

Language Use and Identity within the Virtual Community of Mahjoob.com

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0346

The Asian Conference on Society, Education and Technology 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

This paper introduces the virtual community of the Mahjoob.com website, a global community of 1,251 web forum posters, where globalizing and localizing technolinguistic trends are simultaneously manifested by web forum posters who strategically select between English, Arabic, and 3arabizi, an online Arabic-English hybrid language, in order to project different online identities. The presentation reveals that the Pro-establishment posters tend to use Standard Arabic as well as Salafi English whereas the Anti-establishment posters prefer 3arabizi throughout the debate. This occurs despite the fact that some of these same posters use their opponents' preferred languages in other discussion forums on the website. The paper indicates that, through use of formal language and style, pro-establishment debaters create online identities linked to Islamic orthodoxy. In contrast, the relatively informal style of the anti-establishment debaters serves to position them as bona fide members of the 'Arab street'. Thus, in an entirely asynchronous online context, identity is both fluid and highly contextualized and Arabic-English bilinguals are sophisticated language users who exploit stylistic variations within their texts to project divergent identities.

1. Introduction and Background

This paper investigates online language use and identity on a popular website based on Jordan, Mahjoob.com. The research presented here is part of findings from a doctoral study that examined the varying roles and distributions of Arabic, English, and *3arabizi*, a hybrid language that combines elements of both Arabic and English (see Al Share, 2005; Palfreyman & Al Khalil, 2003; Sakarna, 2006; Warschauer, El Said, & Zohry, 2002) (see below), within the English language discussion forums of Mahjoob.com (Bianchi, 2013).

The guiding research question behind the present paper is:

In light of the overall code patterns in the corpus, how do forum posters use these different codes strategically to create distinct identities?

The study takes a discourse analytic approach to examine identity through the strategic use of Arabic, English, and *3arabizi* with the mahjoob.com corpus. Specifically, the research focuses on an online debate found within the corpus between supporters of the Saudi government and its morality police, which have been labeled the Pro-establishment camp. Their opponents, the Anti-establishment camp, argue vociferously that the morality police and indeed the whole Saudi political-religious complex are corrupt and pander to Western interests despite their veneer of Islamic rectitude. But before discussing the actual results of the debate analysis, a brief introduction to the corpus and the website from which it is derived is in order.

1.1. The mahjoob.com corpus

The mahjoob.co corpus, upon which the current study is based, is a collection of 460,220 discussion forum messages found in 21,626 discussion threads on the eponymous website. In terms lexical items, the corpus contains over 37 million tokens and some 1.4 million unique word types (including spelling variants). The corpus was created from forum messages that were downloaded with permission from Emad Hajjaj, the website owner (see Hoffmann, 2009). The corpus contains all the forum messages found in the English section's forums spanning the period from March 2007 until May 2008. The website itself represents a virtual community (cf. Paolillo, 1999; Perrotta, 2006) of 1,251 web forum users who use various languages that represent both local and globalizing linguistics trends. On the surface, though, the website has an Arabic section and an English section, where one might expect each of these languages to be used respectively. However, even cursory observation reveals that the linguistic composition of either section of the website is far from homogenous as seen in Figure 1 below, which shows the homepage of the English section of the website, from which the corpus was downloaded:

Figure 1: Mahjoob.com homepage



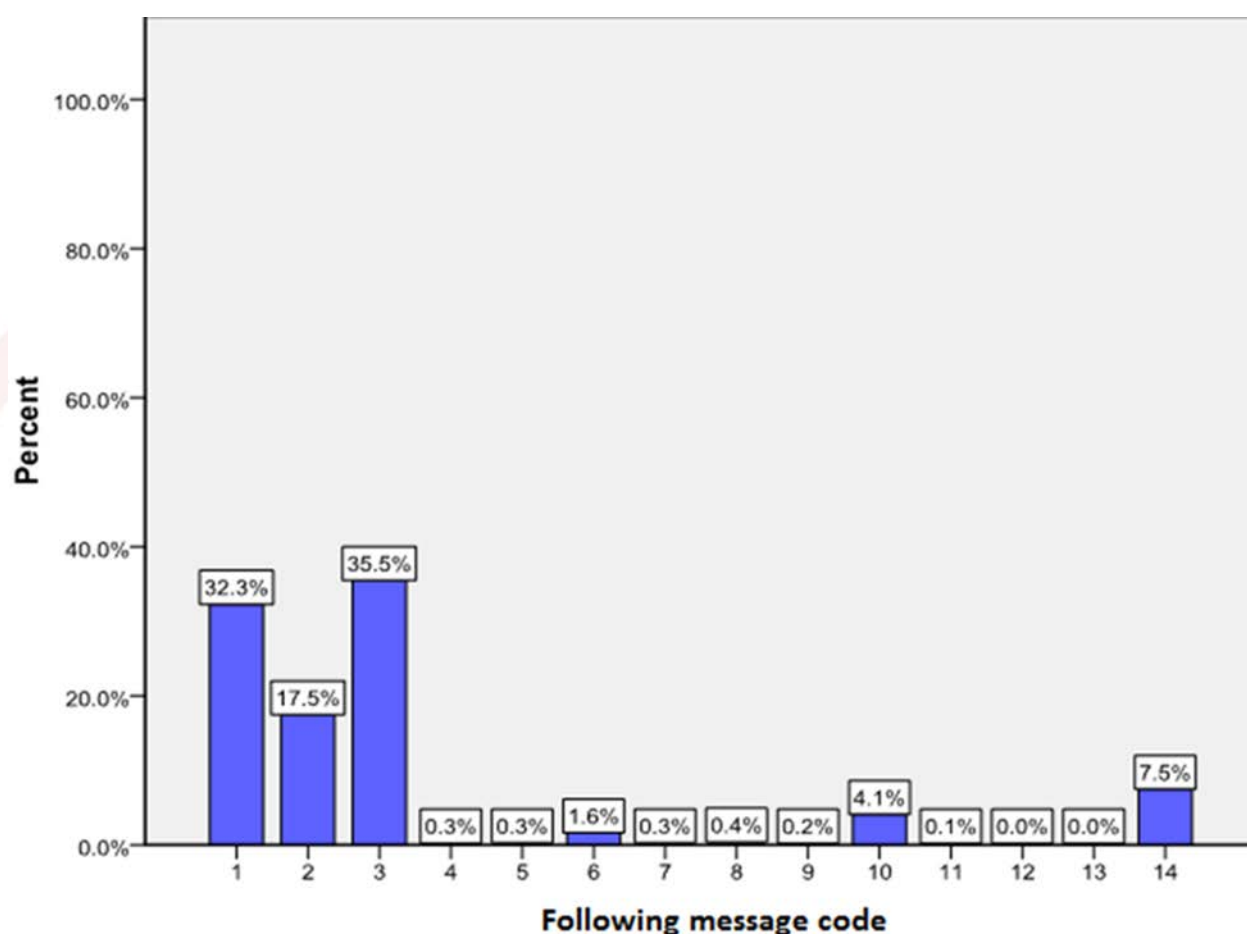
1.1.1. Language Types found in the mahjoob.com corpus

As can be seen in Fig. 1 above, although various pieces of information and titles are written in English, the cartoon of Abu Mahjoob, the main character after whom the website is named, is written in Vernacular Arabic in Arabic script. Still other forms of language are apparent such as 3arabizi (Vernacular Arabic written in Latin script with arithmographemics) in the bottom left corner of the webpage where the forum *e7ke wfadfed* (roughly translated 'get it off your chest').

The corpus itself was analyzed to determine which codes (i.e. languages) were present. Figure 2 below gives a breakdown of these codes in terms of the percentage of messages composed in each code in the entire Mahjoob.com corpus¹.

¹ It is important to point out that this table shows following messages, the messages that appear after the first message in a discussion thread. This is because following messages were found to be more indicative of the general use of language in the corpus since seed messages, the first messages in each thread were found to feature more English and Arabic because of their informative, formal nature as topic starters.

Figure 2: Code Distribution in Following Messages in the Mahjoob.com corpus



Here are the linguistic compositions of Codes 1-14 as listed in Figure 2 above:

- Code 1: Arabic-scripted Arabic
- Code 2: BNC English
- Code 3: 3arabizi
- Codes 4-9, 11-13: Arabic script and Latin script mixed codes
- Code 10: Salafi English
- Code 14: Non-BNC English

As can be seen in Figure 2, Arabic-scripted Arabic (Code 1), BNC English (Code 2)², and 3arabizi (Code 3) were the dominant codes in the corpus followed by non-BNC English (Code 14), and Salafi English (Code 10). For the purposes of the present article, Arabic-scripted Arabic, BNC English, 3arabizi, and Salafi English will all be discussed in further detail since these were the primary codes found in the debate examined here. Thus, in the next few paragraphs, samples of these four codes, taken directly from the debate, will each be presented and described.

1.1.2. Arabic-scripted Arabic

وصدّقني عندما تعود إلى الأردن وتخرج في المساء وتطلّ برأسك من

² BNC English is called thus because it was identified in the corpus using the British National Corpus (BNC) wordlist.

النّافذة وتُشاهد شابا وفتاة يزنون في
السيّارة أمام منزلك ستعلم أهميّة الهيئة

-Muslim4 , Pro-establishment poster

Translation:

And believe me, when you return to Jordan and you go out at night and you lift up your head to look into the (car) window and see a boy and a girl fornicating in the car in front of your house, you will appreciate the importance of the committee (against vice).

In this example, which contains only Arabic-scripted items, the level of language is very formal without any Vernacular Arabic items. This is typical of the type of Arabic found in the debate. However, it is worth noting that elsewhere in the corpus, the Arabic-scripted Arabic was often written in very informal, and Vernacular Arabic. In terms of the entire mahjoob.com corpus, just under a third of all following messages in the corpus were written in Arabic-scripted Arabic although many of these contained Vernacular items as well, unlike the highly formal example above.

1.1.3. BNC English

You always repeat the same things without any proof.

- Snipe_aac, Pro-establishment poster

As can be seen in this example, BNC English contains only English items written in Latin script. In the entire corpus, only 18% of all following messages were written in BNC English. This is somewhat surprising since the corpus was derived from the so-called English section of mahjoob.com. Clearly, other codes especially 3arabizi discussed in the next section were more prevalent than English on the website.

1.1.4. 3arabizi

wbeejo begoolooly enno elhai2a btenteqed elmashayekh.

6ayyeb...does anyone know the phone number for the hai2a?

I'd like to inform them that 300 billions of gulf money is helping the economy of "their enemy" as they claim. 🙄

- Kharroof Tayeh, Anti-establishment poster

Translation:

And they come tell me that the committee admonishes the shaikhs. Okay...does anyone know the phone number for the committee? I'd like to inform them that 300 billions of gulf money is helping the economy of "their enemy" as the claim. Whistling smiley

In the example above, it is seen that 3arabizi contains English items with Arabic items written in Latin script and features 'Arithmographemics' (Bianchi, 2005) i.e. numbers used as letters (e.g. *hai2a*) Also, typical to 3arabizi as shown here is the frequent use of smileys (e.g. 🙄). In terms of the entire corpus, over a third of all following messages were written in 3arabizi making it the most popular code within the English website forums. Thus, it might be said to be the most normative code among website users within the English section of Mahjoob.com. As such, it contrasts sharply with the relatively rare Salafi English (cf. Mujahid, 2009), which also features both English and Arabic items in Latin script, discussed in the next section.

1.1.5. Salafi English

You seem to harbour much hatred for the Hay'ah.

If you really have a complaint and are sincere this is the phone numbers for the ra'ees:...

- Snipe_aac, Pro-establishment poster

Translation:

You seem to harbor much hatred for the committee. If you really have a complaint and are sincere this is the phone numbers for the head (of the committee).

This example highlights the common features of Salafi English³, namely mainly formal English vocabulary and style but with transliterated Arabic items inserted as well. Yet, unlike 3arabizi, Salafi English makes use of apostrophes where 3arabizi would use arithmographemes such as '2' and '3'. In addition, Salafi English typically uses double-vowels to indicate Arabic long vowels, whereas 3arabizi tends not to indicate these.

In terms of overall prevalence within the Mahjoob.com corpus, only 4% of all following messages were written in Salafi English making it one of the rarest codes in the entire corpus. Yet, interestingly, in the debate that will be discussed below, Salafi English is frequently used.

Now that the principal linguistics codes found in the debate have been discussed, the next section will discuss the data and methodology adopted to analyze the corpus for identity-related language use within the debate.

2. The Data and Methodology: Analyzing *Religion Forum* Thread 206940

A single thread was selected from the website, Thread 206940 entitled "Masha2a allah, Masha2a allah" (lit. 'what God hath willed, what God hath willed'). This thread was found in the *Religion Forum*. This thread was selected for analysis of identity because it met three important criteria. First, it exhibited great linguistic heterogeneity. This meant that the use of different codes could be contrasted within to determine if any of these code choices reflected identity-related motives. The second criterion which the thread met was length. As the longest thread in the corpus (it contained 322 messages), identity-related linguistic patterns could be investigated over several lengthy interactions between its posters. The third and final criterion was linguistic unconventionality. In this regard, Thread 206940 was notable as the only thread to have more Salafi English than 3arabizi. Thus, such atypical code use might betray identity-related motives

³ The Salafis are linked to the Wahhabi ideology, espoused by the Saudi government and other GCC states such as Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, and Kuwait (see Lane, 2008, pp. 227-228). 'Salafi' derives from the salaf al-sāliḥ (lit. 'the pious ancestors'), early Sunni Muslim scholars 'saints'. Modern Salafis advocate a return to a pristine Islam as practiced in the days of the Prophet Mohammed and immediately afterwards. Lane (2008) notes that Salafis are a widely divergent group in terms of ideology and political activism (p. 228). Although Bin Laden and his followers claim to be Salafis, their advocacy of violent uprising against corrupt Muslim rulers is condemned by other Salafis such as Snipe_aac (see below), who argue for political acquiescence in the face of Muslim tyranny. For a large sample of typical Salafi English texts, the reader is directed to visit sahihalbukhari.com, a popular Salafi English website.

In terms of methodology, Thread 206940 was read several times and translated into English. Consequently, messages 1-75 were selected as a subset for deeper analysis because they focused on a single topic, a debate on moral authority in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

Using Fairclough's (2003, p. 162) notion of linguistically-realized styles or 'characters', i.e. recognizable stereotypes, four main posters were identified and described in terms of the distinct identities they each projected through code use based on their ideological positions within the debate, which will be described in the next few sections.

3. The Findings

This section consists of a discussion of the four main posters in the debate, starting with a brief overview of the debate, followed by the main assertions of each side of the debate, and ending with a presentation of the linguistic traits of each poster in light of their ideological positions, showing how these contribute to the creation of distinct, opposing identities. To begin, here are the four main posters in the debate:

Anti-establishment:

Kharoof Tayeh (lit. "lost sheep")

Guillotine

Pro-establishment:

Snipe_aac

Muslim4

3.1. The Debate

Kharoof Tayeh starts the thread by copying an Arabic-language news article from Al-aswaq Al-Arabiya, an Al-Arabiya News Channel website, which reports that GCC governments gave billions of dollars to Western nations shortly after 9/11. Thus, Kharoof Tayeh's launches the following question: In light of the above article, why do the Hay'ah (morality police) in KSA pick on citizens and ignore such anti-Islamic behaviour on the part of the authorities?

3.2. The Anti-establishment Stance

The Anti-establishment posters make several assertions:

1. Muslim leaders lose legitimacy when they aid the enemies of Islam or behave in un-Islamic ways, so such leaders should be challenged and removed if necessary.
2. The religious authorities and morality police should admonish the leaders, not just the citizens.
3. The current establishment in KSA is pro-Western and corrupt

3.3. The Pro-establishment Stance

In contrast, the Pro-establishment posters make several counter assertions:

1. According to the Sunnah, there are never any legitimate grounds for rebelling against a Muslim ruler
2. Suggesting that leaders should be challenged is a sign of spiritual treason and heresy (cf. the Kharijites, the 'Seceders')
3. A tyrannical Muslim leader is sent as a punishment by God and this should urge believers to recommit themselves to Islam and be forbearing with their leader

Now that the main assertions of the debate have been presented, it is opportune to examine the specific identity-related features of each of the four main posters in the debate.

3.4. Anti-establishment Poster 1: Kharoof Tayeh

Kharoof Tayeh, portrays himself as one of the 'shabab' (an Arab youth 'one of the boys') through his use of 3arabizi exclusively throughout the debate, he identifies himself with the rest of the Mahjoob.com website posters who tend to use 3arabizi as well. He presents himself as an anti-establishment, disgruntled populist in other words, a *bona fide* member of the 'Arab Street'. To make his points, he copies and pastes a news article in Arabic but does not compose messages in Arabic himself. He also claims not to be such a scholar, but to know right from wrong. As with most 3arabizi users, he uses smileys and humour extensively in his posts, thus lightening the tone of his biting remarks and maintaining an informal, personal style.

3.5. Pro-establishment Poster 1: Snipe_aac

Snipe_aac contrasts greatly with Kharoof Tayeh, who is one of his main adversaries in the debate. As a Pro-establishment poster, he positions himself as a defender of the "Divine Order", in which rulers are placed in positions of power by the Almighty, and thus, are not meant to be removed by man. Snipe_aac also portrays himself as a well-versed and serious student and follower of Islam by quoting the Qur'an and several Islamic traditions and the works of Muslim scholars throughout his various posts. Linguistically, Snipe_aac uses Salafi English almost exclusively, appearing Western-educated because of the formality of his English. Also, through his several quotes, he identifies himself directly with Salafi thinkers and proponents. Stylistically, Snipe_aac avoids the use of smileys and humour entirely in stark contrast to Kharoof Tayeh, thus, portraying the image of the austere student of Islam for whom frivolity and light-heartedness are not becoming.

3.6. Guillotine: Anti-establishment Poster 2

On the same ideological side of the debate is the Anti-establishment poster, Guillotine. Like Kharoof Tayeh he presents himself as a disgruntled populist through his occasional use of 3arabizi especially in response to other Anti-establishment posters like Kharoof Tayeh, with which he identifies ideologically. Yet, Guillotine also style-switches frequently when he interacts with the Pro-establishment posters, using Standard Arabic and formal English on occasion. Thus, Guillotine uses Arabic with Muslim4 and Arabic and English with Snipe_aac. When Guillotine does use formal English and Arabic, he portrays himself as a well-versed student of Islam by quoting Qur'an and Hadith in Arabic or in English translation. Indeed, he often cites Hadith urging jihad against a 'tyrannical ruler' since he believes that is fundamentally wrong to obey corrupt un-Islamic authorities.

3.7. Muslim4

Muslim4 is quite unique in that he virtually only uses a very formal Arabic throughout the debate, despite his apparent knowledge of English. For instance, he reads English posts, but replies to them only in Arabic. The single time that he himself actually uses English in the thread is when he copies and pastes an English-language posting of Snipe_aac's English in order to counter an assertion of Kharoof Tayeh.

As such, Muslim4 portrays himself as an Arabic-dominant serious student of Islam. Like Snipe_aac, his Pro-establishment partner, Muslim4 quotes Hadith, albeit in Arabic, and avoids the use of smileys and humour entirely within the debate. Thus, like Snipe_aac, Muslim4 is also a defender of the 'Divine Order'

Yet, Muslim4 is one of the most intriguing of the four posters because, outside of Thread 206940, Muslim4 certainly does use English, even in a humorous way. Note, for instance, the following tongue-in-cheek English-language posting to a question in the *Girls Corner* forum about whether other girls wear hijab:

i dont wear hijab 🙄

Here, not only does Muslim4 use English and a smiley, but he also flaunts the fact that has a man he is under no Islamic obligation to wear hijab, rendering his own post hilarious and absurd. Thus, it is clear that for the purposes of the debate within Thread 206940, Muslim4 assumes a very somber and serious tone, but elsewhere, he projects a light-hearted joking style and thus, a very different identity, a shabab identity akin to his opponent Kharoof Tayeh's within the debate.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings can be summarized as follows for Pro-establishment and Anti-establishment posters:

Pro-establishment posters:

- Index learned, religious identities through use of Qur'anic, hadith, and scholarly quotations
- Only interpret Islam according to Salafi scholars
- Identify with Salafi scholars, by rejecting 3arabizi and/or informal English outright, using either Arabic-scripted Arabic or Salafi English
- Maintain serious and formal tone (no smileys)

Anti-establishment posters:

- Index popular identities by using 3arabizi like most other Mahjoobians
- Identify with 'the Arab Street', advocating for the 'the people' against the Establishment
- Dare to interpret Islam on their own
- Use smileys and humour to maintain a more intimate and personable style

This study has shown that posters within the discussion forums of Mahjoob.com, a virtual community, are sophisticated language users who have a variety of linguistic codes available to them in order to strategically pick and choose from. Such choices are clearly not neutral insofar as they help their users to portray distinct identities that

they deem appropriate to the circumstances of their interactions as exemplified by Muslim4's serious Arabic-language tone within the debate in Thread 206940 in contrast with his light-hearted, tongue-in-check English-language tone as he teases playfully within the Girls Corner discussion on the wearing of hijab.



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