. However, the sociocultural weight of the utterance differs across the two languages. In Arabic, such a statement is a highly face-threatening act that imposes moral pressure on the hearer. In English, by contrast, it is more likely to be interpreted as a mild observation. Consequently, while the off-record form is preserved, its social force is weakened.

Similarly:

Arabic: "ما شاء الله، الأكل واجد." ("What a lot of food!")

In Arabic hospitality culture, this phrase functions as an indirect invitation to eat, which is an imperative understood through context. Wright's literal translation keeps the surface level politeness but fails to convey the culturally implied directive. As a result, the host-guest relational duty inherent in the Arabic original is significantly weakened in English.

## **6. Discussion: Politeness and Ideology in Translation**

The shifts documented above are not merely linguistic but ideological. They reflect and enact deeper cultural differences between Arabic and English politeness systems as shown in the following five key dimensions:

**6.1. Religious vs. Secular Politeness:** Arabic politeness routinely draws on religious formulas as part of everyday social etiquette. Wright's systematic omission of these markers secularizes the text, transforming acts of faith into neutral social transactions.

**6.2. Collectivist vs. Individualist Face:** Expressions like "عيب علينا" 'ayb 'alaynā, (it is a shame for us) invoke collective honor and shared responsibility. English translations that render this as "it's not right to leave our guest" replace shame-based collectivism with moral individualism. The sense of shared face becomes personal responsibility.

**6.3. Deference vs. Egalitarianism:** Arabic kinship address terms mark deference through hierarchical relationships. Wright maintains these titles occasionally but reduces their frequency, aligning with English egalitarian norms that value equality and sincerity over hierarchical respect.

**6.4. Expressive Warmth vs. Restraint:** Arabic politeness is affectively rich and redundant where repetition, blessings, and apologies coexist naturally. English, in contrast, values concise sincerity. Wright often condenses multi-layered politeness into minimal verbal phrases (“Thank you,” “I’m sorry”). This reflects a shift from ritualized warmth to pragmatic efficiency.

These patterns suggest that Wright’s translation, while preserving the communicative intent of the original, systematically reinterprets its interpersonal meaning. The moral community of Arabic interaction becomes in English a network of autonomous individuals managing face through sincerity and restraint.

## 7. Translation Strategy and Cultural Mediation

From a translation-studies perspective, Wright’s approach combines functional equivalence (Nida, 1964) with domestication (Venuti, 1995). He aims for natural English dialogue while preserving enough local texture to maintain authenticity. Yet domestication inevitably normalizes Arabic politeness, aligning it with Western communicative norms.

A more foreignizing approach retaining formulas such as “May God prolong your life” would preserve cultural distinctness but risk alienating readers unfamiliar with Arabic etiquette. Wright here turns to a pragmatic compromise by using English politeness strategies (hedging, apology, modal verbs) to simulate the social function of the Arabic original without replicating its linguistic form.

This adaptation exemplifies House’s (1997) concept of an “overt translation,” in which the translator mediates between two speech communities, making cultural adjustments to maintain functional equivalence of interpersonal meaning rather than formal symmetry. The result is a text that communicates effectively across cultural boundaries, but at the cost of some cultural specificity.

### 7. Thematic Implications: Politeness as Identity

The transformation of politeness strategies carries thematic weight. In “The Bamboo Stalk”, Isa’s struggle between Kuwaiti and Filipino identities is reflected in his linguistic negotiation between Arabic and English politeness systems. The translation itself enacts this hybridity. Arabic politeness reflects belonging to a moral community; English politeness reflects autonomy and sincerity. Wright’s translation thus performs the novel’s central tension: how cultural identity is constituted through language.

By moderating Arabic formality and religiousness, the English version positions Isa’s story within a global discourse of migration and identity while softening the local specificity of Gulf Arab etiquette. The loss of ritual politeness becomes a symbolic loss of cultural rootedness, which is precisely the theme the author of the novel explores. In this sense, the translation is not merely a rendering of the original but an extension of its thematic concerns.

## 8. Conclusion

Wright’s translation of “The Bamboo Stalk” demonstrates the intricate interplay between language, culture, and politeness. Based on Brown and Levinson’s framework, it becomes clear that English employs positive and negative politeness strategies to replace Arabic ritualized, collectivist, and religious face-work.

While the pragmatic functions that show respect, softening refusals, building solidarity are largely preserved, the cultural motivations and emotional textures are shifted. Thus, the translation shifts from honor-based to autonomy-based politeness, from divine humility to psychological sincerity, and from collective shame to individual morality.

The translator’s choices reveal that translation is not simply a matter of linguistic transfer but an act of cultural negotiation. Arabic discourse is domesticated to fit English politeness conventions, which results in reducing some cultural richness while ensuring communicative fluency. Consequently, “The Bamboo Stalk” in English becomes a text of hybrid identity in that it engages both with and across the boundaries of cultural face negotiation. Future research might extend this analysis to other speech acts, genres, or language pairs, so that we have deeper understanding of the complex ways of politeness negotiation in translation.

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