

# National, cultural and language specificities of Arab official speech style

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**Abstract.** The problems of building a dialogue of cultures with Arab interlocutors are investigated in the paper; there are practical recommendations for its successful solution. Special attention is paid to the study of national and cultural characteristics of representatives of Arab society, and factors that make influence on the establishment and development partner relations with Arabs. The basic moral values, cultural, national, linguistics norms are briefly formulated in the article. Knowledge of that contributes to the successful conduct of intercultural communication at the “East-West” level. In the Arab countries, the traditions and customs of business ethics and communication, in general, are predominantly developing and changing because of the openness of most countries of the world and the interaction in various spheres (economic, educational, cultural, military, political, etc.). Because of its specificity, Arab society can be described as a closed one. Further on we will present and analyze its characteristics and identify the main features of the Arab official and business style of speech. This requires business participants from all sides to have in-depth knowledge of national, socio-cultural, religious, historical, ethno-psychological peculiarities and possess these skills which can be put into practice when required.

**Keywords:** Arab world, Arab business etiquette, verbal and non-verbal communication, dialog of cultures

## 1 Introduction

Intercultural business communication is a distinct socio-linguistic complex that encompasses diverse forms of interaction between different cultures and nationalities. Russia’s international cooperation with Arab countries has now reached a new level — complex, controversial and multifaceted — and it has become a necessity to study thoroughly the techniques of political interaction and cooperation. “Culture is something, that lies deeper than etiquette” [1]. It is common knowledge that the ability to persuade the

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interlocutor of another race, culture and/or religious affiliation, the achievement of the goal in such negotiations indicates that the communicator has successfully mastered fundamentals of international business ethics.

## 2 Materials and methods

The Arab world includes the countries of the Middle East, North and East Africa, as well as the League of Arab States, where Arabic is an official language. The Arab world consists of 25 states with a total population of more than 380 million people and an area of more than 13 million square kilometers, it is the second largest geolinguistic unit in the world (after Russia) and an important geopolitical component of our planet. The researcher of Arab ethnography A.M. Akhunov lists to the Arab world three more territories not recognized by all countries of the world: the State of Palestine, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, the Republic of Somaliland [2]. Most of the Arab population is Muslim, but the high percentage of Arab Christians in some countries, who often occupy high positions in the political hierarchy, should be taken into account due to the fact that this often causes numerous religious conflicts in those states.

**Table 1.** Arabic states with high quantity of Christian population.

| State                                    | Total population, mln | Number of Christians, mln |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Egypt (coptic Christians)                | 81                    | 1                         |
| Syria (before the war, 2011 – continued) | 23                    | 5                         |
| Lebanon                                  | 4                     | >2                        |
| Palestine                                | 3.5                   | >0.1                      |
| Jordan                                   | 6.5                   | 0.15                      |

A high percentage of Christians live in Israel, however, in Iraq the Christian population constitutes only 3% of the total population of 24 million. However, the famous Russian Arabist and translator V.E. Shagal notes that Lebanon is the only country where Christians are constitutionally equal to Muslims [7]. Important to mention, “Arabic (language) has multiply variants, and the difference between these varieties is like the difference between divergent languages” [3]. The Arab world is generally divided into several regions that often exhibit completely different business etiquette. In Arab countries, however, great importance is attached to Islamic customs (a large family and extended kinship, hospitality, respect for elders, etc.), which are traditional. As a rule, all Arabs, regardless of religious affiliation, adhere to these customs. “The ambivalent value of performing and/or being recognized as an Arabic speaker reinforces social agency and professional identity in some situations, tapping into discourses of cultural similarity and awareness” [4]. Also, it is important to pay attention on non-verbal language, that is used in the Arabic world. “Non-verbal language is specifically related to communication without words or those that includes non-linguistic symbols, which are largely without formal structure such kinesics, haptic, proxemics, cronemic, etc.” [5]. Some sciences write about three “key Arabic business relationship characteristics – ehsan, et-moon, and wasta” [6].

## 3 Results

The following is a list of the main features of Arab business language etiquette and behavioural norms adopted in the Arab society, which will contribute to the success of the dialogue and the achievement of the objective. Ignorance or disregard of these established

rules may lead to negative consequences — the breach of relations at the state level and/or inter-state conflicts.

1) Arabic greeting (private and official) is an important “ritual”, it is accompanied by inquiries about one’s affairs, family (male half of the family, for example, about studying/achievements /business /work /fatherhood of the son /grandson /brother of the interlocutor) as well as health. Men are the first to introduce themselves (regardless of age and status) to a woman, the youngest by age or position (of one sex) to an elder, and one person to a group. A man should avoid shaking a woman’s hand, he should avoid extending his hand to her, or kissing her hand. Each colleague should be greeted. According to V.E. Shagal, “Only the right hand should be used for handshakes, handing out business cards or documents, and presenting gifts. The left hand is considered “unclean” and is associated with failure, ill-being, and misfortune” [7].

2) When meeting the Arab interlocutor for the first time, he expresses kindness and courtesy, but it is necessary to know that this is only part of the tradition: the subsequent conversation can be less smooth and productive. The Arab interlocutors avoid precise answers “yes” or “no” because, according to Arab etiquette, straightforward, hasty, and categorical answers are unacceptable. During the conversation with the Arabs, it is recommended to positively evaluate local food, traditional clothes, sights, works of art, music etc. Any compliment (other than compliment to women or, moreover, to sb’s wife /sister /daughter of a partner) is well received. If the Arabic party reneges on a deal (such as a transaction), the refusal is accompanied by explanations, praises in favour of the provision under discussion.

3) Age, experience, education, position in society, achievements are important for the Arab person, therefore one should not hesitate to stress one’s own status (position, academic degree, presence of successful business, numerous offspring, or many relatives, who are also perceived as a great wealth in the eyes of the Arabs). With regard to degrees, the following should be noted: higher education is highly valued in the Arab world, particular respect is paid to doctors and teachers);

4) The male interviewees observe a relatively short cultural distance than is customary in European tradition, they may touch each other (this is a sign of trust), but a distance based on gender differences must be strictly observed. In the Arab world, it is better for a foreigner to refrain from questioning or asking a woman — all negotiations should be with men. However, a foreign woman should address an Arab woman, not a man. It should be noted that, in the Arab world, women are increasingly occupying high-level positions, which means that foreigners should thoroughly think over their business dialogue and conduct during an official meeting with an Arab woman.

5) Any promise is accompanied by the phrase “Inshallah” (“If God wills”, “If God wants”), but it should be remembered that this expression pronounced by the Arab interlocutor does not obligate them to anything. One can hear the answer “Bukra” (“Tomorrow” in the Arabic language of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan) or “Radan” (“Tomorrow” in the Arabic language of Iraq, Saudi Arabia) and then the Arab partner will add “Inshallah”, thus, the promise to fulfill something tomorrow will remain a promise. Personal relationships (familial or long-standing) in the Middle East are valued above anything else. Communication by telephone or e-mail is not considered obligatory. The Arab working week begins on Sunday and ends on Thursday. Friday and Saturday are weekend days.

6) Particular respect in the Arab world is given to foreign partners who are able to speak eloquently and loudly (this concerns men). In the Arab world, the “muruva” (a man’s code of honor) is a system of norms of conduct, a set of standard qualities of an Arab which

plays an essential role. Deception or exaggeration is not considered to be negative, but the main goal for an Arab is to achieve the goal in any way possible and receive the positive attitude of those around him, usually other Arabs, not foreigners. The Arabs are able to say exactly what is wanted to be heard from them (this is called “*mujamaliyat*”), without denying themselves that the words are only words, they do not commit to anything.

## **4 Discussion**

H. Ajami underlines, “The Arab-Islamic culture is being past-oriented and high-context” [8]. A.M. Akhunov highlights the most striking national features of the Arab character to be borne in mind while negotiating, establishing partnership or diplomatic relations, “Extraordinary pride, quick temper, outstanding hospitality, acute resentment, cunning, religious fanaticism, very different position of man and woman” [2]. The researcher notes another important feature, “The readiness of Arabs to hear only what they want to hear. Often the interlocutor hides his own thoughts and prefers to know yours first. To determine the true intentions of the Arab interlocutor is not an easy task to accomplish [2]. N.B. Kovyrshina stresses that in order to fully understand the Arab interlocutors, a certain spiritual closeness must be achieved, and therefore one has to be aware of numerous salutations. “When people exchange good greetings, the soul is filled with joy; the spirit of faith penetrates the person” [9]. E.V. Kuhareva also points out that the study of the Arabic linguistic etiquette implies, first of all, the assimilation by students of a whole rich system of Arab normative figures of speech — the expression of request, greeting, consent, etc. [10]. Kh. Muslekh, in his PhD thesis, lists the main strategies and tactics of persuasion that are used in the Arab world (using political speech as an example): promises, calls to be honest in the decision-making process, analysis of historical events to evaluate the present, references to the future (promises), a switch from literary Arabic to dialects and back to show personal high level of education and at the same time proximity to the lower strata of society, speech design (Use of different figures of speech and expressive means, including periphrases, anaphores and epiphores, repetition of the same sentence with increased intonation for producing a greater emotional impact on listeners, use of words with national-cultural connotations), referencing to religious values [11]. A.M. Piwko states, “The lives of Arab inhabitants of the Middle East are regulated by religion, which is why many elements contained in Islam are reflected in everyday life. ... Arabs are representatives of the pro-partner culture, which strives to maintain positive relationships with the conversation partner, often this relationship is more important than achieving final success” [12].

Nowadays, however, Western (American and European) culture and English language are penetrated deeply in the Arabic world, especially in United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, Jordan, etc. “Global changes taking place in the economic, political, and social spheres” [13]. It finds reflection in business and official style as a result. “The Arab world was enveloped in dual dynamical models of linguistic operations – the usage of local non-standard accents / dialects in everyday social practices, and the market pressures for English, and so on” [14]. For example, “The variety of English used in the UAE has been variously described as “UAE English” or “Gulf English” [15].

## **5 Conclusion**

Finally, it should be stressed that negotiating with Arab partners can take a long time to achieve the objective. The knowledge of the ethnic specificities and mentality of Arab society plays a crucial part in establishing fruitful intercultural communication and ensures that the desired goal is achieved. Successful business communication with Arab partners is based on the knowledge of professional Arab ethics and the ability to apply this knowledge in practice. It should be borne in mind, however, that even in today's world there are closed societies in the above-mentioned areas which are oriented towards traditional systems.

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