

The Lebanese M Community: Identities Lost (or Found) in Translation

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“...as long as our language is inadequate, our vision remains formless, our thinking and feeling are still running in old cycles, our process may be ‘revolutionary’ but not transformative.”

- Adrienne Rich

The first time I was exposed to the word “gay,” I was watching television at home. In the Arabic subtitles, the word *shādh* appeared.¹ From around that time, I have a vague memory of one of my teachers at my Lebanese Catholic School explaining what *shādh* meant. The word easily translated into English as deviant – my teacher had been clear: the norm is a straight line, and anything that deviates away from the line is a *shudhūdh min al-mujtama*’ (deviation from society), whereby the adjective *shādh* becomes the noun *shudhūdh* in that expression. The naïve first-year student I was who left Lebanon to attend college in the U.S. was quick to discover that there are words in English to talk about these nonnormative identities – I will address that term soon – that allow for the existence of the multitude of identities within language. Stepping out of the US and back into Lebanon, I question how the discourse forms around nonnormative identities in Lebanon? What words do people use to describe themselves and what do they not use? What terminology do local advocacy groups employ? This paper begins this research with contextualizing the linguistic fabric of Lebanon. Then, I explain the specific dilemma of putting this research together, in writing, in English. Finally, I partition the state of queer language in Lebanon into the imagined intersection of Arabic and English, or which is critically constructed within the confines of Arabic, to exemplify incongruent equivalency in queer (nontextual) translation.

¹ In the Romanization of Arabic, I use the Library of Congress’s standard transcription principles for Arabic. These guidelines can be found here: <https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsd/romanization/arabic.pdf>

1. (Re)Positioning Ourselves

Before we embark on this exploration, it is important to contextualize this work. Lebanon is a peculiar case study to focus on because bilingualism and trilingualism are commonplace. The phrase “Hi! *Kifak? Ça va,*” is often used to proudly showcase how English, Arabic, and French can exist within and around each other’s boundaries and at the imagined space of their intersection, in conversational Lebanese Arabic. Growing up, the majority of people in Lebanon learn English or French along with Arabic, in American or French schools and universities. I spoke with Sara Mourad, a Lebanese PhD student who graduated from Annenberg last year, and in her paper *Queering the Mother Tongue*, she elaborates that, “ many from the middle and upper classes grow up as Arabs with a hybridized, Western education – minus sex ed classes,” (Mourad). Mourad, who is currently a professor at the American University of Beirut, continues to explain how foreign media consumption shapes sexual knowledge for many. On a local level, normative and deviant representations of physical intimacy are scarce in the visual and verbal landscape of Arab mass media. On the other hand, Arab literature throughout centuries does not shy away from this intimacy. This literary boldness could explain why much of the work on homosexuality has focused on literary texts. Literature will not be the focus here as this research draws from field observations and interviews.

2. Dilemma of Writing

In that same essay, *Queering the Mother Tongue*, Mourad phrased it best: “ There is something inherently troubling in writing about one’s culture in a foreign language,” (Mourad). Gayatri Spivak warns against engaging in a discourse that would suggest the subaltern cannot

speak for itself (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”). Thus, I find it crucial to expand on the role of language itself in this specific paper.

Language in its characteristic fluidity, is a process of translatability: in the end, as William Spurlin explains in *Queering Translation*, one signifier replaces and at the same time displaces another signifier through a continuous play of signification in the absence or deferral of a final meaning (Spurlin, “Queering Translation”). In Lebanon, for example, not all folks know what *mujtama’ al-mīm* (the M community) means. While the use of “LGBTQ community” or *mujtama’ al-aljibitikiyu* is more common, one glance at Lebanese advocacy group’s social media or marketing is enough to elucidate the growing push towards utilizing Arabic, so that these less common terms are more recognizable and used. This illustrates well Spivak’s notion of the untranslatable: the untranslatable is not what one is unable to translate “but something one never stops (not) translating,” (Spivak, “Translating in a World of Languages”).

The notion of a sexual identity in the Arab world is relatively new as Arab society itself is more concerned with sexual acts than sexual orientations or identities. Per Brian Whitaker, in his book *Unspeakable Love*, Arab literature presents evidence that Arab countries, historically, have been relatively tolerant of sexual diversity, where we see the existence of an active/passive binary instead of a hetero/homosexual binary. He argues that “as with many other things that are forbidden in the Arab society, appearances are what count; so long as everyone can pretend that it doesn’t happen, there is no need to do anything that stops it,” (Whitaker 10). While there exist words to describe homosexual activity in Arabic, I wonder if it’s not a violent act to apply the concept of “a homosexual” to this context in which the activity itself resists the identity? In his book *Desiring Arabs*, Joseph Massad, a controversial Middle Eastern scholar at Columbia

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University, describes homosexuality as a foreign import of orientalist nature, and the “...promotion of gay rights in Arab and Muslim countries is an imperialist-style ‘missionary’ project orchestrated by what he calls the ‘Gay International,’” (Massad 203) Alternatively, he suggests the use of the term “same-sex practitioners,” stripping the language of any identity signifier and focusing on the action. According to Mourad, such a categorization is problematic, rhetorically dehumanizing, and unnecessarily limiting. “The self-identification of queers with certain categories is not the same as their regulatory categorization by oppressive structures,” (Mourad).

Writing in English, many of the terms I could use in English to categorize the people I have interviewed would represent a violent act of categorizing this *other* whose voice I want heard and represented. Alas, I consider using “nonnormative identities” instead of “queer,” “LGBT,” “gay,” etc. Still, does this term not create a binary of what falls within the norm and what falls behind it?

In an interview with the director of Helem, a Lebanese LGBT organization, Genwa Semhat explained to me when and why the term *al-hawīyāt al-ghayr namaṭīyah* (nonnormative identities) is used. In press releases and articles, in the media, and in official documents to the Lebanese government, *al-hawīyāt al-ghayr namaṭīyah* is employed. Assuming the norm is heteronormative, this term encompasses everything beyond the (hetero)norm – even those who do not wish to name for themselves an identity. While this is a term Helem would never use directly in contact with its beneficiaries, Semhat explains that “non-normative” delivers a message without attaching to it moral delinquencies and anti-West pushback. Because this term

includes behavior that falls within the hetero-norm as well, such as swing couples and anal sex, it brings the picture closer to a non-LGBT person (Semhat).

Thinking back to my opening story on my schooling of the word *shādh*, does the use of “non-normative” not dangerously follow the logic of using “deviant” as a label? By partitioning identity into either normative or non-normative identity, the labels we apply translate the naming space into a configuration of a power relation, situating the normative as the dominant and pushing the non-normative to the margin (Spurlin, “The Gender and Queer Politics of Translation”).

Even though the use of “nonnormative identity” could be justified, I take on a different umbrella term in this paper: the M community or *mujtama’ al-mīm*. I have mostly observed this term on social media websites of Lebanese groups as a translation of “the LGBTQ community.” *Mujtama’ al-mīm* refers to *mithlīyīn* (gay and lesbian), *muzdawijīn* (bisexual), *mutaḥawilīn* (trans), and *mutasā’ilīn* (queer or questioning) (“من هم مجتمع الميم (LGBTQ)?”). As you can see, all these words start with the letter “m.” Whitaker reminds us that “...linguistic gaps are often cited to support the argument that concepts they refer to do not really exist in Arab society. An alternative explanation is that the concepts do exist but the Arabic language had no need for terminology to describe them until recently,” (Whitaker 204). Having established that the concept of an LGBTQ community exists in Arabic, I shall use terminology that most adequately describes it.

3. Imagining Language

Over the span of eight months in 2016-2017, I conducted interviews with six Lebanese people from the M community; there were men and women among them, living in Lebanon and outside of it, between the ages of 18 and 25. Even though this is far from a representative sample of the community, it is still valuable in providing some insight into the role of language in these individuals' identities. I asked about their background with language and listed words in English and Arabic to collect some information about their emotional relation to these words. Some of the people I interviewed had understandable concerns about how this information would be used, while others did not care if their name was even associated with it. For the sake of maintaining anonymity, none of my individuals shall be named or discussed specifically. Instead, I will draw from these interviews a few themes.

When asked about the first time they found terminology they could identify with, my interviewees were quick to explain that it was a word in English, either "queer" or "gay." It comes up in a movie with some derogatory Arabic subtitle or in a novel and then Google Translate brings up the derogatory term again: *shādh* (deviant) and *lūṭī* (sodomizer) are some examples. One interviewee explained how the word "gay" seemed like this shiny exciting *thing* that, for some reason, could not be reduced to the derogatory terms. Even when they later learned the politically correct terms, such as *mithlī* (gay) or *mithlīyah* (lesbian), these terms were new and unfamiliar. At this time, I cannot definitively say that this disassociation with the terms is similar to how English speakers do not identify with these terms' English equivalent: homosexual. Still, for my interviewees, the words from English felt more resonant. In our talks, and I assume in their daily lives, they had no trouble inserting words of English in sentences of Arabic – *kwīr*, *gāy*, and *lazbiyan* are some examples. Some of my interviewees made a conscious

effort to explain that if they are speaking Arabic, they will use the politically correct terms of Arabic. Here, in the personal narratives, and the M community's everyday life, the borders between languages intersect and a new language where identities of English can thrive in a sentence of Arabic is imagined and understood. This is as much a Lebanese praxis as it is a queer one.

To further elucidate the split relations my interviewees had to words in Arabic compared to words in English, I will discuss their varied emotional reactions to “femme” and “masc” versus *mista'nith* and *mistarjil*. For the men interviewed, the femme/masc binary evoked a strong negative reaction: these words are used to evoke preference on online dating portals, especially adversely against effeminate men. To elaborate, the binary is used as a proxy for the active/passive binary I discussed earlier, reducing sexual identity to the physical act itself. As for the Arabic, most interviewees explained how they have been exposed to the usage of the *mista'nith/mistarjil* binary to express judgement towards atypical gender expression or performance, even in a non-queer context. One woman even explains how the term *mistarjila* (masculine woman) is used by male relatives to put a woman who speaks up back in her place. It is interesting to note that for the Arabic *mista'nith/mistarjil* and the English masc/femme, being feminine is negatively viewed, whether for its association with women under men's power, or its association to the penetrated or passive sexual practitioner (Massad; Whitaker).

4. Constructing Language

In addition to these personal interviews, I conducted interviews with staff of two NGOs, Genwa Semhat from Helem, whom I introduced earlier, and Rabih Maher, the senior social

worker at MOSAIC – MOSAIC is the MENA Organization for Services, Advocacy, Integration, & Capacity Building, and it is an NGO based in Lebanon supporting the LGBTQ community (“MOSAIC MENA | About”). From both, I learned of the collaboration among LGBT advocacy groups in Lebanon and their diversity in providing a variety of services and support: Helem, the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality, M-Coalition, Marsa, and Mosaic. Maher and Semhat separately explained that each of these organizations completes a specific and necessary type of work. Nevertheless, they all work on one united agenda for almost the same audience. I would like to note that both staff members seemed very conscious of which language they were speaking in and even more so of which terms they were using. I would ask a question in English, and they would respond in Arabic, replacing English terms pertaining to the M community with their Arabic equivalents. Instead of imagining a new language that is queer Lebanese, it is in the advocacy group’s interest to maintain a strong national linguistic identity, adding to the Arabic words of Arabic. This linguistic nationalism is especially critical in dealing with homophobic and transphobic governments that wish to attribute the rise of the LGBTQ movement in Lebanon to Western neocolonialism and Massad’s Gay International, calling for a resistance through cultural authenticity (Whitaker).

Terms like *ashāb al-hawīyah al-jandarīya al-ghayr namaṭiya* (those with non-conforming gender identities) and *thunā’iyat al-muyūl al-jinsīyah* (bisexuality) rolled off Maher’s tongue as easily as *tabbūlah* and *ḥummus*. He understands however, that this is not as easy for all of Mosaic’s beneficiaries. In building relationships with its people, Mosaic uses whatever term a given person is using and helps correct any misunderstandings of certain words and concepts. With time, they train people to use proper terms in Arabic without alienating them

from their own identities (Maher). For example, the staff would explain that instead of the derogatory *lūṭī* (sodomizer) or English “gay,” the term *mithli* exists. Semhat, in a similar fashion, explained that on the ground, only Arabic terms are used, and according to her, it is effortless; words from English or French are rarely used (Semhat).

5. Nonequivalent Translation

The final component I wish to introduce is *qāmūs al-jandar* or *Gender Dictionary*, which was published in early 2016 and is available online for free. Still, I excitedly purchased my copy from your typical bookstore in Lebanon. The book was created by a large collaborative team led by Support Lebanon, an information and research center that aims to enhance civil society capacity, efficiency, and effectiveness (“About Lebanon Support | Lebanon Support”). While *Gender Dictionary* is a product of the feminist tradition – the book is dedicated “to all feminists and activists in Lebanon” – several of its entries can be brought into the scope of this research. As a practical bilingual tool of “traveling concepts” and their “local usages in Lebanon,” this work documents well the existence of words in Arabic pertaining to gender and sexual identity (*Gender Dictionary* - قاموس الجندر). In providing definitions and backgrounds to some words, the dictionary is careful explaining the origin of the word in English and its cultural context in the USA, as well as explaining the origin of its perceived equivalent in Arabic, and its respective cultural context in Lebanon. With 22 terms, including “hymen,” “sexuality,” and “cisgender,” the *Gender Dictionary* exemplifies an incongruence of equivalency Spurlin had warned us about. “...Are the very terms used for gender and sexual identities in one language necessarily reducible to equivalents in other languages, particularly when one works across historical periods and/or across cultures? Attention to these transgressions, these slippages of signification, these

differences, when we work across languages and cultures is, in effect, a comparatively queer praxis,” (Spurlin, “Queering Translation”).

Afsaneh Najmabadi, a Persian scholar at Harvard, also explains in *Is Another Language Possible?* that despite the utility of a transnational identity and language which fosters solidarity grounded in the familiar desire for “being the same,” we ought to suspend our assumed language that has worked for activism elsewhere and need to learn what languages and styles of activism have emerged locally (Najmabadi).

All in all, we have found our way to one constant – there will always be the need for more work to study queer identities in the Global South, especially one that extends beyond the critical study of literary works, albeit necessary. Nonetheless, as have exemplified above, language is too fluid and malleable to be contained in the rigidity of ink on paper. The identities of the M community in Lebanon exist with translation, but it does not make them less original. Among the individuals themselves, the most resonant is found at the boundary of English and Arabic. Among advocacy groups, it seems imperative to stay true to Arabic, constructing and utilizing appropriate and representative terms simply because they are needed – will these groups ever know a reality where an individual’s first exposure to terms related to the Lebanese M community is both in Arabic and non-derogatory? Finally, we reminded ourselves that translation is beautifully flawed; signifiers from one language do not displace signifiers from a different language, and this difference is rich.

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