Men's talk in a Lebanese shisha café

Diana Fidaoui & Rima Bahous

To cite this article: Diana Fidaoui & Rima Bahous (2013) Men's talk in a Lebanese shisha café, Journal of Multicultural Discourses, 8:1, 48-64, DOI: 10.1080/17447143.2012.762003

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2012.762003

Published online: 25 Jan 2013.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 165

View related articles
Men's talk in a Lebanese shisha café

Diana Fidaoui* and Rima Bahousb

*Faculté des sciences de l’éducation, Université Saint Joseph; bDepartment of Education, Lebanese American University

(Received 23 May 2012; final version received 19 December 2012)

This qualitative study explores the relationship between gender identity and conversational behavior in all-male groups' interactions in a Lebanese context. We collected the data through non-participant observations and interviews with 15 participants in a shisha café, and we examined the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of the men there. Results of the analysis of participants’ verbal and nonverbal behaviors clearly indicate that men, in all-male groups, attempt to use different conversational strategies (e.g. politeness strategies) and different nonverbal cues (e.g. laughing, frowning) in order to maintain power relations and establish solidarity within the group. The research findings are substantial since they highlight how men’s functions of different conversational styles reflect their powerful status within all-male Lebanese society.

Keywords: politeness; men; Lebanese; nonverbal cues; café context; teasing; culture

Introduction

The linguistic patterns used in conversational settings reveal many things about identity construction (Cameron 2003) and the power relations established among especially male interactants (Okamoto, Slattery Rashotte, and Smith-Lovin 2002). The latter establish strong relationships between each other by engaging themselves in conversations in which they use specific linguistic forms to catch the attention of their fellow partners and, thereby, gain more power (Kiesling 2007). It is assumed that in many conversational contexts men occupy higher levels of status and power than women do (Carli 2001) as a result of their skillful professional experience and their use of verbal and nonverbal behaviors that reflect their social authority (Connell 2000; Kiesling 2003; Whitehead 2002). There are ‘real and stable gender differences in speech’ (Weatherall and Gallois 2003, 490) and these could be tied to sex, power (Kiesling 2007), and people's applications of their ideological notions about gender stereotypes in social contexts (Talbot 2003). Locke (2011) points out that the majority of writers assume that men and women ‘distinctive ways of speaking’ are culture-based (1). However, he argues that this might be true despite the absence of a clearly defined evidence to confirm this fact. He believes that men and women's conversational styles are essentially rooted in their biological dispositions since their ancestors used to compete for their needs using two different strategies.

*Corresponding author. Email: dzf00@mail.aub.edu

© 2013 Taylor & Francis
The present research study explores the functions of all-male groups’ conversational styles in a Lebanese context. We examined the men’s verbal and nonverbal conversation patterns. Our purpose was to identify and describe the different verbal and nonverbal conversational patterns in all-male groups’ conversations and explore the functions of the different conversational styles used by males in a typical Lebanese shisha café.

To our knowledge, no similar studies, to date, about men’s talk in single-sex groups were conducted in Lebanon and the Arab region. Other studies that have been conducted in Lebanon related to gender and culture mainly dealt with gender bias or females’ language and culture (see for instance, Bahous and Khalaf 2008; Mougharbel and Bahous 2010). In fact, no study pertaining to males’ language and culture in a café has been conducted in Lebanon. Moreover, the study describes and analyzes the language of all men group in a Middle Eastern country that is known to be multicultural and multi religious. Therefore, this investigation is unique by itself. We aim to explore the connection between the language and culture of these old retired men to confirm the collectivist culture that each of them belong to despite their religious, socioeconomic, and cultural diversity. We look at how the language is used by these men as a means for survival within a context in which specific ongoing daily routines such as smoking shisha, drinking tea or coffee, playing cards or backgammon, and chatting are performed. The research’s portrayal of linguistic patterns and behaviors that old men hold in same-sex groups may inform Lebanese sociologists about the social lifestyle and the quality of life, in general that these men carry out in such public–private settings. The mode of life and language patterns that characterize this group of old males should model socially accepted practices that younger community members will look up to in the future. Examining men's non-western discourse should facilitate western community members’ intercultural communication with their Lebanese counterparts. In fact, the status of relationships between Eastern and Western people may change if both are exposed to situations that enable them to ‘reflect’ and ‘critique’ each other’s discourses (Shi-xu, Kienpointner, and Servaes 2005, 136). This present study may be perceived by some audience as a description of men’s linguistic patterns in a non-western patriarchal society.

It is important to mention that this paper does not intend to criticize the Lebanese culture nor the dynamics of its corresponding hegemonic society. Also, it does not encourage the adoption of a Western discourse. It only describes old Lebanese men’s discourse for the purpose of understanding their power relations and identity construction within a multicultural context.

Research context

Al-Basta is a traditional and popular shisha café (or coffeehouse) located in a noisy, busy, and poor rural area in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon. It is one of the oldest cafés in the country. It has been there for more than 70 years. It is surrounded by mosques which reflect its Islamic aspect. Al-Basta café attracts a wide variety of Muslim and Christian Lebanese men. Ladies, in general, do not go there as it is considered to be a male-dominated territory.

Many retired Lebanese old men search for a place to hang out and discuss political and economical issues. They find the café the ideal shelter they seek to meet, socialize, exchange news, get entertained, spread gossips, or simply spend time.
Moreover, the shisha café is perceived as a place to escape from their wives as well as their daily life problems. In fact, men at the shisha café do not play cards to gain money; they rather count points and decide who the winner is by the end of each round. They swear and shout at each other, especially when a fellow cardplayer plays the wrong card.

Those who frequently go to the shisha café are usually dressed casually: shirts, trousers, slippers, boots, or sandals. The smell of the tobacco is very thick indoors. One can almost taste it as it escapes from the tall water pipes near every table. The café does not serve alcoholic beverages and snacks. Many smoke the shisha and few smoke cigarettes. The men there either raise or clap their hands to get the attention of the waiters.

The coffeehouse: a socio-historical and cultural perspective

Drinking coffee is relatively a recent and modern act that has its origins in Northern Europe (350 years ago) and Istanbul (a century ago). In Istanbul and toward the middle of the sixteenth century (1554–1555), two Syrian men, Schems and Hekim, opened the first coffeehouse and served the beverage at a low price. A century later, Pasqua Rosee, a Greek Orthodox servant, opened the first coffeehouse in London. The English Levant Company’s merchants funded the café since they were used to the drinking of coffee during their long business stays in Istanbul, Izmir, and Halep. Coffeehouses became popular in London by 1708 and they featured three different concepts: ‘egalitarianism, congeniality, and conversation’ (Ellis 2008, 157). Although they were different, the coffeehouses in Istanbul and London, shared some similarities, one of which can be related to the sociability aspect.

Coffeehouses in Istanbul multiplied and became a setting where people of different socioeconomic backgrounds used to visit to drink coffee, to socialize through playing chess, and enjoy many other entertaining activities (Ellis 2008).

The basic activity carried out by the café’s clienteles included discussion, conversation, gossip, and talk. Regardless of their social hierarchies (i.e. financial, political, or physical statuses), the coffeehouses’ customers were all encouraged to get involved in free, open persuasive, polite, and calm public debates. While they were urged to maintain a normal voice tone, they were also advised to take-turns and consider the time constraints when delivering their thoughts in public. Gossiping and chitchatting were among the conversational acts that were rejected in the café, whereas satiric and lampoon actions were allowed (Ellis 2008). Men in these coffeehouses were not restricted by any rules or regulations, but they all had to respect the discourse etiquette throughout their interactions (Ellis 2008).

We reviewed the literature on men’s talk in formal and informal Western settings to set boundaries for the study. Thus, our literature reviews the characteristics and dominance of men’s talk, friendship, politeness, verbal as well as nonverbal behavior. Most of the studies we relied on were conducted in Western contexts. We do acknowledge that there is a lack of research about issues related to language and gender in non-Western Third World’s cultures. However, reading non-Western discourse is one type of reading activity that engages the reader in a reflective mode that is culture-bound to better understand ‘unfamiliar, subversive, and constructive discourses’ (Shi-xu, Kienpointner, and Servaes 2005, 133). Shi-Xu, Kienpointner, and Servaes (2005) state that the Western world has often tended to
overlook non-Western discourses. He adds that it is time to learn about the latter in order to expand the cultural perspectives of non-Western community members.

Locke (2011) explains that men use characteristic verbal patterns when talking with other men. They tend to ‘interrupt each other, issue commands, threats, or boasts, resist each other’s demands, give information, heckle, tell jokes or suspenseful stories, try to stop another’s story, insult or denigrate each other’ (6) more than females do.

Bauer, Holmes, and Warren (2006) point out that public and informal contexts are generally male-dominated zones. Men are communicatively competent in formal events such as business meetings, seminars, and conferences. Also, in all-male talk, men’s expressed ideas seem to be individually owned. In fact, men use overlaps (simultaneous occurrence of speech) less in conversations, focus more on what is being discussed and exchange news and information (Coates 1997) related to debatable issues such as sports and politics, and do not discuss private and personal issues (Drass 1986). Okamoto, Slattery Rashotte, and Smith-Lovin (2002) report that men use overlaps, more than women do in their conversations to assert their dominance in society.

Alfaraz (2009) discusses the differences among cultures. He adds that in some cultures, talking simultaneously and maintaining silence between turns can be integrated into the conversational sets of cultural norms; in others, the first act is avoided and the second one is expected as a turn-transition.

Tannen (1990) identifies the aforementioned phenomenon as ‘report talk’ (77). She believes that men talk to preserve independence and maintain a social position in a hierarchical social order (Walker et al. 1996). Besides, men maintain their social status by showing the extent to which they are knowledgeable and skillful in addition to holding the center stage by verbally telling stories, jokes, or sharing information (Tannen 1990). Coates (2003, 110) points out that the stories that men share in public ‘perform dominant masculinity’ and Kiesling (2007) explains that the linguistic patterns that they use index their hierarchical status. Aspects such as topic selection, actions, and infrequent use of hedging devices in talk in addition to their competitive conversation style and exploitation of taboo words denotes their performance of masculinity and manhood.

Carli (2001) explains that a dominant behavior is exhibited when interactants tend to directly disagree and reveal a spirit of aggression or competitiveness through the use of verbal and nonverbal cues. Wanting to be dominant is a culture and social-based desire that men have learned to develop. This desire for dominance is something that is missing in men’s being and the fulfillment of such desire is a step toward empowering the self (Cameron and Kulick 2003).

Another aspect of men’s characteristics of talk is the case of taboo language, which is used by people as a way to deliver their emotions and share their feelings with their audience (Jay 2000; Jay and Janschewitz 2008). It is understood as a behavior performed by people who mean to be rude and offensive. Coates (2003) and Bauer et al. (2006) pinpointed that taboo words in the twentieth century were mainly used by men in informal all-male conversations as way of constructing solidarity.

Migliaccio (2009) states that a man’s friendship is a performance of masculinity, which in fact is heavily influenced by expectations pertaining to gender issues. Hence, many men avoid feminine-bound behaviors such as expressing intimacy and self-disclosing with friends (Migliaccio 2001). In fact, ‘Doing masculinity’ is an act that male friends seek to demonstrate their masculine power and maintain their
friendships in society (Migliaccio 2009). Politeness ‘behavior which actively expresses positive concern for others’ (Holmes 1995, 5) is another key issue that we chose to review. Buitkitiene (2006) adds that to be polite is to show respect toward the person one is talking to and to avoid offending him/her. Culpeper (2005) adds that revealing or recognizing the speaker’s private intentions is not an easy task to handle by the hearer who has to draw inferences about politeness or impoliteness throughout the speech act. Kiesling (2003) among others claim that men are more concerned in establishing relationships of power, whereas women concentrate more on constructing solidarity in their relationships. Needless to say that solidarity and power are concepts that are directly related to two types of politeness strategies: positive and negative, respectively (see also, Brown and Levinson 2000). Studies in the field of gender and politeness report that men generally use less positive politeness strategies than women (Holmes 1995). ‘In general, the fewest politeness strategies are seen in conversations among men and the most politeness among women, with mixed-gender conversations falling in between’ (Kiesling 2007, 666). Men’s fewer use or avoidance of linguistic politeness facilitates their performance of masculinity and balances their ‘cultural discourses of masculinity’ (Kiesling 2007, 667).

Another key characteristic that is common in conversation is gossip. Kiesling (2007) explains that gossipers’ purpose is to maintain power in society and to show that they belong to a social status that is higher than that to which the person discussed belongs. Furthermore, this act engages the gossipers in situations that give them the chance to compare themselves to others, create a friendly atmosphere, and fill their wasted time in an undemanding manner (Holland 1996). The prevailing assumption is that men tend to gossip less than women (Locke 2011). American men, for instance, use gossiping as a strategy to punish other men who adopted an ‘objectionable behavior,’ especially if the latter took place in a business setting or in some sort of a shared activity (Locke 2011, 115).

There are, however, two types of gossips (van Niererk 2008) vicious and virtuous (or morally neutral). van Niererk (2008) reported that while Westerners, who stress on the autonomy and privacy of the individual, perceive gossiping as an unethical act, Africans acknowledge its moral and some of its positive values that enable them to maintain their social status as well as their group solidarity though caring about and supporting one another’s moral development. Dunbar (1996) identified gossip as being vicious and ubiquitous. First, gossip invades individuals’ privacy. By practicing this act, the gossipers would be violating their rights of autonomy and losing their dignity. Second, ‘gossip cultivates vicious appetites/dispositions’ (van Niererk 2008, 406). Some people find a pleasure in developing ‘schadenfretude,’ a vicious tendency that allows them to enjoy other people’s sufferings. Third, gossip is basically unreliable since it does not ensure the gathering of accurate information. The gossipers tend to harm, humiliate, as they might maliciously present an unreal version of the character’s actions and qualities (van Niererk 2008). The gossipers may share biased information that might turn into facts especially when they agree, as a group, on the veracity of the data they are discussing (Burt 2001).

Any instance of talk aimed at entertaining may be regarded as humoristic (Pizzine 1991). Humor can serve several social functions: the establishment and maintenance of solidarity among group members, the management and reinforcement of power relationships, and the reduction of inequalities between individuals of different professional experiences. Alternatively, humor cannot only foster power disparities, but also facilitate and challenge people to attain their desired social
hierarchies (Holmes 2000; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). Humor can relieve the negative energy (tension, aggression, and hostility) any person might be feeling. It is a widely recognized stress-reducer technique (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). Besides, humor is situational or contextual and it is highly dependent on gender and culture (Kotthoff 2006). It also promotes the social cohesion of the group as it maintains its social structure, balances, equalizes, and harmonizes its interpersonal and emotive power.

Teasing may promote the group solidarity and rapport as it can maintain the powerful rank of the teaser in society (Straehle 1993). It can be nonverbal linguistic pattern too. Thus, facial expressions can be decoded to know whether one is being teased or not (Hay 2000). A tease promotes solidarity especially if it is related to a false or trivial story. In fact, males are good at teasing especially in single-sex groups. They use powerful teases to attain power-based functions (Hay 2000).

In friendly men’s talk, the role of story-telling is to restructure people’s lives and past experiences, to support their selfhood, and to enable them to discover other selves (Coates 2003). In fact, the act of story-telling enables the story-tellers to re-experience their life stories; it can also attach a deal of meaningfulness to the latter and support the speakers in constructing their own identities (Stokoe and Edwards 2006). Individuals and groups make sense of themselves through their life stories. They become the stories when they tell what they are or even what they wish to be (Cowan 2011).

Men’s narratives feature the use of stereotypically masculine story topics, the portrayal of a world peopled by male characters, the use of taboo words, and the attention to details related to non-emotional topics. These functions that language serves in men’s narratives perform their hegemonic masculinity through the accomplishment of their emotional restraint. As a way to perform their hegemonic masculinity, male story-tellers present themselves and their same-sex protagonists as heroes in their shared narratives (Coates 2003).

Nonverbal patterns in communication such as ‘gazing while talking, gazing while listening, and frequency of gesturing’ are linked to the status of the gender of the person who makes them, since they facilitate the featuring of their dominant status. Nonetheless, exhibiting gestures such as chin thrusts, smiling, and laughing that seem to be gendered may as it may not hold a gender status effect (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999).

On one side, the subculture approach supports the view that the use of nonverbal behaviors like smiling and laughing in conversations are more exhibited by females than by males. On the other side, the situational/authority approach suggests that individuals in low-authority positions laugh and smile more than those in powerful positions, which indicates their respect to their leaders in an authoritative context (Johnson 1994).

Data and methods
We approached the owner of the café who is a relative to the secondary investigator of this study. We explained to him the purpose of the research and asked for permission to videotape, audiotape, and observe the customers at the shisha café. Permission was granted to audiotape and observe a group of four customers who were playing cards on the ground floor of the café. We were only allowed to videotape the conversations on the first floor inside the room where one group of men was playing cards. The interview with the large group of clienteles was
conducted on the ground floor. We recorded some field notes after each event. The use of field notes facilitates the recording of ‘personal or sexual talk that might not turn up in electronic recordings’ (Hopper 2003, 9).

The owner of the café allowed us to sit in one corner of the room on the first floor where card playing was taking place. On the ground floor, he allowed us to sit at the table where the cardplayers were gathered. We were sipping tea while observing this group of men.

Customers who inquired about our presence in this male-dominated setting were told we were the relatives of the café’s owner. Once the data were collected we approached all the men who were involved in this study and asked for permission to analyze their talk to fulfill an academic purpose. They all agreed to maintain their participation in this study.

In this study, the sample of participants consists of 15 silver-haired Lebanese males in their seventies who come to the shisha café almost on a daily basis. The men speak Arabic as a first language, they come from the same socioeconomic background, but they belong to different religions, and inhabit different areas within Beirut city. Most of them do not own a car. Some, especially those who live in the neighborhood, walk to the café, others use public transportation to reach their destination.

Three groups of participants were identified and six separate events were recorded. The first three events were 20 minutes of video recordings of a conversation involving four men playing cards in a separate room on the first floor at the shisha café. The first three events took place over three consecutive days inside that room where the atmosphere was quiet. The fourth and the fifth events, that took place over two days, were 20 minutes of audio-recorded conversation involving four men playing cards on the ground floor at the shisha café where the background noise level was rather high. The sixth event, the interview, consisted of 35 minutes of audio-recorded conversation. The interview that took place on the ground floor of the shisha café involved the same participants who were audio recorded and videotaped during the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth event. Also, it involved customers who jumped into the conversation, out of curiosity, while we were conducting the interview.

The observations were conducted over a period of one month. We took the role of non-participant observers and we were taking written records. We focused on the participants’ verbal linguistic patterns in addition to their nonverbal behaviors while they were playing cards and conversing with each other. All the interactions that occurred among the participants were recorded. While a video recorder and an audio recorder were used to collect data from the group on the first floor, an audio recorder was solely used to gather data from the interviewed group and the cardplayers’ group on the first floor of the café.

We conducted a 35 minute unstructured focus group interview with a purposive sample: a group of seven males. Our questions were adjusted according to the flow of the conversation. The environment was harmonic and non-threatening. We also examined the subjects’ linguistic patterns and nonverbal cues while answering our questions and sharing their responses. The interview was audio-taped then transcribed to keep track and maintain the accuracy of the data.

The subjects were informed about the nature and the purpose of the study after the data were collected. They were told that their participation is voluntary and that their names will be kept confidential. The participants were aware that the interviews, the video and audio recordings will be used for the sole purpose of the study.
Findings and discussion

Overlaps

Excerpt 1

Researcher: Shou btestaemlo alkab la tnédó ba’éd? Masalan haydek el zalame, min samneh Saker?
"What nicknames do you use to call upon one another? For example, the guy over there, who named him Eagle?"

Abu Ahmad & Abu Walid: [Nehena mlabino Saker] (.)
"We named him Eagle."

Researcher: Enta shou laabak Hajj?
"What is your nickname Hajj?"

Abu Ahmad: Ané? °Missieu!%°((winks))
"Me? Mr."

Excerpt 2

Researcher: Tawwadto ala baed? Iza marr nhar w ma shefto fi baed, shoulli bisir?
"If one day passes without seeing one another, what could happen?"

Abu Zakkour & Abu Arif: [Mnetfaad baedne] (.)
"We check on each other."

Abu Arif: Mnottosil bi baed, w mnesal anno bi bayto (.)
"We call each other and if someone is absent, we call him at home."

Researcher: La hayde el daraje alaetkon jayde bi baed?
"Are you to that extent attached to one another?"

Abu Arif & Abu Ahmad: #[Eh shou laken!]
"Of course we are!"

Researcher: Hayde el ahwe ka’anna beit biyejma’ kon(.)
"This coffeehouse is like a gathering place for all of you."

Abu Zakkour: Hayde el ahwe ayle wehde, beit wehid (.)
"This coffeehouse unites us all as one family."

Instances of overlaps occurred three times throughout the interviews with the participants, but we could not identify a single instance of overlap when the participants were playing cards. This shows that they all tried to abide by and respect the social rules of the game by taking turns. Throughout the interviews, overlaps were due to participants’ high willingness to hold the conversational floor. They uttered the same words when they overlapped which implies that these people shared common understandings, beliefs, and behaviors. This finding is in agreement with Drass (1986), Okamoto, Slattery Rashotte, and Smith-Lovin (2002) who maintain that the simultaneous occurrence of speech on talk which is more common in the male society is basically due to men’s need to assert their social power throughout their conversational interactions.
Swearing in talk
Foul language was used by the participants as it is presented in the following examples.

Excerpt 3
Abu Ali: Yehro DIB hal wara! ALLAH la ya’ tikon el afieh!
    # "Fuck the cards! I ask God to bring you all poor health!"
Abu Moussa: Shi wehid hmar(.)
    "I need a jackass."
Abu Gergi: Ahmar men hek ma baa tlae (0.2) Rouh yalla!
    "One cannot find a jackass better than him! Go ahead"
Abu Ali: # Ghayyarna martein!
    "We changed twice!"
Abu Gergi: Wle LEH mesta’ til hek?
    "Why are you so aggressive?"
Abu Ali: Ane arif? Yehre dib el banet! ((Frowns))
    "Do you think I know? Fuck the girls!" ((Frowns))
Abu Omar: ARBAA, yehre dib el shabeb!
    "Four, fuck the young men!"

Abu Ali and Abu Omar were upset while playing the game as it can be noted from Turn 1 and Turn 6. Abu Ali was unable to control his frequent use of foul language. The men tend to lament their poor luck and express their poor performance through the use of swear words when they are engaged in the game. Taboo language is used in this context as a way to share their emotions with their listeners (Jay 2000; Jay and Janschewitz 2008). In none of the speaking turns did swearing entail an expression of rejection of hatred toward the listeners (Jay 2000; Jay and Janschewitz 2008). The swear words used by men were not perceived as offensive by any of the listeners since they knew that the swearing was propositional and polite rather than nonpropositional or confrontational. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) report that polite propositional swearing is used to maintain the social harmony among the interactants. In this excerpt, we note an increase in men's rate of cursing and variety of swear words which is an indicator of their cultural and social backgrounds. This finding is consistent with Jay and Janschewitz (2008), who asserted that men's rate and use of swear words gets higher when they are present in a same-sex public setting. Not a single incident of physical aggression was observed as a result of swearing in this casual milieu.

Gossiping and humor in talk
Interview-based data revealed that men tend to gossip about present and absent friends and tease one another.

Excerpt 4
Researcher: Btelabo ala masare?
    "Do you gamble?"
Abu Walid: Hayda Abu Zakkour, betayetlo marto ya amarje w houwe biyelab mush a masare (0.2)bass marto ma betsado ((laughs))

"Abu Zakkour’s wife labels him ‘a gambler’ although the man doesn’t gamble at all, yet, his wife doesn’t trust him" ((laughs))

Excerpt 5

Researcher: Masmouh tehko siyese?

‘Are you allowed to discuss political issues?’

Abu Ahmad: #Elli baddo yehke, yekhe shou ma baddo, nehna anna horriye taiffiyye.

"The one who would like to address political issues has the freedom to do that since we all share liberal beliefs."

Abu Walid: Hayda masalan, byouaf barra (0.2)lamma btomro wehde helwe (. )biyelhahe ((laughs))

"This man, for example, keeps standing out. When a pretty lady passes by, he follows her." ((laughs))

Excerpt 6

Researcher: Btelab ma Saker shi?

"Do you play with Saker?"

Abu Ahmad: La’ la’ ( .) hayda metel LEHMAR hasha adrik! ((laughs))

"No No. This man is like a donkey, with all my respect to you!" ((laughs))

Excerpt 7

Researcher: Bteshrab bel beit argileh?

"Do you smoke hubble-bubble at home?"

Abu Zakkour: Ane ma beshrab argileh (. )bass marte bteshrab(.) Betkhana ane wiyyehe, mnetadad, bettaffeshne mnel beit (0.2) Brouh (. ) w beje bo’ od alal ahwe.

"I do not smoke hubble-bubble, but my wife does. Whenever we get into fights, she drives me nuts and she kicks me out; so I come here to the café to spend some time."

Excerpt 8

Researcher: Shou fi asbeb tenye bitkhallikon tejo alal ahwe?

"What are the other reasons that would encourage you to come to the café?"

Abu Ahmad: El naa bel beit (0.2) bkoun ma am yeshteghel. "Acts of nagging at home… or unemployment."

Abu Walid: Hayda masalen (. ) Biyeje yom (. ) biyetsabbab alal hajj Abu Ahmad.

"This guy over there for example, he comes to the café on a daily basis to admire hajj Abu Ahmad."

Researcher: Ayya sea btetrok el ahwe?

"At what time do you leave the coffeeshop?"
Abu Zakkour: Ashra (.)hda’esh Bfout al beit(0.2) Bshoufha neyme (.) bfout bnem.
"Around ten or eleven. I go home, I see her sleeping, then I go to bed."

Gossiping was used by men as a strategy to discuss confidential issues about absent individuals like their wives and friends. Same-sex intimate friends share confidential information about themselves. The spread of these information to a third party could negatively affect the concerned person. Close friends have a tendency to share the same way of thinking, ‘anticipate each other’s views and behaviors’ (Locke 2011, 126). Dunbar (1996) defines the act of gossiping as a form of communication in which the gossipers tackle private issues related to specific individuals that might not be present at the moment of the talk. Abu Ahmad, the café owner, mocked Sakr, his friend by describing him as a donkey. Sakr, was present at that moment, but was not an interview participant. Also, Sakr did not react to Abu Ahmad’s utterance since he knew that the latter was gossiping to create an entertaining and friendly atmosphere. Holland (1996) argues that gossipers tend to create an atmosphere that can strengthen their relationships with their interlocutors, maintain their social bonds and solidarity, ensure power relations, and easily fill their wasted time. These results are consistent with Holmes (1999), who claims that teasing, mockery, and trick playing can be the byproducts of the act of gossiping. Moreover, in Excerpt 2, we notice that men switched topics for the sake of gossiping. This shows the extent to which men enjoy invading their friends’ as well as their wives’ privacy (van Niererk 2008). Abu Ahmad, expressed his power over Abu Walid and Sakr, and in turn, Abu Walid exhibited his dominance over Abu Zakkour though laughter in excerpts 4–6. This finding conforms with Duncan (1985) and Radcliffe-Brown (1952) who pointed out that humor can maintain the interlocutor’s social superiority. Holmes (2000) joins Duncan (1985) and Radcliffe-Brown (1952) in identifying instances of humor as moments during which people exert power indirectly. Abu Ahmad used humor ‘to veil socially unacceptable behaviours’ performed by Abu Walid (Excerpt 5) who has a tendency to follow women on the street (Graham, Papa, and Brooks 1992, 162). The data show that humor is not only used by subordinates but also by superiors to deliver specific messages to one another.

Teasing and humor in talk

Men held a sarcastic attitude, mocked, and teased one another as a way to motivate each other to get along in the conversation as it is shown in the following example.

**Excerpt 9**

Abu Mousa: Bikaffe awlek?
"Do you think that is enough?"

Abu Ali: Ma enta khalis menhe!
"You already got rid of it!"

Abu Mousa: La!La!
"No! No!"

Abu Gergi: # Shou bek? Shou hal LAIB ente! ((laughs))
"What’s the matter with you?... What a player you are!" ((laughs))
Abu Omar: Badna mojize!

"We need a miracle!"

We could only track one instance of teasing when the men were playing cards. Abu Gergi criticized Abu Mousa’s strategy in playing the game as a way to express his dominance over his playmates, especially Abu Mousa. The use of humor in this example is highly contextual since the speaker made fun of his friend’s strategy in running the game. Hay (2000) found that a speaker can impose his power over others through teasing or criticizing his individual characteristics.

**Story-telling and sharing personal experiences**

The next example highlights the function and role of story-telling and sharing personal anecdotes in all-male conversations.

**Excerpt 10**

Abu Ahmad: Hayda bezzamenet (0.2) Ken yood bgheir ahwe.Marra allo sahib el ahwe atine kel yom khamestashar alf lira w ad ma yetla alek msemahek ((laughs))

"In the old days, this man used to go to another café. One time, the former café’s owner asked him to pay fifteen thousand Lebanese Liras per day and promised him to forgive him for not paying his charge.." ((laughs))

The café’s owner, Abu Ahmad, attempts to hold the center stage of the conversation. Thus, he exhibits and shares his knowledge with his friends in order to maintain a more powerful and competitive status in his society.

**Nonverbal cues**

We observed that game partners used their self-created and agreed upon conventional nonverbal cues to facilitate their nonverbal communication while playing cards. The following examples present the conventional nonverbal signals used by interlocutors.

**Excerpt 11**

Researcher: Fi taria btestaemlouha hatta tefhamo ala baed ento w am telabo?

"Is there any visual cues you use when you play the game?"

Abu Ahmad: Bel ghamez. ((winks))

"We use winks to communicate."

Researcher: Bel ghamez? Kif yane?

"Winks? How?"

Abu Ahmad: Heke Inteyé ((moving shoulder up and down))

"You move one shoulder up when you have the queen."

Heke Ass ((moving eyebrow up and down))

"You move the eyebrow up and down when you have an ace."

Heke Khoury ((moving palate to the right and left))

"You either move palate to the right or to the left when you have the king."
Males who are engaged in an interactive situation tend to use nonverbal cues when their aim is to build rapport and compete with group members. Nonverbal behaviors such as laughing and frowning were exhibited by male participants when they were engaged in the conversational act. The following example illustrates how a man can use more than one nonverbal cue in the same turn to ascertain his dominant status in society.

**Excerpt 12**

Researcher: Lamma btekhsar shou bethess?

"How does it feel when you lose the game?"

Abu Walid: # Shou okhsar? Eh(.)brawbis! ((Frowns))

"To lose? If I do, I would have(.) nightmares!" ((Frowns))

Ballish ehke terke w BKHANI! ((laughs))

"I would start speaking Turkish and fighting!" ((laughs))

Men in same-sex groups are able to use more than a single nonverbal cue to reflect their high-authority position in the community to which they belong. Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) state that smiling is an act that can express a person's affection or anxiety. Based on our observations, Abu Walid used laughter as a negative expression of anxiety. The findings of the study were based on six naturally occurring conversations carried out in Arabic in a hyper-masculine context. They documented that males, in all-male groups, attempted to dominate the conversations through telling gossips, employing foul language, telling stories, and using nonverbal cues such as laughing, smiling, frowning. This major finding conforms with research that reported men's reliance 'on indirect speech genres, acts, and stances, such as insults, boasts, and other competitive linguistic forms to create homosociality' (Kiesling 1997, 34). The latter affirms that the use of insults and competitive speech forms throughout homosocial and competitive speech activities such as drinking, betting, and board games builds the solidarity of the group and encourages potential members to join. In this study, gossiping and teasing allowed interactants to strengthen their interpersonal relationships and establish solidarity based on difference.

The study participants showed politeness and respect toward each other, especially when they were taking turns to speak. They used overlaps less frequently to ascertain their superior status within the group and to show the extent to which they are knowledgeable. Such finding corroborates with Coates's (1997), who affirms that men use little overlap in their conversations. On the other side, some interlocutors used impolite strategies to demonstrate their power. They used imperatives and raised their voice tone as they were playing cards and conversing with one another since they aimed at monopolizing the conversations. Several of the studies reviewed have reported men's tendency to use specific conversational strategies to exhibit more hierarchy and, therefore, more power in all-male groups (Drass 1986; Walker et al. 1996).

As the above findings show, the use of different verbal and nonverbal conversational styles in all-male groups is multifunctional. This study describes specific patterns in men's conversational styles, especially those who come to the shisha café on a regular basis. It shows that men, within all-male groups, use different speech patterns in their talk. They use different verbal and nonverbal linguistic
patterns to display their masculine identity, maintain their power and hierarchical status in society.

Conclusion

This study explored and described the functions of the linguistic patterns and nonverbal language that Lebanese male interactants used when involved in conversational settings in the shisha café. When the players were engaged in the game, overlapping was not observed mainly because the players were all trying to stay focused on their turns in order to earn a win through which they could exhibit their social dominance and social power over their counterparts. However, when interviewed those men were not bound by any social rules that could prevent from exercising their social dominance. They competed with one another to hold them the conversation floor and, as a consequence, asserted their dominance. Besides, the male participants’ conversations included a non-offensive use of swear words although the cardplayers were involved in a competitive game atmosphere that engaged them in a win-or-lose situation. The neutral reaction that they exhibited toward one another when swear words were uttered revealed the strength of their friendships, social harmony, solidarity, and intimacy. In relation to gossiping, the study’s findings revealed that the café’s customers invaded one another’s private lives. No participant was offended or emotionally hurt by this practice. It seemed that they positively perceived this act as one that creates an entertaining and less-threatening atmosphere, especially when held by the owner of the café who maintained his social superiority. It is interesting to find that gossiping has a positive function within this multicultural and multireligious social context. This shows that men’s different religious dispositions, political stance, and value systems get dissolved when they harmonize themselves into the culture of the café that unifies them. The use of humor through laughter was an indirect power show-off. It was enacted by superiors and subordinates in the café in order to entertain customers attending the talk and lessen/compromise the intensity of the gossip. Teasing was rarely observed during the play of the game. Nonetheless, its use did not negatively energize the game environment. On the contrary, along with laughter, teasing established the dominance of the individual who initiated it. Most probably, teasing was addressed to the playmate who appeared to be losing the game. We have also observed men who expressed anxiety through laughing. This informs us that the act of laughing can be used by interlocutors to fulfill multiple purposes. Story-telling, on the other hand, was noted throughout the café’s owner talk. His willingness to share an anecdote and spend more time talking than the other interviewed customers shows that he is someone who tries to hold his dominance within his own territory and maintain the highest level profile among his customers.

We have also identified instances in which playmates employed pre-developed signal cues and facial expressions to ease their nonverbal communication and facilitate their cheating in the game, thus consolidating their rapport within a highly competitive activity. Obviously, the playmates were aware of these nonverbal signals and tended to use them quite often in an attempt to score high in the game and, therefore, maintain/ensure the dominant status of their group.

The research findings implicate that men in all-male groups tend to use specific verbal and nonverbal linguistic patterns to establish their dominance. Individuals who hold authoritative positions were most likely to dominate the conversations and
act as primary informants. Those in lower social positions were not given the chance to contribute much to the talk and they seemed to care less about this matter. We are wondering whether or not dominant practices have developed indifferent attitudes into these people in addition to the habit of holding constant submissive behaviors toward others.

We do acknowledge that the limitations of the study are many. In fact, no generalizations about the entire Lebanese male population and its conversational styles can be made until a larger sample is tested. The duration of the study should have been longer in order to observe participants’ interactions in more depth, and, as a result, collect more data about men’s conversational styles in a public setting like the shisha café. Another hindrance was the non-stop noise that haunted us while observing the cardplayers and conducting the interview with them on the ground floor. The non-stop noise included voices of nearby conversants, the clatter of glasses and utensils, the noise of ventilation fans to name a few. A final issue was getting access to these traditional coffeehouses that were exclusively populated by older men. As a result, future research must explore the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of younger men in similar coffeehouses to examine any commonalities in the functions of their linguistic patterns in expressing dominance. Besides, further research must also be done on the motivational aspects that drive these older men, especially the submissive ones, to adopt their attitudes, that seem to be too good at one point, vis-à-vis one another in such highly communicative and competitive social cultural context.

**Transcription symbols**

- (.) micro-pause
- (0.2) timed pause
- **CAPITALS** higher pitch volume
- – markedly soft speech
- _underlining_ stressed word or part of a word
- # marked rises or falls in pitch
- [] overlapping talk
- ? rising intonation
- !
- (()) transcriber’s description of nonverbal activity
- % code switch (between Arabic and French)

**Notes on contributors**

Diana Fidaoui holds a teaching position at the Lebanese American University (LAU), the American University of Beirut (AUB), where she teaches a variety of ESL and AFL courses. Fidaoui earned her MA in education (TESOL) from LAU and her BA and TD in education from AUB. Her research interests include writing in higher education, sociolinguistics, curriculum design, and multimedia in education.

Rima Bahous is the Chairperson of the Education Department at the Lebanese American University in Lebanon and the Director of the Center for Program and Learning Assessment. Her research interests are in discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and TESOL.
References


