A Sociolinguistic Perspective to Arabic and Arabs Virtual Communities with Special Reference to the Shi'a as a Religious Minority in the Arab World

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Abstract

Arabic, which is the fifth world language with regard to the number of speakers, geographical spread, and socio-literary prestige (Weber:1997 cited in Palfreyman and al Khalil: 2003; p.9) , similar to all other languages whose orthographical system is not based on Latin symbols has been subject to various types of changes resulted from the language contact with English as the default language used in the computer mediated communication supported by the various tools of the modern technology which represent the most prominent hallmark of our new age of globalization.

This paper presents a sociolinguistic account of the language contact between English and Arabic on the internet. It discusses the sociocultural and sociopolitical considerations in the Arab world that led to and resulted from this language contact predicting a new phase of Arabic in the forthcoming decades. It investigates, moreover, the sociolinguistic grounds of the social interaction within and between the Arab virtual communities on the internet.

The religious minority of the Shi'a in the Arab world has been selected as the specified ethnic and religious group of investigation. The religious, social, and cultural connotations of the interaction occur in their virtual communities have been investigated together with their relation to the other Arab virtual communities.

Key Words: sociolinguistics, Virtual communities, communication, minorities.

رؤية اجتماعية لغوية للمجتمعات العربية الافتراضية مع اشارة خاصة للشيعة كأقلية دينية في العالم العربي

الملخص

مرت اللغة العربية التي تعتبر خامس لغة بالعالم من حيث عدد الناطقين بها ومن حيث الانتشار الجغرافي والمكانة الاجتماعية والادبية (وبر ١٩٩٧/ في باليفريمان والخليل ٢٠٠٣) مثل كل اللغات الاخرى التي لاتستخدم الرموز اللاتينية في الكتابة بمراحل متنوعة من التغييرات التي تنتج

عن الاتصال اللغوي مع اللغة الانكليزية كاللغة القياسية المستخدمة في الاتصالات الحاسوبية مدعومة بوسائل متنوعة من التقنيات الحديثة والتي تمثل العلامة الفارقة الاكثر بروزا في عصرنا الجديد..عصر العولمة.

تقدم هذه الدراسة رؤية اجتماعية لغوية للاتصال اللغوي بين الانكليزية والعربية عبر الانترنيت وتتطرق للاعتبارات الاجتماعية الثقافية والاجتماعية السياسية في العالم العربي التي تقود الى وتنتج عن هذا الاتصال اللغوي وتستشرف عهدا جديدا للغة العربية في العقود القادمة، كما انها تبحث في الاسس الاجتماعية اللغوية للتواصل الاجتماعي بين المجتمعات الافتراضية العربية عبر الانترنيت. تم اختيار الشيعة كأقلية دينية وعرقية في العالم العربي كشريحة للدراسة فقد تم التحقق من الاعتبارات الدينية والاجتماعية والثقافية للتواصل الذي يحدث في المجتمعات الافتراضية الخاصة بهذه الشريحة بالاضافة الى التواصل بين المجتمع الافتراضي لهذه الشريحة وبين المجتمعات الافتراضية للشرائح الاخرى في العالم العربي.

1. A Sociolinguistic outlook on Arabic in the Modern Age

The communication revolution which is the most prominent hallmark of the new age of globalization has made people more homogenized. As far as language is concerned, language distance, similar to geographical and physical distance, has been increasingly shrinking as a result of the prevalence of globalization.

In the Arab world, there have been two different perspectives of the outcomes of this revolution. At one extreme, the conservative perspective led by the advocates of the Arab Nationalism in some Arabic countries as in Syria and Egypt, keeps warning the people from the savage attack of English which "hides a destructive agenda against our beautiful Arabic as the language of the Holly Quran". In an article published in the Syrian Athawra newspaper[1], the author criticizes what he calls the "effeminate performance" of some of the broadcasters in the national TV and Radio channels. He states:

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[1] Mon 28th Nov. 2005

...اعتقاداً منهم أو بمن سمح لهم وأجازهم في هذا الأداء المائع أنها سمة العصر ولهجة حضارة القرن الحادي والعشرين. نظرة خاطفة نلقيها على ما يجري حولنا نكشف بجلاء ووضوح المخططات الساعية إلى تفتيت المنطقة وشر ذمتها ونزع هويتها، أقف هنا لحظة عند هويتها، فاللغة هي أبرز معالم الهوية لأي أمة كانت لاسيما الأمة العربية التي خصها الله بالقرآن الكريم.

They (the broadcasters) think that this effeminate performance is the marked characteristic of the modern age and the civilization of the 21st century. If we stop a moment, we would see that there is an agenda of tearing the region apart and dismantling its identity. Language is the most prominent characteristics of any nation's identity; particularly the Arabic nation which was privileged by Allah in using Arabic as the language of the Holly Quran.

(My translation)

At the other extreme, there has been a new generation in the Arab world, similar to many places around the world, obsessed with all aspects of the new communication technology. Roughly speaking, this generation is of two ranks; the older generation (now 24 to 36-year old) and the younger generation (now up-to-24- year old) (see Warschauer et al. 2003). People belong to these two generations are distinguished by three major characteristics:

A. They are either multilingual or bilinguals (Arabic, English, French) with various degrees of bilingualism/ multilingualism. (Hakuta & Diaz, 1985: pp. 319-344),

B. they are less adhered to the Arab Nationalism perspectives and more inclined to the local patriotism, and hence,

C. they are more attached to the use of the various Arabic vernaculars.

A good example, in this reference, is the Egyptian "Ghaly" who proposed an Egyptian Arabic Wikipedia. Ghaly assumes that "Egyptian Arabic is a language recognized and spoken by millions of people, it is written in personal letters between Egyptians, it is used in songs, advertisement and most importantly in day to day life" (Masry Wikipedia[2]). Giving an Arabic vernacular (henceforth AV) the prestigious status of language has serious linguistic, sociolinguistic, and cultural consequences which might be identified clearly by some of the comments that Ghaly cites in the same site. Ghaly, moreover, ascribes his attempt to establish this site in Egyptian Arabic to the linguistic

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[2] Masry Wikipedia was established on 30th March 2008; it has now 4000 articles.

distance between the Classical Arabic (henceforth CA) as "no one's Mother tongue" and the Egyptian Arabic which is simply "different" from the CA.

The linguistic status in the Arabic countries has always been described in terms of the sociolinguistic phenomena of diglossia (Ferguson, 1972: pp. 75-82) in which two variants of the same language are used in different contexts; in the case of Arabic: the CA with a high prestigious position in comparison to the various Arabic vernaculars with low prestigious status. The clear-cut distinction of contexts identified by Ferguson is no longer valid. The Classical and standard[3] (henceforth SA) variants of Arabic are losing more and more context for the interest of the vernaculars. For instance, the long-established attitude towards the use of vernaculars inside schools and university classrooms, inside the mosques, and in TV and Radio channels have passed through radical changes during the last few years. Warschauer, et al (2002) found that the code switching between the CA and the AVs performed by their subjects (young Egyptian internet professional users) "falls along a continuum, rather than in complete bipolar opposition" (see Figure.1)

| CA | — | SA | — | CA | — | SA | — | VA | — | SA | — | CA | — → | VA |

Figure 1: The Use of Arabic Variants
Based on Warschauer et al (2003)

Building on these findings of Warschauer's study, we may propose the following hierarchy of language use in Egypt before and after the technology revolution whose tools started to be used in the early 1990s:

A. Before the technology revolution:

CA→ SA→ Egyptian Arabic→ FL (French then English)

B. After the technology revolution:

FL→ (English Only) →Egyptian Arabic→ SA→CA

Investigating the language distance between the SA and the various Arabic vernaculars, (Saiegh-Haddad: 2003; cited in Myhill: 2009) talks about the difficulty of acquiring the SA in schools by the Arab children due to the clear language distance

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[3] Following Badawi (1973), among many other Arab linguists, three different variants of Arabic have been identified: Colloquial (illiterate, educated, and elevated), modern formal Arabic (standard), and classical. Each with its own registers and contexts.

between their vernaculars as their mother tongue and the SA. Myhill (ibid) identifies three types of diglossia[4]; the third type is the one related to Arabic in which the high language is based upon a group of prescriptive grammatical and structural rules based on an ancient language. He states:

> These norms are less cognitively accessible to the child acquiring literacy because it is not based upon anyone's everyday usage so that there is no model to be imitated and its rules are more likely to be the invention of grammarians rather than the product of natural language acquisition.

The mentioned-above second characteristic of the last two new generations in the Arab world concerning the shift in their loyalty from the Arab Nationalism principles towards their local distinguished cultures has been supported, on one hand, by the discomfiture in using the SA as opposed to their every-day language which they speak with ease, and, on the other hand, by the various technological tools provided by the new technology. Al-Tamimi and Gorgis (2007) discuss the close relation between the use of vernaculars in e-mail messages and the expressions of feelings. They found that their subjects switched from English to SA and then to Jordanian Arabic when they liked to show more intimacy or complements to maintain solidarity and even vernacular identity. This might be illustrated in the following hierarchy:

English → SA→ Jordanian Arabic → Jordanian Arabic with various accents

The more the users restrict the distance, the more comfortable they feel in distinguishing their identity.

The struggle resulted from such clashes of identities concerning the use of SA vs. Arabic vernaculars is complicated by the use of English as illustrated in the above hierarchy. Casetells (1996/2000: 5-24) & Warschauer (2000a: 511-535, and 2000b:151-170) discuss this struggle between the two powers or clashes of identities in the users' selection between languages: a "global" and "local". They conclude that the use of English has a more instrumental function in establishing a global identity as opposed to the use of the national vernacular in establishing a local identity. As it is obvious, both

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[4] The first diglossic situation occurs when the low language is the language used by a particular social or ethnic group in comparison to the high language of another ethnic group that lives in the same country, for example the case of Arabic (H) and Kurdish (L) before 1990 in Iraq. The diglossic satiation in the second type is distinguished by the assignment of (H) status to the language of an ethnic group in another country as English in India and Pakistan.

the CA and SA are excluded in such clash of identities. On the other hand, Haeri (1997) (cited in Warschauer et al, 2002: 1-18) discusses the language selection of the Egyptian elite, as an example of the elite in other Arabic countries. She assumes that the association between the elite and CA has always been weak due to the elite's English education background, the instrumental need of English in career establishment, and cultural and social distance from the "Islamic fundamentalist movement".

Another worth-mentioning finding discussed by Warschauer et al (ibid) which disagrees with Haeri's conclusion cited above in one way or another, is that the use of English in Egypt by the new generation does not imply the embracing of the western culture at the expense of their Egyptian identity. The subjects of their study assume that they "absorb the best from a broad array of cultures and make it its own". They conclude that the new tools of the modern technology, accordingly, might be used to maintain both the global and local identities. Such an assumption is contradicted by the findings of another study conducted by Al- Katib and Sabbah (2008: 37-65) investigating the language choice in mobile text messages among Jordanian university students. The subjects of this study showed a more integrative conception to the use of English in comparison to the instrumental one discussed above. The subjects of their study assume that it is much easier for them to express themselves in both English and Arabic interchangeably in the same context than in either English or Arabic on one hand, and in English than in Arabic on the other hand. Hence, 39% of the text messages the authors investigated in their data were of mixed English and Arabic texts, 34% were totally English, and only 27% were totally Arabic. The authors, in this study, don't talk about the classical/standard-vernacular distinction; yet, it is clear from the examples they cite that the Jordanian vernacular is meant by their use of "Arabic". Accordingly, we will have the following new hierarchy of language use in Jordan:

Mixed (English and Arabic) → English→ Jordanian Arabic

2. An "Ideological" Approach to the New Trends in Arabic Orthography

October 6, 1960 was the formal date of the first meeting to establish a writing system that might cope with the new rapidly-developing communication technology. The American standard association published the first version of what they called the

American Standard Code for Information Interchange (henceforth ASCII) during 1963, and revised it two times in 1967 and 1986[5]. Since then, the ASCII, which is based on the Latin letters and English pronunciation, has been used as a "default" writing system in the various global means of communication such as the Internet, Mobiles, IPods etc.

One of the interesting outcomes of the language contact between English writing system as the "default" writing system used by the various tools of the new technologies of communication, and the writing systems of the languages which make use of non-Latin characters, has been the manifestation of some hybrid orthographies based on the Latin letters together with some digits to express the sounds that do not exist in English. For example Jannis Androutsopoulos (2009: 221-249) proposes the term "Greeklish" for the Latin-alphabet Greek; using the ASCII in the representation of the Greek language. He assumes that this system was initiated by the Greek students and researchers who were studying in the American universities at the early decades on the internet. Based on Street (1984) and Sebba (1998, 2000, and 2003), Androutsopoulos makes a distinction between the "autonomous" and the "ideological" approaches to orthography. The autonomous approach deals with "Greeklish" as a natural consequence of the new advancement of communication technology. On the other hand, the "ideological" approach investigates the social and cultural outcomes of the use of this hybrid system of writing. As an example of the reaction to Greeklish which might clarify some aspects of the second approach, Androutsopoulos translated an open letter of the Greek Academy to the use of this system:

> We consider unholy, but also senseless, any attempt to replace the Greek script in its own birth-place [...] Just as during Venetian rule, when the rulers attempted to replace the Greek alphabet in Greek texts, we will resist now too, calling on all fellow Greeks to respond and ensure that these unholy plans are destroyed, root and branch.

Following the same ideological approach to orthography, Mark Sebba (2007: 56, 40. 54 & 2009: 35-49) investigates the relation between the writing system and identity construction. He assumes that the writing system can assist particular ethnic, political, or

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[5] American National Standard for Information Systems — Coded Character Sets — 7-Bit American National Standard Code for Information Interchange (7-Bit ASCII), ANSI X3.4-1986, American National Standards Institute, Inc., March 26, 1986. Cited in Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ASCII#cite_note-4

social groups to maintain their identity as distinct from others. On the other hand, he discusses the social and cultural concepts of the writing system literacy associating the cognitive abilities of the users of a particular orthography to the orthographical system they use. Moreover, using the same attempt to establish a sociolinguistic approach to orthography, Sebba (2007:26-58) discusses the vernaculars orthography which is usually associated with some sociopolitical and ideological considerations. He cites the example of Jamaican Creole (pp.130-131) as an example of the orthography choice based on several sociopolitical factors.

Similar to all other languages that use non-Latin script, Arabic writing system has been affected by the orthographical contact between the default writing system of the new technology and that of Arabic. The result has been a hybrid system of orthography. Different terms have been used to refer to this system[6] such as: Latinized/Romanized Arabic (Zawaydeh, 2007: 2-6; Aboelezz, 2009: 1-23; Wardhaugh, 1986-1998:369 ; Al-Tamimi and Gorgis, 2007: 1-4), and ASCII-ized Arabic (Palfryman & al Khalil 2003). Terms as Mixed Script, Arabic Chat System or Arabeez are also used. Regardless of the term used to describe this system of orthography, it has the following major characteristics:

1. It is based on the characters used in ASCII system mentioned above.
2. The direction of the writing is from left to right similar to English
3. Some Arabic Consonant sounds that do not occur in English are replaced by particular digits (e.g. 3 for (ع), 2 for (ء), 7 for (ح) etc.).
4. It is highly inconsistent particularly with reference to the vowels.
5. The letters, usually in small case and capitalization used for emphasis, are separated similar to English.
6. Used informally mostly in Internet chatting and text mobile messages.
7. Used basically by the young generation.
8. Using English words in Arabic word order.
9. Full of code switching, code mixing, and borrowing.
10. Full of English abbreviated forms.

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[6] In this study we are going to use the term "Latinized Arabic" to this writing system.

(Zawaydeh: 2007; Aboelezz: 2009; Wardhaugh: 1986-1998, Al-Tamimi and Gorgis: 2007; Palfryman & al Khalil: 2003).

Unfortunately, most of the related studies about the Latinized Arabic have focused on the "autonomous" approach with some comments about the sociocultural considerations of the new trends in Arabic writing system. Their major concern was to investigate the linguistic characteristics of the difference between the traditional Arabic orthography and this hybrid new one in the various types of data they have collected from the internet chatting, email messages, or mobile text messages.

Palfreyman and al Khalil (2003) studied the Latinized Arabic in instant messages used in MSM and yahoo messengers and emails exchanged between some female students in the UAE. In the course of talking about the sociolinguistic perspectives associated with the Latinized Arabic used by their subjects, the authors admitted that the acknowledgment of any new orthographical system requires a social and political statement (cf. Street, 1995: 5-11& Unger, 2001: 141-152). They cite two examples which represent the two extremes we have talked about in the above section: the alphabet revolution in Turkey in the 1920s changing the Turkish orthography from Arabic to Latin at one extreme, and the Syrian government' regulations made in the 1980s against the use of Latin scripts in shop signs at the other extreme. Investigating their subjects' motivation concerning the selection of Latinized Arabic as their main system of communication on the net, the authors found that it was not only a matter of ease of typing due to their primary computer-using knowledge based on English as some other studies suggest, but there were some other "intrinsic interest in writing" such as the feeling that the Latinized Arabic provides them with a better opportunity to communicate in their Gulf Arabic vernacular, or with a modern technique that might be used to distinguish themselves as a new social group. This tendency is clear in the following statement provided by one of the subjects: Latinized Arabic is a "kind of code we feel that only people of our age could understand…I guess it is a kind of a funky language for teens to use".

Warschauer et al (2002: 8) on the other hand, classified the contexts in which their subjects[7] made their language choice into three types: Formal E-Mail, Informal E-Mail, and Online Chat. They came up with the conclusion that the higher percentages in

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[7] They defined their subjects as "young professionals"; the first generation of the internet users in Egypt.

the three contexts were assigned to English 92%, 83.3%, and 71% respectively, then comes the Roman Script 2.5%, 16.7%, and 9.7% respectively. They ascribed these results to various socio-economical factors such as the "general dominance of English in the professional milieu", "computer and internet use learned in English environment" and "early adopter' fluency in English". The other important finding of the study was the amount of the Egyptian vernacular used by their subjects. Their explanation to this phenomenon is the fact that the internet is outside the traditional social and religious authorities in Egypt.

Based on these findings, we can assume that the traditional Arabic script is usually associated with both the CA and the SA used in highly formal contexts; conversely, the Latinized Arabic initiated by the new Arab generation in the last two decades is more attached with the various Arabic vernaculars and used in informal contexts. The new means of the modern technology just help the Arab users to free themselves from the prescriptive rules of the SA associated with the traditional orthography. This might lead to various types of orthographical modifications to the traditional Arabic scripts. Garra (2007; cited in Myhill, 2009: 22) assumes that the representations of the various Arabic vernaculars by the Latinized Arabic, though seems to imply inconsistent norms and restricted to particular informal Computer mediated communication contexts, "are beginning to take shape, parallel to what started to happen in the Western European languages in the generation or two after the introduction of the printing press".

Moreover, we may assume that the distinction between the CA, SA, and Arabic vernaculars that we have used in this study might be associated with the same distinction between various phases of the Arabic orthography. Accordingly, we have three orthographical Arabic systems. The first one is the classical Arabic orthography (such as alkofi, alandalusi, alteshkille, athuluth etc.) which is no longer used in actual daily writing similar to CA. The second one is the standard Arabic orthography which is the system used in newspapers and magazines in the Arabic countries. It should be noticed that this system suffers from serious inadequacies, the most obvious one is that of taking a little notice of diacritics which plays an essential role in case distinction in Arabic grammar. The third one is the Latinized Arabic associated with the various vernaculars

that simply disregard all the traditional case distinction as all the Arab users do in daily life spoken language.

3. A Sociolinguistic Perspective on the Arab Communication in the Internet Virtual World

3.1. Theories of Virtual Communities in CMC

In an article published in Journalism and Mass Communication, Kalyani Suresh (2003) has classified the classical theories of communication into structural and functional, cognitive and behavioral, interactionist. The structural and functional theory assumes that the social human actions should be studied objectively, the cognitive and behavioral theory is more concerned with human psychological attitudes, and the interactionist theory concentrates on human interactions within the social life. All the theories suggested by researchers involved in investigating the computer mediated communication (henceforth CMC) have been based in one way or another on one of these classical theories of communication. CMC is defined by McQuail, D. (2005) (cited in Wikipedia) as "any communicative transaction that occurs through the use of two or more networked computers". The typical contexts in which CMC research has been identified are instant messages as in MSN and Yahoo messenger, e-mails, and various types of internet chat.

Building on the interactional classical theory of communication, Riva & Galimerti (1998:434) assume that communication is "not only a transfer of information, but also the activation of a psychological relationship, the process by which interlocutor co-construct an area of reality". They investigate the interactions in the virtual reality on the internet and how the feedback presented by the users might affect the identity of the whole group in the chat rooms. In this reference De Kerckhove, D. & C.J. Lumsden (1988) and De Kerchhove (1997) (cited in their study) have identified three types of brain frames: alphabetic, video, and cybernetic. Both the alphabetic and video brain frames are associated with the traditional means of technology (such as TV, Video sets) in which the responses of the users are restricted by the extent of information presented by these means. The cybernetic brain is constructed by the use of computers which "project us outside our own nervous systems and giving us access to … all aspects of the

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environment we find our selves in at any time we choose" (Riva & Galimerti, 1998:438). The cybernetic brain frames has been lately developed to what is called the "inter-brain frame" the brain frame resulted from the networking of the minds of the various users participating in the interaction on the internet chat rooms (see Fig. 2)
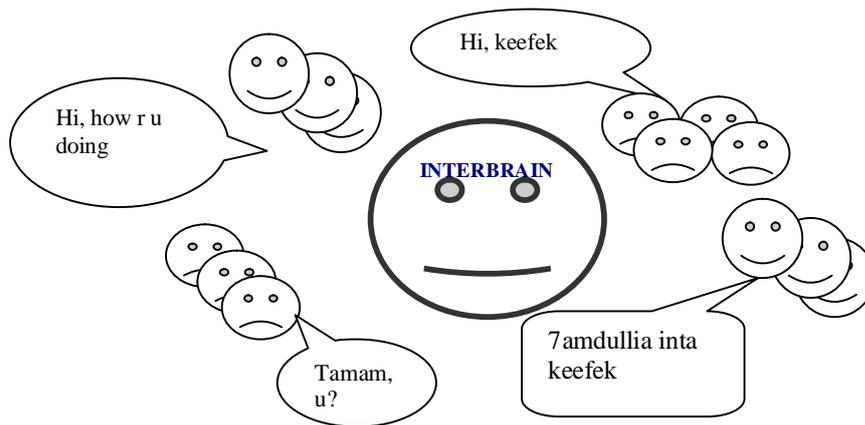

Figure 2: The Interbrain

On the other hand, an important concept found in the CMC research literature related to this study is that of the internet "virtual communities" (Rheingold: 1993; Baym:2003; Herring:2004; Jones:1995a, and Castells: 2000). Rheingold (1993: 5) defines the virtual community as "social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships". Based on previous literature (Haythornthwaite et al.: 2000; Jones: 1995a, 1995b; Reid, 1991, 1994, 1998), Herring (2004:14) provides a more detailed discussion about the typical characteristics of virtual communities assuming that such communities might be operational if the following six criteria are identified:

- active, self-sustaining participation; a core of regular participants
- shared history, purpose, culture, norms and values
- solidarity, support, reciprocity
- criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution
- self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups
- emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals

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It is certainly true that the majority of internet chat rooms does not satisfy these criteria and accordingly are not included within the scope of these communities. The participants in virtual communities should be involved in one way or another and from time to time in the discussion of particular topics related to some kind of shared knowledge with the other participants in the community. They, moreover, should have some kind of related ideas about the real world (for instance, based on political, social, cultural, or religious considerations). This might be expressed by the use of "group-specific abbreviations, jargon, and language routine". The members of the virtual community, moreover, might manifest various attitudes or actions to maintain their distinctive identity as a different group (for instance via "verbal humor or supporting through speech act analysis focusing"). They may also maintain an interaction environment by exchanging critical views about the topics under discussion by some members, followed by resolutions from one or other members in the group. Finally, they should agree upon a particular type of relational hierarchy between themselves.

The third criterion has an essential significance to the scope of this study namely the identity construction of the virtual communities. The early studies about the identity construction in CMC (e.g. Short & Christie,1976:34,65 and Sproll & Kiesler,1986:1492-1512) held the position that the social attachments in CMC is typically weak since they lack the various non-verbal conversational clues that face-to-face interactions make use of such as facial expressions, gestures, and postures. They emphasized the fact that people interacting via computers feel freer to break the traditional norms of ethics usually existing in real life. Some users even make use of "electronic opportunism" to fool others for one reason or another. For instance, they may use false identity (different sex, age, educational background) to achieve various types of interests.

These early theories looked at the individual participation of the internet users. Other researchers have investigated the virtual communities wishing to establish their distinctive salient identity on the basis of the users' share willingness to recognize themselves on social, political, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds or even a combination of some of these factors. For example Rice (1990: cited in Moral-Toranzo, et al, 2007:1660-1674) suggests what is called "organizational model" to disregard the individual

interaction in virtual communities and focusing on these communities as an integrated whole with one distinctive identity. Moral-Toranzo et al. (ibid) use the "social identity model of deindividuation effect" (SIDE) to analyze the social identity of a virtual community established by the North African immigrated minority. They assume that "when people define themselves as group members rather than as individuals – the anonymity of the members would decrease attention regarding interpersonal differences and enhance the salience of the group and social identity".

The social identity theory has been developed by Turner et al. (1987: cited in Moral-Toranzo, et al, 2007:1660-1674) into the "self-categorization theory" which entails three gradual degrees of self recognition; namely, human, social, and personal. According to this theory a participant in a virtual community has to choose one of these identities or shift from one identity to another. The identity shift might be achieved on the basis of several elements such topic change, the participants' social proximity, the shared knowledge, the shared educational background etc. In this reference, Turner (ibid) assumes that the shift from the personal to the social which is "depersonalization" does not imply the complete ignorance of self; rather it should be understood as a type of "self-stereotyping" in which the individual is focusing on the social identity of the whole group.

3.2. The Virtual Arab World

The internet has become part of the Arab's life during the 1990s (e.g. Tunisia 1991, Kuwait 1992, Egypt and UAE 1993, Jordan 1994 Syria 1997). Several social, cultural and political factors have been involved in restricting the internet spread in various Arabic countries. For instance, Saddam Hussein, the former Iraqi dictator, restricted the use of the internet to very limited governmental circles under the direct supervision of his elder son. He validated this restriction by calling the internet an "American propaganda tool". In Syria, on the other hand, there were only two places wherein one was able to access the internet one of which was the Syrian-engineers' association headed by Bashar Al-Assad the present Syrian president. In Saudi Arabia, moreover, the internet access became public only in the late 1990s (Wheeler: 2004, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information).

Despite the different types of sociopolitical restrictions established by the various Arab regimes, there is no doubt that the present situation of the internet access is highly promising; thousands of internet café have been initiated in various Arab countries with the millions of users of (nearly 14 million now) various ages, sex, and educational background. Wheeler (2004) found that the age of users in the Egyptian internet cafés ranged from 16-48; some of them spend 40 hours on-line per week. As to Jordan, the researcher found that the average number of hours per week spent in Internet café was 12, and the users' age ranged from 17 t0 30. All the subjects of the Wheeler's survey assumed that the internet had changed their life in one way or another.

More recently, the Arab internet users have been in a continuous struggle with the traditional political and social governmental and organizational powers to free themselves away from these powers.

> A new phase began when Arab governments began to crack down on Internet users. A game of cat and mouse developed. The cats were the Arab governments, who stalked those citizens who used the Internet to break the prevailing values of the religious, cultural, and political establishment. The mice were all those who chose to swim against the governmental stream. (The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information).

As for the most preferred sites visited by the Arab internet users, Wheeler (2004) found the following most visited sound in Jordan: Google, MSN Messanger.com, MSN Arabic.com, Yahoo, Maktoob.com, Salmeih.com, Hotmail.com, Aljazeera.net, and Islamway.com. Whereas, in Egypt the following sites are more commonly used: Forislam.net, 4arabs.com, ICQ, Yahoo messenger, and Aljazeera.com. The Dubai Expat Diaries list the following most visited websites in Dubai are: Yahoo, Google, You Tube, Face Book, Maktoob, Orkut, Friendster, Wikipedia, Blogger, MSN Arabia, Bayt, Gulf News, and Amazon. TunisLinks.com publishes the following most visited websites in Tunisia: Tunisia Weather, Tunisia Info (New and Media), Tunisia Yellow Pages, Coupe d'Afrique-African Cup, Tunisia National Radio, and La Presse Tunisie.
The sites mentioned above might be categorized into the following: Religious, IRC (Internet Relay Chat), Music, News and Media and Politics.

As it is obvious in the above data, the internet sites' preferences of the Arab internet users are different from one Arab country to another due to several specific social, political, and religious considerations. It has been assumed by many related

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surveys that the religious trend in the internet has been progressing constantly. Thousands of Islamic web sites together with hundreds chat rooms visited daily by thousands of users. Most of these Islamic web sites come from the Gulf region due to the several geopolitical and economical reasons. Some statistics have proposed some exaggerated percentage of the Islamic web site up to 65%. (The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information). On the other hand, on some countries, most typically in Saudi Arabia, the religious authority has been credited with the power of "blocking many websites even if they are not pornographic. Unexaggeratedly, almost 80% of the blocked websites are blocked as a result of the religious institution pressures" (The Initiative for an Open Arab Internet).

Rinnawi, (2002: 1-23) conducted a study in which he examined the users of nine popular Arabic websites[8]. He collected his data by asking the users of these sites some questions to elicit some general remarks about their points of view concerning some religious and political issues. As far as politics is concerned, he concluded that talking politics is considered as "a main indicator for the creation of a public sphere, its flexibility, and openness". Most of the answers he collected were directed against the Arab regimes. Here is one of the examples he cites:

> "Unfortunately we Arabs are experiencing a great catastrophe that we are creating for ourselves, which we have received from our regimes, whereby we talk a lot and do nothing. We are talking to one another, but we are not talking in the true sense – rather, fighting one another, accusing one another, and cursing one another. The root of all this is ignorance, caused by our regimes that cannot stand up against America and Israel, is because they fear the punishment of overturning the entire regime. This fear exists because all Arab regimes are illegitimate, and use religion to suppress the
> Arab people politically and socially." (Mohammad, al-Jazeera.net, September 11, 2002).

The author comes up with the conclusion that the virtual sphere of the internet has refreshed a new phase of pan-Arabism; namely, a virtual pan-Arabism.

4. The Shi'a as a minority group in the Arab World

4.1. Introduction:

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[8]aljazeera.net, arabia.com, maktoob.com, arabtimes.com, amin.org, konouz.com, arabian2000.com, ya-hala.co.il, and arab48.com .

Various types of definitions for the minority group have been proposed; the free science encyclopedia[9] assumes that the term refers to a group of people "that is assigned an inferior status in the society, one that enjoys less than its proportionate share of scarce resources". Minority groups might be classified as such on the basis of different criteria; such as ethnicity, religious, colure, race, or sex. All these categories share two facts; people belong to these groups are treated as socially different from another group of majority which enjoys the dominant power within the same society and accordingly the minor group is considered to be subordinate or assigned a disadvantage status. Feagin (1984:10) identifies the minority group in terms of five major criteria: A. Suffering discrimination and subordination, B. physical and/or cultural traits that set them apart, and which are disapproved by the dominant group, C. a shared sense of collective identity and common burdens, D. socially shared rules about who belongs and who does not belong determine minority status, and E. tendency to marry within the group.

When the members of a minority group numerically are very small in comparison to the members of the other groups within the same nation, they usually integrate culturally and socially within the surrounding majority (e.g. Druze in Jordan and Syria, Mandaens /Sabians) in the south of Iraq. Yet, the case would be more sophisticated when a particular ethnic, religious, or social group represents a majority in terms of the percentage of its members compared to the total population in a particular nation, or in a particular region in a nation (e.g. the black in South Africa under apartheid, the Shi'a in Iraq/ the Kurds in the North of Iraq before 2003, and the Shi'a in Bahrain).

In his latest book "The Shi'a Revival" (2006) Vali Nasr[10], discusses the Sunni/ Shiee struggle in the Middle East after the fall of the previous Iraq regime at 2003. He proposes that the new Middle East "will not be defined by the Arab identity or by any particular form of the national government. Ultimately, the character of the region will be decided in the crucible of Shi'a revival and the Sunni response to it." (P.22). In another chapter of the book, Vali discusses the Sunni reaction against the new political regime in Iraq including the insurgency operations against the American troops assuming that the

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[9] Minority - Widening The Definition, Minority Status And The Individual, Bibliography

[10] A professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California and a 2006 fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations

Sunni reaction, which surprised the whole world, is far from just a nationalist anti-American reaction since it resists not only the American occupation but the new non-Sunni power in the new regime.

The Shi'a in Lebanon is another example which is in one way or another might be even more complicated than the Iraqi Shi'a. Fuller and Rahim (2000) published a book entitled "The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims" in which they discuss the case of the Lebanese Shi'a as a distinctive religious group. They assume that Lebanon is a country with no majority group community, though the Shi'a represent the largest group (one-third) of the total population. The two sociopolitical groups of Shi'a in Lebanon (Amal Movement, and Hizballah) have exchanged the roles of leadership since the Israeli invasion in 1982. Since the last Israeli-Lebanon Summer War, the amount of advocates of Hizballah's sociopolitical and religious principles have been expanded not only by the majority of the Shi'a inside Lebanon but also by many other Arabs outside Lebanon. In their discussion about the relation between Lebanese Shi'a and the west, the authors assume "the Shia have every incentive to push for greater democratic practice in the Arab world…their declared long-term commitment to a democratic agenda should reassure the West" (p. 258). As for the relation between them and Iran they assume "In fact the relationship between Iran and the Arab Shia is quite complex, leaving the Shia highly ambivalent about it" (p. 171).

4.2. The Shi'a on the Internet Virtual World

The Shi'a similar to any other minority group in the Arab countries make a good use of the internet since they find it a great opportunity to publish their own beliefs about Islam which they think to be true, and to share these beliefs with others at the local, regional, and global levels. The top Shi'a sites are categorized with reference to the following[11]:

1. Scholar / Olama (Shie Clergy men sites)	7. Quran sites
2. Center and organization (The Shie organizations all over the world)	8. Islamic cards 9. Mosque
3. Umra and Ziyarat (Instructions related to the traditions used in visiting Mecca,	10. Istifta (asking for fatwa; an authentic explanation concerning particular life issues)

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[11] http://www.topshia.com/

Najaf, Karbala and other holly cities)	11. Mailing groups
4. Personal sites	12. Charity committee
5. General Islamic sites	13. Magazines
6. Women and kids	

The following are some examples from different internet sites about the kind of comments one may find in these sites:

"On this Deeply Grieved and Sorrowful Mournful Occasion of the "Martyrdom Anniversary of Syeda Fatima Zahra (S.A.)", We the Admins of this Page Extend Our Heartfelt and Deepest Grief and Condolences to the Holy Prophet of Islam (S.A.W.W.), Ahlybait (A.S.), Imam Mehdi (A.J.T.F) and to All the Momineen on the Face of Earth. Reference: Shi'a Voice on Face book.

Assalamu 3alaika yabna amir-ul-mu2mineen wabna sayyid-il-wasiyyina Assalamu 3alaika yabna Fatima sayyidati nisa2-il-3alameen… Assalamu 3alaika ya thaarallahi wabna thaarihi wa-l-watr-al-mawtuur allahumma-l3an-il-3isaabata-l-lati jaahadati-l-7usayn wa 3ala 3aliyyi-bni-l-7usayn(Peace be upon you, the son of the prince of the believers and the master of heirs…Peace be upon you, the son of Fatima the first lady of all world women… Peace be upon you, the Allah's retributive justice and the son of His retributive justice and the highly honorably distinguished… Oh, Allah Curse those gang which killed al Hussein and Ali the son of Hussein) Reference: Zawaydeh, B. (2007)

As with reference to the Sunni-Shiee debate on the net, there has always been a violent virtual confrontation between the two main Islamic sects in thousands of sites on the net. Such conformation, though originally based on sectarian aspects, it is manifested in a variety of social, cultural, sociopolitical, or religious outcomes.

As an example of this confrontation, the following comments might be cited[12]:

- "You (Shi'a) have to know that Iran has repressed the demonstrations arranged by the Shi'a and killed the helpless women. Don't provoke the Sunni. The Sunni in Iraq, Lebanon, and in Iran are begging for help. The Sunni population is 950 million; and you are only 50 million. Do not let the Persians make an advantage on you to achieve their scurvy political aims."

- "We in the south of Lebanon are supporting you (Shi'a) and will not abandon you. Yet, our main burden is to eliminate the Israeli entity from existence… these ridiculous

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[12] These comments are quoted form hundreds of comments attached to a movie in YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzEKEC8VNso) viewed by 368.365 viewers. The movie was about an incident of an oppression of a Shiee demonstration in Saudi Arabia.

actions showed on their satellite channels are so devilish and serve the Zionist aims. May Allah support us with Nasrullah; the Master of resistance."

- "The Shiee Iran is about to possess the nuclear weapon… what the Wahabi foxhole in Saudi Arabia is going to do then? I swear you are going to beg for the help of the Americans asking them for protection and you will lose; you Wahabi terrorists."

As it is clear in the above comments, the virtual confrontation between the Sunni and the Shiee is so sophisticated and is not restricted to how each sect understands the Islamic doctrines. The conflict is loaded with sociopolitical, geopolitical, cultural, historical and even economical dimensions.

Moreover, the virtual Sunni-Shiee war is not restricted to the expressions of different points of views in commentaries; they extend to what might be called the wars of hackers. Following is an excerpt from an article published in an Iraqi Shiee site[13] which is full of terms used in real wars:

"Title: The Shiee hacker destroys 900 Wahabi sites
Saudi sources have estimated the number of the Wahabi sites that have been targeted by a reactive attack up to 900; the most prominent one is that of the late Bin Baaz. The Saudi Newspaper Alwatan stated that some of the sites belong to Saudi clergy men have been either partially or totally destroyed."

Another example, in this reference, is the following quotation taken from a Saudi site[14].

"Title: Shiites retaliate for earlier Sunni attack
Sunni-Shiite hacking war disables 900 websites
In a tit-for-tat retaliatory attack, Shiite hackers infiltrated Sunni religious websites Monday in response to attack on prominent Shiite websites earlier this month. The Shiite hackers posted a face painted with the Iranian flag with a logo resembling that of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and a picture of the Israeli flag split in two by the Arabian Gulf embossed with words "The Persian Gulf." The hackers also posted a verse from the Quran reads "Assault those who assaulted you" in reference to the hacking by Sunnis of the Ahlulbayt Global Information Center, the largest Shiite website in the world, which is supervised by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. In the cyber-attack earlier this month Sunni hackers posted a religious chant and a video by American comedian Bill Maher in which he made fun of Sistani's "sexual fatwas."

[13] http://iraqshia.net/vb/showthread.php?t=29982
[14] http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/09/30/57499.html

5. The study

5.1. Background

A typical example to the Arab virtual communities found on the internet is the Paltalk Scene[15] which provides the users with the facilities of communicating via sending and receiving instant messages together with voice and video communication. This software offers thousands of rooms to be used by users all around the world. These chat rooms have the following major services:

1. The owner of the room is able to appoint unlimited Number of administrators.

2. The administrators have the power to red dote (the user will be in the room but not able to participate in the chat), bounce (the user will be dismissed outside the room; yet he is able to come back later), or ban (the user is not able to be in the room for a fixed period of time) any user that abuse their own regulations and norms.

3. The rooms are classified into different grades the typical room is able to contain up to 100 users. Yet, the users in some other rooms particularly those rooms discuss religious issues such as (Ansar Aal Mohammed (the supporters of Mohammed's relatives), or Ali me3e alhaq (Ali is with the Truth) reach up to 900 users per session.

4. Any user is able to raise his hand to have the mike and talk; if there are some other users have already been raising their hand, one has to wait until they finish. Each user may spend 10 minutes on the mike.

5. The owner or the administrator usually selects a topic and writes on the banner located at the top of the screen. The users will choose to raise their hand and talk about it, to send instant messages, or both.

These amazing facilities provide the users with a variety of technological tools to establish all the six characteristics (even more) of the virtual communities mentioned by Herring (2004) (see 3.1.). The software, moreover, provides the users with various categories to classify themselves according to language, place, and preferred topic. The users then keep classifying themselves into more and more restricted circles till they

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[15] Paltalk, including all of its programs, is owned by AVM Software, which is a privately held company founded in 1998 and based in New York City, NY. (Wikipedia)

arrive at very limited circles within the same language, country, and even the same ethnic group.

As explained in 4.1. above, the "inter-subject communication" can be maintained regardless of the physical distance. The interaction in digital computer technology might be as effective as face-to-face interaction (cf. Riva & Galimberti, 1997: 141-152). A miserable example of the efficiency of the interactions happen in the Paltalk is "Kevin Whitrick, 42, Shorpshire" who committed suicide while he was using one of the Paltalk chat rooms urged by some other users[16].

5.2. Methodology

The data of the study have been collected from one of the paltalk chat rooms called "alwa3d alsadiq" owned and used by the supporters of the Shiee Lebanese party "Hizb Allah". Most of the users of the room live outside Lebanon; they are Shiee of different ages, sex, and educational backgrounds. In their website, the owners of the chat room define themselves as:

> "The Hizb Allah chat room is a room for the supporters of the Lebanese Hizb Allah and for those who follow the same scheme as a way of life and a culture; it is the voice of the immigrated supporters; those who are looking for some mutual interests in the virtual world. It is an Islamic political room which supports the Islamic resistance in Lebanon established by supporters of this procession outside Lebanon.[17]"

The data have been collected along a period of two months: April and May 2010. The researcher selects various times and copies the chats without the prior awareness of the users respecting their privacy and freedom of keeping their identities unrecognized. The whole data were classified by numbering the roles taken by each participant at a particular session. The total numbers of the roles were 8864. For the sake of analyzing the data, these roles were further divided into ten parts.

5.3. Data Analysis

Moral-Toranzo, F. et al. (2007) (see 3.1. above) has indentified the following three major criteria in order to fulfill the predictions of the SIDE (social identity of deindividuation effect) model:

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[16] BBC News: Thursday, 13 September 2007.
[17] www.al-ghaliboun.org

(a) Group members have to define themselves as belonging to such a group and as sharing the same categorization.

(b) There must be anonymity among the group members. This will enhance the focus on the group and will reinforce even more group salience as well as group-related effects arising from group identification and group influence.

(c) The influence must be in-group influence. Social influence is determined by the idea that in-group members have the need to agree on a given situation.

These three different criteria have been identified clearly in the specified chat room. All the regular participants are Lebanese, belong to the same ethnic group of Shi'a, live outside Lebanon, and voluntarily support the principles adopted by Hizballah party; most importantly the principle of "Islamic resistance". On the other hand, various types of anonymous conceptions about both political and religious issues have been identified, for instance their obvious respect to Nasrallah as a politician and as a clergy man, their attitudes towards the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, their attitudes towards the Lebanese relation with Syria and Iran, and their connection between the historical revolutionary position of Imam Hussein (61 After Hijra/680 AD) and Nsralla's adoption of the Islamic resistance position. As a result of the acceptance of the principle of the Islamic resistance, all the members of the group have specific obvious aims in sharing and exchanging their own points of view on the basis of this principle.

The Results: First:

The Quantitative data:

A. Language Choice

Four different categories have been identified with reference to the languages used in the interaction: English only[18], Arabic only[19], Latinized Arabic, and Mixed languages. The following table illustrates the resulted percentages together with some examples for each category:

Category	Percentage	Examples
Latinized Arabic	51.7 %	Al_hamdany: allah y5alik rou7 ma3na abo almor: kalam sade2 GeeAre: 1 kor2an rayadyet kaman ya modamer

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[18] Mostly abbreviated.
[19] This category includes both Standard and Lebanese Arabic though we have noticed that the majority of the interaction is expressed in the Lebanese Arabic.

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|		Al_hamdany: allah y5alik arino: kel hal taghiyerrrr fi sharek awasattt ma sar she fi men waki33 Al_hamdany: batalit rou7 ana GeeAre: enno mesh bas kalam abo almor: ya 5aye 3am jareb
Arabic Only	34.7 %	Nitron-3d: هذا التوصيف اسمعتو في لبنان عندما كانت اسرائيل في لبنان وكانت لغة التثبيط لغة الناس العاديه ،نحن بدنا نحرر الجنوب العين لا تقاوم المخرز وهلما جر
English: Mostly abbreviated	10.7 %	Nassrollah_9D9: nv Nassrollah_9D9: usa Abou_Karim_2: brb tarzan_7: vgv Hussien abo ali: lol ok adamo44: mic free madinet-lchames: tyt
Mixed: Mostly Latinized Arabic and other variants of Arabic	2.7 %	abo almor: al hamdany plz mic ablak abo almor: arino fini e7ki b 7oriye plz iza kan fi demokratye 3endak MoonLight 20: برب نستأذنكم للصلاة على السمع

Table One: Language Choice

B. The Community of the Study

The members of the room are divided into regular and irregular members depending on the number of occurrence in the data. The following table indicates the participation of the regular members of the specified community together with the number of their occurrence and percentages of their participation.

Screen Name	Nos & Percentages	Screen Name	Nos & Percentages
1. o0o Qamar Bany Hashem o0o	850: 13%	11. lalune_4	217: 3.32%
2. Abou_Karim_2	833: 12.7%	12. Nitron-3d	208: 3.18%
3. madinet-lchames	663: 10.16%	13. abo almor	202: 3.09%
4. karbala2_l7ussein	535: 8.20%	14. seraj_73	185: 2.83%
5. lina-ana	507: 7.77%	15. mohamad_albaqer	164: 2.51%
6. arino	399: 6.11%	16. Al_hamdany	156: 2.93%
7. seemaa	315: 4.83%	17. AWALY-I (owner)	144: 2.20%
8. Nassrollah_9D9	288: 4.41%	18. alzahra2_mawlaty	142: 2.17%
9. pob_7	243: 3.72%	19. Al-Fou3ani	121: 1.85%
10. xXx_ALMODAMMER_xXx	237: 3.63%	20. QAWAREeR_bh	112: 1.71%

Note: The percentage of the regular user's participation in the data is 73%.

Table Two: Regular and Irregular Members
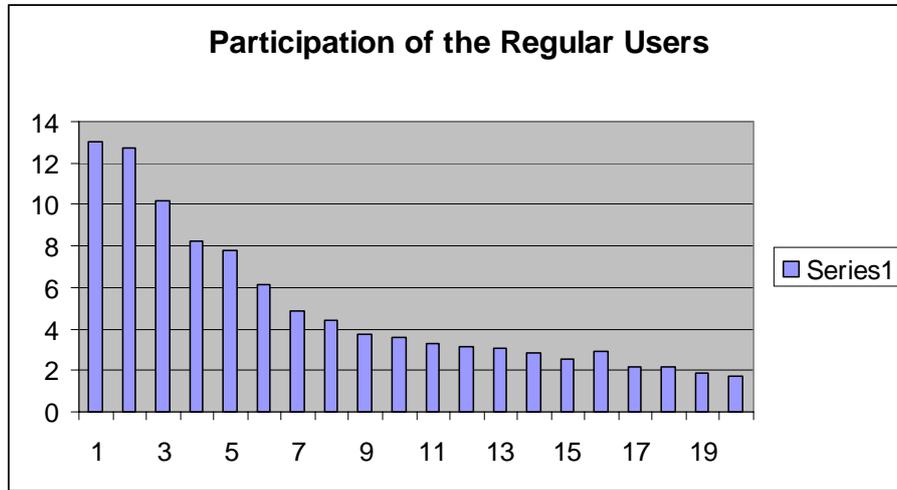
Despite the fact that the room is usually filled with up to 100 users, the users mentioned in the above table are the most active ones at least during the period of the data collection. With regard to the sex (only regular users), it has been found that 14 users were male and 6 users were female. The following figure illustrates the percentages and participation of each sex.

	Male and Female Participation	
	1	2
Male	70%	70.36%
Female	30%	29.96%

1. No. of Occurence 2. Participation Percentage
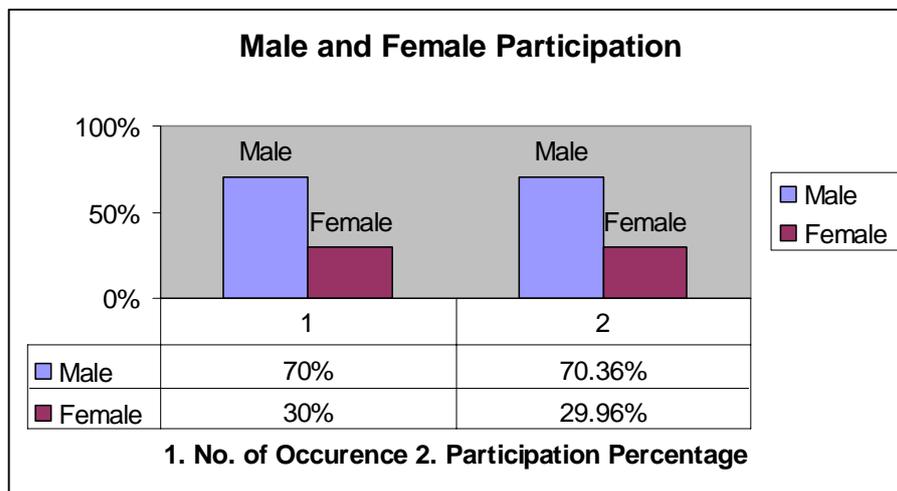
C. The Jargon:

As a distinctive group, there is a particular jargon used by the specified community which indicates their particular political, cultural, and religious identity. The following table illustrates some of the words that occur repeatedly in the data together with their number of occurrence:

1. Arabic words with political connotation (written in both Latinized and traditional Arabic)			
المقاومة (resistance)	46 times	امريكا (America)	18 times
اسرائيل (Israel)	59 times	صواريخ (rockets)	13 times
حزب الله (Hizballah)	51 times	حرب (war)	19 times
الامم المتحده (UN)	6 times		
2. Arabic words with Islamic and Shiee connotations (written in both Latinized and traditional Arabic)			
الله صل على محمد وال محمد وعجل فرجهم (Peace be upon Mohammed and his family and may Allah speed their relief)	505 times	احسنتم (good for you with special use: said mostly to praise someone mostly in religious contexts)	22 times
ماجور (bless you) May Allah reward you	11 times	الحسين (Hussein)	67 times
مولاي و مولاتي (My master/ madam with special use for the those whose parentage goes back to that of prophet Mohammed).	87 times		

Table Three: The Jargon

Second: The Qualitative Data: A. Topics Discussed

One of the major techniques used in the Paltalk Scene is that the owner or one of the administrators usually picks up a topic and writes it on the banner at the top of the page. The idea is to encourage the users to restrict their discussion of particular topics. The users are regularly stimulated by a limited number of speakers who are always proposing various aspects of discussions related to the selected topic. For instance the following topic has been written by the owner in one of the sessions found in the data of the study.

> "The topic in your room al wa3ed al Sadek is: It has been claimed that the military power of the Islamic resistance in Lebanon has been strengthened. Israel, on the other hand, has claimed that a new division of a developed weapon has been submitted to the resistance via Syria. Do you believe these claims? Will you participate and you will be rewarded by Allah."

This is a typical example of the topics discussed in the specified virtual community. It is clear that the topics selected are usually related to the struggle between HizbuAllah and Israel. The way these topics are written reflects, similar to all other aspects of the data, the clear connection between the political and religious associations. The last phrase of the above topic is a good example of this association.

B. Screen Names

The screen names selected by the users similar to the topics selected manifest a clear relatedness between the political principles adopted by the users of the specified community and a variety of religious connotations. The following table illustrates this point:

o0o Qamar Bany Hashem o0o	Religious: A name of one of the Shiee Imams	alzahra2_mawlaty	Religious: The name of prophet Mohamed's daughter
karbala2_l7ussein	Religious: A name of an Iraqi city wherein Imam Hussein is buried.	Labaika ya hussain	Religious: We are under your service Hussein.
Nassrollah_9D9	Political: The name of the leader of the HizbuAllah party	laka al bay3a ya sayyed	Political: We support you Nasrallah
mohamad_albaqer	Religious: A name of one of the Shiee Imams	Mawlay_Ali	Religious: A supporter of Imam Ali

Table Four: Screen Names

C. Text Floating

Another distinctive characteristic of the data is floating the text with repeated words, sentences, and phrases to maintain particular religious or political aspects of the community. The following table illustrates some examples:

 Examples

Religious	Political
mohamad_albaqer 1734 ٱللّٰهُمَ صلّ عَلَىٰ مُحَمَدٍ وَ آلِ مُحَمَدٍ وَعَجِلْ فَرَجَهُمْ وَإِلْعَنْ أعدائهُمْ إلَىٰ يَوم الِّدِينْ وَثَبِّتْنَا عَلَىٰ ولايَتِهِم واحشُرنا معَهم ياكريـــــــمِ (Peace be upon Mohammed and his family and may Allah speed their relief and curse their enemies till the resurrection day and keep us as their supporters and companions to them in the life after death) (My translation)	Abou_Karim_2: 🌸•ٍ.•ٍ.**•ٍ.•ٍ.**•ٍ.•ٍ. * *•ٍ.•ٍ* 🌸•ٍ* 🌸* قسما عظما حتى الموت*•ٍ.•ٍ.**•ٍ.•ٍ.* **•ٍ.•ٍ 🌸•ٍ.•ٍ* انا بايعتك حزب اللـــــه (We swear to Allah that will be HizbAllah's allies until we die)
🌹 mohamad_albaqer 1734	karbala2_l7ussein: يملكون السلاح والعتاد المتطور بنقصهم النفوس الحسينية...نملك السلاح الذي كان متواضع الان بيعلم كيف هو اضافة الى الانفس الابية الحسينية العلوية

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واعدوا لهم ما استطعتم من قوة ومن رباط الخيل ترهبون به عدو الله وعدوكم وآخرين من دونهم لا تعلمونهم الله يعلمهم وما تنفقوا من شيء في سبيل الله يوف اليكم وانتم لا تظلمون Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power, including steeds of war, to strike terror into (the hearts of) the enemies, of Allah and your enemies, and others besides, whom ye may not know, but whom Allah doth know. Whatever ye shall spend in the cause of Allah, shall be repaid unto you, and ye shall not be treated unjustly. (Yusuf Ali's translation)	(They possess the modern weapons but they lack the Husseiny spirit… we possess the weapon which used to be insignificant; now Allah knows how this weapon will be with the Alawi, Husseini and self-proud spirit) (My translation)

Table Five: Text Floating

Discussing the Results

The researcher has proposed a model as a theoretical background for this study illustrated in Figure 3 below. The model is based on the basic idea of language contact between English as a lingua franca (a default language in CMC) and Arabic in all its variants most particularly, the vernaculars. This contact is associated with various types of sociocultural considerations together with some pure linguistic ones. One of the consequences of this contact is the Latinized Arabic Orthography. The specified chat room selected for this study is proposed to be an outcome of this language contact in the sphere of some global sociocultural considerations that might be constructed via CMC.

The results of the study make it clear that the specified virtual community though is categorized by its users as conservative and hence is expected to stick to the basic norms of the classical Arabic; it makes a more use of the Latinized Arabic (51.7%) than the other available languages. This is ascribed partly to the fact that the majority of the users live outside Lebanon and hence they are outside the circle of the conservative norms established by the social and religious elites as indicated in (Wardhaugh: 1986-1998)

On the other hand, the results have indicated that there are two types of users: Regular and irregular; the regular users are those who are almost daily found within the group and their participation is more effective than the other users (73%). As for the irregular users, their frequency of occurrence was found to be limited and their participation was restricted to exchanging complements with the regular users. It might be concluded that the regular users, unlike the irregular ones, are more adhered to the

principles of the specified virtual community. Moreover, the regular users were 14 male and 6 female. The data have shown that both the male and female regular users were active in all aspects of the chat communication. Yet, some of the female users were found to have a tendency to distinguish themselves by using particular color in writing, using more emoticons, and less formal in discussing the specified topics.

As for the topics discussed, it has been noticed that there is an expected clear relatedness between the basic principles adopted by the members of the virtual community and the various types of topics selected for discussion (e.g. the principle of the Islamic resistance and their correlation with the historical revolutionary position of Imam Hussein against the injustice and illegitimate authority). This political-religious correlation in fact is one of the most obvious characteristic of the specified virtual community and is indicated as well by the text floating and the screen names the users select to express their identity and loyalty to both their political and religious principles.
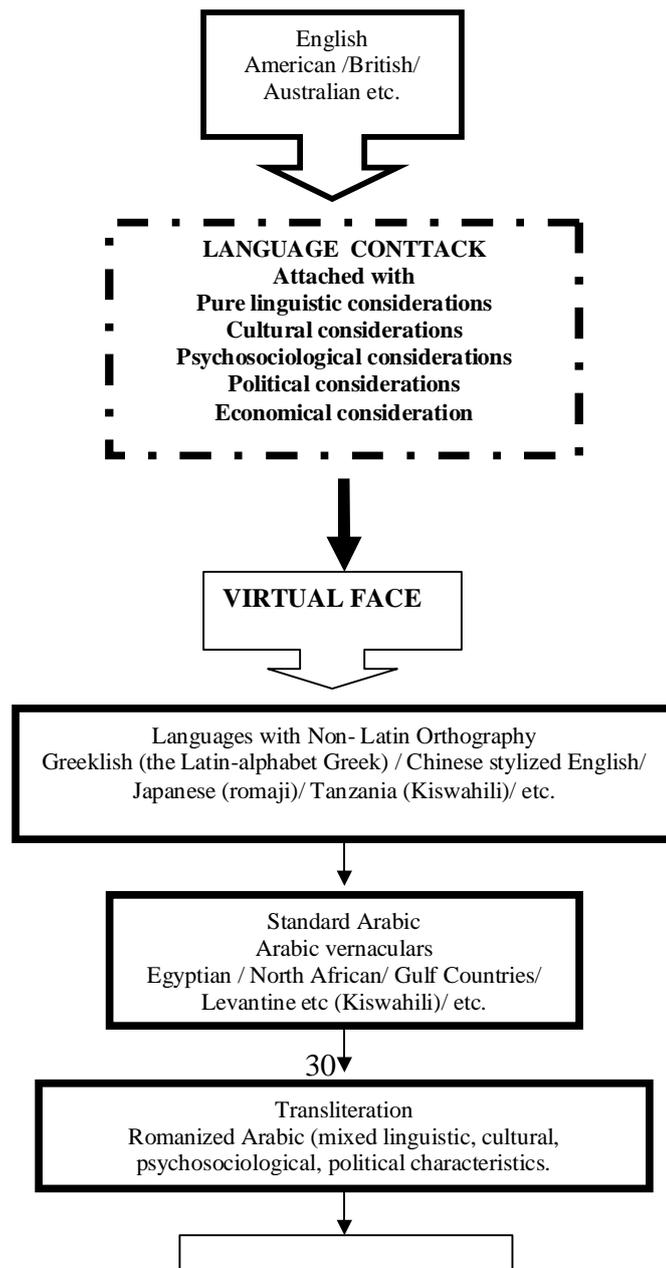
English
American /British/
Australian etc.

LANGUAGE CONTTACK
Attached with
Pure linguistic considerations
Cultural considerations
Psychosociological considerations
Political considerations
Economical consideration

VIRTUAL FACE

Languages with Non- Latin Orthography
Greeklish (the Latin-alphabet Greek) / Chinese stylized English/
Japanese (romaji)/ Tanzania (Kiswahili)/ etc.

Standard Arabic
Arabic vernaculars
Egyptian / North African/ Gulf Countries/
Levantine etc (Kiswahili)/ etc.

30

Transliteration
Romanized Arabic (mixed linguistic, cultural,
psychosociological, political characteristics.

Figure 3
The Theoretical Model of the Study
6. Conclusion

The study is an attempt to shed some light on the future of Arabic in this new century characterized by the amazing expansion of many aspects of computer mediated communication. Based on some sociolinguistic conceptions, the study implies that the orthographic changes that appear in Arabic writing system used in computer mediated communication resulted in what is called the "Latinized Arabic" might be well understood in the sphere of the sociocultural changes that the Arab world has been witnessing. The traditional conservative social, religious, and linguistic elites in the Arab world which were very strict towards any changes of the Arabic prescriptive norms have been losing their powers to control the new-generations' continuous innovations in proposing new techniques of communication.

The results of the study have manifested clearly that the members of the virtual communities, similar to their corresponding ones in ordinary communities in real life, share particular sociocultural and sociopolitical considerations about their life within the same community and with other virtual communities.

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