

Thematic Roles and Grammatical Features of Cursing and Blessing Speech Acts in Kurdish (Ilami Dialect)

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Abstract

Cursing and blessing are two common speech acts seen in many languages. Due to specific nature of these expressions, many linguistic and non-linguistic (e.g. religious) arguments have been proposed in order to study and scrutinize these structures from different perspectives. This article aims to analyze cursing and blessing speech acts in Ilami dialect of Kurdish. In this paper both structural and semantic components of Ilami cursing and blessing will be discussed. Since the communicative role of such expressions is of a great importance, we tried to distinguish the theta roles of cursing and blessing like agent, patient, function, goal and cause of such speech acts. Results show that blessing and especially cursing are very diverse in this dialect and they can serve several functions and goals while uttered but there can be seen some more frequent patterns in these utterances. It was also concluded that cursing and blessing share some common grammatical features. Affected by cultural and social factors, a large number of cursing and blessing expressions are no longer understood literally and they should be treated as idiomatic expressions.

Key words: Kurdish; Speech acts; Cursing; Blessing; Thematic roles; Grammatical features

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INTRODUCTION

Speech act is a term derived from the work of the philosopher J. L. Austin (1911-1960), and now used widely in linguistics, to refer to a theory which analyses the role of utterances in relation to the behavior of speaker and hearer in interpersonal communication (Crystal, 2003, p.427). Based on Searle's idea, speech act is "the minimal unit of communication":

The study of speech act is concerned with the conditions that must obtain for any utterance to "count as" a particular communicating act. The rules that govern the pragmatic performance of speech acts can range from linguistic context bound rules to context-free rules or to any linguistic context bound rules to context-free rules or to any combination of both (Blum-Kulka, 1980, p.5).

On any occasion, the action performed by producing an utterance will consist of three related acts. There is first a locutionary act, which is the basic act of utterance, or producing a meaningful linguistic expression. If you have difficulty with actually forming the sounds and words to create a meaningful utterance in a language, then you might fail to produce a locutionary act. The second dimension is illocutionary act. It is performed via the communicative force of an utterance. We do not, of course, simply create an utterance with a function without intending it to have an effect. This is the third dimension, the prelocutionary act (Yule, 2000, p.48). Several categories of speech act have been proposed:

Declarations are those kinds of speech acts that change the world via their utterance. As an example:

A priest: I now pronounce you husband and wife.

In using a declaration, the speaker changes the world via words.

Commissives are those kinds of speech acts that speakers use to commit themselves to some future actions.

They are promises, threats, refusals, pledges, etc. (Yule, 2000, pp.53-54)

Expressive are those speech acts that speakers express their feelings, e.g. apologizing, welcoming, and sympathizing.

Representatives are speech acts that speakers convey their belief about the truth of a proposition, e.g. asserting, hypothesizing (Crystal, 2003, p.427).

In this article two common kinds of speech acts, cursing and blessing, will be studied. Cursing has been defined as “Calling for evil or misfortune to befall someone or something -- a type of invocation”, and blessing is “the invoking of God’s favor upon a person”. It should be mentioned that cursing and blessing are classified as commissive speech acts because they are related to some future actions; this is why some similarities can be found between cursing, blessing and threats for instance. We try to analyze these structures both structurally and semantically. The pattern based on which cursing and blessing are analyzed is Sabuhi Khamene’s work (2010). She has proposed a pattern to study cursing and blessing linguistically. Based on her research, several thematic roles will be specified for each speech act, including agent (doer), patient, cause and goal. For more understanding English literal and exact translation will be given for each example. Due to cultural barriers some examples could not be translated and for such expressions **No equivalent** is used.

Speech acts are studied by many scholars. Searle (1969, p.18) believes that a “study of the meaning of sentences is not in principle distinct from a study of speech acts.” They are the same study because “every meaningful sentence in virtue of its meaning can be used to perform a particular speech act (or range of speech acts)”.

There are also some other works done by Meijers (1994), Mulligan (1987), Schuhmann & Smith (1990), Searle (1965, 1975), Smith (1990).

Cursing and blessing are studied in different languages. As it was mentioned, in Persian, Sabuhi khamene (2010) has a work on cursing and blessing speech acts in her M.A thesis. She analyzes Persian cursing and blessing both semantically and syntactically in order to distinguish different theta roles and syntactic properties of these locutionary acts.

AN INTRODUCTION TO KURDISH

Kurdish has many dialects, and Ilami dialect is one of these varieties. Britannica describes Kurdish so:

Kurdish is a new western Iranian language spoken in Kurdistan; it ranks as the third largest Iranian language group, after Persian and Pashto, and has numerous dialects. There are two main dialect groups. The northern group—spoken from Mosul, Iraq, into the Caucasus—is called Kurmānji; in Turkey, Hawar (Turkized Latin) characters are used in the written form. It is spoken within a broad region that stretches roughly from Orūmīyeh, Iran, to the lower reaches of traditional Kurdistan in

Iraq. In Iraq, Kurdi is the official form of Kurdish. Subdialects of Kurdish include Kermanshahi, Lekî, Guranî, and Zaza.

As noted, Ilami (sometimes is called Feyli) is another variety under this umbrella, Kurdish. This dialect is widely spoken in Ilam, a small mountainous city located at the west of Iran. Ilami has some similarities with Kermanshahi and Kalhori. Although most of Kurdish varieties have ergative system, Ilami does not have such a system (Kalbassi, 2010, p.104).

DATA ANALYSIS

At this part, some Kurdish cursing and blessing speech acts will be analyzed. Some of them are cursing and the other blessing. For each example a table is drawn. Then different theta roles will be distinguished.

Table 1

Blessing locutionary act: xɔdɑ fæɾ dæt bəxegæ lɑ
God calamity from you throw away

English translation: God bless you!
Function: thanking and wishing
Patient: a boy
Agent: an old woman
Cause: the boy has helped the old woman
Goal: protecting from calamity

Table 2

Blessing locutionary act: æli rəsət bejæɾe
Ali success/guide make

English translation: God bless your heart!
Function: thanking and encouraging
Patient: her daughter
Agent: An old woman
Cause: the daughter is kind and helpful
Goal: to be successful

Table 3

Blessing locutionary act: æli pɑjɑrət bəke
Ali healthy make

English translation: God bless your soul!
Function: wishing, affective
Patient: a boy
Agent: an old man
Cause: The boy obeys the command and helps the old man
Goal: to be energetic and healthy and succeed in life

Table 4

Blessing locutionary act: xɔdɑ xwe ɑwə bəkegæ mələ ɑgerɑw
God himself water spill on fire

English translation: God makes the back to the burden.
Function: wishing, affective
Patient: a family
Agent: a woman
Cause: the family suffer many calamities and disasters
Goal: solving the problems

Table 5

Blessing locutionary act: səxanət aza bu
Bones healthy be

English translation: I wish to God your health
Function: wishing and encouraging
Patient: a boy
Agent: a woman
Cause: the boy has some positive and appreciative features
Goal: to be healthy

Table 6

Blessing locutionary act: kɔrət næməre
Your boy not die

English translation: no equivalent
Function: greeting and wishing
Patient: a mother
Agent: a woman
Cause: mother sympathizing with the woman about her problems
Goal: the health of mother's son(s)

Table 7

Blessing locutionary act: kərə dəwəd wə dəwrətaw (bu)
Boy Davood to around you be

English translation: God bless her/his soul!
Function: wishing and farewell
Patient: her son
Agent: a woman
Cause: the boy is about to travel and mother is worried about her son
Goal: to be healthy

Table 8

Cursing locutionary act: əli dʒama[ətən] sijə bəke
Ali home black do

English translation: God is in his heaven, all is right with the world.
Function: affective and objective
Patient: a family
Agent: a woman
Cause: the intolerable sorrows the woman suffers from
Goal: misery of family

Table 9

Cursing locutionary act: tʃ fər bijəj
affect evil come

English translation: To come to grief
Function: affective and objective
Patient: a man
Agent: an old woman
Cause: the bad features of man
Goal: misery of man

Table 10

Cursing locutionary act: nənət buwəre
Bread cut

English translation: Amazing!

Function: wishing/joking/wonder
Patient: a boy
Agent: A man

Cause: The boy is extraordinarily obese
Goal: to take the bread out of his mouth

Table 11

Cursing locutionary act: sərətən buwə tʃʃətaw
Cancer become suffer

English translation: God damn you!
Function: affective
Patient: a boy
Agent: a woman
Cause: the boy's behavior is annoying
Goal: illness and death

Table 12

Cursing locutionary act: nʊrət bəpəre
Faith jump

English translation: no equivalent
Function: affective
Patient: a child
Agent: a woman
Cause: the child is playful and impolite
Goal: to be totally out of spirituality

Table 13

Cursing locutionary act: bəpətʃəgə dəwar
Wrap to black tent

English translation: their life go to the dogs
Function: wishing and objective
Patient: a couple
Agent: a woman
Cause: She is jealous and sad about wedding and wishes this wedding for her own daughter
Goal: cancellation of the wedding by a bad happening, like the death of couple or their family

Table 14

Cursing locutionary act: qu bəkejə ʃunə mirkanejan
To be left behind their house

English translation: no equivalent
Function: affective
Patient: a girl
Agent: a woman
Cause: the girl is very impolite and is (humiliatingly) the most important member of family
Goal: the death of girl's family and survival of the girl

DISCUSSION

Analyzing the above tables gives us some information about the theta roles, the functions, goals and causes of the cursing and blessing utterances in Ilami dialect. Here we points out some of these findings:

a. Agent and Patient

In most of the examples above, agent, the person who utters a curse or bless, invokes good or evil for other people to express pleasure or displeasure about their behavior. Nonetheless, it is possible to utter a curse or bless with a reflexive impact too. "təf bəʃu də tewə[əm]" (shame on me) can be called a "self-cursing". Sad about a topic, the agent blames himself/herself through a self-

cursing. In this example agent and patient are the same. As it can be seen agent in all of the instances mentioned above is singular and plural agent is not very common. Unlike agent, patient can be either singular or plural as in the following examples:

æli pajarət bəke (a boy-singular patient)
 æli dʒama[ətan sijæ bəke (a family-plural patient)

b. Function

Cursing and blessing have many functions. From the examples above, several momentous functions can be elicited.

Blessing: affective, thanking, encouraging and wishing, etc..

Cursing: affective, objective, joking, etc..

It is worth mentioning that more than one function may be served by a single curse or bless. For example, a bless can have encouraging and thanking functions at the same time, as in example 2.

c. Goal and Medium

We should know each cursing or blessing is uttered to achieve a specific goal. These goals can be related to success, health, protection in blessing and death, illness, misery and calamity in cursing. Speakers use some holy names like the name of God or Imams' as intermediators to achieve those given aims through, xɔda, æli to be mentioned here.

The meaning of cursing and blessing can be intensified by adding some items like adjective, possessive case, reflexive pronoun, etc..

Adjective:

xɔda fʃæmə (eye) wətan daʃtu
 xɔda fʃæmə xere (good eye) wətan daʃtu
 xer is an adjective used to fortify the effect of blessing.

Possessive case:

1. xɔda (God) fʃær dæt bəxegæ la
 xɔdaj æli (God of Ali) fʃær dæt bəxegæ la
 2. sərətən (cancer) buwæ tʃʃətaw
 sərətənə xʊn (Blood cancer) buwæ tʃʃətaw

æli and xʊn are added to the above examples, consequently meanings are more intensified.

Reflexive pronoun:

æli (Ali) dʒama[ətan sijæ bəke
 æli xwe (Ali himself) dʒama[ətan sijæ bəke

d. Cause

Every speech act is expressed due to a range of reasons. In example 13 the curse “bəpəfʃəgæ dəwər” is uttered due to several unsaid reasons: personal characteristics of the woman (she is jealous), a success (marriage) unachievable for woman's daughter and so forth.

It must be hinted that most of cursing and blessing

expressions studied in Kurdish are not literally understood. In fact they should be considered as idioms. For example, “bəpəfʃəgæ dəwər” or “kərə dəwəd wə dəwətaw (bu)” are not understood literally. So in order to understand the intended meaning of such idioms, one must be well aware of the deep and fundamental concepts defined in Kurdish culture.

e. Grammatical Structure of Cursing and Blessing

As it can be guessed cursing and blessing are structurally similar. The “tense” used in these structures is often present, however the use of other forms is also probable:

kɔrəm bəmərə (present) → (kaʃka) kɔrəm bəmərđija (past)

my son die (I wish) my son would die

bær nəgərə (present) → (kaʃka) bær nəgərđija (past)
 fruit not bear (I wish) fruit would not bear

It is worth noting that Ilami dialect does not have any specific structure to show the future tense. So no cursing or blessing is seen in the future tense. The only aspect used in these rigid structures is potential. “bə” is a prefix used to show potential aspect. It is attached to the verbs in all of the instances mentioned thus far. It should be noted that “person” in such expressions can be 1st (as in self-cursing or self-blessing), 2nd or 3rd person. If the listener is simultaneously the addressee too, second person is used otherwise third person will be used to refer to the addressee(s) indirectly:

gəlaraw bəkej¹ → When the listener is addressed 2nd person is used

(illness)

tərki bəke² → when the addressee (may be absent) is indirectly addressed 3rd person is used

(heart attack)

Albeit the examples above are used in the form of sentences, they can also be expressed in the form of interjections. As we will see, interjections lack overt verb, and they are made of a noun phrase:

Blessing:

1. sə[əwət wə dinə æli!

Praise to religion of Ali

When a person has some good qualities or has done something perfectly, well done.

2. namə xɔda!

Name of God

May God preserve you/him.

Cursing:

1. sərətən !

Cancer

No Equivalent

2. zəqnəbut!

Something with a bitter taste like snake's posion

¹ /ej/ is a suffix attached to the verb to represent 2nd person-singular

² /e/ is a suffix attached to the verb to show 3rd person-singular

No equivalent

3. mɑfætæ!

Illness

May you choke on it?

Some of cursing expressions can change to form a bless by negating the main verb:

nɑnət buwære (curse) → nɑnət næwære (bless)

kɔrət bəmære (curse) → kɔrət næmære (bless)

The reverse is also true. When a bless is negated, it may form a curse:

səxɑnət aza bu (bless) → səxɑnət aza næw (curse)

This rule is totally relative. A curse like “særætɑn buwæ tÿfətaw” cannot be negated to form a bless, because it contains a word like “særætɑn” which has a negative meaning and cannot be neutralized when sentence is negated.

*³særætɑn næwæ tÿfətaw**CONCLUSION**

We saw that cursing and blessing are widely used in Kurdish. This variety roots in beliefs and culture of Ilami people. In this article we could compare the structure of Kurdish cursing and blessing. It was seen that these structures share common features both syntactically and semantically. In a syntactic point of view, cursing and blessing are usually used in the present time and less commonly the past time with a potential aspect. They can be uttered in either second or third person and semantically, they seem to be idiomatic in nature. In a social viewpoint, Kurdish examples serve different functions like affective, thanking, wishing, objective and so forth. Obviously, every curse or bless is uttered to achieve a specific goal. Death, misery and health are the most important goals followed in Kurdish cursing and blessing speech acts. Speakers get help from some mediums like God or Imams names and some illnesses (e.g., cancer) to achieve what they want from the curse or bless. It was also distinguished Kurdish cursing and blessing are used metaphorically, in other words the intended meaning cannot be understood word by word. Since these expressions are very various in Ilami dialect, a comparative work can lead to some interesting results and findings.

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³* is conventionally used for semantically unaccepted sentences.