Language and Revolution: Arabic in Lebanon after the October Revolution as a case study

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If Lebanon is ever to recover effective sovereignty and rebuild her policy on firmer foundations than those of the past, the problem of language as one aspect of the problem of cultural identity will have to be eventually addressed.

GORDON 1985: 140

Introduction

Speakers' individual and collective identities are socially constructed through their linguistic and social behavior, and inevitably shaped by the socio-political and cultural situation of a region and its observers (KROSKRITY 2000, 2004; IRVINE & GAL 2000; FULLER 2008). It stands to reason, therefore, that significant changes in a community's linguistic practices are often catalyzed by noteworthy socio-political developments within the same community. In this light, the present study aims to explore recent linguistic developments regarding speakers' use of Arabic and their perception of its status in Lebanon in the midst of a time of profound social and political change: The October Revolution.

The present study opens with an introduction that reviews Lebanon's linguistic panorama before October 17th 2019, and provides a brief synopsis of the succession of events now widely known as 'The October Revolution'. The second section explains the study's theoretical approach and the nature of the data. The third and last section focuses on how the events of the October Revolution have, at least temporarily, affected the use and status of Arabic in Lebanon and reshaped this language's place in the public sphere.

Language and identity in Lebanon before the October Revolution

Lebanon has historically been a land where multilingualism thrives. While Arabic is the official language of the state, French, English and Armenian are also spoken within the Lebanese national territory. The presence and coexistence of all these languages is, undoubtedly, endowed with social, political, cultural and religious connotations (SULEIMAN 2003, 2013).

Lebanese Arabic (LA) is the mother tongue of a great majority of the Lebanese population¹ and the language of daily communication, while Standard Arabic (SA) is the official language of the state and is taught in primary and secondary schools. Naturally, in the case of Lebanon, the relevance of French and English is also a direct product of the country's colonial history and of its close relations with the West—including economic relations, and history of migration and return between Lebanon and western countries.

The state policies and educational language measures applied by the French during their mandate in Lebanon (1925-1943)—such as the amendment of the constitution in 1926 to make French an official language and the language of instruction for science subjects (ZOUHIR 2017)—as well as the continuation of these policies by the French Jesuits after Lebanon's independence through the establishment of schools and the promotion of French among the Maronites, eventually made French the language of the educated Christian elite (SHAABAN & GAITH 1999).

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In addition to the French presence, a group of American Evangelical Protestants came to Lebanon during the 19th and 20th century and founded important academic institutions for the promotion of their language and ideas. Unlike Jesuits, American missionaries did not restrict enrollment in their institutions but rather “provided quality education in English along socio-economic lines for those who could afford to attend their schools, irrespective of religious affiliations” (SHAABAN & GHATH 2002: 568). This policy contributed to a more even expansion of English among the educated elite as contrasted with French. Nowadays, the growing importance of English in Lebanon is not only related to its part in education and academia, but also to its increasing role as a global language in the domains of trade, science and mass communication (ESSEILI 2011).

The question of identity in Lebanon, whether from a political, religious or cultural point of view, is shaped by the diverse understandings of the notion of ‘nationalism’ held by different Lebanese communities. Traditionally, the literature distinguishes two confronting ideologies that, in Gordon's words, have long disputed “whether, metaphorically, Lebanon belongs to the desert or to the Mediterranean Sea” (GORDON 1985: 114). The first, defended mainly by Muslim Lebanese, and also by some Lebanese Christians, advocates for the ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’ character of Lebanon, therefore highlighting Lebanon's role in the history of Arabism and Islam (FARRUX 1961). The second, mainly supported by Maronite Christians, maintains that Lebanon's origins are found in the Phoenician civilization and that the current ‘Arab influence’ in the country is the result of a mere foreign conquest (ENTELIS 1974; SALAMEH 2004, 2010).

As Al-Batal affirms, “language sits at the core of this national debate over Lebanon's identity” (AL-BATAL 2002: 95). The spread of French as an instructional and governmental language fostered a specific educational curriculum that contributed to the diffusion of the already present ideology of “Phoenicianism” in Lebanon (KAUFMAN 2001), which encouraged Christian Lebanese to think of their origins as different from those of the Arabs, creating another identitarian division between Christians and Muslims in the country. This triggered feelings of socio-economic exclusion and resentment among many members of the

¹ GORDON 1985: 144, and personal observation during nine years of residence in Beirut.

Muslim Lebanese community and also among some Christians. In parallel, Arab Nationalist movements, which had been gradually spreading across the Arab world including Lebanon, carried the banner of Arabic language in their fight against colonial powers, under the claim that Standard Arabic represents the link that ties Lebanon historically, culturally, intellectually—and for some, also religiously—to the rest of Arab peoples.

These two confronting ideologies sadly became weaponized in the conflicting sides of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). However, thirty years later, language use is now largely led by generations that did not live through the civil war (or that witnessed it briefly), and so the current language situation in Lebanon presents some novelties. With English being now taught in what were exclusively French private schools and LA starting to play an important role in Lebanese social and cultural life and media, language slowly came to be less of a sectarian identity marker than a socio-economic one (ESSEILI 2011).

As far as foreign languages are concerned, the current linguistic panorama seems to be marked by a loss of vitality of French in the face of the growing popularity of English as well as by multilingual educational trends and practices (HARATY & QUEINI 2001; BAHOUS et al. 2011) and an increasing use of code-switching of English and/or French with LA (BAHOUS et al. 2014).

As for Arabic, although in theory the teaching of Standard Arabic (SA) has been made obligatory in all Lebanese private educational institutions, in practice, Lebanon—as well many other Arab countries—has witnessed how “the insistence on prescribing rules which do not take account of current usage has led to linguistic insecurity even among the educated and, in some cases, the abandonment of Arabic in favour of European languages” (AL-WER 1997: 262). In fact, the establishment and imposition of rules and standards that do not reflect the real usage of Arabic has generated a set of ideologies that—perpetuated by the Lebanese educational system—have irremediably distanced many Lebanese speakers from SA.

These ideologies depict SA as a complicated language, almost impossible to command. Students often report having traumatic feelings related to learning SA at school and failing, or to never attaining ‘full mastery’ of this variety. These perceptions generate in them a great deal of ‘performance anxiety’ when having to use Arabic in certain communicative contexts. Arguably, the context that often causes more anxiety to Lebanese users of Arabic is the written one.

In the 60s, the Lebanese poet, Said Aql, published his anthology *Yaara* using a modern modified Roman script of 36 symbols that he considered to be an evolution from the Phoenician alphabet (AQL 1961). Decades later, and due to the “historical precedence of English over Arabic in Internet and cellular phones” (YAGHAN 2008: 44), Arabizi (also known as ‘Franco’)² emerged and quickly spread among Arab youth as an accurate, flexible and ‘cool’ way of writing local Arabic varieties—and, to some speakers, also as an ‘anxiety-free’ alternative. Although seemingly unrelated, these two events represent direct ramifications of one of the most deeply-rooted ideologies among the Arabs—that which links the use of the Arabic script and the idea of ‘written Arabic’ exclusively to the Standard variety. While my results

² A Romanized alphabet consisting of a combination of the Latin script and Arabic numerals commonly used to write Arabic dialects.

partly confirm that this link remains undeniably strong among Lebanese speakers, the qualitative data in this study points to some interesting cracks in the tie that relates the Arabic script in Lebanon to the Standard variety—cracks that have also emerged during the last decades in other Arab countries, e.g. Egypt, Morocco, Kuwait, etc. (HØIGILT & MEJDELL 2017).

Sociolinguistically speaking, the Lebanese ‘Arabism’ vs ‘Phoenicianism’ dichotomy evolved and gave way to new forms of ‘conflict’. The previous identity conflicts manifested in the fight between Arabic and French became later visible in the ‘struggle’ between SA and LA (AL-BATAL 2002; SULEIMAN 2013). In his study of the Arabic of the Lebanese channel LBCI’s local news, Al-Batal referred to these two new versions of this identitarian dichotomy by “Arabism”—that understands Lebanon as part of the Arab world—and “Lebanonism”—that defends Lebanon’s linguistic and cultural uniqueness with respect to the rest of the Arab world (AL-BATAL 2002: 112).

In the last decades, this dichotomy seems to have slowly dissolved as Lebanese leaders of traditionally opposed political groups, who used to respectively carry the banners of ‘Phoenicianism’ and ‘Arabism’, openly became political allies—thus theoretically resolving the socio-political ‘East’ or ‘West’ conflict. The underlying ideological conflict, however, has continued being fueled by a powerful sectarian elite, formed by members from all political and religious affiliations—for they are well aware that this national identity conflict is, in fact, the root and source of its power.

In this current context, once more, language use and ideology intersect with socio-political ideologies and the Arabic language continues being used, perceived and reclaimed as a tool for power, and a major marker of socio-economic and political identity.

The October Revolution

Since October 17th 2019, Lebanon has witnessed the emergence of an unprecedented social and political movement that calls for sweeping economic and political changes in the country. This movement, which I will refer here to as ‘the October Revolution,’ has been driven by massive demonstrations all over the country in which a coalition of Lebanese citizens across sects and social classes—from now on ‘*thuwwār*’ (lit., revolutionaries)³—have been protesting against the country’s political establishment.

The October revolution defies the current Lebanese political order, which finds its base in sectarian divisions that have been fueled throughout Lebanon’s history, from the “feudal patronage politics” of the Ottoman rule (1526-1917), through the dividing policies implemented by the French mandate (1920-1943), to the unwritten agreement generally known as “National Pact”, which maintained a sectarian system even after Lebanon’s independence in 1943 (HODGES 2019). Some years later, it was the 15-year Lebanese civil war that gave this sectarianism the political shape that remains until our present day.

3 By ‘*thuwwār*’ (lit. revolutionaries) I refer to the aforementioned coalition of Lebanese citizens that consider themselves supporters of the demands and the values of the so-called October Revolution and who have actively taken part, in a way or another, in the events of the October Revolution. Provided the local nature of the contextual specificities surrounding the emergence of this ‘new’ collective, I have preferred to choose the original Arabic word that the members of this group commonly and proudly use to refer to other members of the same in-group.

This sectarian order has been maintained in order to allow the ruling class to consolidate power and wealth under its cover, which has resulted in serious economic and social problems for Lebanese citizens.

The wild privatization and speculation policies that characterized the country's post-war reconstruction, along with the mismanagement of the state's funds, deprived Lebanese citizens of the most basic services (e.g., decent infrastructure, employment opportunities, affordable education and health care, electricity, potable water), and rendered them vulnerable to a deep economic, social and public health crisis. The country currently faces very dangerous levels of wealth inequality, unemployment, even an alarming increase of public health and environmental hazards—that has further aggravated in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemics.

Political leaders have taken advantage of this situation to spread their influence and corruption to the private sector. With no functioning state and an under-performing private sector, citizens constantly face the choice of declaring fealty to sectarian party leadership to access basic services that the state would have otherwise provided, leaving the country to search for these services elsewhere, or sinking further into poverty.

During the last two decades, Lebanon gradually witnessed the emergence of significant popular movements that set the social and political precedents upon which the events of the October Revolution stand. In 2005, the so-called Cedar Revolution, triggered by the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, demanded the withdrawal of the Syrian troops from the Lebanese territory as well as the formation of a new government, one that would be independent from any Syrian influence. In 2011, a series of popular protests—later referred to as the Intifada of Dignity—demanded the end of sectarianism in Lebanon. In 2015, Lebanese protesters took the streets again to decry their government's inability to find effective solutions to an appalling waste crisis. The 2015 protests, led by the grassroots movement 'You Stink!' witnessed the emergence of new civil society political groups (e.g. Beirut Madinati, Li-ḥaqqi) that would later play an essential role in the events of the October Revolution.⁴

In 2019, the already difficult living conditions endured by many Lebanese citizens worsened even more as a result of the austerity budget that the government passed during the summer. Moreover, people's morale was undermined after massive wildfires devastated what little forests remain in the country while the state was powerless to fight them due to its own corruption and inefficiency. All this happened in the weeks leading to the revolution.

On October 17th, the announcement of a new tax on WhatsApp calls, gasoline and tobacco was the last straw that sent around a third of the population into the streets in the subsequent days, in more than 50 cities and towns across the country.

Young Lebanese led a national rebellion against the corrupt political system that had deprived them of the hope for a decent future in their homeland. Under the chant "All of them means all of them", this movement spread across sectarian and socio-economic divisions to reclaim the socio-political space in the form of massive demonstrations. Despite the inaction of the government and its repression of this popular movement through unlawful detentions

⁴ These movements, though limited compared to the October Revolution, nonetheless served as precursors that greatly contributed to the social and political momentum needed for the revolution that was to come.

and even in the face of the excessive use of force both by the army and the security forces, protesters remained peaceful, sending a message of national solidarity and showing a degree of defiance towards political authorities that most considered unimaginable before.

The resignation of several ministers from the Lebanese Forces Party and the subsequent resignation of the PM Saad Hariri are a couple of the immediate political achievements of the October revolution; at the time of this writing a new government has taken over. At the social level, the revolution has succeeded in building and strengthening new ties between Lebanese individuals coming from different classes, sects, generations and geographical origins, as well as in women and students playing a decisive role. The first have carved out a new space for their social and political activism, making the current protest “an opportunity to advance women’s rights and gender equality in Lebanon” (WILSON et al. 2019: 16).

During the events of the October Revolution Lebanese citizens from all origins, sects and political affiliations have shared public squares and have actively interacted on social media, and they seem to have implicitly agreed to do so mainly in Arabic. In the light of the linguistic and identitarian mosaic that is Lebanon, I believe such an agreement suggests that the events of the October Revolution deserve also to be studied linguistically.

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Theoretical Approach and Nature of the Data

The theoretical approach of this study stands on two fundamental principles. The first is that languages are constructed and modified by its users through interaction. The second is that language constitutes a social practice. Consequently, when speakers interact and communicate, their interaction goes beyond the mere transmission of information: each verbal interaction between a speaker and his/her interlocutor may be seen as a social action, **for it makes use of a linguistic system collectively constructed in order to reach a social end**. It is during and through this multileveled interactions that speakers cumulatively construct in parallel both their linguistic and their social memberships, shaping their overall identities (KROSKRITY 2000, 2004; MENDOZA-DENTON 2002).

Within this process of identity construction speakers naturally and cumulative formulate their own sets of evaluative individual perceptions of language use. These perceptions, commonly called “language attitudes”, converge to shape the metalinguistic collective narratives we might refer to as “language ideologies”.⁵ It is worth clarifying that both language attitudes and ideologies are usually not consciously held convictions, but rather what speakers believe and feel to be the “natural” or “obvious” state of affairs concerning linguistic use (SCHIEFFELIN et al. 1998; IRVINE & GAL 2000).

⁵ Linguistic ideologies can be defined as “the socially and culturally embedded metalinguistic forms of language and language use” and they include “conceptions of quality, value, status, norms, functions, ownership, and so forth” (BLOMMAERT 2006: 241). IRVINE & GAL understand linguistic ideologies as “the ideas with which participants and observers frame their understanding of linguistic varieties and map those understandings onto people, events and activities that are significant to them” and that “are suffused with the political and moral issues pervading the particular sociolinguistic field and are subject to the interest of their bearer’s social position” (IRVINE & GAL 2000: 35).

Although speakers' linguistic attitudes and ideologies are not necessarily indicative of the actual linguistic practice, this does not make them less relevant for the study of language. In fact, linguistic attitudes and ideologies are closely linked to the evolution and development of languages (DOSS 2006: 52). Especially important for this study is the fact that language attitudes and the stereotypes they generate serve a variety of social functions at the intergroup level, namely the creation and maintenance of ideologies that explain, generate and enhance (1) the relations among the members of an in-group (i.e. social-explanatory functions) and (2) the differentiations between the in-group and relevant out-groups (i.e. social-differentiation functions) (TAJFEL 1981; GARRETT et al. 2003).

The study of language attitudes has, nevertheless, its own theoretical and methodological challenges. The main one remains that language users cannot be expected to accurately report their own attitudes (or those of others) and, consequently, researchers ought not to take reported attitudes as evidence of actual linguistic behavior (WALTERS 2007). At this respect, the present study adopts an anthropological approach within the study of language attitudes that combines direct observations of community practices and ethnographic interviews. This approach, in the line of Haeri's work (HAERI 2003) aims to provide the reader with a description of contextualized language beliefs and ideologies whose goal is interpretation, rather than prediction (WALTERS 2007: 654).

When speaking about attitudes and ideologies towards Arabic, one cannot but take into consideration the functional differentiation between the Standard variety of Arabic and the various 'national' varieties of Arabic, which FERGUSON (1959) traditionally referred to as *diglossia*. Initially described in terms of context (formal/informal) and modality (written/spoken), the linguistic reality of Arabic today evidences that this differentiation is chiefly based on a deeply-rooted body of attitudes and ideologies towards both varieties (BRUSTAD 2017; MILROY 2001) rather than on purely linguistic facts. While acknowledging the aforementioned differentiation between SA and LA, in this study, "Arabic" is intentionally used as an inclusive term for both SA and LA, given that, in the linguistic reality of the participants, both varieties frequently overlap, interact and mix, depending on the communicative context in question.

One of the realities that have challenged a dichotomic understanding of the notion of diglossia in terms on modality (spoken/written) is the increase of social media usage in Arab countries, which came hand in hand with an increase in the production of Arabic written material in the national varieties. In a country like Lebanon, which shows a significant 'Facebook penetration' (CAUBET 2017: 121 from Internet World Stats),⁶ the current widespread internet usage raises interesting questions regarding the nature of the language used in this newly produced written material (NORDENSON 2017).

Previous studies exploring language use online in the Arab world have looked into the use of Arabic written with Latin letters, often referred to as *Arabizi*, *Arabeasy* or *Franco* (ABOELEZZ 2009; YAGHAN 2008; PALFREYMAN & KHALIL 2003; WARSCHAUER, SAID & ZOHRY 2002), and found that this writing system is used often for communication in the

⁶ See <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#ma>> and <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>>.

regional Arabic varieties rather than in SA. In this context, the present study also explores and comments on the user's choice of script for written material in LA as a potential bearer of linguistic ideologies given that writing systems have generally "obvious connections with subjects of great sociolinguistic interest, like identity and ethnicity" (SEBBA 2009: 35).

As for the data, this study combines more than nine years of direct observations of community linguistic practices in Lebanon (September 2010 – January 2020) with other types of primary and secondary data. Primary data includes 76 responses to the questionnaire "Language and Revolution" (see Appendix), which gathered both quantitative and qualitative information from native speakers of LA living in Lebanon about their perceived use of Arabic and their ideologies and attitudes towards this language,⁷ followed up with eight individual and one group informal interviews carried out with some of the questionnaire respondents. Secondary data includes social media data from Facebook and Instagram and online platforms, such as Akhbar Al-Saha and Megaphone, that were covering protest events, as well as references from the local and international press. The data collection period lasted until the 104th day of protests, January 28th, 2020.

As illustrated in Table 1 below, the 76 respondents who participated in the questionnaire are of different ages, mostly ranging from 20-40 years old, educated, and from a variety of geographic and sectarian origins within Lebanon. It is important to point out that, despite the diversity of origins shown in Table 1, 69.74% of the respondents are currently residents in Beirut. Although this information was not required from the respondents, I am aware that most of the respondents (similarly to a significant proportion of the Lebanese population)⁸ identify themselves as '*thuwwār*' or supporters of the October Revolution.

The participants who filled out the questionnaire belong to the first and second order zones of my social network (as defined by MILROY 1987), which include friends, colleagues, acquaintances, workmates, etc. along with their friends and family. Thus, I do not intend to claim that the results of the present study are representative of the totality of the Lebanese population.⁹ Nonetheless, I believe the data still reflects clear trends of an update in the current status of Arabic within Lebanon that seems to be a reality at least within part of the population, specifically among those educated speakers who have a broad linguistic repertoire, i.e., whose linguistic choices would not be limited to LA only, given their knowledge of foreign languages like French and English and of SA.

7 This questionnaire was presented both in Lebanese Arabic and in English in order not to deter the participation of those who do not feel comfortable reading or writing in Arabic.

8 In the absence of reliable quantitative data about the exact number of supporters of the Lebanese Revolution, I rely on my participant observation and in unofficial numbers reported of attendance to events and demonstrations of the October Revolution to claim that the collective of '*thuwwār*' very possibly includes more than 50% of the Lebanese population (i.e. the majority of the Lebanese population) living in Lebanon at the moment, as well as large numbers of Lebanese abroad, hundreds of whom returned to Lebanon over the weekend of November 22nd to participate in the Independence Day demonstrations, and many other non-Lebanese residing currently in Lebanon.

9 My social network was determined by my age (20-30), my occupation (mainly a university student, both at Saint Joseph University and at the American University of Beirut), and my place of residence (Beirut [Ashrafiyeh, Hamra, Sodeco, Ain al Remmeneh]) during the 9-year period I conducted direct participant observations.

Table 1: Information from the Questionnaire's respondents

GENDER	N.	%	AGE	N.	%	ORIGIN	N.	%
Women	50	65.8%	20-30	40	52.6%	Beirut	21	27.63%
Men	26	34.2%	30-40	28	36.8%	Bekaa	11	14.47%
Total	76		40-50	7	9.2%	Metn	7	9.21%
			50-60	1	1.3%	Mount Lebanon	10	13.16%
			Total	76		North Lebanon	7	9.21%
						Shouf	9	11.85%
						South Lebanon	11	14.47%
						Total	76	

Within this framework, the present study aims to explore some apparent developments in the situation of Arabic in Lebanon after the October Revolution, especially those concerning Lebanese speakers' attitudes towards Arabic as a whole, in order to shed light onto the emerging social ideologies that are being created and enhanced among groups of speakers in Lebanon in view of the socio-political situation that the country is witnessing in recent times.

Arabic in Lebanon after the October Revolution

The present study explores the changes happening in the panorama of language attitudes of Lebanon since the start of the October Revolution, the most significant of these being a noticeable update in the status of Arabic within parts of Lebanese society.

Arabic emerged in the first few weeks of protests as the legitimate language of the October Revolution in Lebanon. It was chiefly in Arabic that Lebanese people made their demands heard and chanted against injustice, in support of their fellow Lebanese citizens and in defamation of the government. Arabic is the language predominantly written on the walls and on protesters' banners, as well as the main language used for the communication, discussions and all the logistical organization necessary to keep the revolution alive.

Given the complexity of the pre-revolution linguistic panorama of Lebanon previously summarized in the introduction, this 'near-monolingualism' on the part of a large percentage of the Lebanese population represents, by itself, a sociolinguistic fact worth exploring, for it suggests a possible momentary shift in the Lebanese's relationship with this language.

The following sections explore two manifestations of this update: namely the perceived increase in the speakers' use of Arabic, and the speakers' attitudinal developments towards Arabic.

Perceived increase in the use of Arabic after the October Revolution

My personal participant observations indicate that the October Revolution may have, in fact, brought with it a general increase of the use of Arabic in Lebanon. Arabic seems to have become the first choice of some Lebanese speakers in certain communicative contexts where it would not necessarily have been so before October 17th.

According to the questionnaire's results, Lebanese speakers seem to generally share these impressions on the matter. To the question: *"Do you think you have been using more Arabic since the revolution started?"* a **77.63% of the respondents answered positively**, versus a 22.37% that provided a negative answer (Fig. 1).

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Fig. 1: Participants' responses to the question: *"Do you think you have been using more Arabic since the revolution started?"*

Most speakers who perceive an increase in their use of Arabic seem to have experienced it across the four language skills: writing, speaking, listening and reading. When asked *"How exactly have you been using more Arabic? (mark all the options that apply)"*, participants reported that their **receptive use** of Arabic, i.e. reading (76.2%) and listening (65.1%), had increased slightly more than their **productive use** of the language, i.e. speaking (49.2%) and writing (50.8%). These results appear to be related to the increase of passive exposure of these users to the information in Arabic concerning the October Revolution.

Such an increase might have been related to both an increasing amount of the information available in Arabic, as well as to the increase of the 'relevance' of such information in the eyes of the respondents. Fig. 2 below summarizes the respondents' impressions on this matter.

Fig. 2: Participants' responses to the question: *"How exactly have you been using more Arabic?"*

Naturally, as the results show, different speakers report having perceived this increase to various degrees and within different skills, according to their previous linguistic background and habits. Some, like the Lebanese 27-year old male who posted Fig. 3 (below), seemed to have perceived this increase as ‘sudden’, ‘new’ and—judging for the use of capital letters—probably also ‘unexpected’, since he did not remember reading Arabic this much since his preparation for his official high school admission exams, around 12 years ago.

Fig. 3: Facebook post from October 22nd, 2019 from a 27-year old Lebanese man from Mount Lebanon. – ‘Brevet’ stands for *diplôme national du brevet*, and consists of a set of both oral and written examinations within the French system of education that students take at the end of the middle school (9th grade).

The reactions to this post, which I present below in Fig. 4, are representative of the variety of opinions and perceptions on the matter.

While the second user commenting seems outraged at such a statement, the fourth user commenting identifies with the post, agrees on the sudden increase in her use of Arabic and admits that she had never read this much Arabic herself.

Comment 2: “Why? Where do you live, my dear? You speak Amharic¹⁰ at yours, or what?”

Comment 3: “And now I only enjoy writing in Arabic!”

Comment 4: “Me, [I haven’t read this much Arabic] in my entire life”

Fig. 4: Comments replying to post in Fig. 3 above.

¹⁰ The reference to Amharic here possibly points to the native language of Ethiopians, being this one of the most common nationalities among foreign intern domestic workers employed in Lebanon under the *kafāla* system (PANDE 2013).

Especially remarkable is the third comment: “and now I only enjoy writing in Arabic” which claims a voluntary and seemingly pleasurable change of the user’s writing habits in favor of Arabic. Moreover, it is worth noting that the author of this comment uses the Arabic script in order to type a sentence in clear LA. This pattern (repeated in Figs 5, 6, 11 and 14) points to a crack in the ideological link that relates the Arabic script in Lebanon to the Standard variety.

These comments reveal an update of previous linguistic trends among language users in Lebanon. Since the emergence of social media and before October 17th (1) a considerable segment of educated Lebanese youngsters¹¹ would prefer the use of English and French over Arabic for their contributions on social media and (2) a significant proportion of those who would choose to post in LA would often tend to do so in Arabizi (Latinized script).¹²

Probably the most attractive quality of Arabizi is its ‘stress-free’ nature. Given that Arabizi is not taught, but rather acquired through practice, this system “supports a person’s intuition”, offering a writing system for Arabic that is “free of typos and errors” (YAGHAN 2008: 45). Moreover, the flexibility and freedom from rules that Arabizi offers to Arabic users contrast sharply with the ‘performance anxiety’ that many Arabic speakers in Lebanon experience when using the Arabic script and, by extension, also with the aforementioned ideology that used to link the use of the Arabic letters exclusively to a rigid set of SA orthographical rules.¹³

In the Lebanese context, the use of the Arabic script was also related to the ‘Arabism’ identity while the use of the Latin Script had been associated to the ideology of ‘Lebanonism’ since the 60s. Long after Aql’s failed attempt (AQL 1961) and with the arrival of the internet and social media, a significant part of the Lebanese young generation started to see in the use of Arabizi a sign of modernity. This idea was reinforced by popular attitudes amongst some young educated Lebanese speakers that associated the use of the Arabic script to write LA with ‘low-class’ and ‘low educational level’ profiles, given that, for many of these speakers, an educated Lebanese youngster would always preferably choose English, French or LA in Arabizi.¹⁴

11 Some exceptions to this would be youngsters with a special interest in Arabic language and literature, or young individuals that were previously committed to certain social and political ideologies, etc. Of course, although this is especially remarkable among youngsters, many adult speakers who acquired a fluency in French or English may also avoid Arabic in specific situations in order to reinforce their socio-economic status.

12 These results seem to be in line with general trends in other Arab countries. According to Ramsay (2012), the linguistic choices made by Egyptian users in a context of ‘online communication’ seem to be determined by the instantaneous nature of many of the platforms used—which somehow seems to require “speech-like” codes—, as well as by the expected audience of the material in question.

13 Interestingly enough, both in the written responses and in the oral interviews, in order to refer to the writing of Lebanese Arabic in the Arabic script, participants would frequently use interchangeably the expressions “to write in Arabic” and “to write in *fuṣḥā*”.

14 The use of Arabizi seems to be a specially cost-effective solution for multilingual users who, like many Lebanese with a similar profile to that of our respondents, tend to use more than one alphabet (BOU TANIOS 2016; ABDALLAH 2008).

The fact that some Lebanese speakers began to choose Arabic (predominantly LA) for their contributions on social media and openly reporting positive attitudes towards the use of the Arabic script to write LA is, therefore, an indicator of change in the linguistic habits of part of the population. In fact, seeing LA written in the Arabic script has become increasingly common especially when the texts in question aim to divulge succinct and straightforward revolutionary content, such as in the poster in Fig. 5.

"One dollar is going to be 3000 L.L [Lebanese pounds]. Diesel and gas are getting more expensive by the day. Electricity rationing is increasing. Go out (to the streets) and say NO! Sunday 12/1/2020. Government premises in Hermel. Time: 4:00 pm. Popular Movement of Hermel".

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Fig. 5: Poster from the Popular Movement of Hermel mostly written in Lebanese Arabic in the Arabic script. Source: Akhbar Al-Saha Facebook page.

Within social media, the increasing use of Arabic after the revolution seems to have also affected speakers' perceptions regarding the use of the Arabic script for their contributions in LA.

In this case, the development of new perceptions towards the use of LA and the Arabic script in social media has provided those not previously familiarized with the Arabic keyboard with the necessary motivation to acquire a new linguistic skill: typing in Arabic.¹⁵ The author of the following comment, a 29-year old Lebanese woman, illustrates this situation in her Facebook post:

"I am getting faster (at typing) on the Arabic keyboard, so please, we can't stop now! See you all downtown. Love"

Fig. 6: Facebook post from October 22nd, 2019 from a 29 year old Lebanese woman from Shouf and resident in Beirut

¹⁵ According to Caubet, despite the availability of an Arabic interface on Facebook since 2009, it took Moroccan users some time to go through their "passage to literacy", meaning that it was not until 2014-2016 that the author observed "a passage from the stage of plain writing and deciphering *dārija* to that of an ability to comprehend and express longer, elaborate, and even literary, texts" (CAUBET 2017: 119). I argue that the situation in Lebanon is somewhat similar, and that the social and political movements leading to the revolution, as well as the October Revolution itself, have acted as catalyzers for many Lebanese speakers to begin their passages to literacy.

In fact, to the open-ended question ‘How would you say that your Arabic has improved after the revolution?’, eleven participants reported that their writing skills had improved, and eight of them specifically identified ‘typing in Arabic’ as a newly acquired skill (see [1] below). I hypothesize that behind this new disposition towards writing in Arabic there is an underlying development of the users’ attitudes towards the socio-political and cultural values that they previously ascribed both to writing in Arabic and to using the Arabic script.

[1] بالكتيبة عالكيورد. من زمان بتقن العربية، بس ما بحب كنت اكتبها

[My Arabic has improved] when writing on the keyboard. I already had a good command of Arabic, but I didn’t use to like writing in Arabic

(translation mine, C.M., 35 years old, male, North Lebanon)

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Both writing and typing LA in the Arabic script are increasingly being perceived by Lebanese speakers as the most natural and logic way to convert their thoughts and feelings into the written format. After the start of the October Revolution, producing LA content in the Arabic script is often chosen over the alternatives of Arabizi [2] and foreign languages [3] in social media. This represents an important update in the general status of Arabic among Lebanese speakers.

[2] Now I start to type a text on Whatsapp using Latin letters then switch the keyboard to Arabic and write Arabic sentences (follow the way it came to my mind, if the idea came in Arabic I write it in Arabic). This is something I wasn’t doing before October 17th

(R.R., 24 years old, female, Shouf; emphasis mine)

[3] I feel more comfortable typing and sharing Arabic content on social media and even within Whatsapp groups, where I was previously only restricted to English. In addition, I no longer feel the need to formalize my Arabic. **Typing Lebanese Arabic as it is (as you’ve done here) has become much easier, widely accepted and more intimate in terms of use**

(A.K. 28 years old, male, South Lebanon; emphasis mine)

Apart from the skill of ‘writing in Arabic more/better/faster’ (11 occurrences), respondents have also reported that after October 17th they have come to ‘read more/better/faster’ (14 occurrences); ‘increased their Arabic lexicon’ (13 occurrences); ‘gain fluency when speaking’ (6 occurrences); ‘learn to make conscious efforts to use Arabic instead of English or French’ (5 occurrences); ‘increase their creativity in Arabic’ (2 occurrences) and ‘improve their listening skills’ (1 occurrences).

It is thus safe to affirm that a general increase of the use of Arabic across social classes and sects has also acted itself as a potent motivator for some Lebanese individuals to try to overcome their difficulties and willingly practice their Arabic (both SA and LA, depending on the communicative context). As a result, **28.95% of the respondents considered that their Arabic skills have definitely improved and 35.53% considers that fact to be possible**. In contrast, 35.53% of the participants denied having perceived any development in their Arabic skills.

Fig. 7: Respondent's answers to the question: "Do you feel that your Arabic skills have somehow improved since October 17th?"

Spot on! 😄
My Arabic skills have skyrocketed in the past 13 days! ❤️🇱🇧
Like · Reply · 23h

Fig. 8: Reaction from an anonymous female Lebanese speaker on Facebook to the vignette in Fig. 15 of this article.

Question number 3, "Why do you think your use of Arabic increased?", aimed to address the motivations behind the 58 out of 76 respondents who perceived an increase in their use of Arabic (see Fig. 1). The participants presented a variety of reasons that can be summarized as follows:

1. **"I use more Arabic now to be more inclusive" (24 occurrences):** 24 out of 58 participants declared that their increased use of Arabic is motivated by their wish to address a wider audience and to contribute to their "sense of unity".¹⁶ The data indicates that this motivation is twofold. On the one hand, in a more informational and practical sense, speakers affirm their commitment and desire to use more Arabic because it is a "shared language", in order **to address and reach to the biggest number of people possible**, which allows protesters to better "organize, disseminate and boost the production of revolutionary material". On the other hand, in a more affective and social sense, the use of Arabic mitigates the differences between Lebanese citizens and becomes a tool for impactful **communication across classes and sects**, reaching also "those who are not privileged enough to speak foreign languages".

[4] [...]because in a country where your use of a foreign language marks the quality of your education, your social class, and potentially your religion, you better erase these attributes that separate you from others, especially in a revolution asking for equity and social justice, a revolution that transcended social, economic, and religious differences

(G.F. 28 year-old, male, Beirut)

2. **"I use more Arabic now because I am more exposed to it" (21 occurrences):** 21 out of 58 participants affirm that their increasing use of Arabic after the revolution is due to their increased exposure to the languages through TV and radio news,

¹⁶ Quotations without a reference in this section are directly taken from the participants' literal responses to the questionnaire.

social media, street discussions, etc., which, in turn, finds its origins in a growing interest in becoming more involved in the socio-political affairs of the country.

3. **“I use more Arabic now because it is the most appropriate language for the revolution” (21 occurrences):** 21 out of 58 participants assert that they have increased their use Arabic after the revolution because they consider Arabic to better address and fulfill their communicative needs and goals in the context of the October Revolution. This motivation is often twofold. At the informational level, Arabic is the most convenient language with which to tackle the specialized subjects related to the revolution, e.g., constitutional rights, laws, decrees, social policies, and so forth, with the **greatest terminological accuracy**. At the social and affective level, Arabic represents also the **most appropriate language to carry the ‘true message’ of the revolution**, given that it succeeds both in “conveying clearly people’s emotions, such as anger, sadness and desperation, etc.” and in giving expression to protesters’ creativity through chants, banners and different modes of street art.

[5] [...] but also because I feel that it is a matter of precision: Our demands have been so well articulated in Arabic that sometimes I feel that they lose meaning/nuances when they are translated

(M.S.; 27 years old; Female; Metn)

4. **“I use more Arabic now because I feel prouder to be Lebanese and to have Arabic as my language” (13 occurrences):** 13 of 58 participants mentioned that the revolution has actually increased their feeling of **patriotism** towards Lebanon and, in some cases, renewed their **pride in using Arabic**. The use of Arabic during the revolution has become a way for speakers to “affirm their identity as Lebanese” and to reclaim their **ownership** of Arabic as their mother tongue, given that “Arabic is the language of the people, the official national language”.

In sum, the nature of the motivations behind the increased use of Arabic in Lebanon after the October Revolution suggests an underlying momentary shift of its speakers’ perceived attitudes towards this language, which appear to be intimately connected to the socio-political changes that the country has witnessed since the beginning of the revolution. The following section will explore in further detail this attitudinal development and its manifestations in the speakers’ linguistic and social behavior.

Update of speakers’ attitudes towards Arabic after the October Revolution

Language attitudes are evaluative reactions to language varieties (DRAGOJEVIC 2017), which means that they are highly subjective and dependent on the social identities of the individuals holding them and, thus, also on the socio-political context surrounding these individuals. It is, therefore, reasonable to suggest that a deeply transformative event such as the October Revolution may have affected temporarily the Lebanese people’s attitudes towards their linguistic varieties.

Fig. 9: Reported attitudes of respondents towards Arabic after the October Revolution

As the previous section concluded, the increase in the use of Arabic that Lebanon has witnessed after the October Revolution seems to have come hand in hand with a **generalized update of Lebanese people's attitudes towards Arabic**. The results of our questionnaire confirm this impression. To the question: "Would you say your attitude towards Arabic now is more positive, more negative or the same than before the October Revolution?", **71.05% of the respondents answered 'more positive'**; 26.32% of the respondents answered 'the same' and 2.63% of respondents answered 'more negative' (Fig. 9).

When describing their attitudinal developments towards Arabic in the written answers to the question "Comment (as much as you like) on your old and new attitudes towards Arabic", respondents attributed a positive set of qualities to 'Arabic' through words such as 'freedom', 'pride', 'Lebanese', 'solidarity', 'modern', 'useful', 'impact', 'appropriate', 'credible', 'popular', and 'mine'. This view of the language contrasts with their pre-revolution attitudes towards Arabic, which they described as: 'complicated', 'vulgar', 'outdated', 'difficult', 'rigid', 'literary', 'useless', 'frustrating', 'unnatural', etc. The results are diagrammed in Fig. 10.

Fig. 10: Reported old attitudes (left side) and new attitudes (right side) towards Arabic extracted from participants' responses to the question cited above.

These findings illuminate the insight that attitudes in general are both “socially-structured” and “socially-structuring” phenomena (SHERIF & SHERIF 1967). This means that attitudes emerge, grow and disappear with society and at society’s rhythm. Therefore, despite the clarity of the results indicating perceived temporary attitudinal shifts among Lebanese speakers during the October Revolution, it is essential to remember that actual changes in language attitudes do not happen overnight or in a homogeneous manner.

We previously defined language as a social process. Just as the revolution reflected the culmination of historical, economical and socio-political processes that cannot be understood without the popular movements of 2005, 2011 and 2015, the emergence of positive attitudes towards Arabic and their transformation into concrete linguistic behavior also constitutes a sociolinguistic process, and it is, in fact, thus perceived by language users such as the author of the following response:¹⁷

[6] *I feel that my relationship to Arabic had been evolving for quite a few years now...As if I was getting ready for now :)*

(F.C. 30-40 years old, female, Bekaa)

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Fig. 11: Artwork by Jana Traboulsi made in 2015 to denounce the violent measures enforced by the Lebanese government to repress popular protests in 2015, and used again during the October Revolution.

The illustration’s text, written in clear Lebanese Arabic, reads: “Who says there is no State? There is a State, and this is how it looks like!”. Source: Akhbar Al Saha Facebook page.

The following sections explore the manifestations of this perceived attitudinal update towards Arabic at **three different levels**—from the regional to the national and supranational levels—with the purpose of shedding light onto their social significance at the intergroup level.

¹⁷ Quotations without a reference in this section are directly taken from the participants’ literal responses to the questionnaire.

Development of positive attitudes towards Lebanese regional varieties of Arabic

One of the manifestations of the speakers' attitudinal update towards Arabic in Lebanon has been the emergence of positive attitudes towards the regional varieties of Arabic in Lebanon and to its cultural production, which has, at least temporarily, contributed to the **legitimization of previously stigmatized LA local varieties**. This process has broadened the notion of LA previously restricted to the 'Beirut koine'¹⁸ so that it now includes other Lebanese varieties as equally legitimate linguistic varieties at the national level in the context of the October Revolution.

Fig. 12: Picture of walls in Beirut (Ring area). Written in red and blue respectively are the names of Nabatiyyeh and Tripoli, two Lebanese towns (in South and North Lebanon respectively) that became examples for the October revolution given the fierceness and resistance of their citizens.

Source: Akhbar Al Saha facebook page.

As Fig. 12 illustrates, peripheral Lebanese cities played an essential role in the October Revolution. The northern city of Tripoli and its local variety (Tripoli LA) may be the best

¹⁸ By "Beirut koine" here I refer to the Arabic variety that emerged in Beirut in the second half of the 20th century, among both incomers and native Beirutis and distinct from the local variety of this second group, which is commonly referred to as 'old *Beirute*'. The historical socio-political circumstances that Beirut lived as an urban center during the 19th and 20th century made the city a fertile ground for the emergence and development of this koineized urban variety. Notwithstanding its perhaps misleading name, this variety is not limited to the geographical boundaries of Beirut, but rather has become almost a standard variety often identified as *al-haky l-šādi* (the normal [way of] speaking), *al-lahze l-bayda* (the white variety) or simply as *lābnāni* (Lebanese). Born in an ethnic and religious melting pot, this variety soon became a vehicle of communication among members of very diverse communities and remained relatively neutral until today. This is probably why it is used as the main variety in Lebanese media and, to some extent, in the production of local culture.

example of this process. Despite being the second biggest city in Lebanon, Tripoli was often brushed aside and its dialect stigmatized through frequent ridicule at the national level. However, scenes from the main public square in Tripoli overflowing with demonstrators quickly took a prominent place on the television coverage, and the local variety gained popularity through the Tripolitan songs and chants that were constantly repeated in public squares across the country, as well as through the statements of iconic Tripolitan characters of the revolution that quickly went viral in social media.

This study rests on the principle that languages are constructed and modified by their speakers through interaction and use. Hence, it follows that language users may also affect the status of a linguistic variety by actively and consistently making (or not) use of this linguistic variety in specific social and communicative environments over a period of time.

Within the context of the October Revolution, speakers shared, repeated and adopted linguistic content produced in the Tripoli local variety (along with other regional varieties) without feeling the need to adapt this content to any set of pre-established linguistic national standards. In this manner, Tripoli LA made its appearance in social and communicative contexts this variety would not have reached before. In this way, speakers temporarily legitimized a previously stigmatized Lebanese local variety through the development of positive attitudes that granted it the right to carry the message of the national uprising.

As a result, the covert prestige that the local Arabic variety of Tripoli enjoyed within its specific in-group spread and extended to become publicly recognized by a wider outgroup of *‘thuwwār’* at the national level. Thus, the local variety of Tripoli “exited the prison of caricature and sarcasm in order to become a unified weapon for the revolution. A weapon for those sectors that have been united by poverty, suffering and political corruption. An active weapon against the suppression of idiosyncrasies and against centralization” (AYYOUB 2020; translation mine).¹⁹

The following post (see Fig. 13), by a 35-year old Lebanese man, illustrates the development of positive attitudes towards local varieties in the context of the October Revolution. In it, the user vindicates the role of the revolution in celebrating the cultural production of local varieties and against the dialect levelling behind the formation of the so-called Lebanese “white variety”.²⁰ Below, another user commenting on the same post protests against the stigmas surrounding the use of these local varieties.

19 The original text reads: تخرج اللهجة من سجون الكاريكاتور والساكازم لتصبح سلاحاً ثورياً موحداً بين شرائح يجمعها الفقر والمعاناة والتضييق وسياسات الإفساد، سلاحاً فعالاً ضد إلغاء الخصوصيات والمركزية.

20 Although ‘white variety’ or *‘al-lahze l-bayda’* commonly refers to the koineized urban variety that I call ‘Beirut koine’ (see footnote n.10 of this study for a brief definition of ‘Beirut koine’), when I inquired the author of this post about his understanding of the meaning of ‘white variety’, he provided me with two different definitions that would be equivalent to ‘Modern Standard Arabic’ and the ‘Beirut koine’ respectively.

Post: “Our revolution is [also] for songs in the regional dialects. Down with the insipid white variety!”

Comment: “and [so that] every person speaks his dialect without shame. This [issue] is very important!”

Fig. 13: Post from December 21st, 2019 by a 35 year old Lebanese man from Shouf. Source: Author’s personal Facebook account.

At an individual level, the message of social and linguistic tolerance and inclusiveness that the October Revolution helped spread through Lebanon has already empowered Lebanese speakers to find pride in their different origins and idiosyncrasies. Below, in [7], when commenting on the development of his attitudes towards Arabic, O.A., a 33 year-old Lebanese man originally from the Shouf region but resident in Beirut, takes pride in his decision to incorporate a feature from his local variety (the uvular realization of /q/) back into the koineized variety he currently uses in Beirut:

[7] *Actually I am now happier to use the dialect of my region of origin (Chouf). I am proud of using قاف (qaf) again :D*
(O.A., 33 years old, male, Shouf, resident in Beirut) ²¹

At a collective level, the October Revolution has empowered Lebanese people to embrace differences and focus on their common struggles. The shared political and social message carried by the ‘*thuwwār*’ seems to have partially mitigated—at least momentarily and in the context of the revolution—some of the sociolinguistic asymmetries among speakers of different Lebanese regional Arabic varieties.

In this sense, the new set of positive attitudes towards the regional LA varieties serves a **social-explanatory function**, for it reinforces the relations within the members of the in-

²¹ The uvular realization of /q/ (as opposed to the urban realization as a glottal stop) is recognized as a characteristic feature of members from the Druze community in Lebanon (ZEIN 1981; GERMANOS 2009; 2011).

group of *‘thuwwār’* through the adoption of a collective linguistic identity that accepts and celebrates regional differences and finds strength in diversity.

Development of positive attitudes towards ‘Lebanese Arabic’

The results of this study also indicate the development of positive attitudes towards LA that acknowledge this variety to be an essential component of the broader notion of ‘Arabic’.

Fig. 14: Reported attitudes of Lebanese speakers when asked about their understanding of the meaning of ‘Arabic’

Given the intimate relationship between language and identity, defining the actual role and meaning of the notion of ‘Arabic’ has often held the key to create and define national and supranational entities (SULEIMAN 2003). The 9th question in the questionnaire was specifically designed to find out more about our respondents’ current understanding of the notion of ‘Arabic’. To the question: “When you read the word “Arabic” in the previous questions, what did you understand by it?”, **75% of the participants answered “Both (Lebanese Arabic and Standard Arabic)”**, while only 18% restricted the notion of ‘Arabic’ to one variety: 9% to ‘Standard Arabic’ and 9% to ‘Lebanese Arabic’.

Within the Lebanese context, the ideological dichotomy of ‘Arabism’ and ‘Lebanonism’ (summarized in the introduction) gave rise to (at least) two different understandings of the notion of ‘Arabic’ among Lebanese. Although driven by different motives, both ideologies coincided in restricting the notion of ‘Arabic’ to SA.

On the one hand, those supporting the ideology of ‘Arabism’ aimed to distance LA from the notion of ‘Arabic’, arguing that this variety is insufficient or unsophisticated in comparison to SA. The belief that some languages are “incapable of fulfilling a wide range of functions” is a widespread negative language attitude (GARRETT 2010: 10). Oftentimes, non-standard linguistic varieties, as it is the case for LA, are “claimed not to be suitable for writing literature, for example, or for conducting affairs of state” (GARRETT 2010: 10).

After October 17th, this negative attitude towards LA— previously held by many Lebanese— seemed to come into question collectively, after LA proved to be an impactful political and social tool, sophisticated enough to fulfil many of the communicative needs and goals of the October Revolution. This represented a point of inflection for some Lebanese speakers, who effectively started to question their own negative attitudes towards their mother tongue. The following response [8] illustrates this experience:

[8] *As a student of Arabic literature, I was always feeling that the Standard Arabic is one of the most beautiful languages to be studied but unfortunately the colloquial version is vulgar and needs sophistication [...] Now, and after doing a tour in Beirut and reading some of the written sentences on the walls using colloquial, I felt something different, something inside of me that was proud of those people to be using **the right language with its right form** (colloquial) to express the deep common Lebanese fears. Other languages or forms wouldn't be able to make the same effect.*

(R.S. 24 years old, female, Shouf; emphasis mine).

On the other hand, social factions advocating for 'Lebanonism' tended to draw a distinction between 'Arabic' and 'Lebanese' often times under the claim that Lebanese is not an Arabic variety, but rather a distinctively separate language that finds its origins in Aramaic. After the arrival of the revolution, all kinds of linguistic content showing distinctive LA traits, as well as mixed codes combining SA and LA has been consistently and collectively labelled as 'Arabic'—as confirmed by the 75% of the respondents who identified 'Arabic' as both Lebanese and Standard Arabic. Moreover, LA has been openly and freely written on the Arabic script (as the following comment illustrates), and speakers, such as the author of the following response, started to refer to LA naturally as a 'subpart' of Arabic and not as a different entity. The comment of M.S. supports this idea:

[9] هيّ مش مسألة "نظرة" بالنسبة إليّ. ممكن أكثر نوع من "الملاحظة" بإنّه الناس فخورة اليوم باستخدامها للغة العربية، وتحديدًا اللبناينة. كأنّه فيه نوع من الوحدة حول اللغة. وهيّ وحدة أطياف وطبقات وكلّ شيء. وهيدا الشيء جميل

[9] *It is not a matter of 'attitude' in my opinion. Perhaps it's more a 'remark'. I noticed that people are now **proud of using the Arabic language, especially Lebanese Arabic**. It is as if there was some kind of unity around it. Unity across sects and classes and everything. And that is something beautiful*

(M.S. 27 years old, female, Metn, resident in Beirut; translation and emphasis mine)

In this light, and looking back to the respondents' pre-revolution and post-revolution representations of Arabic illustrated in Fig. 10 (i.e. 'complicated', 'vulgar', 'outdated', 'difficult', 'literary', 'unnatural', 'frustrating', 'rigid' versus 'freedom', 'pride', 'Lebanese', 'solidarity', 'modern', 'useful', 'impactful', 'appropriate', 'modern', 'mine', etc.), it seems that many of the pre-revolution qualifiers attached to Arabic correspond, in fact, to the old pre-revolution notion of Arabic that was restricted to SA, while post-revolution qualifiers are

representative of **an emergent notion of Arabic**. This would be a more flexible and inclusive notion of Arabic in Lebanon that has broadened its boundaries to include and legitimize LA.

The production of linguistic content in Arabic that embodies and exemplifies this broader notion of Arabic has been commonly spread during the October Revolution. The flyer in Fig. 14 below is an example of such content—it shows a message in simplified SA in red, followed by a second message in LA in black:

“Lebanon has the highest taxes in the world in exchange of zero services” [in SA]

October 17th Revolution. @17oct.revolution

And you are still following your leader and defending him” [in LA]”

Fig. 15: Flyer for the promotion of the October Revolution both in SA and LA. Source: Akhbar al Saha Facebook page.

This new set of positive attitudes towards LA, as well as the resulting broadening of the notion of ‘Arabic’ serve both a **social-explanatory function**, in that they contribute to the construction of a collective national social identity for the in-group of the ‘*thuwwār*’ that relies on a sense of linguistic unity around Arabic language.

In sum, the October Revolution has contributed to the development of positive attitudes towards LA among Lebanese speakers, updating their definition of the notion of ‘Arabic language’ and broadening its boundaries as a result, which seems to have affected these speakers’ sense of ownership of and comfort with the Arabic language as a whole (i.e. both with LA and with SA).

Moreover, and as the following section explains, this attitudinal development has also led, in turn, to a temporary increase of the status of Arabic versus foreign languages.

Development of positive attitudes towards Arabic vis-a-vis foreign languages

Observations indicate that after the beginning of the October Revolution many speakers started to choose Arabic over English and French consistently in contexts where foreign languages were predominant before—e.g. personal contributions in social media, spoken formal and informal discussions about the socio-political situation of the country, etc. Moreover, data indicates that the October Revolution has also contributed to the development of temporary positive attitudes towards Arabic vis a vis English and/or French.

It is well known that language choice is used to express and negotiate identity (KROSKRITY 2000; FULLER 2008; BUCHOLTZ & HALL 2009). Research has shown that, in multilingual environments, the use of a foreign code may be “traditionally motivated by the

instrumental role these languages come to play in accessing social mobility” (CHAKRANI 2011: 175).

In Lebanon, a fluency in English and/or French is usually available only to those with enough resources to access higher education or to enrol in private schools. For these reasons, in the Lebanese context, the use of foreign languages is known to mark social distance between speakers as well as to grant the speaker a wider range of social mobility. As [10] shows,²² Lebanese themselves are not oblivious to the aforementioned social significance of the use of foreign languages in their country:

[10] *I always used exclusively Arabic especially with my kids. But I used English and French outside to go with the flow with some acquaintances who used a combination of 3 languages, maybe to feel part of the group or maybe unconsciously to prove that I am fluent in those 3 and that I am an educated world traveler [...]*

(M.S. 42 years old, female, Bekaa, resident in Beirut).

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As the previous section concluded, one of the motives why speakers claimed to have used more Arabic after the revolution included their wish to show and spread “inclusiveness” and “solidarity” among classes and sects. By choosing Arabic over French and/or English, many multilingual Lebanese speakers are acknowledging their social privileges while purposely claiming their belonging to a wider, more diverse social group than the one they were born into— one that is based on ideals of **social equality**. In the context of a cross-class revolution, most of our respondents feel that Arabic serves them as the most appropriate communicative tool to carry their ideals of social solidarity as well as their new feeling of patriotism.

[11] *[...] After the thawra [revolution], I felt prouder of being fluent in Arabic and maybe **wanted to belong to a rebel group that in my mind was less privileged than the group of people who uses a mix of languages** or maybe more careless about the snobbism that unfortunately is attributed to using foreign languages. Also, using Arabic makes me feel more patriotic.*

(M.S. 42 years old, female, Bekaa, resident in Beirut; emphasis mine).

The development of these positive attitudes towards Arabic over foreign languages was especially visible among Lebanese university students. Although this fact might seem at first sight unsurprising—given that new generations are usually expected to lead both social and linguistic change—, in the case of Lebanon, the young educated generation was the social group that was arguably less in contact with Arabic language and, as a result, also the group that felt less at ease with this language.

²² See also comment [4].

Fig. 16: Weekly Vignette by The Art of Boo within the thread of ‘Thawra Little Wins’ that illustrates the achievements of the October Revolution in Lebanon.

AUB, LAU and USJ respectively stand for: American University of Beirut (English), Lebanese American University (English) and Université Saint Joseph (French), three of the most prestigious private universities in Lebanon who teach most of their courses in English or French.

To the surprise of many (as Fig. 16 illustrates) numerous students from prestigious English and French speaking universities indeed overcame their lack of practice and/or their performance anxiety to become an active part of the October Revolution in its ‘designated language’.

Many of the questionnaire respondents were either students or alumni from many of these institutions, and therefore also fluent in English and/or French. For some of them, the choice of Arabic over English and French, apart from being a deliberate attempt to reduce the social distance between speakers, represented **a conscious act of social, political and cultural resistance**. This resistance, as [12] suggests, represents an internal (and intimate) process of reorientation whereby speakers began to question a set of deeply rooted individual and collective ideologies and attitudes, both socio-political and linguistic:

[12] *I would speak other languages instead of Arabic often because of ‘occidentalism’ and in many ways because of self-imposed Orientalism too*
(M.A. 46 years old, Female, Beirut, emphasis mine).

Within the context of the revolution, the questioning of self-imposed beliefs and attitudes challenged the original ideological conflict that for so long protected those in power. At the collective level, this generated a reorientation in the collective identification of ‘who’ (or ‘what’) was it that, in fact, supposed a threat to Lebanon’s popular sovereignty and national unity.

Rather than putting the blame on their own in-group (among their fellow countrymen and countrywomen) the ‘*thuwwār*’ collectively identified the sectarian political elite as the main cause of the economic and socio-political conflicts that sabotaged the country’s stability for the last century.

This new sense of trust and empathy among Lebanese citizens, which materialized in the events of the October Revolution, constituted for many the real end of the Lebanese civil war and began to uproot the sectarian mistrust that had been slowly rotting the country ever since.

At the linguistic level, the very same realizations led some speakers, like the author of [13] below, to put an **end to their internal conflict with Arabic**—a self-imposed ideologi-

cal dispute that, ever since their formative years, had been pushing many Lebanese towards the use of foreign languages over their mother tongue.

[13] من وراء الثورة تصالحت مع اللغة العربية

Because of the revolution I have made peace with the Arabic language

(C.M. 35 years old, male, Tripoli, resident in Beirut)

In this sense, these new set of positive attitudes towards Arabic vis a vis foreign languages serves both a social-explanatory function—for it aims to mitigate the class asymmetries among in-group members—and also a social-differentiation function—for it differentiates the in-group ‘*thuwwār*’ from a relevant common outgroup, the sectarian political elite.

In sum, a freer and more frequent use of (a broader notion of) Arabic represents an essential element for the strengthening of cross-class and cross-sect ties among the members belonging to the social group of ‘*thuwwār*’, as well as for the reinforcement the Lebanese people’s feeling of ownership towards their shared language.

Conclusions

The present study explores the most recent linguistic developments regarding the use and status of Arabic in Lebanon among those who participated in the October Revolution. My results indicate that, within this group, there has been a **perceived increase of the use of Arabic language** which came hand in hand with the **development of new positive attitudes** towards the Arabic language among Lebanese speakers.

This new status of Arabic as the language of the October Revolution has been especially noticeable in users’ contributions on social media, where Arabic language (especially LA) and the use of the Arabic script have taken an unusual center stage among young educated speakers, challenging the grip of English and French as well as the growing use of the Arabizi writing system, at least temporarily and within the context of the October Revolution.

As for the attitudinal developments, this study shows that the October Revolution has effectively contributed to the development of new sets of positive attitudes towards Arabic among Lebanese speakers at three different levels: (1) towards Lebanese regional varieties of Arabic (2) towards ‘Lebanese Arabic’ and (3) towards Arabic vis-a-vis foreign languages.

Moreover, the present case study also provides evidence of the crucial role of language attitudes and ideologies in shaping the speakers’ linguistic and social behavior, which constructs, through interaction, both the speakers’ individual and collective social identities.

This perceived linguistic attitudinal shift in the direction of Arabic in the context of the October Revolution seems to have played an essential role in the construction of the collective social identity of the national group ‘*thuwwār*’ by fulfilling both **(a) social explanatory** and **(b) social-differentiation functions**:

- a. It strengthened the internal ties among the ‘*thuwwār*’ under a specific language ideology that regards Arabic as an inclusive, flexible and impactful language that is able to

faithfully carry the revolution's message across sects and social classes. According to this sociolinguistic ideology, and for this specific group, Arabic is the shared, national language that, in all its diversity, enhances the in-group's feelings of national pride and belonging, for it is considered one of the pillars upon which Lebanon's national unity stands.

- b. It has differentiated the social group of '*thuwwār*' from other outgroups, namely the sectarian political elite that support the previous status quo based on sectarianism and class segregation.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, every linguistic interaction has, ultimately, a social end. The perceived developments in the use and status of Arabic that followed October 17th and that I have explored in this study stand as a clear manifestation of the *thuwwār*'s agency to satisfy the communicative and affective dimensions of the **social end** that **this new mode of national cross-sect, cross-class popular interaction** intends to reach. By tearing down the imaginary walls separating them and taking back their public spaces, Lebanese citizens finally had the chance to meet each other, and they did so overwhelmingly in Arabic.

The results of the present study therefore support the idea that the October Revolution in Lebanon has been as unprecedentedly contesting and defiant at the linguistic level as it has been at the social and political levels.

However, today, more than a year after the October revolution started, the movement seems to go through a phase of stagnation, especially after the tragic explosion of Beirut port on August 4th, 2020, and while the same political class continues failing to solve the many crises that the country was already witnessing. Given the ever-evolving nature of this topic, further research should explore questions such as: were these socio-linguistic trends temporary? Was their effect limited to a social, economic and political situation? Or will this perceived attitudinal development remain present in the speakers' community and determine the future use of Arabic in Lebanon? Such findings would complement the present work and contribute to the monitoring of language change in the present Arab world and its relation to social, political, economic and cultural conditions.

Regardless of what the future holds for Lebanon, as far as language is concerned, the events of the October Revolution have already helped a group of Lebanese, the *thuwwār*, signal, if perhaps only temporarily, their unity in their attempt to recover effective sovereignty over their country, for it has provided them with a **newly-defined sense of their own linguistic identity**. And fortunately, that is something that no corrupt government will ever be able to take away from them.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

اللغة والثورة - Language and Revolution

- Name – الاسم _____
- How old are you? - قديّه عمرك ؟
20-30 30-40 40-50 50-60 60+
- What is your gender? - شو جندرك ؟
Transexual – عابر / عابرة Man – رجال Woman – امرأة
- Where are you from in Lebanon? - إنت من وين بالبنان؟ _____
- Where do you live currently? (name of city) - وين ساكن / ساكنة هلق؟ _____

- For how long have you been living there? - قديش صارلك عايش/عايشة هنيك؟ _____

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استعمال - Use

1. Do you think you have been using more Arabic since the revolution started?
هل بتعتقد/ بتعتقدي إنه من وقت ما بلّشت الثورة عم تستعمل/ تستعملي العربي أكثر؟
Yes – نعم No – لا
2. How exactly have you been using more Arabic? (mark all the options that apply)?
كيف بالتحديد عم تستعمل / تستعملي العربي أكثر؟ (نقّي كل الخيارات يلي بتتطبّق عليك) ؟
 - I have been reading in Arabic more – عم بقرا بالعربي أكثر
 - I have been writing in Arabic more – عم بكتب بالعربي أكثر
 - I have been listening to Arabic more – عم اسمع عربي أكثر
 - I have been speaking Arabic more – عم بحكي عربي أكثر
3. Why do you think your use of Arabic increased? – ليش برأيك زاد استعمالك للعربي؟
4. What do you feel was keeping you from using Arabic before? –
شو يلي برأيك كان عم يمنعك تستعمل / تستعملي العربي هالقد ؟

Skills - قدرات

5. Do you feel that your Arabic skills have somehow improved since October 17th? – هل بتليقي إنه قدراتك بالعربي تطوّروا (بطريقة ما) من بعد 17 تشرين؟
لا – No Maybe – يمكن Definitely – أكيد
6. How would you say that your Arabic improved? كيف قولك تطوّرت عربيتك؟
7. When you read the word “Arabic” in the previous questions, what did you understand by it? – لما قرّيت كلمة "العربي" بالأسئلة السابقة، شو فهمت منها؟ –
☐ Lebanese Arabic – العامية اللبنانية
☐ Standard Arabic – الفصحى
☐ Both – الإثنين
☐ None of the above. I didn't think about it – ولا واحدة منهم. ما فكرت فيها

Attitudes – مواقف

8. Would you say your attitude towards Arabic now is more positive, more negative or the same than before? هل نظرتك للعربي صارت إجابية أكثر من قبل، سلبية أكثر من قبل أو هي نفسها؟
Same – نفس الشيء More negative – سلبية أكثر More positive – إجابية أكثر
9. Comment (as much as you like) on your old and new attitudes towards Arabic علّق (قد ما بدّك) عن نظرتك القديمة والجديدة للعربي