

PBUH: Some religio-linguistic observations

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This pragmatic study focuses on the ambiguous and multifaceted status of PBUH, an acronym of “Peace Be Upon Him”. Some Islamic texts in English contain certain formulaic honorific acronyms. PBUH is just an example, usually bracketed and somewhat optional; this post-nominal acronym marks the writer’s paying homage to the personality in focus, e.g., in “Muhammad [PBUH]”. Whereas PBUH occurs exclusively in English texts which deal with Islamic themes, it is almost entirely a feature of texts produced by Muslims: non-Muslim writers of such texts never use it.

The Holy Quran (33: 56) instructs the Muslims to discharge utmost politeness toward the Prophet Muhammad, for God and His angels constantly greet him. This injunction is well extended to other Divine prophets as well as to the Ahl al-Bayt (descendants) of the Prophet Muhammad. Hence such formulas may follow the name, kunya, kunya (by-names) of any of the above is mentioned. PBUH never follows the names of non-human entities, either, e.g., the Quran. Hence, use of PBUH may be indicative whether the writer might be conscientious to show her or his sense of politeness. For the present study, the examples have been collected and compared from a number of English books which may (not) directly deal with Islamic topics as professional themes, yet they use the acronym in question whenever they happen to mention the name of the Prophet Muhammad.

The acronym PBUH normally occurs in texts produced Muslims in English. Notwithstanding, lack of this acronym from the text developed by a Muslim should not be taken as the writer’s disbelief. (Cf. Jafri [1979/2000], Hussain [1982], and Ayoub [1978, 2004/2006] in which PBUH never appears despite the Islamic nature of the works and that their authors are Muslim. (This stands against Esposito [2003, s.v. Sala Allah Alayhi wa-Salaam], where he regards it as an “[e]pithet used by pious Muslims”). The aim of the present study has been to investigate the linguistic behavior of PBUH chiefly in a way that would pertain to a politeness theory. This is because it seems that an Islamic version of politeness seem to be different from the current, mainly Western, version. PBUH cannot be found in all religious texts developed by Muslims; some authors prefer other, more Arabic-based formulas (e.g., Qarai [2004] where an under-dotted lower-case ‘s’ is used.)

PBUH is not flawless, linguistically and religiously. There are at least three Oxford books (Bailey [1932/2008], Baumgardner, Kennedy, and Shamim [1993], and Burke and Quraishi [1997]) which contain this acronym, following the name of the Prophet Muhammad. PBUH is never used for abbreviating the name of the Prophet of Islam, as Ritter (2002) misinterprets.

It can be said that PBUH mirrors a linguistic manifestation of the Islamic article of faith, tawalli (reverence), for the Prophet Muhammad and the Ahl al-Bayt (Fakhri-Rohani, 2005). Although it is used in Islamic English texts, only one dictionary of English abbreviations (Fergusson 2000) has recorded it as an entry.

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