

## Teaching Arabic Post 9/11: Humor and the Potential for Critical Language Awareness

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### ABSTRACT

In this study, I draw on data from an ethnographic study of a university-level Arabic as a foreign language classroom to demonstrate how humor could be used as a pedagogical tool to make visible relationships between language and ideology. Tools from critical discourse analysis are used to analyze a teacher's linguistic choices in political humor and the relationship between these choices and the negative representations of the Arabic speaking world that characterize what Byrnes (2004) calls "the language of the public sphere" in the U.S. post 9/11. A follow up discussion of the potential of using humor as a form of Critical Language Awareness is offered to raise students' awareness of the way in which language maintains ideological assumptions and constructs misrepresentations of the 'other.'

**Keywords:** Language, Second Language, Humor, Critical Language Awareness.

### INTRODUCTION

A post 9/11 world affords the language profession a much-needed opportunity to revise its notions of the role of language in the public sphere...For no cultural and linguistic world have the events of 9/11 and its aftermath affected views of "the other" more dramatically than for the Arabic speaking world, often lumped together with the Islamic world, often lumped together with uncivilized societies and terrorism...

(Byrnes, 2004, p. 267)

There is little doubt that the teaching of foreign languages, or modern languages<sup>(1)</sup>, and their cultures has been affected in the aftermath of 9/11 in terms of learning about the 'others' (Byrnes et al, 2004; Kramersch, 2005). Historically, interest in the teaching and learning of particular languages and cultures has surged at moments of political crises. In 1957, the successful Russian launching of Sputnik I disturbed America's sense of national security and military competence. Accordingly, interest in learning Russian reached its utmost during the cold war (Allen, 1992; Kramersch, 2005; Welles, 2002). Typically, this interest in learning the language of the 'adversary' dies out gradually and the number of students interested in learning the language declines as the

political crisis gets resolved.

The situation of teaching Arabic as a foreign/second language in the U.S. is both similar and different. On the one hand, in a post 9/11 context, Welles (2004) reports a 92.3% increase in Arabic student enrollment in the U.S. between 1998 and 2002. A number of US newspapers reported that post 9/11, many U.S. colleges, universities and even middle and high schools have started offering Arabic, some for the first time, many with a huge flux of learners (Allen, 2004; Edwards, 2004; Scollon, 2004). Apparently, as is the case with other foreign languages (Kramersch, 2005), a heightened sense of 'security', 'patriotism' and 'the fight against terrorism' has also been part of the package of learning Arabic as the language of the 'adversary'. For instance, learning Arabic has been introduced in some newspapers, in a post 9/11 context, as a tool in the hands of those who will track 'terrorists.' Richard Brecht, a former Air Force Cryptographer, was quoted in the New York Times, June 16, 2004, as commenting, "five billion dollars for an F-22 will not help us in the battle against terrorism. Language that helps us understand why they're [terrorists] trying to harm us [Americans] will."

On the other hand, the interest in learning Arabic and the negative representation of speakers of Arabic, although more obviously and publicly manifested post 9/11, have not been a new or immediate consequence of the terrible events of 9/11. First, Arabic has been termed "critical" by the National Defense and Education Act (NDEA) as early as the aftermath of World War II (Allen,

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1992, 2004). As McCarus (1987) points out, the need for “infantrymen and intelligence personnel to function in and do research on the Arab world” (p. 14) gave recognition to the importance of proficiency in Arabic. Second, the sociopolitical and cultural context of teaching Arabic has always been influenced by inaccurate and prejudiced views of Arabs and Muslims (Allen, 2004). As early as during the colonial era all the way to the recent media coverage of the aftermath of 9/11, the representation of Arabs, often lumped with Muslims, has been characterized by exaggerated stereotypes, prejudices, and misinterpretations (Said, 1997, 2003). Images of violence and terrorism among Arabs and Muslims have dehumanized the Arab world, its language, and cultures.

With this in mind, the teaching of Arabic has inherited an ambiguous and uneasy relationship between an interest in learning the language of the ‘other’ and a long history of prejudice towards the Arab and Islamic world. Some believe that Arabic is gaining more global interest recently because it is the language of “Islam” (Dahbi, 2004, p. 630). Said (2003) thinks that Arabic is “terribly misrepresented. It’s thought of as being first of all a controversial language because it is the language of Islam. And it is considered to be a violent language” (p. 165). It is not surprising, therefore, that there is very little that is known about Arabic and Arabs apart from the connection to a ‘violent’ Islam. In interviews with Edward Said (2003), Barsamian noted that “all that many Americans know about Arabic is the myth that there are a thousand words for knife (p. 165).”

The current complexities that surround teaching and learning Arabic post 9/11 seem to be characterized by a polemic debate. On the one hand, to learn the language is a tool in the global fight against a “decentralized and dispersed” terrorism (Brand, 2005, p. 7). On the other hand, Kramersch (2003) and others (e.g., Allen, W., 2004; Wesche, 2004) argue that part of teaching and learning a foreign language, in general, is improving intercultural communication and developing a more human understanding of the ‘other.’ In this context, attention to language teaching and learning is significant because it “expresses... embodies... and symbolizes cultural reality” (Kramersch, 2003, p. 3). Therefore, the danger of misrepresenting ‘the other’ is emphasized.

Some studies have underlined the importance of contextualizing the teaching of Arabic<sup>2</sup> through teaching language and culture as inseparable components. This

approach aims to increase cultural proficiency beside language proficiency and strives to change the negative attitudes towards Arabic and the Arab world (see e.g., Al-Batal, 1988; Rammuny, 1996; Suleiman, 1990, 1993). In sum, although foreign language learning has been sometimes tailored for the service of national and federal workforce (Kramersch, 2005), as is clearly the case with Arabic, 9/11 has allowed other opposite ideologies to emerge that raise questions of “what’s going on in the world” (Chomsky, 2005) inside

and outside the United States.

The work of Critical Language Awareness (CLA), as a pedagogical tool for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), differs from traditional approaches to teaching language and culture. It gives significance to the role of language and discourse through which “ideologies are transmitted, and practices, meanings, values and identities are taught and learnt” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 219). CLA aims to deconstruct the way language is used to ideologically construct certain identities for ourselves and/or against others (Janks, 1993). Following Janks’s line of argument, to prepare for critical language learners, teachers need to help students become aware of deliberate linguistic choices in multimodal texts and learn to problematize the reasons behind such choices, the interests served, and the interpretations of readers (cf., Wallace, 1995, 2003).

In this case study, I draw on data from an ethnographic study of a university level Arabic class to argue that humor can be utilized as a pedagogical tool to highlight relationships between language, power and ideology. More specifically, I analyze jokes from one Arabic teacher’s classroom to illustrate the intertextual links between the teacher’s linguistic choices and the political and cultural representation of the Arab world in the U.S. post 9/11. My data suggest that the teacher’s deployment of humor illuminates political and sociocultural relationships between language use and function. I also attempt to explore the potential of deliberately using humor as a form of Critical Language Awareness (Fairclough) in the Arabic classroom to teach students how to challenge layers of interpretations in a given text.

This study is important for two reasons. First, studies that focus on micro classroom interactions in Arabic classes are very few. In conversations with the Dean of Graduate School in one of the US universities about the scarcity of ethnographic studies in Arabic classes, she

commented that this is not surprising. She reminded me of academic ‘surveillance’ (see e.g., Foucault, 1980) and the restricted freedom of scholars. She mentioned a few examples of some teachers who were persecuted because of their political opinions towards the Middle East, for instance. Since the teaching of Arabic is highly politicized, I believe conducting studies inside Arabic classrooms could be a source of anxiety to researchers and the research participants (as is the case in this study as I will refer later). Second, examining the teaching of Arabic in a post 9/11 context is of great consequence to teachers of other foreign languages, those who are interested in being aware of various ways to counter the negative representations of the ‘other’ in their teaching.

### Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical perspective informing this study is grounded in post-structural critical theory. This perspective accentuates the relationship between language and power as dialectically constructed in response to and in dialogue with sociopolitical, cultural, and economic changes in any context (e.g., Fairclough, 2001; Janks, 1991, 1993; Luke, 1996; Pennycook, 2001). In other words, linguistic choices are ideological. By ideology, I rely on Gee’s definition to mean “any theory that involves assumptions (however tacit they may be) about the “value” (prestige, power, desirability, centrality) of experiences, things, or people” (1992, p. 8, quotes in origin). In this article, I explore the relationships between language and the hidden meanings and/or taken-for granted ideological interpretations of the ‘others’ in the Arabic classroom. I analyze how these texts construct assumptions about the Arabic language and its speakers.

In addition to ‘ideology’, a construct that informs this study is that of ‘intertextuality.’ Although the term is usually referenced to Bakhtin, who used the term ‘translinguistics’ instead (Wertch, 1991, p. 51), Kristeva coined the term ‘intertextuality’ drawing on works of Bakhtin. According to Bakhtin:

The word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (It is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions...

(Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 294-5)

The above quote refers to the fact that texts, spoken, written, or multi-modal, draw upon other texts and therefore “other voices than the author’s” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 218). The meanings of the linguistic texts negotiated in classroom interactions are neither stable nor decontextualized. On the contrary, they are intertextual and uttered in response to other texts, constructed in the past or present, within the macro contexts outside the classroom (Gebhard, 2004). Therefore, it is through the nexus of voices and power relations constituted through and by the language of texts that values, identities, and representations of others are maintained and/or resisted. In my analysis, I use the construct of intertextuality to investigate links between political jokes in the classroom and cultural and political texts that reference Arabic and the Arabic speaking world in the U.S. post 9/11. It is significant to mention that this paper is a case study that does not intend to elaborate on a typology of “humor” but rather to elaborate on its contribution to a political understanding of classroom negotiations in one Arabic classroom.

The use of humor in the classroom context and its perception by students has been the subject of several studies (see e.g., Berk, 2002; Cornett, 2001; Shade, 1996; White, 2001). At the college level, Torok, S., McMorris, R., and Lin, W. (2004) examined how three teachers and their students perceived the use of humor in classes. They concluded that the teachers used humor to “facilitate understanding of classroom material, lower tension...and increase student attentiveness” (p. 180). In this paper, the political aspect of the humor is more emphasized than its psychological impact on students.

At a macro societal level, Webb (1981) argues that the “social *use* made of jokes and joking” has not received much attention (p. 35- Italics in original). He states that humor, if used in a political sense, “integrates ideology with the felt experience of an individual” (p. 48). In my understanding, communicating jokes constitutes particular assumptions about the speaker, the interpretations of the listener, and what is (are) laughed at. Therefore, jokes invoke a certain allegiance in favor of one assumption or ideological interpretation against others.

Building on the understanding of the Orient, I draw on the work of Said (1997, 2003) to ground my exploration of the role of language in representing other cultures. Said’s *Orientalism* offers a critical eye in exploring assumptions and ideological representations of

‘the other.’ I draw on his work on the contextual and historical ways of interpreting language.

### **The Present Study**

#### **The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate relationships between the macro sociocultural and political contexts manifested in the aftermath of 9/11 and the language of micro classroom interactions. Personally, as an Arab American researcher and a future educator, I feel very connected to the study (see description of researcher). Academically, the study identifies with the recent challenges that face the language teaching profession and particularly Arabic post 9/11 amidst a sense of controversy and security concerns. It further recognizes the dilemma of the Arabic instructor, in general, who is caught in the double role of being an educator and a native informant on the Arab culture(s). In addition, this paper invites further research on the significance of teaching Arabic with the aim to raise the sociocultural and political awareness of the students.

This paper addresses the following main question:

- What are some of the intertextual links between the Arabic teacher’s political jokes and the representations of Arabs and their cultures in the U.S. post 9/11? How do these jokes construct potential moments of critical understanding of ‘the other’?

#### **The Research Context**

Arabic is taught on this campus<sup>(3)</sup> as an undergraduate level course within the Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies. According to conversations with Dr. David (all names are pseudonyms), a faculty member in this department, the first Arabic faculty arrived to the campus in 1978. At that time, there was neither a Judaic Studies program nor a Near Eastern Studies program. Both were offered as majors within History and later within Classics. Mirroring the literature review on teaching Arabic in the US, this Arabic program was initially interested in a textual approach to teaching- the Grammar-Translation Approach. Later, the change of interests in learning Arabic and the new communicative teaching methods were integrated in this program.

In terms of the learners of Arabic and their investment in this program, Dr. David explains that there has been a recent change. In the beginning, learners of Arabic were mainly interested in a “sort of scholarly pursuits” like Middle Eastern Studies, Biblical Studies, and

Archeology. Nowadays, Dr. David believes that the motivations to learn Arabic “[are] mostly language and culture and ...work for the government [and/or] business in the Middle East.” Comparing the situation to that of Russian after launching the Sputnik, Dr. David believes that Arabic has gained similar interest to Russian as the language of “the adversary” following the terrorists’ attack in 9/11.

#### **The Arabic Teacher and the Class Routine**

Dr. Edward is of Middle Eastern origin and an expert in the field of Middle Eastern Studies. He has been a teacher of Arabic on this campus for almost 12 years. His research interests include classical Arabic historiography, and medieval and modern Arabic literature. He captures the attention and natural interest of his learners during his Arabic teaching through his professional expertise and a witty sense of humor. In a short interview with him, he emphasized the importance of incorporating elements of culture in teaching Arabic language as two inseparable components. In his opinion, it is important to notice the way language is negotiated in “cultural usage”. When asked about his methods of teaching, he described the need to equip students with a strong background of grammar and gradually introduce elements of communicative conversations.

Typically, the class followed a kind of fixed routine. The class started with the teacher invoking some general topics and asking students for any news highlights that they would like to share using Arabic. In many cases, the conversation shifted to English by both the teacher and the students if the topic was very interesting and beyond the learner’s abilities in Arabic. After that, students read a passage in Arabic from the (*Elementary Modern Standard Arabic*) *EMSA* textbook, a sentence for each student, and translated its meaning in English. Explanation of grammatical rules and drills, structural and functional, followed. The *EMSA* units, during this semester, included a variety of topics like: ‘The modern Arab woman’, the ‘Nile River’, the ‘Bedouins’, and ‘Foreign Correspondent in Tunis’.

#### **The Arabic Learners**

14 of the total 17 students of Arabic in this class, Intermediate Arabic I, have known each other for three consecutive semesters. They were enrolled in Arabic Elementary I and II, and were taught Arabic by the same instructor, Dr. Edward.

With only two south Asian students, the rest are American. Only four of the students are connected to the Middle East through heritage either directly or through a spouse. An interesting blend of majors and some minors constitute the class culture that includes: Political Science, Middle Eastern Studies, Biology, Philosophy, French, Spanish, Economics, Religion and International Relations, and Art History. This mixture of academic interest and future investment in Arabic enriches the class both linguistically and culturally, which becomes clear in some class discussions and through the questions the students raise in response to some topics. For example, comments related to politics are usually picked up by Shawn or James who are both majoring in political science. Comments related to art and music are part of Lara's expertise. Some religious comments are enriched by the south Asian students who are both Muslims. Other newspaper highlights about the Middle East are responded to by Isaq who is majoring in Middle Eastern Studies and has a Jewish heritage link in the region.

### **The Researcher**

I have conducted this ethnographic study as part of my training in ethnographic research for my doctoral program in the field of Language, Literacy, and Culture. I am of Middle Eastern origin and therefore ethnically, linguistically, and socio-culturally connected to the Arabic language and culture. As an Arab American who came to the States two months prior to 9/11, my experiences working with Arabic learners are shaped by the aftermath of the terrorist attacks.

Being a participant and observer in the class allowed me to observe the culture of the classroom as it unfolds. I had previously worked as a teacher assistant for these learners during their elementary Arabic courses. During the study, I assumed several roles on personal and professional levels. For example, my affiliation with the program as a teaching assistant allowed me a close relationship with the students and the teacher. I chatted with them formally and informally even outside the course of the study. In addition, although I was only a researcher at the 'Intermediate I' class, students referred to me as their previous teaching assistant, a friend, and a point of reference. For example, Jane, majoring in Political Science and Asian Languages and Civilizations, approached me for help in an assignment when she missed a class. Clara, an Art History student, who sat behind me in several classes, sometimes asked for

explanation of a grammatical rule or the meaning of words. Rula, a Biology/Pre-Med student, chatted with me in the colloquial Syrian dialect and we spent time discussing life in Syria and the use of Arabic in writing e-mails. Others, depending on whom I sat next to, engaged in other linguistic, religious, and family-life oriented conversations. Joy, a Muslim student majoring in Economics, talked to me about her enthusiasm to read the Quran in Arabic.

The teacher positioned me as a resource for information during the course. During the classroom cultural intervals, he would ask me if I had something to add and if I concurred with his opinions or had different ones. My research was part of the classroom talk. Students talked to me prior to the class and checked on how my work was going and if I needed any other data.

It is noteworthy to point here to the subjective roles of the researcher, myself, and the teacher of Arabic in this classroom as 'subversive native informants' of Arabic language and culture. Both are consciously aware of the dominant discourses that shape the American academia concerning its ideological representations of Arabs. As an insider-outsider in such ideologies, one is shaped and at the same time contributes in shaping such discourses.

### **Data Collection**

The ethnographic study took place over a full academic semester, the full period of the Arabic Intermediate I course at this university campus. The Intermediate I class had 16 students. The class met twice a week for one hour and fifteen minutes. I attended almost all classes and used a combination of "thick" (Geertz, 1973) detailed observation notes and personal analytic entries to compile my on-site fieldwork data set. The teacher, Dr. Edward, did not allow the use of videotapes in the class. After my conversations with him about the difficulty of following all that was happening in the class without the aid of an audiotape, he allowed audiotaping in a sporadic manner. He felt that the use of such equipment affected the natural flow of the class and its interactions although students signed consent-forms agreeing to being audiotaped.

In my own speculation and in conversation with colleagues, I wonder if other reasons could have been part of his decision. The time of the research, the research questions, and the broader context of US and Arabs relationships post 9/11 and the War in Iraq might have added to the anxiety level of keeping videotapes or

audiotapes of the data collected. This reflects back on the influence of politics and ideologies on the teaching of Arabic and the representation of the 'other'. Therefore, I was very careful in writing down extensive field notes of 'what' is said in class and 'how' interactions were constructed moment-by-moment. Following Bogdan and Biklen (1992), my field notes consisted of both descriptive and reflective notes.

Besides the detailed on-site notes, a second set of data resources included formal and informal interviews with some classroom students and the teacher. I collected a third set of data through an open-ended survey administered towards the middle of the course. I conducted this survey to collect demographic data about the students and some written responses concerning their initial experiences with Arabic language inside and outside the school environment.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed the data in several steps. First, I looked at the students themselves in terms of who they are and their investment in learning Arabic post 9/11: their majors, their ethnicities, and interests in learning Arabic. Second, I started thoroughly reading and re-reading my notes focusing on intertextual links between the sociocultural and political context of the aftermath of 9/11 and the micro culture of the classroom. In that sense, I allowed the categories to unfold through data itself. I looked for recurring discourse patterns and participant structures. I found many humorous teacher-student interactions documented in my notes.

This paper focuses on my analysis of the humorous language used in the coded classroom interactions. Almost 80% of the humorous interactions involved could be considered political, in the sense that they were linked to and reflected the representation of Arabs and Muslims by the West in the context of 9/11. I used an interdisciplinary critical language approach (Bloome and Egan-Robertson, 1993; Fairclough, 2001, 2003; Gee, 1992; Pennycook, 2001) to analyze the linguistic choices in the jokes. For example, using an intertextual notion of texts, I was able to further analyze the 'pretextual' historical and the immediate 'contextual' possibilities that produced the jokes (Pennycook, 2001, p. 111).

### **Findings**

When I approached the class to conduct my study, I expected tensions in the class for several reasons. First, I

thought the various students' different interests in learning Arabic might cause anxiety. Students' investments in the language ranged between service in the army, a speculated job in the FBI or government translation services, reading and understanding the Quran, and an interest in the Arab culture due to heritage roots or marriage. Second, the 9/11 context, the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the negative image of Arabs and Muslims in the West, as 'terrorists' and 'violent', have exacerbated the tense relationship between the U.S. and the Arab and Islamic world. I expected part of this aggravation to impact Arabic classes.

What I did not anticipate were jokes and humor as a repetitive teacher-student interaction. When initiated by the teacher, the jokes were typically terse with an element of surprise, cheerfulness, and sometimes serious irony. Humorous intervals seemed to provide a positive, comfortable, and supportive atmosphere for students. However, looking at the teacher's linguistic choices, it is clear that the jokes also served as subtle and spontaneous vehicles for introducing instances of misrepresentations and stereotypical images of Arabic language and culture [examples following].

The humorous examples analyzed in this paper are limited to instances that are recognizable by a wider spectrum of audiences as opposed to other instances that could only be grasped by those of Arab background. Furthermore, I have purposefully excluded political humor that impersonates well-known Arab or non Arab figures for further protection of participants.

### **'Jihad' and the 'Holy War'**

One day, when discussing 'soccer' in the Arab world, Dr. Edward was talking about the dusty playground where kids practice their soccer in some Arabic towns as opposed to the clean well-prepared playground for kids in the U.S. Students were curious about the Arabic terms for some other sports like basketball, swimming, and squash. Shawn asked about "*fencing*." Dr. Edward said: "There is a word for that. That is called *Jihad*." The surprise got us all and we burst out laughing. The joke is expressed in the present tense with a degree of commitment to what is said. There is no use of a modality or hedging, but an emphatic tone that makes the audience anticipate a real Arabic equivalent for 'fencing'. The assertive and objective language of the first sentence "there is a word for that" masks the comic and ironic surprise of the second sentence "that is called *Jihad*."

Jihad is neither linguistically nor religiously merely equivalent to the use of 'weapons' to initiate violence or as usually defined in the U.S; 'holy war.' Unfortunately, this is the only common meaning associated with the use of the term 'Jihad' across media means whether newspapers, TV, or speeches of reporters and government personnel. The term then is 'renamed' and given a connotation that changes the real value of the term. Jihad means "to struggle against something or to strive" to achieve a certain purpose<sup>5</sup>. Struggle could be physical, emotional, or intellectual. For instance, striving to raise kids, obtain an academic degree, or practice one's faith are all under the category of 'jihad.' Therefore, it is not necessarily associated with violent acts or 'wars' as the common misuse of the term implies.

The labeling of fencing as 'jihad' gives a sense of timelessness, abstractness and perpetuation to the joke especially in the absence of agents to produce the 'naming' action. "There" and "that" are used for the subject position in both sentences. We have no idea who calls the above action "jihad" and why. The use of passive structures also gives a sense of an already constructed reality in which this term is 'globally' or 'universally' defined accordingly (Fairclough, 2003). The naming of fencing as jihad does enact a particular representation or voice which is set against other unheard voices. According to Fairclough, assumptions diminish other voices or possible interpretations in favor of a dominant implied interpretation.

Said (1997) offers countless examples of how the jihad "motif" has been the most widespread representation of Islam in the West (p. 114). In reference to Islamic or Arab countries, any act of political opposition to the West is foreseen as deriving from the 'Islamic Jihad'. In consequence, a deep sense of anger, hostility, and prejudice to Arabs, lumped with Muslims, is ideologically constructed in misusing the term. It is true that some violent acts have happened in the name of Islam. But they also happen in the name of every other belief without being stigmatized as terrorist acts or holy wars emanating from the belief itself. Two points of clarification are imperative here. First, it is seriously important to make a conscious distinction between Islam as 'faith' and 'political Islam'. Second, the 9/11 tragic event is sometimes compared to Pearl Harbor. The surprise attacks of the Japanese aircrafts on the island of O'aha, Hawaii left behind a great loss and a sense of fear of further attacks. However, the event has not been

constructed as a religious case of Buddhist terrorism. Hence, why only Islam as 'faith or scripture' is stigmatized as an act of terrorism?

### **Hizbullah: "The Party of God"**

While referring to political parties in one of the classes, Dr. Edward asked students what the meaning of "a party" is in Arabic. Dr. Edward meant the political party and not the 'fun' party. Although in English the same word satisfies both functions, in Arabic there are two distinct terms. Noticing the teacher's smile, students expected the pun. Shawn answered the question: /hizb/ \* [political party]. Dr. Edward said: "Always remember 'Hizbullah'...there is a real party crowd." The connection may have evoked the students' laughter because the intertextual reference to Hizbullah, as a terrorist party, in the American media was very prominent. Ironically, Hizbullah is negatively associated with violence and aggression in western media. Its reality as a party is not reinforced politically as much as religiously (Said, 1997). Hizbullah is not defined in the west as a political party resisting the occupation of south Lebanon. It is mostly identified as an Islamic group challenging the U.S. As the example shows, the connection between language use and function, the term /hizb/, are not divorced from the cultural and political interpretations of the linguistic term.

### **Is it "Al-Qaa'ida" or "Al-Kaida"??**

Reference to the media was a typical practice in this Arabic classroom, and lent itself naturally to humor. Many of the students, before the class started, conversed frequently about current topics in the media including: the 9/11 commission, foreign languages and the job market, and the tension in the Middle East. During class, laughter created some critical teachable moments that seemed to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions of language use in the media. For instance, mispronouncing terms in the western media has been very common. Earlier in the semester, a reference to the word "Al-Qaa'ida" which in Arabic means 'the basis or the rule' had been invoked. While passing out a grammar handout titled "the rules," the teacher asked students to name the singular of 'rules' in Arabic. Since no one responded, the teacher said "Al-Qaa'ida" and continued sarcastically that this is not a reference to the one in Afghanistan. He joked about the mispronunciation of the term by the media post

(\*) Transliteration is used instead of Arabic letters.

9/11, changing the [Q] sound to [k] and ignoring a middle consonant /'ayn/. The result, as he defined it, is a new word in Arabic which simply means 'the trick or trap.' The students laughed at the corruption of Arabic pronunciation and the change of meaning that occurs as a result.

The issue of mispronunciation cannot always be excused due to the difficulty of pronouncing a new language. As Said (2003) said in other contexts, experts in Arabic, or simply native speakers, could be consulted to correct such mispronunciation; however, they rarely are. Apologies are rarely offered, either. In fact, mispronunciation mushrooms to the level that -even for some native speakers of Arabic - it might be hard to identify the words used by the media due to a possibility of a new meaning that is constructed. For me personally, it is a source of annoyance to listen to the news of the Middle East in English.

The problem at stake is not simply mispronunciation. If we define language as a significant marker of one's cultural identity, then mispronunciation becomes serious. Giving license to instances of mispronunciation by several educated or authority figures in the media simply 'legitimizes' (Fairclough, 2003) the newly assumed pronunciation against the manner in which native speakers of Arabic refer to such terms. Again, unequal power relations silence some voices and give an authoritative power to others. Ideologically, this legitimization confirms the new pronunciation against the traditional one which is connected to the linguistic identity and culture of Arabs. Examples of ignoring how native speakers of Arabic pronounce some terms are documented elsewhere. For example, mispronunciation of Islam as 'Izlum', Muslims as 'Mooslems', and Al-'raq as 'I-raq' (examples from Said, 2003) or even 'I-rak' are common. Said explains this as part of the Oriental 'alienation' and 'dehumanization' of people, their civilization, and culture (p. 165-66). Although mispronunciation could be subconscious, insensitivity to even attempting to correct it and further acting obliviously to its impact on the native speakers of Arabic, and their cultural identity, further belittles the 'others.'

#### **Arabs and 'Security Measurements'**

Political terms, excessively employed in reference to Arabs and Muslims, have found their way in the classroom. On one occasion, the teacher came into the class and approached his desk. Students occupied the

back seats leaving the front seats empty. Upon observing the seating, the teacher asked "What do you think is going on here? Security measurements?" students could not hold their laughter. Positioning himself as an 'Arab' from whom others need to stay away for fear of violence is funny but ironically part of the sad reality. The term Arab, which is often equal to Muslims, becomes a derogatory term for violence. Watching the news daily, 'security measurements' to protect the US borders and airports from terrorist Arabs and Muslims is a common metaphor or image. These negative images are all characterized through language as well as other multimodal texts, including caricatures, for instance. Therefore, understanding texts goes beyond their immediate static forms to contextual links to a larger attitude of fear of and contempt towards Arabs.

#### **That is 'Illegal'**

Another political term that found its way into the classroom is the term "illegal" which might be transliterated in Arabic sounds as /mamnoo'/ or / g'air qaanuuni/. In one of the classes, Debbie admitted that she has been collecting all Dr. Edward's jokes since Elementary Arabic. The teacher, who was surprised by this confession, enjoyed hearing some of his jokes back. All the students turned their gaze towards Debbie who read off her notes: "Many of you are not using the short vowels. That is *illegal*." Dr Edward's statement concerns attention to the language rules he considers appropriate. Any violations in following the teacher's rules, like dropping case markers (vowels), are labeled as 'illegal'. In similar instances he refers to using commercial books to learn Arabic as 'illegal'.

It can be humorous to use political terms in classroom rules context. However, these terms have been widely and haphazardly used across the media to describe actions against terrorists. By using these terms in reference to Arabic language, one might believe that it further politicizes the language itself. The teacher could have used such instances to direct students' attention to the fact that any language learning is politically and ideologically loaded.

Could such use be also interpreted as an act of resistance? When asked to translate negative idioms by the students, the teacher usually refrains. When Eden asked the teacher to translate "shoot" or "I'll kill," Dr. Edward refused. When Lara and Shawn wrote phrases like "I kill" on the board, and referred to their use of a

commercial book to find the terms, the teacher said this was “*illegal*.” Shawn told me that he believes that part of the “teacher’s ideology” is that translating such idioms will “reinforce” the negative terrorist connotation associated with Arabs and their culture post 9/11. Therefore, he thinks that “not translating” the terms could be the teacher’s way of resistance.

One could further argue that the humor surrounding the term ‘illegal’ could be mediated as a two-way critique. On the one hand, it addresses the anti-Arab discourse in America and other western contexts as well. On the other hand, it might be deployed as a critique of the limited and sometimes absent level of freedom in the Arabic speaking World. It is no surprise that a number of Arab playwrights have utilized comedies as a genre to humorously and critically critique the political and social ideologies in diverse Arabic countries.

#### ‘The Bedouins’

The reference to ‘the Bedouins’ has occurred in multiple occasions in the classroom. With the war on terrorism, reference to the involvement of some Bedouin tribes in terrorist attacks in the Arab world (e.g., in Egypt) has been part of the news which found its way in classroom talk. The teacher has directly and indirectly attempted to problematize the students’ stereotypical images of the ‘Bedouin’ in general. Students found it surprising to refer to Bedouins as ‘*free*’ border crossers, ‘*frontiers*’, ‘*independent*’ and an ‘*interesting bunch*’ as opposed to the common representation in the west as rough, exotic, and/or primitive nomads. Students laughed when the teacher spoke of some Bedouins as living in modern houses and enjoy watching satellite channels. The teacher’s instances characterize the Bedouins as a group that is shaped by the socioeconomic and sociocultural processes of change in the Arab World. For the students, it is this unexpected picture of Bedouins that aroused their astonishment and therefore laughter as for example imagining Bedouins with musical instruments (the Rabaabah).

Representing the Bedouin as an important figure of preserving, scaffolding, and assessing the pure form of Arabic language was a fact that amazed students the most. In one of the lessons about ‘verb paradigms’ in Arabic, the teacher refers to these paradigms as musical rhymes: “things have to sound good in Arabic,” he comments. He further refers to the consultation by early Arab linguists of the language of certain Bedouin tribes

as ‘language models’. In later conversations with me, Shawn described the image of the Bedouins as “most respected and whose language was supposed to be the purist” as a fact that “flipped [his understanding] on its head.”

It is fair to say that humor in the classroom was not only used to indirect reference to ideology and politics but also simply to cheer students up. I observed several instances where students initiated jokes to laugh about the demanding Arabic classes, although they are outside the scope of this paper. For example, in one of the very intense classes, in which the teacher was explaining the rule of the subjunctive in Arabic, students felt overwhelmed with understanding the new rules. They requested several explanations when doing the drills together. The level of frustration was noticeable. Dr. Edward tried to alleviate the situation:

Mr. Edward: [smiling] look at the bright side. We

are not doing the full list of the ...subjunctive, imperative, jussive...you name it ...

Shawn: Does it come with *Prozac*? [All burst out laughing]

#### What If? The Potential for Humor as a Form of Critical Language Awareness

The function of political humor in language teaching could be viewed as similar to the work of Critical Language Awareness (CLA) although not as direct or explicit. CLA is described as the explicit pedagogical tool to the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) into educational sites, in specific the work of Fairclough. However, the work of CLA has incorporated aspects of critical language studies from different approaches as well (Pennycook, 2001). The use of CLA helps students raise a level of awareness of the ways language is *produced* and *interpreted* (Fairclough, 2001). By directly deconstructing texts, the relationship between language, identity, and power is openly problematized. In essence, CLA helps articulate struggling ideological representations of reality constructed through language.

At least in this classroom, humor is kind of a middle ground. It neither ignores the ideological and sociopolitical meanings of language production and interpretation; nor directly works on interrogating such texts. In a way, humor masks the direct interrogation of

texts while CLA attempts to challenge the not so obvious relationships between language and ideology.

Students of Arabic in this classroom found humor to be educationally sound. In conversations with James, he thought that this class was different from other classes because it was “pretty fun” and they “learn[ed] at the same time.” Debbie, who admitted that sometimes she feels lost when she does not get the point, said: “sometimes [the humorous cultural intervals are] political and sometimes... cultural and ...informative...and I enjoy[ed] that.” Shawn also spoke of his conceptions of the Arab culture as “flipped on its head” referring to the change in his newly constructed image of the ‘Bedouins’ for instance. He further mentioned that each time he goes into the class, he feels “like [he] knows less but... [he’s] more aware of things” he didn’t know before.

In reference to the evaluation of the classroom culture as it unfolds through the politically constructive humor, Shawn said that the “open environment” which many students enjoyed and talked about after class has allowed for the construction of “a very small core dedicated group of kids [which] lent itself wonderfully to some sort of social development.”

Hence, can political humor and CLA be brought together? Is engagement in explicit deconstruction of texts possible or even safe in Arabic classes post 9/11? Could a direct use of CLA in Dr Edward’s classroom have been productive? I tried in my analysis to explore links between Dr Edward’s jokes and the misrepresentation of Arabic and Arabs. Would it be possible for a foreign language teacher to make such links explicit?

I believe that CLA could be used as an explicit pedagogical tool in generating such discussions about political humor. If “texts do not mean until they are interpreted” (Pennycook, 2001, p. 111), students could benefit greatly by interrogating the contextual elements that produced texts such as political jokes, including their own interpretations.

For example, in the case of Edward’s joke about ‘Hizbullah’, a deconstruction of the meaning of ‘party’ and the way it is defined politically and religiously could be explained. Thinking of who has the power to interpret language and represent a particular world view would help students read against the texts. Interrogating texts would help students develop awareness of the meanings and ideologies transmitted in language use.

Following the examples of Janks (1993), the joke on

the term ‘jihad’ could be a chance to engage students in a critical discussion: What is the meaning of term? Can we use the grammatical root of the term to figure out the meaning? Does the root imply several meanings? What effect does a selection of one meaning have on Americans, the West in general, Arabs, and Muslims? Whose voices are validated? Whose voices are excluded? Whose interest is prioritized? Intertextually, how does this reflect the world of ‘us versus them’? And what assumptions about the language and culture are legitimized or taken for granted?

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents a case study of one teacher’s deployment of political humor in the Arabic as a foreign language classroom. My analysis of intertextual links between the teacher’s jokes and the (mis)representations of Arabs and the Arabic speaking world that are prevalent in the United States post 9/11 point toward the potential for using humor, with regard to the various ways it could be defined or interpreted, to raise students’ awareness of representations of the ‘other’. Such deployment attempts to weaken conventionally established discourses that might prejudicially represent the Arab world and Arabic language. The very naming of Arabic as a ‘critical’ language in the discourse of American academia is an example of a politically and racially driven representation.

Significantly, the paper can’t claim that the representations of the Arab world and its speakers from the perspective of all the participant students have positively changed. Further future research in Arabic classrooms might shed some light. The humor did attempt to humanize the Arab world by allowing students to recognize the heterogeneity of its speakers; demographically, religiously, politically, and economically. Indirect and cautious humorous allusions to the biased representations of Arabs by the media have been part of this attempt as well. However, some students might be more consciously aware of ideological uses of language than others. For instance, earlier in the semester, Shawn once used the term “Jihad” to refer to the hard study he’d undergone for the previous Arabic test. Thomas and I shared a smile which Shawn caught. He reacted, “we need not use this word” because it is overtly “misused”. Although this incident occurred prior to the teacher’s joke about ‘jihad’, it is a clear indication of students’ partial awareness of the dehumanization and

misrepresentations around the anti-Arab discourses and their willingness to act upon and possibly make a change.

In the end, the teaching of Arabic must be reassessed in the light of the recent sociopolitical and cultural changes in the aftermath of 9/11. Teaching Arabic should not only focus on achieving a level of proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, or listening. It should go

beyond the static linguistic forms into a microanalysis of texts in relation to wider contexts in the society. As Brynes (2004) points out, we in the foreign language profession need to take into account the “language of the public sphere” and help our students raise their awareness of the relationship between language and ideology.

### NOTES

- (1) See Reagan (2002) for replacing ‘foreign languages’ by ‘modern languages’. He argues that using the term ‘foreign’ accentuates the ‘foreignness’ of these languages which further alienates the speakers and cultures of such languages.
- (2) Debates concerning ‘diglossia,’ attitudes to Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) versus non-standard Arabic varieties, and the suitable varieties of Arabic to be taught are outside the scope of this paper. Some suggested references include: Alish, 1997; Al-Wer, 1997; Belnap, 1995; Ferguson, 1996; Ibrahim M., 1986;

Ryding, 1995.

- (3) Neither the name of the university nor its location will be disclosed to protect the privacy of the participants.
- (4) “MSA is a universal form of Arabic learned in schools across the Arab world; it is opposed to dialectical or colloquial Arabic, of which there is a particular variety for each community and differs according to region and such social factors as religion, socio-economic status, etc. The dialects are used for all non-formal situations-at home, at work, social occasions...” (Abboud, 1983, p. v).
- (5) Fatoohi, L. (2004). Jihad: the meaning of jihad. Retrieved on November 25, 2006 at <http://www.quranicstudies.com/article96.html>

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## تدريس العربية عقب أحداث أيلول: الطرفة وأثرها في مهارات الإدراك اللغوي التحليلي

سوسن عمر العبادي\*

### ملخص

تعتمد هذه المقالة على بيانات كمية ونوعية مستقاة من دراسة ميدانية اثنوغرافية في صفوف تدريس العربية كلغة اجنبية على المستوى الجامعي في احدى الولايات الامريكية. يهدف البحث الى القاء الضوء على مفهوم الطرفة وامكانية اعتمادها كوسيلة تعليمية بيداغوجية لاطهار العلاقة بين مفهوم "اللغة" و"الايدولوجيا". يستفيد البحث من ادوات تحليلية مستقاة من نظريات تحليل الحديث لتحليل الاختيارات اللغوية للاستاذ واثرها في تصحيح التصورات والمعتقدات السلبية لدى الطلاب في امريكا، عن العالم العربي والذي اصبح محل "لغة الساحة العامة" في امريكا بعد احداث ايلول كما تصفه بايرنز (2004). يقدم البحث مناقشة وتقييماً لدور الطرفة واستخدامها كصورة من صور الادراك اللغوي التحليلي لتوعية الطلاب بخصوص العلاقة بين الاختيارات اللغوية والافتراضات الايدولوجية والتمثيل الخاطيء "للاخر".

**الكلمات الدالة:** "اللغة" و"الايدولوجيا"، العربية كلغة اجنبية، مفهوم الطرفة الطرفة واثرها على مهارات الادراك اللغوي التحليلي.

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