Ostensible Commissive Speech Acts In Saudi Spoken Arabic: Socio-Pragmatic Functions

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Abstract: This study examines the sociopragmatic functions of ostensible commissive speech acts in Saudi spoken Arabic, focusing on invitations and offers. Using a mixed-methods approach that combined participant observation and recall interviews, we analyzed 58 naturally occurring instances through the lenses of speech act theory, politeness theory, and the joint pretense model. The findings reveal eight core communicative functions: signaling welcome, expressing gratitude and appreciation, demonstrating courtesy and politeness, softening embarrassment, acknowledging familiarity, easing conversation endings, conveying sympathy and concern, and alleviating social discomfort. This study makes three key contributions. First, it demonstrates how ostensibly insincere speech acts achieve "contextual felicity" by prioritizing social harmony over literal sincerity in Saudi Arabia's high-context culture. Second, it expands politeness theory by illustrating how such acts function as institutionalized tools of relational maintenance. Third, it provides empirical evidence of culture-specific communicative patterns in which implicit understanding takes precedence over propositional truth. These insights advance the field of cross-cultural pragmatics by showing how ritualized insincerity operates as a socially authentic practice in collectivist societies, offering valuable implications for intercultural communication training.

Keywords: Contextual Felicity, Ostensible Speech Acts, Politeness Theory, Saudi Arabic, Sociopragmatic Functions

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural communication explores how individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds interact and convey meaning (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Ting-Toomey, 1999). It emphasizes the influence of cultural context on communication patterns and interpretation, which is essential for fostering effective interaction in an increasingly globalized world (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). This is particularly evident in high-context cultures, where communication depends more on implicit cues and shared knowledge than on explicit verbal expressions (Hall, 1976). In societies like Saudi Arabia, such cues are embedded in social dynamics and relational norms that may not be readily apparent to outsiders. This aligns with Hall's (1976) framework, contrasting high-context cultures with their low-context counterparts, which prioritize directness and clarity.

These implicit cues are especially salient in ritualized exchanges such as ostensible invitations, where expressions of politeness, hospitality, and solidarity may not reflect literal intentions. In Saudi Arabic, tribal identity and social hierarchies further shape indirectness and communicative conventions (Alkhonini, Al-Shboul, & Dakamsih, 2024). Understanding how speech acts, including invitations, offers, and promises, are perceived and interpreted in this cultural framework is therefore critical. According to Searle (1969), speech acts are utterances that perform communicative functions, allowing speakers to express social intentions (Solomon & Theiss, 2022). For instance, an utterance like *"Let's have dinner tonight"* may function as a commissive act signaling a future commitment. However, in high-context settings like Saudi Arabia, such expressions may lack sincerity in the literal sense, instead serving a relational purpose. These are known as ostensible speech acts—utterances that appear to perform a function while covertly fulfilling another (Isaacs & Clark, 1990; Goffman, 1983; Utsumi, 2000).

Goffman (1983) describes these acts as socially motivated performances, often used to navigate interpersonal dynamics and preserve face. Ostensible speech acts thus reveal both explicit and implicit dimensions of interaction, particularly in cultures where indirectness is a communicative norm (Abdelhadi & Alkinj, 2023; Abdel Hady, 2013; Isaacs & Clark, 1990). Recognizing the function of these acts within a specific cultural context is central to sociopragmatics, as it facilitates deeper insights into the subtleties of language use (Yaqubi, 2020).

Several cross-cultural studies have explored ostensible speech acts in languages

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such as English (Isaacs & Clark, 1990; Link & Kreuz, 2005; Walton, 1998; Wolfson, 1981), Chinese (ChaiSi, 2009; Su, 2020), and Persian (Beeman, 1986; Eslami, 2005; Koutlaki, 2002; Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006). Additional research has examined Arabic varieties, including Moroccan (Naim, 2011), Jordanian (Abdel Hady, 2013, 2015), Iraqi (Kadhim & Al-Hindawi, 2017), and Saudi Arabic (Alzahrani, 2023). These studies collectively underscore the role of cultural nuance in interpreting ostensibly insincere speech acts, with most focusing on invitations as the primary form.

Despite extensive research on ostensible speech acts, two critical gaps persist in the literature. First, existing studies have disproportionately focused on invitations, often neglecting the equally significant role of offers in high-context communicative settings, where both forms serve as relational tools to maintain social harmony. Second, much of the research has been confined to urban or non-Saudi contexts, thereby overlooking the distinct communicative practices embedded in tribal communities of southern Saudi Arabia, where hospitality, social hierarchy, and cultural codes shape indirect speech patterns. Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates both invitations and offers to explore the sociopragmatic functions of ostensible commissive acts in Saudi Arabic. It further examines how these acts operate as institutionalized politeness rituals that prioritize social cohesion over literal sincerity, thereby challenging the universality of Searle's (1969) felicity conditions by situating speech acts within culturally specific frameworks. Accordingly, the study is guided by two research questions: (1) What are the sociopragmatic functions of ostensible commissive speech acts (i.e., invitations and offers) in Saudi spoken Arabic? and (2) How do cultural norms and contextual factors shape the performance and interpretation of these functions?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study analyzes ostensible commissive acts through the integrated lenses of Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), the Joint Pretense Model (Isaacs & Clark, 1990), and Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987). These frameworks, when combined, illuminate how culturally embedded insincere speech acts function pragmatically to maintain social harmony, particularly within the high-context communication norms prevalent in Saudi Arabia.

2.1.1. Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory, first introduced by Austin (1962) and later refined by Searle (1969), proposes that language is not solely a medium for conveying information but also a mechanism for performing actions. In this framework, utterances are not merely descriptive but serve functional roles in communication, such as making requests, offering help, greeting others, or committing to future actions. Austin (1962) identifies three dimensions of speech acts: the locutionary act, which pertains to the literal content or meaning of an utterance; the illocutionary act, which conveys the speaker's intention; and the perlocutionary act, which reflects the effect the utterance has on the listener. Among these, the illocutionary act is particularly central, as it captures the performative function of speech in social interaction.

Building on this foundation, Searle (1976) categorizes illocutionary acts into five types based on their communicative purpose: representatives (statements of belief), directives (attempts to influence behavior), commissives (commitments to future actions), expressives (revelations of psychological states), and declaratives (utterances that change social reality). For these acts to be deemed successful, Searle (1976) outlines four felicity conditions: the propositional content condition, which assumes mutual understanding of language; the preparatory condition, requiring the appropriate authority and context; the sincerity condition, necessitating genuine intention; and the essential condition, which ensures the act is intended to carry force within the interaction (Ardiati, 2022; Marsili, 2021).

While Speech Act Theory provides a useful framework for analyzing communicative intent, it is limited in its application across diverse cultural contexts, particularly in high-context societies such as Saudi Arabia. In such cultures, communication is shaped not only by explicit language but also by unspoken norms, relational dynamics, and shared cultural knowledge (Wierzbicka, 2010). In the Saudi context, as Al-Shalawi (1997) notes, collectivist values and tribal affiliations emphasize the preservation of harmony and relational obligations over the literal truth of an utterance. This leads to a cultural reconfiguration of sincerity: what might appear as a violation of Searle's (1976) sincerity condition in one culture could, in fact, function as a normative and respectful communicative strategy in another.

Marsili (2021) challenges the universal applicability of Searle's (1976) framework by arguing that sincerity itself is culturally constructed and context-dependent. In high-context societies, speakers may intentionally use ostensibly insincere expressions to maintain social cohesion, avoid direct confrontation, or demonstrate deference. Isaacs and Clark (1990) address this phenomenon through the concept of "ostensible communicative acts," utterances that mimic genuine speech acts but are understood by both speaker and listener to serve a symbolic or relational function. In Saudi Arabic, these acts are especially common in the form of ritualized invitations and offers, which, while not meant to be taken literally, are essential tools for reinforcing social ties and expressing

solidarity. Therefore, a culturally situated application of Speech Act Theory is essential to understand how seemingly insincere language can, paradoxically, serve sincere social purposes.

2.1.2. Ostensible Commissive Acts and Joint Pretense

Ostensible commissive acts are culturally patterned utterances that outwardly resemble genuine speech acts, yet are understood by both the speaker and the listener as non-literal in intent. Rooted in Isaacs and Clark ' (1990) framework of "ostensible communicative acts," these expressions operate through a mechanism of joint pretense, whereby both parties tacitly agree to treat the act as sincere for the sake of social convention, despite their shared recognition of its symbolic function (Isaacs & Clark, 1990). For instance, a Saudi speaker might offer an emphatic invitation, "*You must join us for dinner!*" not as a literal request, but as a culturally recognized display of respect and hospitality. This collaborative understanding reflects an implicit communicative contract in which the listener is expected to decline the offer without disrupting social harmony, thus maintaining politeness and preserving face.

Traditional speech act theory, particularly Searle's (1969) insistence on the sincerity condition, fails to fully capture the pragmatic effectiveness of such acts. While these expressions technically violate the expectation of genuine intent, they serve essential relational functions. The gap between literal language and social meaning highlights the need for more culturally situated models of communication. Scholars such as Abdel Hady (2013) and Link and Kreuz (2005) emphasize that ostensible speech acts rely on surface-level adherence to sincerity norms, mutual recognition of their symbolic nature, and the listener's active participation in upholding the pretense. These interactions are typically marked by deliberate ambiguity, often conveyed through hedging, non-committal language, or strategic politeness cues, where the speaker's real intent is left unspoken but understood through cultural fluency.

In Saudi Arabia, these ostensible commissives are more than social niceties; they are institutionalized politeness rituals embedded in the broader communicative fabric of a high-context, collectivist society. Rather than aiming for direct outcomes, such utterances are used to signal solidarity, generosity, and communal belonging. For example, a public offer from a tribal leader may not entail an actual expectation of acceptance but instead affirms social cohesion and respect for hierarchical roles. As Alkhonini et al. (2024) and Al-Zubeiry and Alzahrani (2024) observe, such indirectness is a strategic feature of Saudi politeness, where the careful balance between explicitness and ambiguity allows speakers to fulfill relational obligations while avoiding potential discomfort or loss of face. Thus, ostensible commissive acts in Saudi Arabic illustrate how indirect speech, while seemingly insincere, performs a vital social function in maintaining group harmony and reinforcing culturally embedded norms.

2.1.3. Politeness Theory and Face in Saudi Culture

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory offers a foundational framework for understanding how speakers use language to manage social relationships and preserve "face," the public self-image individuals seek to maintain. They distinguish between positive face, which reflects the desire for approval, inclusion, and respect, and negative face, which refers to the need for autonomy and freedom from imposition. Certain communicative acts, particularly those involving refusals, requests, or directives, are classified as face-threatening acts (FTAs) because they have the potential to disrupt interpersonal harmony. In response to such threats, speakers deploy a range of politeness strategies, including on-record speech (direct and unambiguous language), positive politeness (solidarity-building through compliments or shared identity markers), negative politeness (indirectness and deference, such as hedging or apologies), and off-record speech (indirect hints or ambiguous statements that rely on inference).

In the Saudi context, these politeness strategies are deeply embedded within broader cultural values and social structures, including tribal hierarchies, Islamic ethical norms, and collectivist ideals centered on community and hospitality. Positive politeness strategies are prominent in in-group interactions, where the use of honorifics, ritualized invitations, and formulaic expressions of generosity reinforce social bonds. Conversely, negative politeness is more common in hierarchical or formal settings, where deference and indirectness signal respect for status and social distance. Most notably, off-record strategies—such as vague responses, non-committal offers, or ostensible invitations—play a central role in navigating obligations while avoiding direct imposition. These forms of indirectness allow speakers to fulfill cultural expectations without placing undue pressure on the listener, thereby preserving both parties' face.

Such communicative practices reflect a cultural imperative to avoid embarrassment and maintain interpersonal harmony. For instance, indirect refusals or ritualized offers (comparable to *ta'arof* in Persian culture) enable individuals to decline obligations gracefully without appearing disrespectful. In this sense, ostensible commissive acts such as invitations and offers that are not meant to be taken literally embody a balance between fulfilling social rituals (thus affirming positive face) and mitigating imposition (thus safeguarding negative face). As Al-Shalawi (1997) and Al-Zubeiry and Alzahrani (2024) suggest, these acts function as "social lubricants," facilitating smooth interpersonal exchanges within a framework of shared cultural expectations.

The interplay between politeness strategies and sociocultural norms in Saudi Arabia demonstrates the adaptability and cultural specificity of Brown and Levinson's theory (1987). While the model has been critiqued

for its implicit universalism, its application to the Saudi context reveals how politeness is not a static or global construct but a negotiated practice shaped by local values, communicative goals, and relational dynamics. In this high-context setting, ostensible commissive acts are not anomalies or violations of politeness but rather culturally institutionalized practices that preserve social cohesion and reaffirm collective identity. Understanding these practices is thus essential to any analysis of politeness and speech acts within Saudi Arabian discourse.

2.2. Previous Related Studies on Ostensible Speech Acts

A substantial body of research has explored ostensible speech acts across a variety of cultural and linguistic contexts, offering valuable insights into their characteristics, social functions, and implications for pragmatic communication. A seminal contribution by Isaacs and Clark (1990) examined ostensible invitations in American culture, conceptualizing them as offers made without genuine intent. Drawing on 156 examples gathered through undergraduate reports, interviews, and recorded telephone conversations, the study identified five core features of ostensible invitations: pretense, mutual recognition, collusion, ambivalence, and off-record purpose. These features underscore the strategic function of such acts in protecting face and managing interpersonal relationships. However, the scope of their investigation was limited to American, low-context settings. The study did not explore how ostensible speech acts operate in high-context societies, where implicit meaning, cultural norms, and social expectations strongly influence interpretation. Moreover, while the structural elements were effectively mapped, the affective and relational nuances of these acts across cultural boundaries remained underexamined. The present study builds on their foundational model, extending the analysis to Saudi Arabia, where cultural values and tribal traditions significantly shape the form and function of ostensible communication.

Research conducted in high-context cultures, such as Iran, offers further insights. Beeman (1986) differentiated between "genuine" and "offhand" invitations, observing that Iranian speakers adapt their invitations based on social status, requiring more planning when addressing superiors and using insistence among equals. His work highlights the interplay between hierarchy and politeness but remains narrow in scope, focusing primarily on Iranian urban norms. Similarly, Koutlaki (2002) examined the Persian concept of *ta'arof*, focusing on ritualized offers and expressions of gratitude as face-enhancing strategies. While her study provides a rich account of hierarchical politeness practices, it is based exclusively on urban Iranian data, particularly from Tehran, and uncritically applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory without questioning the cross-cultural applicability of sincerity conditions. Additionally, her methodology relies heavily on theoretical interpretation without integrating observational or interview-based data, limiting its empirical depth. In contrast, the current research addresses both methodological and cultural limitations by incorporating naturalistic data collection within Saudi Arabia's tribal regions and critically reassessing the theoretical frameworks in light of local practices.

Eslami (2005) further investigated ostensible invitations by comparing Persian and English usage, revealing that while both languages display similar surface features, they differ in how sincerity and politeness are culturally constructed. In Persian, ostensible invitations, often a form of *ta'arof,* are ritualistic tools for affirming social ties rather than sincere communicative intentions. Eslami's (2002) findings reinforce the need to interpret speech acts within culturally grounded frameworks. However, her comparative approach is limited to two languages and overlooks the broader variation among high-context cultures, particularly within Arab societies. The present study addresses this gap by exploring ostensible speech acts within the distinct socio-cultural fabric of Saudi Arabia, focusing on both invitations and offers as mechanisms for negotiating identity, status, and social expectations.

Studies within the Arab world have further expanded understanding of ostensible speech acts, though most remain limited in geographic scope. Naim (2011), examining Moroccan Arabic, emphasized the relational dimension of ostensible invitations, arguing that such acts are more likely to be extended to acquaintances rather than close family members. He suggested a more nuanced classification system, such as "ostensible reinforced," to account for invitations with deeper social weight. While his critique of Isaacs and Clark (1990) framework is valuable, the findings are grounded in a specific dialect and cultural context, limiting their broader applicability. Similarly, Abdel Hady (2015) explored ostensible invitations in Jordanian Arabic, demonstrating how these acts operate on two levels: a surface level of apparent sincerity and a deeper level of shared cultural understanding. His analysis highlights the dual function of such acts in mitigating face-threatening situations while also serving persuasive purposes. Nevertheless, the study remains localized to Jordan and does not fully address the potential variation in communicative norms across Arab regions. The current research builds upon these findings by investigating ostensible speech acts in Saudi Arabia, with particular attention to tribal values, religious norms, and regional dynamics.

More recently, Alzahrani (2023) conducted a pioneering study on ostensible invitations within Saudi Arabia, applying Isaacs and Clark (1990) framework to a sample of 37 female participants in Riyadh. Her findings confirmed the presence of all seven strategies identified in the original model, with a strong emphasis on the absence of persistence (86%) and the absence of motivating the invitee (73%). The study also identified culturally distinctive features, such as the use of intensified swearing and interrogative forms to issue invitations. While Alzahrani (2023) work is significant in introducing empirical data from Saudi culture, its exclusive focus on urban, female participants and on invitations alone limits the generalizability of the findings. It overlooks regional diversity, male perspectives, and other types of commissive acts, such as offers, which are also culturally significant.

Addressing these limitations, the present study broadens the scope of inquiry by including male participants and examining both invitations and offers within southern Saudi regions such as Abha and Al-Baha. These areas are characterized by strong tribal affiliations and distinct hospitality traditions, providing an opportunity to investigate how ostensible speech acts of invitations and offers vary across demographic and regional lines. This expanded approach reveals nuanced pretense strategies, such as ritualized insistence in tribal contexts contrasted with more deferential forms in urban settings, thereby challenging the universal applicability of Isaacs and Clark ' (1990) model.

Theoretically, this study advances understanding by integrating and adapting three influential frameworks. First, it builds on Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1969), which, while useful in categorizing commissive acts, does not adequately explain the pragmatic acceptance of insincerity in cultures where relational harmony supersedes literal intent. The study introduces the concept of "contextual felicity" to account for how speech acts achieve social legitimacy even when they fail traditional sincerity conditions. Second, it reinterprets Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) by situating ostensible acts within institutionalized rituals grounded in Islamic values (e.g., ḍiyāfa, hospitality) and tribal loyalty (ʿaṣabiyya), thereby moving beyond individualistic conceptions of face. Third, it enriches the Joint Pretense Model (Isaacs & Clark, 1990) by incorporating culturally specific variables such as kinship terminology, ritual insistence, and hierarchical expectations. Together, these contributions reframe ostensible speech acts not as anomalies or violations of communicative norms, but as culturally coherent practices essential to high-context social interaction.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining participant observation and recall interviews to examine ostensible commissive acts—specifically invitations and offers—in Saudi spoken Arabic. This dual strategy enables the capture of both naturalistic interactional data and retrospective interpretive insights, aligning with the sociopragmatic emphasis on cultural context (Abdel Hady, 2013; Isaacs & Clark, 1990).

3.1.1. Participant Observation

Participant observation was conducted over a four-month period (April–July 2024) in southern Saudi Arabia, specifically in Abha and Al-Baha, regions known for their tribal cohesion and distinct hospitality traditions. The research team acted as participant-observers in three primary contexts: (1) family gatherings such as majlis sessions, (2) community events including weddings and tribal mediations, and (3) formal and informal social encounters in public spaces such as marketplaces.

Access to these social environments was facilitated through tribal gatekeepers, including respected local leaders who endorsed the researchers and ensured adherence to cultural protocols. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was maintained in field notes and subsequent documentation. Across the observation period, 58 instances of ostensible commissive acts were recorded. Each instance was accompanied by detailed contextual annotations, capturing participant roles, nonverbal cues, relational hierarchies, and pragmatic outcomes such as face preservation or reinforcement of solidarity.

3.1.2. Recall Interviews

To supplement observational data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 male participants aged between 25 and 55. Participants were selected to represent a diverse range of tribal affiliations (e.g., Assiri, Ghamdi, Zahrani), educational backgrounds (from high school to postgraduate level), and occupational roles (e.g., educators, farmers, tribal mediators). This gender-specific focus addresses the demographic imbalance in prior research (e.g., Alzahrani, 2023), which focused exclusively on female participants, while also respecting local norms related to gender segregation.

Interview questions explored participants' interpretation of ostensible acts (e.g., "How did you know the offer wasn't genuine?") and the social consequences of compliance or non-compliance (e.g., "What happens if you accept an ostensible invitation?"). Open-ended prompts minimized response bias and allowed participants to articulate culturally grounded reasoning. Follow-up probes elicited contextual details, including kinship terms, ritualized expressions, and situational norms. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to protect participant identities.

4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through a three-stage qualitative process involving transcription and categorization, iterative coding, and triangulation for validation.

In the first stage, all interview data were transcribed verbatim, and field notes from participant observations were organized according to speech act type (invitations or offers) and interactional context (tribal or urban settings). Using NVivo software, the data were further categorized into contextual clusters, such as hierarchical interactions and peer exchanges, to facilitate comparative analysis.

The second stage involved iterative coding, beginning with first-cycle coding to identify surface-level features such as insistence, hedging, or refusal markers, using descriptive codes informed by Saldaña's (2009) methodology. In the second-cycle coding, broader thematic patterns were identified and organized around sociopragmatic constructs, including relational bonding, hospitality performance, and tribal authority, guided by the study's theoretical frameworks. To ensure inter-coder reliability, two researchers independently coded 20% of the dataset. After resolving minor discrepancies through discussion, a Cohen's kappa (κ) of 0.82 was achieved, indicating substantial agreement.

The third stage emphasized triangulation and validation of findings. Observed instances, such as a tribal leader extending an insistent offer, were cross-checked against participants' interview narratives (e.g., "We insist on showing respect"), ensuring consistency between reported perceptions and natural behavior. Cases that diverged from emerging patterns, such as urban participants expressing discomfort with ritual insistence, were examined in depth to refine coding categories and strengthen the validity of emerging themes.

4.1.   Ethical Considerations

The study followed strict ethical protocols that were both institutionally and culturally informed to ensure respectful and responsible research practices.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants through oral and written briefings conducted in Arabic. These briefings emphasized the voluntary nature of participation and clarified participants' rights to withdraw at any time without consequence. To maintain confidentiality, all personal and tribal identifiers were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms (e.g., "Abu Ali," "Sa'eed," "Bader," or "teacher").

The research also prioritized cultural sensitivity. Data collection in gender-segregated environments adhered to Saudi norms: male researchers conducted fieldwork exclusively in male-only spaces. Furthermore, tribal approval was sought from community leaders, who reviewed the study's data collection protocols, particularly those involving public interactions, to ensure alignment with local customs (ʿurf). These measures ensured that the study upheld ethical standards while respecting the sociocultural dynamics of the research setting.

5.   Results and Discussion

This study investigates ostensibly insincere commissive acts in Saudi spoken Arabic by addressing two key questions: (1) What sociopragmatic functions do ostensible speech acts of invitations and offers serve? and (2) How do cultural norms and contextual factors shape their performance and interpretation? Drawing on 58 naturalistic examples collected through participant observation and interviews, we analyze eight representative scenarios (four invitations and four offers) to illustrate how such speech acts function within Saudi Arabia's high-context culture.

While the illustrative scenarios are drawn primarily from participant observation to provide rich contextual data, recall interviews yielded crucial insights into participants' perceptions and motivations. These interviews confirmed the intentionality behind utterances, validated observed social expectations, and revealed strategies for navigating face-threatening situations. This triangulation strengthened our understanding of the acts' functions and meanings. Our findings demonstrate that ritualized invitations and offers, though superficially insincere, serve as sophisticated social tools that preserve harmony while managing complex relational dynamics.

5.1.   Functions of Ostensible Speech Acts of Invitations

5.1.1.   Signaling Welcome

Ostensible commissive acts in Saudi Arabia often function as ritualized gestures of welcome, maintaining social harmony while affirming hospitality. This sociopragmatic function is exemplified in the following exchange:

Situation 1: Invitation for sharing Qahwah (coffee)

Social and psychological context: Abu Ali was greeted by Sa'eed and Majed, two acquaintances passing by his house. He invited them inside for some Qahwah (coffee).

> **Sa'eed:** *Salam ʕlikum Abu Ali; kef ħa:lak wa kef alomu:r mʕak?*
> *[Peace be upon you, Abu Ali. How are you, and how are things going with you?]*

> **Abu Ali:** *Wʕlikum alsalam, alħamdulillah, tefaḍalu teqahwow.*
> *[Peace be upon you, too, praise be to Allah. Come in and have some coffee.]*

> **Sa'eed:** *yʕṭeek alʕafyah, maʕana mawʕed maʕa nas.*
> *[Thank you. We have an appointment with some people.]*

> **Abu Ali:** *Allah maʕakum.*
> *[May Allah be with you.]*

This interaction illustrates how ostensible commissive acts serve as culturally embedded signals of welcome in Saudi culture. The exchange follows a predictable three-part structure that communicates hospitality while preserving social boundaries: (1) the host's conventional offer ("tefaḍalu teqahwow") acts as a symbolic

welcoming gesture without the expectation of acceptance (Brown & Levinson, 1987); (2) the guest's polite refusal ("maʕana mawʕed maʕa nas") reflects mutual awareness of the invitation's ritualistic nature (Isaacs & Clark, 1990); and (3) the host's religiously framed farewell ("Allah maʕakum") maintains the hospitable tone while gracefully concluding the interaction (Al-Zubeiry & Alzahrani, 2024).

This ritualized sequence exemplifies how Saudis use ostensibly insincere speech to affirm social bonds while maintaining respectful distance—an essential dynamic in high-context communication (Alkhonini et al., 2024). The entire exchange functions as a culturally encoded politeness strategy that signals welcome while upholding social decorum.

5.1.2.   Expressing Gratitude and Appreciation

The use of ostensible commissive acts to express gratitude reveals distinctive sociopragmatic patterns in Saudi communication. Consider the following illustrative scenario:

Situation 2: Invitation to spend the night with a friend

Social and psychological context: Moayed and Salem are close friends. Salem asked Moayed to bring him his mobile phone, which he had left in his car. On his way home with his two young children, Moayed stopped by Salem's house to deliver the phone. Salem came downstairs, thanked his friend, and invited him to stay for dinner and tea.

> **Salem:** *yʕţeek alʕafyah; xali:k maʕna allailah, netʕša: wansmur netqahwa.*
> *[Thank you. Stay with us tonight, have dinner, and enjoy coffee.]*

> **Moayed:** *jazak Allah xair. wallah mestʕjel, baqi waraya mešwar θani.*
> *[May Allah bless you. I swear I'm in a hurry; I still have another errand.]*

> **Salem:** *bellah xali:k maʕna.*
> *[For God's sake, stay with us.]*

> **Moayed:** *marah θanyah.*
> *[Next time.]*

This interaction exemplifies how ostensible invitations are used as ritualized expressions of gratitude in Saudi Arabic (Al-Ghazo, 2023). The exaggerated nature of the invitation ("stay the night") and its quick withdrawal after the second polite refusal underscore its symbolic function, what Abdel Hady (2015) terms "gratitude by proxy." This practice differs from Persian *ta'arof*, where social hierarchy dictates the degree of insistence (Koutlaki, 2002), whereas Saudi patterns emphasize egalitarian solidarity (Almegren, 2017). Three cultural features shape this exchange: the religious framing ("bellah") lends sacrality to the gesture, the obligatory second offer maintains politeness conventions, and the non-committal deferral ("next time") preserves relational potential.

Theoretically, this challenges traditional speech act models, demonstrating how apparently insincere propositions (Searle, 1969) attain communicative legitimacy through cultural reframing (Wierzbicka, 2010). Unlike the structured insistence of Persian *ta'arof* or the self-effacing tendencies of Japanese *enryo* (Ide, 1989), Saudi ritual invitations reflect a tribal ethic where brief, egalitarian performances suffice. These findings refine politeness theory by showing how collectivist facework (Brown & Levinson, 1987) functions in Bedouin-influenced communities, where ostensible acts help sustain group cohesion without extended negotiation.

5.1.3.   Exhibiting Courtesy and Politeness

Ostensible commissive acts also serve as markers of courtesy and deference, especially in hierarchical relationships. This is evident in the following exchange between a student and his teacher:

Situation 3: Invitation from a student to his teacher for dinner

Social and psychological context: Majed unexpectedly ran into his teacher at a mall around 4 p.m. After greeting him warmly, they had the following conversation:

> **Majed:** *hala estað! kefak? wallah yum alsaʕd ani šoftak.*
> *[Hello, teacher! How are you? I swear it's a good day because I saw you.]*

> **Teacher:** *ħayak Allah. teslam! kefak?*
> *[You're welcome. Thank you! How are you?]*

> **Majed:** *bexair, Allah ysalemak.*
> *[I'm well. May Allah keep you safe.]*

> **Teacher:** *Allah ywafiqak.*
> *[May Allah help you.]*

> **Majed:** *teslam, bellah taʕša maʕna estað bellah ʕlaik?*
> *[Thank you. Please join us for dinner, teacher, for God's sake?]*

Teacher: *yʕṭeek alʕafyah.*
[Thank you.]

Majed: *tayeb. maʕa alsalamah.*
[Okay. Goodbye.]

Teacher: *fii ʔman Allah.*
[May Allah be with you.]

This exchange highlights three key sociopragmatic dimensions of ostensible politeness in Saudi Arabic. First, the invitation's formulaic structure ("bellah taʕša maʕna"), its deferential tone, and its atypical timing (4 p.m.) signal that the invitation is ritualistic, particularly within teacher-student dynamics (Mills, 2003). Second, the power asymmetry renders the invitation non-binding; the student's lower status transforms the act from a literal offer into a gesture of deference, echoing Austin's (1962) concept of illocutionary force shaped by social hierarchy. Third, the three-turn closure illustrates high-context communication efficiency (Hall, 1976), where shared cultural expectations render extended insistence unnecessary.

These dimensions align with Fathi's (2024) model of high-order politeness strategies that capture the subtle relational work behind such brief exchanges. They also challenge Searle's (1969) sincerity condition, illustrating that ostensible invitations can achieve social legitimacy and politeness through cultural reconceptualization. Furthermore, the findings enrich Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory by illustrating how hierarchical politeness functions within collectivist societies. In contrast to Persian *ta'arof* (Koutlaki, 2002) or East Asian deference norms (Ide, 1989), Saudi politeness centers on concise, symbolic exchanges rooted in tribal and Islamic values. This practice also contrasts with Turkish communication, where direct invitations are more prevalent (Ünsal Şakiroğlu & Özyıldırım, 2024). Ultimately, Saudi Arabic conventionalizes ostensible commissive acts as tokens of hierarchical politeness, demonstrating how apparent insincerity is resemanticized into functional and socially appropriate discourse (Abdel Hady, 2015; Naim, 2011).

5.1.4. Softening Embarrassment

This study reveals that ostensible invitations in Saudi Arabic often function as culturally coded politeness strategies for mitigating embarrassment in social interactions. A representative example occurs when Ali enters a government office and inadvertently interrupts two employees during their modest breakfast.

Situation 4: Extending an invitation while having breakfast at the office

Social and psychological context: Ali visited a government office to inquire about a personal transaction. Upon entering, he observed two office workers eating breakfast. One of them extended a polite invitation, despite the meager meal.

Ali: *alsalam ʕlikum*
[Peace be upon you]

Office worker: *Waʕlikum alsalam.*
[And peace be upon you]

Ali: *maʕlyš baġait asʔal ʕan maʕamalati.*
[Excuse me, I would like to inquire about my transaction.]

Office worker: *tayab estana šwai ħata naxleṣ faṭu:rana. tefaḍal efṭur maʕana.*
[Okay, wait a moment while we finish our breakfast. You're welcome to join us.]

Ali: *la, šukran.*
[No, thank you.]

The performative nature of this invitation is evident through several contextual cues. First, the inadequacy of the meal, two sandwiches shared between three people, violates local hospitality norms, indicating that the invitation was not meant to be taken literally (Alzahrani, 2023). Second, the office worker's effortless acceptance of Ali's refusal highlights mutual recognition of the invitation's symbolic function, in line with Isaacs and Clark's (1990) model of ostensible speech acts.

Despite technically violating Searle's (1969) sincerity condition, this exchange achieves what might be termed "contextual felicity" by fulfilling positive politeness goals (signaling inclusion and respect) while avoiding imposition (negative politeness) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The phrase *"tefaḍal efṭur maʕana"* (*"Join us for breakfast"*) operates as a culturally encoded mechanism to preserve face and diffuse potential discomfort caused by the interruption. Such usage exemplifies the Saudi cultural priority of relational harmony over propositional accuracy (Almegren, 2017; Koutlaki, 2002).

The interaction's three-turn efficiency further reflects its ritualized character, confirming that the invitation was less a literal commissive act and more a socially expected gesture. Unlike Western contexts where similar insincere offers might be perceived as dismissive or even offensive (Link & Kreuz, 2005), Saudi participants use these expressions collaboratively to navigate social friction and maintain mutual dignity. This process of cultural

resemanticization transforms what appears to be insincerity into a socially valid and meaningful communicative act.

Ultimately, such examples challenge the universalist assumptions of traditional speech act theory (Searle, 1969), suggesting the need for culture-specific frameworks that accommodate the nuanced dynamics of Arab pragmatics and politeness (Usmani & Almashham, 2024). Ostensible invitations in Saudi Arabic thus function as essential tools for facework, particularly in public, hierarchical, and potentially face-threatening situations.

5.2. Functions of Ostensible Speech Acts of Offers

5.2.1. Acknowledging Acquaintanceship

The analysis reveals that ostensible offers function as social recognition markers in Saudi professional contexts. Consider the following scenario:

Situation 5: Offering help at work

Social and psychological context: Abdullah and Bader are neighbors. Abdullah visited the STC company to purchase a SIM card for his new worker. There, he encountered Bader, who works in the internet service department. They exchanged greetings and engaged in the following conversation:

> **Bader:** *erheb! kaifak Abdullah?*
> *[Welcome! How are you, Abdullah?]*
>
> **Abdullah:** *hala Bader! wallah alḥamdulillah.*
> *[Hello Bader! Thank God.]*
>
> **Bader:** *aiš axdumak fiih?*
> *[What can I do for you?]*
>
> **Abdullah:** *bas aqṭaʕ šari:ḥa lelʕamel.*
> *[Just getting a SIM card for my worker.]*
>
> **Bader:** *tayab ʕala xair.*
> *[Okay, wish you the best.]*
>
> **Abdullah:** *yʕṭeek alʕafyah.*
> *[Thank you.]*

Bader's ostensible offer *"Aiš axdumak fiih?"* ("What can I do for you?"), Despite being unable to help with Abdullah's request, it illustrates how Saudi workplace interactions prioritize social harmony over literal meaning (Abdel Hady, 2015). Abdullah's immediate response, treating the question as symbolic, reflects mutual cultural understanding and aligns with Isaacs & Clark ' (1990) model of ostensible speech acts. This usage challenges Gricean maxims, as the apparent offer is not intended to be fulfilled but functions as a relational acknowledgment (Beeman, 1986). Unlike Persian *ta'arof*, which involves layered insistence (Eslami, 2005), or East Asian deference rituals (Ide, 1989), the Saudi approach balances politeness and efficiency. It simultaneously reinforces social bonds, avoids obligation, and signals cultural fluency, demonstrating the value of culture-sensitive pragmatic analysis.

5.2.2. Mitigating Conversation Partings

The Findings indicate that ostensible offers also function as strategic tools to ease conversation endings in Saudi Arabic. The following example illustrates this role:

Situation 6: Extending help to a teacher when saying goodbye

Social and psychological context: Wail unexpectedly encountered his teacher at a bookstore. After a brief chat, Wail offered assistance just before parting.

> **Wail:** *salam ʕalikum, masa alxair estađ.*
> *[Peace be upon you, good evening, teacher.]*
>
> **Teacher:** *waʕlikum alsalam, hala Wail.*
> *[And peace be upon you, welcome Wail.]*
>
> **Wail:** *kaifak estađ? enša Allah bexair.*
> *[How are you, teacher? Hope you're well.]*
>
> **Teacher:** *alḥamdulillah. aiš maʕak hena?*
> *[Thank God. What brings you here?]*
>
> **Wail:** *bas aštari baḍ almestalzamat.*
> *[Just buying some stationery.]*

Teacher: *tamam.*
[Okay.]

Wail: *ʔy xedmah lak estað?*
[Any service I can offer you, teacher?]

Teacher: *šukran!*
[Thank you.]

Wail: *maʕa alsalamah.*
[Goodbye.]

Teacher: *Fii ʔmani Allah.*
[May Allah be with you.]

Wail's parting offer, *"ʔy xedmah lak?"* ("Any service I can offer you?"), and the teacher's simple *"šukran!"* ("Thank you"), functions as a ritualized conversation-closer rather than a sincere offer. The offer's strategic timing, non-engagement, and religious closure signal its phatic purpose. This aligns with high-context norms in Saudi culture, where indirectness and facework are preferred over explicitness (Abdel Hady, 2015; Al-Zubeiry, 2013). The analysis contributes theoretically by: (1) challenging Gricean expectations, (2) adapting Isaacs & Clark 's (1990) conversation termination model to Arab contexts, and (3) distinguishing Saudi closing rituals from Persian or East Asian patterns through their blend of tribal informality and Islamic formality. This further demonstrates how ostensible offers gain real social meaning within local frameworks.

5.2.3.   Expressing Sympathy

The Ostensible offers are also employed as expressions of sympathy, as demonstrated in the following encounter:

Situation 7: Offering financial assistance to a friend

Social and psychological context: Nasser met his friend Mohaned at a private hospital where Mohaned's wife was undergoing surgery. During their exchange, Nasser offered help.

Nasser: *Mohaned! masa alxair.*
[Good evening, Mohaned.]

Mohaned: *hala Nasser, masa alnour.*
[Hello Nasser, good evening.]

Nasser: *salamat! eš maʕak hena?*
[Hope all is well! What brings you here?]

Mohaned: *zawjati ʕendaha ʕamaliyah.*
[My wife is undergoing surgery.]

Nasser: *Allah yešfyha!*
[May Allah grant her recovery.]

Mohaned: *ameen!*
[Amen.]

Nasser: *teħtaj falu:s ay šai?*
[Do you need any money or help?]

Mohaned: *la teslam.*
[No, thank you.]

Nasser: *Allah yaʕinak. Salam.*
[May Allah help you. Goodbye.]

Mohaned: *Fii ʔmani Allah.*
[May Allah be with you.]

This exchange functions less as a literal offer and more as a scripted sympathy ritual. Three contextual cues highlight its ostensible nature: (1) the emotionally sensitive context (a hospital visit), (2) Nasser's immediate withdrawal after the refusal, and (3) the religious phrasing ("Allah yaʕinak"), which emphasizes spiritual solidarity over material help. Though it violates Searle's (1969) sincerity condition, it aligns with Wispé's (1991) performative model of sympathy, showing concern without burdening the recipient. The two-turn efficiency reflects high-context norms, distinct from Persian *ta'arof* reciprocity (Eslami, 2005) or East Asian burden minimization (Ide, 1989). These findings demonstrate how Saudi speakers use religious and cultural frames to express emotional support while preserving dignity (Brown & Levinson, 1987), challenging universalist speech act models and calling for context-sensitive pragmatics.

5.2.4.   Expressing the Speaker's Concern

The Ostensible offers also function as ritualized expressions of social concern, particularly in casual encounters, as seen in the following scenario:

Situation 8: Offering help to a friend

Social and psychological context: Mosa saw his friend Fahed across the street and called out with an offer of help.

> **Mosa:** *Fahed! ʔy xedmah lak?*
> *[Fahed! Any service for you?]*
>
> **Fahed:** *hala Mosa! yʕṭeek alʕafyah.*
> *[Hello Mosa! Thank you.]*
>
> **Mosa:** *Fain rayeh?*
> *[Where are you going?]*
>
> **Fahed:** *Wala makan, qaʕed.*
> *[Nowhere, just staying around.]*
>
> **Mosa:** *Yallah maʕa alsalamah.*
> *[Alright, goodbye.]*
>
> **Fahed:** *maʕa alsalamah.*
> *[Goodbye.]*

This brief exchange reflects three key sociopragmatic features: first, the non-persistent nature of the offer confirms its phatic purpose (Al-Awaid & Mohammed, 2024); second, Fahed's response *"yʕṭeek alʕafyah"* elevates the exchange to a religiously framed blessing (Al-Shalawi, 1997); third, the succinct four-turn structure aligns with Hall's (1976) concept of high-context communication, where shared cultural knowledge minimizes the need for elaboration.

Such interactions challenge the universality of speech act theory (Searle, 1969) by demonstrating how Saudi Arabic redefines sincerity through social ritual. Distinct from *ta'arof* (Eslami, 2005), Saudi ostensible offers emphasize Islamic solidarity over transactional obligation. These findings contribute to cross-cultural pragmatics by documenting (1) ritualized concern as a distinct communicative function, (2) the role of religious discourse in everyday interaction, and (3) the cultural reconceptualization of sincerity in high-context societies.

6.   Practical and Theoretical Implications

The implications of this study extend beyond theoretical contributions and offer valuable insights for cross-cultural communication. Understanding ostensible commissives as tools for relational maintenance allows individuals and organizations to better interpret and navigate Saudi communicative norms. Avoiding the misperception of these acts as insincere or deceptive, and recognizing them instead as genuine attempts to build rapport, can enhance interpersonal and professional relationships.

These insights are especially relevant for intercultural training programs, which often rely on surface-level strategies. Rather than teaching isolated functions, effective training should emphasize the underlying cultural values, such as politeness, indirectness, and harmony, that shape Saudi discourse. By aligning communication strategies with these values, individuals can improve negotiation outcomes, foster stronger relationships, and achieve more positive cross-cultural interactions.

Theoretically, this study contributes to pragmatics and speech act theory by proposing a shift from individual sincerity to relational intentionality. In high-context cultures such as Saudi Arabia, the goal of communication is often not to convey literal truth but to sustain social bonds. This challenges the universality of models like Searle's (1969) sincerity condition and underscores the need to re-evaluate politeness theories in light of cultural variability.

We propose the concept of "contextual felicity", the idea that the success of a communicative act should be evaluated based on its ability to achieve relational goals within a specific cultural context, rather than on its adherence to literal truth. This concept advances pretense theory by introducing culture-specific parameters of collusion, where shared recognition of an act's ostensible nature becomes a marker of pragmatic competence. In doing so, this study offers a refined framework for analyzing communication in high-context cultures.

7.   Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the sociopragmatic roles of ostensible commissive acts in Saudi Arabic, it acknowledges several limitations. First, the reliance on recall interviews introduces potential memory biases and may affect the accuracy of reported interactions. Second, the study's focus on the southern regions of Saudi Arabia limits the generalizability of findings, particularly to urban centers or areas with northern dialects.

To address these limitations, future research should incorporate naturalistic data such as audio or video recordings, allowing for more objective analysis of interactional dynamics. Additionally, longitudinal studies and comparative analyses across different regions and dialects could provide a more comprehensive view of the cultural factors influencing commissive speech acts. Expanding the scope beyond invitations and offers to include other commissive acts, such as promises or threats, would further enrich our understanding. Finally, future studies should explore how the notion of contextual felicity applies to other high-context cultures, offering a broader theoretical lens for examining culturally embedded pragmatic practices.

8. Conclusions

This study investigated the sociopragmatic functions of ostensible commissive speech acts in Saudi spoken Arabic, focusing on invitations and offers. Moving beyond a descriptive account of surface-level features, the analysis uncovered the deeper cultural significance of these acts. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study identified eight core functions: signaling welcome, expressing gratitude and appreciation, demonstrating courtesy and politeness, softening embarrassment, acknowledging familiarity, easing conversation endings, conveying sympathy and concern, and alleviating social discomfort. However, the central contribution lies not in cataloguing these functions, but in understanding how they collectively form a broader system of relational maintenance within Saudi society.

Our findings demonstrate that ostensible commissives are not merely insincere utterances, but rather strategic communicative performances aimed at preserving face, upholding social harmony, and navigating complex hierarchical relationships. These acts reflect a culturally specific form of communicative competence, where the ability to perform such speech acts effectively signals adherence to core Saudi values. In doing so, the study challenges Western-centric notions of sincerity, arguing instead for culturally sensitive frameworks that recognize contextual felicity, where communicative appropriateness, not literal truthfulness, is the primary measure of success.

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Data availability statement: Data is available at request. Please contact the corresponding author for any additional information on data access or usage.

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