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# “Habiibs” in Australia: Language, Identity and Masculinity

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*Tackling the phenomenon of using Arabic words by second-generation Lebanese-Australians when conversing in English, and reading it culturally and sociologically, constitutes the primary aim of this article. In so doing, this paper concentrates on a number of spoken Arabic words with particular emphasis on the word “habiib”, and shows the relationship between these linguistic constructs and the boundary construction of the embattled identity of these youths. Furthermore, the probing into “habiib” and to a lesser degree, into other Arabic terms, reveals the power relations that traverse the linguistic world of the male and female youths examined by this article. In other words, this article shows the extent to which hybrid linguistic constructs constitute, and are constituted by, unequal gender and ethnic relations. They are also shown to be strategic acts of resistance against the broader community, which tends to keep the users of these words at the margin of society.*

*Keywords:* Habiib; “Lebspeak”; Identity; Second-generation Lebanese-Australians; Ethnicised masculinity; Aestheticisation of youth identity

In recent years, as I engaged myself over a period of time in the observation of a group of young people of Lebanese background in Sydney, I became aware that the language they use in their daily conversation in English is punctuated with specific Arabic words and expressions. I also noticed that in doing so, they impute new meanings to some of these words and leave others intact.<sup>1</sup> These preliminary observations have led me to examine more closely the language used by these youths in their routine conversation. To fulfil this task, I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with male and female youths of Lebanese background living in southwest

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Sydney with the aim of examining more systematically their usage of a specific Arabic word, *habib*, when speaking Australian English.

To begin with, however, it is appropriate to discuss the analytical advantage of using the concept of “ethnic capital” for the purpose of this investigation. “Ethnic capital” is a form of cultural capital that has been converted into symbolic capital because it has received recognition and legitimacy by the (Australian) state and its guardians in the domain of culture. It is true that in recent years, the Liberal and National Coalition government in Australia has been less enthusiastic about multiculturalism, and at the state government level in New South Wales, the former Labor Premier, Bob Carr, has increasingly brought ethnicity, and more particularly Lebanese youth ethnicity, under severe attack. This has undoubtedly resulted in partial devalorisation of Lebanese “ethnic capital”, and consequently a reduction in its symbolic value, as I have demonstrated in a previous study on ethnic leadership (Tabar et al.). However, despite these developments, multiculturalism is still the official policy of the Australian federal and state governments, and ethnicity, including its Lebanese version, is still a valuable form of capital desired by members of the Lebanese migrant community for the purpose of receiving favourable treatment by the authorities and securing an enhanced position in the “field” of ethnicity. On the other hand, for “ethnicity” to be valorised and become a form of symbolic capital, it has to fall in line with the definition assigned to it by the state and public guardians of “ethnic affairs”. In practice, this means that if an “ethnic” group deviates from the dominant norms of multiculturalism or opposes a state policy in the “field” of ethnicity, it will run the risk of making its ethnic capital lose some or all of its symbolic value. Consequently, different ethnicities acquire different symbolic values depending on their compatibility with the official policy of multiculturalism. For this reason, “ethnicity” is more often than not an object of struggle and negotiation between its “representatives” and those of the dominant authority. Moreover, a particular ethnicity as defined by the state is not only challenged by “representatives” of the community concerned, but may also be subjected to criticism emanating from various groups within the community who could hold competing and incompatible terms for defining their ethnic identity. Therefore, in presenting a challenge to the official interpretation of the designated ethnicity, these groups do not end up opposing the representatives of dominant authority alone, but also those of their own community espousing the official version of their ethnicity.

In sum, the state sets limits on the various forms of ethnic capital that operate within the ethnic field in order to maintain its dominance. In so doing, it grants recognition to specific ethnic styles, dispositions and characteristics, including what Bourdieu calls “legitimate discourse” (650), and transforms them into ethnic symbolic capitals. This paper examines the invention and the use of new linguistic varieties manifested in the speech of young Lebanese-Australians, and argues that they don’t simply fail to qualify as part of the “legitimate discourse”, but they also constitute acts of resisting this discourse by creating a new identity and assigning a transgressive meaning to it. In this vein, I tend to agree with linguists (Gal; Heller;

and Woolard) who argue that “Bourdieu’s view of symbolic domination is flawed in that it does not accommodate the possibility for resistance and links the hegemonic power to relative numbers of speakers of a particular variety” (Pavlenko and Blackledge 11). More significantly, one could elaborate on Bourdieu’s metaphor of a marketplace and show that in any given place “there may be several alternative market places which assume different language behaviours [sic] and linguistic varieties. In local markets, local linguistic variants may be seen as solidarity-based linguistic practices and as a form of opposition to symbolic domination” (Pavlenko and Blackledge 11).

It is from within this perspective that I aim to examine the “Lebspeak” as a “local linguistic variant” used by youths of Lebanese background in their “local market” and show that it is not only a marker of identity, but also a linguistic resource which challenges the state’s definition of Lebanese ethnicity through the invention of an “illegitimate” vocabulary undermining this definition.

### **“Arabic-Speaking Community”: A Reified Linguistic Community**

In the Australian discourse about multiculturalism, the term “Arabic-speaking community” refers to a community of migrants who come from Arabic-speaking countries and speak the Arabic language that they transported with them to Australia from their countries of origin. So according to the imagery created by multiculturalism, these migrants speak Arabic. Or, if they are second-generation migrants they are depicted as people who come from an Arabic-speaking background with little, if any, skill in speaking the language of their parents. In any event, however, the Arabic that first- and second-generation Lebanese migrants speak is presumably similar to the language that they inherited from their country of origin. This perception of the migrant fits very well with the general tendency found in official multiculturalism to divide up the Australian population into discrete and well-bounded linguistic communities whose intercommunication, in the absence of English language use, is secured by accredited interpreters and translators. From within this perspective, community languages, including Arabic and Australian English, are reified in that they are not conceived as living entities that are dialogically made and remade in changing and different contexts. In this paper I argue that this perspective lends itself too easily into disregarding new linguistic constructs that are continuously created by migrants and their descendants in their daily interaction with broader society. In examining the appropriation of the Arabic word *habiib* and its fusion with the English spoken by second-generation Lebanese adolescents, I intend to deconstruct the reified and homogeneous character of ethnicity (including the Anglo-Australian ethnicity) and its attendant linguistic practices produced by the multicultural imaginary of the Australian authorities.<sup>2</sup>

## Methodology of Research

Information for this paper has been mainly gathered through open-ended interviews with sixteen young people chosen through the snowballing method. Because of the open-ended character of the interviews, the responses varied in length depending on the informant. At times answers were brief and not very suggestive, at others they were lengthy inviting further questioning. However, all the interviews were guided by a core set of questions, which revolved around a brief biography on the informant and his/her relation to the word *habiib*: if used, when and with whom? The meaning of *habiib*? What behaviour is associated with being a *habiib* and is it used by both sexes? The sample for the interview consisted of six females and ten males who all lived in Bankstown Local Government Area (LGA) except for one who resided in Parramatta LGA. Their age bracket was between 14 and 20 years old. One of them was unemployed, and the rest were still studying (ten were in secondary education, two in a technical college and three at university). Four males were Christian and six were Muslim. The girls were divided between four Christians and two Muslims. All interviewees, however, were second-generation Australians whose parents were born in Lebanon except for one female whose mother was a second-generation Lebanese born in Australia.

Moreover, given that the two areas from which the sample is selected have a large number of first- and second-generation Lebanese migrants,<sup>3</sup> this paper operates with the assumption that the open-ended interviews conducted along with the field notes taken over the period of one month while attending social gatherings of Lebanese youth largely reflect the linguistic experience of the second-generation Lebanese living in these areas.

## English/Arabic Language: Inventing Words/Creating Solidarity

Research findings show that youths of Lebanese background used a number of Arabic words when conversing in English with each other and one word in particular, *habiib*, acquired new meanings while the meanings of others more or less remained the same. The word *habiib* warrants particular analysis because it provides rich evidence about the relationship between the spoken language of the Lebanese Australian youth and their strategic endeavour to create a new identity and resist their subjugated position in society.

In Arabic, the word *habiib* means “darling” or “a beloved person” whereas *habiibah* refers to its female counterpart. Both words, however, derive from the noun *hubb* meaning “love”. In addition, in Lebanon (and many Arab countries) the word *habiib* can be used to express a special liking to a second person that could be a friend or a close relative.

All the respondents that I interviewed indicated that they use Arabic words when speaking in English with others who come from the same ethnic background. The most frequently used words were *habiib*, *shoo* (“what’s up?”) and *yallah* (meaning “let’s go” or indicating impatience). Other words mostly included swear words

and *ijah*; employed strategically by teenagers to inform each other of the arrival of an undesirable authority figure such as the teacher who is about to enter a classroom or a security guard in a shopping mall. When I asked the male respondents about the use of the word *habiib* in particular, eight of them stated that they used it; one claimed that he used it sometimes and the last (aged 14) said that even though his older brothers and friends call him *habiib*, he did not use it at all. In contrast, all the female respondents showed familiarity with the term, but only four of them indicated that they used it in conversing with other friends.

In response to the question: “Do you use the term *habiib*?” Farid,<sup>4</sup> a Maronite Catholic and a 17-year-old high school student, said “Yeah I use it, [...] sometimes when I’m saying hi, I’d say hi *habiib*”. Diab (also aged 17), a Muslim *Alawi*, who learns painting at the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) College, gave a slightly different answer, “When I see my mates, I go, ‘hi *habiib*, what are you doing?’ or with my girlfriend”.

Nabil, a Muslim *Sunni*, aged 18, said that he didn’t use it much but “a lot of people” call him *habiib*. Boulos, a 17-year-old Maronite high school student, claimed that he used *habiib* to refer to “a close friend or loved one”. Another Maronite teenager (17-year-old) reported that, even though he tries to avoid the term, he still uses it: “it comes up once in a while”. Ali (18-year-old *Sunni* Muslim), Rayan (a *Sunni* Muslim and a 20-year-old university student) and Hashim (a *Shiite* Muslim studying Pharmacy) declared that they use the term *habiib* “on some occasions” without any further specification.

The answers given by the above respondents evidently show that the word “*habiib*” in its original meaning (i.e. referring to a beloved person or used as a greeting expression) is widely used among these youngsters. But as we progressed further into our interviews the picture started to become more complex.

When I asked Hashim, “Does anyone call you a *habiib*?” he replied:

- Yeah, my friends do.
- Why do they do it?
- It’s just a common term. It’s used in Arabic, like a slang language.
- And your friends are Lebanese?
- Not all of them, no.
- The ones that call you *habiib*?
- No, not all of them, one of them is Iraqi, one of them is Egyptian, one Syrian, one’s Palestinian.

Ali revealed that his “multicultural” friends also use the term *habiib*, and when I asked him about the identity of these friends, he replied, “They could be Indonesian, Greek, Italian”. He then added that he and his friends employed *habiib* as a greeting expression when saying: “*shoo habiib*, what are you doing?” Rayan confirmed that most of his university friends, including the ones from a non-Arabic background, call him *habiib*. To him, the term was “becoming popular”.

It is clear from these answers that *habiib* is not only widely used by many young people of Lebanese background, but also by Arab-Australians of non-Lebanese background (i.e. Iraqi, Syrian, Egyptian and Palestinian) as well as non-Arabs (i.e. Indonesian, Greek and Italian) who associate themselves with Lebanese youth.

Moreover, our search revealed that the term *habiib* was not simply confined to the spoken language of adolescents, but was also slowly integrating into Australian popular culture, such as Fat Pizza, a TV comic show, and was increasingly being used to name take-away shops which sell Lebanese food in various parts of Sydney and to customise number plates for cars.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Habiib* and *Habiibship*: Newly Acquired Meanings in a New Context**

The analysis of the interviews by our respondents demonstrates that the meanings of *habiib* and *habiibship* have undergone particular changes emanating from the context in which the word *habiib* is used.

According to Hashim, *habiib* refers to a form of bonding between the speakers “on the basis of ethnicity or religion”, and “if you say the word *habiib* you obviously know he is going to be from an Arabic-speaking background, so it definitely puts them together”. Clearly, in Hashim’s view the use of *habiib* is about a sense of solidarity exclusive to young people of Arabic-speaking background. Nabil also brought out the issue of ethnic “closeness” in his response: “When [Aussies] use mate, they bring a closeness together, between two people, and they show an interest in getting to know them. When a Lebanese person, to another Lebanese person, uses *habiib*, that’s like saying mate but in Lebanese”. Nabil’s comment clearly indicates the role that the use of the word *habiib* plays in the process of constructing a distinct identity for the Arabic-speaking youth in Sydney. For him, “closeness” generated by mateship is different to the one built on *habiibship*. The latter is derived from an ethnicity shaped by the experience of migration. In the same vein, Waleed declared: “[*habiib*] can be used as a form of identity in that the Lebanese youth have adopted their own part-slang term to communicate in their own unique Lebanese way”.

Many young second-generation Lebanese-Australians are using the term *habiib* to exude a sense of ethnic comradeship that binds them together and draws a line between them and the Anglo-Australian other. On the right to use the word “*habiib*”, Charble reported: “In a sense, you have to be a Leb to actually use the word, I don’t know why, but that’s the way it’s been carried out for the last I don’t know how long. If an Aussie came up to you, or any other nationality, and told you ‘*shoo habiib?*’ it would be ‘who are you to tell me that, you’re not one of us’”.

Farid stated that *habiib* is a “Lebanese name for someone [. . .] like a lot of time I’ll say to my friends ‘*Marhaba* [hello] *habiib*’, or ‘How are you *habiib?*’ It’s like a reference to your Lebanese friends”. And when I asked Farid for the reason which makes him and his friends use *habiib*, he said: “They’ve learnt to accept that, they want to classify themselves as something. I know you’re Lebanese, you know I’m Lebanese; I’m going to call you *habiib*. A lot of the time you can say “the *habiibs* from

Lakemba, the *habiibs* from Bankstown. It's another way of saying boys". Farid also raised the point about associating the use of *habiib* with respect "[Calling them *habiibs*] is a way of showing that you respect them, you're a *habiib*". In other words, a person qualifies to become a *habiib* if he is of Lebanese background and deserves to be respected by those calling him by that name.

Nabil reported that "[...] when someone does call you *habiib* you feel in with them, you've got that friendship going". Ali made a similar point, "[*Habiib*] means friend, how can I explain it, like a close friend, someone you can trust, someone you've known for a long time, you understand them [...] [a *habiib* is] my best friend". Diab, Waleed, Ahmad and Rayan repeated the same point when they stated that *habiibs* refer "mostly" to their good friends. In fact, Waleed likened a *habiib* to his cousin, a reference to a blood-based form of identity.

In bringing out the issue of trust, Ali points to another important characteristic found circulating among the use of *habiib*. According to him, the feeling of solidarity experienced by users of *habiib* is also founded on "trust". Indeed, "trust" and the feeling of "security" are found lacking in the broader society due to the high level of unemployment that Lebanese adolescents have been facing since the early 1980s (Humphrey, *Family, Work and Unemployment* and *Islam, Multiculturalism and Transnationalism*), and the increasing racism to which they have been subjected since the crisis of "Lebanese gangs" in 1998 up until today (Lattas). Recent writings on "trust" indicate the importance of this condition for overcoming the feeling of risk and anxiety generated by living in modern society and "to achieve a practical engagement with the open-ended nature of modernity" (Elliot 76). *Habiibship*, therefore, is not about "trust" found operating between Lebanese Australian youth and the broader society but rather it is generated among the *habiibs* themselves. Furthermore, what came across from talking to these youths was the strategic aspect of identifying as *habiibs*: introducing oneself as a *habiib* automatically qualifies the speaker to "be in" with the group, granting him "respect" and "trust". These resourceful qualities are extremely useful for second-generation adolescents in their daily encounter with broader society, which is oftentimes hostile to them.

As to the inclusion of non-Lebanese youth in the circle of *habiibs*, it would be interesting to further examine Ali's responses. We asked Ali why he says that he doesn't use the term *habiib* when speaking to an Anglo-Australian, and he replied:

Because, [...] they are full far away. When you talk to a wog [referred to as a multicultural friend, too], you can talk how you want to talk, but with them they won't understand nothing, they might just think you're stupid [...] I just use it for someone that's a wog, or Asian, but not Australian.

Clearly, Ali states that he did not use the term *habiib* when conversing with Anglo-Australians because they would think he is "stupid". On the other hand, he reveals that using the term with his "multicultural" friends was not a problem simply because he could talk to them the way he wants. In saying these words, Ali is trying to



express an idea that goes beyond the issue of linguistic misunderstanding. This idea is made clear in the following statement:

[*Habiib* and “mate”] differ, because mate is like a friend, or because I’m your mate you’re going to the bar, have a drink, just to make fun of them. But with the term *habiib*, you’re talking to him, like a serious talk, you might want to be laughing and say *habiib* this, and *habiib* that, you just say it once in your conversation, or twice, like “hi *habiib* how are you?” or “see you *habiib*, I’ll talk to you later”. But you won’t use it all the time [...]

Ali draws a distinction between Anglo- and non-Anglo-Australians by playing out the differences between the terms *habiib* and “mate”. According to him, *habiib* is preserved for a “serious” talk with young people of “wog” background (a term used by Ali to broadly denote migrants from the Middle East and Southern Europe), a talk that makes no sense to Australian “mates” because they don’t share with him the experience of being a “wog” or a migrant. Therefore, the term *habiib*, which partly expresses this “shared experience”, could not be understood by the “Australians”. Users of *habiib* are perceived to be “stupid”. In sharing *habiibship* with “wogs” and “Asians”, Ali is sharing the experience of being treated differently by the host society. “Mate”, according to him, has no binding power because it is used indiscriminately and very lightly. *Habiib*, on the other hand, denotes a shared reality that enables “wogs” and “Asians” to use it.

### Language as an Aestheticised Inscription of Gender and Identity

As I have demonstrated above, *habiib* as used by Lebanese-Australian youths refers to young people of (mainly but not restricted to) Lebanese background who have an exclusive sense of bonding that is based on trust and respect. However, as we move forward in examining the data collected from the interviews, we learn that *habiib* has acquired an additional meaning referring to an aestheticised and masculinised mode of living developed by some Lebanese-Australian teenagers.

At the beginning of his interview, Boulus lamented the fact that the term *habiib* had lost its original meaning, and as I probed further into what he meant by the newly acquired meaning of *habiib*, he described this meaning in terms of the way in which a typical *habiib* would behave: “[*Habiibs*] always think they’re bigger than who they really are. If someone is calling *habiib* in public, they’re probably looking up to themselves, saying, ‘look at me, I’m on the top of the world, and everyone’s under me’. Yeah, that’s what it’s come to these days.” Waleed reported that among his friends “the term *habiib* is also used to describe a typical Lebanese show off”. In trying to make the same point, Diab focused on the attitude of *habiibs*, “Attitude, [a *habiib*] thinks he runs the show, he thinks the only one is me, I’m in the spotlight, look at me”. We then asked Diab whether *habiibs* are troublemakers, and his answer was “Not really, some of them are just all show, they want to be, but when it comes to it they’ll back away, they won’t do anything much”. Hashim also agreed that *habiib* can

have a different meaning: “those kinds of people” he said, “may act like gangsters, it really depends on who you’re trying to target, some people might call it *habiib*. They might have a certain behaviour, like walking side to side, or have a necklace round their neck, or acting tough or something like that”. He then added, “Sometimes their attitude is pretty bad, cos they’re pretty loud, and they don’t have respect for other people [...]”. Nabil described *habiibs* as people who “tend to pick up that slang type of talking through hanging out on the streets, and going out places where they meet people which they shouldn’t be meeting, they pick up that kind of talk”. But then Nabil broadened the term *habiib* to include those who “would be jolly, [...] down to earth, but still got something to him. If he’s smart person, he goes to uni, has a wide vocabulary, and talks properly, he would not use *habiib*, only if they were mucking around or saying it as a joke”. Similarly, Farid attributed two different meanings to “*habiib*”, “[...] if they want to say they’re the *habiibs* from Bankstown, automatically you assume it’s a Lebanese gang. But if my friend were to say to me *habiib*, I’d say it’s a friendship”.

Charble confirmed that a *habiib* is “a try-hard, cos it’s not being yourself, and I don’t think anyone is like that, I think it’s just the image which is being portrayed against us Lebanese, and I think some people like [this image]”. I then asked him, “Why do you think they put on this image?” and he replied, “I think it’s power, to show power, and dominance over other people”.

All the male informants in the sample agreed that a *habiib*, in the sense of being a teenager of Lebanese background, could also mean a “try-hard”: someone who acts tough and is always intent on assuming the image of a strong person. The fantasised and inflated character of the power position taken on by these teenagers is best understood by reference to their marginal status in the broader society, and more particularly, in the ethnic field as defined by the dominant discourse of multiculturalism (see Tabar et al. for a detailed analysis of the relationship between the rise of multiculturalism and the formation of an “ethnic field” in Bourdieu’s term). This is not to deny the real power that these young people enjoy within their own created world. In fact it is this power which enables them to endure and resist the sense of marginality that they experience in broader society. It is a sense of power which translates itself into a specific style of life which is mostly evident in the way they dress, cut their hair, drive their car and, of course, speak to others (e.g. showing no respect). As well as revealing this new meaning of *habiib*, the above discussion discloses additional meanings that make the term polysemous indicating a complex and incompatible reality that it tries to capture in the speech of Lebanese youngsters. These meanings are: “street boys”, “easy-going and smart young men”, “friends”, “drug dealers and gang members” from Bankstown LGA.<sup>6</sup>

In relation to our female respondents, we found that as they depicted *habiibs* in terms similar to those used by male respondents, they also emphasised their putative masculine power. Leila reported to us that *habiibs* “think they’re better than another race/religion. A *habiib* is someone who has a car that he has spent so much on it so it can look good [...] *habiibs* are usually the ones who have the hotted-up cars, big

religious symbol hanging half way down their chest and those who think they can get any girl they want". Leila then added, "I don't like the term *habiib*, but when I hear it, honestly, the first thing that comes to my mind would have to be young, Lebanese boys, hehe (laughing sarcastically)". Mirna gave us a similar impression:

When I think *habiib* I think typical Lebanese teenager, somebody who has an ego problem, somebody who kind of places themselves superior, above other people [...]. If somebody was to say to me "that person is a *habiib*", I would immediately think he's Lebanese, he's teenager, he probably has a fast car, probably trying to grab some girl's attention in a rude manner.

Fatima went even further and spoke about the inauthentic character of *habiibs*, "A *habiib* is someone who follows people, who is not an original or genuine person. It's someone who follows a group and tries to impress others. [*Habiibs* try] to be someone they are not. Not in good ways, not in education or not in a job [...].". In addition to making the same point, Salima indicated that "the whole thing of what is a *habiib*, to me, when I see person with their car, heaps of gel in their hair, flirting with girls, girls doing the same with guys, swearing, showing lack of respect [...]. that kind of attitude" (for a discussion of "try-hards" and "wannabes" among youth of Lebanese background, see Collins et al. 136–70).

The responses of both female and male informants clearly indicate that *habiibs* were obsessed with "grabbing" girls' attention, "hotted up cars" and loud music, and have their own style of dress and a peculiar way of talking. This was confirmed by Salima's report to us: "at school most of the *habiibs* are Lebanese [...]. they do wear a lot of Adidas and Nike, you wouldn't see them wearing Mambo or Billabong, or something, so that's their trademark. On their pencil cases you have the Nike and Adidas signs [...].". On their relation to cars, Salima wanted to be elaborate:

The loud cars, instantly you have *habiib*, then you have WRX, or something, they're loud cars, and all the *habiibs* [referring to those in her school who amount to 40 according to her estimation] now have their P's [provisional driving licenses], they're always talking about the speaker systems in their cars, and what kind of car they're having. With the car also comes their music; you always hear the cars going boom, boom, boom, in the street.

Myriam relayed to us the way in which *habiibs* walk, "their shoulders are like that [slightly lifted to give the impression that their upper torso is bigger and that they are strong], and they've got the chains". She also mentioned that they use "slang language" and "rude words" with a "deeper tone" when they talk.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the graphic description of *habiibs*' behaviour, Leila reported that "[...] [*Habiibs*] usually have their tarty girlfriends with them".

Among the male respondents more was said about *habiibs*' demeanour. Boulus linked the *habiibs*'s obsession with hotted-up cars with their concern to present a good image, "[...] the more money that's spent on the cars to make it look good, the presentation is what they're into". Charble stated that *habiibs* dress up with

“bandanas and beanies over their head, Adidas here and there”. And when they talk, “[t]here is always that extra tone to their voice, or extra swear word where it’s not needed”. When they walk “there’s always the shrugging of shoulders, and twisting of legs”. Farid agreed with this description and mentioned that this type of *habiibs* is located in Bankstown and Canterbury area, “that kind of *habiib*, will be classified as having a deep voice, he’d be swearing a lot [...]”. In addition to reporting that *habiibs* dress up with “Big puffy jackets, big hoods, baggy pants”, and have their cars “lowered, exhausts, mags and big systems”, Ali indicated that they wear a special hairstyle, “zero underneath, and long from the top, or rat tail, or fringes, so many ways”. It is clear from these words that in the act of creating their aestheticised world, *habiibs* are also involved in re-accentuating their ethnic phallic order in which they are immersed.

Salima and Noha were the only female informants who reported to us the presence of female *habiibs*. In contrast, all male respondents agreed that the term *habiib* is only applicable to boys. They systematically refused to include girls as part of the *habiib* group. Despite this masculine appropriation of *habiibship*, the evidence gathered from the girls suggests that female *habiibs* are also present, even though their number is considerably smaller than their male counterparts. Moreover, the girls’ responses above show clearly that male *habiibs* deploy their *habiibship* as a strategy to entice female teenagers and accentuate their masculinity. They ethnicise their masculinity as a strategy to enhance their influence over their female counterparts. In the description of our female informants, the term *habiib*, therefore, inscribes a hyper-sexualised masculinity with a particular style of dressing, posturing and even speaking. It constitutes a type of “masculinity” in what I would call the ethno-gender regime found among Australian-Arabic youth. In this regime (Connell), we found two types of femininities: one that could be labelled as a “subordinate femininity” (referred to by one female informant), and the other as a “resisting femininity” (e.g. all our female informants). Within this relation, “subordinate femininity” represents the female teenager who approves the “macho” version of a *habiib* and submits to his domination. By contrast, the “resisting femininity” ridicules this type of *habiibship* and rejects its members’ domineering style in relating to their female counterparts.

What also comes across in the above quotes is the reference by male and female respondents to *habiibs*’ style of speaking; their use of swear words and the intonation of their voice. Although this linguistic aspect of the *habiibs*’ behaviour was not specifically recorded in our interviews, it was distinctly notable when conducting our fieldwork. After listening to the conversations of our interviewees and other adolescents on several occasions we became aware of certain features which marked the way *habiibs* spoke to each other; raising their voice with particular phrases, such as “I swear to God” and “you know what I mean”, the regular use of a swear word in Arabic, *jahish* or *hmarr*, meaning “donkey”, and the changing of [th] into [d] in “this” which becomes “dis”. Additionally, they spoke from the “back of their throat” to produce the effect of a “deep voice” as mentioned by Myriam, Charble and Farid.<sup>8</sup> They also created their own hybrid verbs when conversing with their peer or their

parents. So instead of saying, “I’m washing the dishes” or “I’m going over there”, they would say: “I’m *ijlying*” and “I’m *ruhing* over there”. This is done by adding the English “ing” to Arabic colloquial verbs, “*ijly*” and “*ruh*” to invent new hybrid verbs. Undoubtedly, these observations are consistent with the general conclusion reached by linguists in their recent study on “ethnolects” when they state: “Ethnolects may be marked by phonetic, grammatical, lexical/semantic and /or prosodic features” (Clyne et al. 154).

### Conclusion: Tying the Threads Together

It is clear from the above discussion that the meaning of *habiib* has been transformed in use by the Lebanese-Australian youth when speaking in English; its original meaning of referring to a specific “darling” or “beloved person” is rarely in exclusive use. More than this, its adoption by these young people into their spoken English language and its newly acquired meanings reflect the complex relationships experienced by them. In his analysis of “national language” and the novel, Bakhtin shows the inescapable link between language and social reality (67–68). The link between language and the social reality of second-generation Lebanese-Australian youth has been the focus of this study through the analysis of the word *habiib*. In addition, I want to argue that the “voice” articulating the experiences of these young people is not heard or read in the white-centred terms of multiculturalism. Instead, community languages (including English as a national language) are presented as reified entities, which could be preserved by their respective communities without acknowledging the linguistic fusion and bricolage, implemented by second-generation adolescents in their daily experience of living in a multicultural Australia. From a linguistic perspective, the dominant narrative of multiculturalism is predicated upon the assumption of linguistic plurality which denies the existence of a “new voice” articulated by second-generation migrant youth who are fusing and transforming the linguistic and cultural pluralism “to create a new way of speaking” (see Warren for a similar conclusion reached in her study of “wogspeak” in Melbourne). In this sense, the narrative of multiculturalism has an abusive and transgressive effect on the lived experience of these young people through the operation of what Spivak would call its “master concepts” (Morton 34–35, 45) which include social harmony, community relations and linguistic and settlement needs of non-English-speaking communities.<sup>9</sup>

It is within the context of challenging this multiculturalism that we should understand the processes that lead Australian-Lebanese youth to impute new meanings to the term *habiib* and to integrate it (and other Arabic words) into their speech. As shown above, the term “mate” does not capture the specificities of these young people’s experience, which pertain to their age, generation, ethnicity and strong bonding based on their shared social reality likened at times to a blood-based unity. In addition, the experience of these young people and its stylisation which is evident in their specific way of talking, dressing, listening to music and driving cars, is totally unacknowledged by the characteristics of the symbolic capital of ethnicity as

defined by the official and master discourse of multiculturalism. More importantly, when the definers of this discourse talk about the cultural manifestations of these young people, they name and define them in a way that undermines their symbolic value and make them the opposite to what they consider to be the defining characteristics of a valorised ethnic capital; their linguistic invention is unrecognised and even degraded (it's bad language), their social gathering is perceived to be a grouping of "Lebanese gangs" with the intention to commit various crimes, their style of music and dressing are symptoms of a pathologised gang identity. In short, the state definers of the ethnic capital, assisted by a growing number of influential radio broadcasters and newspaper commentators, criminalise and demonise the creative cultural manifestations of the social experience of Australian-Lebanese young people by imposing its own "abusive" reading on them.

More generally, the integration of certain Arabic words into the speech of Australian-Lebanese youth (i.e. *habiib*, *shoo*, *yallah*, *'ijaa* and swear words) helps in the construction of their ethnic and hybrid identity (ethnically Lebanese and Australian), which cannot be articulated in the white-centred discourse of multiculturalism because the latter is predicated upon the existence of mutually exclusive cultural/linguistic communities. In this context, Lebanese-Australian youth borrowed words from the language of their parents and transformed its meanings to articulate their specific experience and give it a creolised verbal (and cultural) expression. The multicultural discourse on "youth of Lebanese background" or "of Arabic-speaking background" names and defines these Lebanese-Australians in terms of their cultural past as either a consensual and homogeneous group of youngsters or as real or potential members of the so-called "Lebanese gangs" (Collins et al.; Tabar et al.). In doing so, it does not give a voice to their currently diverse experiences, especially to those relating to their invented response to racism and social exclusion inflicted upon them by the surrounding society.<sup>10</sup>

The integration of the term *habiib* into the speech of the Lebanese-Australian youth, and the imputation of new meanings to it, is a linguistic response to this racism, that is reflective not only of their need to construct a sense of solidarity to face this racism, but also of their innovative way of opposing it. The previous discussion shows that to be a *habiib* is to declare a detachment from the dominant identity for lack of "trust" and "respect". It is also to have a unique style of life that challenges the dominant norms of dressing, talking, driving cars and listening to music. The totality of these youth cultural practices creates its own valorised sense of an ethnic capital, which is diametrically opposed to the ethnic capital defined by the dominant ethnic field.

Finally, the choice made by this study to primarily examine the Arabic word *habiib* is not a random one. As indicated above, it is a word that condenses a set of complex relations pertaining to the reality of these young people. This study attempted to unpack this reality by first looking at how this generation of young migrants have borrowed the word (and few other words) from the Arabic language of their parents, and how they have transformed its original meaning to suit the needs emanating

from their experience as young migrants of Lebanese background. It also showed that this word has acquired a number of meanings, each one expressing an aspect of the complex reality surrounding the life of second-generation Lebanese youth in Sydney. Overall, this study wanted to argue that the borrowing of the Arabic word *habiib* is indicative of a complex and contradictory reality experienced by second-generation Lebanese youth, a reality that has to do with question of cultural creativity, the challenge of the white-centred terms of ethnic capital, identity, masculinity, marginality and power.

## Notes

- [1] Linguists have dubbed this phenomenon an “ethno-lect” and it is called “Lebspeak” among its users according to journalist, Deborah Cameron (5). Michael Clyne defines ethnolects as “varieties of a language that mark speakers as members of ethnic groups who originally used another language or distinctive variety” (Clyne 86).
- [2] For a similar approach in the study of identities in multilingual countries, see Pavlenko and Blackledge.
- [3] The latest census shows that in 2001 there were 71,310 Lebanon-born persons in Australia. In 1996, the second-generation of Lebanon-born origin (defined as persons born in Australia who had one or both parents born in Lebanon) numbered 82,582. It is expected that at the time this article was written the number of second-generation persons of Lebanon-born origin had sharply increased. It is also established by the findings of 1996 and 2001 censuses that the state of New South Wales had the largest number of first- and second-generation Lebanese migrants, and more particularly, the Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Bankstown and Parramatta had the highest number of first- and second-generation of Lebanese migrants. According to the 1996 census, Bankstown LGA had the highest number of first-generation (9,294) followed by Canterbury (9,063) and Parramatta (5,936). The 2001 census also shows that 90.6 per cent of the Lebanon-born people in Australia had Arabic as their main language spoken at home (McDonald).
- [4] All names used in this article are pseudo-names.
- [5] The author encountered two restaurants, one in Bankstown and one in Lakemba, using the term *habiib* to name their businesses, and two cars were observed in the area having the same word inscribed on their number plates.
- [6] More recently, the image of a *habiib* as a member of a gang has been appropriated by the Australian art industry. This was done by a TV show series called “Fat Pizza” which, later on, was turned into a comic film on the wider screen. In this show/film, there is a Lebanese character called “*Habiib*”. *Habiib* is depicted as “a drug dealer, car thief and a gang member who is currently on work-release from jail”. He also delivers pizzas for Bobo, the chef and owner of Fat Pizza. *Habiib* has a long lasting relationship with Toula, “his overweight, Greek, donut-munching girlfriend”. *Habiib*’s best friend is also Lebanese. His nickname is Rocky the Lebanese Rambo, who acts as “the muscle for [*Habiib*’s] hustle”. He is big, strong and ready to call the cousins for any brawl, anytime. Although this show/film parodies *Habiib* as a stereotype for the Lebanese youth, it fails to capture in the first place its polysemous character.
- [7] Bakhtin correctly observes that when “sacred languages [read Australian English] are spoken by the accents of vulgar folk [read ethnic] language, they are seen in a new light, their artificiality is highlighted” (41–83). Lebspeak can be described as a “novelisation” of Australian English in the Bakhtinian sense of the word. Bakhtin describes the features of novelised genres as follows: “They become more free and flexible, their language renews itself

by incorporating extra-literary heteroglossia [i.e. that which insures the primacy of context over text] and the “novelistic layers of literary language, they become dialogised, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally-this is the most important thing- the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic open-endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the open ended present) (6–7). One can readily describe Lebspeak as being a “dialogised” language, i.e. “relativised, de-privileged and aware of competing definitions of the same things”. Lebspeak is “permeated with laughter, irony, humor”, and “elements of self-parody”. As such, it is creative because it has “a living contact with” evolving reality.

- [8] Interestingly enough a study on “wogspeak” in Melbourne showed similar linguistic features manifested by the speech of second-generation migrants from Greek, Italian and Turkish background (Warren).
- [9] A good example of how the state is appropriating the voice of the youth of Arabic-speaking background would be to look at the various state initiatives in New South Wales (NSW) proclaiming to address the problems of these youth in the wake of the “gang rape” in 2000 and the recent Cronulla riots in December 2005.
- [10] In his discussion of Bourdieu’s writings on language, Hanks says: “Behind the unity of most standard languages lie power relations, unifying administrations, economy and state formation, or governance [. . .] Dictionaries, grammars, and their authors are part of the same process, as is the inculcation of standard in the educational system [. . .] The entire process is a kind of symbolic domination in which nonstandard varieties are suppressed, and those who speak them are excluded or inculcated” (75).

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