

# Opening Interactions Between Inquirers and Employees in Jordanian Public Utility Services

Meera B. Sahawneh\*

Department of English Language and Linguistics, Faculty of Science and Arts, Jordan University of Science and Technology, Irbid, 22110, Jordan

Mohammed Nahar Al-Ali

Department of English Language and Linguistics, Faculty of Science and Arts, Jordan University of Science and Technology, Irbid, 22110, Jordan

Raneem B. Al Dwairi

Department of English Language and Linguistics, Faculty of Science and Arts, Jordan University of Science and Technology, Irbid, 22110, Jordan

**Abstract**—This article investigates the strategic sequential options used to open a real workplace discourse in public utilities between Jordanian inquirers and employees. We examined how these opening moves are co-constructed and function, what linguistic choices are utilized to articulate these moves, and how they reflect socio-cultural relations between the interlocutors. The data reported here were drawn from seven employees and 100 Jordanian inquirers recruited from those approaching the organization and the employees responding to face-to-face inquiries. To achieve this, we adopted Al-Ali and Abu-Abah's (2021) sequential moves observed in Jordanians' telephone conversation openings. The moves identified in the data analyzed can be categorized into three groups: cross-culture-free phatic components (Greeting, Question-After-You (QAY)), socio-culture-bound components (Expressing hospitality, Invoking God-wishes, and Introducing oneself), and context-bound components (Expressing annoyance, and Topic introducer). Contextual and socio-cultural practices of Arabic speakers result in new moves that have led to a delayed switch to the core topic. Such a practice can be related to relationships in Arab culture established upon collectivism and indirectness that focus on rapport-building exchanges. Such findings will, hopefully, contribute to understanding how interlocutors use socio-cultural and religious affiliations to co-construct the components of this genre.

**Index Terms**—openings, public utility services, workplace discourse, face-to-face interaction

## I. INTRODUCTION

Conversation transactions in various social settings and workplace discourses frequently involve a triplicate structure: opening, main topic, and closing. The opening phase serves to “oil the interpersonal wheels” (Holmes, 2000, p. 49) in social interaction. To achieve this, interlocutors use “prefabricated linguistic units”, and “conventionalized pre-patterned expressions” (Coulmas, 1981, pp. 1-2) to serve the functions of greeting, expressing gratitude, or leave-taking in a manner that makes it possible to “relate to others in an accepted way”. Such strategies encourage rapport building and facilitate participants' engagement in the forthcoming discourse encounter. The openings have been regarded as ‘small talks’ compared to the ‘full’ form of talk (e.g., meetings, interactions in workplace contexts); they typically occur on the ‘real full talk’ boundaries. For Holmes (2000), small talk can serve as ritualized greetings and parting exchanges of the core business talk. Thus, there is an amount of overlap between the small talk and the openings in that they relate more to the interpersonal social function in contrast to the transactional function of the real talk that “gets stuff done” (Coupland, 2003, p. 2), mitigate the threat of social contact, and help to structure and maintain social interaction and cohesiveness (Laver, 1975; Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Hopper (1992, p. 5) considers the opening exchanging sequence of turns between two parties in conversation small talk, whereas Sun (2004) and Al-Ali and Abu-Abah (2021) call them opening moves. The present study will not use small talk as a cover term since it includes different forms of talk, including phatic exchanges of greeting/leave-taking, some points near the core topic, and sometimes core-related talks (Holmes, 2000; Jin, 2018). The term, opening moves, is adopted in the current study since other researchers have used it to analyze different discourse practices. For example, this term is used by Scarpetta and Spagnolli (2009) in analyzing stand-up comedy performances, and it is used by Boden (1994) and Nielsen (2013) in analyzing business meetings.

Although opening conversations are considered almost phatic small talks and taken for granted, Tracy and Naughton (2000) consider them a necessary element of institutional success at various levels of the workplace as they put

---

\* Corresponding Author. Email: [mbsahawneh@just.edu.jo](mailto:mbsahawneh@just.edu.jo)

interlocutors at their ease, enabling them to ask questions or make interesting comments about ‘safe’ topics. Therefore, the frequent engagement in daily workplace talks in various contexts between parties in interaction needs some mutual acquaintance and mutual orientation between parties in workplace transactions where rapport building, according to Jin (2018, p. 41), is “equally important as instrumental task completion”. Pavlidou (1994, p. 121) also points out that these openings remain a sensitive area cross-culturally, even for those who have mastered the basics of a foreign language and culture because these opening preferences vary cross-culturally.

As far as we know, no study has investigated face-to-face conversation openings in Arabic using discourse analytic tools to examine the verbal sequential opening moves in their social and cultural workplace context. Thus, there is a pressing need for a study to address this area. Therefore, we present an analysis and interpretations of the opening moves of a real workplace discourse between Jordanian inquirers and employees at public utilities. This article examines the opening strategic sequential moves used, how they are co-constructed and function, and how they reflect socio-cultural relations between the interlocutors. Therefore, we address the following questions: What opening moves and linguistic choices are utilized to articulate inquiries between Jordanian inquirers and employees? What functions do these opening sequential components accomplish in this discourse context? What contextual and social factors determine the selection of these moves?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The opening phase of a communicative event has the purpose of establishing links of fellowship (Al-Ali & Abu-Abah, 2021) between the interlocutors. Much work has been conducted on the telephone conversation opening phase (e.g., Sifianou, 2002; Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002; Lee, 2006; Grieve & Seebus, 2008), most of which have been triggered by Schegloff’s (1968, 1986) seminal telephone opening conversation model realized by a ‘summons-answer’, ‘identification-recognition’, ‘reciprocal greetings’, and ‘question about you’ sequence. These component categories of openings do not necessarily need to be present in all telephone conversations. In addition to Schegloff’s (1968, 1986) categories, Sun (2004) identified the following moves in analyzing the pragmatic functions of Chinese telephone openings: ‘affirmation of recognition’, ‘voice recognition comments’, and ‘disturbance check’. Drawing on Schegloff’s and Sun’s (2004) telephone opening moves, with some modifications, Al-Ali and Abu-Abah (2021) identified the following telephone opening functional moves that are most commonly used by Jordanians: Opening, Greeting, Address, Question-after-you (QAY), God-wishes, Disturbance check, Territorial breach apology, and Topic introducer.

In Arabic, studies have focused mainly on examining the lexical expressions signaling greetings and partings in face-to-face interactions. In a contrastive study between Iraqi and Jordanian Arabic greetings and partings, Gorgis and Al-Quran (2003) found that Iraqi people utilize *Allah wi Mohammad wi ali wiyyak* “God, (Prophet) Mohammad and (Imam) Ali be with you”. Jordanians, in contrast, tended to use a similar expression in Jordan but without ‘Ali’ (i.e., *Allah wi Mohammad wiyyak* “God and (prophet) Mohammad be with you”). In the Arabian Gulf, Alharbi and Al-Ajmi (2008) found that *assalaamu calaykum* “Peace be upon you” is used for greeting and parting, depending on the context.

Having been triggered by Schegloff’s (1968, 1986) framework of telephone call opening sequencing, other researchers have studied the sequential structure of openings of workplace discourses, such as face-to-face interaction (House, 1982), business meetings (e.g., Boden, 1994; Nielsen, 2013), and medical talk (e.g., Jin, 2018). In his study of face-to-face conversation, House (1982) found the following sequential moves: ‘territorial breach apology’, ‘remarks’, and ‘topic introducer’ in addition to those proposed by Schegloff (1968, 1986). Boden (1994) describes the following organizational issues that mark the openings of meetings: assessments of attendance, proposals to ‘get started’, or announcements and general information items (pp. 96-97). Likewise, Nielsen (2013) demonstrates that showing readiness to open meetings consists of ‘Opening via boundary marker’ (e.g., WEII), ‘Passing opportunity to talk’, ‘Opening via reference to procedure’, ‘Start declaration’, and ‘First topic selection’ (p. 49).

Most medical consultations reported by Jin (2018) open with invoking a phatic exchange by ‘Greeting and making co-presence’ to establish a relationship before getting into the medical business. Openings occasionally involve minimum exchanges on weather and work as a form of relational talk that serves functions, such as transition to core talk and building relationships.

This article addresses a relatively under-researched area compared with telephone conversations. Notably, although many studies have drawn on Schegloff’s model to examine conversation openings of ordinary talks in various cultures, some scholars (e.g., Godard, 1977; Sun, 2004; Al-Ali & Abu-Abah, 2021) consider this model as culture-specific for Americans that cannot be generalized to all speech communities in the same way. It is worthwhile noting that most of the studies reviewed emphasized the importance of discourse context and social relationship in determining the function of a particular stretch of language within the opening phase. Sometimes, it is difficult to determine if an utterance is related to the opening phase or the core phase of the conversation, as some utterances are interwoven with the core talk rather than the opening phase.

Furthermore, the literature review indicates that no study has investigated the opening of face-to-face conversation in Arabic using discourse analytic tools to examine the verbal sequential opening moves in their social and cultural workplace context. Thus, there is a pressing need for a study to investigate what functional component moves the participants in an authentic workplace use to open conversation when inquiring about and responding to questions related to public utility services. This study also attempts to find out how this workplace discourse affects the type of

component moves selected to articulate the purpose of this genre and to what extent these selected functional components are similar or different from the opening components reported in previous studies.

### III. METHODS

This study investigates the openings of inquirer-employees' authentic interactions at public utilities in Jordan. This workplace is Yarmouk Water Company, which the Jordan Water Authority owns. This company is responsible for collecting, purifying, operating, maintaining, and distributing drinking water in the Northern Governorates of Jordan, including five governorates, which cover half of the Jordanian population (i.e., five million people). The data reported here were drawn from seven employees and 100 Jordanian inquirers aged between 25-50 years. The inquirers were recruited from those approaching the organization to inquire about its services. The employees are responsible for responding to face-to-face inquiries from the people coming to the organization. Those employees were selected based on availability and willingness to participate in the study. Ethical approval was granted by the organization, and informed consent was obtained from the employees before they participated in the study. The researchers adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring that the participants were not coerced or deceived in any way. The identities of all the inquirers and employees were treated with strict confidentiality. Therefore, we used pseudonyms or code names throughout the study to ensure anonymity and protect participants' privacy. The inquirers were not explicitly informed about the recordings, as they already know that any conversation between them and the employee in the organization is recorded for quality assurance purposes.

To facilitate data collection, tape recordings and written records were used to collect data. For data collection, one of the researchers, in person, recorded the face-to-face conversations between the employees and inquirers in the employees' offices using a voice recorder program on a mobile phone. Written records were also used to code data in real-time during the recording to capture any significant loss of information like non-verbal behavior as well as the overall flow and structure of the conversations, focusing on how participants co-construct the openings and closings of their conversation. The length of the recordings varied; some recordings lasted for 3 minutes, while others extended to 20 minutes, particularly in cases where the employees and inquirers shared familiar relationships or when the inquirer's issue was complex. The data was gathered over two months at the end of 2022.

To identify a descriptive account of the functional moves marking the opening and closing phases, we adopted Al-Ali and Abu-Abah's (2021) move structure utilized to describe the sequential move patterns observed in Jordanians' telephone conversation openings with some modifications and additions. However, we also identified other components related to the discourse context because the previous models do not apply well to real, face-to-face interactions in the workplace.

To identify the openings, we considered the sequences and verbal cues as they occur in the workplace socio-cultural context in terms of the inquirer's purpose of his/her visit, the social relationship between the interlocutors, and at which stage this exchange between the inquirer and the employee occurred. However, it is not always possible to draw a decisive boundary between the phases of conversation due to the "permeability of boundaries" between these phases (Holmes, 2000, p. 39). To facilitate the analysis of interlocutors' turn reference, we included the letters I and E in each exchange example to refer to the inquirer and the employee, respectively. The researchers listened to the opening of each conversation between each inquirer and employee and transcribed the related exchanges. Then, the researchers assigned a function to each utterance (i.e., move) of the opening components. After discussing and identifying the function of each move, the researchers coded the moves in each opening and assigned a function to each move. To ensure the reliability of the researchers' coding of the component moves identified, 60% of data openings (60 recordings) as a subsample were selected randomly from the data analyzed and given to two professors, who are specialists in discourse analysis, to recode them following our suggested coding scheme. When we calculated the average degree of agreement among the coders, we found an 82% agreement with those done by the researchers. For the openings on which there was disagreement, the researchers sat with the coders, recoded the disagreed-upon cases, and reached a consensus.

### IV. RESULTS

We identified nine functional components describing the opening phase within the context of a Jordanian organization, Yarmouk Water. Table 1 presents the opening functional components identified within 100 conversations between the inquirers and the employees in Jordanian Public Utilities (JPUs).

TABLE 1  
STRUCTURE OF FUNCTIONAL COMPONENTS OF CONVERSATION OPENINGS IN JORDANIAN PUBLIC UTILITIES

Functional move components		
	No.	%
Greeting	92	92
Using address terms	44	44
Introducing oneself	28	28
Question-After-You (QAY)	64	64
Expressing hospitability	38	38
Invoking God-wishes	67	67
Lack of contact	19	19
Expressing annoyance	17	17
Topic introducer	44	44

The analysis of the sequential functional components of the opening phase and the linguistic lexico-grammatical signals used to realize these components during inquirer-employee interaction in JPUs has revealed nine components (see Table 1). This does not mean all these components are found in each interaction and follow the same order.

In what follows, we present each component move and its frequency, the lexico-grammatical signals utilized to realize it as well as illustrative exchanges extracted from the data.

#### A. Greeting

Greetings refer to salutations at the beginning of a conversation between participants. This essential component sets the tone for the interaction and helps establish a friendly and polite atmosphere (Holmes, 1995). This component is the most frequently used (92%) in the opening phase. It is realized by greeting adjacency pairs. The interlocutors utilized various forms of greetings reflecting the intricate fabric of social norms and cultural traditions that shape face-to-face interaction within the context of the utilities. They relied heavily on the Islamic greeting as the main option to initiate this component move; it surfaced in 44% of the interactions because this formal greeting can be used at any time during the day, as shown in 1.

1. I: *Ṣassalaamu Ṣalaykum* 'Peace be upon you.'
- E: *wa Ṣalaykum alssalaam* 'Peace be upon you too.'

This formal greeting is widely used in many Arabic-speaking countries to express good intentions towards the other party. The second most common way of greeting is *yaṣṣtiik il-Ṣaafye* 'May Allah give you strength', followed by *marḥaba* 'Hi', which is informal. Time-specific greetings like *sabaah ilxair* 'Good morning', *masaa? ilxair* 'Good evening' are also used.

Similarly, the employees responded to the inquirers' greetings with a wide range of responses. For example, in response to the greeting term *marḥaba* 'Hi', various expressions were used, such as *Ṣahlan wa-sahlan* 'Welcome', *ḥayaak allah* 'Greeted by God', and *yaa hala* 'Most welcome'.

Sometimes, recipients respond with duplicated greetings expressed by two similar forms like *Ṣahlan Ṣahlan* 'Welcome! Welcome!' or elaborated greetings realized by *ḥayaak miit marḥaba* 'Welcome, hundred hi' as in exchange 2. The latter greeting is a warm and traditional expression of welcome and hospitality in Jordanian culture. It is commonly used to greet guests or intimates to make them feel valued, comfortable, and appreciated.

2. I: *Marḥaba* 'Hi!'
- E: *ḥayaak miit marḥaba* 'Welcome, hundred hi.'

#### B. Using Address Terms

Address terms are utilized to get attention using diverse forms of address at various phases of the interaction. This component occurred in 44% of the interactions. Our analysis indicated that the participants utilized connotative kinship address terms realized by *Ṣaxii* 'brother', or *Ṣami* 'uncle', and absolute social honorifics like *Ṣayiid* 'master' to address one another. The address terms *Ṣummi* 'my mother' and *waaldi* 'my parent' are also utilized to convey respect for elders, addressing them as if they were one's parents; these address forms emphasize the deep-rooted cultural norms of respecting and caring for older people.

However, the most addressing practice encountered in the data is paedonymic terms. They are used to address one another by the name of his/her first-born child for respect, using the Arabic term *Ṣabu* 'father of'+ proper name, like 'Abu Ahmed'. Consider the following exchange:

3. I: *marḥaba Ṣabu*+ eldest son's name 'Hi, **Ab**+ eldest son's name'
- E: *Ṣhalan* 'Welcome.'
- I: *yaa ṣiidi il-Ṣaziiz* 'O' my dear sir

In exchange 3, the inquirer addressed the employee using a paedonymic term to show politeness and respect. In the third turn, he used an honorific term *ṣiidi* 'sir' supplemented by a term of endearment, *il-Ṣaziiz* 'dear', to show more intimacy and respect for the addressee.

#### C. Introducing Oneself

This component occurred in 28% of the interactions; it establishes participants' identities and creates a foundation for further communication (Schegloff, 1979). The inquirers are always the ones who introduce themselves, not the employees. Introducing oneself in the data analyzed is not meant to establish one's identity but to promote oneself in order to get more attention, care, and gain more favorable treatment, especially when the inquirer introduces himself referring to someone, who has a high status and is known to both parties. This component was realized by various options like stating one's affiliation and position or aligning himself with an influential kinship who is known to the addressee, as in 4, or being recommended by the addressee's relative, or referring to neighborhood (e.g., *?ana dzaaritku ?um X* 'I am your neighbor, mother of X').

- |    |    |                                    |                               |
|----|----|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 4. | I: | <i>Marhaba</i>                     | 'Hello'                       |
|    | E: | <i>?ahlan yaa hala</i>             | 'Welcome. Welcome.'           |
|    | I: | <i>?ana garaabit X</i>             | 'I am the relative of X'      |
|    | I: | <i>ya hayyaaka allah, tafað'al</i> | 'Oh, God bless you, welcome.' |

After the reciprocal greetings in 4, the inquirer introduces himself referring to a kinship relation between himself and someone well-known to the employee. This form of self-identification not only means introducing oneself but also connotes an alignment with someone influential, whose kinship or high social position can guarantee a certain advantage and attentive response from the employee. This practice is related to the cultural concept of *wasta* 'intercession', where individuals can utilize their social connections to gain favor and more consideration.

#### D. Question-After-You (QAY)

Data analysis revealed that this move occurred in 64% of the openings. This sequence is phatic in nature, involving ritualized inquiries about the addressee's health, family members, and current activities (Al-Ali & Abu-Abah, 2021), and the recipient's response to these questions. Such inquiries and responses are ritualistic, and no genuine accounts are expected (House, 1982). This component was most frequently realized by linguistic expressions, such as *kiif ilhaal/fluunak* 'How are you?', or *fu ?axbaar iffuyul* 'How are you doing at work?', as in 5. Individuals tend to respond with thanks to God or reciprocate the same question.

- |    |    |                                   |                                    |
|----|----|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 5. | E: | <i>kiif ilhaal</i>                | 'How are you?'                     |
|    | I: | <i>?a-lhamdu lillaah. fluunak</i> | 'Thanks be to Allah. How are you?' |
|    | E: | <i>yaa hala yaa hala</i>          | 'Welcome, Welcome.'                |
|    | I: | <i>fu ?axbaar iffuyul</i>         | 'How are you doing at work?'       |
|    | E: | <i>?a-lhamdu lillaah</i>          | 'Thanks be to Allah.'              |

In exchange 5, the employee asks the inquirer about his well-being, whereas the inquirer responds to this by thanking God, not the questioner, followed by repeating 'How are you?', to which the employee responds with a duplicated 'welcome' in the second turn to index familiarity and intimacy with the recipient. Similarly, the inquirer reciprocates the QAY with the employee to show respect and friendliness. This kind of back-and-forth exchange reflects the customary nature of this sequence, where both participants politely inquire about each other's well-being without necessarily providing genuine information about themselves. Moreover, this exchange may be extended to asking about family members or relatives when the participants have mutual family relations or friendship. This is exemplified in exchange 6, where the inquirer extends his questions by asking about the addressee's father.

- |    |    |  |   |
|----|----|--|---|
| 6. | I: | <i>fu ?axbaar il-walid ba?du fii Dubai</i> | 'How is your father? Is he still in Dubai?' |
|    | E: | <i>laa ridzi?</i>                          | 'No. He returned.'                          |

Notably, the question-after-you usually occurs after reciprocated greetings in the first two turns, which showcases a genuine concern for the well-being of the person being addressed. This component also reflects cultural norms of caring and respect for one another's extended family, especially when there is a mutual relationship.

#### E. Expressing Hospitality

Expressing hospitality is a speech act performed by a speaker who extends an invitation to an invitee. It can be realized by a friendly and generous reception and entertainment of visitors or strangers (Staats & Groot, 2019). This component occurred in %38 of the interactions. The inviters tend to use lexical expressions, such as *?halan wa-sahlan* 'You are welcome', *miit marhaba* 'A hundred welcomes', *?itfað'al idzlis* 'Come in, take a seat', and questions like *fiu tifrab* 'What would you like to drink?', *xaliina nnð'ayifak, gahwah, ?aw faai* 'Let us offer you some coffee, or tea?'. The 'hospitality' component creates a welcoming atmosphere and encourages further engagement, as in exchange 7.

- |    |    |  |  |
|----|----|--|--|
| 7. | I: | <i>ya?tiik illsaafyih.</i>                                   | 'May Allah give you strength.'                                     |
|    | E: | <i>miit marhaba, tfað'al idzlis.</i>                         | 'A hundred welcomes, please come in. Take a seat.'                 |
|    | I: | <i>fiu ?axbaarak</i>   | 'How are you doing?'   |
|    | E: | <i>gabil ?axbaarii, xaliina nnð'ayifak, gahwah, ?aw faai</i> | 'Before how am I doing? Let us offer you some coffee, or tea?'     |
|    | I: | <i>fukran fukran habiibi bas wallaahi mista?dzil</i>         | 'Thank you, thank you my dear, but I swear by God I'm in a hurry.' |

- E: *laa wallaahi maa bis'iir*  
'No. I swear by God. This is unacceptable.'

The exchange above indicates a kind of relationship between the interactants. It can be noticed that the inquirer initiates the conversation with a friendly greeting, expressing his wish for the other person's well-being. The employee replies with a warm and inviting welcome realized by *miit marhaba* 'a hundred welcomes', followed by inviting the inquirer to sit down to convey a generous invitation. Hospitality is more evident in the fourth turn when the inquirer is asked to have coffee or tea. Although the inquirer declines the offer by thanking the employee twice and giving a reason for his apology (i.e., he is in a hurry) and confirms this by swearing, the employee does not accept the apology and swears by God that the inquirer should accept the invitation. Although swearing is not tolerated universally, except among intimates, it is sometimes socially and emotionally indispensable (Jay & Jay, 2015, p. 215). The invitee's insistence on the invitation can be explained with reference to Arab culture, according to which paying an invitation is not enough, but one should insist on the invitee to reflect a genuine hospitality. It is worth noting that offering and accepting invitations reflects the social values prevalent in Arab culture. It is meant to enhance the relationship and create a welcoming atmosphere for further engagement.

#### F. Invoking God-Wishes

This component move, which is marked by formulaic expressions having the function of expressing the wish of the bestowal of favorable mercy of God on the addressee, occurred in 67% of the openings. The internal structure of the Invoking God-wish formula consists of the subject 'God', a verb expressing the wish, and a pronoun object suffix referring to the recipient of the favorable action (Al-Ali & Abu-Abah, 2021). Typical formulaic expressions signaling this component are: *ʔalla yaʕtiik illʕaafyih* 'May God give you strength', *ʔalla iyt'awwel ʕumrak* 'May God lengthen your life' and *ʔalla yihfað'ak* 'May God save you'. Invoking God-wishes were also extended to the addressee's family members, using expressions like *ʔalla yihfað' ʔawlaadak* 'May God save your children', or to his/her parents, *ʔalla yirham waalidayk* 'May God have mercy on your parents'. This component is always reciprocated when uttered by one party, as shown in exchange 8.

8. I: *Marħba* 'Hello!'  
E: *Tfað'al* 'Welcome.'  
I: *ʔalla yaʕtiik illʕaafyih* 'May Allah give you strength.'  
E: *ʕalla yihfað'ak* 'May God save you.'

#### G. Lack of Contact

This component move, which occurred in %19 of the data, is a comment by intimate friends that indicates a lack of communication or connection for a long time (Pavlidou, 1994, p. 498). The interactants may refer to previous unsuccessful trials to contact, as in exchange 9.

9. E: *yaa hala, yaa hala, waynak zaman maa fuftak.*  
'Welcome, welcome. **Where have you been? I have not seen you for a long time.**'  
I: *raniit ʕaliik ma raddeitʕ ʕalai*  
'I called you, but you didn't answer me.'  
E: *yaa-zam infat'ar galbi ʕaʕaan afuufak miʕtaagilak*  
'Man, **my heart aches because I want to see you. I miss you.**'

This exchange indicates that interlocutors have not contacted each other for a long time and refers to previous unsuccessful calls. It reflects a strong relationship between the interactants. This component was realized by linguistic expressions, such as *zamaan maa fuftak* 'I have not seen you for a long time', and emotional expressions like *miʕtaagilak* 'I miss you'. The 'Lack of Contact' component is evident in the first turn, where the employee says that he has not seen the inquirer for a long time, and the inquirer's reference to previous unsuccessful calls in the second turn. However, it has become more evident in the employee's last turn, where he expresses a strong emotional attachment and a sense of longing upon reuniting with each other. This component is not phatic but context-dependent (Sifianou, 2002; Sun, 2004) as it is encountered whenever the participants have a strong relationship (i.e., it cannot be extended to all situations).

#### H. Expressing Annoyance

Annoyance is a feeling of discomfort caused by something or somebody that disrupts satisfaction, often resulting in a desire to eliminate the source of bother (Schulte-Fortkamp, 2002). The data revealed that annoyance, which occurred in %17 of the data, was expressed with verbal or/and non-verbal cues, directly or indirectly, as exemplified in 10 and 11.

10. I: *Bidhum ʔimawtuuni, bidhum ʔimawtuuni raayiha dʕaayye ʕala iffarikah wallaahi ma ʔana ʕarfih suu ʔasawii uff*  
'**They will kill me. They will kill me. I have been back and forth with the company. I swear I don't know what to do. Uff**'  
E: *wala bitmuuti. ʔihdi*  
'You won't die. Cool down.'  
I: *hai rabiʕ marrah baadzi huun wil-muʕkilih maa nhllat*

‘This is the fourth time I have come here, and the problem has not been solved.’

In exchange 10, the inquirer opened the conversation with strong expressions of frustration and exaggerated annoyance realized by ‘They will kill me’ repeated twice, followed by swear words, and closed with the non-verbal interjection ‘uff’, accompanied by a puff of air to intensify the amount of exasperation. This interjection is usually uttered in Arab culture when one is fed up with a situation. In the second turn, the employee tries to reassure the woman and calm her down. However, her annoyance and complaints continued, claiming that her problem had not been solved although she had come back and forth several times.

Sometimes, annoyance is expressed indirectly in a monologue, where the inquirer speaks to himself, as in exchange 11.

Context: The following turn is uttered by a woman who is talking to herself but is audible to others; it takes place while the employee is being engaged with another inquirer, and the woman is waiting for him to finish the conversation and give her the floor to present her inquiry.

11. I: *laa ?ilaaha ?illal laah muhammadun rasuulul-laah wa laa hawla walaa quwata ?illa bil-laah*  
 ‘There is no God but Allah, and there is no power or might except with (the help of) Allah (God)’  
 E: *kiif haalik maalik za?laanih*  
 ‘How are you? Why are you angry?’  
 I: *?iyt’awil ?umrak*  
 ‘God lengthen your life.’  
 E: *?itfadð’ali juu bagdar ?asaa?dik*  
 ‘You are welcome. How can I help you?’

Exchange 11 indicates that while the employee is engaged with another inquirer, a woman is waiting for him, talking to herself saying ‘There is no God but Allah, and there is no power or might except with (the help of) Allah (God)’. This expression is often uttered when one becomes frustrated, and all human solutions are exhausted. It is used to remind oneself that one must never rely on people’s resources so much but must return to Allah in remembrance because He is mighty and has all the power to solve problems. According to Jordanian culture, this utterance is interpreted as a way of seeking composure and help from God as well as a kind of self-control to avoid misbehavior when one is frustrated. In this context, it functions to express annoyance and draw the employee’s attention. That is meant to exert pressure on the employee, urging him to speed up the service or solve the problem in any way.

### I. Topic Introducer

This component marks the end of the opening part of a conversation (House, 1982) and a transition from the socio-relational frame to the main topic frame. The inquirer can signal the disclosure of the main topic, or the recipient may initiate or shift to the core of the transaction by offering a service (e.g., Yes, please?). This component occurred in 44% of the Arabic data. The most frequent signals used by the inquirer to mark this move are *?issabab illi xallaani ?aadzi lahuun* ‘the reason why I have come here ...’, *biddi ?as?alik* ‘I want to ask you ...’ and *biddi ?ahkiilak ?an ?ifi* ‘I want to tell you about something ...’ as in 12.

12. I: *law samaht biddi ?as?alak ?an ha-affaylah* ‘Please, I want to ask you about something.’  
 E: *aah tfadð’al* ‘Yes. Please.’

On the other hand, the employees may offer help using interrogatives like *bagdar ?asaa?dak* ‘Can I help you?’ or *?ay xidmih* ‘Any help?’ to indicate that they are ready to serve or to ask the addressee if s/he needs any service, as illustrated in 13.

13. E: *?ahlan wa-sahlan* ‘Welcome.’  
 I: *ya?tiik il-?aafye* May Allah give you strength.’  
 E: *bagdar ?asaa?dak* ‘Can I help you?’

In Extract 13, it is the employee who announces the shift from the phatic frame to the instrumental or main topic frame. This component is particularly relevant to the genre studied by Ventola (1987) of service encounters of the kind where someone seeks a service from another. Ventola (1987) argues that most transactional encounters follow a generic structure opened by ‘Offering a service’.

## V. DISCUSSION

The data analysis has provided insights on the pragmatic component moves and their linguistic realizations. Jordanians opt for to open workplace discourse at public utilities. These functional moves can be categorized into three groups: cross-culture-free phatic components (Greeting, and Question-After-You (QAY)), socio-culture-bound components (Expressing hospitality, Invoking God-wishes, and Introducing oneself), and context-bound components (Expressing annoyance, and Topic introducer). Therefore, the interpretation of these findings should consider the socio-cultural and contextual issues that have given rise to these functional components and their linguistic realizations. These contextual and cultural issues constrain and specify how participants behave, make choices, and participate in interactions (Al-Ali & Abu-Abah, 2021; Al-Ali, 2010; Samovar & Porter, 2003).

As regards the cross-culture-free phatic components, the occurrence of ‘Greeting’ and ‘Question-After-You (QAY)’ in the data analyzed is consistent with what has been documented in different discourse interactions, such as the telephone opening conversations in various languages (e.g., Schegloff, 1986; Sifianou, 2002; Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002; Lee, 2006; Al-Ali & Abu-Abah, 2021) and across cultures (e.g., Godard, 1977; Sifianou, 1989; Grieve & Seebus, 2008). They also occur in the initial phase of face-to-face interaction (House, 1982), transactional service encounters genres (Ventola, 1987; Eggins, 1994), and medical consultations (Jin, 2018). The occurrence of these moves in the initial phase of conversation cross-culturally and in different domains has the functions of establishing a mutual availability of the participants (Al-Ali & Abu-Abah, 2021) and allowing them to “cooperate in getting the interaction comfortably underway” (Laver, 1975, p. 220). These phatic functional moves have been schematized to the extent that they have become ritualistic cross-culturally even though the linguistic options and forms realizing these moves used by each language community are different. For example, although the phatic QAY component is used in different speech communities to ask about the well-being of the addressee him/herself, Jordanian participants tend to ask about the well-being and affairs of other family members like fathers, brothers, etc. These linguistic phatic choices can be attributed to Arab social relationships primarily founded upon extended family relations (i.e., a larger scope of the concept of self). Another example illustrating the differences in linguistic choices is that in responses to questions about one’s well-being, the recipient does not thank the questioner, as is the case in other cultures, but s/he thanks God who is thought of as the giver and protector of one’s well-being. Such linguistic and stylistic choices uncover the effect of religious affiliations, which is consistent with what has been observed in Al-Ali and Abu-Abah’s (2021) study of the opening of telephone conversations.

By contrast, the ‘Expressing hospitality’, ‘Invoking God-wishes’, and ‘Introducing oneself’ component moves are socio-culturally bound. Extending invitations to in-group members in workplace interactions can be due to Arab socio-cultural customs and religious motivations. Notably, hospitality is generally extended to acquaintances and honorable inquirers of high social status. Hospitality is an Arab social custom inherent in Islamic heritage (Janardhan, 2002). Arabs place a high value on generosity (*karam*) not only as a social habit (Shryock, 2004) but also as an integral part of the Islamic religious faith. That is because intense dedication to hospitality is considered a sacred duty, as the prophetic saying states: “He who believes in Allah and the Last Day should honor his guest”. Thus, genuine or ostensible invitations are not only paid in casual interactions but have also crept into formal settings (i.e., workplace interaction). In contrast, this social custom is rare in other societies (e.g., American or English) (Isaacs & Clark, 1990, p. 494). Likewise, the high frequency of ‘Invoking God-wishes’ (67%) also indicates the impact of religious affiliations. This tendency agrees with what has been documented by many researchers (e.g., Ferguson, 1983; Morrow, 2006; Al-Ali & Abu-Abah, 2021). Ferguson (1983) points out that God-wishes are of frequent occurrence in Syrian Arabic as formulaic politeness expressions, and Morrow (2006, p. 45) detects the omnipresence of Allah (God) among Arabic speakers to the extent that they “could scarcely conceive of a conversation where the name of God would not appear”. These findings are also consistent with the high frequency of God-wishes encountered in Al-Ali and Abu-Abah’s (2021) study of Jordanian telephone conversation openings.

Although some researchers have recognized that ‘Introducing oneself’ is used by participants cross-culturally to reflect their identities (Schegloff, 1979), none of the instances encountered in our data is meant to serve this function. Instead, it is far from being innocently used to reflect identity. Rather, it is intentionally employed to get more attention and gain favorable treatment, especially when the inquirer has a high status. Introducing oneself is not only realized by mentioning one’s name but also by reflecting one’s affiliation, position, kinship to an influential person, or relationship to a person mutually known to both parties. This practice reflects inquirers’ social connections that can be used as pressure tactics to gain favor or more attention from the addressee. This cultural concept is called *wasta* ‘intercession’ in Arab society, which is meant to get something done by virtue of who you are or who you know. It involves a protagonist intervening on behalf of the addresser to obtain a position or gain more favor from the addressee (Cunningham et al., 1994). An Arab inquirer is likely to have a good chance if he knows someone in an organization (Al-Ali, 2004) who can help him/her get things done quickly without wasting time waiting in queues.

‘Expressing annoyance’ and ‘Topic introducer’ components can be thought of as context-bound moves. The former, as a speech function, emerges when one encounters a problem or is fed up with an element of the context of the situation. Such behavior sometimes arises in organizations and utility services where the bureaucracy of governmental organizations is dominant. For example, you cannot get things done unless you stand in endless queues wasting your time dealing with inefficient employees, or you, sometimes, must go back and forth several times, as in exchange 10. However, expressing annoyance is by no means neutral. This component is sometimes used as an instrumental task completion to exert a sort of pressure on the employee, urging him to speed up the service, solve the problem in any way, or draw the employee’s attention or sympathy to get the problem resolved. Addressers employed both non-verbal and verbal-linguistic signals to articulate this component. The latter sometimes includes religious expressions related to Arab culture, especially when used as self-controllers to avoid misbehavior. The other component, ‘Topic introducer’, is co-textually bound because it occurs immediately before the main inquiry frame. It announces the participant’s immediate shift from the socio-relational frame to the instrumental frame (i.e., down to business) (Jin, 2018).

## VI. CONCLUSION

Using a real face-to-face interaction at workplace public utility services between inquirers and employees, we have explored and illustrated how the opening phase of this interaction is executed, focusing mainly on identifying the main components constituting this phase and how they are realized linguistically. We also revealed the contextual and socio-cultural relations indexed by the co-construction of these components and how they are negotiated. The corpus showed that the interlocutors tend to use a set of functional moves, some of which are cross-culture-free phatic components that are similar to those utilized in other cultures and languages, others are socio-culture-bound components that surface in Jordanian Arab culture, and some others are context-bound components. These contextual and cultural issues constrain and specify how participants behave, co-construct, negotiate, and articulate these functional components as well as the linguistic selections realizing them.

The occurrence of ritualistic phatic moves (e.g., Greeting and QAY) in the initial phase of cross-cultural conversation is reasonable since they are meant to build rapport and establish a mutual availability of the interlocutors to get things done. In contrast, the occurrence of the socio-cultural components is influenced by socio-cultural customs, kinship ideology, and religious affiliations. Socio-cultural habits like extending invitations to acquaintances, kinship relations, and influential inquirers during official working hours are Arab social customs. These acquaintances and influencers can also exert social pressure on the employees to get more attention, favorable treatment, and immediate response to their inquiries. Thus, employees spend some time complementing invitees at the expense of work time. Concurrently, other inquirers are queuing and waiting to be served. This social behavior results in delaying official work, which in turn leads to the rise of additional context-bound components like 'Expressing annoyance'. Another socio-cultural practice is the genealogical kinship ideologies held by the interlocutors that lead to extended inquiries about the well-being of extended family members. This behavior is due to social relationships established upon the concept of collectivism. This conclusion supports Feghali's (1997, p. 352) view that Arab collectivism influences their social interaction patterns. Likewise, additional moves like 'Invoking God-wishes' and some religious linguistic terms occur due to religious affiliation. Therefore, it can be concluded that building and maintaining relationships between participants in public utility services is equally important as the completion of the inquiry task. However, this equality in dual purpose results in tension between building and maintaining social relationships, and serving inquirers efficiently because the former purpose becomes dominant in certain situations, and the other hardly matters.

It can also be concluded that these contextual and socio-cultural practices result in the occurrence of new component moves that give rise to a lengthy opening phase and a delayed switch to the core topic. Such a practice can be related to Arabs' indirectness by going through a set of rapport-building relation exchanges before shifting to the core phase (Zaharna, 1995; Al-Ali- & Abu-Abah, 2021).

Analyzing the dynamics of public utility services reveals similarities and differences between this genre and other workplace interactions. Therefore, the findings of this study can have practical implications for intercultural communication and discourse studies in that they, hopefully, contribute to the understanding of how interlocutors use socio-cultural and religious affiliations to co-construct the components of this type of discourse. Such an analysis is required to enrich interactants' perception and raise their awareness of these socio-relational moves that facilitate their interaction with utility service providers.

## APPENDIX. TRANSLITERATION

The most noteworthy symbols used in transcribing Arabic words given in this article are: ʔ glottal stop, g voiced velar stop, ð<sup>s</sup> emphatic voiced interdental fricative, dʒ voiced post-alveolar affricate, y palatal glide, ʃ voiceless alveopalatal fricative, t<sup>s</sup> emphatic voiceless dento-alveolar stop, s<sup>s</sup> emphatic voiceless alveolar fricative, h voiceless glottal fricative, ʕ voiceless pharyngeal fricative, x voiceless velar fricative, ɣ voiced uvular fricative, ʕ voiceless pharyngeal fricative, a short central low vowel, aa long central low vowel, u short back high vowel, uu long back high vowel, i short front high vowel, and ii long front high vowel.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Al-Ali, M. N. (2010). Generic patterns and socio-cultural resources in acknowledgements accompanying Arabic Ph. D. dissertations. *Pragmatics Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA)*, 20(1), 1-26.
- [2] Al-Ali, M. N. (2004). How to get yourself on the door of a job: A cross-cultural contrastive study of Arabic and English job application letters. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 25(1), 1-23.
- [3] Al-Ali, M. N., & Abu-Abah, R. N. (2021). The functional components of telephone conversation opening phase in Jordanian Arabic. *Pragmatics*, 31(1), 6-32.
- [4] Alharbi, L. & Al-Ajmi, H. (2008). Greet with the same or render a better greeting: Some translational discourse of Persian-Gulf-Arabic greetings. *Iranian Journal of Language Studies*, 2(1), 115-146.
- [5] Boden, D. (1994). *The business of talk: Organizations in action*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- [6] Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage* (Vol. 4). Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Coulmas, F. (1981). *Conversational routine: Explorations in standardized communication situations and prepatterned speech*. Netherlands: The Hague, Mouton.
- [8] Coupland, J. (2003). Small talk: Social functions. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 36(1), 1-6.

- [9] Cunningham, R. B., Sarayrah, Y. K., & Sarayrah, Y. E. (1994). Taming "wasta" to achieve development. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 29-41.
- [10] Eggins, S. (1994). *An introduction to systemic functional linguistics*. A & C Black.
- [11] Feghali, E. (1997). Arab cultural communication patterns. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 21(3), 345-378.
- [12] Ferguson, C. A. (1983). God-wishes in Syrian Arabic. *Mediterranean Language Review*, 1, 65-83.
- [13] Godard, D. (1977). Same setting, different norms: Phone call beginnings in France and the United States. *Language in Society*, 6(2), 209-219.
- [14] Gorgis, D., & Al-Quran, M. (2003). Greetings and partings in Iraqi and Jordanian Arabic: With special reference to English. *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, 30(3), 610-618.
- [15] Grieve, A., & Seebus, I. (2008). G'day or Guten Tag?: A cross-cultural study of Australian and German telephone openings. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40(7), 1323-1343.
- [16] Holmes, J. (2000). Doing collegiality and keeping control at work: Small talk in government departments. In J. Coupland (Ed.), *Small talk* (pp. 32-61). London: Longman.
- [17] Holmes, J. (1995). The functions of greetings in conversation. *Language in Society*, 24(1), 1-22.
- [18] Hopper, R. (1992). *Telephone conversation* (Vol. 724). Indiana University Press.
- [19] House, J. (1982). Opening and closing phases in German and English dialogues. *Grazer Linguistische Studien*, 16, 52-82.
- [20] Isaacs, E. A., & Clark, H. H. (1990). Ostensible invitations 1. *Language in Society*, 19(4), 493-509.
- [21] Janardhan, M. (2002). Culture-Middle East: Arab hospitality runs deep. *Global Information Network*, 3, 1-4.
- [22] Jay, K. L., & Jay, T. B. (2015). Taboo word fluency and knowledge of slurs and general pejoratives: Deconstructing the poverty-of-vocabulary myth. *Language Sciences*, 52, 251-259.
- [23] Jin, Y. (2018). Small talk in medical conversations: Data from China. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 134, 31-44.
- [24] Laver, J. (1975). Communicative functions of phatic communion. In A. Kendon, R. Harris, & M. Key (Eds.), *The organization of behavior in face-to-face interaction* (pp. 215-238). The Hague, The Netherlands: Mouton.
- [25] Lee, S. H. (2006). Second summonings in Korean telephone conversation openings. *Language in Society*, 35(2), 261-283.
- [26] Morrow, J. (2006). The origin of the Allah lexicon. In J. Morrow (Ed.), *Arabic, Islam, and the Allah lexicon: How language shapes our conception of God* (pp. 115-187). Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press.
- [27] Nielsen, M. F. (2013). "Stepping stones" in opening and closing department meetings. *The Journal of Business Communication* (1973), 50(1), 34-67.
- [28] Pavlidou, T. (1994). Contrasting German-Greek politeness and the consequences. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 21, 487-511.
- [29] Samovar, L., & Porter, R. (2003). *Intercultural communication: A reader*. Australia: Thomson Wadsworth.
- [30] Scarpetta, F., & Spagnoli, A. (2009). The interactional context of humor in stand-up comedy. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 42(3), 210-230.
- [31] Schegloff, E. A. (1986). The routine as achievement. *Human Studies*, 9(2-3), 111-151.
- [32] Schegloff, E. A. (1979). Identification and recognition in telephone conversation openings. In G. Psathas (Ed.), *Everyday language: Studies in ethnomethodology* (pp. 23-78). New York: Irvington.
- [33] Schegloff, E. A. (1968). Sequencing in conversational openings. *American Anthropologist*, 70(6), 1075-1095.
- [34] Schulte-Fortkamp, B. (2002). The meaning of annoyance in relation to the quality of acoustic environments. *Noise and Health*, 4(15), 13-18.
- [35] Shryock, A. (2004). The new Jordanian hospitality: House, host, and guest in the culture of public display. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46(1), 35-62.
- [36] Sifianou, M. (2002). On the telephone again! Telephone conversation openings in Greek. In K. K. Luke & T. Pavlidou (Eds.), *Telephone calls: Unity and diversity in conversational structure across languages and cultures* (pp. 49-86). Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- [37] Sifianou, M. (1989). On the telephone again! Differences in telephone behaviour: England versus Greece. *Language in Society*, 18(4), 527-544.
- [38] Staats, H., & Groot, P. (2019). Seat choice in a crowded cafe: Effects of eye contact, distance, and anchoring. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, Article 331.
- [39] Sun, H. (2004). Opening moves in informal Chinese telephone conversations. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 36(8), 1429-1465.
- [40] Taleghani-Nikazm, C. (2002). Telephone conversation openings in Persian. In K. K. Luke & T. Pavlidou (Eds.), *Telephone calls: Unity and diversity in conversational structure across languages and cultures* (pp. 87-109). Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- [41] Tracy, K. & Naughton, J. M. (2000). Institutional identity work: A better lens. In J. Coupland (Ed.), *Small talk* (pp. 62-83). London: Longman.
- [42] Ventola, E. (1987). *The structure of social interaction: A systemic approach to the semiotics of service encounters*. London: Frances Pinter.
- [43] Zaharna, R. S. (1995). Understanding cultural preferences of Arab communication patterns. *Public Relations Review*, 21(3), 241-255.

**Meera B. Sahawneh** received her PhD degree in Linguistics from the University of Manitoba, Canada in 2017. She is currently assistant professor in the Department of English Language and Linguistics at Jordan University of Science and Technology, Irbid, Jordan. She teaches syntax, discourse analysis, functional grammar, and morphology. Dr. Sahawneh's research interests include syntax, discourse analysis, and pragmatics.

**Mohammed Nahar Al-Ali** received his PhD in discourse/genre analysis from Durham University, UK. He is currently professor in the Department of English language and Linguistics, Jordan University of Science and Technology. He teaches discourse analysis and pragmatics. His articles on critical discourse analysis, pragmatics and translation have appeared in journals like *Discourse and Society*, *Intercultural Pragmatics*, *Pragmatics*, *Pragmatics and Society*, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, *Discourse Studies*, and *Discourse and Communication*.

**Raneem Bashar Al Dwairi** received her BSc degree in English Language and Linguistics and her MSc degree in Applied Linguistics from Jordan University of Science and Technology. She is interested in discourse analysis, socio-pragmatics, and sociolinguistics.