The Politics of Written Language in the Arab World

Writing Change

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CHAPTER 12

The Oralization of Writing

Argumentation, Profanity and Literacy in Cyberspace

Emad Abdul Latif

1 Introduction

Social media has revolutionized reading and writing practices in the Arab world. Before the advent of the Internet, social media and interactive media, writing was mostly restricted to practical contexts such as educational institutions, work, and personal communication through mobile phone applications and email. Written communication about social or political matters was sporadic and not widespread. Social and interactive media motivated the diversification of writing activities which now address a wide range of situations and topics, serve a variety of functions, and are circulated in highly disparate contexts. It could be said that writing has become a near-daily practice for an increasing number of ordinary individuals in the Arab world's public space.

Similarly, reading has flourished in the Arab world owing to the spread and variety of social media. Even though this media is dominated by images, the space available for written language is very important: many contributions involve posting comments, traditional sayings, advice, proverbs, news excerpts, etc., all of which present a wealth of written material. This increase in the quantity of materials which are read over social media is particularly influential in poor communities whose members cannot afford printed books and newspapers but are able to connect cheaply to the Internet thanks to subscription sharing (as is the case in most of rural Egypt).

The number of Internet users in Egypt reached 48.3 million by the end of 2016, which was 52 % of the population at the time (92.54 million), with social media proving highly popular (28 million by 2016). By the end of 2012, the number of Facebook users in Egypt reached 12.2 million.[1] This rose to 28 million in 2016, i.e. 30 % of the population.[2] Egypt ranks 14th worldwide and first in the Arab world in the number of Facebook users.

1 See http://newsbox.com/index.php?m=release-pdf&id=53824.

2 See http://digitalmarketingcommunity.com/indicators/facebook-users-details-egypt-2016-social.

Although only 6% of social media users in Egypt preferred YouTube to other social media sites in 2014, 16% of social media users have a YouTube account, and 63% visit YouTube on a daily basis (ibid.). Posting comments to YouTube videos in Arabic cyberspace is a common literacy practice which has not yet received sufficient scholarly attention. The present study seeks to draw attention to the massive corpus of viewers' comments on YouTube, especially since the academic literature appears to be dominated by research on Facebook and Twitter.

The language of ordinary individuals in computer-mediated communication (CMC) raises a number of research questions in the field of linguistics generally, and rhetoric more specifically. This chapter explores some of the linguistic and rhetorical features of a specific type of audience rhetoric in interactive media, namely commenting on political events broadcasted on YouTube.

2 The Data

The data is drawn from viewers' comments on two different YouTube videos of a famous political debate in the Arab world, which took place between two candidates in the first stage of the 2012 presidential elections in Egypt: Mr Amr Moussa and Dr Abd al-Munʿim Abu al- Futūḥ. They were the two most likely candidates to win the presidential race according to several opinion polls at the time.[3] The first candidate is a liberal; he served as minister of foreign affairs for a period under Mubarak, and was the general secretary of the Arab League prior to running for president. The second candidate is a physician and an activist commonly pegged as an Islamist, having left the Muslim Brotherhood shortly before joining the presidential race.

The two videos were broadcasted on YouTube on the 10th of May 2012. The comments studied belong to the period from May 2012 to May 2014 when the videos had reached 473, 860 views and received 4,886 written comments which make up the dataset of this study.[4] This body of comments was chosen due to the sheer size of the dataset and that the majority of comments were produced as the event was being broadcasted, which guarantees a high degree of spontaneity. Studying viewers' comments on the only presidential debate in Egypt's modern history could shed more light on everyday discourses written

3 Results from most opinion polls conducted during this period can be found here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egyptian_presidential_election,_2012#Opinion_polls.

4 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4r-x92f8D8
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrbkI1fkZFM.

in cyberspace. This is an important trend in the study of written CMC (Rowe & Wyss, 2009), no less important than an older trend which is concerned with the study of aspects of literary works in cyberspace such as hyperlinks, the dominance of images, electronic books, and interactive fiction (Bolter, 2001). I will focus in my analysis on the prevalence of written profanity in the viewers' comments. First, however, I will discuss how CMC has affected writing practices in the Arab world.

3 Writing in Cyberspace

Social networks have resulted in a revolution in spreading the right to public speaking, and in the domination of writing in spaces it did not occupy in the past (Baydoun, forthcoming). This change in audience writing is one aspect of how the concept of *audience* has changed as a result of CMC (Sharon et al. 2006). One prominent aspect is the evolution of the audience's ability to respond effectively to the discourses they receive. Thanks to interactive technology, ordinary audiences are now able to produce written and visual responses to the messages they receive. These responses have the capacity to spread and possess high symbolic capital, heralding a new age that we may dub "the age of audience response". Elsewhere, I have outlined the most important features of audience responses in CMC as opposed to audience responses in traditional communication. Such features include immediacy, low editing and censorship, anonymity, and non-traceability (Abdul Latif, 2012). The focus on written responses brings to the fore several features that are relevant to the present study:

a *Limited Control and Editing*

Traditional audience writing was usually subjected to many forms of selection and censorship, during which unwanted responses were excluded and other responses were re-processed and edited, such as in *Letters to the Editor*. In contrast, the current responses enjoy a great degree of freedom and reach. Nevertheless, there are still parameters which govern responses in certain spaces in relation to word count or to content and style. Responses may also be targeted or organized by certain groups or entities, in the same way that some responses may be excluded in a systematic manner or that responses are disabled altogether on some websites. However, these measures do not compare to the older restrictions on audience responses. The relative freedoms afforded by CMC draw audiences who are attracted to the variety of dissemination outlets for responses and the existence of personal spaces which are hardly subjected

to any external restrictions. This presents a good opportunity to study written 'drafts' before they undergo editing and selection.

b ***The Size and Variety of the Responses***

Audience responses in non-interactive media are usually limited in length and quantity, and are typically verbal only. In contrast, there is often no limit on the length and quantity of audience responses in cyberspace. Indeed, the length of some responses may exceed the length of the original message. Moreover, cyberspace is multimodal; responses may comprise words, images, colours, motion, signs and video clips.

c ***The Ability to Compile, Count and Measure Responses***

For a long time, there were various difficulties in securing corpora of everyday writing for research purposes. Such writings were usually undertaken in an artificial research environment, interfering with their spontaneity. Moreover, many of these writings raised confidentiality issues. Publishing excerpts from these writings was restricted because they were never intended for public circulation. In addition, a great deal of effort is required to study paper corpora which are not digitized. The writings available on YouTube and other social networks overcome some of these problems; they are mostly spontaneous, accessible, and easy to use because they are in digital form. They may also be published if they were intended for public consumption and not protected by intellectual copyrights. Alternatively, if publishing the writings would constitute breach of privacy or copyright, then they may be published after securing the owner's written permission.

This new domain of language use presents fertile ground for linguistic research in general and for sociolinguistic research in particular. Through the study of these written corpora, we may explore features of language use by ordinary individuals as well as features of CMC, which sits on the boundaries between private and public space. Hence, these corpora present a valuable resource for sociolinguists in particular as they make it possible to investigate traditional questions – such as communicative behaviors in CMC, written communication strategies, code-switching, bilingualism, etc. – in addition to raising new questions relating to the influence of cyberspace on writing and the linguistic features of CMC. In short, the written comments of individuals in cyberspace present rich material for the study of contemporary language use in the Arab world. Over the following pages, I will focus on profanity in CMC.

4 The Pragmatics of Swearing: Causes and Functions

When browsing Arabic comments on social media networks, it is difficult to overlook the pervasiveness of profanity. This linguistic phenomenon includes cursing, vulgarity, the use of swearwords and taboo language. Even though profanity features in everyday interpersonal communication, it appears to increase in CMC where it is possible to remain anonymous while communicating from behind a crystal screen.[5] Moreover, profanity intensifies in the context of expressing political allegiances and ideologies.

Despite the prevalence of swearing in everyday language use in Arab societies, linguistic studies on this topic are rare. In contrast, there are numerous, multi-faceted studies on swearing in the English language. According to Fägerrstten (2007: 15), these studies outline the history and evolution of profanity, its grammar and semantics, frequency of usage, and degree of offensiveness. Other studies address the pragmatics of swearing, especially (im)politeness (Locher, 2010; Ljung, 2011). Fägerrstten (2007) classifies swearwords by degree of offensiveness, while Sood, Antin and Churchill (2012) study the efficiency of profanity detection systems, the contexts in which profanity is used, and how it is received. The study reveals fundamental problems with profanity detection systems, and great difficulties in determining the contexts in which profanity is used. From a more linguistic perspective, Ljung (2011) studies the sociolinguistic characteristics of swearing, using examples from past and contemporary research. Mercury (1995) addresses profanity from the perspective of second language acquisition; he studies the use of taboo language in teaching English as a second language to adult learners.

Other researchers have studied the linguistic dimensions of profanity in cyberspace (Doostdar, 2004; Dynel, 2012). Doostdar adopts an anthropological approach to the study of vulgarity in Iranian personal blogs on the Internet. He uses the term 'vulgarity' to denote the linguistic vulgarity which results from the use of (Persian) slang and the presence of many grammatical and spelling mistakes. He discusses the controversy surrounding the concept of linguistic vulgarity in personal blogs from an anthropological perspective. It is clear that the concept of vulgarity, as applied by Doostdar, refers to standards of linguistic correctness, and is therefore different from how we use the concept in the present study to refer to the use of offensive words and expressions. On the other hand, Dynel studies the relationship between swearing and (im)polite-

5 A group of individuals launched a website to combat profanity on Arabic Facebook pages: https://www.causes.com/causes/808417-.

ness by analyzing comments by anonymous writers on YouTube. Dynel states that swearing is generally regarded as a sign of impoliteness, but some words which could be classed as cursing in certain contexts may indeed serve functions of solidarity politeness such as promoting group membership, establishing a common ground with interlocutors, and engendering humor. In a later study, Wang (2013) suggests that the use of profanity in everyday speech may serve four positive pragmatic functions: expressing emotion, verbal emphasis, group solidarity, and aggression.

There are many gaps in research on profanity in cyberspace. Few studies address profanity in platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and others. Moreover, the interactive dimension of the production of profanity among participants has hardly received any attention. There is also a pressing need for studies which compare the use of profanity in cyberspace to its use in live communication. Another potential research area is the effect of profanity in political and social struggles in contemporary societies. Profanity in the Arabic language in particular – whether in live or virtual communication – has hardly received any scholarly attention. To the author's knowledge, the present study is the first attempt to study Arabic profanity from a sociolinguistic perspective.

Profanity in the Arabic language requires much scholarly attention to address its various dimensions from a rhetorical linguistic perspective. For example, it is possible to study the source of profanity; whether the words originate from the lexicon of religion, sex, family relations, etc. It is also possible to study the history of the usage of certain profanities and to classify them into categories (e.g. sexual, religious, ethnic, etc.). Similarly, we may study the grammar and morphology of profanities, as well as the textual and contextual links they establish. We may also study the effects of profanity from a social or psychological perspective. The present study will address two points: the factors which influence the prevalence of profanity in cyberspace, and the functions of profanity. I will focus on general factors and functions without embarking on a detailed analysis of the specific factors which motivate the production of profanity in a particular comment in the dataset, or the specific functions served by the use of profanity in one of the comments.

a *The Transfer of Effect: The Profanity of Live Communication in the Mirror of Virtual Communication*

The prevalence of profanity in Arabic CMC may be seen as an extension of its spread in face-to-face communication. The use of profane language in public spaces – such as streets, public transport, or even films and talk shows – is no longer met with the kind of shock or distaste it might have received less than

three decades ago.[6] Profanity used to be associated with marginalized social groups and specific age groups and professions in the past, but it is now present on a much wider scale. This is an independent phenomenon which certainly warrants sociolinguistic study but is beyond the scope of the present research.

It is clear that this is an important factor in explaining the prevalence of profanity in CMC; language use in cyberspace is not mutually exclusive from language use in live communication. Nevertheless, profanity in cyberspace has specific features. First, it is written profanity, as opposed to the oral profanity of the street. This is particularly significant in the Arab world where written Arabic dominates formal and semi-formal domains of use and is therefore held in very high regard (Belnap & Bishop, 2003), notwithstanding the fact that the oldest written swearwords discovered come from ancient Egypt (Ljung, 2011). It is also worth noting that, for many centuries, writing was not available to all sections of Arab societies due to high rates of illiteracy. The ability to write was associated with attaining a certain degree of education and culture, and as a consequence, with belonging to (or assimilating into) the socially privileged classes. This feeling of social distinction motivated the use of a more refined level of communication in speech as well as in writing.

Hence, profanity in Arabic CMC was boosted by social and linguistic practices, particularly the absence of institutional regulation and the malicious use of the freedom afforded by the ability to conceal one's identity.

b *The Freedom of the Anonymous Actor*

The pervasiveness of written profanity in cyberspace may be explained by the absence of accountability. This explanation relies on the fact that, for as long as public space has existed, language ideals have been imposed by tradition, religion or law. It was the duty of society to hold to account those individuals who violate the traditions or laws which set out what may or may not be said in public space; using profane or taboo language could be punishable by death (Ljung, 2011). There is a long tradition of laws which incriminate undesired

6 It is worth pointing to the public controversy which occurred over the use of the expression *ibn il-kalb* (son of a dog) in Nour El-Sherif's 1982 film *Sawwāq al-Utubīs* (The Bus Driver). The offensiveness of this expression pales in comparison to some of the expressions that are frequently used in today's films, soaps and television shows. With the advent of traditional mass media such as the radio, television, state theatre and cinema in Egypt, there was an unwritten code of ethics pertaining to the kind of language which was deemed acceptable in public spaces and mass media. This unwritten code imposed restrictions on the use of profane, offensive and racist language. Investigating information, decisions or recommendations related to this code would be an interesting area of research.

speech in public space. Indeed, there are laws in place in many countries today which regulate speech in public space. However, some Arab societies do not have such laws or do not implement them. It may be said that one of the reasons that profanity prevails is the absence of legal codes which regulate language use in CMC, as well as the many ways in which one's identity can be concealed in cyberspace, for example by using fake email or Facebook accounts.[7]

Feeling free or far from accountability may indeed motivate the overuse of profanity, especially among younger age groups who are subjected in some societies to strict restrictions on language use in everyday face-to-face communication. The lure of profane language intensifies when we take into account the natural human impulse to break taboos in the absence of punishment. In Arab societies, profane language is a prominent taboo. This explanation for the upsurge in linguistic profanity is linked to another explanation which is premised on the notion of linguistic contagion.

c *The Spiral of Profanity*

The spread of certain behaviors is subject to the theory of contagion which is widely used in crowd psychology. The theory of the spiral of silence offers an academic framework for contagion in communicative public contexts (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1993). As Scheufele (2008; 175) notes, "The spiral of silence model assumes that people are constantly aware of the opinions of people around them and adjust their behaviors (and potentially their opinions) to majority trends under the fear of being on the losing side of a public debate". The theory explains how opinions are distributed in the public domain. I suggest that it could also explain the spread of profanity as a behavior. If we apply the theory of the spiral of silence to explain the spread of profanity, we might claim that profane language spreads on the internet in the form of an outward spiral which draws others in, in an almost involuntary manner.

The contagious effect of profanity is amplified in light of the dialogical and interactive nature of CMC. Profane words do not only qualify ideas or topics, they are curses and insults directed at other participants. This may be the most influential factor in spreading profanity; profanity is responded to with similar or harsher profanity. This is how what we may call *chains of profanity* are born.

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7 For more information on laws which incriminate profanity, I refer the reader to the Media Law Handbook published in 2010 by the United States Department of State: http://photos.state.gov/libraries/amgov/30145/publications-english/media-law-handbook_001.pdf.

The present data includes 23 chains of profanity. Each chain comprises three to five instances of profanity produced by two to three comment-writers. The typical pattern is that a comment-writer initiates an insult, triggering a chain of profane responses as can be seen in the following translated examples:

> A: [Name], the Wahhabis and the Salafis are more honourable than your family. What's wrong with the Wahhabis? At least they are Muslims, unlike your communist scoundrel, Bashar, Russia's little dog! Truly all Arabs are traitors to have kept Bashar [in power] until now.
>
> B: [You are] the epitome of hypocrisy and making fools out of people, Moussa, you rascal!
>
> C (*in response to another comment-writer*): You are an ignorant and retarded individual cursing people from behind a screen. Come to Syria and see [what's happening] with your own eyes but you won't do it because you're a coward!
>
> D (*in response to* C): There are no mercenaries and terrorists but you, Bashar's dogs!
>
> E: Tomorrow you will go back to shepherding and milking goats you sons of a whore – it's only a matter of time until your oil runs out and you return to the age of ignorance [*jāhiliyya*].
>
> F: Your mother's cunt and twice the cunt of the mother of your gay king that Zionists fuck!
>
> G: You rubbish Egyptians, be like us in the beloved Saudi Kingdom and choose a popular king better than those corrupt scoundrels … A kingdom is better for you than a scrawny, feeble, maimed democracy.

These chains of profanity are sometimes interrupted by other comment-writers who criticize profanity. What is interesting here is that some of these comments use profane language – such as the use of insults and curse words – to criticize profanity. Examples such as the following support the idea that profanity is contagious, and infects even those who criticize it. The examples also reveal the contrast between what language says and what it *does*.

– heya laih el nas betshtem shatayem **bent wes5ama**[8]
*Why are people using **trampy**[9] curses?*
– 7dsh plz yeshtem shatayem **bent wes5a**
*Please, stop using **trampy** curses!*
– عيب٤ بطلوا شتيمة **يا بقر**
*Shame on you! Stop cursing **you cows**!*
– يا رجالة بلاش **شتيمه وسخه** احنا مش لوحدنا وفيه بنات بتتفرج وفيه ناس من دول تانيه
*Lads, there's no call for **filthy curses**. We are not alone; there are girls watching and people from other countries.*
– يا ريت محدش يشتم لاحترام الحوار بعد اذنكم ... ابو الفتوح **هينيك** موسى **العرص**
*I wish no one would curse; be respectful in your dialogue please. Abul Fotouh will **fuck** Moussa **the pimp**.*
– علي رأي **العرص** محدش يشتم يا **ولاد المـ****
*As the **pimp** said, don't curse you **sons of a tramp**.*
– ندعو الكل بالاحترام فى الكومنتات لأن معانا بنات **ياولاد الوسخة هههههههههههههههه**
*We urge everyone to comment respectfully because there are girls around, you **sons of a whore**. Hahahahahahah.*

We could argue that the continuous notation of laughter in the final example indicates the writer's awareness that their comment contains a paradox which they find funny.

The explanation of the spiral of profanity is premised on some individuals' susceptibility to being influenced by the behaviors of others. Nevertheless, the profane language produced as a result of this influence is not restricted or regulated by premeditation in the same manner that we might find in other kinds of crowd profanity where profanity is used as an instrument of political manipulation as I shall explain.

d *The Effect of Political Polarization*

The explanations I have presented for the prevalence of profanity in CMC may apply to audience discourse, but there may be other explanations which relate specifically to viewers' comments on the electronic transmission of the presidential debate between Abul Fotouh and Moussa. One such explanation is the intense political polarisation and emotionally charged atmosphere which surrounded the 2012 presidential elections. Linguistic transgression was a common feature of the discourse which accompanied candidates' political cam-

8 The examples displayed have not been edited.

9 Literally, 'begotten by a filthy woman'.

paigning. In fact, there is no shortage of verbal aggression in the debate itself; there was an abundance of mutual accusations, strategies of moral assassination and *ad hominem* argumentation. Viewers' comments appear to ride this wave of verbal aggression and take it to the extreme. Indeed, there are many comments which criticize verbal aggression in the debate, for example:

- هي المناظرة دي عشان يشبشبوا لبعض ولا يعرضوا برامجهم !!!! يعني ننتخبهم دلوقت عل أساس مين فيهم هزأ التاني أكتر وطرقعلة
  Is this debate intended for them to humiliate each other[10] *or to present their* [*presidential*] *programs?! Are we now supposed to elect them based on who insulted and abused the other more?*
- ايه لازمة شخصنة الامور، سعات بتبقى وصلة ردح مش مناظرة
  Why do they have to make things so personal? This is sometimes more like a slander fest than a debate!
- الاتنين بيعايروا بعض ياجدعان انتا فلول وانتا اخوان
  Each of them is trying to smear the other: you belong to the old regime; you belong to the [*Muslim*] *Brotherhood*
- تحولت الى خناقه والله والناس دى اخدانا كوبرى علشان يرموا كلام على بعض
  It has turned into a fight, by God! These people are walking over us to jeer at each other.

It is interesting to investigate the relationship between the use of profane language on the one hand and political orientation on the other. We may ask the question: did the supporters of one candidate use more profane language than the supporters of the other? The question is motivated by the preconception that the supporters of Abul Fotouh are less likely to use profane language than Moussa's supporters because of the former's religious, Islamic orientation. Religious morality and behavior are known to act as a deterrent against profanity. Indeed, many comments by the supports of Abul Fotouh employ religious rhetoric. This was particularly clear in the arguments they forwarded in their comments to promote Abul Fotouh's presidential program. However, the statistical analysis of the data disproves this hypothesis: contrary to expectation, the number of instances that Abul Fotouh's supporters used profane language exceeded the number of instances for Moussa's supporters. Out of 436 profane comments, 247 (57%) overtly declared their support for Abul Fotouh, while 162

10 Literally, beat each other up with slippers.

(37%) declared their support for Amr Moussa. The remaining 27 comments (6%) belong to comment-writers who did not declare their political orientation, and some of these comments do not concern the candidates but the debate moderators, the commercials, or other subjects.

These results give us cause to pause; they contradict the original hypothesis that there would be an inverse relationship between choosing a candidate with a religious orientation and using profanity to defend this choice. In rejecting the hypothesis then, it would appear that there is no relationship between the religious orientation of the candidate or the comment-writer and the comment-writer's use of profanity to demonstrate support for their preferred candidate. The higher percentage of profanity among Abul Fotouh's supporters may be explained by two factors:

First: there is a discrepancy between the number of comments which support Abul Fotouh vis-à-vis comments which support Moussa; the comments which overtly support the former make up 48% versus 37% for the latter, while 15% are neutral or deal with unrelated topics (e.g. comments on the debate moderators, commercials, etc.). Hence, the quantity of profanity is directly proportional to the quantity of comments.

Second: I present this second explanation reservedly as it is difficult to verify. This explanation relates to the relationship between morality and politics for those who belong to political Islam groups. While the discourse of these groups attacks opponents based on their lack of (religious) morality, some of their political practices demonstrate that they are not significantly different when it comes to the ethics of political practices. Profanity is one linguistic manifestation of this paradox. My intuition is that the profanity produced by some individuals who are affiliated with political Islam in the context of mass communication is not any less than the profanity produced by others who belong to other political currents. However, this remains a presumption which can only be verified through a separate study.

e *The Poor Level of Rational Argumentation*

The prevalence of profanity in CMC may owe to the poor level of rational argumentation: I hypothesize that the two are directly related. It is observable that most of the comments using profane language do not contain rational arguments, evidenced opinions, or justified beliefs. What they do contain is judgments, biases and curses – and in some cases only curses.

The data reveals that some comment-writers were conscious of this connection between profanity and the poor level of rational argumentation. This negative relationship may have been an additional motivation for denouncing profane language by some comment-writers who appear to be aware of the

negative image that profanity reflects of their community, as evidenced by the following examples:

- ممكن يكون النقاش أرقى من المسبات الوسخة ... خلينا نسمع وبموضوعية
  The discussion can be more refined without resorting to filthy swearwords. Let's listen objectively.
  على فكرة ممكن توصلوا رأيكم واعتراضكم بمنتهى الاحترام! مش لازم تقولو كلام مالهوش لازمة يعني! :)
  By the way, you can voice your opinions and our objections respectfully, there is no need for unnecessary [*vulgar*] *speech*
- ياااا جماعه ارتقوا وبلاش شتيمه جزاكم الله خير
  Folks, be more sophisticated and drop the curse words, may Allah reward you.
- أرجو التعبير بالآراء باحترام
  Please express your opinions respectfully.
  الإتنين مش بقدر بلد بحجم وتاريخ وثقل مصر فمن يرد بتفاهه وقلة إحترام للمكانه التي يطمح إليها لا يجب ان نوصله ليكون رئيسا لمصر
  Both [*candidates*] *do not match a country with the history and importance of Egypt; a person who responds frivolously and with lack of respect for the post he aspires to must not receive our support in becoming the president of Egypt.*
  فكيف أرد على تهجم المنافس بتهجم مماثل ؟؟؟؟ هذا إسلوب مصارعة الثيران وليس نقاش ومناظرة الحكماء ورجال الدوله
  How can one respond to their opponent's aggression with equal aggression??? This is how bull-fighting is conducted, not debates between wise people and politicians.

Further studies are needed to establish the relationship between the prevalence of profanity and the poor level of rational argumentation; the hypothesis I present is based on preliminary observation. The hypothesis can be tested using large corpora where the relationship between profanity and the frequency and types of rational arguments can be properly investigated.

5 The Functions of Profanity

Profanity serves a range of functions in everyday language use, from verbal aggression, abuse and offence, to threatening the positive face of others. Profanity may also be used to enhance group solidarity, assert an opinion, or produce humour (Dynel, 2012). The following discussion will shed light on other specific functions which are performed by profanity in CMC.

a ***Ugly Reality, Ugly Language: Language as a Reflection of Reality***

One of the arguments for the necessity of profane language in public space is that the reality which is narrated, described or assessed by language is itself an ugly reality which cannot be described using polite words. The explanation that profane language reflects an ugly reality relies on two presuppositions: first, that a person's language must provide an accurate description of their life, and second, that polite language cannot provide an accurate description of an ugly reality. However, the position that the fundamental function of language is to accurately describe reality is in conflict with another position which supports the use of profane language; namely, that the fundamental function of language is to assess and change reality, and that profane language can serve as an instrument to accomplish this.

b ***Towards a Better World: Employing Profanity to Change Reality***

There is an opinion that the use of profane language may be motivated by the desire to reform the word. According to this opinion, describing reality using polite language is a form of linguistic mitigation; polite language conceals reality underneath an artificial linguistic veil. This supposed linguistic mitigation is criticized for enabling a profane reality to subsist, because the ugly core remains hidden beneath layers of contrived lexis. On the other hand, profane language is lauded for honesty and transparency; it is seen as a revealing, pointed language which seeks to reform reality by ruthlessly and unashamedly confronting this ugly reality (Marcuse, 1969).

Some of the theoretical underpinnings for supporting the use of profane language are premised on the role of profanity in changing reality. For example, Herbert Marcuse (1969) calls for embracing 'naked', 'insolent language' which refers to things by their real name. Marcuse himself does not hesitate to use profane language to describe the language of international politics in his time – and in all times. Such language would refer to the Vietnamese peasant defending his land as a 'terrorist', while the American pilot who drops Napalm bombs over civilian villages is hailed a 'humanity-loving liberator' (Marcuse, 1969; Abdul Latif, 2010). From this perspective, written profanity becomes a manifestation of the power of writing as an instrument of political awareness and liberation, calling to mind discussions of literacy as liberation (Scribner, 1988), and as a skill which enhances political awareness and social mobilization (Hull et al., 2008).

This argument persuasively defends the prevalence of profanity in CMC as well as reality, especially in relation to criticizing authority. Profanity appears even more effective when we take the psychological dimension into account; that is, the capacity of profane language to reduce tension and to support

ordinary people's ability to resist the difficult conditions (or ugly reality) they are experiencing, making them less painful and more endurable (Stephens & Umland, 2011). The situation is different, however, when profanity is directed at ordinary people in non-critical contexts.

The effect of profanity as a force for changing reality is perhaps rather limited. It is therefore not surprising that one of the viewers of the presidential debate should make the following comment:

– ya gam3a yareet balash shetema, 2el shetema mesh hat3'ayer 7aga, 5alenna mot7adereen we ne7terem ra2y ba3ed Thanks
Folks, there is no need to curse each other, cursing will not change anything. Let's be civilized and respect each others' opinions. Thanks.

This comment demonstrates the writer's awareness of the limited role of profanity in changing reality. This hints at the need to look for other explanations for the prevalence of profanity in Arabic written CMC.

c *Profanity Militias: Face Threatening as a Political Weapon*

In light of the growing influence of CMC, there have been attempts by some governments and powerful entities to control this space. However, traditional control mechanisms were insufficient due to the abundance of alternatives and the difficulties of technological control. Some of these governments and entities have resorted to another means of controlling this space; namely, drowning social networking sites with targeted messages which serve their interests. This is achieved through organized groups that I refer to as *electronic militias* (Abdul Latif, 2012a). This term draws on war metaphors, although the reality is not always metaphorical: these groups are in fact part of the military establishment in some Middle Eastern countries. Such groups – officially or unofficially – adopt the designation of 'electronic army', such as in the *Egyptian Electronic Army* Facebook page.

Electronic militias perform several functions. The function of relevance to the present study is posting comments to news websites, video clips, images, etc. These groups will usually target certain messages and bombard them with comments which serve the interest of their employers. If we look at the profane language which is directed at specific authors or topics, for example, we will observe that there are similarities between them even though they are supposedly produced by different authors. These similarities could of course result from a range of factors, but we do not rule out the possibility that they may be produced by electronic militias, especially with respect to controversial political messages. Despite the fact that information on this topic is scarce – and

that most of it comes from newspaper articles which may themselves be the product of electronic militias – we cannot ignore that the profane language in some messages may be the work of organized groups with the purpose of tarnishing the image of specific people and diminishing their influence. In this context, curse words become an instrument of political manipulation. Profanity may also serve the interests of other parties by sowing animosity between comment-writers and steering written interaction towards confrontation. A potential manifestation of this may be the abundance of racist and chauvinistic comments which appear bent on sabotaging rational communication between the comment-writers. This may also explain the fact that comments are disabled on many news websites, especially on opinion articles whose writers are often targeted by electronic militias.

What strengthens the effect of electronic militias in producing written profanity is that some of the chains of profanity occur in digressional contexts which are not immediately related to the original topic. For example, there is a chain of comments in the data which contains an exchange of curse words with a sectarian premise between a party who claims to be Sunni and another who claims to Shiite. Similarly, there is an exchange with a nationalist premise between a party who claims to be Egyptian and another who claims to be Syrian, and another exchange between a party who claims to be Saudi and another who claims to be Egyptian.

This explanation for the prevalence of profane language in CMC requires further study, especially from a sociolinguistic perspective and with the linguistic tools to verify the existence of structural similarities between certain sets of written messages in CMC.

6 Conclusion: New Medium, New Writing

In this paper I have analyzed a dataset of viewers' written comments on YouTube. The analysis reveals the pervasiveness of verbal aggression and face-threatening in public cyberspace, suggesting that public CMC is less inclined towards mitigation in expressing opinions than direct verbal communication.

With specific regard to the prevalence of profanity, this prevalence may suggest that writing in cyberspace embodies the features of everyday oral language more than those of written language. This is supported by the fact that most of the curse words and profane expressions are in *ʿāmmiyya*, and are transcribed as they would be pronounced without being converted to *fuṣḥā*. They may even be coupled with images depicting bodily gestures which

accompany cursing such as the extended middle finger. Hence, we may talk about the *oralitization of writing* in public space as a feature of written Arabic in CMC. I use this term to refer to the transfer of features of oral communication in private domains to written communication in cyberspace. This phenomenon manifests the effect of the medium through which written communication takes place on the writing itself.

Blenap and Bishop had predicted that the "more immediate communication now available via the Internet (e-mail, chat) may serve to further erode the spoken/written distinction and result in even more [colloquial Arabic] being used in the written mode" (2003: 19). Subsequent studies have revealed that this prediction has come true. For example, Sebba (2012: 7) concludes that online chat and text-messaging share several features of oral conversation such as mode, interactivity, synchronicity, sequentiality and permanence. I believe that the oralitization of writing in CMC increases as other types of CMC become available, such as comments on Facebook and YouTube.

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