

# Speech Acts of Some Jordanian Idioms

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The primary aim of the study at hand is to investigate Jordanian idioms in light of Speech Act Theory. More specifically, it attempts to highlight and explore the speech acts and the illocutionary acts used in Jordanian idioms based on Searle's classification of speech acts. In order to achieve this goal, the researcher interviewed 20 Jordanian Arabic language native speakers and asked them to give a Jordanian idiom and a context in which it occurs. After analyzing the data, the study reveals that there are four speech acts of Jordanian idioms. They are *expressives*, *directives*, *representatives*, and *commissives*. It also reveals that Jordanian idiomatic expressions perform many pragmatic functions (illocutions). They are *insulting*, *blaming*, *criticizing*, *scorning*, *asking*, *advising*, *asserting*, and *threatening*.

**Keywords:** pragmatics, Speech Act Theory, context, Jordanian idioms

## Introduction

Idioms are expressions that can have either a literal or a figurative meaning depending on the linguistic context in which they are used. For example, the sentence "Do not spill the beans" could have the literal meaning: *do not knock over the beans* or in the appropriate context, it could have the figurative meaning: *do not reveal the secret*. Many scholars and linguists have defined the term idiom. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2010, p. 744) defines an idiom as "a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words". Lewis (1993) defines an idiom as a particular kind of lexical in which the meaning of the whole is not immediately apparent from the meanings of the constituent parts. Weinreich (1969) also defines it as "a complex expression whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of its elements" (p. 26). This indicates that idioms' meanings cannot be inferred from the meanings of their individual parts.

Idioms are often deployed in any context whether it is formal or informal, oral or written. In the oral form, they can be used in daily conversations, lectures, news reports, and so forth, while in the written form, they can be utilized in textbooks, poems, novels, and so forth.

Pragmatically speaking, idioms, like any utterance, have the potential to perform various pragmatic functions (illocutions) when they are contextualized. In other words, an idiom can achieve a wide range of pragmatic meanings based on the context in which it is used. Searle (1969) states that "all linguistic communication involves linguistic acts" (p. 42). This means that a single idiom can have multiple pragmatic functions in different contexts. Accordingly, in order to identify the exact pragmatic function of an idiom, it is important to determine who said it and why, when and where it was said.

In Jordan, idioms are extensively used in day-to-day communication, performing numerous kinds of speech acts such as *advising*, *warning*, *requesting*, and *criticizing*, to name just a few. It is worth mentioning to

say that the context itself determines the pragmatic meaning of the idiom. Put it differently, we need to determine who said the idiom and why, when and where it was said in order to identify the exact pragmatic function of the idiom.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there seems to be an absence of the studies that investigate Jordanian idioms based on Speech Act Theory. This observation was what motivated the researcher to carry out the study at hand in an attempt to partially fill this research gap.

The main objective of the current study was to investigate the pragmatic functions of Jordanian idioms in socially situated utterances. It tried to identify the types of both speech acts and illocutionary acts dominantly presented in Jordanian idioms.

The study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are the speech acts of Jordanian idioms?
2. What are the illocutionary acts of Jordanian idioms?

The significance of the present study derives from the fact that it is the first study that attempts to investigate Jordanian idioms in light of Speech Act Theory. Therefore, this study may be a new contribution to pragmatics. It is also hoped that this study benefits linguists in general and pragmatists in particular. Moreover, the results of the study may widen people's understanding of Jordanian idioms and their use.

As mentioned earlier, this study tackles the speech acts of some Jordanian idioms based on Searle's classification of speech acts. Therefore, it limits itself to identifying the speech acts and the illocutionary acts of some Jordanian idioms. It is also limited to the idioms that are used in spoken communication.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Speech Act Theory**

Speech Act Theory is one of the most important theories that falls under the umbrella of pragmatics. It was introduced by the philosopher John L. Austin (1962) who defined it as "theory which analyzes the role of utterance in relation to the behavior of the speaker and hearer in interpersonal communication" (p. 61). It was then elaborated by Austin's student, John Searle (1969; 1979; 1975). They both believe that language is not only used to describe things but also to perform actions.

Searle (1969) states that "all linguistic communication involves linguistic acts" (p. 42). This means that when people say something, they perform some kinds of acts such as *requesting*, *offering*, *advising*, *apologizing*, and several others. Such acts are called speech acts, which are defined by Searle (1969, p. 16) as "the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication".

Austin (1962) reports that speech acts refer to the use of language in order to perform an action. They involve three aspects: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Locutionary act refers to the literal meaning of the utterance or the actual words uttered by the speaker and illocutionary refers to the force of the speech. The perlocutionary act refers to the influence of the utterance on the hearer.

Searle (1976) divides the illocutionary acts into five major categories as follows:

1. Representatives: The speech acts which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. Examples of speech acts are *stating*, *suggesting*, *claiming*, *concluding*, and so forth.
2. Directives: The performance of such acts is understood as an attempt by the speaker to have the hearer do something. Directive speech acts are used for functions such as *asking*, *requesting*, *inviting*, *advising*, and so forth.

3. Commissives: These speech acts are performed to create an obligation on the part of the speaker. That is to say, they commit the speaker to some future course of action. Examples of speech acts are *promises, offers, vows, and so forth*.

4. Expressives: These speech acts are performed to express an attitude or an inner state of the speaker, which says nothing about the world. Some examples are *thanking, apologizing, welcoming, congratulating, and so forth*.

5. Declaratives: Declarations bring about change in reality that corresponds with what is uttered, thereby changing the world through their actual utterance. Some examples are *appointing, sentencing, judging, and so forth*.

A key distinction made in speech act theory is between direct and indirect speech acts. According to Yule (1996), when there is a direct relationship between form and function, the utterance is referred to as direct speech act and when there is an indirect relationship between form and function, the utterance is referred to as indirect speech act.

### Previous Studies

Elshamy (2016) carried out a study to investigate the idiomatic expressions and their pragmatic functions in the conversations of the novel *Taxi* in the light of Speech Act Theory. After analyzing the 58 episodes of the novel *Taxi*, the study reveals 80 idiomatic expressions fulfilling 13 pragmatic functions: *describing with six subcategories, complaining, stating, concluding, and swearing, thanking, condoling, sympathizing, deploring and excusing, agreeing and opposing and advising*. These pragmatic functions have been classified based on four of Searle's speech acts: (1) *representatives*, (2) *expressives*, (3) *commissives*, and (4) *directives*.

Another study was conducted by Listyantono (2014) who scrutinized the use of idioms in *The Dark Knight Rises* movie script. The way to collect data is by using documentation method. The result of the research shows that, first, there are five classifications of speech acts of idiom in *The Dark Knight Rises* movie script according to the context of the dialogue, representative, commissive, expressive, directive, and declaration. From 67 data, there are 38 idioms or 56.7% data belonging to representatives, one idiom or 1.2% data belonging to expressive, four idioms or 6.0% data belonging to commissives, 16 idioms or 23.9% data belonging to directives, and eight idioms or 11.9% data belonging to declarations. It means that the most dominant of the occurrence is the idiom in representatives type as the one of the speech acts classifications.

Murar (2010) discussed some characteristics of idiomatic expressions, considered a subtype of multi-word units or phrase logical units. The paper is structured in two parts: The first part gives a brief overview of the definition, meaning, structure, and typology of idioms, while the second part deals with some of their pragmatic and functional aspects. The analysis of pragmatic idioms points out a few salient features, such as: Their occurrence is determined by a particular social situation, the importance of the context of situation for their correct interpretation, their function sometimes overrides their meaning. Some idiomatic expressions are used to implement speech acts of various kinds, such as greetings, making comments, recommendations, or issuing warnings, prohibitions, and others.

The study at hand is different from the above mentioned studies in two main aspects. Firstly, it deals with Jordanian idioms that are regularly used in daily conversations. Secondly, it applies Searle's classification of speech acts to highlight and explore the speech acts as well as the illocutionary forces in Jordanian idioms.

## Methodology

In this section, the researcher explains the methodology followed and used in the study at hand.

### Participants

Twenty Arabic-speaking people, with ages ranging from 20 to 40, participated in the present study. They were all monolingual speakers of Jordanian Arabic and were randomly selected from different cities across Jordan.

### Interview

Bell (2005) emphasizes the importance of interviews in data collection as he points out that “the major advantages of the interview are useful to follow up ideas” (p. 157). Accordingly, in order to elicit the data required for this study, the researcher conducted interviews with 20 Arabic-speaking people. During the interviews, which were conducted at participants houses, the researcher asked them to give a Jordanian idiom within its real context (see the Appendix A). That is to say that the researcher asked the participants to say an idiom and to use it in a real context. Each interview lasted for about five to eight minutes.

### Procedures of the study

After the data had been gathered (i.e., the idioms used in contexts provided by participants), the researcher translated the idioms both literally and functionally as they were used in their real-life situations. The researcher then identified the kinds of speech acts along with the illocutionary acts of the contextualized idioms following Searle’s classification of speech acts.

## Analysis and Discussion

Once the data collection process had been completed, idioms were classified according to the speech acts they served. Accordingly, it was found that those idioms were used to perform four types of speech acts: *expressives*, *directives*, *representatives*, and *commissives*. These will be discussed in turn below.

### Expressives

The illocutionary point of expressives is to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content. In expressive there is no detection of fit. In performing an expressive the speaker is neither trying to get the world match the words nor the words match the world, rather the truth of the expressed proposition is presupposed (Searle, 1979, p. 15). There are four illocutionary acts falling under this category. They are *insulting*, *blaming*, *criticizing*, *scorning*. For more explanation, consider the following examples:

كان مهر مريم بنت محمد غال جدا، فعندما تقدم زيد لخطبتها رفضه ابوها، وقال له: “انت واقع من طيارة”

Translation: Mariam’s dowry, daughter of Mohammad, was very expensive. When Zaid asked her father for her hand, her father refused him and said to him “you are falling off a plane” (func. You are very poor).

The above idiomatic expression is widely used among Jordanians to describe a person who has financial difficulties. When this idiomatic expression is contextualized, it can accomplish various pragmatic functions such as *criticizing*, *insulting*, and so forth. According to the context at hand, the speaker (i.e., the father) used the idiomatic expression to mean that Zaid is very poor and hence he cannot afford Mariam’s dower. From a pragmatic point of view, the speaker here tries to insult the hearer indirectly. Thus, the illocutionary act of this

idiomatic expression is *insulting*, which falls within the speech act of expressive.

كانت زوجة صدام تطلب من زوجها ان يشتري لها الكثير من الأغراض أسبوعيا، حتى كثرة ديون زوجها، فقال لها زوجها: "شحتيني الملح".

Translation: Saddam's wife used to ask her husband to buy her a lot of things every week until his debts got ran up. So, he said to her "you caused me to beg salt" (func. You made me very poor).

The above idiomatic expression means to cause somebody to beg the cheapest thing in life, which is salt. Jordanians use this idiomatic expression frequently in order to show the expertly poor status of a person. They use the particular word الملح "salt" because it is considered the cheapest thing to be bought in our society. Such an idiom can implement a single speech act in one situation and another elsewhere. According the context at hand, Saddam used this idiomatic expression to blame his wife for ending him up being at this level of poverty. By using the idiom here, the speaker performs the illocutionary act of *blaming*, which falls under the expressive speech acts.

كان أبو خالد رئيس شركة مقاولات، وكان يرفض أي قرار يقترحه عليه زملاءه فقال احدهم له: انت "راسك يابس".

Translation: Abu Khaled was a head of a contracting company and he used to reject any suggestions made by his colleagues. So, one of them said to him "your head is solid" (func. You are stubborn).

The above idiomatic expression is widely used among Jordanians in order to describe a person who is stubborn. This idiom can convey multi-pragmatic meanings such as *asserting*, *criticizing*, and so on, according to the contexts in which it occurs. Taken it in its context, the speaker used this idiom to criticize Abu Khaled who always refuses to accept any his colleagues' suggestions. By determining who said the idiom and why, when and where it was said, we can stipulate that the illocutionary act behind using this specific idiom in this certain context is to criticize the hearer. The illocutionary act *criticizing* is categorized as expressive speech act.

. كان أبو حمد مصرا على الاستمرار بالانتخابات النيابية بالرغم من ان مؤازريه عددهم قليل جدا-عددهم لا يتجاوز المائة والخمسين مؤازرا- فقال له منافسه: عليك الانسحاب من الان لأنك "كات الشعيب".

Translation: Abu Ahmed was insisting on continuing the parliamentary elections, although his supporters were very few their number does not exceed 150 supporters. His competitor said to him: You should withdraw now because you are "fell off a very small valley" (func. You will lose).

The above idiomatic expression is much used by Jordanians to describe a person's weak position. Searle (1969) states that "all linguistic communication involves linguistic acts" (p. 42). Therefore, this idiom fulfills at least one pragmatic function when it is contextualized. Taken it in its context, the speaker used the idiomatic expression "كات الشعيب" to scorn the hearer. This is because that the speaker tried to belittle the value of the hearer. Accordingly, the illocutionary act of this idiom is *scorning*, which falls under the speech acts of expressives.

### Directives

Directives: The illocutionary point of these consists in the fact that they are attempts (of varying degrees, and hence, more precisely, they are determinates of the determinable which includes attempts) by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. The direction of fit is world-to-words and the sincerity condition is want (or wish or desire). The propositional content is always that the hearer H does some future action A (Searle, 1979, pp. 13-14). There are two illocutionary acts falling under this category, namely, asking and advising. By way of clarification, consider the following instances:

كان أبو خالد يقوم بحصد زرعته، فعندما رأى جاره ثامر مارا من جانبه قال له: يا ثامر، ثمر عن ايديك، وساعدنا.

Translation: Abu Khaled was harvesting his crop so when he saw his neighbor Thamer passing by, he said to him “tuck up your sleeves” (func. Prepare yourself for help).

One of the most common idiomatic expressions used across Jordan is the idiom “ثمر عن ايديك”, which implies that the speaker asks the hearer to get ready so as to provide assistance. It is worth mentioning that such an idiomatic expression can implement many pragmatic meanings in different contexts. Based on the context above, the speaker asks his neighbor to help them. Accordingly, from a pragmatic point of view, the illocutionary act of making use of this idiom is *asking*, which falls under the directive speech act.

قال أبو صالح لابنه محمد الذي اقتربت امتحاناته: يا ولدي، شد حزامك.

Translation: Abu Saleh said to his son, Mohammad, whose exams are coming up: O’ my son “fasten your belt” (func. Be ready for your exams).

The above idiomatic expression is used across the country, Jordan, to mean to prepare yourself well in order to do something. Thus, it can execute some kinds of pragmatic functions in different situations. Based on the context at hand, the speaker used the idiomatic expression in order to advise the hearer to start from now studying and preparing for the exams. Pragmatically, the illocutionary act of this idiom is *advising*, which falls within the speech acts of directives.

### Representatives

Representatives (assertives): The point or purpose of the members of the assertive class is to commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something is being the case, to the expressed proposition. All the members of assertive class are assessable on the dimension of assessment which include true or false. The direction of fit is words to the world (Searle, 1979, p. 12). There are two illocutionary acts fall under this category. They are criticizing and asserting. To clarify, consider the following examples:

كان أبو خالد يريد ان يشغل احمد في مزرعتهم لأن احمد يملك جسم قوي، فعندما سال عنه جاره قال له: لا يغرك ضخامة جسم احمد فانه ”فشق فاضي“.

Translation: Abu Khaled wanted to employ Ahmed in his farm since Ahmed has a strong body. When he asked about him, his neighbor said to him: Do not be deceived by Ahmed’s strong body; it is “empty shots” (func. He is worthless).

The above idiomatic expression “فشق فاضي” is widely used among Jordanians to describe a person who is physically weak. Such an idiom can be used to accomplish various meanings according to when it is used, who uses it, who is the person talking to/about, and where it is said. In the context offered above, the speaker (Ahmed’s neighbor) used the idiom in order to criticize Ahmed. From a pragmatic point of view, the idiom carries the pragmatic meaning of *criticizing*, which falls under the speech act of representatives.

أخبر زيد صديقه محمود: ان جارهم أبو محمد اشترى قصرا كبيرا جدا بمليون دينار، فقال محمود لزيد: هذا أبو محمد ”عظمه ذهب“.

Translation: Ziad told his friend Mahmoud that their neighbor Abu Mohammad has bought a massive palace for a million dinars. Then, Mahmoud said to Zaid that this Abu Mohammad: “His bones are golden” (func. He is very rich).

People use the above idiomatic expression in order to describe someone who is wealthy. Needless to say that this idiom can convey various pragmatic functions based on the context in which it is used. According to the context above, the speaker used this idiomatic expression to say that Abu Mohammad is very rich. Pragmatically speaking, the pragmatic meaning of the above contextualized idiom is *asserting*, which falls within the speech act of representatives.

. توفي ابو علي، وهو رجل كبير بالسن بعد صراع طويل مع المرض، ولم يخرج في جنازته الا ثلة قليلة وعندما سال خالد احمد عن سبب قلة الحضور، رد أحد جيرانه قائلا: هذا الرجل "مقطوع من شجرة".

Translation: Abu Ali, who is an old man, passed away after a long struggle with the illness. Only a very few people attended his funeral. When Khaled asked about the reason for the small number of mourners, Ahmed said: This man is "cut out of a tree" (func. He has no relatives at all).

The above idiomatic expression is used to describe a person who has no relatives. As outlined previously, any utterance performs at least one illocutionary act (Austin, 1962). Thus, this idiom can implement a wide variety of pragmatic functions based on the context in which it is uttered. It can perform the illocutionary act of *criticizing*, *advising*, and several others. According to the context at work, the speaker used this idiom to assert that this person does not have a family at all. Accordingly, the pragmatic function behind using the idiom here is to assert the point that the dead person has no family. The illocutionary act of assertion falls under the category of representatives.

### Commissives

A commissive illocutionary point is an act in which it is used by the speaker to commit his/herself (in varying degrees) to some future course of action (Searle, 1979, p. 11). There is a single illocutionary act found within this category: *threatening*. To have a better understanding, consider the following instance:

كان اخوان احمد يتآمرون على اخذ حق اخيهم احمد من الميراث، فعندما علم احمد بذلك قال لهم احمد مهددا: "لحمي مر".

Translation: Ahmed's brothers were conspiring to take his inheritance. When Ahmed knew of this, he said to them threateningly: "My flesh is bitter" (func. I am undefeatable).

Jordanians use the above underlined idiom frequently to describe a person who is unable to be defeated. That is to say, it is deployed to describe a person who has a strong personality and qualities of self-confidence and assertiveness. Considering the above context, the speaker (i.e., Ahmed) threatens the hearers (i.e., his brothers) not to seize his inheritance. In Speech Act Theory' terms, the illocutionary act related to such an idiom in this specific context is *threatening*, which is a commissive speech act.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The main purpose of this study was to highlight and explore the kinds of speech acts and illocutionary acts (pragmatic functions) in some Jordanian idioms. The study employed Speech Act Theory: in particular, Searle's (1969; 1979) classification of speech acts. Based on the analysis, it was found that the most frequently occurring types of speech acts performed by Jordanians were *expressives*, *directives*, *representatives*, and *commissives*. It was also found that Jordanians deploy idioms to serve eight pragmatic functions, which were *insulting*, *blaming*, *criticizing*, *scorning*, *asking*, *advising*, *asserting*, and *threatening*. Moreover, the study also revealed that the meaning of idioms is highly context-dependent.

The researcher recommends that a study examine Jordanians idioms in light of Politeness Theory. What is more, it is suggested for some studies to investigate relevant translation aspects. It is hoped that the current study motivates many researchers to deal with similar linguistic issues and phenomena in Arabic.

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### Appendix A

#### Interview Questions

During the interviews, the researcher asked the following questions:

1. Can you give me a Jordanian idiom?

.....

.....

2. Can you give me a situation in which that idiom is used/said?

.....

.....

### Appendix B

#### Sample of Situations

بدأ أبو محمد بالعمل في التجارة حديثاً، فقال أحدهم واصفاً "عظمه طري".

Translation: Abu Mohammad has been recently working as a trader. Somebody said: "his bones are weak" (func. He lacks experience).

كان خالد معتاد على سواقة سيارة أبيه بسرعة عالية جداً، فقال عمه لأبيه: لا تعطي سيارتك لابنك لأنه "يبيع روحه".

Translation: Khaled was used to driving his father's car so fast. So, his uncle said to Khaled's father: do not give your son your car because "he is selling his soul" (func. He is a reckless driver/ he drives so fast).

. أراد عمر أن يطلب ابنة جيرانه لابنه سامي، فعندما تقدم لخطبتها، قال له أبوها: ابنك "عقله خفيف".

Translation: Omar intended to ask his neighbors' daughter for his son Sami. When he asked her hand, her father said to the father: "your son's brain is light (weak-minded)" (func. He is crazy).

سأل محمد موسى عن أوضاع صديقهم خالد المادية الذي عاد من السفر مؤخراً، فقال له موسى: "يألب بالمصري".

Translation: Mohammad asked Mousa about their friend Khaled's financial status after Khaled had returned from travelling recently. Then, Mousa said to him: "he plays with money" (func. He is very rich).

أوصى حازم ابنه علي بأن لا يتعامل مع ابن جاره خالد، وقال عنه "إن وجهه بارد".

Translation: Hazim recommended his son Ali not to deal with their neighbors' son Khaled and he said to him that "his face is cold" (func. He is rude).