

Words on Screens: Women's Names in Mobile Phone Contact Lists in Jordan

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Abstract

This study investigates how male Jordanians store the names of their female relatives in mobile phones contact lists. The source of the data is a small-scale survey of 90 male Jordanians from three equal age cohorts: young (18-35), middle-aged (36-49) and old (+50). The participants' responses were coded in an excel sheet in which each token was coded for either [r] (real name) or [p] (pseudonym). Using Rbrul for quantitative analysis, the data were analysed within the framework of variationist sociolinguistics. The results show that male Jordanian city dwellers store the real names of their female relatives in mobile phone contact lists more than the village dwellers. With regard to age as a social factor, the findings demonstrate that the young and old groups are less sensitive about using the real names of their female relatives than the middle-aged group. The results were interpreted with reference to the changing roles of women in Jordan and social pressure.

Keywords: women, men, Jordan, names, mobile phones, contacts.

Introduction

The relationship between language and society is reciprocal. Language has a significant impact on society and society in turn has a powerful influence on language. The influence of language on society is demonstrated in the linguistic Relativity Principle, or the so-called Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. This hypothesis comes in two versions: strong and weak. The strong version asserts that language determines thought, whereas the weak version asserts that language usage influences thought. The essence of the two versions is that one's native language influences the way he/she perceives the world (Trudgill, 1974). On the other hand, the influence of society on language can be traced in the reflections of the physical environment, social environment and social values of the speech community in question. For example, if the physical environment of one society

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is polar whereas that of another is desert, we expect that to be reflected in language usage. Trudgill (1974, p. 27) illustrates this point with examples from English, Eskimo and Bedouin Arabic. He demonstrates that English has “only one word for *snow* (or two if we included *sleet*), Eskimo has several... It is essential for Eskimos to be able to distinguish efficiently between different types of snow... In the same way... Bedouin Arabic has a large camel vocabulary.” By the same token, the differences between English and Arabic with regards to lexicalised kinship terms are examples of the influence of the social environment of society on language (Trudgill, 1974). Finally, in many societies social values influence language usage. For instance, in traditional Arab societies, males avoid mentioning the names of their mothers, sisters and wives in front of strangers. In other words, the image of women in the Arab world is reflected in some linguistic behaviour by males. To illustrate, the name of one's mother has long been a social taboo in some Arab societies, such as in the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula. It has long been a common social practice for males in these areas to keep the names of their mothers a familial secret. If however, for some reason, one's mother's name became public, they would receive verbal abuse from their peers. Females in these areas, however, have not shown similar social and linguistic practices. This may be due to the social traditions and values of these societies with regard to the role of the woman, i.e., the woman has a dependent role on man and is considered part of his honour, and hence he feels the need to protect her and anything related to her by all means even by suppressing her name. This is, of course, one residue of the “patriarchal system which has governed the family system since time immemorial” (Fargues, 2003, p. 47). One of the pillars of this system is the “girl-women subordination to males within the family or marriage units” (Fargues, 2003, p. 47). In some conservative Arab Islamic communities, overprotecting the woman ranges from covering her head, confining her to the house in the name of religion, confining her to domestic conventional roles or even hiding her name. Until recently, women in Saudi Arabia were not allowed to drive or travel without a male *mahram* ‘a husband or an unmarriageable kin, such as grandfathers, fathers, brothers, uncles, etc.’.

In one of the episodes of the popular Saudi Arabian satirical TV comedy series *Tash Ma Tash*, the principal character, Nasir, takes his mother to a health centre where he meets with one of his peers, Suleiman, who accidentally hears the name of Nasir's mother, Muneera. Suleiman then makes sure that this information becomes public among all their mutual friends. Consequently, Nasir endures a lot of verbal abuse and mockery from his peers that he decides to leave the country. After a long period of time, Nasir comes back thinking that his peers and other neighbours have forgotten the incident. Now that many old buildings have been demolished, and many new ones have been built in his old

neighbourhood, he inquires about the location of his old family's house. Not recognising him, the neighbours answer by saying "Are you inquiring about the house of the Son of Muncera?" Consequently, he decides to leave again. This episode rightly reflects the subordinate role of women in some Arab conservative societies and how men often try to force their dominance over women.

There is no doubt that some Arab societies have changed drastically over the last few decades with respect to women's roles. However, it was only six months ago that a relative of ours got a job in one of the Jordanian banks in Irbid city. One day, she told us that a customer came that day to open a new bank account. He asked her kindly to help him fill in the application form. Under the personal details, he was asked to fill in his mother's name. He stopped for a while thinking and rethinking and then barraged her with questions about the necessity of this information. When she told him that it was very necessary to fill in all fields of the application form, he enquired about the confidentiality of the form. She told him that the bank always makes every effort to keep the confidentiality of its clients' information. He then told her that he would only write the name of his mother if she was the only person who would see it. She told him that was impossible as the application would be sent to the capital city of Amman for processing and reminded him that the name of his mother was mentioned on his ID card which he provided a copy of. He paused and thought for a while and begged her: "Please make sure that no one sees it but you". This anecdote speaks volumes about how women are still conceived by some men in Jordanian society. Nevertheless, some might see it as a manifestation of respect for the mother.

As we previously mentioned, in the last few decades the role of women in the Arab world has changed dramatically. In most of the Arab countries nowadays, women are no longer mere mothers and homemakers. They have started to take more active roles as leaders and organisers (Rama, 2013). This change in women's roles in the Arab World is expected to have influenced the way Arab men use the language to refer to them. This study is dedicated to investigate how Arab men store the names of their female siblings in the contact lists of mobile phones.

Naming, addressing and referring to women in Arabic

The way members of a community refer to themselves and to others is not random; it may reflect status distinctions. The relationship between the speaker and the addressee plays a central role in his/her choice of the suitable 'forms of address'. The same person might be referred to using different 'forms of address' depending on his/her context in relation to the addresser. This context is

often referred to in sociolinguistics with the terms ‘-power’ and ‘+power’ (see Holmes, 2013). The term ‘power’ refers to one's social status or rank in relation to others. Sometimes however, it might refer to one's age or gender. To illustrate, in English, forms of address such as “*sir, Mr Smith, Smith, Frederick, Fred, mate* and so on, are all different. Each has different stylistic implications, and the rules for their usage, as well as the frequency of their usage, are quite complex. These rules often vary from class to class, age-group to age-group, and place to place” (Trudgill, 1974, p. 105). The case of the Arabic forms of address, such as *sayyid* ‘Mr.’, *Sayyid Darwish* ‘Mr. Darwish’, *Darwish* ‘Surname’, *Ibrahim* ‘First name’, *Barhoum* ‘nickname: contracted first name’ to refer to the same person is not different from the English ones mentioned above. Interestingly, competent speakers are often equipped with the necessary social and linguistic repertoires that enable them to choose the adequate forms of address in the right time and place. These linguistic and social rules differ from one speech community to another. For example, speech communities differ on the way they name or refer to women.

In the past, Arabs used to choose tough names for their male offspring, such as *Ṣakhr* ‘rock’, *Thiib* ‘wolf’, *Mhaawish* ‘fighter’, *Laith* ‘lion’, *Ṣaqr* ‘falcon’, etc. In contrast, females used to get tender names, such as Zahrah ‘flower’, Noorah ‘light’, Jamiilah ‘beautiful’, Areej ‘scent’, and Wafaa ‘loyalty’ (see Darwish, 2010; Abu Hatab, 2015; Darwish & Bader, 2014). The fact that Arab tribes used to fight very often over water and grass and the fact that only male fighters would participate in such battles may explain the Arabs' tendency to choose tough names for their male offspring. Although time has changed ever since, traces of this naming practice in many Arab speech communities can be easily found. In a study on a large corpus of Arabic personal names in Jordan, Abdel-Jawad (1986, p. 91) reports that “male personal names are chosen to indicate qualities and attributes of manhood, courage, generosity, nobility and similar praiseworthy qualities. Female personal names are often chosen to indicate favourable feminine qualities and attributes such as beauty, serenity, chastity, modesty, softness and kindness.”

Mahfouz's novel *Bayn al-Qasrayn* ‘Palace Walk’, a first of a famous trilogy, is often remembered by the way the main male character ill-treats his wife. Bassiouney (2009, p. 143) concentrates on the way they both address each other. Throughout the novel, the husband addresses his wife by her first name *Amiinah* ‘honest’ while the wife addresses her husband by *si* ‘mister’ followed by his first name; “it is no coincidence that his first name is *Sayyid*, meaning ‘master’. Thus throughout the novel, his wife refers to him as ‘mister master’. The relationship between them can be neatly explicated in terms of Brown and Levinson's theory of power and politeness.” In other words, being a woman, the wife has little

power compared to the husband, and thus she “has to maintain her face as much as possible, and has to preserve the face of others. The husband, *Sayyid*, has much more power; he does not have to pay attention to face” (Bassiouney, 2009, p. 143).

As mentioned above, power is often related to social status (class and/or occupation) and sometimes to other social variables, such as age and gender. Parkinson (1985) investigates the terms of address in Egypt. His findings reveal that knowledge of the appropriate use of terms of address in Egypt is vital for successful verbal communications. He even compares its importance to the knowledge of the conjugation of verbs. He has found no significant relationship between the use of the Egyptian terms of address and gender. He concludes that terms of address in Egypt are more sensitive to class, occupation and age than to gender.

Farghal & Shakir (1994) investigate kin terms and titles of address in Jordanian Arabic as social honorifics. They argue that affectionate titles of address in Jordanian Arabic are “social honorifics that may be utilised to promote solidarity among acquaintances or strangers” (p. 248). Examples of such affectionate Jordanian titles of address include: *hubbi* ‘my love’, *hayaati* ‘my life’ and *ruuhi* ‘my soul’. Despite the similarity of these Jordanian Arabic titles of address to their English counterparts, i.e., love, darling, etc., “sex-restrictions on such honorifics in English and Jordanian Arabic are different. While adult Jordanians may only use affectionate honorifics with the same sex, (for example, among males), adult English speakers often use these honorifics appropriately across opposite sexes, (for example, adult males addressing adult females)” (p. 249).

In a two-year fieldwork in the Egyptian Western Desert, Abu-Lughod (1986) explains that women in these areas must hide any emotional or affectionate attachments because society expects them to be modest. She explains that women in those areas “rarely use their husbands' names but refer to them simply as “that one” (*hadhāk*) or, if they are affectionate, “the old man” (*shāyib*) or “the master of my house” (*ṣāhib bētī*)” (pp. 154-155). Similarly, Abu-Lughod observes that men in these areas do not refer to their wives by names when others are around.

Objectives and Procedures

This study aims to show how Jordanian males store the names of their female relatives in the contact lists of mobile phones. In particular, the study investigates how the names of Jordanian wives, fiancés and girlfriends are stored in the Jordanian males' mobile contact lists. Previous studies have shown that Arab men tend to avoid using the real names of their wives and siblings in front

of others (Bassiouney, 2009; Farghal & Shakir, 1994; Abu-Lughod, 1986). Although mobile phones are private properties, they belong to the public sphere as others may occasionally see what is written on the screen, especially when they signal incoming calls. The driving force behind conducting this study is the authors' observation that men in Jordan use many techniques to hide the names of the females in their lives, such as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, etc. The authors noticed that some Jordanian men use pseudonyms instead of the real names to refer to the females in question. They do so because of various social reasons. The data for this study was collected through an informal survey conducted by the authors themselves. The number of participants is 90 male Jordanians who belong to three major age groups: young (18-35), middle-aged (36-49) and old (+50). Because the authors needed each age group to consist of 30 participants, they utilised convenient purposeful sampling. In the survey, the participants were asked to answer the following principal question: "How do you store your wife's, fiancé's, girlfriend's, mother's or sister's name in your mobile contact list?" The surveys were conducted using various ways depending on how the participants offered themselves available: some were surveyed face to face, others were surveyed over the phone, and few asked for the questions to be sent to them either via email or *whatsapp*. The answers were collected and classified according to the three age groups. Using Rbrul for quantitative analysis, the data were analysed within the framework of variationist sociolinguistics. Rbrul is a programme designed mainly to handle sociolinguistic data and is able to report whether certain linguistic and non-linguistic factors are statistically significant in the interpretation of certain linguistic phenomena. Within Rbrul, the variable under investigation is the use of real names to store the names of female relatives in mobile phone contact lists in Jordan (R). This variable is coded with its two variants: real name [r] and pseudonym [p]. An excel sheet was prepared in which each token was coded for either [r] or [p].

Findings

The runs of Rbrul regarding the use of the variable (R) using the 'real name' [r] as the application value correlated with place of residence and age as displayed in Table 1. A factor weight above 0.5 favours the application of the rule (in this case, the use of the real name variant [r]), while a value less than 0.5 disfavors this application. Log-odds values basically carry the same information given by the factor weight, i.e., a positive value favours the application of the rule and a negative value disfavors it (see Guy, 1993; Johnson, 2009, p. 361; Clark, 2010; Abu Ain, 2016).

Table 1: Rbrul results for (R).

					R² 0.213
Place of residence	logodds	tokens	[i] mean	centred factor weight	
city	0.749	50	0.620	0.679	
village	-0.749	40	0.325	0.321	
(p<0.00128)					
Age	logodds	tokens	[i] mean	centred factor weight	
young	0.765	30	0.633	0.682	
old	0.086	30	0.500	0.521	
middle	-0.850	30	0.333	0.299	
(p<0.0182)					

The results in Table 1 are those retrieved from the step-down analysis. They show that the 'place of residence' and 'age' are statistically significant social factors in influencing the choice by male Jordanians on how they store the names of their female relatives in mobile phones contact lists.

With respect to the 'place of residence' as a social factor, the results in Table 1 show that it is the most statistically significant social factor ($p < 0.00128$). The results show that city dwellers (factor weight = 0.679, i.e., above 0.5) use real names [r] more than village dwellers (factor weight = 0.321, i.e., below 0.5). Put differently, the percentage of male Jordanian city dwellers that use real names in storing their female relatives' names in mobile phones contact lists is 62% compared to 32.5% by village dwellers. Clearly, life in the city is more open than life in the village; therefore, the results are somehow expected. Social change with regards to the roles of women often starts in the city. In other words, in the city women have more opportunities (social networks) to play wider roles than in the village, and hence they become more equal to men. Consequently, men in the city use real names to refer to their female relatives more than men in the village because male city dwellers view their female counterparts as equals.

With respect to 'age' as a social factor, the results in Table 1 show that it is a statistically significant social factor ($p < 0.0182$). Interestingly, the results show that young (factor weight = 0.682, i.e., above 0.5) and old (factor weight = 0.521, i.e., above 0.5) male Jordanians use real names [r] more than middle-aged (factor weight = 0.299, i.e., below 0.5) ones. Put differently, the percentages of young and old male Jordanians that use real names in storing their female relatives' names in mobile phones contact lists are 63.3% and 50%, respectively, compared to 29.9% by middle-aged male Jordanians. These results can be

interpreted in terms of 'social pressure'. It appears that young and old male Jordanians have less social pressure when it comes to referring to their female relatives in public (in this case storing the names in mobile phones contact lists). Middle-aged male Jordanians have more contact with people from outside the close and extended families; therefore, they are under more social pressure to hide the real names of their female relatives. In fact, this behaviour of middle-aged individuals is well-documented by Labov (1963) when he studied the centralisation of (ay) and (aw) in Martha's Vineyard, an island off New England on the United States east coast.

Conclusion

Names are not mere tags used to refer to individuals in any given society. To the contrary, they carry more significant social values which differ from one society to another. This study has investigated how male Jordanians store the names of their female relatives in mobile phone contact lists. It has revealed that not all male Jordanians store the real names of their female relatives. Some male Jordanians still view women as dependents that need to be protected by all means even by suppressing their real names. This is pertinent, of course, to Arab male's honour, "the most important supreme value in Arab life, more important than life itself" (Bukay, 2003, p. 34). Undoubtedly, Arab societies have changed significantly over the last few decades with regards to the issue of honour and women's roles. The findings of this study confirm this change and show that Jordanian men in the city use the real names of their female relatives in mobile phones contact lists more than men in the village. Moreover, the results indicate that young and old male Jordanians use the real names more than the middle-aged ones who still, perhaps for reasons related to social pressure, try to hide the names of their female relatives behind pseudonyms.

كلمات على الشاشات: أسماء النساء في قوائم اتصال الهواتف المحمولة في الأردن

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ملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية قيام الأردنيين الذكور بتخزين أسماء أقاربهم الإناث في قوائم الاتصال بالهواتف المحمولة. ويعتبر مصدر البيانات عبارة عن مسح على نطاق صغير لـ 90 من الذكور الأردنيين من ثلاث مجموعات متساوية في السن: الشباب (18-35)، ومتوسطي العمر (36-49) وكبار السن (+50). وتم ترميز ردود المشاركين في ورقة (excel) باستخدام رمزين: إما [r] (أي اسم حقيقي) أو [p] (أي اسم مستعار). وتم تحليل البيانات في إطار علم اللغة الاجتماعي المتباين باستخدام برنامج (Rbrul) للتحليل الكمي. تظهر النتائج أن سكان المدن الأردنية الذكور يقومون بتخزين الأسماء الحقيقية لأقاربهم الإناث في قوائم الاتصال بالهاتف المحمول أكثر من سكان القرى. أما فيما يتعلق بالعمر كعامل اجتماعي، فتوضح النتائج أن فئات الشباب والكبار أقل حساسية من فئة متوسطي العمر تجاه استخدام الأسماء الحقيقية لأقاربهم الإناث. وأخيراً تم تفسير النتائج بالرجوع إلى الأدوار المتغيرة للمرأة في الأردن ولضغوط المجتمع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النساء، الرجال، الأردن، الأسماء، الهواتف المحمولة، قوائم الاتصال.

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