

Imperatives and Vocatives as Gendered Indexicals in Saudi Arabic

This comparative sociolinguistic study investigates how both imperatives and vocatives function as gendered indexicals in formal discourse in Saudi Arabic across two generational cohorts. With Saudi Arabia undergoing rapid sociocultural transformation, particularly in gender dynamics and public discourse, this study explores how syntactic and addressive choices in directive speech acts are shaped by shifting cultural norms. Grounded in Silverstein's Indexicality Theory (2003) and Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987), this research examines the extent to which imperative forms, grammatical constructions used to issue commands, requests, or advices, and vocative expressions, explicit terms of address such as /*ya: wa:lid*/ ("hey father") or /*ya: binti*/ ("hey daughter"), reflect and negotiate gendered expectations and social positioning in both same-gender and cross-gender interactions. Data were collected through a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) involving 80 native Saudi Arabic speakers (40 males and 40 females), equally divided between the two age groups. Participants responded to six culturally-situated scenarios eliciting directive speech acts addressed to same-gender and cross-gender interlocutors. The analysis focused on three primary features: (1) the syntactic form of the imperative (bare vs. mitigated), (2) the deployment of vocatives (e.g., /*ja: walad*/, /*ja: binti*/, /*ja: ommi*/) as markers of formality, hierarchy, or relational alignment, and (3) the use of politeness strategies such as lexical hedges, modal verbs, and honorifics. Findings demonstrate that both imperatives and vocatives serve as indexical cues of gender performance and sociopragmatic orientation. Female participants predominantly employed mitigated imperatives and deferential vocatives in cross-gender scenarios, signaling face sensitivity, cultural modesty, and alignment with expected gender roles. Male participants, by contrast, showed a preference for direct imperatives and solidarity-oriented vocatives in same-gender interactions, often indexing assertiveness, authority, or camaraderie. Generational variation further revealed that younger speakers across genders favored more flexible and adaptive forms, frequently combining softened directives with strategically chosen vocatives to reduce imposition and foster interpersonal rapport, especially in cross-gender contexts. Vocatives, in particular, emerged as highly sensitive to gendered and generational distinctions, with younger speakers tending to use neutral or honorific terms even in informal contexts, while older speakers relied on relational or kin-based vocatives more freely in same-gender scenarios. These findings underscore that vocatives are not merely formulaic address forms but are culturally encoded indexicals that help speakers manage identity, social distance, and role expectations within interaction. This study highlights the intertwined role of directive syntax and vocatives in Saudi Arabic as powerful resources for performing gender, negotiating power relations, and managing formality. The study contributes theoretically to sociolinguistic and pragmatic research on indexicality and empirically enriches the documentation of gendered linguistic behavior in Arabic discourse.