

FROM THE FIELD

A Passport-less You: How Can an Arabic-English Identity Clash and Concord?



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Nouf came to Gonzaga University to study communication and leadership studies. Then connected her writing passion with languages and joined TESOL (teaching English as a Second Language). Her future plans include: a home garden with bird feeders, flowers, fruits and veggies plus 10 rabbits, and 4 dogs. One of her top favorite things are handwritten letters and cards. She enjoys talking to people and getting to know them and their stories.

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Back in 1993, our living room had a 20-inch Sony TV sitting gloriously in the middle of a hefty white wooden bookcase. In this room, I stood and watched Cinderella every morning for as long as I can remember. I knew zero words in English, yet I remember understanding the movie. This memory solidifies a feeling that I still recognize to this day: it was the starting point of my identity and language clash.

I grew up monolingual, speaking Arabic only. When I watched Cinderella, I did not think that this was in another language, or that the language was called English; I simply thought the characters were saying words I did not understand, words that I had not learned yet. It never occurred to me that what I knew was in translation, in Arabic. That is a difficult idea to grasp at a young age, and English did not officially become my second language until I began high school. Then, we began to have TV channels dedicated to broadcasting English shows, movies, and songs. The language started to surround me more; between school and home, there was a great amount of English constantly audible during my day. Music, in particular, made a difference. The sounds of the guitar played by Bon Jovi ignited in me an endless passion for western music, and my birth identity has never been the same since.

Identity

The word identity is often abbreviated "ID," an acronym for a longer word: identification. Identification is an official document that contains the main details about a person's identity: full name, age, gender, country of birth, and a unique number, which can lead to more detailed background information. This type of tangible ID is given to a person at birth. However, there is another form of ID that is never printed, handed out, or decided by anyone else: cultural identity.

As my love for western culture grew, my cultural identity did too. However, I never abandoned my birth identity. The Arabic language will always be in my blood, and a proof of my infinite love for it is shown in my dedication as a teacher. Connecting the two has led me to wonderful serendipities, like crossing paths with "Arabic Mike," a British YouTuber and native English speaker with a popular series of Arabic-language videos.

I think those who immerse themselves in the culture of their L2 often feel as if they are caught between two cultures. Sometimes I have been confused by my L1 and L2 identities when I could not merge them. At other times, it felt exhilarating for them to be separate. As someone who learned English during the same period (Middle School) in which Mike learned Arabic, I have recognized within myself an internal, irreversible

change. It made me wonder about his experience. We share two languages, Arabic and English. We shared opposite L1s and L2s. To what extent do we share an Arabic/English identity? These realizations made me want to discover the Arabic ethnographic side of Mike.

Ethnography & Hymes

Ethnography “[is] a writing culture, or portrait of the people. Ethnography studies how people’s realities make sense to them and has a meaning in their lived settings. This is accomplished by interviewing and observing. An ethnographer is expected to deliver a descriptive narrative of a group’s contexts and activities...” (Mayo, 2017).

Dell Hathaway Hymes established a foundation for the ethnographical study of language use. He left his mark on the field of communication by developing a disciplinary area known as Ethnography of Communication. Prior to 1962, whenever linguists were trying to study a language by itself, it was typically detached from two essential factors, time and place. Hymes' contribution was to propose an "ethnography of speaking" to analyze speech acts and help researchers study language more effectively by considering time and place. Those two factors help create the context that plays a role in revealing how people actually use language, and that leads to discovering patterns. Hymes' "ethnography of speaking" theory later became the basis of the S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model (Setting and Scene, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre]. S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. is a constructive tool for studying how people talk, but the main purpose of the model is to extract a pattern that leads to discovering the speech community of a certain group of people. Hymes (1972) defined a speech community as “people who share rules for when and how to speak” (p. 54).

Mike’s S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G.

The main goal of Mike’s channel is to teach Arabic. Throughout the years, his content has been mostly geared toward language learners. The majority of his videos were instructional, but every now and then he would host another person: family members, friends who speak Arabic, or a fellow YouTuber. In the summer of 2018, a new theme appeared on Mike’s channel in the form of playlists with titles such as "Chatting with Arabs" and "Arabs around the World." A total of 11 videos were posted. The average length of a video was ten minutes, with some videos around 30 minutes long. Analyzing these videos through the lens of the S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model, I made a number of observations about the rules of Mike's speech community and his L1/L2 identities.

Setting and Scene

The Setting was outdoors during the summer months of 2018 at busy tourist attractions around the U.K. and Europe, where interviewees were moving from one spot to another during their daily activities. The Scene is a lighthearted, informal, unscripted, and quick face-to-face conversation about the interviewee's activities in the city with some additional background information. Typical information shared during the interview included name, age, country of origin, hometown, the weather back home, travel experience and plans, while practicing Arabic phrases and code switching within the conversation.

Participants

Mike is the interviewer: a 29-year-old British male spending the summer at home in London or travelling around neighboring countries such as France and Switzerland. His interviewees are random strangers, mostly Arabs enjoying their summer vacations or studying at a university or English language institute. Their ages range from teens to early 20s, and the majority are unmarried males traveling with friends or cousins. Mike also occasionally interviewed individuals or a family with children. As social media is made for an audience, the Participants also include the more than 115,000 subscribers to his YouTube channel.

Ends

On July 28, 2018, Mike was outdoors in the Knightsbridge district close to Harrods in London. It was time for his weekly live stream, so he turned on the camera and started filming. His subscribers joined the stream and started to message him. He mentioned that it would be a shorter session than usual because he was outside and almost out of battery, but he would still do it to not lose the continuity of his channel. As he was answering the questions he received, someone asked, “Can you talk to someone there?” He turned around and greeted a group of Arab men who were passing by. They chatted for a short while, and he returned to the live stream. It was the first time Mike had filmed something in direct response to a viewer’s request.

The person who messaged Mike with “Can you talk to someone there?” might have inspired the “Chatting with...” series, or it could have been a coincidence. In the same video, Mike mentioned that he had been carrying business cards with his YouTube channel’s name, as well as his Instagram and Snapchat handles. In the live stream, he tells the viewers how, having no access to a printer, he handwrote them quickly. This suggests that he had already thought about chatting with people on the street and had planned for this, or perhaps, his End was simply the constant work of promoting his channel.

Act Sequence

After Mike responded to the subscriber's request to strike up a conversation with a random passerby, he began repeating the same Act. The structure of the conversation he uses with all his conversations is similar in content, but it can be altered and adjusted according to the flow of the conversation. First, he initiates the interview with some questions in mind. He occasionally gets interrupted by questions, mostly at the start, as the interviewees try to understand what is happening at the same time they are asked to make a decision to participate. They are surprised by a western-looking male speaking fluent Arabic, being filmed, and being asked questions by someone they do not know. However, once they navigate past the introduction, the conversation flows easily.

The Sequence of the conversation and the set of questions that Mike asks are similar. He always opens with "as-salamu alaykum," an Arabic greeting that means "peace be upon you," followed by learning the interviewees' names and introducing himself as "Arabic Mike." He mentions his YouTube channel and states that the video he is filming will be uploaded there, asking permission to film them. Sometimes Mike uses the platform as a selling point to tempt the interviewee into being filmed, especially with younger generations, who are avid consumers of social media and must desire to be on the platform themselves.

Key

Mike's approach when speaking with strangers is to keep a friendly, playful tone (Key). The conversation is not serious, and he often jokes with interviewees during their chat. This happens after they have established an understanding of the video's nature, Mike himself, and the lightheartedness of his questions.

Instrumentalities

In addition to Arabic, Mike can speak French, Portuguese, and Mandarin. The conversation starts in Modern Standard Arabic and often shifts to include these other languages, or regional variations of Arabic, based on the interviewee's origins. This is one of Mike's strategies to keep the conversation going and make connections with the people he approaches. Since he has travelled and lived in many Arabic-speaking countries, he makes sure to mention this whenever relevant. Finding out where someone is from helps him create a faster connection when he shares that he has been to their country and describes which cities he has visited there. When Mike speaks to Saudi, Kuwaiti, Emirati, Bharani, and Omani people, he switches to a Gulf (in Arabic, Khaleeji) accent; he uses a Levantine (in Arabic, Shami) accent while talking to people from Jordan. As

for code-switching across languages, he used French when conversing with a family from Morocco.

Norms

Having lived in Arab countries, Mike is very aware of unspoken cultural norms. Mike has always been respectful in the content he shares on his channel. His opinions are balanced, fair, and mindful of other groups. When filming these conversations, the interviewees catch on quickly to the nature of the video, which is meant to entertain, and make friendly conversation in Arabic. They never interrupt Mike when he is asking questions. They always wait for their turn to be able to comment.

Mike holds a microphone in his hand so that voices can be clear on the video. This might signal them to speak, but only when the microphone is given to them do they take a turn speaking. There have been times when Mike has handed the microphone over to the interviewee to hold throughout the conversation.

The microphone assists in directing the conversation by giving organized turns. No-one interrupts when they should not, although interruption is welcomed, and jokes are always a good addition to the conversation. Mike never hesitates to allow the interviewee to ask spontaneous questions or make random comments; although he is controlling the interview to some extent, he is still performing an obvious speech act through moving the microphone and displaying an inviting body language demonstrating that this is not a structured, formal interview.

Genre

The Genre of Mike's videos are classified as educational and entertaining social media content.

Discourse Analysis and Mike's Pattern

Not all components of the S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. tool are needed every time a researcher wants to identify a speech community. What determines the components is dependent on the type of question that interests the researcher. In terms of identity, discovering who is a member of a group—and what it means to be a member of the group—it is best to focus on the components P.A.S. In other words, who are the Participants (P), and how does their Act Sequence (A) help to define their identity as a group member in a particular Setting and Scene (S)? In Mike's videos, a summary of P.A.S. might include the following information: Participants were mostly young Arab males visiting or studying in the U.K., France, or Switzerland. The Act Sequence was to always reach out to strangers with a greeting in Arabic, then start a face-to-face friendly, unscripted

conversation with a set of questions about the interviewee's background, food, culture and purpose in the city while leaving the conversation open to questions and jokes. The Setting and Scene were always outdoors in busy tourist attractions, and sometimes parks.

Social Media and Language Learning

Social Media Language Learning is an approach that focuses on connecting social media channels with language learners (FluentU, 2017). This method is facilitative since language learning is both naturally interactive and basically social. Language learning is difficult on its own and requires a lot of motivation, consistency, and hard work. Social media adds an element of interactivity to the equation, shifting the concept of learning a language from something that is hard work to something that is fun.

The Internet has enhanced language learning precisely through the use of social media. Traditional learning has turned to active learning, which means that students participate directly in their own learning by commenting and asking questions, rather than absorbing information passively. When we think of using social media for learning, we realize that the nature of classroom instruction has changed. But how does identity fit into this new equation? Identity has become an essential construct in applied linguistics. Demerath (2014) explains, "We have learned over the last 30 years or so that cultural identity has a big impact on the academic success of students." While no two people acquire the culture in the same way, for younger generations there has been an exposure to the transmission of cultures outside of school. Various kinds of media and social media—and YouTube specifically—allow students to acquire a different culture than their own through a computer screen. When teachers invest in learning more about what their students do outside of school, they will discover new cultural interests. By making connections and building bridges between their cultural identities and the material in a class, an improvement in the student's academic outcome will appear. Sometimes, however, cultural identity is not shaped by a classroom, and social media can help build those bridges.

Mike as an Arabic Teacher

It takes a lot of courage to put yourself out there on social media, and appearing on video can be scary for a language learner. Mike overcame that by not focusing on the fact that he is still learning Arabic. On the contrary, he decided to teach it as he learned it. Opening himself to the world on a universal online platform made him a better teacher.

Mike's approach to teaching Arabic and unique teaching style are what made him popular. Interestingly, when you look closely at his subscriber base, most of his fans

are native speakers of Arabic. His presentation is what makes us dedicated to following his channel. There is a non-traditional language teaching method that Mike applies. Many times, I have noticed that he uses Arabic slang, teaching words that have no direct translation/equivalent in English. It reminds me of Sanders' *Lost in Translation* (2014). It was pleasant to see the author use a word like "Gurfa" (the amount of water that can be held in one hand) as an example from the Arabic language. People like Sanders and Mike manage to gently communicate the beauty of the language by highlighting the little gems that make its literature rich and incomparable. It is certainly pride that has made me and the other 115,000 subscribers devotees of his channel. We see in him an outstanding Arabic language ambassador.

Bon Jovi Fan

Whenever Mike uploads a video, I get a notification. From behind the screen, I watch the great progress that my friend has made throughout the past five years. Sometimes I catch little mispronunciations, and sometimes I help with translations, but at all times, I see genuine interaction between him and Arab people. I used to fear watching him reach out to random strangers, thinking they might turn him down or be rude to him, but I am constantly delighted to notice that they too are happy to talk to him. They are demonstrating a positive attitude by supporting him. They never make inside jokes, and on the contrary, they respectfully correct him if there is a need. I am proud of both Mike's courage and the attitudes of all the respectful Arabs he has interviewed. When the media often fails to fairly represent us, people like Mike carry the mission of rebuilding those bridges.

My music playlist might be 95% English, but that is just a little part of who I am. It was never my goal to convert my Arab identity to a western one, but I have always recognized parts of myself in each culture. I feel that I fall equally between the two, and it would take me a lifetime to pick one over the other, as I will never do. When I think about this identity clash that I constantly go through, I realize that there is a bigger picture to it. Human beings are not meant to completely belong to one culture, nor are they expected to be split between two. A human being's identity is forever and for always an empty canvas. It is hard to paint on and permanently decide what it should be, as nothing is everlasting about a person's identity. In the living human art gallery that is our world, it is better to see an empty canvas open to any interpretation and against every categorization. It might still have a frame, but it is a borderless one. In the end, when the world demands that you carry a form of ID, it's worth always remembering that your real ID is what is found in a passport-less you. `

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