

# THE PRAGMATICS OF ARABIC RELIGIOUS POSTS ON FACEBOOK: A RELEVANCE-THEORETIC ACCOUNT

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## **Abstract**

Despite growing interest in the impact of computer-mediated communication on our lives, linguistic studies on such communication conducted in the Arabic language are scarce. Grounded in Relevance Theory, this paper seeks to fill this void by analysing the linguistic structure of Arabic religious posts on Facebook. First, I discuss communication on Facebook, treating it as a relevance-seeking process of writing or sharing posts, with the functions of 'Like' and 'Share' seen as cues for communicating propositional attitude. Second, I analyse a corpus of around 80 posts, revealing an interesting use of imperatives, interrogatives and conditionals which manipulate the interpretation of such posts between descriptive and interpretive readings. I also argue that a rigorous system of incentives is employed in such posts in order to boost their relevance. Positive, negative and challenging incentives link the textual to the visual message in an attempt to raise more cognitive effects for the readers.

**Keywords:** Pragmatics, relevance-theory, Arabic, Facebook, Cyberpragmatics

## **1. Introduction**

The role of language in the religious domain cannot be underestimated. Crystal explains that language plays a fundamental role in “the practical understanding, expression, presentation and furtherance of any set of religious beliefs” (1965: 86). Arabic Islamic religious messages (in the form of a verse from the Quran, a supplication, or just the picture of someone praying), have been spreading among its followers through various means, from slips of paper to emails to text messages on mobile phones. Recently, the widespread use of social networking sites (henceforth SNSs), such as Facebook, for all sorts of communicative acts, including those for a religious purpose, could be seen as a natural progression. Arabic is among the fastest growing languages on Facebook (Arab Social Media Report), so it is no surprise that religious posts feature heavily on the pages of millions of Arabic-speaking Muslim users. In addition to their important role in the identity formation of those users in cyberspace, the linguistic features of such religious posts exhibit interesting patterns.

From the linguistic perspective, this study falls within the area known as “cyberpragmatics”, a term coined by Yus (2001) to refer to applying cognitive pragmatics to users’ interactions online. This research attempts to highlight how communication on Facebook could be seen as part of relevance-based communication which has its roots in the inherent cognitive feature of the human mind to seek relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1986). Whether it is an utterance in a face-to-face conversation, the opening line in a novel or a post on a Facebook page, humans process such stimuli with the expectation that they are relevant, i.e. they can impact one’s cognitive environment in some way. Besides, the paper discusses how some functions of the Facebook page are geared to specific types of explicit communication.

This paper analyses a corpus of 80 religious posts on Facebook.<sup>1</sup> Typical of cyber multimedia input, all of these posts combine the visual and the textual in the form of an image of a religious nature (e.g. a picture of a beautiful mosque, a picture of a little boy praying, or a picture of a religious supplication written in a calligraphic style) together with a textual message calling for ‘liking’ or ‘sharing’ this post due to its religious value. The examples below<sup>2</sup> illustrate the type of data analysed in this study:

- (1) *hal ladaika l-šaraf linašrahā ’alā ḥā ’iṭak*  
Do you have the honour to share it on your wall?  
(a picture of the name Muhammad (Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him) painted on a plaque]
- (2) *lā taḥruj qabla an ta’mil laik*  
Don’t leave before clicking ‘Like’  
[a picture of a beautifully designed mosque]
- (3) *law awwel marra tešufuh idḡaṭ laik*  
If this is the first time to see it, click ‘Like’  
[a picture of the oldest Qur’an book]

These types of posts abound on the Facebook pages of Arabic-speaking Muslims regardless of age, social status or level of education. They play an important role in identity formation of users in the cyber space, as these posts are often shared by Facebook users, without knowing who originally created them, in a claim for a certain level of religious empathy. Within the framework of relevance theory, communication on Facebook is seen as part of the wider view of relevance-driven intentional communication. There are mutual expectations of relevance

<sup>1</sup> All posts have been collected from the author’s own newsfeed in the period between 2013-2015. All posts consist of a visual image with a textual message, and all have been shared on the author’s newsfeed while the original creators of these posts are unknown.

<sup>2</sup> Due to copyright issues, all examples discussed in this paper will only include the exact textual message accompanying the image. An explanation of the content of the image will be provided between square brackets following each example. All examples are transcribed (italics), followed by English translation.

between users on Facebook pages, where every post, comment, 'like' or 'share' is communicating a message to all users. Relevance theory provides us with the analytical tools to describe how communication takes place on Facebook. Moreover, data analysis shows that the choice of linguistic structure is geared to the purpose of these kinds of posts. The writer addresses the audience directly through an imperative, an interrogative or a conditional with the ultimate goal to gain the audience's acknowledgement of the value of this post in the quickest way possible: by clicking 'Like' or 'Share'.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the relationship between religion, language and social media as discussed in the literature. It also briefly highlights the role Facebook posts play in the identity formation of users. Section 3 presents a view of communication on Facebook from a relevance-theoretic perspective. It starts with highlighting some linguistic features of communication on Facebook in general, then discusses how Facebook functions communicate meaning within the mutual expectations of relevance. Section 4 presents an analysis of the corpus data collected for this study. The data is analysed in terms of the linguistic structures used (imperatives, interrogatives and conditionals) by appealing to the relevance-theoretic distinction between descriptive and interpretive representation. In section 5, it is argued that there is a system of incentives that is rigorously employed in such posts. Such a system presents the readers with either a positive, a negative or a challenging incentive with the aim of boosting relevance.

## 2. Religion, Arabic and social media

Social media is a form of computer-mediated communication (CMC), a term which has forced its way into the field of research to encompass all "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers" (Herring, 1996: 1). As wide this definition may be, it is significant for its implications on the role of language in this type of communication. Numerous studies have tried to capture the essence of change CMC has had on human languages in various platforms (Crystal 2006, 2008; Baron 2008; Knaś 2010; Goddard & Geesin 2011; Tannen & Trester 2013; Dabrowska 2013; Page et al. 2014; Zappavigna 2014 *inter alia*).

Social media itself is hardly a well-contained notion. It is defined as "Internet-based sites and services that promote social interaction between participants" (Page et al, 2014: 5), but that includes a wide array of platforms ranging from blogs, discussion forums, wikis, and podcasts to all kinds of SNS (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Linked-In) and content-sharing sites (e.g. YouTube, Flickr, Instagram). And the list could go on. The exponential growth of social media and its increasingly interactive potential means that the possibilities of new forms of social media are unlimited.

While the relationship between language and religion is as old as both of them, religion's relationship with social media is considerably younger. The dissemination of religious messages among its practitioners is a normal social practice. Recently, technology has had more intersection points with religion than ever before. However, Campbell (2010) argues that there is not enough research that looks into the connections between religion and the Internet despite the fact that many people interact with both on a daily basis. This interaction can be in the form of searching the internet for information on a certain religion, or simply identifying one's religious affiliation on a social media website. On a deeper level, some studies have been interested in the ways social media websites affect users' religious beliefs (e.g. Campbell 2010; Miller et al 2013; McClure 2016, *inter alia*).

Whereas Christianity could be linked to many languages in the world, Islam is invariably linked to one language – Arabic. Arabic is the first language of some 420 million people in the world, and Islam is the official religion of some 22 Arabic-speaking countries. According to the Arab Social Media Report (2014), the total number of Facebook users in the Arab World is approximately 81 million. The report also reveals that Facebook is the most favoured social networking tool in the Arab World, and that the Arabic language is one of the fastest growing languages on Facebook. However, there are very few studies that discuss the relationship between the Arabic language, Islam and Facebook.

The data collected for this study includes religious multimedia posts collected from the Facebook pages of Arabic-speaking Muslim users. The variables of age, location or level of education are irrelevant here, since the aim of the research is to linguistically analyse the textual messages in such posts. It is worth noting that such religious posts are common among practitioners of all religions and in many languages. The examples below illustrate such textual messages shared by Coptic (in Arabic) and Christian (in English) users respectively on Facebook:

- (4) *law biṭhib el bābā šnūdā i'mil laik wa šīr*  
If you love Pope Shnuda, click 'like' and 'share'  
[a picture of the Coptic Pope Shnuda]
- (5) I forgive you! Like if you accept me.  
[a picture of Jesus]

It is interesting to note that some studies on the relationship between Christianity and social media have shown that “religiosity is associated with less participation in online communities” (Miller et al. 2013: 228). No similar findings have been reported regarding Islam and social media; however, there are other studies that claim that religious activities performed online are a reflection of religious activities performed offline. In the words of Campbell (2010: 31), “traditional offline religious practices are imported online”. In this

sense, it is reasonable to argue that posts with a religious nature on the Facebook pages of Muslim users are not surprising, and even expected, as the dissemination of religious prayers and messages is essentially considered a good deed in Islam. In the data analysis, it will become clear that this is an important assumption that writers exploit with such posts, as they appeal to this assumption and even expect it to be common knowledge among Muslim users.

But the question remains, why and how did Facebook acquire a significant role in the identity of any religion or its practitioners in the cyberworld? Since its inception in 2004, Facebook quickly gained momentum in the world of social media for its highly interactive nature, ease of use and appeal to the basic social activities of users. In fact, Facebook has successfully capitalised on the most defining characteristics of the so-called “Web 2.0” era in terms of dealing with “web users as creators (rather than consumers) of content” (Page et al, 2013: 8). However, the importance of social media websites, such as Facebook, to researchers in the fields of media studies, linguistics, sociology and even anthropology lies in what they reflect about the users’ identities on both the personal and the collective levels.

On Facebook, the number of friends<sup>3</sup> one has, the type of posts appearing on the newsfeed, the language used in the posts, and the kinds of topics in the posts, all these are factors that bear on the identity of the user in cyberspace. Page et al. (2013: 14) further argues that “displays of networked connections might signal the communities with which the person is associated, but can also be valued as an indication of status or authority”. This shows how Facebook posts can shape and influence one’s identity. The connection between ‘physical’ and ‘virtual’ identities has been discussed by many in different fields, including sociology, media studies and linguistics. Yus (2011: 23), for example, argues that the physical identity of a person (which includes inherited, acquired, and personal features) is reflected in cyberspace to form one’s virtual identity. In this sense, a virtual identity “is shaped by using and exchanging texts, pictures or multimodal discourses with other users” (Yus 2011: 36). Facebook provides a convenient tool to shape our virtual identities, with all its cultural, social, personal, and religious facets.

Religious posts, in particular, are greatly significant when looking into the identity of Muslim Arabic-speaking Facebook users. Such users can and do personalise their Facebook pages according to their Islamic beliefs. This could mean anything from identifying religious affiliation on the Facebook profile, to some kind of self-censorship on the types and themes of posts created, liked or shared. This kind of “networked religion” (Campbell 2010) then connects individual identities to the group identity, where shared posts strengthen ties within the group and emphasise the common. In relevance theoretic terms, a major component in group identity would be the set of shared assumptions that

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<sup>3</sup> See Yus (2011: 134) for a brief discussion of the linguistic-pragmatic adjustment of the concept ‘friend’ in social networking sites.

could bear on communication within the group. Finally, this leads to the macro-identity level, which could be seen as representing Islam as a religion, or Arabic-speaking Muslims as a culture.<sup>4</sup> Al-Rawi (2013) uses the term “virtual *Ummah*” (Islamic nation), an iconic term which refers to the online public sphere of Muslims.

In the next sections, I focus on communication via Facebook from the linguistic perspective, and on Arabic religious posts in particular. I use relevance theory as a theoretical framework for the discussion.

### 3. Communication on Facebook: A relevance-theoretic view

Each kind of SNS exhibits certain features unique to this particular platform. As Goddard & Geesin (2011: 15) explain “there is no single language of new technologies, but rather a range of styles of communication that share certain properties of language use”. The central question of cyberpragmatics, according to Yus (2011: 13), is “how information is produced and interpreted within the Internet environment”. There have been few studies so far which apply relevance-theoretic principles to platforms of internet-mediated communication. In addition to the work of Yus (2005, 2008, 2010, 2011), one study (Scott 2015) looked into the pragmatic function performed by hashtags in communication on Twitter. The author argues that hashtags guide the hearer’s inferential processes by activating certain contextual assumptions in the derivation of explicit and implicit content.

Facebook, as a platform of social networking, has its own affordances as a communication tool, as well as limitations. The combined features that characterise what Facebook users can and cannot do directly affect the way communication occurs. The main function of Facebook is to allow members to share information with each other. Facebook describes its mission as “to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected”, with 1.13 billion daily active users (as of June 30, 2016).<sup>5</sup> There are two main features on a Facebook page: the status update box and the newsfeed. The former allows users to type their input in the form of a textual message. As Facebook developed, users became able to use this space to share audio-visual links, add information on location, indicate their activities/feelings through a range of visual icons. As Brügger (2015) explains, Facebook evolved from being concerned with the question “who are you?”, to “what are you doing, and when”, to “where are you” in a series of stages. The second feature, the newsfeed, allows users to view all the content produced by their ‘friends’ in one place, and in descending chronological order. Typically, communication on

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<sup>4</sup> For more on identity formation in cyberspace see Yus (2011) and references therein.

<sup>5</sup> <https://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/> (accessed 12 July 2016)

Facebook occurs between one user and a group of ‘Friends’ (closed or open group depending on privacy settings) in an asynchronous setting<sup>6</sup>.

### 3.1. Features of linguistic communication on Facebook

The easiest way to add an input on Facebook is to type something. According to Bouvier (2015: 157), scholars have been “critical of the basic effects of social media use on everyday linguistic skills, of our very vocabulary, and ability to use grammar and spell”. Whether one accepts them or not, Barton and Lee (2013: 5) identify typical orthographic features of written CMC in English. These include: acronyms, word reductions, letter/number homophones, stylised spelling, and unconventional/stylised punctuation. There are very few studies that discuss the orthographic features of Arabic on cyberspace. Björnsson (2010) discusses Egyptian Romanized Arabic on Facebook, and the extent to which the language has evolved and normalised without the guidance of any language authority. According to this study, Egyptian Facebook users have several options at hand, including typing standard or colloquial Arabic in Arabic or in Roman letters, or simply writing in English. The data for this study, as illustrated in examples (1)-(4) above, exhibit the tendency to mix Arabic with romanised Arabic, especially in the two iconic Facebook words/functions ‘like’ and ‘share’.

Such forms of linguistic creativity in the cyberworld are common in both English and Arabic. Due to the nature and function of SNSs, languages such as English and Arabic share a more truncated, informal and creative online discourse compared to the standard written variety. However, the discussion about features of Arabic on SNSs has an additional dimension, i.e. the standard versus colloquial dilemma. The diglossic nature of the Arabic language dictates that classical/standard Arabic is the High variety, which is mainly written, while the regional dialects are the Low varieties, which are mainly spoken.<sup>7</sup> However, a mix of standard Arabic and a colloquial variety in one utterance on Facebook is a mundane event. Examples (2) and (4) above illustrate this with the verb *tišūf* (to see, instead of the standard *tarā*) and the colloquial present tense prefix *bi* in *bithīb* (to like). Furthermore, Gordon (2011) discusses some deviant orthographic features of Arabic online such as repetition of vowels to convey stressed and elongated pronunciation (similar to *helloooooo* in English). This is illustrated in (6) and (7) below. Another feature is fossilised phrases consisting of phonetically condensed words (similar to *cya* for *see you* in English). In the data, this mostly occurs with formulaic expressions of the religious nature such as *mā šā’ Allah* (an expression of awe at the power of Allah usually said upon seeing something beautiful), which is then fossilised into *maša’allah* (one word), resembling the phonological condensation in the colloquial variety of language.

<sup>6</sup> Not to mention that Facebook also has the ‘messenger’ tool which is used for synchronous communication.

<sup>7</sup> For more on diglossia in Arabic see Bassiouney (2009) and Albirini (2016).

- (6) اضغظ لايك واكتب آمييبييين  
Click 'Like' and write Amen.  
[picture of a religious supplication in a calligraphic style]
- (7) مستحيل ما تعمل لايك لهذا الابد!!!!!!ع  
It is impossible not to click 'Like' for this creativity.  
[picture of the Kaa'ba and the Holy Mosque in Mecca]

The lack of face-to-face interaction on Facebook, and other SNSs, also affects communication. According to Crystal (2006: 35), features such as body language, intonation, turn-taking and other visual cues are not available to communicators via a computer as they are in real life. However, he still argues that 'netspeak' is to be "seen as written language which has been pulled in some way in the direction of speech" (2006: 51). This could be seen in variation of spelling and other orthographic features of languages online. But one feature of communication on SNSs has been specifically developed to compensate for the lack of the visual medium, i.e. emoticons. Page et al (2013: 18) explain that the absence of facial expressions or tone of voice in written textual posts urged social media sites developers to create other resources "to convey emphasis or pragmatic nuance". Emoticons and other visual icons on Facebook are excellent examples. Recently, Facebook has even made available five (until the writing of this paper) emoticons a user can click in reaction to a post just as fast as clicking the 'Like' icon. Multimodal posts on Facebook can be achieved with the click of a button. However, this also means that they "require multimodal communication skills in order to interpret them" (Goddard & Geesin 2011: 51). By combining the textual, the visual and the audio, and combining the asynchronous posts with the synchronous chatting, Facebook is a perfect example of how SNSs are stretching the users' interpretation skills as these social websites grow more complex and interactive.

### 3.2 Communicating on Facebook: Like and Share

Looking at communication on Facebook from a relevance-theoretic perspective, it is seen as a relevance-seeking process of producing and interpreting posts. As a writer starting to type a message in the status box, you have both the informative intention to inform the audience of a particular message, and the communicative intention to inform the audience of your informative intention. Applying relevance-theoretic principles to communication on social media, Yus (2011: 14) argues that "there are important pragmatic consequences that the different forms of communication on the Net exhibit". Therefore, considering the communicative principle of relevance and the different ways an utterance can be relevant to one's cognitive environment (Sperber & Wilson 1986), it is reasonable to assume that the following is an accurate characterization of communication on Facebook:



- As a writer, you intend your post to be relevant enough to be worth the addressee's processing effort;
- As a reader, you expect the post to be:
  - relevant enough to be worth your processing effort
  - the most relevant one compatible with the writer's abilities and preferences
- As a reader, you expect the post to either:
  - strengthen an assumption you already have
  - contradict and eliminate an assumption you already have
  - combine with another contextual assumption to arrive at a contextual implication.

As an addressee on Facebook, you are generally expected to respond to posts in one of three ways: (a) to 'Comment' by typing a message in the comment box; (b) to click 'Like'; or (c) to click 'Share'. Now let us set aside the first option since it will always vary according to what is actually typed in the comment box. However, it is interesting to discuss options (b) and (c) in light of the relevance-theoretic distinction between levels of explicitly communicated propositions and implicit propositions as well. The function of the 'Like' icon in Facebook is to express a personal attitude towards a certain proposition in the quickest way possible. That is, clicking 'Like' amounts to communicating "x likes P". In (8) for example, communication could be seen as follows:

- (8) A posts: I got a new job today.  
 B clicks Like.  
 B communicates: B likes<sub>p</sub>[A got a new job today]

Within the context of Facebook, the same propositions could be communicated between A and B in different ways. Consider, for example (9) and (10):

- (9) A posts: *Al hamdulilah*. (Thanks to Allah)  
 B comments: What happened?  
 A replies: I got a new job today.  
 B clicks Like.
- (10) A posts: ☺  
 B comments: Good news?  
 A replies: I got a new job today.  
 B clicks Like.

In (8-10) A communicates a proposition with various degrees of explicitness, then B communicates a propositional attitude. This is achieved by embedding the proposition in what is termed a "higher-level explicature", i.e. a higher-order description that explicitly communicates the propositional attitude of the speaker towards the proposition expressed.

Similarly, the function of ‘Sharing’ someone else’s post could be considered the virtual equivalent of reported speech in cyberspace. On a basic level, the act of sharing a post amounts to embedding that post in a higher-level explicature of speech act as (11) illustrates:

- (11) A posts: I got a new job today.  
 B clicks Share.  
 B communicates: A said  $\rho$ [A got a new job today]

On this view, the two main functions of communicating on Facebook are seen as cues for the derivation of higher-level explicatures. That is, the inferential enrichment of the proposition expressed by clicking ‘Like’ or ‘Share’ includes its embedding in propositional attitude or speech act descriptions. In this case, these explicitly communicated assumptions are the most relevant in that context. In fact, relevance theory has shown how higher-level explicatures play an important role in utterance interpretation. Clark (2013: 209) draws attention to the fact that “hearers always infer at least one higher level of embedding for any proposition we express”. This usually takes the form of “x believes that P”.

Whether in the physical or the virtual world, inference matters. One of the strengths of relevance theory is that it explains in a systematic manner how inference plays a major role in interpreting any stimulus. According to Yus (2011: 14), “internet users use inferential strategies when they interpret messages on the Net, and these do not differ from the ones used for the comprehension of utterances in oral conversations”. Consider, for instance, (12) written by a Muslim user on Facebook the morning of Eid after Ramadan at 7:00 am:

- (12) Ali: I’m drinking coffee ☺  
 [a picture of a Costa coffee cup on a table]  
 Proposition expressed:  $\rho$ [Ali is drinking coffee]

It is reasonable to assume that within a relevance-theoretic account of communication on Facebook, users expect their ‘Friends’ to be able to access the necessary contextual information that will allow them to arrive at a correct interpretation of the utterance on all levels, explicit and implicit. In the above example, users might have access to the following contextual assumptions:

- (13) a. contextual assumption about the use of the smiley emoticon.  
 b. contextual assumption about Ali’s love for coffee.  
 c. contextual assumption about the time Ali wrote this post (and possibly location)  
 d. contextual assumptions about Ramadan, Eid and the religious practices during those periods (i.e. fasting).

Therefore, by posting this, Ali would expect his audience among the list of ‘Friends’ on Facebook to arrive at the following propositions:

- (14) Higher-level explicature: Ali is happy he is drinking coffee  
 Implicitly communicates:  
 (a) Ali was suffering from lack of coffee in the morning during Ramadan  
 (b) Ali probably woke up for Eid prayer

We should remember that any inferential activity requiring cognitive effort must be rewarded with some kind of cognitive effect. It is interesting to note how certain features of a SNS can influence and direct the reader’s inferential path. Yus (2011: 16) explains that one of the main aims of cyberpragmatics is to determine the extent to which features of a certain online medium would affect the search for relevance, i.e. “how they affect the assessment of the cognitive effects that may be derived and the mental effort demanded in return”. Let us look at a fourth option for a Facebook user in response to a particular post. Consider example (15) between two best friends on Facebook who had a fight the day before, then A posts this picture:

(15)

A:



B: (does not respond)

In posting this image with the textual message, A fully intends to communicate this message to Friend B (while it will probably be irrelevant to other Friends on Facebook who do not share the same contextual assumptions), and expects the friend to interpret it as relevant. Given the way Facebook works, B now has four options in response:

- a. responds by ‘Comment’ on this post.
- b. responds by clicking ‘Like’ to this post.
- c. responds by clicking ‘Share’ to this post.
- d. responds by doing nothing.

The first three options would communicate a certain proposition explicitly. But, does the fourth option mean that B finds the post not relevant enough to be worth processing? On the contrary, by further inferential work, option (d) could communicate a range of propositions depending on the contextual assumptions accessible to A. In fact, not responding in any of the ways Facebook provides for

users could be relevant in a number of ways, which corresponds to different kinds of cognitive effects. To illustrate, B not responding could communicate to A that:

- (16)
- a. B is still angry from the fight [strengthens an assumption]
  - b. B still wants me to apologise. [contradicts and eliminates the assumption that B had forgiven me]
  - c. A is not the kind of person who posts silly pictures [contextual assumption]
  - d. B thinks A is not taking this situation seriously [contextual implication]

This section presented an overview of communication on Facebook from a relevance-theoretic perspective. Whereas considerations of relevance are applied in the same way as in face-to-face conversation, it can be argued that Facebook tools such as ‘Like’ and ‘Share’ stream some of the expectations of relevance into particular paths. Similarly, the absence of these tools could also be seen as guiding the interpretation process in search for relevance within the accessible contextual assumptions.

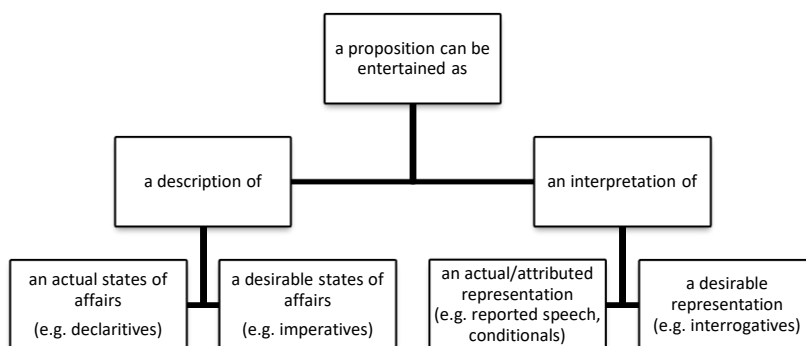
#### 4. Data analysis

The corpus data collected for this study includes 80 religious posts shared on Facebook newsfeed. All of them are ‘second-hand’ posts shared by friends, where the original creator of the posts is unknown. Each post consists of an image accompanied by a textual message in Arabic. The analysis of the data has shown that these textual messages are divided into 3 categories according to their linguistic structure: imperatives, interrogatives and conditionals. It is interesting to note that such religious posts tend to use non-declarative structures (imperatives, interrogatives) or complex structures (conditionals), whether independently or in combination with one or more declarative sentences. The common theme in those linguistic messages is to urge the reader to declare his/her condoning of the proposition by clicking ‘Like’ or ‘Share’ icons.

From the perspective of relevance theory, these three structures are good examples for the distinction between descriptive and interpretive representation. Clark (2013: 258-9) explains that utterances are not always used to communicate information describing states of affairs in the world. Sometimes speakers also express their own beliefs, opinions or attitudes. Consider the following examples:

- (17) Ali does not use Facebook.  
 (18) Ahmed said that Ali does not use Facebook.  
 (19) Use Facebook.  
 (20) Does Ali use Facebook?

The proposition expressed in (17) can be entertained as a description of an actual state of affair, which can be judged as true or not. However, this proposition can also be entertained as an interpretation of an actual representation if it expresses the speaker's belief about Ali, or is used in the context of reported speech as in (18), or is used as a representation of someone else's thought about Ali. In this case, these propositions can be judged by how closely they resemble the thought or utterance they represented. If we add to this distinction that states of affairs could be actual or desirable, then we have four possibilities for entertaining a certain proposition, as Figure (1) summarises. Wilson and Sperber (1988) argue that different linguistic constructions may be "semantically specialised" for different types of representation. Therefore, in the figure, examples of certain structures are shown in relation to a type of representation.



**Figure 1.** Descriptive and interpretive representations (adapted from Sperber and Wilson 1986)

In the literature within relevance theory, non-declarative utterances, such as imperatives and interrogatives, have been discussed as counterparts in representing desirable states of affairs, albeit one does that descriptively and the other interpretively (Wilson & Sperber 1988, Sperber & Wilson 1986, Clark 1991). Conditionals, on the other hand, are more complex since they consist of two clauses: an antecedent and a consequent of various semantic types. Noh (1996) analyses conditionals from a relevance-theoretic view, arguing that in many cases antecedents are used interpretively to represent a contextually given proposition. The next sub-sections elaborate on each of the three structures.

#### 4.1. Imperatives

The main purpose of such religious posts is to spread a good religious message. Therefore, it is not surprising that imperatives are used abundantly in the data. Utterances (21) and (22) below illustrate some examples:

- (21) *'idğat laik wa-ktub mā šā' al-llāh*  
Click 'like' and write 'ma shaa Allah' (a supplication)  
[picture of Al-Kaa'ba, the holy place in Mecca]
- (22) *lā taḥruj qabla 'n tağğat laik wa taktub al-ḥamdulilāh*  
Do not leave before clicking 'like' and writing 'al hamdulilah' (a supplication meaning 'thanks to Allah')  
[picture of a physically disabled man praying]

Relevance theory view of imperatives moves away from the traditional speech act theories, to a more feasible and systematic account of different kinds of imperatives. This account starts from the assumption that imperative utterances have an intrinsic semantic content which interacts with more general relevance-based pragmatics to yield the different interpretations. The relevance-theoretic distinction between descriptive/interpretive meanings is crucial here, but so is the distinction between actual and desirable states of affairs. At the heart of the semantics of imperatives is the notion of desirability, because “if there is no connection between imperative utterances and expressions of some attitude at least akin to desire, it is hard to see why the hearer of an imperative utterance should ever recognize that the speaker wants him to bring about the state of affairs described” (Wilson & Sperber 1988). However, desirability alone cannot differentiate between imperatives and infinitival clauses; it needs to be complimented with the notion of achievability of the state of affairs concerned since it did not actually obtain yet.

Wilson and Sperber (1988) argue that different linguistic constructions may be “semantically specialised” for different types of description. In the case of imperatives, it is argued that they are “specialised for describing states of affairs in worlds regarded as both potential and desirable” (1988)<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, the interpretation of the examples above can be formulated as follows:

- (23) p[x clicks 'like' and writes 'ma shaa Allah'] is a description of a potential and desirable state of affairs
- (24) p[x not leave before clicking 'like'] is a description of a potential and desirable state of affairs

Wilson and Sperber (1988) also draw attention to the fact that desirability is a three-place relation in the form of 'x regards y as desirable to z'. Therefore, there is an element of semantic indeterminacy as to who considers x desirable. Within the framework of relevance theory, this is something to be pragmatically resolved, given the contextual assumptions and the expectations of relevance. For example, desirability would be interpreted to be from the point of view of the speaker in the case of requests, orders, commands, pleas and good wishes,

<sup>8</sup> Imperatives have also been analysed as communicating a higher-level explicature of the form “Speaker desires that p” (Sperber and Wilson 1986, Clark 1991). However, I will only discuss imperatives here in terms of the descriptive-interpretive distinction.

given that the hearer is in a position to bring about the state of affairs concerned. In the case of advice and permission, desirability is interpreted as being in the hearer's interest.

The differentiation in interpreting different kinds of imperatives is, then, a matter of pragmatic inference. It is by considering all manifest contextual assumptions concerning the social and physical relations between the speaker and the hearer, and the degree of desirability that one can interpret an imperative as a request or as a command. For example, (25) can be interpreted as a request given the contextual assumption in (26) or as a command given the contextual assumption in (27):

- (25) Leave.  
 (26) Speaker and hearer are roommates in the students' dorms.  
 (27) Speaker is an employer speaking to a house maid.

In the data, the role of religious assumptions affecting the interpretation of such utterances cannot be overlooked. It is reasonable to assume that such religious posts on Facebook try to exploit the common assumption held by Muslim users of social media that there is an underlying sense of obligation to spread good Islamic messages in cyberspace. The stronger this assumption is, the more desirable the proposition expressed would be for the reader. Section 5 discusses how writers attempt to raise the level of relevance of these utterances by adding different kinds of incentives.

## 4.2. Interrogatives

The standard speech-act account of interrogatives is that they are used to request information. However, Wilson and Sperber (1988) remind us there are other kinds of interrogatives which cannot be discussed under this definition, including rhetorical questions, guess questions, expository questions, self-addressed questions among others. The type of interrogatives in the data can be discussed under the category of rhetorical questions. Rhetorical questions do not normally request information, rather act as a reminder for certain propositions. The following are examples from the data:

- (28) *hal ladaika l-šaraf linašrihā 'alā ḥā'iṭak?*  
 Do you have the honour to post it on your wall?  
 [picture of the name Muhammad (Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him) painted on a plaque]
- (29) *kam laik yastaḥiq yā muslimīn?*  
 How many 'likes' he deserves, Muslims?  
 [picture of a boy praying near Al-Kaa'ba]

In (28), for example, the question does not require information about the reader's personal qualities inasmuch as it serves to remind him/her of the assumption that it is honourable to share religious posts. Similarly, in (29), the writer does not expect a numerical answer in writing, but a practical response reflected in the number of 'Likes' because the readers are reminded of the assumption that such religious posts deserve many 'Likes'. In other words, with this type of questions, the writer manifestly expects the reader to know the answer already.

Interrogatives and imperatives have one semantic feature in common, that is they both express representations in a desirable, not an actual, world. However, the main difference is that interrogatives are interpretive representations rather than descriptions of states of affairs. In the words of Wilson and Sperber (1988: 93), "interrogatives are interpretively used to represent what the speaker regards as relevant answers". Since these relevant answers are propositions which have not obtained yet, therefore it is argued that interrogative utterances are used to represent desirable thoughts. Given that a thought would only be desirable if it is relevant, a question can be considered to be an interpretation of its answer which the speaker considers relevant. Therefore, the interpretation process for these examples might be explained as follows:

- (30) Do you have the honour to post x on your wall?  
 Relevant answer: It is honourable to post x on my wall  
<sub>p</sub>[It is honourable to post x on my wall] is an interpretation of a desirable thought.
- (31) How many 'Likes' does he deserve Muslims?  
 Relevant answer: He deserves many likes.  
<sub>p</sub>[He deserves many likes] is an interpretation of a desirable thought.

Applying the principle of optimal relevance, these utterances are considered relevant enough to communicate to the reader. Because of the nature of the rhetorical questions, we could argue that in both cases, the writer makes it manifest that the answer to the question is relevant to the reader. The appeal to the reader's point of view is important in resolving the issue of desirability. According to Sperber and Wilson (1988), the semantic indeterminacy of desirability in rhetorical and expository questions is resolved in the reader's favour.

But how would this interpretation affect the response of the Facebook user, or, ideally, lead him/her to click 'Like' or 'Share'? The force of a reminder that these interrogatives carry could lead to a positive cognitive effect. In (30), for example, the proposition [it is honourable to post x on my wall] could strengthen an already existing assumption in the reader's cognitive environment. In another scenario, the proposition would combine with other contextual assumptions regarding the rewards from posting religious messages, to result in a contextual implication that the writer should post this on Facebook.



### 4.3. Conditionals

A conditional is a complex syntactic structure. It consists of an antecedent and a consequent and a number of logical features that could characterise their relationship. However, it can be noted that the use of conditionals in the data followed one pattern: an antecedent expressing a proposition, followed by a consequent expressed by an imperative. The examples below illustrate this:

- (32) *law qult subhān allāh 'idğaṭ laik*  
 If you said “Subhan Allah” (a supplication meaning how powerful is Allah), click ‘Like’  
 [picture of a leaf where the word Allah in Arabic appear to be written]
- (33) *law 'awwell marrah tišūfuh 'idğaṭ laik*  
 If this is your first time to see it, click ‘Like’  
 [picture of a very small Quran book said to be the smallest printed Quran in the world]
- (34) *law šāyef 'ism ḥabībak 'idğaṭ laik*  
 If you can see the name of your beloved (Prophet Muhammad), click ‘Like’  
 [picture of a stroke of lightning shaping the name Muhammad in Arabic]

In all of these examples, the consequent is exactly the same: it is an imperative asking the reader to click ‘Like’. As discussed earlier, the imperative is to be interpreted as a description of a desirable state of affairs that is obviously in the capacity of the reader to bring about. Yet, we still have to resolve the desirability issue, i.e. is the proposition [click Like] desirable from the point of view of the writer or the reader? We need to look at the antecedents.

It is important to note how the propositions expressed in the antecedent clauses are related to the context of interpreting those utterances. For example, the proposition [it is the first time for x to see y] is not ‘given’ in the sense that it has been mentioned in previous discourse. The notion of ‘givenness’ in the literature has been defined in several ways (Chafe 1976; Prince 1981; Sweetser 1990 *inter alia*). I am going to assume a rather broad definition of givenness as Prince (1981: 230) explains it: “the speaker assumes that the hearer knows, assumes, or can infer a particular thing (but is not necessarily thinking about it)”. If we consider that the proposition expressed in the antecedent is a proposition that the reader is probably ‘thinking about’ at the time of processing the visual stimulus, then its relation to the imperative becomes more plausible.

Noh (1996) discusses given antecedents in conditionals as a case of metarepresentative use. In terms of relevance theory, she analyses them as a case of interpretive use since “given antecedents are used to represent another representation in context” (1996: 15). With the lack of any previous discourse to such Facebook posts, the use of the conditionals here makes use of the integrated multimodal post. Upon processing each post, it is reasonable to assume that the propositions below could be considered as thoughts attributed to the reader:

- (35) Seeing the picture of the smallest Quran, the reader is probably thinking [it is the first time I am seeing this]
- (36) Seeing the picture of the lightning stroke, the reader is probably thinking [I can see the name of the beloved Prophet]

Therefore, the function of the antecedent in these examples is to appeal to the reader's point of view by interpretively representing an attributed thought. It could also be argued that these given antecedents are used to guide the reader's inferential path to see the relevance of the consequential link between antecedent and consequent, and consequently, of the element of desirability. As mentioned before, interpretive representations cannot be judged as true or false, rather as faithfully resembling another representation or not. Therefore, if the propositions expressed in the antecedents faithfully represent an attributed thought of the reader, then it is likely that this would positively affect the reader's interpretation of the imperative in the consequent. The interpretation of examples (33) and (34) could be finally formulated as follows:

- (37) If  $p$ [this is your first time to see it] is a faithful representation of reader's thoughts, then it is a desirable state of affairs that  $p$ [you click 'like']
- (38) If  $p$ [you can see the name of your beloved] is a faithful representation of reader's thoughts, then it is a desirable state of affairs that  $p$ [you click 'like']

However, a reader's response on Facebook to such an interpretation is not always going to be straightforward. A reader may well have seen the picture of the smallest Quran and still clicks 'Like' or vice versa. Other contextual assumptions would play a role, such as the reader's religious assumptions about the 'obligation' to like such religious posts, the possibility that the reader encountered similar posts before, etc.

## 5. System of incentives

In addition to identifying syntactic patterns in the textual messages in the data, it was noticed that there is a rigorous system of incentives, which seems to be a common feature in such posts. As discussed above, the main aim of these posts is to be relevant enough for the readers to the extent that it drives them to express their positive propositional attitude towards the message by clicking 'Like' or 'Share'. The linguistic structures used are intended to help by expressing desirable representations or states of affairs. However, it also appears that in many of these posts, this strategy is deemed not relevant enough. Therefore, we find that often the imperative, interrogative or conditional structure is accompanied by further linguistic input designed to be an incentive for the reader to 'Like' or 'Share'. Even the visual organisation of the posts suggests that the three linguistic structures (imperatives, interrogatives or

conditionals) are the main linguistic stimulus by font size and position in the image (usually top center) while the extra linguistic incentive is at a lower degree (usually bottom center, smaller font size or different font colour). In fewer cases, the post would use a different structure that is designed, by vocabulary choice and other features, to explicitly carry an incentive. The proposition expressed in those incentives only serves to further explain to the readers why it is good to ‘Like’, or why it is bad not to ‘Like’ the post. I divide these incentives into three types: positive, negative and challenging.

### 5.1. Positive incentives

The utterances considered to be expressing a positive incentive intuitively employ a range of ‘positive’ vocabulary in the religious sense, such as *ḥasanāt* (rewards), *jannah* (heaven), *‘a‘māl ṣāliḥa* (good deeds), etc. All these words in the interpretation process activate shared assumptions among Muslim readers, which are intended to link liking/sharing the post to the religious benefits it will bring to the reader. From the relevance-theoretic perspective, this would be seen as a positive cognitive effect. Consider the examples below.

- (39) *māḍā sataḥsar idā našartahā*  
*qad tamūt wa tabqā hiya laka nahr min al-ḥasanāt*  
 What will you lose if you share it?  
 You might die, and it will remain a river of rewards for you  
 [picture of a page from the Quran with readable verses]
- (40) *‘inšurhā..*  
*la‘allak takūn al-sabab fi islām šaḥṣ*  
 Share it..  
 You might be the reason for someone to embrace Islam  
 [picture of a group of non-Arab people performing prayer]
- (41) *taḥayyal law qumt binašrahā wa raddadahā al-‘ašarāt bisababak*  
 Imagine if you ‘Share’ it and dozens of people repeat it thanks to you  
 [picture of a supplication written in a calligraphic style]

In (39) and (40), the two main linguistic structures are the interrogative and the imperative respectively. Within the relevance-theoretic framework, the processing of these two utterances can be formulated as:

- (42)  $\rho$ [I will not lose if I share it] is an interpretation of a desirable thought  
 (43)  $\rho$ [Share this post] is a description of a potential and desirable state of affairs

The interpretation of these two propositions in the context of the reader’s religious assumptions could well be relevant enough to produce positive cognitive effects for the reader and lead him/her to click ‘Share’. However, the post includes more linguistic stimuli to process. Following the principle of relevance, any extra processing effort must be offset by extra cognitive effects.

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the further linguistic message here acts as an incentive to the reader by explicitly elaborating on the positive outcomes of the proposition expressed in the imperative or the interrogative. This incentive could also be an extra guarantee for the writer that the reader will see the proposition expressed as desirable from his/her own point of view.

## 5.2. Negative incentives

The choice of vocabulary is equally significant in the case of negative incentives designed to elaborate on the disadvantages of not ‘Liking’ or ‘Sharing’ the post. Therefore, words such as *‘īb* (shame), *‘ār* (disgrace), *šaiṭān* (devil) are not surprising. The examples below illustrate this type:

- (44) *qimmatī l-‘ār tišūf qabrīl-rasūl wi mā ti ‘mil laik*  
It is the ultimate disgrace to see the Prophet’s tomb and not click ‘Like’.  
[picture of the Prophet’s tomb in Medinah]
- (45) *iw ‘ā al-šaiṭān yeḡlibak wa yimna‘ak min našraha*  
Beware lest the devil wins over you and prevents you from sharing it  
[picture of Al-Kaaba at the time of hajj (pilgrimage)]

If we compare these utterances to shorter versions which only explicitly express the main message, then the amount of extra processing the reader has to do becomes evident:

- (46) a. It is the ultimate disgrace to see the Prophet’s tomb  
and not click ‘Like’.  
b. Click ‘Like’
- (47) a. Beware lest the devil wins over you and prevents you from sharing it.  
b. Share it.

It is not the case that the two versions explicitly express the same proposition, however it could be at least said that version A says a lot more with a higher degree of explicitness. It could also be argued that the original utterances, compared to version B, have in common an underlying negative implicature that the reader will not click ‘Like’ or ‘Share’. The semantic-pragmatic effect of using the intentional negative vocabulary in those utterances increases the strength of this implicature. The use of the imperative would only present the proposition expressed as a desirable state of affairs, but the writer here is appealing not to the notion of desirability from the reader’s perspective, but rather to the notion of fear.

Relevance of such utterances could be achieved through a number of scenarios. For example, (44) might be processed in the context of an existing assumption (48), and therefore it contradicts and eliminates this assumption. On the other hand, (45) might be processed in combination with the contextual assumption in (49), and consequently arrive at the contextual implication (50).

- (48) It is ok not to click 'Like' for such religious posts.  
 (49) If the devil wins over me, then I am a bad Muslim.  
 (50) I should share this post to be a good Muslim.

### 5.3. Challenging incentives

The final type of linguistic incentives employed in Arabic religious posts does not resort to express the positive or the negative aspect of the main proposition. Rather, they present a challenging incentive to the readers and such an incentive is expressed through an implicature arising from the utterance and the context. (51) and (52) illustrate this type:

- (51) *lil'asaf hāḍihi al-šūra lam tu 'jib 'aḥad*  
 Unfortunately, no one 'liked' this picture  
 [picture of a little boy praying]  
 (52) *mustaḥīl mā ti 'mil laik l ihādā l-'ibdā'*  
 It is impossible not to 'Like' this creativity  
 [picture of a miniature Kaa'ba and the Holy Mosque]

Although both examples have different structures and different semantic content, it is noticed that when they are processed in the context of Facebook posts and expectations of response on Facebook, both give rise to a strong implicature. Starting with (51), processing this utterance following a path of least effort in considering possible interpretations, it is reasonable to assume it implicitly communicates:

- (53) The writer wants me to 'Like' this picture.

The lack of any explicit request from the writer to the reader to click 'Like' encourages the derivation of the implicature in the search for relevance. The use of the adverbial "unfortunately" explicitly communicates the writer's propositional attitude to the proposition expressed, and further helps in guiding the interpretation process to its intended explicatures, implicated premises and implicated conclusions.

In (52), the challenging implication is more obvious. Presenting the interpretation process in simple terms, it could be argued that this example communicates the following assumptions:

- (54) Explicature: Not to like this post is impossible.<sup>9</sup>  
 Implicated premise:  
 if something is impossible, then it is a challenge to do it.  
 Implicated conclusion: the writer challenges me to 'Like' this post

<sup>9</sup> For the sake of simplifying the discussion, I am not commenting on issues such as reference assignment or semantically adjusting the concept IMPOSSIBLE.

Clark (2013: 238) argues that “the relative strength of implicatures varies according to which contextual assumptions are accessible in particular situations”. Processing those kinds of utterances in the context of mutually manifest assumptions about communication on Facebook and religious beliefs helps in guiding the reader to derive those implicatures with a fairly high degree of strength. Whether this interpretation will actually lead the reader to accept the challenge and click ‘Like’ is a different matter.

## 6. Concluding remarks

This paper attempted to shed some light on the use of Arabic religious posts on Facebook and the impact of such posts on their recipients. As a form of internet-mediated communication tool, Facebook plays an important role in shaping the religious identity of the Arabic-speaking users in cyberspace. According to Ellison et al (2007: 1144), “Facebook constitutes a rich site for researchers interested in the affordances of social networks due to its heavy usage patterns and technological capacities that bridge online and offline connections”. Therefore, this research looked into the usage patterns of religious posts from the linguistic perspective of relevance theory.

Communication on the Facebook page is seen as a relevance-seeking process of producing and interpreting posts. It was shown that communication on Facebook involves the expression of propositional attitudes and higher-level explicatures through the tools ‘Like’ and ‘Share’. Even the failure to use any of the tools guides the reader’s inferential activity in the search for relevance.

Analysis of the corpus data has shown a pattern of multimodal posts which combine a visual image with a textual message in Arabic. Such textual messages are divided into three groups according to their syntactic structure: interrogatives, imperatives and conditionals. The common aim of these utterances is to urge the reader to communicate their propositional attitude towards the utterance by clicking ‘like’ or ‘share’. The element of desirability that is exploited by these syntactic structures is consistent with this aim. Further analysis has also shown that a rigorous system of incentives is employed in the utterances in order to boost their relevance to the readers. Those incentives could be positive (liking or sharing will have a positive effect on the reader), negative (not liking or sharing will have a negative effect on the reader), or a challenging incentive (challenging the reader to like or share).

Linguistic studies of Arabic on social networking websites in general still has a long way to go. This study only hopes to serve as a starting point for deeper research into the many pragmatic features of Arabic online. Also, further research is needed into how certain pragmatic features bear on the notion of identity formation. Yus (2011: 118) states that SNSs are interesting because the information shared therein includes “indices of the attributes of the user’s

identity". This study attempted to provide an overview of one religious aspect of Arabic-speaking Muslims' identity in the virtual world.

This study also aimed to provide a clearer picture of how communication on Facebook can be analysed by means of the relevance-theoretic framework. Due to limitations of space, there is a lot of potential for future research. For example, the idea of degrees of relevance on the Facebook page is worth further investigation. Within the structure of Facebook as a website for asynchronous communication among a group of virtual 'Friends', it is reasonable to assume that posts cannot be relevant to everyone in the same degree or in the same manner. Another area for further research involves the use of emoticons. The question of how emoticons communicate meaning, individually or in conjunction with a linguistic message, could be approached from different perspectives. The extent to which emoticons are used to communicate is in itself a significant feature to be investigated. However, further research into the way emoticons achieve relevance could be significant inasmuch as it bears on the semantic-pragmatic distinction.

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