

Examining the Impact of Perceived Cultural Distance on the Pragmatic Choices of Saudi Customers in Service Encounters

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Abstract

This study examines service encounters in Saudi Arabia from a pragmatic perspective. Its aim is to investigate the possible impact of perceived cultural distance between customers and service providers on pragmatic choices. It specifically examines how Saudi customers construct their service encounters when talking to service providers of the same (versus different) cultural/ethnic background in terms of discourse structure; strategies of request and internal modifications, and stylistic strategies. Three cafés with service providers of three different ethnic/cultural backgrounds are chosen. One has Saudi service providers, the second café has Arab (non-Saudi) service providers, and the third café has non-Arab service providers. Forty socially minimal service encounter interactions that take place in each café are observed and manually recorded. The study uses the framework of 'rapport management' by Spencer-Oatey (2002) as its approach for data analysis. The findings indicate that there are differences among the three sets of data in terms of discourse structure, the realization of the speech act of request, and the stylistic aspect of interactions. According to the special nature of service encounters, customers' pragmatic choices are explained in terms of expressing certain degrees of social distance rather than politeness. More specifically, the closer cultural distance between customers and service providers, the more pragmatic strategies functioning to achieve more closeness and solidarity are employed.

Keywords: Cultural distance, forms of address, pragmatic choices, Saudi Arabia, service encounters

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Introduction

This study examined language use in service encounters in Saudi Arabia. It specifically focused on the possible impact of perceived cultural distance on pragmatic choices by Saudi customers. The concept of perceived cultural distance in this study is borrowed from the field of social psychology. It refers to the degree to which individuals from one culture perceive individuals from other cultures to be different with regard to ethnicity, nationality, language, customs, religion, etc., (Sharma & Wu, 2015).

Since the current study focuses on examining service encounters in Saudi Arabia from a pragmatic perspective, and since there are many definitions and views of pragmatics, it is important to clarify the view that the researcher adopted in this study regarding pragmatics. Following Félix-Brasdefer (2015), the researcher views pragmatics as combining a social component which includes socio-pragmatic and cultural expectations, and a cognitive component for the interpretation of social actions.

Current research on service encounters was triggered by the pioneering work of Merritt (1976) who examined the structure of face-to-face interactions in convenience store at an American university campus. Consequently, researchers around the globe were motivated to examine language use in service encounters. Pragmatic research on service encounters in particular has received great attention by researchers in different languages during the last a few decades (e.g., Bataller, 2015; Economidou-Kogesidis, 2005; Félix-Brasdefer, 2015; Michno, 2019). However, in Saudi Arabia and to the best of my knowledge this is the first and the only study to date that has examined language use in service encounters. Moreover, while numerous researchers have considered the impact of factors such as gender, social distance, region, social class in their examination of service encounters in other languages, the possible impact of perceived cultural distance was not explored yet.

Saudi Arabia represents an interesting context for examining service encounters from a pragmatic perspective with particular focus on the possible impact of perceived cultural distance on pragmatic choices by speakers. This is not just because service encounters in Saudi Arabia were not studied before, but also the majority of people working in shops are migrant workers coming from different ethnic/cultural backgrounds. According to the most recent census of population in Saudi Arabia which was conducted in 2017, the number of migrant workers is estimated to be 12,143,974 (Saudi General Authority for Statistics, 2017). This number represents 36.8% of the whole population and constitutes the majority of the labour force in Saudi Arabia (De Bel-Air, 2018). In fact, Saudi Arabia relies heavily on these migrant workers to do many jobs ranging from those requiring no skills to those of high skills (Rajan & Oommen, 2020). These include jobs such as nurses, technicians, janitors, construction labourers, drivers, salespersons, barbers, cleaners and domestic workers (Rajan & Oommen, 2020). The majority of these migrant workers come from two broad regions: Asia (South and Southeast Asia) including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Philippines, and several Arab countries including Egypt, Yemen and Sudan (Rajan & Oommen, 2020).

Based on this complex ethnic/cultural diversity in Saudi business/service sector, the present study is concerned with exploring Saudi customers' linguistic behavior in relation to this diversity. It will specifically examine the extent to which perceived cultural distance affects

Saudi customers' pragmatic choices. For this purpose, naturally occurring service encounters at three cafés will be compared and contrasted. One café has Saudi service providers, the second café has Arab (non-Saudi) service providers, and the third café has non-Arab service providers. In order to get as naturally occurring data as possible, non-participant observation will be used and data will be recorded manually. The data collected for this study was analyzed according to Spencer-Oatey's (2002) illocutionary, discourse and stylistic categories for the analysis of 'rapport management'.

This study is guided by the two following research questions:

1. How do Saudi customers construct their service encounters when talking to service providers of the same cultural/ethnic background in relation to discourse structure; strategies of request and internal modifications, and stylistic strategies?
2. How do Saudi customers construct their service encounters when talking to service providers from different cultural/ethnic background in relation to discourse structure; strategies of request and internal modifications, and stylistic strategies?

The main objective of this study is to examine the extent to which perceived cultural distance affects customers' pragmatic choices in service encounters.

Literature Review

Overview of Service Encounters

Service encounters refer to interactions between a customer and a server taken place in formal and informal institutional settings such as markets, small shops, cafés, grocery stores, bookshops, travel agencies, and medical and governmental front-desks (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2005; Félix-Brasdefer, 2015). Interactions in service encounters can be carried out in an actual service setting (i.e., face-to-face), online, in writing via mail, or over the phone (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015). In this study I adopt the term *service encounters* for face-to-face interactions that take place at a designated commercial setting (cafés) in which some kind of commodity (e.g., food, drinks) is exchanged between a customer and a vendor.

Service encounters typically include openings, negotiations of the exchange, and closings (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015). Generally, there are two types of service encounters: socially minimal service encounters and socially expanded service encounters. Socially minimal service encounters include openings, negotiations of the exchange, and closings, while socially expanded service encounters also include discussion on interpersonal topics (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015). Moreover, service encounters always involve the speech act of request (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2005). This might be a request for information relating to the exchange (e.g., price or availability of a product) or request for action on the part of the interlocutor (i.e., seller or server) (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2005).

Filliettaz (2005) regarded service encounters as a social practice that is mediated by various linguistic and pragmatic strategies which make them "far more complex and unpredictable than we intuitively imagine them to be" (p. 105). In addition to their transactional function, service encounters comprise of interpersonal functions as well (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015). Interpersonal functions enable interlocutors in service encounters to maintain and establish social relationships

in greeting, phatic talk, thanking, and expressing a comment that is outside the main transactional task (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015). Moreover, service encounters are context sensitive. The situational context where service encounters take place contributes to constituting them and at the same time it reflects various social aspects of their context (Filliettaz, 2005; Félix-Brasdefer, 2015).

Pragmatic Studies on Service Encounters

Reviewing literature on service encounters showed an existence of a large body of work that examined this area from a pragmatic perspective in different languages. However, pragmatic study of service encounters in the Arabic-speaking World and in the Saudi context in particular is still an understudied area. In the following the researcher will establish the departure point for the current study by providing a brief overview of relevant previous pragmatic studies on service encounters. This will be accompanied by highlighting the research gap that this study will attempt to fill.

Most pragmatic studies on service encounters were conducted from two dominant perspectives: cross-cultural pragmatics and variational pragmatics. The former included studies that typically focused on pragmatic similarities and differences in service encounters between different languages (Schneider & Barron, 2008). For example, Economidou-Kogesidis (2005) compared politeness strategies in service encounters between Greek and British English. The focus in Economidou-Kogesidis's (2005) study was on the degree of directness in the realization of the speech act of request between customers of the two languages. Moreover, Félix-Brasdefer (2015) investigated pragmatic similarities and differences in service encounters between American English and Mexican Spanish. Félix-Brasdefer's (2015) study focused on characteristics of transactional and relational talk, pragmatic and discursive functions of relational talk and address forms, and the realization of politeness in the two languages.

Studies on service encounters from the perspective of variational pragmatics focused on how language use varies within a single language (Schneider & Barron, 2008). In fact, most recent work on variational pragmatics including work on service encounters was inspired by Labov's (1972) pioneer work on linguistic variation from a sociolinguistic perspective. Regarding factors conditioning pragmatic variation, Schneider and Barron (2008) identified two categories of factors. These included macro-social factors which are relatively stable (e.g., region, social class, ethnicity, gender and age) and situational micro-social factors (e.g., power and social distance) (Schneider & Barron, 2008).

The influence of these factors on language use in service encounters has been examined in numerous studies. For example, Bataller (2015) studied pragmatic variation of service encounters in Spanish based on the factor of region by comparing and contrasting interactions at cafeterias in two different regions in Spain: Granada and Valencia. Moreover, Bataller (2019) investigated pragmatic strategies used to make requests by customers at four corner stores in two cities in Colombia: Bucaramanga in the eastern Andean region of the country and Cartagena on the Caribbean coast. While the two previous studies focused on pragmatic variation of service encounters across regions in the same country (at the national level), there are other studies that focused on pragmatic variation across countries that speak the same language. For example,

Félix-Brasdefer and Yates (2019) examined pragmatic variation of service encounters in small shops in Mexico, Argentina and Spain.

Gender and pragmatic variation in service encounters has received great attention by researchers as well. For instance, Antonopoulou (2001) examined gender and politeness in Greek service encounters. Moreover, Félix-Brasdefer (2012) explored the role of gender in pragmatic variation in market service encounters in Mexico. Similarly, but with particular focus on address forms selection, Michno (2019) studied gender and pragmatic variation in corner-store service encounters interactions in Nicaragua.

Social distance which refers to the degree of familiarity between interlocutors has received some attention in service encounters research. Torres (2019), for instance, examined the effect of social distance on pragmatic choices in cafeteria service encounters in Puerto Rico. In this study, Torres (2019) showed how the degree of familiarity between service providers and clients played a significant role on the pragmalinguistic structure of requests by customers.

Based on the review presented above, it is clear that both macro-social factors and micro-social factors affecting pragmatic choices in service encounters have received great attention in literature. However, the possible impact of cultural distance between customers and service on pragmatic choices has not been considered in previous work on service encounters. In fact, this is not only the case with pragmatic research on service encounters, but also with other scholarly work on pragmatics in general as well. For instance, the seminal work of Brown and Levenson (1987) of Politeness Theory and other theoretical frameworks influenced by this theory have focused on three factors; namely power, social distance and ranking of imposition.

Cultural Distance and Service Encounters

Although the possible impact of ethnic/cultural differences between customers and service providers has not been considered in previous pragmatic work on service encounters, it has been considered in the social psychological work on intercultural service encounters. More specifically, the impact of “perceived cultural distance” on certain service outcomes has been the concern of a number of studies on intercultural service encounters (e.g., Ang, Liou & Wei, 2018; Sharma & Wu, 2015; Sharma, Tam & Kim, 2012). Perceived cultural distance (PCD) refers to the degree to which individuals from one culture perceive individuals from other cultures to be different with regard to ethnicity, nationality, language, customs, religion, etc., (Sharma & Wu, 2015).

Research in social psychology suggests that similarity in individuals’ cultural characteristics (low PCD) increases harmony during human interactions, while differences (high PCD) generate dislikability (Etgar & Fuchs, 2011). Based on this view, a number of researchers were motivated to examine the impact of PCD in the context of intercultural service encounters. Findings of studies on this issue have shown that customers tend to perceive service outcomes such as service quality and customer satisfaction more favorably if service providers come from the same (vs different) culture (e.g., Ang, Liou & Wei, 2018; Sharma & Wu, 2015; Sharma et al., 2012).

The current study borrows the notion of perceived cultural distance that was explained above to find out whether it has any impact on customers' pragmatic choices. Accordingly, findings of this study will add a fresh perspective to the extant literature on pragmatic study of service encounters.

Method

Participants

The data corpus of the current study includes naturally occurring service encounter interactions taken place in three cafés which are located in the same neighborhood in Jeddah city. This neighborhood is located in an area which can be characterized as middle class. The choice of these cafés is based on the ethnic/cultural background (nationality) of service providers. In fact, these cafés conduct business in an almost identical way and their setting and products are very similar; the only difference is the ethnic/cultural background (nationality) of service providers. One café has male Saudi service providers, the second café has male Egyptian service providers, and the third café has male Indian service providers. In order to collect data in these cafés, owners were approached by the researcher and they were provided with an explanation of the nature of the project, and permissions were granted.

The data were specifically taken from socially minimal service encounters which are limited to no more than openings, negotiations of the exchange, and closings. The data corpus of the study consisted of 120 brief interactions; 40 interactions taken place in each one of the three cafés mentioned above. Accordingly, there were three sets of data based on the nationality (ethnic/cultural background) of service providers. Considering the focus of this study which is merely on the linguistic behavior of Saudi customers, the data corpus consisted only of talk directed by them. The data corpus also consisted only of interactions by customers who appeared not to be familiar with service providers. Interactions with customers who seem to be regular were not included. This decision is taken in order to get homogeneous data corpus with regard to the degree of social distance (familiarity) between interlocutors.

Moreover, considering the highly conservative nature of the Saudi context with regard to sex segregation, only interactions between male customers and male service providers were included. The age factor will not be accounted for in this study and only interactions by adult customers will be included. Information about age can only be estimated as will be explained in the next section.

Instrument

Data were collected using non-participant observation. Data were recorded manually by the researcher on an observation sheet that was specially designed for this purpose. Only specific parts of interactions by customers were noted down. These include opening, main request and closing. This was done without approaching customers for any further information. Collecting data using this way was used in a number of sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies, and proved to be effective when studying particular linguistic features and strategies (e.g., Antonopoulou, 2002; Salazar & Orts, 2018). In fact, using this way for collecting data was pioneered by Labov (1972) in his famous study of (r) stratifications in New York department stores. The motive to use such way for gathering data is to overcome the "researcher's paradox", which refers to the possible influence of the presence of the observer on the data (Labov, 1972). Therefore, applying

non-participant observation and manually recording data in the current study would enable the researcher to get naturally occurring data which are regarded in such studies as “essential to get a clear idea of the workings of language” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni’s, 2005, p. 29).

Procedures of the Study

Regarding the actual conduct of data collection for the current study, the researcher was sitting in a spot behind the service counter near the service provider so clear hearing of interactions could be possible. In the three chosen cafés, the service provider will be usually standing up behind the service counter and customers have to make their way to the service counter. They make their order, pay, and collect their orders. The researcher was sitting in a position that does not pose any inconvenience or suspicion. He would look like one of the staff members busy doing some paper work. Gazing and eye contact with customers will be avoided.

Age of customers was roughly estimated and only interactions by adult customers were observed. Regarding the degree of familiarity between customers and service providers, this was inferred from the way the interaction was handled between the interlocutors and further check if needed was done with service providers after customers have left. The time needed for getting the required data was six weeks; from the beginning of March till the mid of April 2020 and it was done during different times of the day.

An important aspect that the researcher had to consider is the identification of the nationality (ethnic/cultural background) of service providers by Saudi customers. In fact, based on the facial features and physical characteristics of individuals, it would not be difficult to identify their ethnic/cultural backgrounds (Fong & Chuang, 2004). This assumption is further eased by the exclusive ethnic/cultural background belonging of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. As indicated previously migrant workers in Saudi Arabia come from two groups of countries: Middle East and Asia. Individuals of these two groups of countries have their own distinct physical appearance which makes it easy to distinguish between them.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Spencer-Oatey’s (2002) analytical framework of ‘rapport management’ which examines how individuals build, maintain, or threaten relationships with others through language. Spencer-Oatey (2002) distinguishes five interrelated domains that play a significant role in the management of rapport: discourse, illocutionary, participation, stylistic and non-verbal domain. The discourse domain is concerned with the structure of the interactions, the illocutionary domain focuses on the realization and interpretation of speech acts, the participation domain examines the procedural aspects of exchanges, the stylistic domain analyses aspects such as honorifics, forms of address, and choice of tone, and the non-verbal domain focuses non-verbal aspects such as gestures and body movements (Spencer-Oatey, 2002).

Considering the nature of this study and its purpose, three of the above-mentioned domains were used to analyze the collected data. These include discourse, illocutionary and stylistic domain. In fact, these three domains are particularly relevant to the analysis of service encounter interactions (Placencia, 2008; Torres, 2019; Bataller, 2015). In Torres’s (2019) words, these three domains are “especially pertinent to service encounter interactions” (p. 231). In the

following the researcher will explain how the collected data were analyzed using these three domains.

Analysis of Discourse Domain

The discourse domain in service encounters is concerned with the use of rapport-enhancing devices by interlocutors such as greeting expressions, thanking expressions, and leave-takings (Antonopoulou, 2001). More specifically, the two most important aspects of the discourse domain in service encounters include opening and closing of the transaction (Bataller, 2015; Torres, 2019). While these two aspects are regarded as interactional, the part where customers preform the main service request which will be discussed in the next section, is regarded as transactional (Antonopoulou, 2001). The function of openings is “to lubricate the transition from noninteraction to interaction, and to ease the potentially awkward tension of the early moments of the encounter”; while the function of closings is to ease “the transition from full interaction to departure” Laver (1975, p. 218, as cited in Bataller, 2015, p. 122).

To analyze data related to this domain, first, expressions used by Saudi customers for opening and closing transactions were classified into categories. Absence of expressions related to opening and closing transactions were observed as well. The frequency and percentage of expressions used in the opening and closing of the transaction in each of the three data sets were calculated. Second, the results of the three data sets were compared and contrasted to reveal similarities and differences between them.

Analysis of Illocutionary Domain

The illocutionary domain in service encounters is concerned with the transactional part of the encounters in which customers make their main requests (Antonopoulou, 2001). In order to analyze collected data related to this domain, a modified version of Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper’s (1989) coding scheme of request head act strategies and internal modifications was used. Based on this coding scheme, requests are usually performed using a variety of directness level, and internal and/or external modifications (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

Regarding the directness level of requests, three possible levels were identified: direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Internal modifications include linguistic elements appearing in the same act while external modifications include devices in the linguistic context surrounding the speech act (Deveci & Hmida, 2017).

Considering the special nature of requests in service encounters in which there is no real imposition involved and requests have to be relatively clear, non-conventionally indirect strategies of requests and external modifications are not expected to be used (Antonopoulou, 2001; Bataller, 2015; Placencia, 2008). Moreover, it is noteworthy to mention that while Blum-Kulka et al’s (1989) coding scheme was used as the main system for classifying request strategies in this study, various works on request strategies in Arabic language (e.g., Alfattah & Ravindranath, 2009; Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012) and in service encounters in other languages were referred to as well (Bataller, 2015; Félix-Brasdefer, 2015; Michno, 2019; Placencia, 2008; Torres, 2019). Direct request in Arabic service encounters can be realized in the form of: 1) commands or imperatives (e.g., *ateni lateeh* ‘give me a latte’); 2) want statements (e.g., *abgha latteh* ‘I want a latte’); 3) ellipticals (e.g., *lateeh* ‘latte’). Conventionally indirect strategies of

request in Arabic service encounters are usually realized using query ability (e.g., *mumken tateni lateeh* ‘can you give me a latte’). Internal modifications accompanying requests in Arabic service encounters can include politeness markers (e.g., *fadlan* ‘please’).

To analyze data related to this domain, the frequency and percentage of request strategies and internal modifications used to make service requests in each of the three data sets were calculated. Absence of internal modifications will be noted as well. This was followed by comparing and contrasting the results of the analysis of the three data sets to reveal similarities and differences between them. It should be mentioned here that the analysis focused only on the first service request made by a customer. Requests for favors that might have come after the main service request were not included in the main analysis.

Analysis of Stylistic Domain

In this domain, terms used by customers to address service providers were analyzed. Absence of terms of address were considered as well. After conducting the quantitative analysis, a qualitative analysis of the used terms of address was conducted to reveal their social significance and interpersonal function. Results emerging from the three data sets were compared and contrasted to reveal similarities and differences between them.

Results

Results emerged from data analysis are divided into three sections. The first section reports on analysis of discourse structure of service encounters. The second section reports on analysis of illocutionary domain of service encounters. Finally, the third section reports on analysis of stylistic domain. As explained previously the data corpus of this study consists of three data sets. The first data set includes talk directed by Saudi customers to Saudi service providers, the second data set includes talk directed by Saudi customers to Arab (non-Saudi) service providers, and the third data set includes talk directed by Saudi customers to non-Arab service providers. For the purpose of clarity, the first data set will be referred to as SS group, the second data set will be referred to as SA group, and the third data set will be referred to as SN group.

Analysis Results of Discourse Domain

Openings

This section focuses on showing similarities/differences between the three groups in terms of distribution (absence/presence) of greetings and the preferred greeting expressions.

Table one presents results of distribution of presence and absence of greetings in the three groups.

Table1. *Distribution of presence and absence of greetings*

	SS Group		SA Group		SN Group	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Greeting	40	100%	38	95%	38	95%
No greeting	0	0%	2	5%	2	5%
Total	40	100%	40	100%	40	100%

As Table one shows, the three groups have a great similarity in terms of initiating service encounters with greetings. Almost all customers in the three groups began service encounters with greeting. More specifically, 100% of customers in the SS group used greetings, 95% of the SA group, and 95% of the SN group.

Table two presents results of used greeting expressions by customers in the three groups. Table1. *Distribution of greeting expressions*

Greeting expressions	SS Group		SA Group		SN Group	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<i>asalamu alaikum</i> 'peace be upon you'	20	50%	35	85%	38	95%
<i>sabah alkhair</i> 'good morning' <i>masa alkhair</i> 'good evening'	12	30%	3	10%	0	0%
Combinations	8	20%	0	0%	0	0%
No greeting	0	0%	2	5%	2	5%
Total	40	100%	40	100%	40	100%

As Table two indicates, although the three groups are similar in terms of distribution (absence/presence) of greeting, the preferred greeting expressions were different. While the use of the greeting expression *asalamu alaikum* 'peace be upon you' is common among the three groups, using other greeting expressions differs. Customers in the SS group tended to use the expressions of *sabah alkhair* 'good morning' and *masa alkhair* 'good evening' (30%) more frequently than customers in the SA group (10%) and SN group (0%). Combination strategies were used by (20%) of customers in the SS group, while this does not exist in the other two groups. Combination strategies include the use of the expression *asalamu alaikum* 'peace be upon you' in company with expressions such as *sabah alkhair* 'good morning' or *masa alkhair* 'good evening'.

Closings

This section focuses on showing similarities/differences between the three groups in terms of distribution (absence/presence) of thanking and preferred thanking expressions.

Table three shows results of distribution of presence and absence of thanking in the three groups.

Table 3. *Distribution of presence and absence of thanking*

	SS Group		SA Group		SN Group	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Thanking	39	97.5%	25	62.5%	14	35%
No thanking	1	2.5%	15	37.5%	26	75%
Total	40	100%	40	100%	40	100%

As Table three shows, there is a difference between the three groups in terms of closing service encounters with thanking on the part of customers. SS group showed the highest frequency of closing service encounters with thanking service providers (97.5%). SA group came next in terms of the number of ending encounters with thanking service providers (62.5%).

Finally, SN group showed the least number of closing service encounters with thanking service providers (35%).

Table four presents results of used thanking expressions by customers in the three groups.

Table 4. *Distribution of thanking expressions*

Thanking expressions	SS Group		SA Group		SN Group	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<i>Shukran</i> 'thanks'	9	22.5%	20	50%	12	30%
<i>yateek alafiah</i> 'May God give you health'	7	17.5%	5	12.5%	2	5%
<i>salemt</i> 'be well'	1	2.5%	0	0%	0	0%
Combinations	22	55%	0	0%	0	0%
No thanking	1	2.5%	15	37.5%	26	65%
Total	40	100%	40	100%	40	100%

Regarding the preferred thanking expressions by customers, the three groups varied greatly. As Table four shows, while SS group mainly used combination strategies of thanking (55%), these were never used by the SA and SN groups. Combinations of thanking expressions include the use of *shukran* 'thanks' in company with the expression *yateek alafiah* 'May God give you health'. They also include the use of the expression *salemt* 'be well' with the expression *yateek alafiah* 'May God give you health'. It is noteworthy to mention that when thanking expressions are used at all by customers in the SA group and SN group, they mainly include the use of *shukran* 'thanks'; SA group (50%) and SN group (30%). Only five times the expression *yateek alafiah* 'May God give you health' was used by customers in the SA group, and two times by customers in the SN group.

Analysis of Illocutionary Domain

In this section, the researcher presents results related to the main request strategies and internal mitigating devices used by customers to make their service encounter requests. As specified previously, an adapted version of Blum-Kulka et al's (1989) coding scheme was used to classify the main request strategies and internal mitigating devices.

Request Head Act Strategies

Table five presents results of the distribution of request head act strategies in the three groups.

Table 5. *Distribution of request head act strategies*

Request strategies	SS Group		SA Group		SN Group	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Direct						
Command	5	12.5%	11	27.5%	13	32.5%
Want	5	12.5%	3	7.5%	1	2.5%
Elliptical	8	20%	23	57.5%	25	62.5%
Indirect						
Query ability	22	55%	3	7.5%	1	2.5%
Total	40	100%	40	100%	40	100%

As shown in Table five, request head act strategies used by customers in the three groups vary greatly. While direct request strategies were used more frequently by customers in the SA group (92.5%) and in the SN group (97.5%), they were only used by (45%) of customers in the SS group. On the contrary, while the indirect request strategies were almost non-existent in the SA group and SN group; (7.5%) and (2.5%), respectively, they were used by (55%) of customers in the SS group. It is clear then that SS group have a clear preference for indirect request strategies in comparison to the SA group and SN group who have a strong preference for direct request strategies.

Three direct request sub-strategies were used by customers of the three groups in this study. These include commands (e.g., *ateni wahid lateeh* 'give me one latte', want statements (e.g., *abgha wahid espresso* 'I want one espresso'), and ellipticals (e.g., *ethneen moka* 'two mocha'). The three groups showed a big difference regarding the preferred direct request sub-strategies. While ellipticals were used by (57.5%) of customers in the SA group and by (62.5%) of the SN group, they were only used by (20%) of customers in the SS group. The same trend is observed in the use of commands as well. This direct request sub-strategy is used by (27.5%) of customers in the SA group and by (32.5%) of the SN group, and only by (12.5%) of the SS group. The want sub-strategy seems to be the least preferred direct request sub-strategy by all groups. It was used by (7.5%) of customers in the SS group, (12.5%) of the SA group and (2.5%) of the SN group.

Regarding the indirect request strategies, the SS group showed the highest level of preference for using these strategies. As shown in Table five, while the indirect request strategies were used by (55%) of customers in the SS group, they were very rare in the SA group and SN group; (7.5%) and (2.5%), respectively. The indirect request strategy used in this study comes in the form of query ability (e.g., *mumkin tateni shai bi alnina* 'can you give me one tea with mint?').

Internal Modifications

The other analytical element in the illocutionary domain is the use of internal modifications embedded in the request proper. Table six presents results of the distribution of internal modifications in the three groups.

Table 6. *Distribution of internal modifications*

Internal modification	SS Group		SA Group		SN Group	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Politeness marker: <i>lu samaht</i> 'if you would permit' <i>min fadlak</i> 'please' <i>lu takaramt</i> 'if you would' <i>bidun amr aleek</i> 'without ordering you'	37	92.5	13	32.5%	8	20%
No Internal modification	3	7.5%	27	67.5%	32	80%
Total	40	100%	40	100%	40	100%

As Table six shows, customers in the SS group used more internal modifications (92.5%) than customers in the SA group (32.5%) and in the SN group (20%). While there are many internal mitigating devices that were identified in the general literature on pragmatics (e.g., downtoners, understaters, hesitators...etc.), results of the current study showed that the only internal mitigating device used by customers in this study is politeness markers. These politeness markers come in the form of expressions such as *lu samaht* 'if you would permit' and *min fadlak* 'please'. When these expressions were used by customers, they are used with both direct and conventionally indirect requests.

Examples of using politeness markers with different direct request strategies include the following:

1. A politeness marker accompanying a command:
adeni Spanish lateeh lu samaht.
Give me Spanish latte, if you would permit.
2. A politeness marker accompanying a want statement:
abi athneen espriso bdoon sukar min fadlak.
I want two espresso without sugar please.
3. A politeness marker accompanying an elliptical:
lu samaht wahid kahwah turki.
If you would permit, one Turkish coffee.

Examples of using politeness markers with conventionally indirect requests include the following:

mumkin tajeeb li wahid krosan bi aljobn min fadlak?
Can you bring me one crossonate with cheese please?

Analysis of Stylistic Domain

In the stylistic domain, the researcher looked at the distribution of forms of address. Table 7 presents results of the distribution of presence and absence of forms of address in the three groups.

Table 7. *Distribution of presence and absence of forms of address*

Forms of address	SS Group		SA Group		SN Group	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Form of address	18	45%	21	52.5%	23	57.5%
No forms of address	22	55%	19	47.5%	17	42.5%
Total	40	100%	40	100%	40	100%

As Table seven shows, there is no huge difference between the three groups in terms of the frequency of using forms of address. While forms of address were used by (45%) of customers in the SS group, they were used by (52.5%) and (57.5%) by customers in the SA group and SN group, respectively. However, the three groups showed great inconsistency in terms of the specific forms of address used favored by customers in each group.

Table eight presents results of used forms of address by costumers in the three groups.

Table 8. *Distribution of the used forms of address*

Forms of address	SS Group		SA Group		SN Group	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<i>Akhoi</i> 'brother'	7	17.5%	0	0%	0	0%
<i>Yateeb</i> 'good guy'	6	15%	1	2.5%	0	0%
<i>Habibi</i> 'beloved'	5	12.5%	2	5%	0	0%
<i>Mohamid</i> 'mohammed'	0	0%	18	45%	14	35%
<i>Sadik</i> 'friend'	0	0%	0	0%	9	22.5%
No forms of address	22	55%	19	47.5%	17	42.5%
Total	40	100%	40	100%	40	100%

As Table eight shows, there is a steady pattern for using specific forms of address by customers in each group. Customers in the SS group, for instance, when addressing Saudi service providers use names such as *akhoi* 'brother' (17.5%); *yateeb* 'good guy' (15%); *habibi* 'beloved' (12.5%). Examples of this in full utterances include the following:

1. *shukran habibi*
'Thanks beloved'
2. *yateeb mumkin wahid lateeh lu samaht*
'good guy, can I have one mocha if you would permit'
3. *wahid lateeh min fadlak akhoi*
'One latte brother, please'

Customers in the SA group, when addressing Arab (non-Saudi) service providers use names such as *mohamid* 'Mohammed' (45%); *yateeb* 'good guy' (2.5%); *habibi* 'beloved' (5%). Examples of this in full utterances include the following:

1. *mohamid athneen kortado sukar mazboot*
'Mohammed, two cortado with sugar'
2. *habibi jeeb le wahid shai nena*
'beloved, bring me one tea with mint'

Customers in the SN group, when addressing non-Arab (non-Saudi) service providers use names such as *mohamid* 'Mohammed' (35%); *sadik* 'friend' (22.5%). Examples of this in full utterances include the following:

1. *sadik athneen espresso bdoon sukar*
'friend, two espresso without sugar'
2. *shukran mohamid*
'Thanks Mohammed'

Discussion

This study examined naturally-occurring service encounters at three cafés in Saudi Arabia. It focused on examining the extent to which cultural distance between customers and service providers can have an impact on pragmatic choices by the former. Three cafés with service providers of three different ethnic/cultural backgrounds were chosen. To compare and contrast customers' pragmatic strategies in these three settings, an analysis of the discourse, illocutionary, and stylistic domain was conducted.

The analysis at the discourse level showed that Saudi customers tended to use different discourse structures in service encounters based on the extent of cultural distance between them and service providers. This became clear when analyzing openings and closings of service encounters. In spite of the fact that the analysis of the openings did not show any significant difference between the three groups in terms of distribution, in which almost all Saudi customers initiated their service encounters with greetings regardless of the ethnic/cultural backgrounds of service providers, the preferred greeting expressions in the three groups varied greatly.

The greeting expression *asalamu alaikum* ‘peace be upon you’ was the most commonly used expression by customers in the three groups. This expression is the most popular and basic greeting expression in Arabic and Islamic culture. However, when greeting service providers of the same ethnic/cultural background, Saudi customers tended to use longer greeting expressions. This include the use of *asalamu alaikum* ‘peace be upon you’ in company with other expressions such as *sabah alkhair* ‘good morning’ or *masa alkhair* ‘good evening’. This shows that Saudi customers tended to show more closeness and friendliness to service providers of the same ethnic/cultural background.

The analysis of the closings of service encounters reflects a similar tendency found in the analysis of the openings of service encounters discussed above. The analysis showed that when talking to service providers of the same ethnic/cultural background, Saudi customers tend to close service encounters with thanking expressions more frequently compared to those with service providers of different ethnic/cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the analysis showed that when closing service encounters, Saudi customers tended to use longer thanking expressions such *shukran Allah yateek alafiah* ‘thanks, and may Allah give your health’. The use of such long thanking expressions by customers make their interactions “appear more personal” (Bataller, 2015, p. 132). On the other hand, Saudi customers construct brief thanking expressions when talking to service providers of different ethnic/cultural backgrounds, which mostly include the expression *shukran* ‘thanks’ which is the most common and basic thanking expression in the Arabic culture.

Overall, it is clear that Saudi customers’ choice of discourse structures is influenced by the perceived cultural distance between them and their interlocutors. This is evident in the differences discussed above between the three groups related to openings and closings of service encounters. The differences were not just in terms of the distribution (absence and presence) of openings and closings of service encounters, but also in terms of the preferred expressions. As has been shown above, Saudi customers tend to use longer opening and closing expressions when dealing with service providers of the same ethnic/cultural background.

It could be argued that the differences between the three groups might be due to the different linguistic background. However, the second group of service providers come from the same linguistic background of customers and the analysis still showed different results compared to those related to greetings and thanking directed by Saudi customers to Saudi service providers. Considering the fact that customers and service providers in all three groups are not familiar with each other, one possible explanation for using such long expressions is to achieve more solidarity and friendliness based on shared ethnic/cultural background.

At the illocutionary level, the analysis showed clear differences between the three groups. When dealing with service providers of the same ethnic/cultural background, Saudi customers prefer to use conventionally indirect strategies to make their requests and these are usually accompanied by internal modifications. On the contrary, when dealing with service providers of different ethnic/cultural backgrounds, Saudi customers prefer to use direct request strategies with hardly any internal modifications. The further cultural distance between customers and service providers, the more direct request strategies and less internal modifications are used by customers.

In general, using indirect request strategies and internal modifications is associated with achieving more politeness. However, in service encounters the case is different. This is due to the fact that when making a request in service encounters there is no real imposition involved so speakers need to mitigate it (Bataller, 2015; Danblon, de Clerck & van Noppen, 2005). Requests in service encounters can be considered as a special type of request that does not pose any threat to the requestee's face as "the receiver has more to gain than the person making the request in this economic system of open competition" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005, p. 36). Therefore, when a customer uses internal modifications in their request in service encounters, these could be regarded as ways to show friendliness rather than ways to soften imposition results from making a request (Danblon et al., 2005).

At the stylistic level, the analysis showed great differences between the three groups in terms of the specific forms of address used by customers in each group. When addressing Saudi service providers, Saudi customers tend exclusively to use two categories of address terms: kin terms and terms of endearment. Examples of these two categories include: *akhoi* 'brother' and *yateeb* 'good guy'. Although kin terms are normally used to indicate blood relations, they have been extended beyond that to include non-relatives (Alenizi, 2019). According to Alenizi (2019) when terms of address of these two categories are used by speakers of Saudi Arabic to address strangers, they are meant to show "respect and display solidarity" (p. 234).

A striking observation in the analysis of the stylistic level relates to addressing non-Saudi (no-Arab) service providers. Two categories of terms of address are used by Saudi customers in this context: common names and terms of endearment. The common name that was used in this context is *mohamid* 'Mohammed' which is the name of the prophet in Islam (peace be upon him). In Saudi Arabia, the famous name "Mohammed" is usually used to address workers from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan etc. if their names are unknown (Alenizi, 2019). In spite of the fact that this name has a special significance in Islamic culture, its use in this way has given it a negative meaning. According to Sharawi (2013), "the name Mohammad has come to be associated with any person whose name we don't know and denotes inferiority which contradicts our love and respect for the Prophet (pbuh)" (p. 1). As a result of this use of the name "Mohammed", Saudis generally would not appreciate it to be addressed by this name by strangers since it is commonly used to address migrant workers especially from eastern Asian countries.

The second category of terms of address used by Saudi customers to address non-Saudi (no-Arab) service providers is terms of endearment. These include the term *sadik* 'friend'. In fact, this term is used by many Saudis to only call migrant workers from eastern Asian countries.

Although this term is basically classified as a term of endearment, its use to address this group of people has associated it with inferiority. This becomes clear from Saudis' reaction when they are mistakenly addressed by it as they don't feel comfortable if someone calls them using this term. Moreover, the negative connotation of this term can be inferred from its humorous use among close friends. When a Saudi person wants to tease a close friend, he would use this term to address him.

It is very clear from these findings that the chosen terms of address are impacted by the perceived cultural distance between customers and service providers. In fact, these findings correspond to the existing argument relating to the function of terms of address in which they play a significant role in expressing and managing interpersonal relationships. Clyne, Norrby, and Warren (2009), for instance, state that address forms function to "express a degree of social distance, common ground and group boundaries" (p. 79). More specifically, Placencia (2015) argue that functions of various terms of address can include: "respect, closeness, trust, distance, familiarity, solidarity or a lack of it, intimacy, warmth, affection (in)equality, hierarchy, impatience, anger, annoyance, condescension, contempt, servility and humiliation" (p. 38).

Based on the results and discussion presented above, this study argues that perceived cultural distance plays a significant role in the choice of pragmatic strategies by speakers. Although previous work has recognized a number of factors influencing the choice of pragmatic strategies (e.g., power, social distance, social class, gender...etc.), this study claims a novel contribution to this area by recognizing perceived cultural distance as an influential factor as well. As it was explained in previously, this study borrows the concept of perceived cultural distance from the field of social psychology. According to studies that examined the impact of perceived cultural distance on service outcomes such as service quality and customer satisfaction, it has been found that customers tend to perceive service outcomes more favorably if service providers come from the same (vs different) culture. Similarly, results of this study confirm the impact of perceived cultural distance on customers but on their pragmatic choices. More specifically, the closer the perceived cultural distance between interlocutors, the more pragmatic strategies that are supposed to achieve more solidarity and friendliness are employed by speakers.

Conclusion

The present study focused on examining the potential impact of perceived cultural distance on pragmatic choices by Saudi customers in service encounters. Findings of this study revealed that customers tend to construct their interactions in a way that expresses more solidarity and friendliness when their interlocutors come from the same/similar ethnic/cultural background. Since this factor has not been recognized in previous research on factors influencing pragmatic choices, this study claims that these findings might be regarded as a novel contribution to the area. Nevertheless, more research is needed to provide more insights on this idea. Although this study has used naturally occurring interactions which are supposed to provide authentic data, the small number of interactions might limit the results of this study. Also, due to the specific nature of service encounters in cafés, more studies are needed to be conducted in other business sectors. Finally, since this study focused only on interactions between individuals who are not familiar with each other, further research examining the impact of the degree of familiarity along with cultural distance is expected to enrich this area.

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