

# Responding Strategies to Greetings and Invocations in Jordanian Arabic in CCCS Interactions: A Socio-Pragmatic Study

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Doi:10.19044/esj.2020.v16n8p62

[URL:http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/esj.2020.v16n8p62](http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/esj.2020.v16n8p62)

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on examining the types of responding strategies employed in the interactions between Jordanians and the employees of the call-centre-customer service (CCCS) of a major telecommunications company in Jordan. It focuses on their linguistic behaviours upon responding to greetings and invocations. Naturally-occurring interactions and designed situations were used to collect data from 28 Jordanian Arabic speakers who participated in this study. Data were transcribed and translated into English and further divided into groups according to types of participants' responses to greetings and invocations. The results revealed that responses to greetings were different based on their length and type, whereas responses to invocations usually involved a response that included the same invocation. Furthermore, it has been revealed that participants are impacted by the socio-religious norms of the Jordanian society.

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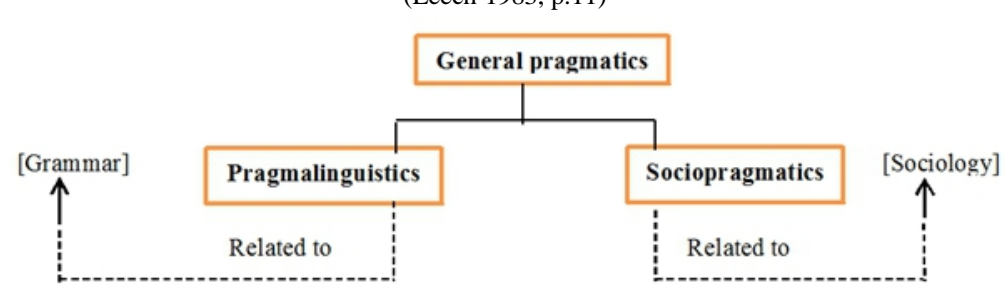
**Keywords:** Greetings, invocations, Jordanian Arabic, social norms

## Introduction

In his *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, David Crystal defined sociopragmatics as “A term sometimes used within the study of pragmatics to refer to the way conditions on language use derive from the social situation” (Crystal, 2008, p. 441). According to this definition, sociopragmatics is a subfield of pragmatics which lays emphasis on the social situations. However, the history of sociopragmatics can be traced back to the work of Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983). Leech (1983) classified the areas of pragmatics into, first, *general pragmatics* which concerns “the general conditions of the communicative use of language” (p. 10). The second area is *pragmalinguistics*

which concerns with “the particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions” (p. 11). Thus, pragmalinguistics is concerned with the extent of forms of correctness or appropriateness. The third area is *sociopragmatics*, which focuses on “more specific ‘local’ conditions on language use” (p. 10). It investigates the beliefs of the interlocutors according to their social and cultural values. Also, it is concerned with the influence of socio-contextual factors in language as social actions. In other words, in sociopragmatics, linguists are interested in the relationships between aspects of language use and the cultural and social norms and practices of the speech community of that language. Leech (1983, p. 11) presented the relationships between the three areas of pragmatics in a diagram as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Pragmatics: general pragmatics, pragmalinguistics, and sociopragmatics (Leech 1983, p.11)



Greetings are social phenomena essential for being a member of any human society; they have a high value because of their role in promoting and maintaining relations between the members of the community. Ferguson (1967) considered greetings as a politeness formula whose presence or absence in a certain context is more important than their specific meaning. In this regard, Goffman (1972) characterised greeting exchanges as access rituals that include two types: passing greetings and engaging greetings. Hence, they function as a switch to open or close relations. Their role is to re-establish social relations, acknowledge status, and guarantee for safe passage when performed between strangers. Duranti (2009) considered greetings as an essential part of the communicative competence which is necessary for living and being a member of any speech community. He emphasized the importance of greetings for language learners and linguists. He says, “They are often of the first verbal routines learned by children and certainly one of the first topics introduced in foreign language classes. They are also of great interest to analysts of social interaction, who see them as establishing the conditions for social encounters” (p. 188).

Across the Arab world, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the language of literature, media, education, formal speech, and other formal

situations. In each region, people use a dialect of Arabic known as colloquial Arabic which differs radically from the literary language. It includes most of the national and regional varieties that constitute the everyday spoken language. Most of the colloquial Arabic dialects are similar to the extent that they are mutually intelligible. However, some of them diverge greatly to the extent that they can be mutually unintelligible. For instance, it is difficult for a Jordanian Arabic (JA, henceforth) speaker to hold conversation with a speaker of Moroccan Arabic. When speakers of different dialects of Arabic find it difficult to converse in their own dialect, i.e., it is difficult to understand each other, they may resort to MSA as a means of communication since it is learnt by most of them as a process of their formal education (Al-Saidat & Al-Momani, 2010; Abushihab, 2015).

A number of greetings are used in each speech community in all aspects of their daily life in different places including home, workplace, gatherings, and public places such as market, bus station, mosques, and other open scenes. Jordan is no exception.

### **Literature Review**

The literature on the impact of sociocultural factors and linguistic politeness is very rich. Researchers have been engaged in investigating the variables that play a role in the choice of communicative strategies that speakers employ in their interactions. In JA, a number of studies have investigated the impact of the social and cultural factors on a number of speech acts (e.g., Amer et al., 2020; Al Kayed & Al-Ghoweri, 2019; Al Rusan, 2018; Rabee & Al-Abed Al-Haq, 2017; Abushihab, 2015; Bani Mofarrej & Al-Abed Al-Haq, 2015; Almutlaq & Jarrah, 2013; Rababa'h & Malkawi, 2012; Al-Momani, 2009; Migdadi, 2003; Al-Abdul Halim, 1994, among others).

Al-Abdul Halim (1994) collected data from different places in Jordan such as hospitals (patients and physicians) and universities (professors and students) to study greetings formulas in JA. He concludes that the relation between the interlocutors affects the choice of the greeting. For instance, in exchanges between students and their professors, students' greetings are longer than those of the professors in order to signal respect and politeness towards them.

Rabee and Al-Abed Al-Haq (2017) selected 32 utterances of greetings from the Glorious Qur'an to investigate their socio-pragmatic functions. They grouped the utterances according to addresser, addressee, and occasion into: Allah's greetings and salutations, angels' greetings, prophets' greetings, Muslims' greetings, and infidels' greetings. The results of the study showed that greetings in the Glorious Qur'an are used for a number of functions including praising, honouring, welcoming, supplicating, appreciating, and establishing interpersonal relationship and solidarity between people.

Rababa'h and Malkawi (2012) investigated the sociolinguistic politeness of greetings used by Jordanian people in their social interactions focusing on the factors that govern their forms. They collected 100 spontaneous interactions from various rural areas in Irbid<sup>8</sup>, which is the authors' own speech community. The results of the study showed that the choice of greeting depends on the participants' social status, age, gender, and the relationships between the interlocutors. As for gender differences, males tend to use politer greeting terms at addressing other males and less polite ones when greeting females. Women themselves use less formal and less polite forms of greetings but they achieve higher degrees of intimacy by adding appropriate cultural terms of address and low-pitched tone to their greetings. Gender differences also show that certain greetings such as 'good morning' are sex-marked, used mostly by women, whereas cultural greetings such as 'gaww illghaanmiin' (May Allah strengthen the noble) are sex and age markers, used mostly by men (Rababa'h & Malkawi, 2012, p. 26). As for age and social status of the interlocutors, the study showed that young people may not be greeted by old ones, and superiors may be greeted more than the inferiors. Old Jordanians, whether males or females, use politer and longer terms of greeting than the young ones do. The authors conclude that greetings in the Jordanian society can be grouped into socio-religious greetings (e. g., assalammu alaykum 'Peace be upon you'), and cultural greetings (e. g., gaww illghaanmiin 'May Allah strengthen the noble'). The former group is acquired before the latter.

Bani Mofarrej and Al-Abed Al-Haq (2015) focused on a number of social factors in determining the politeness strategies used by JA speakers. The results of their study showed that there is no relation between the region and the politeness strategies employed in the use of euphemistic death expressions. On the contrary, geographical location was found to be a factor that influences the types of salutations used by Jordanian people in a study conducted by Almutlaq and Jarrah (2013). They investigated the various types of salutations used by Jordanian people aiming to find out the way people structure salutations and the social factors that govern their use. According to the findings of the study, salutations are of different types and structured in various ways in JA including: two-noun salutations (sabah likhear 'good morning'), verb-noun salutations (ysa'id sabahak 'may your morning be a happy one'), one-noun salutations (marhaba 'welcome'), preposition-noun salutations (a'la ila'afya 'may you have good health'), particle-noun salutations (ya ahlan, ya marhaba 'Oh. Welcome'), and number-noun salutations (meet marhaba 'one hundred salutations') (Almutlaq & Jarrah, 2013, p. 113).

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<sup>8</sup> Irbid is a city situated in north of Jordan.

In addition to this, the authors pointed out some factors that are responsible for the variation in the use of different structures of salutations as performed by the speakers of JA. They established that the structure of the salutation can be related to the geographical location whether it is an urban or a rural 'local environment', to Islam as the main religion in Jordan, to the level of education of the speaker, and finally to the relation with the West (the direct contact or the use of media causes some Jordanian people to use Western salutations such as 'hi', 'hello', and 'good morning').

How speakers of JA respond to thanking is investigated by Al Rusan (2018). He focused on the strategies they employ when performing this speech act. Based on the analysis of natural observation of the participants in real-life situations, the results revealed that acceptance is the most frequent type of response followed by denial, whereas the least frequent ones were the strategies of non-verbal and no response. He concluded that responses to thanking may strengthen the relationships between interlocutors.

A recent study in the area of speech acts in JA was conducted by Al Kayed and Al-Ghoweri (2019). Aiming to explore the strategies employed in the speech act of criticism, they used DCT for data collection from 73 undergraduate Jordanian students. The results of the study showed that indirect strategies are more frequent than the direct ones, which indicates that Jordanians consider criticism as a face threatening act.

Migdadi (2003) conducted a study to explore the relationships between compliments and gender differences (among other variables). The author employed 10 fieldworkers to collect naturally-occurring data on compliments examples used by Jordanian people in Irbid<sup>9</sup>. Having the purpose of correlating compliments and compliment responses to gender, age, and traditionalism as social variables, the author tried to find out whether the differences in gender, age, and being traditional or non-traditional have any significance in giving and responding to compliments. Among the findings of the study is that JA speakers who share same gender and age use compliments when speaking to each other more frequently than people who differ from each other in these categories. As far as gender and age are concerned, female and young people tend to use compliments more than other groups in the following categories: compliments on appearance, explicit compliments, and compliment plus explanation. Finally, when performing compliments, Jordanian men use blessings and disagreements, whereas women use questions.

A study on Jordanian students was conducted by Al-Momani (2009) to investigate the realisation of requests and compare them with those of American English native speakers. The participants are Jordanian EFL

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<sup>9</sup> Same as above.

learners, American English native speakers and JA native speakers. He found out that the three groups prefer conventional indirect strategies to direct strategies in their request speech act realisation. He attributed the reason of similarity between Jordanian EFL learners and JA native speakers in their preference to the fact that the cultural norms are deeply ingrained in them and strongly influence their linguistic choices in their JA and second/foreign language.

A recent study was conducted by Amer et al. (2020) on similar participants in Jordan. The study aimed to find the strategies used by Jordanians when making requests. The authors found that there were a number of strategies employed by Jordanians depending on the type of the topic and, sometimes, on the gender of the interlocutors. They concluded that Jordanians have a preference for the conventional indirect strategies. Moreover, they followed the socio-cultural rules of their society when holding a conversation.

The above studies investigated a number of speech acts, including greetings in the Jordanian context, relating them to different social variables including age, gender, region, religion, relationships, and other similar variables. Although their focus was speech acts in Jordanian Arabic, none of them, according to the best knowledge of the researchers, has targeted greetings in interactions between Jordanian people and employees of the call-centre-customer services (CCCS) of telecommunications companies in particular. Thus, this constitutes a gap in the literature on greeting responses strategies in the JA context. Therefore, this study aims to enrich the literature on the JA context by bridging the abovementioned gap.

## **Methodology**

Data for this study were collected from 28 participants; they were randomly chosen from the list of employees of the CCCS telecommunications company and their customers. The first author of the study contacted the head of the company and obtained their consent for conducting this study. She went to the company and conducted a meeting with the participants in which she explained the objectives of the study and their roles as participants. After she obtained their consents to voluntarily participate in the study, she collected the data. The data collection process was carried out during a two-month period in four visits she made to the site of the company. Because interactions were naturally-occurring ones, the researchers were unable to do any arrangements to control variables such as age, gender, or social status. The participants were divided into two groups: customers (C) and employees (E). The study involved qualitative data collection using recordings of naturally-occurring interactions that took place between the customers and the CCCS employees and making use of imaginary situations designed by the researchers to elicit precise information about certain greetings and invocations responses. Since the

language of the interactions was Arabic, the data was phonemically transcribed and translated into English then divided into groups according to the strategies employed in greetings and invocations.

## Findings and Discussion

### Greetings

Greetings play an important role in smoothing the relations between members of the society. In Jordan, greetings are very important. Such importance is indicated by the existence of many expressions and forms in the society (Almutlaq & Jarrah, 2013).

The greeting */ʔassala:mu ʕalaykum waraḥmatul la:hi wabaraka:tu/* ‘peace and Allah’s mercy and blessings be upon you’ is one of the most important greetings not only in Jordan but also in the Islamic world (Rabee & Al-Abed Al-Haq, 2017). Rababa’h and Malkawi (2012) state that it is the most common and politest greeting term because of its socio-religious significance. Its importance comes from prophetic and religious traditions, according to which it was the greeting of Adam and of his offspring (Abushihab, 2015), and, as ordered by the Apostle of Allah, should be spread among Muslims (Rababa’h & Malkawi, 2012, p. 14). It is a context-free greeting used at any time of the day or night and on any occasion (Abushihab, 2015).

This greeting can be shortened to */ʔassala:mu ʕalaykum waraḥmatul la:h/*, */ʔassala:mu ʕalaykum/* or just */sala:m/* (Almutlaq & Jarrah, 2013). In all cases, the forms have no difference in meaning because the omitted items are implied in what remains and the hearer understands the intended meaning.

Situation 12, shown below, aims to elicit responses to certain Islamic expressions spoken in standard Arabic. */ʔassala:mu ʕalaykum waraḥmatul la:hi wabaraka:tu/* is the first one.

You received a call from a subscriber whose expressions included many Islamic expressions in standard Arabic. What would your response be to these?	
Peace and Allah’s mercy and blessings be upon you	السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته
May Allah bless you	بارك الله فيك
May Allah reward you well.	جزاك الله خيرا
May God be with you	في أمان الله
Situation 12	

All interviewees except respondent 5 (R5) responded in the same way using */waʕalaykumis sala:m waraḥmatul la:hi wabaraka:tu/* ‘peace and Allah’s mercy and blessings be upon you’ as shown in Example 1. This confirms Rababa’h and Malkawi’s (2012) statement that the greeted person should use at least an equal greeting (p. 20). However, R5 replies with the shortened form */waʕalaykumis sala:m/* which is acceptable in the culture, but less polite.

Example 1	R1-4, 6-8	waṣalaykumīs sala:m warahmatul la:hi wabaraka:tu Peace and Allah’s mercy and blessings be upon you. greeting
	R5	waṣalaykumīs sala:m Peace be upon you. (situation 12)

Participants of this study sometimes add certain greeting terms in response to the greeting /waṣalaykumīs sala:m/ such as /ya: hala/ or /ʔahlan/ ‘welcome’ to show more respect to the greeter, as in Examples 2 and 3 respectively.

Example 2	2	C3	sala:mu ṣalaykum Salaam.
	3	E3	waṣalaykumīs sala:m ya: hala (.) nitṣarraf ṣala ʔisimil karri:mʔ Salaam. Welcome! May I know your name?

Example 3	2	C7	ma:rhaba (.) ʔassala:mu ṣalaykum Hello. Salaam.
	3	E7	ʔahlan waṣalaykumīs sala:m ʔatṣarraf bil ʔisimil karri:mʔ Hello. May I know your name?

The finding that most of the interviewees used the same response or a longer one to the /ʔassala:m/ greeting contradicts Rababa’h and Malkawi’s (2012) finding that females’ responses to this greeting are sometimes inappropriate as they violate the norms and the socio-religious rules such as the response “ahleen ya hala” (welcome) (p. 20). According to the data of this study, such violation is not approved even if the male respondent used a shorter form and the female-participants used the same greeting or a longer one, such as the one used by E7, in Example 3. Such finding leads us to conclude that there is no gender distinction among Jordanians in the use of this particular greeting or the response to it.

Like /ʔassala:mu ṣalaykum/, the greeting /marḥaba/ ‘hello’ is used at any time of the day and on any social occasion, so it is context-free. It signals intimacy and solidarity (Rababa’h & Malkawi, 2012). Participants of this study show a huge use of /marḥaba/ in starting their conversations; however, the respondents reply in different ways showing various types and structures of responses to this greeting.

Example 4	1	E1	marḥaba (.) i: wan maṣak (.) Keif bagdar ʔsa:ʔidʔ Hello. E1 is speaking. How can I help you?
	2	C1	Marḥaba Hello.
	3	E1	ʔahlein (.) nitṣarraf ṣala ʔisim ḥazirtakʔ Welcome! May I know your name?



In Example 4, E1 in line 1 starts with */marḥaba/* and C1 replies with the same expression, which is also the greeting for which E1 replies in line 3 by */ʔahlem/* ‘welcome’ (lit.: two welcomes). In this regard, Rababa’h and Malkawi (2012) state that the proper response to this greeting is “*ahlan wa saḥlan*” ‘welcome’ (p. 20) which is similar to the response used in this example by E1.

According to the available data for this study, */yaʕṭr:kil ʕa:fyih/* ‘May God grant you health’ is also used as a response to */marḥaba/*.

Example 5	1	E10	marḥaba (.) i: ṭn maʕa:k (.) kef bagdar ʔasa:ʕidʔ
			Hello. E10 is speaking. How can I help?
	2	C10	yaʕṭr:kil ʕa:fyih
			May God grant you health.

In Example 5, C10 responds to E10’s */marḥaba/* by saying */yaʕṭr:kil ʕa:fyih/*. This kind of response has at least three different forms; there is no difference in their meaning. The other two forms found in the data of this study are: */ʔalla yaʕṭr:kil ʕa:fyih/* which includes the name of God */ʔalla/* ‘Allah’ and */ʕalʕa:fyih/*, as in Example 6.

Example 6	1	E5	marḥaba i: faf maʕak
			Hello, E5 is with you.
	2	C5	ʕalʕa:fyih
			Hello.

The literal meaning of */ʕa:fyih/* is ‘health’, which is present in the three different linguistic forms. Based on this response, the speaker wishes the hearer good health. In the examples above, the use of */marḥaba/* can be attributed to the idea that the customers value the employees’ work, thereby wishing that God grants them energy and health for it. In the literature, Almutlaq and Jarrah (2013) found that this expression is used among Jordanian peasants while working in the field in the countryside, as their hard work requires a healthy, vigorous body.

Another response for */marḥaba/* is */ʔassala:mu ʕalaykum/* ‘salaam’ which is a short form of */ʔassala:mu ʕalaykum waraḥmatul la:hı wabaraka:tu/* ‘peace and Allah’s mercy and blessings be upon you’. As shown in Example 7, it can be used alone or after */marḥaba/*, as in Example 8.

Example 7	1	E3	marḥaba (.) i: θṛi: (.) kef bagdar ʔasa:ʕidʔ
			Hello. This is E3. How can I help?
	2	C3	sala:mu ʕalaykum
			Salaam.

Example 8	1	E7	ma:rḥaba i: ṣıṿn maʕk kef baʔdar ʔasa:ʕidʔ
			Hello. E7 is speaking. How can I help?
	2	C7	ma:rḥaba (.) ʔassala:mu ʕalaykum
			Hello. Salaam.

The participants of this study use /ʔalla yaʕtɪ:kɪl ʕa:fyɪh/ ‘May God grant you health’ as a kind of greeting to begin their conversations. The responses to this greeting go in line with the socio-religious rules, i.e., to respond with at least an equal greeting. In Example 9, C4 uses /yaʕtɪ:kɪl ʕa:fyɪh/ as a greeting to the employee (E4) who responds with /ʔalla:y ʕa:fr:k/ which gives the same meaning of the greeting.

Example 9	2	C4	ʔalla:h yaʕtɪ:kɪl ʕa:fyɪh
			May God grant you health.
	3	E4	ʔalla:y ʕa:fr:k nıtʕarraf ʕala ʔısım Һazırtakʔ
			May God grant you health. May I know your name?

In relation to this, Rababa’h and Malkawi (2012) state that the greeting /yaʕtɪ:kɪl ʕa:fyɪh/ is originally said to a person who is working or has finished a job requiring a physical effort. On the other hand, Alrefai (2012) described this greeting as a common softener between participants having equal powers used to reflect solidarity among interlocutors.

### Invocations

Invocations are used by participants as polite verbal rewards for the hearers’ efforts. Common among other invocations are /ʔalla yaʕtɪ:kɪl ʕa:fyɪh/ ‘May God grant you health’, /ba:rak ʔalla fr:k/ ‘May God bless you’, and /dʒaza:k ʔalla xeir/ ‘May God reward you well’. The first one is discussed above. For the second and third invocations, participants’ responses are somehow similar in that they respond either with the same invocation or with ‘Thanks’. For instance, in response to /ba:rak ʔalla fr:k/ in situation 12, R5 and R7 mostly use the same invocation to reply to the caller, whereas, R3 and R8 thank the caller, as shown in Example 10.

Example 10	R3	ʃukran ʔılak
		Thank you.
	R5	ʔufr:k
		And you.
	R7	ʔalla:y ba:rık fr:k
		May Allah bless you.
	R8	kulıʃ ʃukur
		All thanks. (situation 12)

Similarly, the responses for /dʒaza:k ʔalla xeir/ ‘May God reward you well’ are either returning the same wish or thanking the other participant. In Example 11, R1, R2, and R7 use /ʃukran/ ‘thank you’, whereas R4 and R8 use /waʔryya:kum/ ‘and you’ which means ‘same to you’.

Example 11	R1, R2, R7	ʃukran
		Thank you.
	R4, R8	waʔryya:kum
		And you. (situation 12)

Such invocations are connected to the social and cultural backgrounds of the participants. As Migdadi (2003) states, invocations are essential in the Jordanian culture as they are originated within their sociocultural norms and values. Breaching them could be considered as a violation of the values that are part of the traditional Arabic-Islamic heritage. The adherence of the participants of this study to the sociocultural norms confirms the finding of Al-Momani's (2009) study that the cultural norms are rooted in all speakers and can strongly influence their linguistic choice.

## Conclusion

This study aimed at examining the types of responding strategies to greetings and invocations employed in the interactions between Jordanians and the employees of CCCS of a major telecommunications company in Jordan. The researchers analysed the responding strategies as produced by the participants of this study. Thus, this indicates the types of each and the degree of politeness involved in the different strategies. The results revealed that responses to greetings were various in their length and type. Participants' responses can be classified under four categories: using the same greeting, a shorter or a longer form, or a different one. Such responses are influenced by the Jordanian socio-religious norms. Certain responses to greetings include invocations. When responding to an invocation, participants usually used a response that included the same invocation. As for responses that included invocations, God's name is either included or implied in the structure of the invocation.

Moreover, the researchers mapped the results of similar previous studies. We conclude that our study conforms to the study of Rababa'h and Malkawi (2012) in the use of and responses to */ʔassala:mu ʕalaykum waraḥmatul la:hi wabaraka:tu/* 'peace and Allah's mercy and blessing be upon you' and */marḥaba/* 'hello'. We also conclude that */yaʕti:kil ʕa:fyih/* 'May God grant you health' is another frequent greeting used by the participants of the study. However, our findings differ to some extent from those of the previous studies, such as Almutlaq and Jarrah's (2013), in which they stated that the expression */yaʕti:kil ʕa:fyih/* is used by Jordanian peasants working in the field in the countryside and whose work requires a strong body. Furthermore, Rababa'h and Malkawi's (2012) opined that it is used to refer to people who have finished a hard work that requires physical effort. In this study, this expression is used by both callers and employees, however, neither of them needs to make great physical efforts or have strong bodies to interact in the context of CCCS conversations. This study recommends conducting future studies in similar organisations by investigating other speech acts such as responding to compliments, requests, giving advice, insult, and other social interactions.

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