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Voices from the Arabic Classroom:

Arabic Learners' Attitudes toward Using Arabic Religious Terms

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Applied Linguistics

by

Kinda Al Rifae

2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Voices from the Arabic Classroom:

Arabic Learners' Attitudes toward Using Arabic Religious Terms

by

Kinda Al Rifae

Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Linguistics

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Susan J. Plann, Chair

The motivating idea behind this research is the close and dynamic relationship between language, culture, and social identity. In this dissertation, I discuss this relationship in terms of Arabic language learners and focus, in particular, on a unique feature of Arabic—the God-expressions or Allah Lexicon—religious formulae spoken by religious and non-religious people alike in their everyday conversations. These formulae serve myriad communicative functions and are prevalent throughout the Arab world. However, they are also socially and culturally “loaded,” that is, their meanings cannot be derived from the component words themselves but must be deduced from the context in which they are used. As such, there are no “perfect” equivalents to most of these formulae in other languages, and Arabic learners may have difficulty in understanding and/or producing them.

Scholarly research has demonstrated that language learning involves the process of acquiring a new identity. For some students, particularly heritage learners, the Allah Lexicon is

not problematic to this process because they likely feel a personal, familial, ethnic and/or religious resonance when learning and using the phrases. However, I argue that for foreign language learners, the identity acquisition process can be challenging, complex, and difficult: first, because Arabic is distinctively different linguistically and culturally from English; and secondly, because the phrases of the Lexicon strongly evoke a Muslim identity—one that may drastically differ from, or even contradict, the learner’s own conceptions and beliefs. Thus this dissertation explores the ways in which Arabic learners “digest” these Arabic religious expressions. How do they understand these phrases? To what extent are they aware of their social and cultural connotations? Do learners choose to use these phrases or refuse to use them because the terms evoke discomfort? How do learners feel about using phrases that evoke a Muslim identity in the current anti-Islamic climate?

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the individual learner and his/her identity shifts and struggles when learning and using Arabic and the God-expressions. Using interviews as a data collection technique, I investigate the questions I have posed and probe learners’ attitudes towards the language and its native speakers, in general, and towards this cultural aspect of Arabic, in particular. Although the main goal of this research is to better understand Arabic learners and know how they receive and perceive what is taught to them, the broader goal is to expose persistent, cultural stereotypes and bridge the gap between English- and Arabic-speaking people.

The dissertation of Kinda Al Rifae is approved.

Michael Cooperson

Olga Kagan

Olga Yokoyama

Susan J. Plann, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

DEDICATION

To my parents, family, and Arabic students

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

That language and culture are powerfully connected is well understood in the field of Applied Linguistics. As Brown (1994) noted, “A language is part of a culture and a culture is part of a language: the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture” (p.165). However, the importance of this connection to second language (L2) teaching, especially the intersection between language, culture, and identity, is often neglected by teachers who are preoccupied with teaching students the language system. This discrepancy was brought home to me in my own United States (U.S.) college classrooms where I teach Arabic. My students come from a variety of linguistic, cultural, and religious environments. Some have an ethno-cultural relationship with Arabic, either being from Arab families or being non-Arab Muslims. These students may want to gain sufficient literacy to read the Quran, to better practice their religion, and/or to connect to extended family in their home countries. Other students have no knowledge of Arabic and are learning it for the first time; they may want to travel or to be able to access Arabic texts for their degree, or to find a job in the military, the FBI, or the CIA for national security. Whatever the case, the student population is always diverse in language skills, motivation, and cultural background. Their differences inspire not only many lively class discussions, particularly about Arab culture, i.e., food, dress, holidays, religious practices, social habits, and beliefs, but also mixed emotions. I have witnessed students smiling, laughing, nodding, frowning, and indicating astonishment and bemusement. As an applied linguistics researcher interested in pragmatics, i.e., linking specific instances of language usage to broader social and cultural contexts, I became interested in my

students' linguistic responses and gestures. I interpreted them as reflections not only of their attitudes towards new cultural information, but also of (1) changes in the ways they viewed the target language and its speakers; and (2) how they viewed themselves and their own cultures. Moreover, my Muslim background and the varying religious and cultural backgrounds of my students drew my attention to the “identity work” taking place in my classrooms. The origins of this dissertation began with questions regarding what students thought and felt about acculturating to Arabic culture in the course of learning to speak its language.

Of particular interest to me in this context was a micro-linguistic, Arabic phenomenon that is connected to issues of stereotyping, racism, identity, and education: namely, a set of Arabic religious, formulaic phrases, such as *al-salāmu ‘alaykum* (Peace be upon you), “*al-ḥamdulillah*” (Thank God), *inshallāh* (God willing), and *Allāhu akbar* (God is the Greatest), that are also known as the “God-expressions” or the “Allah Lexicon” (Morrow, 2006). Arabic speakers use these phrases in their everyday conversations to fulfill a variety of communicative functions beyond that of imparting religious content. For example, the God-expressions are a linguistic code that enable Arab speakers to express politeness. Therefore, these phrases are socially and culturally loaded with meanings that cannot be derived from the component words themselves, but must be deduced from the context in which they are used. The myriad functions and frequent use of the God-expressions, spoken by religious and non-religious people alike, make them a unique feature of Arabic, and they may be potentially difficult for Arabic learners to understand because there are no “perfect” equivalents to them in other languages. In my research for this dissertation, the Allah Lexicon has enabled me to use a small glossary of set phrases as a means of focusing on the broad, complex issue of identity. Thus the intent of my study is to better understand how Arabic learners, given their different religious and cultural

backgrounds, handle the Allah Lexicon, to pinpoint similarities and differences in learners' attitudes towards using these terms, and to discuss the implications for the Arabic classroom from a teaching perspective.

Although there has been significant interest in teaching and learning Arabic after the events of 9/11 (e.g., Furman, et al, 2010; Allen, 2007; Taha, 2007; Al-Batal & Belnap, 2006), that interest has yet to be matched by a scholarly investigation into the process by which Arabic language learners in the U.S. acquire Arabic pragmatics. As I noted above, this process requires an examination of identity, specifically how learners cross the borders of "Self" in order to become speakers of the language of the "Other," who in this case is the "native speaker" (Kramsch, 2009). This Other may be sought out due to the learner's desire for linguistic proficiency, or because the learner finds the Other's difference "cool," or even because the Other is a possible enemy. At the same time, however, the Other might be subconsciously resisted due to previously held stereotypes. As the language learning experience unfolds, learners become more acquainted with that Other, and their initial assumptions about him/her may change. Kramsch (2009) argues that learners experience a "third culture" or "third place," which is "a symbolic place that is by no means unitary, stable, permanent and homogenous" (p. 238). This place is reached when the cultural identity of the first language (L1) intersects with that of the second language (L2), with a resulting third cultural identity that has varying resemblances to, and differences from, those of L1 and L2. In my opinion, this process of cultural identity formation and the relationship between language use and identity as an aspect of second-language learning are as significant and worthy of investigation as the acquisition of an L2 vocabulary, syntax, and grammar.

1.1 Research questions

My research focuses on (1) learners' beliefs and conceptions about Arabic and Arab culture prior to or at the onset of the learning process; (2) the changes, if any, that happen to those beliefs as the teaching/learning process unfolds; (3) the ways in which learners' beliefs and attitudes become evident in classroom discourse; and (4) the dynamic of having Arabic students, who have different degrees of affinity or ethnocultural ties towards the language, together in the same classroom with those who have a different ethnic and religious background. More specifically, this research will ask the following questions:

1. What are students' attitudes toward the Arab culture and the native speakers of the language prior to and after studying Arabic? Does the students' Arabic learning experience lead to increased or decreased use of the God-expressions?
2. How do Arabic learners feel about using terms that represent a Muslim identity? What are some of the potential barriers to using the terms? Do learners struggle to reconcile their Western identities with what they are being taught in the classroom about Arab and Muslim culture? Does the current anti-Islamic environment impact American students' attitudes and motivations to use these expressions?
3. How do learners, given their different cultural backgrounds, look at learning Arabic together in the same classroom? Do these students view benefits or disadvantages from being together? What effect does it have on shaping their cultural identities?

1.2 Research significance and purpose

Language educators, who work to get their ideas across to learners, may forget, neglect, or have no access to the learners' perceptions about *what* is being taught. Thus learners' attitudes and ideologies, which may affect absorption of this knowledge, remains largely beyond their reach.

In second language acquisition research, scholars are preoccupied with the cognitive aspects of learning. They discuss input, output, and the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) as if learners were machines that can be fed information. Unfortunately, researchers are not always concerned that learners come to the classroom with their own histories, ideologies, conceptions, attitudes, and beliefs already formed. According to Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), second language learning is “a struggle of concrete socially constituted and always situated beings to participate in the symbolically mediated lifeworld of another culture” (p. 155). As I noted earlier, only a few studies deal with learners’ identities in relation to Arabic, a language that is linguistically and culturally very different from English. Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is threefold: (1) to demonstrate how students interact with the cultural aspects of the target language and how those aspects construct and shape their identities and worldviews; (2) to show the role that learners’ subjective experiences play in their sociocultural competency, i.e., their ability to “express messages appropriately within the overall social and cultural context of communication” (Celce-Murcia, 2008, p. 46); and (3) to sensitize language teachers to learners’ differences, especially those of a cultural nature. In addition, this research exposes and describes possible cases of resistance based on stereotypical judgments about a language and culture and, in doing so, will hopefully lead to “social critique and transformation” (Pennycook, 2001, p. 6) that will enable the crossing of cultural divides. This study contributes to social theory, theories of communicative competence, critical applied linguistics research, and language pedagogy. It is also my hope that this research will inspire and inform language learners, Arabic educators, and students in study-abroad programs.

CHAPTER 2

LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

2.1 The Phenomenon of God-expressions in Arabic

As I noted in Chapter 1, Arabic religious terms—the God-expressions or the “Allah Lexicon”—are formulaic religious phrases that are explicit, i.e., they invoke the name of Allah, or implicit, i.e., they evoke the name of *Allah* in the minds of speakers or listeners. Although the word *Allah* was used before Islam was born (Peters, 1994), the arrival of the Islamic religion paved the way for expansion of what the word meant to believers and resulted in a higher frequency of use (Morrow, 2006). *Allah* is the third most frequently used word in the Quran and in the Arabic language if prepositions, conjunctions, proper nouns, and the verb “to be” *kāna* (was) are discounted (Morrow, 2006). The prevalence of this word is indicated by how many expressions contain it. According to Morrow and Castleton (2007), *Allah* is Arabic’s “most common content word” (p. 205). Quranic teachings are the reason that Arabic today includes hundreds of God-expressions. Many verses in the Quran and *aḥādīth* (authenticated reports of the Prophet Muhammad's sayings and actions used as a source of law) dictate or urge Muslims to frequently use the word “God.” Fishman calls Arabic “a holy language” (Castleton, 2006) because many of its phrases come from the Quran. As Ferguson (1985) has noted, it is through religious discourse that “the people praise God, they hear the messages of their faith, they make requests of God, they feel repentance and are reassured, [and] they feel the Spirit at work” (p. 21). In this way, native speakers of the Arabic language, by using the Allah Lexicon, “have naturally integrated the divine influence of God-expressions into their daily lives in a seamless manner” (Morrow, 2006, p. 203). Thus phrases that are reminders of Allah’s power and characteristics not only appear in conversation multiple times each day in many different communicative situations, but

also may be seen in people's homes as written on eating utensils, wall hangings, baby blankets, and jewelry. The two phrases *lā ilāha illa Allah* (No God but God) and *Muḥammad rasūlu Allah* (Muhammad is the messenger of God) are found on many different flags throughout the Islamic world, including the official state flag of Saudi Arabia.

From birth, all Arab Muslim children and many non-Arab Muslim children are exposed to the God-expressions. For example, an Islamic custom is to have an elderly man, either a sheikh or practicing Muslim, whisper the *tabkīr* (“*Allāhu akbar*”) and *shahāda* (“*lā ilāha illā Allāh*”) into a newborn's ears so that the first words he/she hears are the mention of God. As children grow, they see members of their family praying and reciting the Quran, and they may even accompany their parents to the mosque at the young ages of three or four. Before being able to fully verbalize their language, small children imitate adults by bowing and bending, pretend-praying, and saying *Allahu akbar* in baby-talk. Once the children become fully verbal, they will be required to say some of the God-expressions, not only because the parents want to see their children learning about Islam, but also because many of the terms are politeness formulae essential to societal integration. Davis (1987) argues that, in any given speech community, even very small children are typically expected to use everyday expressions of politeness. For instance, children are supposed to say *bismillāh* (in the name of God) before beginning a meal and *al-ḥamdulillāh* (Thank God) upon finishing it. Davis (1987) contrasts the expectations of British parents that children as young as three years old should correctly use the terms “please” and “thank you” with those of Moroccan parents who place more emphasis on teaching their children religious phrases than on the expressions related to “please” and “thank you” (p. 86).

Since the rise of Islam, Arabic speakers have been using God-expressions in contexts that differ from the ones mentioned in the Quran, and thus the expressions have gained new layers of

meaning. In some cases, they have completely different meanings from the original ones.

Inshallāh, which literally means “God willing” and functionally means “hopefully,” is a good example. In the Quran, *sūrat al-Kahf* (al-Kahf verse), God instructs Muslims to believe in His will and thus, when speaking, to introduce future actions and intentions with *inshallāh*. The verse’s translation (by Wahiduddin Khan) reads, “And never say of anything, ‘I shall certainly do this tomorrow,’ without [adding], ‘if God so wills.’” While this meaning, which serves as a token of subservience to God’s intent, is still the primary one, *inshallāh* has different meanings in different dialects of Arabic. For example, in Syrian Arabic, *inshallāh* can also mean, “Don’t tell me that . . . you failed/didn’t finish the work/etc.” In Egyptian Arabic, based on intonation, it can mean, “I don’t care if . . . you failed/didn’t finish the work/etc.” In Jordanian Arabic, it operates as a directive, a marker of a tag question, a mitigator, an expressive, and an apology (Fargal, 1995).

Ferguson (1983) calls such uses “metaphorical extensions” and believes that they may be even more frequently applied than the originals. He notes that “[m]etaphorical uses of this kind are sometimes created by individual speakers, but often they have also become conventionalized” (p. 70) and provides an interesting example. In Colloquial Arabic (Levantine), the language people use in their everyday activities, *Alla ya ‘īk l’āfyah!* (May God give you activity) is most frequently used as a salutation to someone who is doing fairly heavy work, e.g., physical labor such as working in a garden or mental effort such as studying for an exam. The utterance can be interpreted as praise or encouragement for the worker; however, if the work has been done for the speaker, the utterance is understood as a thank you. A Syrian wife, for instance, may use the formula to greet her husband when he comes home from work; in return, he may say it to her when he sees something she has made during the day. Contrary to this usage,

however, the same utterance may also be used if a speaker wants to suggest that the addressee has done something that is wrong, not required, or has had adverse consequences for the speaker. In this sense, *Alla ya 'ṭik l'āfyah!* could be taken as *Alla lā ya 'ṭik l'āfyah!!* (May God NOT give you activity). Similarly, *Alla yishfīk!* (literally, May God heal you; functionally, “Get better soon!”) may be taken as *Alla yishfīk min jnūnak!* (May God heal you from your craziness and foolishness, functionally, “God help you!”).

The rich variety of meanings of the God-expressions in Colloquial Arabic is closely linked to local culture and contributes to their frequency of use. This phenomenon also exists in Modern Standard Arabic although it has fewer metaphorical extensions because it is more formal than Colloquial Arabic and more resistant to change. Also, the majority of the phrases have the same or similar wording in both types of Arabic, but they differ slightly in terms of pronunciation, depending on the dialect being used.

God-expressions, as the most frequent and distinctive types of “politeness formulas” (Ferguson, 1976), include the “fixed expressions conventionally used in many societies for such purposes as greeting, taking leave, thanking, apologizing, congratulating, and expressing various kinds of wish” (Davis, 1987, p. 75). Ferguson (1997) uses the phrase, “God-wishes,” to refer to some of these terms, emphasizing their role as politeness markers in Arab societies. These God-wishes include requests, compliments, condolences, and apologies, among others. In the case of requests, *Allah ykhalīk* (May God keep you [safe]) is said to mitigate the “face-threatening act” of requesting—an act that could be imposing something on the listener that he or she does not want (Brown and Levinson, 1978). As Harrell, Abu-Talib, and Carroll (2003) explain, “it is an important cultural pattern that compliments or words of praise should be accompanied by a deferential reference to God. Without the reference to God, such statements appear crude, and in

older, more traditional social circles, they are taken as bad omens which bring misfortune” (p. 352).

Despite the many references to God in Arabic politeness expressions, these phrases are used (1) with a high frequency in both important and trivial matters, i.e., ranging from a casual greeting to bargaining to talking about death; and (2) in a wide diversity of locations, i.e., in the market place, at home, at mealtime, in songs, or at the mosque. As a result, many of the terms have been “bleached” of their religious connotations. Accordingly, believers and nonbelievers alike now use these phrases. In their study about *inshallāh* (God willing), Cleft and Helani (2010) note that “the widespread use of religious expressions in ordinary Arabic conversations, irrespective of the religious affiliation of the speaker has long been noted” (p. 385). Piamenta (1979) says that “The formulae, specifically wishes, congratulations, farewell expressions, condolence, etc., were originally non-literal, personal invocations, *dua*, for help, protection, and approval . . . Eventually, the *dua* formulae took their normal course in everyday spoken Arabic becoming idiomatic and stereotyped, and losing their extemporized nature ad hoc” (pp.1–2). The phrase, *al-salāmu ‘alaykum* (Peace be upon you) is another example of “bleaching.” Although this phrase is called “Islam’s greeting” and is used frequently in Egypt and the Gulf region as the most common greeting form, speakers of this term may be practicing Muslims, non-religious Muslims, or non-Muslims. However, as Piamenta (1979) points out about phrases like *al-salāmu ‘alaykum*, “Though common in Arabic spoken by all creeds, the formulae have not lost their Islamic essence” (p. 2). In other words, the literal meaning or semantic content of the phrases carries the religious connotation while the functional or pragmatic meaning carries the illocutionary force—a linguistic disjunction that teachers and students of Arabic must handle on a regular basis.

This research focuses specifically on five phrases that are the most common formulae that students are likely to encounter in their Arabic studies or hear if they interact with native Arabic speakers. As well, these terms are repeatedly mentioned in the media as being iconic of Arabs in general and Muslims in particular. In the list below, each phrase is in the Syrian dialect as per Ferguson (1985) and translated in both its literal and functional meanings:

1. *Al-salāmu ‘alaykum* (Peace be upon you): the primary form of greeting in the Arab Gulf region and used at the end of the Islamic prayer. While the term is also widely used in other Arab countries such as Egypt and Syria, other forms of greeting are also spoken, depending on religious or personal preference. This phrase also has shorter versions such as *salām* (peace) and *salamāt* (plural of peace), functionally used to say “hi” or “greetings,” respectively. These functional versions are less formal and less religious than the longer version.
2. *Al-ḥamdulillāh* (Praise be to God): the response to “How are you?” that is usually taken to mean “I am fine.” However, it is also used when a person is not feeling or doing well because a Muslim thanks God in both good and bad times. Thus the literal phrase is used to congratulate someone, e.g., *ilḥimdillāh ‘ala ssalāmeḥ* (Thank God you’re safe/healthy), which can be said to a returned traveler or a woman who has safely given birth. In addition, it can also express the speaker’s relief that something happened or did not happen, e.g., *ilḥimdillāh, najaḥt bilimtiḥān* (Thank God, I passed the exam). Functionally, the expression can be interpreted as “fortunately,” and it can be used as a modesty tool. It minimizes self-praise in the sense that the speaker implies it is God, and not he/she who has succeeded, e.g., as in *ilḥimdillāh ‘milt kil hād bi ‘usbū ‘ waḥid* (Thank God, I did all this in one week).

3. *Inshallāh* (God willing): an indication of intent, e.g., *rah rūḥ bukraḥ, inshallāh* (I will go tomorrow, God willing). Functionally, this expression means that “hopefully” something might happen, e.g., *Inshallāh rah tshatti bukraḥ* (God willing, it will rain tomorrow). The expression can also be used to politely imply a lack of intention, depending on its delivery. For instance, if *rah rūḥ bukraḥ* (I'll go), *inshallāh* is said with a weak intonation and no eye contact, the phrase may mean the speaker does not intend to go at all. Rather, it is being used as a potential excuse because in the event that the speaker does not go, he/she can avoid responsibility and attribute the lack of action to “God’s will.” *Inshallāh* can also be used to mean, “Don’t tell me that . . .!” as in *inshallāh ma khallaṣt* (Don't tell me you haven't finished yet!).
4. *Mashallāh* (What God wishes): a way to hedge compliments. Literally, the speaker invokes the protection of God to ensure that a quality of the recipient, e.g., beauty, goodness, or strength, will remain. This usage of *mashallāh* is similar to the common English expression, “Knock on wood.” Functionally, it shows that the speaker is not envious, e.g., *mashallāh ḥilwa ktīr* (What God wishes, she is very beautiful); however, it might also express sarcasm: “She is very ugly.” The speaker’s tone of voice, in addition to other contextual cues, reveals the intended meaning.
5. *Allāhu akbar* (God is greatest): a statement often used in Islamic prayer. Functionally, a speaker says it either to express pride in achieving an important goal or to express sarcasm, i.e., what he/she did was not important. Also, the phrase can be said to comfort a person who feels sad for being mistreated; in this case, it is a reminder that God is greater than the abuser and will take revenge on his/her behalf.

2.2 Cultural Specificity of the Arabic Language

Religious and politeness formulae exist across all cultures; however, their content and usage are culture-specific. Religious discourse functions as a carrier of people's beliefs and conceptions, and although several modern religions share general concepts of God, Heaven, and Hell, their linguistic representations are not necessarily the same. Religious expressions are an integral part of the cultural system of a speech community, and are encoded and categorized differently in different languages. Similarly, politeness discourses across cultures share a common purpose. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), interlocutors attend to each other's "positive face," i.e., "the positive and consistent image people have of themselves, and their desire for approval," and "negative face," i.e., "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, and rights to non-distraction," in their interactions (p. 61) in order to preserve harmony by showing good intentions and consideration for the feelings of others. As Lakoff (1990) writes: "Politeness is a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interaction" (p. 34). However, the linguistic representation, or vehicle, for achieving politeness differs from one society to another, and depends on a variety of social and cultural factors. Moreover, many cross-cultural studies have shown that what constitutes "face wants" can vary across cultures, as can the way to address those wants (Meier, 1997; Matsumoto, 1989).

Arabic religious formulas are culturally loaded, and their English translations are seldom equivalent. Thus the translations give rise to meanings and associations that can be very different than the originals. The examples in Table 1 show how Arabic and English differ significantly in the social and cultural meanings associated with (1) the acts of greetings; (2) compliments/greetings; (3) condolences; (4) congratulation; and (5) astonishment.

Table 1. *Five Common Arabic Religious Phrases and their English Translations*

Arabic phrase	Translation	English usage equivalent
1. <i>Al-salāmu ‘alaykum!</i>	Peace be upon you!	Hello/Good morning!
2. <i>Alla ya ‘tik il ‘afyah!</i>	May God give you activity!	Stay well/Have a nice day!
3. <i>Wahhid Allāh!</i>	Say no god but God!	Take it easy!
4. <i>Inshallāh alf mabrūk!</i>	God willing, one thousand blessings!	Congratulations!
5. <i>Allāhu akbar!</i>	God is greatest!	Oh my God!/This is great!

Even if linguistic similarities exist to express politeness in both languages, the implied force of the resulting utterances may not be in any way similar. Coulmas (1981) noticed that “many routines, especially politeness routines, defy interpretation on the basis of word meanings alone and without knowledge of cultural habits, customs, attitudes etc.” (p. 8). In other words, although a religious phrase may translate well in a directly comparative way, and its pragmatic function might be transparent in a literal translation, some cultural implications may still be absent for those not familiar with the requisite cultural context. *Inshallāh* (God willing, or hopefully) is a good example. The translation, “God willing,” gives the pragmatic meaning although not completely, and the functional translation, “hopefully,” has no religious connotations. However, the other meanings that *inshallāh* has in Arabic have no English equivalents or metaphorical extensions that retain the religious or cultural aspects of the phrase.

The formulae in Table 1 require particular and specific responses, and those responses also differ in Arabic and English. For example, “hello” in English requires a corresponding answer, which may be as simple as an echoed “hello,” a different greeting formula such as “hi, how nice to see you,” or a less conventional expression such as “hey, where have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you” (Davis, 1987, p. 86). In contrast, the Arabic greeting *al-salāmu*

‘alaykum (peace be upon you) usually requires a precise politeness formula as a response—*wa-‘alaykum as-salām* (and peace be upon you)— before the conversation can continue. Davis (1987) notes that there are a “variety of levels at which formulas in two languages may contrast, and the ways in which a superficial similarity between two formulas may obscure quite complex differences” (p.87).

Ferguson (1985) points out that, in American English, responses to questions about one’s health or well-being generally impart information about good health, e.g., “I feel fine” or “OK” (“I’m OK). The respondent usually also thanks the questioner for asking about his health: “Just fine, thanks,” or “OK, thank you.” In contrast, Syrian Arabic responses have greater variation. They are comprised of (1) expressions of good health, i.e., *tamām* (perfect) and *mabsūt* (happy); (2) God-expressions, i.e., *al-ḥamdulillāh* (thank God) and *nishkur Allah* (we thank God); and (3) a God-wish directed to the original speaker, i.e., *Allah ykhalīk* (God keep you). Notably, thanks in Arabic are addressed to God rather than the questioners (p. 76).

A difference in usage also exists between God-expressions in English and Arabic. Harrel, Abu-Talib, and Carroll (2003) observe that “in English the word ‘God’ is usually restricted to either oaths, both profane and serious, or to formally serious situations,” whereas Arabic “employs references to God, and to religion in general, in a wide variety of everyday situations” (p. 331). Despite the fact that other religious communities in the U.S. may have their own recurrent use of God-expressions, Arabic God-expressions seem to be unique because of their high-frequency use in Arab populations and the multiple functions they perform in the speech of both believers and non-believers.

2.3 Language-specific Stereotypes

Unfortunately, some of the commonly used God-expressions in Arabic have become associated with terrorism. Many Westerners have a negative image of Islam, partly because of the way the Muslim religion has been corrupted by the actions of some extremists and terrorists. Upon the execution of their crimes, terrorists use particular God-expressions based on the belief that their actions bring them closer to God. While the phrases themselves could be used by Muslims who are either proponents or opponents of the West, the phrases have become symbolic of people that the Western media refers to as “Islamic terrorists.” For example, the phrase *Allāhu akbar* is probably the primary expression that is associated with terrorism. In September 2013, John McCain, senior United States senator from Arizona, told Fox News that *Allāhu akbar* is the same as the Christian phrase, “Thank God,” to point out that the Syrian Free Army was not comprised of Muslim extremists; rather, the soldiers in this military force were moderates whom the U.S. should be arming and assisting in the war against terrorism (Spencer, 2013). In response, many critical and anti-Muslim comments were posted online. Those commenting identified the following usage of *Allāhu akbar*: (1) the September 11, 2001 terrorists said it before flying jetliners into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania en route to Washington D.C; (2) Nidal Hasan said it on November 5, 2009 before he slaughtered American soldiers at Fort Hood; (3) the mother of the terrorist Tsarnaev brothers said it after the Boston Marathon bombings on April 15, 2013; and (4) extremists spray-painted it on the side of the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi on September 11, 2012 (McMurry, 2013; Schachtel, 2014). The numerous criticisms of McCain’s statement suggest that this phrase is an icon of terrorism for many Western people. Another example of an Arabic God-expression associated with terrorism is *lā ilāha illā Allāh* (There is no god but God). This phrase is part of the *shahada* or declaration

of faith in Islam. It is written in the white lettering at the top of the ISIS¹ (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) flag and is used extensively in the ISIS videos featuring the beheadings of their foreign hostages. Unfortunately, the use and appropriation of these terms by terrorists distorts their meaning, negatively affects Western views of Islam, and promotes harmful stereotyping of Muslims.

The story of Egypt Air Flight 990, which crashed into the Atlantic Ocean in 1990, is a good illustration of negative stereotyping. The 217 victims were mostly Egyptians and Americans, and among the Egyptian victims were 35 high-ranking military officers who had completed their training in the U.S. and were returning home to Egypt. Investigations of the accident, led by the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board, concluded that the co-pilot had intentionally caused the plane to crash based on his repetition of *tawakkaltu 'alā Allāh* (I rely on Allah, meaning “I put my trust in Allah” in solving this problem) shortly before the crash (Castleton, 2006). Some investigators interpreted the co-pilot’s words as meaning that he wanted to end his life, but to Arabic native speakers, this key utterance meant that the co-pilot was trying to save, not crash, the airplane. This latter theory was further substantiated by the fact that the co-pilot was not religious and lived a mostly Western lifestyle.

Many Westerners have stereotypical images of Arabs or Muslims as fundamentalists who are close-minded and backward because of their belief in Islam (see Lyons, 2014; Poole, 2002; Poole & Richardson, 2010). For example, the attack on the French weekly satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, which published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, was seen as Muslims rejecting freedom of speech and the press. Recent terrorist attacks such as those in Orlando, Paris, Brussels, and Germany have fueled more antagonism, stereotypes, and hatred towards

¹ The Obama administration in 2015 opted to call the group ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), thereby indicating a larger area affected by the groups’ activists.

Muslims. Indeed, the 2017 travel ban proposed by U.S. President Donald Trump on people who wish to enter the U.S. from seven majority-Muslim countries can be seen as a repercussion of this animosity. Although the Western media does play a role in propagating negative images, ignorance about Islam, as a religion, is also a factor in the harmful stereotyping of Muslims. Those students of Arabic who are subject to the influence of the media and images of terrorism associated with Islam may develop a negative impression about their target-language speech community. Additionally, those students who are agnostic or atheistic are often proud of being non-religious, and they may be negatively affected by the Allah Lexicon. This research is about probing their attitudes and feelings towards using these phrases.

In conclusion, the following points outline implications of the God-expressions on the learning and teaching of Arabic and Arabic religious terms:

1. One cannot effectively and legitimately teach Arabic without including Islamic expressions, not only due to the high frequency of their use in the language but also because God-expressions are an integral part of the politeness system in Arabic, and politeness plays a large part in cultural competence and successful language acquisition. Developing students' abilities to interact with those who are linguistically and culturally different necessitates teaching them the social amenities that smooth out interpersonal cross-cultural interaction and open the doors of acceptance. In this sense, the importance of this phenomenon is beyond doubt.
2. The terms can be difficult for Arabic learners to understand or acquire—even native speakers of Arabic find them difficult to explain or translate into English—a problem that is religious and cultural as much as linguistic. One reason that makes religious formulae incomprehensible and hard to learn is that the expressions are primarily of religious

origin and require an understanding of Islam, the Quran, and the Sunnah (Morrow, 2006).

3. Learning about Arabic religious formulae is part of the language socialization process. It enables students to learn about Arab culture, and just as children master language and social skills together, so should Arabic students be sensitized to the social uses of language in their early learning practices. As Holmes (1978) argued long before 9/11, the foreign classroom must be “a socializing context” whereby novices are socialized through language, and part of such socialization is learning to use language meaningfully, appropriately, and effectively.
4. Using God-expressions necessarily means displaying a Muslim identity, which may be accepted by some learners but possibly resisted by others, depending on the reasons behind why the students wish to learn Arabic.

2.4 Classroom Culture: Arabic Teaching and Learning in the United States

2.4.1 Arabic as a Critical-need Language

Reasons for teaching Arabic in the U.S. have shifted over time, reflecting changing academic, social, geographical, and national factors. According to McCarus (1992), Arabic was first taught in the U.S. during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for mainly “theological” and “philological” purposes, i.e., to help people understand Hebrew and the Old Testament (p.207). He also notes that a second shift occurred during World War II, which created a nationalistic incentive for teaching and learning Arabic; however, the country was unprepared for contact with the Middle East and lacked professional Arabic instructors (p. 208). Finally, the tragedy of 9/11² sharply increased interest in learning Arabic not only among the general public, but also by

² So great was the demand for Arabic educators that 9/11 has been referred to as “the Sputnik moment” for Arabic (Al-Batal, 2007).

the U.S. government, which funded the teaching of Arabic and other “critical” languages such as Russian, Persian, Hindi, and Chinese (Al-Batal 2007; Al-Batal & Benalp 2006). Allen (2007) suggests that “since that day the status of Arabic in the national consciousness has been transformed almost overnight to become the number-one desideratum of the American government and its various agencies” (p. 285).

The number of advertisements for translators and interpreters by different U.S. agencies and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), especially those involved in national security, skyrocketed (Taha, 2007). In January 2006, President George W. Bush introduced the National Security Language Initiative, which was aimed at increasing the number of American students learning foreign languages, particularly those deemed critical-need (Taha, 2007). Students were also much more interested in the study of Arabic after 9/11 (Al-Batal & Benalp 2006). The Modern Language Association of America (MLA) report of 2013 shows that enrollment in Arabic classes at U.S. universities nearly doubled between 1998 and 2002 from 5,505 to 10,584; by 2006, the number had jumped to 23,987; and in 2013 it had increased to 32,286 (Goldberg, Looney & Lusin, 2015). In the U.S., Arabic is currently the eighth most-studied foreign language (Stone, 2014).

Although national and security reasons remain significant factors for Arabic learners hoping to get governmental jobs, many Americans learn Arabic for other purposes. It is one of the top five languages of the world with regard to native speakers and one of the six official working languages of the United Nations (Al-Batal & Benalp 2006). Taha (2007) notes that Arabic is a necessary language for those in international business and foreign diplomacy while Dahbi (2004) describes Arabic as a global phenomenon, not limited to the Middle East.

2.4.2 Arabic as a Heritage and Non-heritage Language

Students of Arabic usually fit into one of two groups in terms of ethnic background: (1) Arabic heritage language learners (HLLs) who have an “ethnocultural attachment” to the language, i.e., learners of Arab descent and non-Arab Muslims; and (2) Arabic foreign language learners (FLLs) who have no “ethnocultural affinity” to Arabic, i.e., learners with no ethnic or cultural ties to the Arabic language.

HLLs have various degrees of proficiency in the heritage language, from knowing only some words and phrases to having a full command of the colloquial variety of Arabic. Thus, this study adopts Polinsky and Kagan’s (2007) broad definition of a heritage language as being “part of the person’s family or cultural heritage” (p. 369) and Valdes’s (1999) criteria of who qualifies as a heritage learner: “[I]t is the historical and personal connection to the language that is salient and not the actual proficiency of the individual speaker” (p. 38). Although some HLLs in this study consider themselves as having both English and Arabic as their native languages, their proficiency level is not equal to that of native speakers of Arabic, due to the limiting effects of growing up in English-speaking or other non-Arabic-speaking countries. While the HLLs may speak their parents’ particular Arabic dialect, most native speakers also have considerable exposure to Modern Standard Arabic, acquired formally through schooling as well as informally through its ubiquity in print media and television throughout the Arabic-speaking world.

Arabic HLLs are usually grouped together in academic studies because they have cultural, historical, and/or religious ties to Arabic. Although these students generally have different levels of proficiency in Arabic, they are familiar with Islamic expressions and may already be using them on a regular basis. However, for the purposes of this research, HLLs are limited to those learners of Arab descent only. These learners have been exposed to Arabic in

their families but are dominant in English because they live in an English-speaking country and/or because the family no longer speaks Arabic. Although non-Arab Muslim learners also have cultural ties with Arabic through their religion (Islam) and demonstrate more similarities than differences to HLLs than FLLs in their attitudes and knowledge of Arab culture, this study handles them as follows: first it separates them into their own category—semi-heritage language learners (S-HLLs); and secondly it lists them with the FLLs; and third, it aligns them with either the FLLs or HLLs depending on their inclination. This organization reflects the fact that the three non-Arab Muslim students interviewed for this research do not self-identify as Arabic HLLs, and they provided two reasons for this. The first is that they are proud of their heritage and do not like to be grouped with Arabs or mistaken for being Arab. Moreover, they consider themselves HLLs of the language that their parents speak, i.e., Urdu, Indonesian, and Persian. The second reason they do not align themselves with Arabic HLLs is that their level of language proficiency is lower than that of students of Arab descent, and they feel a greater association with the FLLs in the classroom. In other words, although this study focuses on Islamic expressions with which non-Arab Muslim students are familiar and tackles the Islamic component of the culture with which they identify, it categorizes students the way they see themselves as opposed to the way they have been classified in the literature.

The third group, the FLLs, is heterogeneous and includes students with no ethnic or cultural ties to Arabic and no inherent affinity for the language. FLLs are students who are exposed to Arabic mainly in the classroom and who speak another language outside the classroom. In the context of this study, FLLs speak primarily English as their native language although, for some, English may be a second language. Some FLLs may have learned or practiced Arabic for a limited period of time through travel and/or study-abroad programs in

Arabic-speaking countries.

2.4.3 Motivation for Learning Arabic

Students' motivation to learn Arabic may have either a direct or an indirect relationship to their willingness to acculturate and adopt the new language with all of its cultural aspects, including religion. Research that has addressed students' motivation for learning Arabic at the college level in the U.S. has revealed different reasons why students seek to learn Arabic. As Huseinlei (2006) argues, "Arabic learners' orientations for studying Arabic can fall on a continuum rather than being characterized as either instrumental or integrative" (p. 406). Notably, the studies' locations and whether they were performed before or after 9/11 seems to influence the findings.

Regardless of timing, however, one important outcome of this research is that the motivations of FLLs are clearly and significantly different from those of HLLs.

Learning about Arabic culture has been a goal for FLLs since before 9/11. Belnap (1987) surveyed 568 learners of Arabic as a foreign language in the U.S. and Canada, only 9 percent of whom were of Arab descent. In this study, the ranking of reasons for learning Arabic was the desire (1) to understand Arabic literature and culture; (2) to travel or live in an Arab country in the future; and (3) to communicate with Arab people. A small percentage (19.9 percent) of the respondents thought that learning Arabic might help them in their careers. Finally, an even smaller percentage (14.4 percent) wanted to learn Arabic for heritage reasons. In 2001, Kuntz and Belnap surveyed 71 students of Arabic at two study-abroad programs to investigate student beliefs about learning Arabic. They found that a large majority (80 percent) of learners believed in the significance of interaction and oral communication, i.e., they were learning Arabic in order to travel to Arab countries and be able to interact with Arabic native speakers. Nearly half of the respondents (47 percent) believed that Arabic would help them get a good job, and only 12

percent were studying Arabic to fulfill degree requirements. Abuhakemah reported that 85 percent of students who enrolled in lower-to-intermediate classes at a highly rated Arabic Summer School immersion program at Middlebury College expressed a desire to learn how to socialize in Arabic, and 83 percent were interested in learning more about the politics of the Middle East (cited in Huseinlei, 2006).

The desire on the part of FLLs to travel to Arab countries and interact socially with the people there persisted after 9/11. Husseinali (2006) surveyed 120 American college students enrolled in a first- or second-year Arabic as a foreign language class – only 19 percent of them were classified as HLLs. He identified four major types of learner orientations: (1) “instrumental orientations,” i.e., getting a job or fulfilling degree requirements; (2) “political orientations,” i.e., understanding the politics of the Arab world and the Middle East; (3) “cultural identity orientations,” i.e., relating to one’s own culture and heritage; and (4) “travel and world culture orientations,” i.e., understanding the Arab world’s culture (p. 402-3). The results of this study confirm previous findings: the majority of FLLs were motivated to study Arabic in order to understand the political scene of the Arab region, use Arabic in their travels, and/or meet new people. Moreover, 90 percent of learners in both HLL and FLL groups were highly interested in communicating with native speakers of Arabic. Most agreed that they were studying Arabic to “learn more about other cultures to understand the world better” (p. 401). Equally significant is that the majority of respondents agreed that Arabic is an important world language because of its relation to “Islam as a world religion,” its influence in literature, and its role in the global economy (Husseinali, 2006, p. 401).

In contrast, another study reported negative attitudes about Arabic language and culture post-9/11. Taha (2007) administered a questionnaire to a sample of 142 students studying Arabic

in a historically black university in the United States; the mix was 34 international graduate students and 108 American undergraduate students. The purpose of the study was to explore the attitudes, motivation, and perceptions of students regarding the teaching and learning of Arabic as a foreign language in the post-9/11 era. Results of the study indicate that, although most of the respondents agreed that learning Arabic is important for utilitarian purposes, they seemed divided on its specific usefulness in their future careers. The two groups differed in their general perceptions of Arabic language and culture. Some students, especially in the undergraduate group, expressed mixed feelings and/or unfavorable opinions. One student even expressed skepticism about the intentions behind the increasing the number of Americans learning Arabic: “It seems to me the government is trying to make African-Americans learn Arabic so we can go overseas and fight against the Arabs” (Taha, 2007, p. 154). Overall, these results show a difference in attitude between the international students, most of whom showed positive attitudes towards the Arabic language and culture); and American undergraduate students who showed mostly negative attitudes. For instance, in response to the statement, “learning Arabic as a foreign language is important to me because I like the language/culture” (p. 157), only one-fifth of American students agreed, about one-third were not sure, and almost half disagreed. In contrast, slightly more than half of the international students agreed, a little more than a quarter were not sure, and only one-fifth disagreed. Taha (2007) suggested a number of reasons for this divergence, including the likelihood that international students were better acquainted with different languages and cultures than American students, who tend to learn about them mostly in a classroom setting, and that perhaps American students were still harboring negative feelings about the Arab culture following the aftermath of 9/11 and/or the war in Iraq.

Significant differences have also been found between HLLs and FLLs regarding their

motivation to learn Arabic. In a study investigating HLLs' attitudes and motivation for learning Arabic, Seymour-Jorn (2004) interviewed Arab-American students at the University of Wisconsin to examine their attachment to the Arabic language. Seymour-Jorn found that for most of the participants, Arabic is important for cultural identity reasons. Respondents expressed a belief that one cannot understand one's culture without knowing Arabic. However, the respondents were divided between those taking Arabic to be able to read and interpret the Quran and those who wanted to improve their reading and writing skills. Husseinali (2006) found that 74 percent of HLLs said that they were learning Arabic to be able to relate to their Islamic identity, and 66 percent said that they were learning Arabic because of their own Arab culture. According to Kono and McGinnis (2001), the motivation of HLLs is often quite different from that of FLLs because "many [HLLs] are dealing with deeply felt issues of identity, struggling to understand their relationship to their home culture and language, mainstream America, and perhaps other groups as well" (p. 199).

An additional dissimilarity is that FLLs are more motivated than HLLs in order to understand the world and the politics of the Middle East while more HLLs are motivated to understand the problems that Arabs face. Also, FLLs demonstrate more active instrumental motivation than HLLs because they want to get a job that requires knowledge of Arabic. HLLs, however, demonstrate passive instrumental orientation; they are more motivated than FLLs to learn Arabic in order to fulfill degree requirements (Husseilani, 2004, p. 403). In his study, Brosh (2013) found that "national threat" was one of the factors that urged his respondents, who were mainly FLLs, to learn Arabic. Brosh argues that "some students feel a greater sense of national threat due to changes in the sociopolitical context and they learn the language out of patriotism" (p. 34).

The findings from this research make it clear that learning about Arab culture and understanding it, as in the case of FLLs, and relating to one's own culture, as in the case of HLLs, are among the top reasons why students learn Arabic in the U.S. Yet many scholars have limited their research to focus on student motivation and have not examined how students *experience* the learning process and how they *feel* about it. Indeed, students' motivation to learn Arabic may be affected by their attitudes toward the Arab culture after they begin study as well as before. This study explores the relationship between student attitudes toward Arab culture and their motivation for learning Arabic after they have begun to experience the teaching and learning in the classroom.

CHAPTER 3

ACADEMIC CONTEXT

3.1 Arabic God-expressions in the Literature

The phenomenon of Arabic God-expressions has been approached from different scholarly angles in the linguistics literature: (1) examining different meanings and uses of particular expressions such as Migdadi et al.'s (2010) study on the use of *mashallāh* (What God wishes) and Farghal's (1995) on the pragmatics of *inshallāh* (God willing) in Jordanian Arabic; (2) studying the relationship between the pragmatics of the evil eye in the Middle East and Arabic religious terms (Abu-Rabia, 2005; Mughazy, 2000); (3) analyzing the problems associated with the translation of God-expressions (e.g., Farghal and Borini, 1997); and (4) exploring, via sociolinguistics, how Arab-American Muslims tend to use religious formulae as markers of identity and in-group membership (e.g., D'Agostino, 2003; Almansour, 2010). Researchers in critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Castleton, 2006; Morrow and Castleton, 2007) have demonstrated that, after 9/11, Muslims were subjected to injustice and stereotyping when they spoke Arabic and uttered phrases also used by terrorists. Thus, CDA has provided another scholarly perspective on the formulae.

In a study pertinent to this dissertation, Castleton (2006, hereafter refers to all citations unless otherwise indicated) compared how often two groups of native Arabic speakers used God-expressions. The first group consisted of speakers living in the Arab world ("non-residents") and the second group of speakers living in the U.S., i.e., "resident Arab-Americans" and "new immigrants." Her assumption was that some Arab-Americans might find American English inadequate to convey the expression of their "feelings, attitudes, or values" (p. 202). To test this,

Castleton posed the following survey questions: (1) “Where does the *inshallāh* go?” when the two groups engage in an English-speaking environment? (2) what changes or modifications do the speakers make to the Allah Lexicon? and (3) do Arabic speakers have to suppress part of their language in order to avoid stereotyping, discrimination, or racism (p. 205). Respondents chose ten phrases that they used in their own speech from a pool of frequently used God-expressions. They were then asked whether they used the phrases in their Arabic form or translated them into English. If the latter, the respondents had to indicate if they said the phrases “silently or in a whisper when speaking English” (p. 207). Castleton was searching for instances of code-switching or “code-repression” (p. 212).

Castleton’s major finding was that, although the Arabic participants used God-expressions when they spoke Arabic, they did not regularly incorporate them, either in Arabic or translated into English, when among English speakers. As anticipated, those who lived in the Middle East were “more comfortable transferring the frequency and pragmatics from the Allah Lexicon into their English conversations” (p. 228). However, U.S. participants would rarely use the Allah Lexicon when speaking English aloud. Castleton also found an interesting paradox between how comfortable respondents said they felt when using the God-expressions compared to how willing they were to use them. Although many participants declared that they felt at ease when using religious formulae in an English-speaking context, responses to other questions showed that only slightly more than one-third of the respondents actually used them (p. 226).

The majority of respondents in the Castleton research viewed their language as one that they were proud of and as “worthy of respect, profoundly connected to religion” (p. 223). However, in response to the question, “Where does the *inshallāh* go?” the respondents replied “There isn’t a place for it in English ... since nobody will understand it” (2006, p. 213).

Castleton suggests that non-residents tend to transfer these phrases to their English speech more than residents do because they may not find the U.S. a safe environment in which they can reveal their cultural identity through the use of L1 phrases (p. 217). In addition, the Castleton emphasizes “the improbability of word and phrase transferability to another language environment when there are complex cultural pragmatics at work in the original language” (p. 214). Despite the potential validity problems associated with self-reported data (e.g., Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Fiske & Taylor, 1991), this possibility of “complex cultural pragmatics” requires verification. This study asks whether students consider God-expressions appropriate for use in the U.S. context, and if not, is this related to the lack of shared pragmatic content in the terms, or because the terms explicitly mark one’s relation to the Arab culture generally and Islam specifically? Although the reported use of the Allah Lexicon may be different from actual use, students’ beliefs about the language they use or think they should use are important.

Using M.A. students of translation at one of Jordan’s universities, Farghal and Borini (1997) analyzed the translations of ten religious formulae spoken by native speakers of Arabic with B.A. degrees in English. The phrases in their Arabic form occurred in *Awlad Haritna*, a 1959 novel by the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, which had been translated in 1981 by Philip Stewart as *Children of Gebelawi* (p. 82). Farghal and Borini found that the students’ attempted translations show instances of “pragmareligious failures,” which are defined as “a subcategory of sociopragmatic failures that stem directly from assigning religious shades to English translations of Arabic religion-based politeness formulas” (p. 78). For example, the phrase, *ahlan ahlan zarna n-nabi*, uttered by one of characters in the novel to welcome a guest, was translated by some students literally as “Welcome, welcome, the Prophet visited us” (p. 86). The failure in this

translation was that it did not maintain the meaning intended in the original utterance and would seem sarcastic and odd to an L1 English reader. Other students translated the God-expression as “Welcome!” which still did not express the hosts’ desire to demonstrate to the guest that the visit honored them. Farghal and Borini (1997) concluded that for this example, Stewart’s translation “Welcome! This is a great honor” (p. 86) is a successful one.

My own experience suggests that Muslims in the U.S. use God-expressions extensively when they are with other Muslims. Perhaps the expressions provide a way for them to show identity and exhibit religious reverence and/or to assert themselves because of their marginalization as a group. This observation matches the results of a study by D’Agostino (2003), which shows that Muslims in New York City use religious expressions such as *al-salāmu ‘alaykum*, (Peace be upon you) and *inshallāh* (God willing) as “a way of presenting themselves as pious individuals and of belonging to the community of believers” (p. 290). On the other hand, those who avoid using these formulae when they are with other Muslims are perceived as distancing themselves from their own community. This perception also applies to non-linguistic acts such as dressing conservatively or wearing a head covering—practices that are usually favored by Muslims wishing to identify with other Muslims. (p. 291).

Similarly, Almansour (2010) examined a group conversation in English among three non-Arabic-speaking Muslims who came from different linguistic backgrounds. The study explored the participants’ code-switching from English into the “Arabic Islamic phrases” *mashallāh*, *al-ḥamdulillāh*, *bismillāh* and *inshallāh* (p. 47). The study showed that, despite the diversity of their language communities, these participants were able to communicate using phrases from a language that they did not speak (Arabic) and to do so in a way that was both comprehensible and meaningful. Furthermore, their use of these code-switching phrases allowed them to

establish themselves as a Muslim group, share their identity as Muslims and members in the community of Islam, and to make it clear that Arabic can be a language of communication for people from non-Arab countries. Hence this study showed that, when participants spoke these four phrases, they claimed a shared religious identity with people from diverse linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds.

In sum, the literature on Arabic religious terms covers their linguistic peculiarities, translation problems, prevalence in Arabic, and multiple social and pragmatic functions. However, scholars have not addressed how learners of the Arabic language navigate the complexities of these formulae. This dissertation's goal is to fill in this gap in the literature.

3.2 Sociocultural Considerations

3.2.1 Identity Theory

This research draws on identity theory for two reasons. First, the relationship between language and identity is very clear in the linguistic phenomenon of God-expressions. As previously mentioned, the Allah Lexicon is rich in religious connotations and thus is a marker of Muslim identity: "The Arabic language and the Muslim faith are often viewed as inseparable parts of the same Arab Muslim identity" (Morrow and Castleton, 2007, p. 202). Second, as Wenger (1998) argues, "because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity" (p. 215). Therefore, the acquisition of a second language can be seen as a transformative agent in identity as a learner strives to become his/her second Self, with all the similarities and differences that this Self can have compared to the L1 Self. Students imagine themselves as native speakers and, because they "want to belong to a community and construct their identities as members of the group, they invest energy and time into learning how to be like those members" (Murphey et al., 2004, p. 85). Pavlenko and Norton (2007) note that "the

process of imagining and re-imagining one's multiple memberships may influence agency, motivation, investment, and resistance" in second language acquisition (p. 669).

Identity can be broadly defined as how one (1) positions the Self and the Other (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004); (2) builds a relationship with the world; and (3) understands future possibilities (Norton, 2000). Bucholtz and Hall (2004) maintain that identity is not only the source of culture but also the outcome of culture; in other words, it is a "cultural effect." Thus language, as a fundamental resource for cultural production, is also a fundamental resource for identity production. This assertion challenges the common understanding that language functions merely as a mirror that reflects one's culture and identity. The working definition of identity captures these key insights, in that identity is considered "an outcome of cultural semiotics that is accomplished through the production of contextually relevant sociopolitical relations of similarity and difference, authenticity and inauthenticity, and legitimacy and illegitimacy" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004, p. 382). As Hall (1996) argues, identity is tied to processes of differentiation from other identified groups in that identity is established across differences; thus the knowledge of Self emerges in relation to Others. Hall also stresses that identity has the capacity to selectively include and exclude particular groups. Identity is, therefore, tied to a sense of belonging, a feeling that one is an "insider"—or that one is not.

Gee (1996) shows how people's identity positions and discourses can shift to express solidarity with others when they use language variation to manifest membership in a group and demarcate certain social identities, i.e., "tak[ing] on a particular social role that others will recognize" (p. 127). Group recognition signals insider status, but Gee notes that the insider must "get things right" in order to gain—and retain—acceptance, i.e., the insider must have his/her "word–deed–value combinations" acknowledged as legitimate by other members (Gee, 1996, p.

127). Identity, i.e., the “who you are and what you are doing,” Gee argues, is enacted through a three-way simultaneous interaction among social or cultural group memberships, a particular social language or mixture of languages, and a particular context (p. 69).

The use of God-expressions provides a good example of how language includes some and excludes others and allows Muslims to assert their identity and in-group membership. As noted above, many Muslims in the U.S. use these expressions extensively when they are with other Muslims as a way to display identity, exhibit religious reverence, and demonstrate cohesion as a group. Consequently, Muslims who avoid using these formulae when they are in the company of other Muslims or who choose not to dress conservatively or wear a head cover are thought to be distancing themselves from the community; this concurs with the findings from D’Agostino’s (2003) study.

The 2013 Malaysian Court decision to restrict the use of the word *Allah* to Muslims provides a good example of how language can legitimize some people and delegitimize others. The purpose of this decision was to protect the country’s official religion, Islam, from conversions, based on the belief that the word, *Allah*, is not an integral part of the Christian faith and that its usage by non-Muslims might cause confusion in the Malaysian community. However, an article (“Word ‘Allah’ is not exclusive to Islam”) in *The National*, an English publication of the United Arab Emirates, makes it clear that this prohibition overlooks both the “theology” and “etymology” of the word (as cited in Neo, 2004, p. 763). *Allah* entered Malaysia through the Arabic language, and Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews had been using it to refer to God even before the coming of Islam (Peters, 1994). Moreover, Islam is inclusive in its consideration that the God of Muslims, Christians, and Jews is one and the same, thereby raising the question: why not refer to the same God using the same word? While political and racial

issues were also involved in the Malaysian Court's decision, the ruling also demonstrates how one linguistic term can create boundaries in order to segregate identities.

3.2.2 Social Construction Theory

This research study views identity as being socially and culturally constructed. It is multifaceted, complex, and tied to social practice and interaction as a flexible and contextually contingent resource (Block, 2007; Norton, 2000). Identity is a process, as opposed to being an essentialized, fixed product and is subject to change and negotiation (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens 1984) because an individual continues to interact with, and learn from, his/her environment. Weedon (1997), discussing subjectivities, defines identity as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation in the world” (p. 32).

People are continuously making linguistic choices, whether consciously or unconsciously, and these selections index a particular identity and are picked up by others as such. In accordance with Norton Pierce's notion of the learner's identity, this study follows Pennycook's (2001) definition of “language learner” as “a complex social identity that must be understood with reference to large and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interactions” (p. 147). In this way, an identity may be a source of pride for some, yet resisted by others.

Also, in line with the assumptions made by sociolinguistics, language is seen here as a primary resource for enacting social identity and displaying membership in a social group or network (Schiffrin, 1996; Rampton, 1995). Lippi-Green (2012) describes language as the “most salient way we have of establishing and advertising our social identities” (p. 3). Holmes (1992) agrees that language is primarily social: “[L]anguage performs two functions at once: it conveys

the overt message and at the same time sets up or confirms the social identity and relationships of the people who are speaking or writing to one another” (p. 139). Thus L2 learning is seen as a form of language socialization (Ochs, 2002; Rymes, 1997; Poole, 1992; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984), which entails “the explicit and implicit communication of cultural norms and ideals through linguistic interactions between experts and novices in social groups or communities” (Block, 2003, p. 131).

3.2.3 Critical Applied Linguistics

Another sociocultural dimension to this research is that it resides within the field of critical applied linguistics. Pennycook (2001) notes this field of linguistics avoids “decontextualized contexts” when examining language acts; rather, it seeks to “find ways of mapping micro and macro relations” involved in those acts (p. 5). Thus this study explores the micro-relationships between the text (the Allah Lexicon) and its acquisition in the classroom and the macro-relationship between the text and larger concepts of society, culture, power, racism, resistance, ideology, education, and globalization. The goal here is not just to describe these relations, but to problematize them and to shed light on the struggles that an individual may go through when aligning him/herself with a particular identity, particularly with regard to social issues of racism, stereotyping, and personal resistance. In this way, the study follows Pennycook, who argues that pinpointing cases of social inequality and injustice is part of the process of “social critique and transformation” (p. 6). Specifically, when a student refrains from, or rejects, an identity—in this case, the Muslim identity, the action draws attention to the stereotypes associated with that identity. Revealing negative stereotypes associated with an identity is a significant step to getting rid of them.

3.3 Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom

3.3.1 What is “Arab Culture”?

This research acknowledges that culture is “the ‘glue’ that binds a group of people together” (Brown, 1994, p. 163). It guides and governs people’s behavior, and sensitizes them to social rules and norms. According to Vygotsky and other members of the sociohistorical school of psychology, culture may be seen as “a mode of development that is unique to our species and which permits the achievements of previous generations to find their way to the present” (Pavelenko and Lantolf, 2000, p. 171). Lessard-Clouston (1997) asserts that “culture is the foundation of communication” because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, but also the topic and methods by which communication proceeds (p.3). In addition, culture “determine[s] how people encode messages, the meanings they assign to messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be interpreted” (p. 3).

“Arab culture” falls within these broad definitions; however, to describe it more specifically is difficult. Although Arabic is a major part of Arab culture, it cannot be a defining characteristic because people from different regions and countries speak different Arabic dialects—a diversity that reflects the complex social and historical nature of the Arab world. Although Modern Standard Arabic does bind all Arabs together, depending on their literacy, this diglossia can be problematic. Those dialects with similarities can sometimes be collapsed into one category, e.g., Levantine Arabic includes Shami, Lebanese, Jordanian, and Palestinian dialects. However, differences among dialects can not only create difficulties in understanding but also be sufficiently sharp that speakers cannot be mutually intelligible (Syrian Arabic and Moroccan Arabic). Reynolds (2015) suggests that “if the Arabic dialects had developed on their

own as written languages at some point (as Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, French, and Italian did) we might well now refer to ‘Arabic’ not in the singular, but in the plural, or perhaps even as a family of languages” (p. 2). Given that language and culture are closely entwined, this linguistic diversity carries cultural diversity along with it.

Religion is another significant factor in the diversity of Arab culture. Although the majority of people in the Arab world are Muslim, there are also Christian Arabs, Jewish Arabs, Druze, and Baha’i. Moreover, a number of ethnic minorities do not identify as Arab, such as Armenians, Imazighens (Berbers), Kurds, and Nubians. In Magnusson’s (2015) terms, these “ethnic and religious minorities are among the leading producers, consumers, and critics of Arab culture” (p. 36). Finally, the majority of Muslims worldwide are not Arabs by definition; in other words, Islam, like Arabic, cannot be a defining characteristic of Arab culture.

Given the linguistic and religious diversity in the Arab world, can one use the term Arab culture at all? Because the purpose of this research is to examine Arabic religious phrases, most of which are used by Arabic speakers regardless of dialect or religion, Arab culture will refer to the shared history, common religious and social habits, traditions, and music that dominate the Arab world—all of which permeate the language in one way or another.

3.3.2 Culture and Language

As noted in the Introduction, an L2 education involves the learning of culture as well as the language itself. This affects teachers as well as students. As Stern (1983) so aptly puts it, “language conveys culture, so that the language teacher is also of necessity a teacher of culture” (p. 251). Politzer asserts that language teachers must be interested in the study of culture not because they necessarily want to teach the culture of the other country, but because they *have* to teach it. He argues that “if we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in

which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning” (as cited in Brooks, 1986, p. 123). Kramersch (1993) aligns herself with Politzer:

Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learner when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them. (p. 1)

The concept of “communicative competence” has expanded to include not only knowledge about language form, but also about language use. Over the past two decades, scholarship in language teaching has increasingly shown the importance of explicitly teaching culture in the pragmatics of the L2 classroom. According to Celce-Murcia (2008), there are six interrelated components of communicative competence, three of which are relevant to this research: (1) “sociocultural competence” refers to “the speaker’s pragmatic knowledge,” or how he/she expresses messages appropriately within the social and cultural context of a communication (p. 46); (2) “formulaic competence” is the “ability to use fixed, predetermined fragments of language that speakers use routinely in everyday interactions” (p. 47); and (3) “interactional competence” includes the “knowledge of how to perform common speech acts accurately” (p. 48). For a student to learn the proper usage of Arabic religious terms, he/she needs to develop Celce-Murcia’s sociocultural, formulaic, and interactional competencies.

Sociocultural competence, i.e., avoiding cultural miscommunication, grows as a student learns the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of the target country or culture. Thomas (1983) observes that “while a speaker who is not operating according to the standard

grammatical code is at worst condemned as ‘speaking badly,’ the person who operates according to differently formulated pragmatic principles may well be censured as behaving badly; as being an untruthful, deceitful, or insincere person” (p. 103). Indeed, by using pragmatic competence a non-native speaker with only nascent grammar skills may bridge the communication gap by allowing a native listener to deduce the communicative meaning through the speaker’s cultural intent (Davies, 2004, p. 208). As Handford (2002) puts it, developing sociocultural knowledge will aid the learner to be able to make predictions and “navigate sensitively through the murky waters of another culture” (p. 2). Rivers (1976) points out that foreign language students need to conform to cultural norms to be able to avoid embarrassing misunderstandings, and to accomplish this, they must be able to utilize the usual and expected forms of language readily and in an unconstrained way (p. 2).

Scholars have conducted extensive research on pragmatic knowledge to illustrate the need for direct and explicit instruction on pragmatics (Taylor, 2003; Bouton, 1990; Harlig and Griffin, 2005). Evidence from the classroom shows that exposure to the target language alone does not guarantee the development of pragmatic competence and that “pragmatic functions and relevant contextual factors are often not salient to learners and so are not likely to be noticed even after prolonged exposure” (Rose, 2005, p. 386). In spite of having mature pragmatic knowledge in their L1 language, learners do not always transfer available knowledge and strategies to the L2 language. In fact, learners often “tend towards literal interpretation, taking utterances at face value rather than inferring what is meant from what is said” (Kasper, 1997).

The awareness of the importance of teaching culture is increasingly reflected in foreign language textbooks and curricula that include aspects of the target language’s cultural habits, ways of dress, food, and customs. This emphasis on teaching culture has been translated into a

variety of pedagogic techniques and strategies, such as providing (1) student-centered activities that give students opportunities to perform a wide range of communicative acts (Kasper, 1997); (2) “critical incidents” or interactive situations (Staknevich, 2002, p. 1) in which stories about cross-cultural miscommunication and subsequent sets of questions are designed to teach students cross-cultural sensitivity; (3) “culture assimilators,” i.e., short descriptions of interactions between persons from different cultures with each interaction followed by four interpretations of the behavior and speech from which students must choose the correct one; (4) “cultoons,” (Henrichsen, 1998) i.e., a series of pictures highlighting issues of cultural misunderstanding or shock that students must evaluate in terms of appropriateness (as cited in Thanasoulas, 2001, p. 16); (5) in-class sociocultural dialogue about aspects of linguistic differences between cultures (Boxer and Cortes-Conde, 2000, p. 205); (6) “pseudo-dictogloss” exercises (Hondo and Goodman, 2000, pp. 5–6), i.e., students read or listen to discourses that include certain politeness features, after which they must describe the pragmatic implications and discuss their findings with a partner; (6) role-playing/simulation (Littlewood, 1992; Kasper, 1997; Kodotchigov, 1998); (7) native speaker classroom guests; and (8) written and audiovisual sources of authentic interaction designed to raise pragmatic and cultural awareness followed by activities that offer to students opportunities for communicative practice (Kasper, 1997).

The Arabic classroom is no exception to this increased focus in language pedagogy on incorporating culture into the curriculum. In 1988 Al-Batal, an Arabic educator and one of the authors of a well-known series of books used to teach Arabic in the U.S. (and used by the UCLA participants in this study), argued that the teaching of culture in Arabic language textbooks has been “sporadic, peripheral, and lacking in systematization” (p. 443). He added that the cultural content is usually overshadowed by the emphasis on language structure and grammar, especially

in the elementary textbooks. Al-Batal emphasized that, while some Arabic students become familiar with the Arab culture through content courses on Islam or Middle Eastern History as part of their major or by traveling to the Arab World, many students are only exposed to the Arab culture through the language itself. Although Arabic textbooks do have some cultural content, they do not provide a clear definition of cultural objectives or an organized way of presenting cultural material. Moreover, Al-Batal says that enhancing the cultural content of Arabic language programs should also help in countering negative stereotypes about Arabs as perceived by a “large number” of Americans as being “oil-rich Arabs,” “camel jockeys,” “terrorists,” “Islamic fundamentalists,” and the people with the “guttural language” (p. 444). Among the cultural objectives that Al-Batal suggests borrowing from Lafyatte (1975) are (1) “The ability to recognize and/or interpret active everyday cultural patterns”; (2) “The ability to act appropriately in everyday situations”; and (3) “The ability to evaluate the validity of generalizations about Arab culture” (pp. 144–5). In addition, Al-Batal proposes including the teaching objective of recognizing and exploring the main tenets of Islam as they pertain to the Arab culture because this knowledge is necessary for student to develop a high level of cultural proficiency in Arabic (p. 145).

In sum, researchers and educators are making a major effort to highlight the importance of teaching culture in FL classrooms and to provide pedagogical tools to help students gain cultural understanding. However, some language teachers still view cultural information as knowledge to be dumped out in class and picked up by students if possible.

3.4 Conclusion

By drawing from a variety of sources, i.e., sociocultural theory, identity theory, critical applied linguistics, and literature that analyzes the phenomenon of God expressions from different

angles, I have followed Rallis and Roseman (2009) who describe a dependable study as carefully conducted, i.e., “one that has a strong conceptual framework that guides the research.” In Chapter 4, which describes the study methodology, I also adopt Rallis and Roseman’s tenet that a dependable study is one that is researched appropriately, i.e., “whose method of data collection fits the framework” (p. 267). Therefore, I present the research methodology and its rationale as the most appropriate means to probe the research questions and describe the setting, study participants, and research analysis while always reflecting on my role as a researcher and interviewer. In doing so, I ensure that strong evidence will be presented and rich descriptions provided.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

4.1. Why Qualitative Research?

Researchers in applied linguistics tend to prefer quantitative research over qualitative research (Lazarton, 2000). Quantitative research is objective and involves practices such as the gathering of numerical data and the use of statistical methods while qualitative research involves subjective practices such as the collecting and interpreting of primarily textual data (Croker, 2009). This latter type of research yields what many academics consider to be ungeneralizable findings. However, as Croker (2009) argues, it is precisely this subjectivity that distinguishes qualitative research as it allows a researcher to make a distinct contribution, “one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities in relation to the data they have collected” (p. 11). Thus qualitative inquiry, according to Rallis and Roseman (2009), searches, not for “abstract universals,” but rather for “concrete universals,” and “working hypotheses” (p. 266).

Qualitative researchers believe that meaning is socially constructed and that there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality: “these constructions and interpretations change, depending on time and circumstances, so reality is not universal but person-, context-, and time-bound” (Croker, 2009, p. 6). In fact, one of the strengths of qualitative studies is that “they allow for an understanding of what is specific to a particular group, that is, what cannot possibly be generalized within and across populations” (Davis, 1995, p. 441). Additionally, one of the main features of qualitative research is that it captures the individual’s perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 7).

The goal of my research—to tease out what students of Arabic think and feel about assimilating to Arabic culture in the course of learning to speak its language—is well suited to

qualitative inquiry. Using in-depth interviews, I obtained information about Arabic learners' backgrounds and their perspectives on many linguistic and cultural issues. This research allowed me to provide extensive descriptions of their attitudes towards Arabic culture in general and the micro-phenomenon of God-expressions in particular.

4.2 Research Practices

Although qualitative methodology is well established and does not need justification, issues related to “trustworthiness” must be addressed. To establish a trustworthy study, I follow Rallis and Roseman (2009) who provide a definition of trustworthiness in qualitative research as “a set of standards that demonstrate a research study has been conducted competently and ethically,” and who describe competent practice as ensuring credibility, dependability, and usefulness (p. 264).

To make certain that my research fulfills Rallis and Roseman's (2009) first criterion for trustworthy research, i.e., credibility, I adopted their three proposed strategies: “prolonged engagement,” “triangulation,” and “member checking” (p. 265) The first, “prolonged engagement,” refers to the gathering of data over a long period of time, or, if gathered over a short period of time, collecting data intensively. My study demonstrates the former, spanning four years, incorporating both formal and informal observations, and featuring 31 interviews with Arabic learners. Prolonged engagement allowed me to more fully understand the research setting and participants and to develop a more informed interpretation of the data. The second strategy, “triangulation,” refers to the collection of data from multiple sources and through different data collection methods (p. 266). To achieve triangulation, I used both observations and interviews as research methods, following Rossman and Wilson who argue that “data gathered from one source or through one method can serve to elaborate on data gathered from other

sources. Thus, interview data could elaborate data gathered through observation, deepening the conclusions that can be drawn” (as cited in Rallis and Roseman, 2009, pp. 265-6). The third strategy, “member checking,” confirms that the final analysis is derived from the participants’ intentions (p. 266). Thus, to ensure that I accurately understood student responses, I played the devil’s advocate and/or the ignorant interviewer during interviews, where necessary. In addition, during the interview transcription and analysis process, I contacted the interviewees on multiple occasions to clarify their intentions. I also conducted follow-up interviews with several respondents to ensure that I had accurately captured their viewpoints and perspectives.

Rallis and Roseman’s (2009) second criterion for trustworthy research is dependability, i.e., the study is carefully conducted and with strong evidence gathered and presented. The 31 interviews provided qualitative data that was elicited by probing learners’ attitudes towards the target culture in detail. To provide context for the readers, I introduce each interviewee with a description of their linguistic and religious background.

The third criterion for trustworthy research, according to Rallis and Roseman (2009), is usefulness, i.e., the conclusions made by studying one particular group can be transferred to, and/or has implications for, a larger population. Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that the transferability of a piece of qualitative research can be enhanced through a “thick description” of the context of the study. In this research, details about my conceptual framework, the study’s design, methods of data collection, the participants, the interpretations and conclusions, and the time and context in which the conclusions were found provide readers with a clear picture of the circumstances informing the findings. As Rallis and Roseman suggest, potential users will determine for themselves if the study’s conclusions are useful for them (p. 268). While this study aims to show how each participant is unique in his/her experiences and attitudes, and thus

identity, it also provides useful and dependable information for the Arabic classroom in general.

4.3 Research Method

According to Croker (2009), qualitative research is “an umbrella term used to refer to a complex and evolving research methodology” (p. 5). This methodology is “complex” because researchers may use a variety of data collection methods, such as observations, interviews, open-response questionnaire items, and verbal reports, and “evolving” because researchers may start with one method and end with another. Indeed, this study followed that pattern of research as it started with observations and evolved over time to the exclusive use of interviews.

Moreover, the interview questions evolved during my four years of study such that the first eight interviews with the original 39 students were not included in this dissertation due to issues of question comparability, leaving 31 interviewees who provided appropriate data.

Although the eight initial interviews did probe learners’ attitudes towards using religious terms, they were limited to this topic and became part of a pilot study. In later interviews, I expanded the interview protocol to probe other issues, such as the learners’ knowledge of Arab culture before and after the learning experience and the dynamic of both heritage and non-heritage students studying Arabic together, i.e., how this affected students’ cultural identity.

4.3.1 Observations

I conducted informal and formal observations in the spirit of scholars who immerse themselves in research to gain an “emic” perspective, i.e., one that is formed *prior* to developing a theory about the phenomena they investigate (Harris, 1976). My informal observations started in 2012 when I taught Arabic in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures (NELC) at UCLA. While teaching, I monitored how my students used God-expressions and noticed that their use was connected to the identity issues that were taking place in the classroom. Rather than going to the

classroom with an agenda to study this phenomenon, I discovered it through these initial classroom observations and saw that it required further investigation.

Formal research followed the formulation of a hypothesis concerning the students' reactions to using the terms. I questioned my assumptions and performed several formal observations in beginner, intermediate, and advanced Arabic classes at UCLA between 2012 and 2013. In 2012, a colleague set up a video camera in his beginning intensive Arabic class for me, and we recorded 18 hours of classroom activities during the second half of the course when students had developed some speaking proficiency. Being external to this setting meant that I was able to view interactions with an impartial, outsider's eye. The observations from this footage, in addition to notes I had taken from participating in cultural events, field trips, and language exchange events, strengthened my hypothesis that there were certain salient characteristics differentiating the use of God-expressions by FLL and HLL students.

The first salient characteristic involves a "need-to-know." Because FLLs experience some difficulty in understanding the meanings and appropriate usage of the religious terms, they usually ask for clarification not only when they first encounter the formulas but also in subsequent encounters. Such students tend to busy themselves with the pragmatic meaning of the term as a whole and not the meaning of the component words. For example, during an informal conversation, one FLL student told me that she used the term *al-ḥamdulillāh* to mean "I'm fine" for months without realizing that the word "God" was contained within the expression. Continuous questions about the terms, in turn, generate so much curiosity about Arabic culture that classroom discussion often moves from purely linguistic issues to sociolinguistic concerns such as cultural habits and norms.

The second salient characteristic involves usage. Although FLLs have difficulty grasping

the meaning of the God-expressions, they do not necessarily reduce their usage of them. As the recorded classroom skits and presentations demonstrated, students' determination to use God-expressions often resulted in humor and laughter. For example, in one group presentation from the 2012 intensive class recordings, three female FLLs sat at their desks, facing each other in a circle. The opening words of the presentation were as follows:

S1: *As-salāmu 'alaykum* (Peace be upon you)

S2: *As-salamu 'alaykum*

S3: *As-salamu 'alaykum*
[all laughing]

S1: *Wa 'alaykum as-salām* (And peace be upon you)

S2: *Wa 'alaykum as-salām*

S3: *Wa 'alaykum as-salām*
[more laughter]

S1: *Kayfa l-ḥāl?* (How are you?)

S2: *Kayfa l-ḥāl?*

S3: [looking at the paper in front of her and murmuring] *Kayfa l-ḥāl?*
[S1 and S2 raising their hands and laughing]

S1: *Al-ḥamdulillāh!* (Thank God)

S2: *Al-ḥamdulillāh!*

S3: *Al-ḥamdulillāh!*

S3: *Hal najaḥtum fī imtiḥānikum?* (Did you pass your test?)

S2: *Na 'am najaḥtu fī imtiḥānī* (Yes, I passed my test)

S2: [raises her hands and in a laughing voice] *Al-ḥamdulillāh* (Thank God)

S1: *Ana najaḥt ayḍan. Al-ḥamdulillāh, hunā nadrus kathīran* (I passed too, thank God; here, we study a lot.)

According to Goffman (1981), one way to interpret the meaning of the humor in this presentation is that the students are assuming the role of “animators,” rather than “authors” of the speech, thus producing different identities in their discourse – by assuming different degrees of authorship and responsibility of what they are saying (p.128). Mocking the voice of the Other is a way to “deflect authorship and responsibility from the content of an utterance” (De Fina, 2011, p. 273). The students’ “stylized” utterances point to an identity switch as the students use humor to show that that they are donning identities not expected of them. As De Fina (2011) notes, stylized utterances “communicate the author’s distancing from the character he/she is depicting” (p. 274). In the sample presentation, role-playing was a means for students to practice the target language. I find that those who dissolve into laughter when using unfamiliar, culturally-laden terms are not intending to be disrespectful of that language or culture; instead, they are laughing at themselves and their perceived inadequacies in mastering the new language. Perhaps, because Arabic is such an important world language and because most FLLs desire to join the ranks of insiders (those who are seen as “fitting in” with Arab culture due to their language skills and cultural knowledge), the stakes are high, and the students are acutely aware of their own Otherness as they struggle to navigate the new language and culture.

The third salient characteristic of the use of God-expressions among FLLs involves discourse strategies. They seem to extensively use the God-expressions as discourse markers when they engage in role-play, skits, or group presentations. They throw in the terms and sometimes exaggerate them to help buy more time so that they can organize and manage their speech, especially when they have lost their train of thought. It is not uncommon that the only Arabic phrases some FLLs use when conversing with their teachers who they meet by chance outside of the classroom or during a cultural or language exchange event are the following: *Al-*

salāmu ‘alaykum (Peace be upon you), *al-ḥamdulillāh* (Thank God), and *mashallāh* (What God wishes). While this usage occurs, in part, because the greeting sequence necessitates the terms, I suggest that students may also be demonstrating solidarity or affiliation with their Arab Muslim teachers. Two other reasons may be students’ desire to display their knowledge of Arabic, which their position as an Arabic learner dictates, and their general difficulties in speaking Arabic, i.e., resorting to static politeness formulas used in greeting is easier than conducting an entire dialogue. In contrast to FLLs, HLLs use the God-expressions in a much more natural and unselfconscious way. Often they do not smile or laugh; they use the phrases appropriately; and they rarely ask teachers about them or about the cultural norms related to them. In fact, sometimes HLLs jump in to explain the terms in the Arabic classroom, taking the role of someone who knows.

Although the above observations about how and why the students use the phrases are necessary to demonstrate student attitudes, this particular type of scrutiny only paints part of the picture. By asking students directly about their thoughts and feelings regarding the God-expressions, this research provides a better understanding of their motives, rationales, and feelings of comfort or resistance. Although what people report about their linguistic behavior may not match their actual behavior, thus creating potential discrepancies between self-reports and actual use, this study focuses on learners’ attitudes and perceptions of their use of the language with the aim of emphasizing the students’ voices, rather than the researcher’s. Therefore, the goal and scope of this study makes interviews a legitimate, reliable source of data collection.

4.3.2 Interviews

As noted above, this study used individual interviews as the primary data collection method. Throughout the interviews, I focused on students' stories about their Arabic learning experiences with regard to the religious aspect of Arabic and how and whether those experiences have affected their identity. Research on this method supports my approach. Pavlenko (2001) argues that each individual L2 learning experience is unique and provides insight into the intimate relationship between identity, language acquisition, and socialization. The writer further adds that the depth and breadth of the second language socialization process can be successfully examined only within the focused lens of the personal narrative (Pavlenko, 2001). As this research concerns learners' attitudes and perceptions about the L2 culture, the use of narratives that allow participants to reveal what they think and feel is the most appropriate source of data collection. Other researchers agree that interviews yielding personal student narratives not only complement the more traditional empirical approaches, they also constitute the best technique for data collection in this kind of research (Kanno & Norton; 2003; Pavlenko & Lantolf 2000; Norton, 2000). Therefore, identity research has relied heavily on narrative as a main methodology and method of inquiry.

4.3.2.1 Interview protocol

The interview protocol consisted of semi-structured questions. The rationale for the adoption of this protocol is multifaceted. First, a semi-structured protocol allows for comparability because interviewers must ask all informants the same core questions. Yet, this protocol also gives interviewers the freedom to expand upon themes by asking targeted, follow-up questions based on informants' responses (Brenner, 2006, p. 362). Second, this protocol allows interviewers to incorporate respondents' personal and cultural backgrounds into the questions (Brenner, 2006, p.

362). Third, as Schensul (1999) argues, “semi-structured interviews combine the flexibility of the unstructured, open-ended interview with the directionality and agenda of the survey instrument to produce focused, qualitative, textual data at the factor level” (p. 149). Schensul observes that, although the questions asked in this protocol may be pre-formulated, the answers are usually open-ended and may expand more fully in response to further, sensitive questioning. Thus the semi-structured interview format meets the objectives of clarifying the central domains and factors in this study by operationalizing these factors into variables and developing preliminary hypotheses (Schensul, 1999, p. 150).

4.3.2.2 Interview questions

The interview questions for this study are ordered by topic or domain and consist of five main parts. As several authors have recommended, ethnographic interviews designed to explore an informant's social world begin with a general descriptive question (Brenner, 2006; Kvale, 1996; Spradley, 1979; Werner and Schoepfle, 1987). Also known as a “grand tour question,” it leads to natural and emerging “mini-tour questions” (Brenner 2006, p. 363). Thus, the interviews for this study opened with a “grand-tour” question, e.g., “How is your Arabic learning experience going?” The dual purposes of this question were to build rapport with the respondent and to offer a broad opportunity for the respondent to highlight any important issues that could be examined later in the interview.

The first part of the interview focused on gathering demographic information, the linguistic and religious background of the participants, and their reasons and motivation for learning Arabic. The second part of the interview concerned students’ knowledge about Arab culture. For example, students were asked what they knew about Arab culture before they started learning Arabic and whether their knowledge and/or perceptions had changed after studying

Arabic. The third part of the interview examined students' attitudes toward Arab culture with a series of questions and discussion statements, e.g., (1) "Discuss the negative versus positive aspects of the Arab culture, including the aspects that struck you most, and why"; (2) "Describe situations where you encountered Arabic religious terms, then identify which of the terms you would use (if any), including on what occasions and with whom"; and (3) "Express how you understood those terms, and then analyze which terms you feel comfortable or uncomfortable using, and why."

The fourth part of the interview addressed the dynamic of learning about Arab culture in a classroom where both HLLs and FLLs are together. Sample questions and discussion statements included: "What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of having both heritage and non-heritage learners together in the same classroom in terms of learning about Arab culture?" and "Tell me about a time when you felt uncomfortable in the class, if at all, due to a cultural difference between you and a heritage/non-heritage learner of Arabic." Finally, the last part of the interview concentrated on identity negotiation and constructions, asking if the cultural learning experience had affected the student and, if so, in what respects. I revised the interview questions following the results of a pilot study that indicated the need for more specific probing questions to elicit the necessary information from the students (see Appendix for the interview protocol).

Since attitudes were sometimes hard for students to verbalize, I used a variety of probes, when necessary, during the course of the interview to encourage informants to expand on their responses. I used (1) "detail probes," e.g., who, when, where, and how; (2) "encouragement probes," e.g., saying "uh-huh," "interesting," and "tell me more"; (3) "silent probes," e.g., leaving a pause after an informant speaks to provide him or her with the time needed to finish his

or her train of thought and to urge him or her to elaborate; and (4) “clarification probes,” e.g., restating what the informant has just said to offer him or her an opportunity for correction or elaboration (Brenner, 2006, p. 354).

4.3.2.3 Interview Transcription

I recorded and transcribed the interviews, which ranged in length from 50 to 75 minutes. In the case of three interviews that lasted longer than 60 minutes without completing the protocol, I scheduled another interview at the informants’ convenience to complete the interview questions. To ensure accuracy, unclear parts of the transcriptions were presented to the interviewees, providing me with an opportunity to engage in “member checking” (Merriam, 2009).

Transcription practices can be thought of as a continuum with two dominant modes: “naturalism,” in which every utterance is transcribed in as much detail as possible, or “denaturalism,” in which idiosyncratic elements of speech, e.g., stutters, pauses, response, or cries, are removed (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005). This study is in the center of this continuum, but slightly closer to the denaturalization approach. Rather than being interested in the intricacies of spoken language or the tools used to coordinate a conversation such as turn-taking, repairs, or overlapping talk, I primarily focused on the informational content of speech (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Jefferson, 1985; Ochs, 1979). While a naturalized approach is useful for particular types of studies, it can obfuscate the substance of the interview and distract the reader from the content. Although I implemented a “full and faithful transcription” in this study, accuracy also concerns the substance of the interview, that is, the meanings and perceptions created and shared during a conversation (Cameron, 2001, p. 33). My method of transcription incorporated such features such as laughter, hesitations, smiles, and response tokens, where necessary, i.e., especially when these features indicated tone, attitudes, or feelings. My aim was

to give the reader an idea of how the speech was delivered and avoid the outcome of “white-washed data” (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005).

4.4 Data Analysis

Beyond the simple enumeration of practices and collected materials, qualitative research stipulates a particular conceptual system and set of beliefs about the world under investigation. The analytic procedure for this study follows recommendations made by Emerson, et al. (1995), including careful reading and open coding of notes, writing initial memos, focused coding, and the creation of integrative memos. Coding involves staying closely anchored to the data by sorting it into various categories that organize it and render it meaningful (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). Through an iterative process, core themes are selected, based on how important they appear to participants and how frequently they occur across the data set (Emerson, et al., 1995).

The analytic method used in this study is “thematic analysis,” as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006). I recorded, transcribed, and familiarized myself with the data by reading and re-reading it, noting down preliminary ideas and generating initial codes. I collated codes into potential themes and reviewed the themes by checking how well suited they were in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. I then refined the themes and gave them clear definitions and labels. Finally, I produced a scholarly report of the analysis, in which I interpreted the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications in relation to the research questions and previous literature.

I applied an inductive or “bottom-up” approach to the search for emerging themes (Frith and Gleeson, 2004; Sipe and Ghiso, 2004). An inductive analysis is “a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a preexisting coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Hence, the analysis was data-driven, and a rich

description of the data was provided. After I had identified themes and patterns, a top-down approach (Erickson, 2004) confirmed the validity of the discovered themes. Additionally, themes that appeared to be outliers or exceptions to the patterns were given special attention and were included in the results, as appropriate, in order to avoid oversimplifying the data.

4.5 Study Participants

I recruited 31 Arabic learners at UCLA for this large-scale, four-year qualitative, interview study for two reasons: to achieve data saturation sufficient to yield meaningful results, and to reflect a typical Arabic classroom. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) describe saturation using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) definition as the point at which "no additional data are being found whereby the [researcher] can develop properties of the category" (p. 65). Recommendations made by Guest et al. (2006) indicate that they reached data saturation in their qualitative methodology interview study at a threshold of 12 interviews. Achieving saturation may be affected by a variety of factors; however, the number of interviews I conducted yielded sufficient data to be meaningful.

With regard to my goal of recruiting interviewees who would be representative of those in a typical Arabic classroom, my sample was "purposive." According to Miles & Huberman (1994), the most commonly used samples, particularly in applied research, are purposive, i.e., the common element is that participants are selected according to predetermined criteria relevant to the particular research study. Thus my recruits represented a typical, intermediate-level Arabic classroom at UCLA: a mixture of males and females ranging between the ages of 18 and 40 and including both graduate and undergraduate students who are heritage and non-heritage learners. I did include three advanced learners, one HLL and two FLLs, in order to determine whether greater language proficiency would yield different results in terms of students' understanding

and use of the terms under investigation. However, I did not interview students at the beginning level because, although they may come to the classroom with certain attitudes and preconceptions, these students are at the earliest stage of learning the language and, therefore, in the logistical, as opposed to analytical, phase of learning. Thus the L2 identity of beginning Arabic students would not yet be fully developed.

My population sample included two groups: 20 students who were learning Arabic as a foreign language, and 11 students who had some familiarity with it and who were learning it as their heritage language. Although I did not plan to control for age differences, most of the participants were relatively young, between 18 and 30. Each group of learners was approximately equally divided by sex. Most of the interviewees were my former Arabic students, and I no longer had any authority over their teaching or grading when interviews were conducted. The advanced learners were graduate students whom I had met as a graduate student at UCLA. These participants and I shared the same space, i.e., the teaching assistant’s lounge, and we attended events held by NELC. All learners were given pseudonyms: I gave Arabic names to the HLLs and American names to FLLs. The backgrounds of the learners are described in Table 2.

Table 2

Background of Arabic Learners

Name	Country of origin/ancestry	Gender	Religious background	Proficiency level
FLLs				
Ginette	United States	F	Christian	Intermediate
Jennifer	Israel	F	Jewish	Intermediate
Samantha	United States	F	Jewish	Intermediate
Lydia	United States	F	Christian	Intermediate
Kinely	United States	F	Christian	Intermediate
Niya	Pakistan	F	Muslim	Intermediate
Shohreh	Iran	F	Muslim	Intermediate

Molly	United States	F	Christian	Intermediate	
Kurt	United States	M	Christian	Intermediate	
Nathan	United States	M	Christian	Intermediate	
Jack	United States	M	Christian	Intermediate	
Jim	United States	M	Christian	Intermediate	
Joshua	United States	M	Christian	Intermediate	
Christopher	United States	M	Christian	Intermediate	
Owen	England	M	Christian	Intermediate	
Alfega	Indonesia	M	Muslim	Intermediate	
David	United States	M	Christian	Intermediate	
Harry	United States	M	Christian	Advanced	
Logan	United States	M	Christian	Advanced	
Mark	China	M	Christian	Advanced	
<hr/>					
HLLs					
Ruba	Lebanon	F	Druze	Intermediate	
Noha	Palestine	F	Muslim	Intermediate	
Safa	Syria	F	Muslim	Intermediate	
Lama	Syria	F	Muslim	Intermediate	
Sawsan	Palestine	F	Muslim	Intermediate	
Marsayl	Syria	F	Christian	Intermediate	
Natalia	Lebanon	F	Muslim	Intermediate	
Marwan	Palestine	M	Muslim	Intermediate	
Hameed	Palestine	M	Muslim	Intermediate	
Salameh	Jordan	M	Christian	Intermediate	
Maher	Lebanon	M	Christian	Advanced	

4.6 Data Collection

The data for this study was collected from Arabic students at UCLA and gathered in two ways. First, I contacted those I had taught in the previous four years via email. I explained the project and asked for their participation; those who agreed were interviewed in a place of their choice on the UCLA campus and given the consent form in person. Second, the advanced students were recruited through my acquaintance with them as a graduate student at UCLA. Those who agreed to be interviewed were contacted via email with further details, and meetings were arranged individually.

4.7 Positionality

When researchers contemplate their own conceptions and assumptions in gathering and interpreting qualitative data, such as individual personalities, value systems, cultures, personal traits, theoretical orientations, and research plans, they gain additional insights into the nature of the phenomena under investigation (Heider, 1988, p. 76). Croker (2009) argued that “it is important for researchers to be constantly aware and systematically reflect on their own personal identity and impact on the participants and research setting” (p. 10). In a similar vein, Brenner (2006) suggested that who researchers are and how they interact with informants during the interviews may influence informants’ perceptions as well as the answers they yield.

Consequently, researchers must not only describe themselves, but also relay their impressions of how they might be viewed by the interviewees. As a former Arabic teacher of many of the interviewees, I had already built a good rapport with them. This positive relationship was advantageous because it (1) helped in building and maintaining trust with the informants, which arguably led to “credible data”; (2) provided me with some contextual knowledge that assisted in interpreting the data; and (3) allowed for friendly and insightful interviews with the informants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 256).

The interviews demonstrated the role that “dynamic rapport” can play in an interview and showed its importance (Morrissey, 2006; Yow, 2005). From our discussions in the classroom, I believe that students feel I am open-minded about and interested in their ideas and views. For example, during one interview, a female FLL named Kinley expressed openly to me, a Muslim woman wearing a hijab, that she is against religion. I asked her what she would include about Islam in an article about Arab culture:

I: What would you say about Islam?

K: That's hard for me. Ummm, I'm very critical of religions as you know as ideologies, not faith necessarily, but uh, you know I would include information about the five pillars and the exposure to Islam that I've had through friends in classes ... largely that the Quran teaches love and acceptance more than other people ...

I: Please feel free to express any ideas you may have. I mean, I don't want my identity to affect your responses in any way.

K: I have no problem in saying it. I think religion in general tends to encourage authoritarian thinking and insular thinking, and you see that with fundamentalist Christians as well as fundamentalist Muslims ... um ... to me, I mean it's not the case. I've met people of many religions who are open-minded and very compassionate and wonderful, but I've also met very many who are, I mean essentially use, their religion as a means to justify aggressive or exclusive behavior.

Later in the interview, Kinley confided in me that she was three months pregnant. She described how she had had to defend herself against a male Muslim acquaintance who had criticized her condition because in Islam it is forbidden to have sex before marriage. If Kinley thought that I would judge her, she would not have shared this information with me. The excellent rapport that I had with Kinley paved the way for open and honest responses.

However, despite my good relationships with the students and my efforts to remove bias, my concern about positionality was persistent. In spite of being a naturalized American citizen, I am still a relative newcomer to the US, and I continue to abide by Arab culture in my habits and lifestyle. In accordance with Sherif's (2001) article on the notion of the insider/outsider identity of the researcher, I am a potential insider to the Muslim HLLs but an outsider to the FLLs and, to a lesser extent, to the non-Muslim HLLs. As a Muslim and a native speaker of Arabic who wears

a hijab, I was concerned that my appearance, demeanor, and fluency might affect the interviewees' responses to some degree. To the Muslim HLLs, the visual cue of the hijab might help them to express their feelings more openly; at the same time, it could create a distance between myself and the FLLs and non-Muslim HLLs. Most of the FLLs were Americans, born and raised in the U.S. to American non-Muslim parents, and many of them were agnostic in their religious beliefs. This raised the issue: to what extent did my outsider identity affect the students' responses? Also, because I had been a former teacher for most of the interviewees, a power dimension was present in my relationship with them. This raised another issue: did their respect for me as their teacher express itself in false testimony about Arab culture? These were, and remain, legitimate questions. However, during the interviews, I received the impression from the students, through their words, expressions, and gestures, that their responses were sincere and unbiased. My assessment now is that my outsider identity did not play against me. The example below demonstrates that students felt they could be candid with me. When I asked Lydia about her motivation for learning Arabic, she said that she wanted to be a CIA analyst:

I: What does a CIA analyst do?

L: If you were working as an analyst what they are usually doing is they monitor the activity of terrorist groups in other countries and stuff like that, or just anyone that could possibly be a threat, so what I will be doing is like listening to the conversations or reading messages that these people are sending out or just looking at their situation in general and analyzing it and try to determine like what their next step might be or what they're planning, so that kind of thing.

Clearly, Lydia saw herself in the position of an American FLL learning Arabic because it was “the language of the enemy,” and thus had distanced herself from the community of native

speakers. The openness displayed by some students in sharing their negative view of religion, and others in expressing their desire to work for the CIA or FBI illustrates that my positionality—as an insider to the foreign culture and an outsider to the American FLLs—did not contaminate the data or hinder or limit my research.

I took extra steps to make sure that my identity did not affect student responses. All interviewees were assured at the beginning of each interview that the more openly and honestly they expressed their feelings, the more helpful they would be for this research and for future learners of Arabic. I also told them that I did not expect any particular answers. In the following chapters, interactions between the participants and myself are included, where necessary, with the goal of giving readers a fuller understanding of how my conclusions were reached. Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I—a Muslim and a native speaker of Arabic—strove to be “self-reflexive” (Clark, 2009), i.e., aware of others’ discursive practices as well as my own self-positions, conceptions, and biases.

CHAPTER 5

THE HOW AND WHY OF USING ARABIC RELIGIOUS PHRASES

5.1 Introduction

Three questions I pose in this research are (1) how do Arabic learners view Arabic religious phrases and why; (2) are they comfortable using these phrases; and (3) if they use them, how do they do so? In this chapter, I answer these questions, in part, by demonstrating when students use these phrases and their rationale for not only using them but also sometimes exaggerating this use. I also highlight the differences between FLLs usage of the formulae and that of their HLL counterparts. Finally, I address the humor that accompanies usage by presenting FLLs' accounts of what triggers this humor and by examining HLLs' reaction to it.

5.2 FLLs and the Normalization of Arabic through Its Religious Phrases

5.2.1 Surmounting linguistic difficulties

It's a language that I had no idea about whatsoever. I mean, like, this is kind of embarrassing for me to say just because I am a linguistics major. I didn't even put two and two together that the writing system went from right to left until my *Al-Kitaab* [the Arabic textbook] showed up in the mail and I was like "Oh my gosh!" I should have figured that out before I thought about studying Arabic. (Jack)

Here, my interviewee, Jack, expresses a fact common to most FLLs: that learning a foreign language in general, and Arabic in particular, is daunting, challenging, and overwhelming, especially at the early stages. A common strategy, employed by my interviewees to overcome the difficulties, is to rely on Arabic's frozen formulae of Arabic religious terms in the hope that the path to Arabic mastery goes through the God-expressions. Students use them as a technique to compensate for linguistic inadequacies when they are asked to verbally produce ad hoc in the

target language. As Kinley, one FLL interviewee, explained to me, impromptu speaking in Arabic is a cognitive juggling act of sentence structure, conjugation, verb inflection, and appropriate sounds, and using a God-expression is a way to avoid the problems. Kinley described her use of religious formulae as a way for her to “normalize speaking Arabic,” and I have appropriated this phrase for my research because it encompasses the many reasons why students use the Allah Lexicon.

Kinley, a native English speaker who was born in Bridgeport, Texas, was learning Arabic as part of her major in linguistics but also had intellectual and personal motivations. She wanted to improve her “serviceable” Arabic and achieve a level of fluency that would allow her to communicate more than basic needs. She noted that those “cultural expressions” made it “different” and “easier” to speak Arabic. As she said:

When you’re just learning, and you are sure you sound like a fool with everything you say, it [the religious phrase] sort of helps to avoid the more difficult phrases. I think as we got a better handle, or at least with the few people I studied with, we were using those phrases as a way to sort of help us normalize speaking Arabic. It helped us feel more comfortable because we sort of understood basic cultural interactions versus complex sentences about “I went to market last week and bought this and I will do this next week.” (Kinley)

Language learners, particularly at a low level of proficiency, are often preoccupied with their inferior position with regard to native speakers. They are very sensitive about whether they are using the right words and if they sound funny or odd when using the target language.

Kinley’s remark, “you sound like a fool,” not only pointed to her learning dilemma but also

indicated that she intended to figure a way around the problem. For Kinley, using these Arabic formulaic phrases was the solution.

Christopher, an intermediate-level FLL who was born near San Francisco and speaks English as his first language, illuminated the problem when he discussed speaking Arabic with a friend in his dorm who came from Dubai. He described what he learned in the classroom as “the academic Arabic,” which “sounds funny if you don’t use any of these sort of expressions. Just like in English, it sounds like you’re reading a textbook.” The Arabic curriculum that he and the other interviewees in this research followed included both *fuṣhā* (formal Arabic) and a colloquial dialect (either Egyptian or Levantine), using the third edition of *Al-Kitaab*. Until recently, *fuṣhā* was the sole focus of instruction because many Arabic educators had the firm belief that teaching other colloquial dialects should be done separately (Al-Batal, 1992; Al-Batal & Belnap, 2006; Maamouri, 1998; Palmer, 2007). Using God-expressions helped Christopher when he spoke Arabic in the Egyptian dialect he was learning and made conversation easier:

It [using the expressions] bridges communication a little bit between the two speakers... When I was trying to speak with my friend, if I used a certain word in *fuṣhā* or if I tried to say a sentence in *fuṣhā*, he wouldn’t quite understand it. You’d struggle through it a little bit and maybe an expression might be able to help it out.

(Christopher)

Adding phrases in *‘āmmiyyah* (colloquial Arabic) when talking *fuṣhā* made Christopher not only sound less formal but also as if he were able to speak the dialect.

Not only does the use of the God-expressions enable more fluent conversations and bridge the *fuṣhā* - *‘āmmiyyah* (formal-colloquial) gap, it also demonstrates knowledge of the language. David, an American and native English speaker, is specializing in the history of the

Middle East and needed to read and write Arabic in order to get into a master's program. He also believed it “would be nice to speak it [Arabic]” so that he could go to Syria or Lebanon and conduct his research. He believed that use of the phrases showed that he “understands the language,” is “comfortable using it.” In other words, he accepted the use of the phrases as an essential part of the language. When I asked him if he incorporated religious terms when he spoke Arabic, he acknowledged that he did and gave me *inshallāh* as an example. In fact, he noted that native speakers often reminded him that it was necessary:

D: They make me use it.

I: What do you mean, “they make me use it?”

D: Whenever I am talking to someone about [the fact that] I am going to Lebanon, I say, “Hopefully, we’ll get in there.” Then they would say, “*Inshallāh*.” Like to remind me to say it.

I: That sounds like a reminder to you?

D: Mm-hmm (affirmative), I always feel bad so I am starting to say it regardless.

I: I don’t get that? Why do you feel bad?

D: They say, “*Inshallāh*,” and I am, like, “Oh, yeah. *Inshallāh*.”

I: You think that, “Oh, I missed that. I should have said it?”

D: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

The same idea of necessity was reiterated by Kurt, who was born in Fayetteville, Arkansas, and spoke English only at home. Kurt, who was in his fourth quarter at UCLA and enrolled in Modern Standard Arabic and Egyptian dialect, noted that *Inshallāh* was the only way he knew how to say “hopefully” in Arabic and, given that he didn’t know a non-religious version, did not have much of a choice.

5.2.2 Authenticity and cultural integration

Normalizing Arabic via God-expressions does not only include the linguistic side of the language but also the cultural side. Many students are driven to use these terms in order to decrease their foreignness and outsider status to the people who speak that language.

Logan, a native English speaker born in Virginia, had traveled in the Middle East and Europe. He had been to Lebanon in 2006 (two and a half weeks before he was evacuated due to the war), Morocco in 2008 (eight weeks), and Egypt in 2010 (a year). As an advanced student, he described himself as nearly fluent in Modern Standard Arabic and as only able to “really get by” in the Egyptian dialect. Logan had a first-hand experience with the terms when he was in Egypt and believed that they helped him blend in.

Without doing that [using the terms], you’re really not speaking the language that people speak. I stand out as a foreigner but if I would use those, it would just make things flow faster or flow more smoothly. Maybe [this occurred] because people wouldn’t look at me twice and wonder where are you from because you speak funny. (Logan)

For Logan, then, use of these terms brought him closer to native speakers linguistically and culturally, and also helped him with fluency when speaking the dialect, which he described as difficult.

Ginette, who was born in a small town in Ohio and grew up speaking English, sought mastery in Arabic. This Ph.D. student, who was in the French and Francophone program, had decided to become a medievalist and wanted to look at early Arabic and French travel narratives. She was a distinguished student in my Intermediate Arabic class, and based on her hard work, I could tell she would not settle for less than full competency, which for her entailed sounding

authentic. When I said to her that I had noticed how frequently she used the God-expressions in class and even in the course of the interview, she described a similar motivation to that of Kinley, Christopher, Logan, and David and suggested that using these terms show mastery and proficiency:

Basically, they show a high knowledge of the language and a high proficiency and also a fairly high knowledge and proficiency in the culture too. I'm saying culture, but it's also religion and it's all combined. With French, for example, it's hard to understand if you're using just very formal things and not using any colloquial expressions...I think they enable you to carry on and basically not stick out so much in terms of your use of the language as not being a native speaker, if that makes any sense. (Ginette)

Kurt, however, looked beyond the desire to fit in, and believed that part of the integration process takes place through the use of these formulae. A 20-year-old man and native English speaker, he was born in Fayetteville, Arkansas, spent a few years in Texas, and then lived in Tennessee. He was a four-year scholarship winner in the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) who sometimes attended class in formal military attire. Upon graduation, he would be required to serve for eight years in the military. He was majoring in Arabic and, now in his second year at UCLA, concurrently enrolled in Modern Standard Arabic and Egyptian. He saw the ability to speak Arabic as a marketable skill and viewed use of the phrases as a way to be more culturally competent: "It's just a matter of, do you want to look as least foreign as possible? I think they are important if you want to do your best to assimilate."

The same integration theme was reiterated by Lydia, a Californian who does not affiliate with a religion and who has a "very strong interest in international events" and the Middle East

area. She believed that immersing oneself in Arabic culture meant accepting its Islamic component:

I think it is important to use them [God-expressions] because you have to remember that a big part of Arabic is Islam. The entire Quran is written in Arabic; they're very connected to each other. If someone was to say, "Oh I'm not Muslim, so I'm just never going to use these phrases at all, I'm going to completely cut them out of my vocabulary," you wouldn't really fully be immersing yourself in the culture because religion, Islam in general, is a big part of the Arab culture. (Lydia)

Accepting the language and its cultural aspects as one "package" seems to be the rationale behind Mark's use of Arabic religious phrases. Born in Hong Kong but raised in the U.S. from the age of two, he considered himself a native English speaker. As a graduate student with an interest in Semitic languages such as Hebrew, Mark had been curious about Arabic and was now an advanced student in his third year of Arabic. Mark seemed to love learning languages and spoke a number of them: Cantonese, Hebrew, Arabic, and Spanish. He embraced these languages as they were, adopted everything in a language as the correct practice, and integrated the God-expressions in his Arabic because they were "something people use." For Mark, authenticity and assimilation were crucial to language learning:

It's like not saying, "Hello," in English or not saying the same things we say in English, like, "Get well soon." It's important to use [the phrases]. It's a courtesy. I feel like if you're going to learn a language, you might as well adopt everything in the language. Just because most people who speak it are Muslim doesn't mean everything in the language is Muslim or that by using the language you are Muslim, yeah? I think if you want people to accept you as part of their culture, you should try to use as many of these

words as possible, as much as they use them. So, you should punctuate your speech with them because that's the way people speak. (Mark)

Along similar lines, Kinley, who is agnostic and against religion as ideology, suggested that using these “cultural expressions” aided her in assuming an Arab identity:

It's kind of like helping us feel more comfortable in our own skins because we have our own cultural expressions in our languages, and those are the everyday pieces of speech that we use to communicate with each other and identify with each other. It's helping us feel more comfortable in assuming an Arab identity, even if it's as an L2 learner.

(Kinley)

In sum, students' use of the God-expressions was an attempt to “normalize” their acquisition of Arabic. First, they manipulated the easier-to-use formulaic phrases to linguistically avoid producing more difficult speech. Second, they dropped the phrases into conversations to appear more authentic and culturally integrated.

5.3 Comfort in Using Islamic Phrases: Where Does It Come From?

Clearly, some FLLs are at ease using the God-expressions and willing to accept the language and its religious component as one package. There are several reasons for this feeling of comfort.

First, students become aware that many of these phrases are not religious per se. Rather, they are often introduced in the classroom as part of a dialogue and translated for the students pragmatically rather than literally. As I noted in Chapter 4, one student acknowledged, in an informal conversation, that she used *al-ḥamdulillāh* for more than a month before she realized the word God was in there. Lydia also noted that whenever she performs a dialogue, she uses *al-ḥamdulillāh* or *inshallāh* because she knows that “even though those have Muslim roots to them, or they have a religious root to why they're used, they're not necessarily religious terms.”

Second, students, particularly those who are Christian, find comfort in Islam's similarities to Christianity. Christopher, for example, explained that as a Christian who believes in one God as a source of strength, hope, and optimism, he did not find it difficult to embrace most of these terms: "It's a different religion, but it's still a shared belief that there's something greater that can help bring out the good of a situation."

Third, students find comfort in using the religious phrases when they perceive of them as idiomatic expressions. Idioms, by nature, have component words that do not reflect the meaning of the whole expression, but users of the language accept and use them. For example, Christopher noted that "I had bigger fish to fry" in English was very similar in meaning to "I have other cats to whip" in French. Both were "weird," but he recognized that the meanings of idiomatic expressions, including God-expressions in Arabic, depended upon their use in context, which he described as "how they're being said, who's saying them, what's going on in that person's mind, and that person's life." When students understand that an idiom has different meanings depending on its context, their use of that expression increases.

Context determines whether a phrase, particularly stereotypical ones such as *Allāhu akbar* (God is greatest), has negative or positive connotations. Owen got first-hand experience of this dichotomy when he was deployed with the British military in Iraq. Born and raised in England, he moved to the US, where he was serving with the US military, when he was 28. He studied Middle Eastern North African Studies with Arabic at UCLA, and he described his mastery of Arabic as *nuṣ nuṣ* (so so), but wished it were better. Owen encountered the phrase *Allāhu akbar* in two different contexts: in Iraq where it was used by jihadists to promote violence, and in Jordan at a football game where it was used by fans cheering their team. In the

second instance, he was so entertained by the use of *Allāhu akbar* that he started chanting it himself. Owen described his new understanding of the relationship between idiom and context:

O: It was the bad people [terrorists] saying that. They were rejoicing, because they'd done a certain act to us, which I can't really talk about. When I went to see Jordan against Iraq in a World Cup qualifier in Amman for football, I heard *Allāhu akbar* shouted across quite a lot. That was a completely different context. At first, I was like, "Crikey, this is bringing back some memories." Then I realized that again it's one of those generic phrases that people can associate to whatever...When I heard *Allāhu akbar* the first time, I was very pretty scared to be honest. When I heard it in Jordan, at first I was scared. Then I realized it was completely different. It was a football tournament and the Jordanians had just scored, and they were rejoicing, and they were shouting at the Iraqis on the other side of the stadium, so I joined in.

I: So you used it?

O: I did, and the Jordanians were high-fiving me. They were going, "Oh, *mashallāh*" (What God wills/How wonderful). Yeah, I joined in. It was great. By the end of the game, there was a little group of Jordanians that actually loved the fact I was there. I bought a Jordanian scarf, I had a flag, and I was supporting Jordan. They said, "What're you doing?" I said, "Well, I'm studying and practicing Arabic, I'm studying at a university here, you know, I love it, let's go Jordan!" When Jordan scored, I was shouting. They loved it, and we built up such a rapport. A sort of brotherhood... [it's something] I've been used to all my life in the military and playing team sports. I really enjoyed it.

For some students, *Allāhu akbar* was even internalized. For instance, Harry, an advanced student and practicing Christian, was not bothered by the term at all. He believed that it was unfortunate that the phrase has become associated with terrorism, but that the words themselves were neutral and could be used in a variety of settings:

When something political happens that I like, if a law passed that I was happy about, I'd say, "*Allāhu akbar*," or if I passed a test maybe I'd say, "*Allāhu akbar*," or I might use *Allāhu akbar* instead just for fun, because I like the way it sounds. I do think it's really sad that people use it when other people are murdered. I think that's tragic. (Harry)

5.4 A Step Beyond Comfort: Incorporating the Phrases into English

Some students are not only comfortable incorporating these phrases into Arabic, but they start discovering uses for them in English. *Inshallāh* (God willing) provides a good example. Logan got so accustomed to using this phrase when he was in Egypt that he now added it to his English speaking and thinking:

I find myself now in English saying that [*inshallāh*] or wanting to say it...I want to say that more than "I hope so" because it's better...I know they mean the same thing, but I think it means more. When you say *inshallāh*, you really hope that it's going to happen. And it's more powerful than the [English] equivalent, "God willing." I don't ever think "God willing" in English. That doesn't pop into my mind because it's too high a register of language. (Logan)

Ginette, an agnostic from a Christian family, had also internalized *inshallāh* and started incorporating it into her English: "If I'm saying something in the future or saying something I want to happen, always even when I'm speaking English, I always think *inshallāh*, always, always, always." Appropriateness also mattered for Ginette, not whether the term was religious

or not. For example, when she added *al-ḥamdulillāh* (Praise be to God) it was “just a response to how’s it going.”

Christopher felt that Arabic God-expressions demonstrated optimism, unlike English expressions used in similar situations.

I thought they [the expressions] were very interesting as a look into the values and the perspectives that were held in Arab culture. Thinking about the meanings of each of the expressions in contrast with how they’re used because, for example, when something unfortunate happens, someone says, “*Lā ilāha illā Allāh* (There is no God but Allah).” In English, it would be almost the equivalent of saying, “That’s really unfortunate,” or “I’m sorry to hear about that.”...In Arab culture, there’s more of a sense of optimism, trying to reinforce something positive by saying “There’s no god but God.” It seems to me like a positive affirmation of something that is believed to be a great thing, a good thing. It’s interesting how the English equivalent might be “Dang, that sucks.” Something negative and a little bit more individualistic, but then in the Arab expression, it’s much more humble and optimistic. (Christopher)

Christopher also found that the expressions were “sentimentally generous” and showed care for other people. For instance, he thought that *Allāh ma`ak* (May God be with you), used when wishing someone good luck, also constitutes a wish that their Lord be with them.

5.5 HLLs and God-expressions

5.5.1 Familiarity with the terms since childhood

Unlike FLLs who must adopt language learning strategies, e.g., using Arabic God-expressions, to normalize Arabic and minimize their outsider status in relation to native speakers, Arabic HLLs are insiders and using the terms for most of them is the norm. The majority of them are

raised with some or all of the religious phrases and use them in a natural and spontaneous way with their family and others who speak Arabic and/or are Muslims.

Sawsan, for instance, was an HLL who had been born in the U.S. but had grown up with Arabic in the home, had Arabic tutors, and attended Islamic elementary and middle schools. Similar to most HLLs, her proficiency in Colloquial Arabic (Palestinian/Jordanian) was higher than her proficiency in Standard Arabic. As a practicing Muslim, Sawsan was motivated to study Arabic so that she could read the Quran and understand the Hadiths. Her attitude towards the religious formulae had changed as she had grown up:

My parents always used them [God-expressions], especially the term *inshallāh*. I hated it when they said it, because it meant like it [what I wanted] was not going to happen. Then when I went to Islamic school, I saw that if you use those terms you are really religious, so I didn't like them then either. I am not that religious, and I don't want people to think I am a *shaykha* (religious woman) so I didn't use the terms at all until high school. My parents explained to me that you say these words so that situations don't get worse or that you mean it at the bottom of your heart, like when you are not saying it out of jealousy...[Thus] when you say, "Good luck," you should say, "Good luck, *inshallāh*," because you really want them to do well and they won't unless Allah supports them. That's why I started using them [the phrases] and now I use them too much, even with non-Muslims or people who don't know Arabic. (Sawsan)

Although Sawsan described her adult use of the phrases as "too much," she did not mean that her religiosity had increased. Rather, her increased use of God-expressions represented a reinforcement of her cultural identity whether she was with Arabic speakers or with non-Muslims. In the latter case, she appeared to relish the assertion of her minority status as a

Muslim in the US, an indication perhaps of Americans' increasing awareness of Arab culture and language since 9/11.

The three semi-heritage learners interviewed in this research were also familiar with the religious phrases, having heard them from an early age. Shohreh, who had been born and raised in California, had learned Persian from her Iranian parents but was more fluent in English, which had also been spoken at home. Shohreh was a practicing Muslim, although liberal in her attire, and had enrolled in religious studies before switching to a major in chemistry. Commenting on the religious phrases, Shohreh said, "I grew up hearing those terms, so I came into the class with an understanding of their meanings. For us, they're used in pretty much exactly the same way as they are in the Arab community. Nothing was surprising or new for me coming in." Shohreh saw more similarities than differences between Iranian and Arab cultures: "I'm Iranian, so I'm not from an Arab background and I don't participate in that in the home, but nonetheless, we're neighbors." She also noted that Arabs who live in Iran are essentially the same as Iranians, culturally speaking: "Maybe they speak Arabic at home, but other than that really, we do the same things, we cook the same things. Yeah, we're basically the same."

5.5.2 Difficulties mastering the formulae's social intricacies

Although most HLLs appear to use the Allah terms fluently, there are often gaps in their knowledge. For example, they may not know exact meanings of phrases. Natalia, born in Seattle, Washington, and a non-practicing Muslim, had learned Arabic from her Lebanese parents who had immigrated to the US in the seventies. She considered colloquial Arabic (Lebanese) to be her native language because she had learned it before acquiring English. In Natalia's family home, the formulae had been "used at home all the time," especially by her mother. However, despite her bilingualism, she was unable to translate the phrases into English:

I honestly didn't know how to say it in English (laughs) like if I am using a sentence talking to someone, I'll just say 'blah blah blah, *inshallāh*' even in English, so I guess I am just used to it too. It's so normal to use it in English: "Oh, I hope to get into UCLA, *inshallāh!*" (Natalia)

Although she had known before taking Arabic at university that *inshallāh* meant "hopefully" in a religious sense, she had not known its exact meaning. As she noted, she "couldn't put two and two together and come up with the words 'God willing.'" Natalia has a similar problem with *mashallāh*,

I know what it [*mashallāh*] means in Arabic, but I can't explain it in English. I've had people try to explain it to me but...I know you say it when you see something very beautiful, when you see a baby...*Ism Allāh* (God's name) is another one I can't explain. (Natalia)

Other HLLs in this study also described this translation difficulty as a realization of the culture-specificity of the phrases, i.e., that they seemed "weird" or "not right" in English because the English translations sounded much more "serious" and religious. In other words, the HLLs felt that Arabic God-expressions were dissimilar to English terms that could be used in the same situations. The result is that students feel they are using terms that do not, or cannot be, transferred to another language and thus remain peculiar to them.

Being familiar with many of the religious formulae since childhood does not mean that an HLL will have full mastery of the social norms of when, and with whom, these phrases are to be used. Hameed, who was born in California and whose parents were from Palestine, went to an Islamic Sunday school. Although his family had tried to implement Arabic as much as they could, he said that it "really wasn't enough to stick" as they would "revert back to English if

things got too complicated.” He had also lived in Palestine from age 10 to 12 years old and considered himself an advanced speaker in *Fallahi*, the local dialect of his village. However, he was only an intermediate speaker of *Fusha*. He knew that it was common for Arabic native speakers to use the religious phrases in English, but he never understood where Christians and non-Muslims “fell on that matter.”

In sum, despite HLLs’ familiarity and fluency with the God-expressions, they reveal a lack of mastery in the usage of these phrases, due to ignorance of their exact meanings and confusion about their usage with non-Muslim Arabic speakers.

5.5.3 Personal meanings and English equivalents

For many of the HLLs in this study, the God-expressions carried special meanings—meanings that they felt were more profound than the equivalent meanings in English. Noha was a senior majoring in health sciences and minoring in Arabic and Islamic studies. Although she was born in the U.S., she maintained strong ties to her Palestine heritage through long visits to Ramallah, where her parents still had a house. Noha’s main reasons for learning Arabic were “personal” and, as she was a Muslim, religious: “that’s [speaking Arabic] part of [my] identity” and “it’s important to know [my] heritage language.” Noha uses God-expressions frequently and says that, although their use is common, they provide greater meaning than their English equivalents:

Why would you say, “Hello,” when that has very little meaning, when you could say, “*As-salāmu ‘alaykum*, peace be upon you.” That means so much, much more than just hello...I choose to say, “*inshallāh*,...*al-ḥamdulillāh*,” and all those things because... those words have more meaning than their English counterparts. (Noha)

Although Noha considered English her second language, she was currently more proficient in English than in Arabic. The American community where she had grown up did not have any

Arabic speakers, Muslims, or Arabs. The result was that she had no opportunity to attend an Arabic-speaking Sunday school: “That was something a lot of people [other students] did. That’s how they know Arabic so well. Even though they didn’t go overseas..., they all know it [Arabic] because they went to Sunday school, or a Saturday school, or a Muslim school.” Also, her family had few connections with other Arabic-speaking families: “My mom had a couple Muslim friends, and my dad knew a Syrian family, but we didn’t really talk to them. They didn’t have any kids that were my age so I never had that practice.” When her parents speak to her in Arabic at home, she generally responds to them in English. She thought that this “disconnect” was not a problem of comprehension: “It’s not about understanding, it’s about being able to respond back...[I] can’t make the words anymore.”

Given Noha’s inability to communicate well in Arabic, her strong desire to do so, and her familiarity with God-expressions, it would appear logical that she would use the phrases for the same reasons FLLs do, i.e., to help with fluency and lessen the burden of conducting a conversation in Arabic. However, this was not the case. She used the phrases because they have “more meaning” than their English equivalents.

Two of three semi-heritage Arabic learners in this study felt as Noha did about God-expressions. One of them, Alfega, presents a good example of this belief and consequent behaviour. Born in Indonesia to Indonesian parents, he lived in various mid-Eastern countries—Indonesia, Malay, and Qatar—before coming to the US as an undergraduate student in 2014. Alfega spoke three languages well: the Palembang dialect of Indonesian, Malay, and English. His knowledge of Arabic, however, was not on the same level, partly because education in the three countries was not the same and partly because of the style of education in Indonesia, where students learn how to read the Koran in the proper *tajwīd* (Quran recitation), but are not taught its

meaning—a skill that is restricted only to people who want to do it. According to Alfega, “You can read it nicely; you have your own tone, your own melody going on, but then you don't know anything.” When living in Qatar, Alfega, who was Muslim, had his “I should have learned it” moment and thus decided to take Arabic when he came UCLA, where he was put in an intermediate-level class.

Alfega felt that Arabic religious phrases were beautiful and polite. For example, he described *lā ilāha illā Allāh* (there is no god but God) as a declaration of faith, a very “sacred” and “precious” term that he used in prayers. However, he did note that his positive attitude could be due to his Muslim identity:

In Arab culture, me included, we believe that there is a very powerful deity somewhere that organizes things around for you, and then when you say “May the supreme power help you,” it’s just like a very nice thing to say. If you go down the street and you say, “May whatever the biggest, the greatest power out there help you,” you’re, like, “Oh wow, thanks.” (Alfega)

5.5.4 HLLs’ usage of God-expressions

While FLLs use the phrases to sound like native speakers, to show knowledge of the language and culture, or even just because native speakers use them, HLLs have different motivations. One of these is to demonstrate affiliation with other Muslims and to show in-group membership. Noha, for example, had rarely used the terms outside of her family before she came to UCLA because all her friends were American: “white, Anglo-Saxon, decent people.” At university, she found others who understood the phrases, and she used them all the time. Thus, even when she would meet an hijabi (a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf) not known to her, she would say, “*As-salāmu ‘alaykum.*”

Lama had a slightly different motivation. She was a liberal Muslim who did not cover her hair, was not conservative in her attire, and associated with people who drank. She had been born in the US but had grown up speaking only Arabic at home with her Syrian parents. She had also spent summers in Syria with her extended family and now hoped to return to the Middle East to live and work. For Lama, the God-expressions enabled her to have an insider identity with religious Muslims.

L: I guess I sometimes intentionally use them [the expressions] when I have conversations with people who are, like, more religious. I don't know why, but I just find myself using them because I feel like they use those terms a lot.

I: To feel part of the group?

L: Yes. I have friends who are very religious, and when they're talking, they'll be using phrases like *inshallāh*, *mashallāh*, *subhāna Allāh* (Glory be to God) so when I am talking to them I find myself using them more, but if people aren't using them, I won't use them as much. But if a religious friend asked me, "Oh, Lama, are you going to this event?" instead of saying "Oh, yeah, I will," I'll be like "Yeah *inshallāh*, like, I'll be there."

(laughs)

I: So what's your reason?

L: I don't know maybe it's because that I know they use these things and they see people that use them in a positive way, and so I'm trying, like, make myself to be, "Oh, I'm not so different from you." (laughs)

It is clear that knowing the phrases and using them on a regular basis does not make Lama feel like an insider to a group of religious Muslims. In cases like Lama's, an HLL can make a

stronger attempt to show affiliation by exaggerating the frequency of the terms and prolonging the pronunciation of each of the component words.

5.6 Humor and Sarcasm in FLLs' Use of Religious Phrases

Humor that accompanied the production of religious phrases by FLLs was prevalent during both the formal and informal observations of Arabic classrooms and, according to participants, stems from a variety of sources.

5.6.1 Speaking difficulties and self-mocking

One source of humor was the challenge of learning how to speak in Arabic. Jack, who was born in California and spoke English at home, was a linguistics major and believed that Arabic was the most challenging language of all he had studied: Spanish, French, Italian, Garifuna from the Caribbean, and Lakota/Sioux from North America. Jack believed that Arabic would be a “really useful” language when travelling, even in the U.S. However, he found that when he heard people speak in Arabic, he faltered: “I like to say hello but then I’m, like, I don’t know how far I could get, so I hesitate and get nervous.” Jack, who was culturally Christian, did not think that the humor was related to the religious meaning of the phrases; rather the humor was found in the act of speaking when a person was still grappling with how to do speak correctly:

I don’t think it necessarily has to do anything with the actual phrase as much as just when you’re acting out things, you’re being honest about it because you’re in front of people and you’re nervous. Also, learning a new language is a humorous process in many ways because you’re going to say things funny, and they’re going to be hard to pronounce, and they’re going to come out of your mouth and feel funny, and then combine that with being in front of the class and stuff. You’re bound to have some lapse and nervous

energy. At least for me, I wouldn't think of it [as] anything to do with what actually is being said. (Jack)

Being very self-conscious about how one speaks Arabic and thus self-mocking was a theme shared among many of the FLLs. Another example was illustrated by Christopher, who pointed out that difficulties in the pronunciation of the phrases were good sources of humor:

I remember learning Arabic last year for the first time, and the first time the teacher said, “*Lā ilāha illā Allāh*” in class, a bunch of us [were] saying “How did she say that?” It's hard to use all those strands of noises. I remember other classmates and I, once we figured out how to be able to say it, we said it all the time so we thought it was fun. We don't think about the fact that we're saying, “There's no god but God.” It's a little bit difficult to personally attach yourself to those connotations. Then it really got bumped up later in the year when we learned *lā ḥawla wa-lā quwwata illā billāh* (There is no might nor power except in Allah). Oh, my gosh, how the heck did they say that in the video? I remember hearing that. I remember listening, trying to comprehend. Sometimes I think in learning a language, you hit a point where if you hear too many words in a row that you don't know, your brain just stops trying to understand. It's like, well, that's all I'm going to get out of the video. I remember having that trouble a little bit, especially because that expression seems to have more sounds that don't exist in English, like the more emphatic *ḥa* then the *qāf* as well. That was really difficult. (Christopher)

The two terms *lā ilāha illā Allāh* and *lā ḥawla walā quwwata illā billāh* can be tongue twisters for FLLs, and pronunciation efforts do understandably generate humor.

5.6.2 Dissonance between meaning and beliefs

Christopher's comment that he and his fellow students found it difficult to attach themselves to the phrases' connotations indicates that Christopher was aware of the distance between what he was saying and what he was accustomed to linguistically and culturally, which could be another source of the humor. Such an interpretation was provided by Kinley, who noted another dimension of Arabic's difficulty, i.e., the "dissonance" between what the students say and what they believe in:

I know a lot of people in our class who aren't very religious. It [the humor] was a sort of a way to lessen that mismatch between what they believed and the actions their tongues were making. I think, especially those of us [whose] American side is a lot more secular than Arab society...the dissonance between what I believe and what I'm doing was sort of creating that [the humor]. Although to be fair, when I'm presenting, I have hard time not being nervous. I'm sure some of those giggles had to do with being nervous about presenting in the first place. (Kinley)

This dissonance caused Kurt to speak sarcastically when he used the God-expression, *lā ilāha illā Allāh*. Kurt did not identify with a religion. Although his parents were Southern Baptist, an evangelical Protestant sect of Christianity, religion had not been an important part of his upbringing. He noted that he would not use the phrase to express wonder—as some native speakers do—because it was not the kind of language he would use when expressing astonishment. Sarcasm was his means of demonstrating the barrier that existed for him between the phrase's religious meaning and connotations and what came to his mind when he wanted to express wonder. Therefore, he was able to maintain an outsider position to the religion and culture embodied in the phrase:

If somebody was, like, “We’re going to go eat at this restaurant but it’s a really long line or you have to get a reservation,” I’d be, like, “*Lā ilāha illā Allāh;*” like, we’ll get in the door. Yeah, I’d use it sarcastically. If you’re trying to get off the phone with somebody or if somebody said something stupid, I’d probably be, like, “*Lā ilāha illā Allāh;*” but...Say I was at a museum and saw some beautiful painting or saw a beautiful sunrise over the pyramids, I would not be, like, “*Lā ilāhā illa Allāh.*” I wouldn’t use it as an expression of wonder. I would only use it sarcastically. (Kurt)

Christopher also reported being sarcastic when using the phrase when he was with his Emirati Arab friend at the dorm. For instance, if the friend ran out of swipes and could not get into the dining hall or was upset about what was being served in the dining halls, Christopher would use it. His friend would usually laugh when this occurred because humor arose from the use of a serious phrase for trivial matters –student sarcasm when using this particular term is something I often encountered in my classroom. Of course, native speakers of Arabic also can be sarcastic when using the God-expressions, but they use the phrases both sarcastically and non-sarcastically, depending on the situation and the communicative function being fulfilled. For FLLs, the God-expressions are culturally and religiously loaded and not part of their lexicon. Hence if they do use them, it is to fulfill the sarcastic function, which enables them to detach from the content of what they are saying.

5.7. HLL Humor and Sarcasm: Dealing with a Muslim Identity

5.7.1 Distancing oneself

The combination of humor and religious phrases is practiced by some Christian HLLs who want to create a distance between the message and themselves. For example, Marsayl, an agnostic in a Syrian Christian family, jokingly used these religious phrases to distance herself from a Muslim

identity. She played with the pronunciation when she was with Muslims to indicate that she did not affiliate with the religiosity inherent in the phrases.

I have a lot of Muslim friends so, like, you use them more around them anyway. I don't use it with Christian friends, not really. I know I enunciate it more if I am with Muslim friends, so I know I don't say, "*Al-ḥamdulillāh.*" I say, "*Al-ḥamdulillāh.*" I enunciate it more.

Otherwise it's *al-ḥamdulillāh*, you passed, *najaḥt* (good), *mabrūk* (congratulations). Like *Allah*, I don't really use it as much as I think. Muslim students use that a lot more.

(Marsayl)

5.7.2 Asserting oneself

Some HLLs reported that they may use these terms in a humorous way to expose and mock the negative conceptions that some Americans hold against Islam or even to challenge that image through confrontational yet funny remarks. For example, Hameed used the terms sarcastically and obnoxiously to "test the waters" when he was with people who were not Muslim. He knew the stereotypically negative image that *Allāhu akbar* evoked, and he wanted to trigger reactions.

Sometimes, I just like to be obnoxious for no reason...I was in John Wooden, the gym, and I was working out with a girl. She's a Muslim girl. She knows how to do the *zagareed* thing (ululations—a sound made by women in order to express joy at happy occasions such as a wedding party, graduation ceremony, etc.). So, the fire alarm went off. I had nothing to do with that. So everyone was being evacuated out of the gym. And so we thought it would be funny, so I yelled *Allāhu akbar*, and she did the *zagareed* thing. Everybody looked back, freaked out. We had it on video, just to get the reaction of what happens. Everybody freaked out and stared at us, like, "What the hell is going on?" I like to test the waters a lot. I like to push the limits so that's the only reason I would use

that [expression], just kind of sarcastically, just to get a scare out of people, to be, like, “Aha, you're a racist.” That kind of thing. (Hameed)

To be obnoxious and assert one’s identity as a Muslim in a challenging way was also illustrated by Natalia, who laughingly said that sometimes she would use these phrases to express the idea that “Yeah, I’m Muslim, so you have a problem.”

5.7.3 Taking Allah’s name in vain

Although the students’ humor, irony, and sarcasm is not intended to be inappropriate or disrespectful (although it could be in rare cases), some HLLs believe it is insulting to them as it mocks their religion. Noha, for instance, had seen the phrases used for trivial reasons, or as she put it, when “something stupid happens.” In this situation, a student would say, “*Lā ilāha illā Allāh,*” or “*Allāhu akbar,*” and then the others would repeat the phrase. Noha did not accept this usage as appropriate because the phrases were not jokes and using them in this manner degraded their meaning, e.g., Allah is the greatest. For her, people should only use phrases in situations when they realized how great Allah was, e.g., not having confidence about doing well on a test, but getting an A. When asked to provide an example of misuse, Noha described conversations during class breaks when she might say, “*Inshallāh,*” and the other students would respond with an animated “*inshallāh,*” and move their hands up, i.e., using vocal inflection and a gesture that were inappropriate when saying this phrase. She also noted that students might add, “*Allāhu akbar,*” although this phrase does not follow *inshallāh*. She believed that these student behaviors were attention-getting strategies.

As a teacher, I understand the challenging linguistic and cultural hurdles that face FLLs who wish to learn Arabic, and I have not taken the classroom behavior that Noha described as demeaning or insulting. However, when asked how she felt during these conversations, Noha’s

touching response made me concerned about this humor in my classroom and that some HLLs were offended by it.

I felt like they were making fun of me. My culture and my people. That's a form of racism and discrimination. People think it's okay because it's just words, but those words mean a lot to these people [Muslims]. I just really didn't enjoy that. I would tell people, "Don't joke about that, that's not funny." Not everybody got it. No matter how nice you are to people, there's people that just don't care and don't know that they're being subtly discriminatory, or subtly racist, or subtly stereotypical, and I just didn't like that. (Noha)

Noha also said that she had often been "straight up about it," telling people that their usage of the phrases was wrong and that she felt that they were making fun of her. Some students took that advice but others did not. According to Noha, some students did not even try to learn what the words meant. Rather, they took their cues from the media and movies, which inaccurately represented Muslims and used the phrases as trigger words.

Noha's observation that some students did not recognize that their humor and sarcasm were "subtly discriminatory" or "racist" touches on a complex classroom situation. First, I agree that most students do not know they are possibly offending their classmates: the last thing that an FLL wants to do when using the target language is be offensive. Moreover, the same sarcasm and animation in an Arab Muslim friend would not likely affect Noha's sensitivity. The source of her discomfort could be discriminatory practices that she has been subject to, making her susceptible to being offended by FLL classmates. I discuss this aspect of language learning in subsequent chapters.

5.8 Conclusion

As the data above demonstrates, FLLs use many of Arabic's religious phrases for a variety of reasons. They use them as a way to normalize Arabic both linguistically and culturally, i.e., they accept, and find comfort in, the fact that the phrases are integral to making meaning in the language. The humor that comes with use sometimes arises from students' knowledge of their linguistic inaccuracies and pronunciation difficulties. Sometimes the humor delineates the differences between the pragmatic system of their native language and that of Arabic and eases feelings of dissonance between what they believe in and what they are saying.

For HLLs, it is habitual to use the religious formulae, having been raised with them. Sometimes they employ the phrases, which are fundamental to the Muslim religious identity, to find common ground with other Muslims. At other times, they use them to challenge anti-Muslim and/or anti-Arab discrimination and stereotypes. However, some HLLs do not accept the humor when FLLs use these phrases and consider it inappropriate and lacking in sensitivity and knowledge of Arab culture. In the next chapter, I present cases of discomfort, avoidance, and resistance to God-expressions by both FLLs and HLLs.

CHAPTER 6

AVOIDING AND/OR REJECTING GOD-EXPRESSIONS

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 painted a picture of FLL and HLL use of the Arabic religious formulae, i.e., when, how, and why the phrases are used with both Muslim and non-Muslim conversational partners. In this chapter, I describe the opposite, i.e., when and how students avoid or even reject using these phrases and the reasons for their actions. The cases presented here vary in terms of intensity and cause. However, one common factor is that those phrases that students described as the “more Islamic,” e.g., *al-salāmu ‘alaykum* (Peace be upon you), *lā ilāha illā Allāh* (No God but God), and *Allāhu akbar* (God is greatest), were the focus of concern as compared to the less religious or “everyday” phrases, e.g., *al-ḥamdulillāh* (Thank God) and *inshallāh* (God willing).

6.2 FLLs’ Discomfort with God-expressions

Some FLLs expressed feelings of discomfort using religious formulae that ranged along a continuum from mild discomfort because of a phrase’s non-existence in English, to a stronger but temporary discomfort that went away with frequent exposure and use, and ultimately to an intense discomfort and a deliberate decision not to use the phrases—a state of mind that included a refusal to pronounce them during the interview. Reasons behind this discomfort also varied from purely personal reasons, to those related to the difference in religiosity between Arabic and English, and finally to more ideological reasons related to identity issues and affiliations.

6.2.1 Mild or temporary discomfort

The culture-specific nature of the Arabic religious phrases creates a distance between them and their FLL users that leads to less use. Christopher, an intermediate-level student discussed in Chapter 5, had looked at these phrases in a positive way, i.e., as more “optimistic than their

English counterparts.” However, he also believed that he had “no full resonance or appreciation” of their meaning because Arabic was not his native language. He thought that, from an American perspective, it was difficult to experience the terms as a native speaker would or to have a “personal connection” with them. Therefore, he remained hesitant about including them in his Arabic. Even an advanced learner such as Harry, a Christian who said that the religiosity of the phrases was not that problematic for him, did not use the phrases because they were often incomprehensible to him. He described these particular phrases as “Islamic” and thus “peculiar” to that religion. For example, *lā ilāha illā Allāh* did not “bother” him, but also did not “make any sense” to him: “I don’t know when I would use it. I understand how it’s used but I wouldn’t think to use it. Not for any reason. It just doesn’t come to my head.”

Some students described a situation of temporary discomfort, which they emphasized did not last long, when using the phrases. Ginette, whose father was Catholic and mother was Protestant, did not affiliate with a religion; nevertheless, she said that she was surprised when she realized how much religion penetrates Arabic. This occurred during her first exposure to Arabic and Arab culture, an Intensive Beginner Arabic course that was “sort of a microcosm of the Arab world within the United States” with teachers from Jordan, Morocco, and other Arab countries:

Allah was just in everything, and so that was interesting for me. I was like, “Okay, this is really a part of the language.” We don’t have that at all as far as I know, [but] maybe, as being an English speaker, I just don’t realize it. We say, “Oh, my God” or something, but it’s not these expressions, it’s not everyday stuff. So that was really interesting. I feel like I understand that a little bit more now. (Ginette)

With more Arabic study and a better understanding of the language, Ginette's initial reaction had moderated. Rather than being shocked by the religiosity of the phrases, she was now intrigued by their role in strengthening social and cultural bonds.

Kinley's adjustment to the phrases was similar. As noted in Chapter 5, she believed that the "cultural expressions" helped her lessen the burden of learning Arabic; however, she did feel an initial discomfort using the religious phrases for "personal" reasons. Her mother was Catholic and her father was a devout Presbyterian. Her family was very observant, and her father made everyone pray before meals. She noted that her family was poor, and often they would get breakfast and not eat again until late at night. Praying before meals in particular, and religion in general, began to seem unnecessary, perhaps hypocritical, to her:

It [before-meal prayers] used to irritate us because of our practical needs, so because of those personal reasons I took a lot of issues with that [Arabic religious phrases] just because it reminds me of when I was a kid and I hated praying [to] or mentioning God before meals. It seemed such an unnecessary thing when my brothers and I were hungry.

(Kinley)

Not only did she no longer affiliate with a religion, she was very critical of religions "as ideologies, not faith" and believed that religion encourages "authoritarian thinking." Problematic phrases for her were *bismillāh* (In the name of God) and *al-ḥamdulillāh* (Praise be to God).

Al-ḥamdulillāh was another one because that's, like, when you say in English, "Praise be to God" which is different from saying "Thank God." It has very definite religious connotations, and it was a little bit uncomfortable for me making an acknowledgment, a linguistic acknowledgement of a higher power I didn't necessarily believe in. (Kinley)

However, Kinley's discomfort with the God-expressions was "temporary," and after a few weeks of her first Arabic course, she learned to use them in context and was "a lot less uncomfortable." She realized that although these phrases praise Allah, they were "part of the communication in the Arab world." She was also more accepting because she had friends, non-religious Arabs who used the phrases, and said that she now realized that the majority of native Arabic speakers are inclusive and do not exclude people who do not use them. Although she had thought she would be "irked" by the constant references to religion in conversation, it did not take her long to accept them: "My mom used to say it's hard to hate what you know about or...someone you know, and I think that's true even when something like references to God and religion oppose what you believe personally."

6.2.2 Discomfort from fear of crossing boundaries and causing offense

Learners often assume they lack the legitimacy to use certain forms of the language, not only due to problems with proficiency, but also for social and cultural reasons and their outsider status. "Who has the right to use those terms?" and "Is it appropriate for those who do not belong to the religion to use some of these phrases?" were questions asked by the majority of FLLs interviewed. Language learners have a strong tendency to make predictions and formulate hypotheses that may not be accurate. A common FLL hypothesis is that the phrases are only used by Muslim native speakers; therefore, if people from outside the religion use them, native speakers will be offended. As Kinley noted, for example, there were certain words so "inherently religious" that their use or incorrect use could be offensive. Therefore, it was better to avoid them, especially because wrong usage marks "ignorance" of the language. This concern about appropriate use of the phrases demonstrates the fragility and stress inherent to the outsider position.

Jim, who was willing to say what native speakers say, still hesitated before using the phrases. Born in California, he had grown up speaking English but was exposed to Portuguese, Spanish, Aramaic, and Arabic through his Christian family. These early influences motivated him to study Semitic languages and literature. After obtaining an undergraduate degree in Iranian Studies, his decision to continue Arabic study stemmed from a desire to link loan words, language structure, and other comparatives with Persian languages. One phrase that concerned him was *al-salāmu ‘alaykum*. He never understood if it was used as a general expression or limited to a religious context:

I am worried that I would offend somebody by using them [the phrases]. If I were to meet someone who perhaps considers *al-salāmu ‘alaykum* an exclusive Muslim greeting and [then] to be greeted by me as non-Muslim with that greeting, I am not sure how that would be perceived. (Jim)

Jim demonstrates that he has designated himself as an outsider and that his self-imposed, unprivileged position does not give him the right to use the God-expressions.

Students are also very sensitive about committing errors that may show their lack of linguistic and cultural competency. Christopher, who used the terms in a humorous way to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps with his friend from Dubai, said that he would be a lot more “conscious” of them if he were studying abroad in an Arab-speaking country:

I would be a little bit more sensitive and concerned. I don’t want to seem patronizing with the language I use. I don’t want to seem like I’m certainly ever mocking because the expressions were fun for me to learn how to use and learn to say with my friends here... It was funny if I said, “*Lā ilāha illā Allāh*” because my friend dropped his ice cream or something. I don’t know, maybe that expression would be used in the Middle East

somewhere if something like that happened, but I wouldn't ever want to use the expression...I think it's fine to use the expression for a comedic situation, but never to make comedy out of the expression. (Christopher)

Even students who have more familiarity with Arabs and Arab culture and who have been in contact with Arabs outside the academic environment said they are still hesitant to use the God-expressions when abroad. Jared, for example, had extensive contact with Muslims, yet was cautious about the phrases. He had been born to a non-practicing Catholic family in Chicago, a city with a large Arab community that included Iraqis, Palestinians, and Syrians. He had had Arab friends growing up, and his family had hosted an exchange student from Palestine for six months during his senior year of high school. Now, he was double-majoring in African and Middle Eastern studies and Arabic and hoped to live in the Middle East so that he could improve his speaking skills. Jared had no problem using the phrases in class or “even in the United States” because foreigners appreciated the effort, but he felt that his comfort with the language and culture would not extend to his travels:

I think if I was abroad I would be more careful about what I say. If it was like a very sensitive situation, let's say someone has died or something like that, there's phrases you could say, maybe I wouldn't use them in that situation because that's... a sensitive time. If they're grieving, maybe they don't want to be annoyed by somebody trying to use a term. (Jared)

Kurt, who used certain phrases sarcastically as pointed in Chapter 5, repeated the same concern as Jared about giving offense. He pointed to *Allāhu akbar* as a problem because it was used in American media's portrayal of Arabs and, as a result, was mocked by non-Muslim Americans. For him, using it would be similar to using the “N” word:

K: I wouldn't say the "N" word around black people. Do you know what I'm saying?
Have you heard people say, "*Allāhu* snack bar?"

I: No.

K: People will be like, "*Allāhu* snack bar." People will joke around and say it...*Allāhu akbar* is [also] very offensively used in a lot of circles by conservative people in the US.

I: Oh, I see.

K: Yeah. I don't know how Arabs in the Middle East who only speak Arabic, who don't speak English, I don't know how much insight they have to how offensively people in the U.S. use *Allāhu akbar*.

I: Okay. Could you explain that to me?

K: People will just use it. If someone's pretending, joking around, being like, "Oh, I'm Osama Bin Laden, '*Allāhu* snack bar.'" They just use it to trivialize or make fun of Islam. It's a very mocked term, especially where I'm from. It's not like people say it every day, but if you do get on the topic of Islam, or terrorism, or the Middle East, you probably will hear *Allāhu akbar* or something sarcastically said.

I: You said Allāhu akbar is in a way like the "N" word?

K: Yeah, kind of. Even though the "N" word is in rap music, and black people can say it between each other, and it's like a term of endearment or joking, if a white person says it, it's like you don't have the right. You're not part of the same shared tradition.

To assess the validity of students' perception about the negativity with which Arabic native speakers would view non-Muslim foreigners who use the God-expressions, I discussed the issue with two advanced students who had lived in Egypt. Logan told me that he had frequently used the phrases in Egypt, and people's reactions had been a smile or a laugh:

L: In some cases where it stood out, I would sometimes get a smile or get a “Where do you study Arabic?” I don’t know why they would ask that because, honestly, it’s not really something people teach.

I: Why do you think they smiled or laughed?

L: Because I think they don’t expect that from someone who is obviously not Egyptian in the first place and probably not Arab as far as they know. I don’t really look all that Arab. It would surprise them, I think.

Contrary to Logan’s positive experience, Harry had received a negative reaction when he used *al-salāmu ‘alaykum* with a Christian woman. The woman was Coptic, and he said she had been offended.

I wasn’t sure how or when it [*al-salāmu ‘alaykum*] should be used because some people don’t like to use it. Some people get offended by it, like Copts oftentimes won’t want to use the phrase, so I didn’t know when or where to use it. Yeah. I don’t understand why she was offended, but probably for political reasons...[what] it basically comes down to is [that] politics and religion becomes part of someone’s identity, and then they think they’re the same thing. (Harry)

In this quote, Harry was referring to the hatred and animosity between the Muslim Brotherhood, represented by supporters of former president Mohamed Morsi, and Egypt’s Christian minority. The degree of hostility was so severe that any reference to Islam was rejected. His story, in part, justifies student concerns about using the phrase because of the Christian-Muslim divide in the Arab World. However, the outsider position they ascribed to themselves is attributable to particular circumstances. I suspect that many Arabs would likely take the FLLs’ use of the phrases as a sign of friendliness and amity—as occurred in Logan’s case.

6.2.3 Resisting Islamic phrases

In many cases, such as the ones mentioned above, student discomfort with using the religious phrases was either temporary, limited, or driven by a sensitivity about causing offense. However, this study found examples of FLLs who expressed a firm decision not to use these phrases for religious reasons. Molly serves as an example of this attitude of denial. She was in an Islamic Studies Master's program, and becoming fluent in Arabic was essential for her research. She had grown up in a conservative small town in the American Northwest and attended a private evangelical Christian school. She believed in God and described herself as a "fairly spiritual person," but she did not identify with any one religion because she did not like the exclusivity that the identification entails. She said she felt uncomfortable using phrases that "express religious sentiments," and firmly refused to use the God-expressions, despite having studied abroad in Egypt:

I never used *al-salāmu 'alaykum* while I was there [in Egypt], and I still don't use it. For some reason, I don't feel comfortable with this expression because I am not part of the Islamic faith, and I don't identify with it...I would never initiate using the term, here in the States or in an Arab country. (Molly)

In other words, Molly had established a self-imposed boundary between herself and the users of the term *al-salāmu 'alaykum*. When asked about *Allāhu akbar*, she said,

I am not comfortable using the term, *Allāhu akbar*. I can't think of a time that I would ever use this phrase. In English, I never say in conversation "God is great" or "God is greater." This phrase...is used really to express religious sentiments, rather than just [being] a phrase used in everyday language to say, "Hello" and "Goodbye." (Molly)

Molly could not pinpoint a precise reason for her refusal to use the God-expressions; rather, she had a general objection to communicating via “religious sentiments.” In contrast, Jennifer had a very specific reason for refusing to use the phrases. She was specializing in Israeli history and took Arabic classes because she wanted to study Arab relations, move to Israel, and work in peace activism. According to her, Arabs make up a large percentage of the population of Israel, and it would be “extremely useful” to be able to communicate with them. However, although she had been born in the US, she identified primarily as an observant Jew. She refused to use the Allah phrases because she believed that saying them conflicted with her religion’s practices, i.e., her religious identity conflicted with the identity associated with the phrases.

J: When I started learning a lot of those phrases, I spoke to a rabbi about it because I... wasn’t sure, as an observant Jew, if I am even allowed to say the name of God in another language, and it turns out that, in some cases, I am not. So, I actually avoid using those phrases in Arabic when I can. It’s kind of a weird feeling for me to say, like, to say it.

I: To say al-ḥamdulillāh or inshallāh?

J: Yeah it’s weird for me.

I: Why?

J: Well, there is this idea that Jews can only say the name of God... if they are conscious of it being their God, so when I say God in English—even that like would not be okay if I didn’t have the mindset right, the intention. So I can say Allah if I am thinking consciously about it being my God, but I feel like, for some reason in Arabic, it doesn’t have the same feel to me as saying it in English or Hebrew.

I: But if an Arab says to you “How are you?” You avoid saying...

J: Yeah, no, I don't really say, (pause) yeah. Like I won't avoid saying it at all costs, like in tests and exams, I'll write it down, but it is like a weird feeling for me to say it.

I: Could you elaborate a little bit more on this?

J: Sure. So (pause) for observant Jews or for other Jews, the idea is Jews pray to a God that's not the same as other religions' gods.

I: But isn't the idea of God the Creator the same among all religions?

J: Good question. Not necessarily, at least not in Judaism. I know that in Islam it's different. In Islam, all religions pray to the same God so that's why I originally asked the question to my rabbi, and he basically said if you're saying Allah meaning the Jewish God, then it's okay.

I: Could you educate me? How is the Muslim God different from the Jewish God?

J: Uh, the Jewish, well, (pause) the (pause) the Jewish God. If someone prays to the Jewish God, it means they are praying to a God whose chosen people are Israel.

I: Uh, okay.

Obviously, by refraining from using the Allah terms, Jennifer made a linguistic choice that matched her religious beliefs. This choice put her in an outsider position, which could separate her from the community of Arabs in Israel. It is likely that Jennifer will need to learn alternative phrases to successfully communicate with them.

Mark's situation was similar to that of Jennifer although he did not initially mind using the God-expressions. It was his parents who had cautioned him about using these phrases when he had started practicing Arabic at home. Mark noted that his parents were very religious Christians; in fact, his father was a church pastor. In his family, many words from other religions could not be spoken, e.g., Buddha, Confucius, temple names, and so forth. Understandably then,

his parents were concerned that *Allah* was the name of a pagan god, especially because Christians were not supposed to say the names of foreign gods. He assured his parents that it was not a problem:

They thought that *Allah* was the name of the Arab or Muslim god. I said there is no Muslim god, there's one God; everybody believes in one God. All the Abrahamic religions believe in one God. If an Arab Christian is talking about God, they would say *Allah*, too...*Allah* is just a word, like it's "Deus" in Latin. It's just the word for God. It's not the name of a god, so yeah I just had to clarify that. (Mark)

Given that the overwhelming majority of FLLs are agnostic, they are not surprisingly uncomfortable using discourse that they find particularly Islamic or religious. This discomfort stems from reasons both linguistic and ideological and manifests itself in different ways and intensities, depending on the phrase used and the student's religious background.

6.4 How and Why HLLs and Semi-HLLs Avoid God-expressions

The practice of avoiding religious phrases is not restricted to FLLs; rather, it is also characteristic of some heritage and semi-heritage learners. However, the latter's reasons for avoidance are different and related to Muslim stereotyping, the Arab Christian-Muslim divide, and a high level of sensitivity around the issue of politeness.

6.4.1 Fear of being stereotyped

HLLs and semi-HLLs live with multiple, and often conflicting, identities as a result of birth, background, and religion. Marwan, for example, had three identities: 1) an American by birth; 2) a Muslim by practice, e.g., fasting at Ramadan and occasionally attending Friday prayers; and 3) a Palestinian Arab by heritage as his parents were Palestinian. He had heard and used God-

expressions all of his life as is typical of a heritage learner. When I asked him whether there are God-expressions he would refrain from using, he said,

People are going to hear that [*Allāhu akbar*], and they're going to have that association [with terrorism],...and that's going to freak them out. If I were to say that [in public prayer], I'd lower my voice...It's a hard feeling to go through, to navigate, because I don't want to have to do that...I really wish we could reclaim that [phrase] and not have it be almost a bad word to say...We'll say everything else. We'll say, "*Al-ḥamduillāh*." We'll say, "*Lā ilāha illā Allāh*"—things like that, but if you say, "*Allāhu akbar*," that phrase specifically, they've taken that and have been using it against us. (Marwan)

It is clear from Marwan's use of the pronouns, "they" and "us," that he strongly separated himself from people who stereotyped his religion, and this separation reinforces or takes away from his other identities. He was very aware of his outsider status in mainstream America and very wary about it:

It's also an issue of safety now, especially with all the rhetoric about Muslims. It's been on national television lately. Being visibly Muslim or being openly Muslim is scary right now. I wouldn't say that out loud because of the consequences or the potential consequences of it. It's no less frustrating because of that. I understand why, but it's still very frustrating. (Marwan)

Lama, a non-conservative Muslim, shared Marwan's concerns about speaking the phrase *Allāhu akbar* in public:

The only term that I would feel afraid of using, and I actually have been in situations when I felt uncomfortable when other people used it, is *Allāhu akbar*, which is slightly irrational maybe, but there is all what it has come to mean in America especially after

9/11, the whole jihadi terrorist whatever. When I hear people saying it or saying, like, “*Takbīr*,” and the response is *Allāhu akbar*,...[it is] just very unsettling, especially if we are in unenclosed area where everyone can hear. The only other one [phrase] I might be uncomfortable using is *al-salāmu ‘alaykum*, but...groups try to counter that by saying, “No, it means peace be upon you,” so to lessen bad stigma around it. (Lama)

Noha, a student of Palestinian heritage discussed in Chapter 5, had been involved in several negative and racist incidents because of her Muslim identity. One involved a police officer:

I work in Powell library, and [after I leave], I realize I forgot my sunglasses. So I go back in and I see this police officer coming down and...it’s concerning to me [because] this is my place of work and everybody that works there, they’re my friends. So I was like, “Is everything okay?” I asked him like, “Officer, I work here. Is everything okay?” He just looks at me, he’s like, “I’m trying to keep the library safe from bombers like yourself.” (Noha)

Consequently and not surprisingly, Noha was very careful about using the God-expressions and fearful because she no longer felt safe in public places: “I try to be mindful of what I say and around who I say it.”

The semi-HLLs had similar concerns to those of the HLLs. Niya, a Muslim of Pakistani origin, thought that *Allāhu akbar* scares people because of all the connotations associated with it. She did not risk using this phrase because there were other ways to say, “God is great,” such as *al-Raḥmān* (The Merciful). Shohreh, a Muslim of Iranian heritage, reported a high level of negativity in social media around, specifically, *Allāhu akbar* and *lā ilāha illā Allāh*, and she no longer participated on such sites because it would be “a waste of time.” Moreover, she found that

her difficulty using the religious phrases rose sharply when she was talking to someone who was “particularly anti-religious”:

I’ve known people who are particularly negative about anything related remotely to religion. You just don’t want to agitate them. You don’t want to create a fight or a heated discussion or anything, so you just avoid what you have to for the time being. (Shohreh)

Language points to one’s identity, and an overwhelming majority of the HLLs and semi-HLLs in this study understood this connection. Thus, they avoided *Allāhu akbar*, a phrase associated with 9/11 and terrorism, because they feared that listeners might stereotype them as violent and/or extremist.

6.4.2 Acknowledgment of the Arab Christian-Muslim divide

It is not surprising that both HLLs and semi-HLLs avoided language that could create unfavorable feelings and discomfort in, or barriers or even conflict with, non-Muslims. However, Hameed (Ch. 5), a Californian-born Muslim of Palestinian origin, saw the issue through another lens: the Christian Arab-Muslim divide. He discovered this division after receiving a scholarship from the National Arab-American Professionals of Orange County (NAAPOC), an organization that he had assumed was primarily Muslim, not Christian. At the NAAPOC celebratory dinner, when he was receiving the check, he was asked what his plans were:

I was speaking to the microphone and told them, “Oh, I want to be a doctor, *inshallāh*,” and all of that stuff. They’re all sipping beer and wine [i.e., not Muslim practice]. It just didn’t click for me, and then my friend pulled me aside and was like, “Maybe you should try to keep this secular.” They still clapped, regardless, so I felt like I was okay, and she was like, “Do you realize what you just said?” I was like, “What?” Then, she filled me in, and I was like, “Oh, that’s interesting.” (Hameed)

Hameed did not take this information seriously until he was added to the NAAPOC Facebook page and saw “atrocious” posts. For example, the head of the organization wrote entries that he read as “We don’t want to hear about your God at all.” This poster wrote in such a way that he presented himself as secular and divided Muslims and Christians into “two separate entities”:

There was a ceremony that he attended, that they said that it would be completely secular or something like that, I guess. They had a *khutbah* (sermon) at the end. That infuriated him. He went on this whole rant about how Muslims should be...“If you don’t want us to do this, then you shouldn’t do that.”

Having come to the belated conclusion that NAAPOC’s members did not like, care about, or appreciate Muslims and Muslim culture, Hameed realized that, for his own personal well-being, “if you’re going to accept money from these people, you should probably refrain from saying any kind of religious phrases.”

Although Hameed had always thought that all Arabs lived in harmony, his experience with NAAPOC taught him that there was a “lot of divide” between Christians and Muslims and that there was “some animosity” there too. One explanation that he gave for that animosity was that Christians tried to distance themselves from Muslims:

A lot of them dress and behave like typical Americans...They talk like them. Arabic wasn’t even really spoken there, and it’s called the National Arab-American Professionals...As far as I can remember, none of them really had Arabic names...I’m assuming they don’t want us, in a sense, taking them down with us. They want to just differentiate like, “Look, this is who they are. We’re other people. We’re Christians.” They just seemed like they were just striving to assimilate and just did not want to identify. (Hameed)

Hameed's experience of the divide between Christians and Muslims was reiterated by the Arab-Christian HLLs. For instance, Salameh, a practicing Christian of Jordanian heritage who identified as "mostly American" but also "Jordanian," recognized that he and his family did not use God-expressions in order to separate themselves from Arabs who were Muslim.

My family doesn't really use it [*al-salāmu 'alaykum*] so I just never picked it up. I guess this comes back to the perceptions of religion, depending on majority and minority. I think, in Jordan, my family felt like it's important to distinguish yourself as a small minority in a majority, certain religion country. I think they felt like language was one way to do that. We don't say these things that they say. That's one way we distinguish ourselves. (Salameh)

Another HLL, Marsayl, who was of Syrian descent and had been born in the US into a Christian Orthodox family, felt a similar discomfort with the God-expressions. For example, when Marsayl went to her first Arabic class, the Egyptian teacher greeted the students by saying, "*Al-salāmu 'alaykum*," and the students were responding, "*Wa- 'alaykum al-salām*." She found the experience strange and uncomfortable because she, her family, and her friends do not greet one another in this fashion. Marsayl told me repeatedly that if she saw someone she thought was a Muslim, she would use *marḥaba* (hello) as a greeting.

M: I think still *marḥaba* (laughs) because that's what I am comfortable with. I'm not going to say *al-salāmu 'alaykum*. I'll never use that.

I: *Why?*

M: It just feels really formal and it also feels like it's associated with that religion, so like I guess in a way kind of separates me, sets me apart... It may be like if somebody hears me [not saying it], "Oh, okay, she is not a Muslim." It just

doesn't feel comfortable. It's just not what I use. It feels weird to go out of my comfort zone just to greet someone else [that way]. I'll stick to *marḥaba*.

Although Marsayl noted that she was in the process of “los[ing] her faith and question[ing] everything,” it is clear that her identity as an Arab-Christian was still sufficiently powerful to compel her to resist assuming an identity that she believed did not represent her.

Finally, one participant in this research was neither Christian nor Muslim. Ruba was a Druze of Lebanese heritage with very little exposure to Muslim culture. Although she had spent a year in Lebanon during high school, she had lived in a predominantly Druze area and experienced only the sectarian aspect of the mainstream Lebanese society. Thus she found that in her first Islamic Studies class at UCLA, she “did not know what they were talking about.” When speaking Arabic now, she used the “fluid” or “everyday phrases” only, not the “more Islamic” ones such as *al-salāmu ‘alaykum*, which she told me was either used by old people or said when entering a mosque as opposed to a store. “Quranic phrases,” which as she put it, were used in a religious context of which she was not a part. For her, the divide she experienced was that between the Druze and Muslims. In sum, refusing to use the God-expressions allowed the Arab-Christian and Druze students to reject the connections they had to Muslims through their heritage and to assert identities that were different from those of Muslims.

6.4.3 Concern about being inappropriate

Being very careful not to be impolite, i.e., not to break the rules of pragmatics, is a concern shared by all the learners. FLLs do not want to cause offense by using phrases that are, from their point of view, strictly Muslim and/or are widely mocked in Western culture. HLLs are also very sensitive about using the wrong term with the wrong person. For example, Salameh, “an

experienced writer” of English, did not feel sufficiently proficient in Arabic to introduce the God-expressions into an environment of Christian listeners:

I don't feel I have that same mastery of Arabic. I think it would be taboo to use those expressions in a Christian setting. If I were much more connected [to the culture], I would have no problem probably doing that using the phrases because personally I think it's important to break those divisions in language. Because I'm not as connected, I probably don't feel as qualified to do that. I have no way of justifying or defending or knowing exactly what I'm doing or why I'm doing it. (Salameh)

Although Salameh wanted to bridge the divide between American Christians and Muslims, he was not at a high enough linguistic and pragmatic level to do so.

Even advanced students, however, are concerned about preserving the rules of pragmatics in Arabic. Maher was an advanced HLL and a graduate student in Arabic who had been born in Californian to Lebanese parents but who had had very little exposure to Lebanese Arabic. He identified as a non-practicing Catholic. He noted that he understood the God-expressions, i.e., those used “reflexively or as part of the language” and those used for a religious purpose, and did not mind using them. However, he was careful when talking to someone with a religious background, Muslim or Christian, for fear of not being appropriate.

Maher also asked me about a part of the Allah lexicon rarely discussed in an Arabic language learning environment: swear words that are God-expressions such as *yehriq dīnak*, which translate literally as “God burn your faith” or more colloquially as “God damn it.” He did not know the degree of offense associated with these phrases or the context in which they could be used; thus, given the risk of being inappropriate, he did not use them but he wondered,

How bad is that [*yeħriq dīnak*]? Because my wild grandfather would say it when he was really mad, and it was one of those things you hear somebody say when you bang your finger with a hammer or someone cuts you off in traffic. I never understood if that was something that sounded really ugly. In your native language, you know which swear words sound really ugly, like the ones they don't allow on TV. You don't say them in certain contexts because they sound ugly. Which one of these [Arabic swear words/phrases] are lighter so you can use them in certain contexts with friends at school, with classmates, and which ones you don't ever say around? That's really hard to know for a non-native. (Maher)

This section has demonstrated the significant role that the fear of being inappropriate, i.e., considered insensitive or incorrect, plays in stopping students from using the religious phrases, whether the expression is a polite phrase used impolitely or constitutes swearing that may be “ugly.” As Mayer noted, “You always have your antenna out for what is appropriate and what is not.”

6.5 Conclusion

Two related major themes were shared among all learners, whether FLLs, HLLs or semi-HLLs, regardless of their proficiency level. The first theme is the need and importance of appropriate speech so that the speaker avoids offending his or her target language interlocutor. Related to this is the second theme: When students use the target language, they are very sensitive to who they are, to whom they are talking, and how what they say will land on their listeners' ears. Topics specific to FLLs, on the one hand, are (1) the foreignness they experience with phrases that do not exist in their native language; (2) a concern about boundaries that they themselves set and that separate them from the target speech community; and (3) a fear of mentioning the name of a

God who is “different” from theirs. On the other hand, HLLs’ concerns are far more religious in nature. Some have been confronted with negative stereotypes of Muslims, compelling them to hide their religious identity, while others face a religious division between Arab Christians and Muslims, which is manifested linguistically.

In the next chapter, I explore how learning about God-expressions in particular, and about culture in general, influence student identities, and whether that influence affects the three groups of learners—FLLs, HLLs and semi-HLLs—in similar or different ways.

CHAPTER 7

FROM THE MICRO OF GOD-EXPRESSIONS TO THE MACRO OF IDENTITY:

LEARNING ARABIC AS AN IDENTITY CHANGER

7.1 Introduction

The act of learning, regardless of what kind it is or how small, moves an individual from one knowledge state to another. Learning another language is significant not only because it takes the individual from a position of not knowing to knowing but also because the learner is exposed to the complex, unique nature of language itself. This aspect of language affects the learner's identity, which is fluid, dynamic, and constantly evolving (Norton, 1995, 2000; Wenger, 1998). In this chapter, I zoom out of the micro-phenomenon of God-expressions in Arabic to address the larger issue of how acquiring Arabic in general and learning about the Islamic component of Arab culture in particular influenced the students, especially because Arab Muslim identity is stigmatized in Western perception and media. To capture that influence, I examined students' attitudes towards Arabs, Arab culture, and the Arabic language prior to their Arabic learning process in the university classroom. Then I explored how the Arabic learning experience affected, or even changed, many of them. Change in identity manifested itself differently, depending on whether the students were FLLs, S-HLLs, or HLLs.

7.2 FLL Changes: Holding More Positive Views

Not surprisingly, the FLL participant-testimonies in this research show in multiple and variant ways that learning Arabic changed and expanded their views of what Arab or Arab culture means. However, it is the depth of this change that is exceptional. Student attitudes and concepts were transformed from "neutral" or tainted images and attitudes to positive and, at times, extremely admiring views about the target-language speech community. These new views

eliminated stereotypes of, and reductive concepts about, Arabs and not only altered their perceptions about the world but also about themselves and their academic future.

7.2.1 Gaining new cultural perspectives

The majority of the FLLs stated that their knowledge about Arabs and Arab culture was very limited before learning Arabic. In fact, more than half of them acknowledged that, apart from what they heard in the media, they knew very little. In many cases, that knowledge was limited to vague impressions of Arab culture such as it “came from the Middle East,” was “closely tied to Islam,” and was “different from Persian culture.” Their geographic comprehension was equally narrow; for example, Iran and the Arab world were “next to each other.” Christopher’s knowledge about Arabs and Arab culture before learning Arabic is representative of many of the interviewed students. He described that knowledge as follows:

Basically nothing. If I were looking at a map and I was showing where my knowledge of culture might stop, as soon as it would hit the Mediterranean Sea, everything beyond that is a mystery. Who knows how things go there?

Even those who self-described as having a fair understanding of the region and culture still stressed that their Arabic learning experience was an eye opener. All interviewees emphasized to different degrees that their knowledge of Arab culture had grown exponentially—knowledge that resulted in more favorable views and, in some cases, gave the students the agency to defend them.

Lydia, the youngest of the interviewees, is representative of this change. She was still in high school when she took the intensive Arabic course at UCLA because her ambition was to be a CIA analyst. She described learning Arabic as “very weird” at the beginning of the course. However, over time, her learning brought about new insights. For example, she came to

understand that use of the God-expressions by people speaking Arabic was not an indication of the fundamentalism and backwardness that are typically portrayed in the media. Rather, she realized that this use was an integral part of their cultural expression:

I understood that there were two sides to everything that I was seeing. I realized now that Arab culture and Islam are very much connected, but they're not the same thing. Not everybody who lives in Egypt, or lives in Iraq, or lives in any of those countries is...going to be a conservative Muslim who hates America, who thinks anyone else is wrong in what they believe. It helped me to better understand why extremists do what they do because learning their language has made me want to know so much more about the culture and helped me to understand more: really, what the difference is between a Muslim and a person who is doing those things in the Middle East. (Lydia)

Not only was Lydia more informed now, but she wanted to help her fellow Americans understand Arabic and its culture. Thus, when a discussion about ISIS started in one of her high school classes, she realized that the other students had “no idea of what that was” and that she was now more comfortable discussing Islam and differentiating it from ISIS. And she said her new worldliness gave her an advantage compared to people who “tune out what’s going on around them in other countries.”

For many students, preconceptions about Arabic-speaking countries and Islamic culture, i.e., they were very conservative, strict, narrow-minded, and oppressive to women, altered significantly. For example, Kinley’s knowledge prior to Arabic language learning was sparse and generally negative. She knew that Muslims were predominant in the Middle East; she knew about the revolution in Iran, Khomeini, and some of the other “dictatorships in neighboring

countries;” and she knew a little about Saudi royalty and its involvement with the U.S. in “war-mongering.” Learning Arabic opened Kinley’s eyes:

I learned that Arab people are a lot more open-minded than the rest of the world gives them credit for, given the sociopolitical nature of instability of the region. I also learned that there are conservative cultures in different countries, but there are a lot of socio-politically progressive people as well, and it’s [the reality is] not compared to what our media portrays people of the Arab world. They’re a lot more intelligent and competent and involved in the modern world than a lot of people believe. (Kinley)

As with many interviewees, Kinley blamed the media for misrepresentations of the Arab world. Already “anti-establishment in ideologies,” Kinley believed that the American media portrayed neither Americans nor Muslims with accuracy. Although “ambivalent” about Arab culture before learning Arabic, she felt that she now had a much more “accurate” view. For example, she had been “put off” by open displays of religion by Christians and Muslims; however, now it was “less off-putting” because she understood more about the role of religion in people’s lives.

Similarly, Jennifer exemplifies how studying a language can bring about revelations that might not be possible by other means. Prior to taking Arabic, she thought Arab culture, probably due to geographical and historical reasons, was similar to her Jewish culture, blunt and direct. She noted that it was “shocking” for her to realize that politeness was such a pervasive characteristic of Arab culture—a positive impression she had received from the many Arabic politeness formulae, most of which are religious expressions. As she said,

It’s [Arab culture] very, very polite and friendly, always offering stuff and saying hello a million times. In Jewish culture, it’s the exact opposite. Everyone is really curt and open

about their feelings, and not polite, which I thought was really interesting. I thought it [being curt and open] was a Middle Eastern thing to be. (Jennifer)

Logan, who described himself as slow to come to any judgement about anything, did not have an opinion initially about Islam because he did not know much about it. However, over time, he decided that “Islam is just like any other religion, but it has its own intricacies and idiosyncrasies that people take as being the defining feature of anyone who is Muslim.” He said that things were “muddy” for him at the beginning, but he began to understand that not all Muslims are practicing Muslims, i.e., some are “Muslim with quotation marks.” For example, in Egypt, he saw Muslims who would not drink alcohol, but also many who would. He noted that some Western people were confused by, or did not believe, this contradiction in a powerful religion such as Islam, and he realized that his education had provided him a broad and informed understanding of the diversity of Muslim culture and the intricacies of what it means to be a Muslim.

Alfega, a Muslim S-HL, did not accept the negative portrayal of Muslims in Western media; however, living in Qatar had tainted his image of Arabs. He had unhappy experiences with local children at the international school that he had attended there, and he now strongly believed that Qatari Arabs created barriers between themselves and “expatriates.” This was not necessarily just an impression because some Arab Gulf countries make a clear separation between the citizens and expatriates that hampers social mixing between the two. However, after learning more about Arab culture, Alfega realized that “there’s a great divergence between what they [Qatari Arabs] are and what their culture is,” and he could not apply what he believed about the “locals” in Qatar to all other Arabs:

I have all these bad images, but then when you learn about Arabic and you learn about Arab culture, you realize that it's just they're weird. The language is beautiful; the culture is beautiful so you realize that it's just them. There's always a bad egg in a group of eggs. (Alfega)

For Ginette, becoming more informed and enlightened meant that she was a more “enriched” person. Her exposure to Arab culture before learning Arabic had been limited to the media, a few “Muslim friends” who observed Ramadan, and an academic study about the controversy surrounding Arab women’s use of the veil in France and French republican values. For her, enrichment meant a better understanding of Arab culture:

For me, also getting to know people in a different language is very special and that's one of the things that I love the most. You end up with sort of a new identity, and then to be able to make a connection with somebody and using that new framework, you do, you feel like a new person...I think it's [learning another language] freeing. I think it opens you up to different ways of being. (Ginette)

Learning the Arabic language and more about Arab culture affected Ginette at the level of her identity because she had deepened her knowledge about, and her insight into, different ways of being.

7.2.2. Seeing similarities rather than differences

Learning the language and being exposed to Arab culture helped some students see more similarities than differences between the target speech community and their own, especially those who had traveled to the Arab world and met with native speakers as part of their Arabic learning experience. Nathan, for example, had participated in a high school exchange program sponsored by the State Department and spent three months in Oman. He had lived with a

practicing Muslim family and occasionally had gone to the mosque with the men of the household, an experience that increased his knowledge by making it “much greater and wider.” He now believed “there’s a lot more to it [Arab culture]” than was reported in American media, which “warps perceptions” when it presents Muslim culture as very different from other cultures:

I almost felt there were more similarities between that community of people [in Oman] that’s practicing Muslims and the community I came from practicing Christianity.

There’s more similarities than I think people would have thought...there has been a portrayal of Muslims and Arabs being anti-American...and putting Muslim culture and Western culture at odds with each other. The media and some parts of American society describe Muslims and Arab culture more generally as a threat to the United States or a threat to the West. Being abroad, living with this family for a year I saw how preposterous that was, and it’s kind of ridiculous to assume that this huge group of people are all in opposition to the United States. (Nathan)

The enmity between Arabs and Americans that is often portrayed in the media made no sense to him after living in a nurturing community that had provided a warm and welcoming environment. He had made “life-long friendships” in Oman and planned to return.

Joshua had also found more similarities than differences between Americans and Arabs. He had grown up in a Hispanic, Christian family and his knowledge of Arab culture was limited to stories he had heard about Hebrews and Arabs being descendants of Ismael. However, he majored in Arabic at university, took courses on Islam, and received a scholarship that enabled him to study in Jordan with a practicing Christian-Arab family with three children. There, he recognized that, instead of finding major differences, he found similarities to family life in the US: “They were trying to do the best for them [the children], send them to school, put food on

the table and live their lives, just trying to survive. I actually saw, fundamentally, things are just the same.” Joshua did, of course, encounter cultural differences. For example, he wore earrings and found that this was frowned upon because Muslim men do not wear earrings. However, he recognized that this type of difference was superficial and much less important than the human traits that were shared by all.

Mark, who started learning Arabic with an impression that Arab countries are very hot and women wear the hijab, responded in a way that was similar to Joshua:

I feel like we’re all people; ultimately we’re all people. We always have distinctions among ourselves, like I’m this and this, and these labels prevent us from talking to other people. So I think it’s very good that by learning a different language, we learn to overcome that. You learn to overcome setting boundaries for yourself based on differences. I think the same thing applies for how we debate about gays and lesbians. Same thing. People are people. (Mark)

Jared was the only FLL who claimed a very good knowledge of Arab culture because when he was in high school, his family had hosted a Palestinian exchange student. He realized that, although Islamic beliefs and practices were different, e.g. going to a mosque for prayers on Friday, Arabs themselves were just people: “I guess the more you realize that all cultures are very similar, you don’t view them as outsiders, you just view them as like us.”

In sum, the data show that students’ identities undergo change when they are able to see through ideological, cultural, and religious differences to the human similarities that they share with members of the target culture. Their boundaries of Self and Other start to dissolve, a process that leads to more understanding, acceptance, and even unity.

7.2.3 Becoming more compassionate and curious

The FLLs' Arabic learning experiences and exposure to Arab culture resulted in a more compassionate stance towards Arabs and their political crises and struggles. Jack, for example, demonstrated a more positive attitude toward Arabs when he sided with the Palestinians in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

J: Last summer, we were in class. There was obviously a huge conflict going on between Palestine and Israel, and that was pretty hard to ignore. I found myself definitely siding with Palestinians more so than Israelis and thinking about that a lot.

I: You mean the conflict in Gaza?

J: Yeah. I believe it overlapped with our course quite a bit... There was a lot of bombing going on where Israel was really going hardcore and killing a lot of innocent people, it seemed.

I: You felt that you were more siding with Palestinians?

J: Oh, yeah, for sure.

I: That's because of your Arabic learning experience?

J: I think there's more to it, and it's a very complicated issue that I have no first-hand knowledge of. From what I've learned and been told, I've always sided with Palestinians on that, but it was even easier to do when I was directly in an Arabic class. Not that we ever talked about it because we didn't obviously, but being closer to the Arabic world didn't hurt in helping to have an opinion on it, I guess. (Jack)

Jack became more interested in the Mid-East politics and came to believe that American mainstream media portrayed Arabs very negatively: "It's very rare that you see anything positive. Even though there's tons of positive things happening, you don't really see it." This

issue bothered him, and he even got into an argument with friends because he had been shocked by a “very blanketed” and negative statement, i.e., “something along the lines that the Muslim shouldn’t be Muslim,” made by Bill Maher, an American comedian and a television host.

Samantha, a Jewish self-described Zionist born in a small town in Washington State, was taking Arabic because she was interested in eventually obtaining a “counter-terrorism” position at the FBI. Taking Arabic had impacted her political views because her new knowledge and her contact with Arabs had given her a new and different perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than that of her family, particularly her grandfather who had instilled in her strongly pro-Israel sentiment. For example, Samantha’s Syrian tutor explained to her that believing in Zionism meant disregarding the concerns of the Arabs living in and around Israel. Samantha was interested in learning more:

I think being in Arabic has opened up this opportunity for me to have relationships with these people [Arabic heritage learners and her Arabic tutor] and know how the Arabs feel about this conflict. I am able to talk to the people who are directly affected by it. Now, my newsfeed on Facebook isn’t all just people with the same view...I get to see both views on things. (Samantha)

During her interview, Samantha appeared hesitant and unsure of how she would now judge the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She did not side with the Palestinians as Jack had, but she now realized that conflict, by its nature, was complex with tangled roots and no easy answers.

On the whole, an overwhelming majority of FLLs demonstrated a high level of motivation to continue their Arabic studies as well as curiosity about Arab culture. Many expressed a strong interest in going to the Middle East while those who had been there wanted to return. Ginette believed that Arabic class was a fruitful experience, not only for what she learned

but also for what she realized she did not know: “In a way it’s a good thing because it’s sort of unsettling and makes you realize how much you don’t know, and how much you don’t understand. It makes you want to learn and know more.” This motivation to learn more was also buttressed by the realization that she was capable of learning a “complex” language such as Arabic: “Also, it can be a confidence booster...to tackle something that you didn’t think you were going to be able to do. That can make you more confident in your life.”

Similarly, Christopher, whose initial knowledge of the culture had “stopped” at the Mediterranean Sea, reiterated the idea that learning about a different way of life increased his curiosity to learn more:

It’s opened my eyes, definitely, a lot more to how things can be very different, but neither necessarily good nor bad. It certainly has sparked my curiosity a lot more. I’ve been more curious about wanting to watch more Arab movies, about wanting to listen to more Arab music, and seeing what that daily life looks like. (Christopher)

Kurt, who believed that learning a dialect provided a better understanding of the culture, wanted to learn Egyptian and reported that he now was taking an Egyptian Arabic course series parallel to his Arabic courses although the work load was heavy, given the huge amount of vocabulary he has to learn for both classes. His enthusiasm was at a high level:

I think the cultural education is actually motivating. I still want to continue. I didn’t get burned. There’s some people who take one year of language and they’ll be like, “I hate this culture. I hate this language. I hate the way it sounds. I want to quit.” I had friends that did that with Russian...I’m excited to learn more. I get more excited to learn more as I go. I guess it’s like a positive feedback loop if you want to call it that. I’m excited to keep going. (Kurt)

Kurt's experience of a "positive feedback loop" sums up that of many FLLs. The more they learn Arabic and about the culture, the more they want to learn. Although not all students may decide to take a dialect course as Kurt had or continue to advanced levels, it is clear that many end up with a more compassionate attitude toward Arab culture and a higher level of motivation to learn more.

7.3 Other Components to FLLs' Attitude Change

Chapters 5 and 6 and the section above provide data that demonstrate that, in general, students' attitude change from negative to positive with regard to Arab culture results from learning about the language and the culture. In particular, I have found that learning about the God-expressions helps students gain a positive perspective on a culture that is usually accused of fundamentalism and backwardness. They develop a better understanding of what the expressions mean, the extent of the religiosity inherent in them, and the role they play as politeness formulas. However, as I demonstrate below, there are other related factors, both linguistic and cultural, that lead students to think more highly of the target speech community.

7.3.1 Language "complexity"

The complexity of Arabic grammar not only interested a number of students, it also led them to perceive of Arabic speakers as more intelligent and enlightened than they had realized. For example, Mark was fascinated by Arabic grammar, a positive attitude that made him interested in meeting and talking with Arab people:

I think Arabs are a great group of people. They're definitely not an obscure culture even though we may look at them as backwards nowadays. They're quite advanced. So that really changed my mind. That really gave me the impression that these people were cultured. They were civilized, they had knowledge, they had science, they had libraries,

and they understood grammar. It's a beautiful system of grammar. They figured it out. They developed it. It's actually very useful for Semitic study. You'll be shocked at how much we owe to the Arabs for understanding Semitic languages. I'm talking about old Semitic languages that no one could understand. (Mark)

His knowledge of the Arabic grammar system enabled Mark to better understand phrases such as *Allāhu akbar*, which US media included in their coverage to make Arabs appear more threatening:

What's *Allāhu akbar*? Akbar is *af' al* [superlative form in Arabic] from *kabīr* (big). If you understand the language, you know where it's from... But the thing is I won't use it on the street, no. Because if people hear me, they will think that I'm doing something because they're ignorant (laughs). Because they don't understand. (Mark)

Shohreh found Arabic to be worthy of respect because it was "sophisticated" and "complicated." She, like many students, was frustrated by the complexity of Arabic; however, over time, she gained a better "appreciation" of the language. Not only did she consider Arabic as part of her, she was ready to "defend" it:

I am more fond of the Arabic language than I was previously. I always had a high respect for it, but I think learning it and spending enough time with it made it feel closer to me than it was previously. I speak of it more positively than I would have in the past. It's not that I wasn't close to it or that I didn't like it before. I did, I was fond of it before, and that's one of the reasons I wanted to learn it, but that increased. That sense within me increased, and I'm glad that it did. I enjoy hearing Arabic more than I did before. I enjoy noticing that somebody is speaking Arabic or somebody is Arab, I get excited. Because in

some sense, it has become a little bit of me and my life. It's, in a way, a piece of me. It has become part of my identity, I guess you could say. (Shohreh)

Shohreh's comments reveal another "positive feedback loop" of language learning that arises from the fact that a language cannot be detached from the people who speak it. She found that the more she enjoyed Arabic, the more she enjoyed Arab people: "When you respect the language more, you respect the people more." Shohreh also clearly recognized that learning Arabic had altered her sense of identity. When the Other becomes "a piece" of oneself, the Self is no longer stable and must find a new "balance," resulting in fundamental change.

7.3.2 Diglossic nature of the language

Students become more aware of the diversity of Arab culture when they understand its diglossic nature: Arabs speak and/or understand both a formal and "informal" Arabic, i.e., one of many regional dialects. In an interview, I asked Kurt what would he include in an article about Arab culture addressed to people who do not know Arabic. He said he would demonstrate the diversity of Arab culture by describing its many dialects:

I'll talk about the differences between the countries and the differences between Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic. And I'll show them, "Here's how you'd say 'Hello,'" or "Here's my name in Egyptian and there's how you say it in Morocco, and that's not even the same." I would actually focus on how different it is, how Arab culture might not even be a thing. Lebanese people are very distinct from Egyptian people versus if you're talking about the Maghreb, that's almost completely different. Yeah. I think I just found out that it was a lot more diverse, you know. (Kurt)

Similarly, Alfega, who had lived in Indonesia, gained a greater appreciation of Arabic and Arab culture when he learned about the different dialects:

In Indonesia, you just have this vision that Arab is a one thing. It's like a uniform one identity that is the same for everything. You have that vision, and then once you start learning Arabic you start to see that even the languages are different. Shami [Levantine] is different from Masri [Egyptian]. And in countries that speak Shami, there are some differences..., and within the same country you have different dialects. You start to realize that there are these differences going on. (Alfega)

Students like Kurt and Alfega began Arabic with a simplistic concept of Arab culture as one uniform construct. However, as the learning process unfolded, their concept was proved to be false, and they began to understand the extent of the diversity and complexity of Arab culture.

7.3.3 Generosity, family, and music

Students admired the generosity in Arab society, the strong family and community relationships, and the music. For example, Christopher, who had talked about the generosity and optimism inherent in God-expressions (Chapter 5), became aware of the “optimism” and “energy” of Arab culture after learning about the way in which Arab families gathered for celebrations. He noted that the “comfortable,” “casual,” and “fun” side of Arab culture is not portrayed in Western media, but he felt that he could experience it in the classroom. This experience was complemented by the actions of his dorm friend from Dubai who always offered him food and insisted on paying when they were in restaurants, scenes that replicated a class video in which two individuals “went on forever,” offering and rejecting tea.

Mark was similarly impressed by the generosity of a Saudi friend, whom he had met in a language exchange event. They had first formed a transactional relationship in which they practiced language skills, but their friendship strengthened:

I went to my Saudi friend's home, and he made a whole meal for me, *Koufta* or something. It was really nice. It was really good, too. I'd only met him a couple of weeks and he made a whole meal for me. He said, "Oh, we eat it with our hands, but I'll get you a fork if you don't feel comfortable." How friendly they are. How open they are. Every time you go they always give you something to eat. Every time. And I've been there many times. They're always like "Oh, you're hungry? Eat, eat." That's really nice.

(Mark)

Nathan had also been touched by the hospitality of that family that hosted him in Oman and impressed by the sense of community entailed in the Friday prayer ceremony.

Every Friday, all their family got together. And before I left everyone came and brought food and everyone came to see me...And that touched me just because I was not part of their family, and I was only with them for a couple of months. But the hospitality and the welcoming nature and taking me into their family—that really left an impression on me because they didn't have to do that by any means. I am still in contact with them.

(Nathan)

For students, music was another portal into Arab culture. They not only enjoyed Arabic music, they also gained greater awareness of the diversity in the culture. Shohreh echoed other students when she said:

I did really enjoy learning some of the artists, though. Like, I didn't know about Fairuz, for instance, and I became obsessed with her after I learned about her. I still listen to her music sometimes, and that was really refreshing. I especially liked the diversity of artists in term of gender, in terms of religion as well. I really enjoyed the fact that Fairuz was not a Muslim, and yet she is tremendously famous across the Arab world. Neither was

her husband, and he was also tremendously famous. It's just refreshing to see that togetherness, in a sense, and knock down the barriers that we often assume have to exist.

I liked that. (Shohreh)

Shohreh's experience coincides with my own classroom observation that students often find it strange seeing video-clips of Arabic songs that appear Western and liberal as opposed to Arab and conservative. Thus, although some songs may contain religious phrases, the context is completely secular, e.g., the female singer of a love song wearing revealing clothes.

FLLs are not alone in appreciating the cultural aspects of hospitality and the strong bonds among Arab people. HLLs also value the generosity, strong community ties, and music of their heritage culture. However, these cultural characteristics do not change their attitudes towards the culture because HLLs are exposed to them, in varying degrees, at home and at an early age. In the next section, I discuss how and why HLLs' reaction to the Arabic learning experience is unique and peculiar to them.

7.4 HLLs and Attitude Change

Culturally and linguistically speaking, it is logical to assume that heritage learners are at an advantage, as compared to foreign language learners, due to their exposure to the target culture and the language at home and, perhaps, due to visits to their countries of ancestry. Another logical assumption is that their exposure to the culture and being part of it make them immune to the negative Western media's portrayal of Arabs. Thus it is also reasonable to question the extent to which heritage learners are informed about Arab culture and how the knowledge brought to them in the classroom changes them, if at all.

A seemingly contradictory finding of this research is that the overwhelming majority of the HLLs remarked that they did not learn much about Arab culture because it was part of their

upbringing while, at the same time, most emphasized that their knowledge of the culture was limited. Although these two propositions may seem contradictory, they do describe the HLLs' situation. Most grow up in a household that practices the culture of origin, or at least retains parts of it. However, that knowledge is fragmented by, and homogenized with, the American culture that surrounds them. Therefore, I argue that studying Arabic and learning about Arab culture affects them significantly. However, they grapple with certain identity issues, some of which emerge due to learning Arabic along with FLLs.

7.4.1 More culturally informed and responsible

For many HLLs, learning Arabic solidified their cultural knowledge, but more importantly, got them out of the familial cocoons that had limited their understanding of cultural practices beyond their country of ancestry. Hameed, for instance, is of Palestinian heritage and felt that he had been exposed to Arab culture his “whole life.” However, he found himself asking his parents if what he learned in Arabic class about culture was accurate, particularly when that information was related to a country other than Palestine:

There have been things that I learned that I wasn't even sure were entirely accurate. I would go home and ask my parents. They'd be like, “Well, maybe in some circumstances.” For example, it came up once in class that if you marry an Egyptian woman, their family pays for the wedding. I don't know how accurate that is, but it sounded like a sweet deal to me. (Hameed)

The Arabic classroom also broadened HLLs' cultural knowledge and what it meant to be Arab. For example, Safa, who identified herself as a Muslim Syrian American, decided that the diversity of Arab culture meant that her Muslim identity was stronger than her Arab one:

I think it [learning about Arab culture] has made me think more critically about my own understanding of the language and the kinds of assumptions that I've made about who was Arab. I pretty much was exposed to all these different things that I had no idea about, that made me realize that the way that I grew up was a very particular experience of Arab culture. I realized that being Arab was not as strong of an identifier as I had previously thought, like it didn't shape as much of my life as I thought. (Safa)

In other words Safa became aware that "Arab" was an umbrella term that covered many different people, not just the conservative Muslim that she was. She now wanted to learn more about her own specific identity not only for herself but also for the FLL classmates who often asked her cultural questions:

It [learning about Arab culture] has made me want to be able to learn more about myself so that I can tell other people the right answer, to be better at giving people information about my culture. Even though I'm a part of it [Arab culture], it has just made me want to know more about it. It has made me more interested in my own people. (Safa)

Noha was in a situation similar to that of Safa, initially unaware of Arab cultural diversity, but now curious for herself and desirous of being a better cultural representative when other students asked her questions about growing up in Palestine, the different dialects spoken there, and Israeli-Palestinian issues:

People ask me questions, culture-related questions, like the other ones I told you about. I just feel like I need to be able to give them a good answer now. I feel like now slightly more responsible for responding properly and not just giving my own family's thing.

As Safa and Noha learned more about Arab culture, they took on the responsibility of being spokespersons for it. They would not have acquired this new role for themselves, which

strengthened their Arab identity, if they had not been learning Arabic, but also in class with those who were inquisitive about it.

7.4.2 More “Arab” and prouder

Many HLLs reported that they felt prouder of who they were after taking Arabic courses at the university level. Despite using national (Syrian, Palestinian, etc.) or religious (Muslim or Christian) identifiers to refer to themselves, the overwhelming majority now said they felt more “Arab.” For example, Noha was still Palestinian first, but she said,

My identity has changed a lot since I came to UCLA, and since I met Arabic speakers, and since I started taking Arabic, actually. It has changed... Now I would say, “I’m Arab.” That’s my identity, but I wasn’t that confident in saying that before. Now that I’m learning Arabic, I don’t know, it just makes me more confident in saying that. I didn’t think that way before. (Noha)

Noha also felt that assimilating to American culture and losing her identity meant losing herself along the way. Although she understood why some of her friends took their hijabs off after the 2015 San Bernardino shooting, she did not want to compromise her identity in the same way:

Americans don’t have their own identity, they really don’t. They’re a melting pot, and I think that’s because the people that came here didn’t keep their heritage and stuff. If everybody becomes American, then you’re basically like nobody. I feel like that’s really sad. I really enjoy being Arab and somebody from Palestine and somebody that’s Muslim too. Those are all huge parts of my character and huge parts of my personality and what make me a person. If I lost all that, I don’t know what I would be, I would be like everybody else. I don’t want to be like everybody else. (Noha)

Hameed had the same opposition to assimilation. Because of his white skin and blond hair, he could easily pass as American, but he identified himself as Palestinian by wearing a Palestinian shawl and using bracelets and backpacks with the Palestinian flag. In his words, “just so someone could understand that I’m different than these Americans. I have a story, ask about it.” His growing Arabic language skills also increased his confidence when he talked to his relatives, thus strengthening those familial relationships. He noted that you can have a “million Ph.D.s,” but if you cannot speak the language of your family, you will feel “stupid.” In general, Hameed wanted Arabs to feel more cohesive as a people and stronger in their identity:

We should be looking at ourselves under the umbrella of Arab, yet we constantly divide ourselves. I don’t know. A lot of people that are from certain places, they like to hide who they are, because they want to assimilate and stuff like that. I feel like our pride is one of the best things about us. (Hameed)

Salameh’s experience of learning Arabic helped him more critically define what he values in both Arab and American culture. His new knowledge “solidified” certain aspects of Arab culture in his life and made him “less embarrassed” about some of its aspects. For example, he now made hummus for the non-Arabs he lives with who get “excited” when he makes Arabic food: “I get the bread, I heat it up, put out the side dishes, and we’ve had breakfast.” Before, Salameh “probably wouldn’t have ever done that or if I did I wouldn’t share it.” In other words, he wanted to normalize what it mean to be Arab in the U.S. and to show Americans aspects of Arab culture that are not available in the media:

“I just try to slip things in here and there, whereas there were times when if I had the choice about talking about something or not talking about something, I wouldn’t have talked about it. Now I lean to talking about it, or lean to bringing it up.”

7.4.3 HLLs' identity struggles

7.4.3.1 Minorities searching for their identity in the language

Some minority, non-Islamic students did not feel represented in the curriculum because the religious component of the culture, which they acknowledged was significant, blurred or erased their identities. For example, Ruba, the Lebanese Druze student, noted that the textbook and accompanying videos wrongly gave the impression that all Arabs were Muslim. When I asked Ruba what aspects specifically gave her that impression, she explained,

I don't remember all of them, but the Allah ones [God-expressions], you know what I mean? And then there was Ramadan and these holidays, but there wasn't an emphasis on Easter. Even the videos that were shown were very like women in headscarves. Even in predominantly Muslim areas like Egypt, not everyone's covered, right?... We never watched a video about a Christian community or a Druze community or any other community that are... present in the Middle East. There was never any [videos] around going out or clubs. In Lebanon, there are bars. I think a lot of people who I've taken Arabic classes with, who weren't familiar with the region, just assume everyone's Muslim. (Ruba)

Although Ruba felt that the course materials were not inclusive, the data presented early in this chapter clearly demonstrate that the diversity of Arab culture and society did become apparent to FLLs, even if not fully, due to their learning experience:

Marsayl, who was Christian, felt a similar grievance, and not only did she search for her identity in the Arabic courses, she also asserted her identity in public spaces:

A lot of the times I'm like, "I'm Arab," and they'll be like, "Oh, where is that thing around your head?" And I'm like, "No, that's Muslim, not Arab. There's Christian

Arabs,” and they’ll be like, “What?” and I’m like, “Yeah, there’s ten percent or 20 percent of us like this. There is a decent amount.” We’re a minority but still we’re something. (Marsayl)

It is, of course, implausible to argue that the desire of Ruba and Marsayl to make their identity more visible arose just from their language learning experience. The minority-majority struggle is an issue that has dimensions and repercussions well beyond learning Arabic in the classroom. However, non-Muslim Arabic speakers see the Arabic classroom as one way to assert the identities of Arab minorities, i.e., groups that are often neglected and need to establish and champion their existence.

7.4.3.2 Being subject to stigma

As mentioned in Chapter 6, some HLLs and S-LLs avoid God-expressions that are associated with terrorism because they are concerned by the stereotypical images of Muslims that misrepresent them. This issue also problematizes student identities.

Safa, the practicing Muslim who wore a hijab, complained that her classmates often thought of her as less intelligent or less critical because of the way she covers her hair. They even approached her and told her they were impressed by what she had to say, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, indicating they were surprised she had that “level of thought”:

There’s this kind of assumption because I look a certain way or because I’m Muslim and a woman who practices and wears hijab, that I am, for whatever reason, less critical or less articulate or less able to have agency in what I’m doing... This is a tacit assumption that you’re going to bring a less critical voice. And because you’re Muslim, you aren’t as intelligent or you’re simpler or you’re brainwashed or something like that. There’s this kind of feeling that you have to prove yourself, and you have to prove like, “Oh no, I am

doing this [wearing the hijab] because I chose to do so.” And there’s always this feeling of justifying yourself as an individual in a lot of these settings, especially when you’re having discussions about religion or faith or more critical type of things. (Safa)

Safa wanted Americans to move beyond this reductive way of understanding Arabs and hijabi Muslims. Perhaps because of the stigma she had experienced, Safa considered it important that students in an Arabic course should learn about the contributions that Arab culture has given to the world in fields such as science, literature, music, and so forth.

Noha noted that she was often asked questions such as “Why are you wearing something that means that you are the property of somebody else?” “When you wear hijab, do you feel like you’re oppressed?” and “What about [women’s oppression in] Saudi Arabia?” Noha had to defend herself and her religion, e.g., explaining that what Saudis do in Saudi Arabia has nothing to do with her religion and that “it’s not an Arab thing, it’s a Saudi Arabia thing.” Having to distance herself from Saudis and to explain what hijab means, or being subject to incidents such as the one with the police officer who bluntly stereotyped her (Chapter 6), compelled her to assert and re-assert her identity and her way of life multiple times.

7.4.3.3 Complex and shifting identities

The fact that HLLs are *born* into the identity of their country of ancestry (Palestinian, Syrian, Egyptian, etc.) does not necessarily mean that they experience or affiliate with it in the same way as those who *grow up* in the identity in those countries. At the same time, being born or growing up in their American identity does not necessarily mean HLLs experience or affiliate with it in the same way as Americans from other backgrounds do. In many cases, HLLs carry multiple identities, which sometimes conflict with each other culturally and religiously, and they shift among them over time, according to circumstances, and often with struggle.

Hameed recognized that switching identities was a survival technique that allowed him to avoid negative stereotyping. When he was younger, his identity was only that of being Palestinian; however, when he was older, he realized the stigma around that identity and switched to that of being American:

Whenever there's some kind of disaster that happens in the US,...people go online and say, "Well, all Muslims, all Arabs do this." Immediately, we're like, "Oh, no, we're one of you." Then, when we want to talk about our culture, we pretend that we're divided. I say I'm Palestinian-American, in that exact order. (Hameed)

Hameed had made several trips to Palestine and Jordan and, on all of them, he was identified as American and/or rejected because of it. For example, during a two-year stay in Palestine when he was in grade school, Palestinian children had aggressively "picked up fights" with him because of his very shaky Arabic and out of envy for of his lighter complexion and Palestinian–American background. During another visit in 2014, Hameed learned "the hard way" that he also needed to abide by the culture of his country of ancestry:

I was in a different city called Sinjil. They had a gym there, and we didn't have one at my place, and so I went and I worked out there. We had to walk home, it was probably ten p.m. From Sinjil to our home, it was probably like a 30-minute walk, and all I had was my gym clothes. I know that maybe it would be frowned upon. I didn't know that you could have a mob running after you kind of thing. Yeah, some older men chased me down, and I got surrounded. Then, luckily, they were like, "Look, you're this and this and that." I was like, "Dude, if you show me where to buy a shirt, I will buy one. I don't want any problems. I just came out of the gym." I ended up getting a shirt, and then my cousin came and picked me up afterwards. (Hameed)

Despite such treatment, Hameed said that these trips “ignited pride” in his Palestinian identity and gave him the sense that Palestine is his “actual home.” In particular, the Intifada, which he had witnessed during his childhood stay, had been a culture shock for him and left him with a strong sense of his identity:

Seeing a Hummer go through our village, seeing tanks on the road that’s right behind our street, going through checkpoints, having AKs in our faces anytime we would want to go to the next village—that was all insane. That’s why I don’t need a piece of paper to identify as a Palestinian. I believe, just experiencing all of that stuff, being on the receiving end of all that brutality, and the injustices committed there—I think it’s more than enough to make you feel like a Palestinian. (Hameed)

And Hameed was not alone, for adversity runs like a dark thread through many HLLs’ narratives about the reasons for asserting their Arab identity. Such adversity exists both in the U.S. as they receive Arab images of fundamentalism and hatred of the West and in the Arab World as they receive Western images of foreignness and outsidership.

Marwan was another HLL student who struggled with his dual identities: Palestinian and American. He was proud of his Palestinian heritage and, when discussing the cultural component of the Arabic curriculum with me, he noted that he hoped to bring a better image of Palestine to his fellow American students, an image that had, in his opinion, degraded amidst accusations of terrorism and/or sympathies with victims during the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He wanted to demonstrate that Palestinians had had an important culture prior to the Israeli occupation: “We don’t want to only be known for having been occupied for 67 years. There was a Palestine before that. We had an identity before then. We had music and art and all these things.” Marwan also wanted to go to Palestine, a place he had never visited, but he believed his history of activism for

Palestine meant that he would be turned away at the border by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF):
“Just because of my name, because of the way I look and my affiliations, they can pick any one of these things and use that as a reason to not let me into Palestine.”

For Marwan, this physical distance was matched by an emotional one. He shared with other Palestinians in exile a guilt that made it difficult to connect to his Palestinian identity:

We're not there so we're not really Palestinian. We don't have the same agency or legitimacy to claim what our resistance is. I'm here in America; I'm not resisting in any real direct way. By claiming my Palestinian identity, by just living and thriving, people say existence is resistance: that's a phrase that comes up. In a sense, it's true. That's in a very intangible way. (Marwan)

At the same time, Marwan was also conflicted about his American identity and felt strongly that he could not connect with American culture:

American culture, I don't even know what it is. It's like waving flags, eating hotdogs, and being proud to be an American. That's American culture. I don't watch sports. I don't really like the music that mainstream people are really into here. There are some aspects of it, movies and shows and things like that, that I get into. I don't think liking these things makes you distinctly American. I don't feel that I'm American, especially when I am portrayed on a daily basis to be not American. My beliefs, both religiously and politically, and my appearance is exemplified as un-American. (Marwan)

Not surprisingly, Marwan's ambiguity about his identity was reflected in his personal choices:

I have a jacket that has a Palestinian flag on it. There's days where I can wear that, and I don't feel I have any problem with it. There's other times where I won't bring that out. I don't want to be harassed. I don't want to have somebody think that I'm carrying a

weapon or something when it's just my phone in my pocket. I don't need that. I'd rather just completely avoid that than risk it. (Marwan)

In other words, Marwan seemed to be trapped in an identity limbo, sometimes veering toward, or retreating from, his Palestinian self, sometimes falling back on the uncomfortable perch of his American self, and sometimes just existing in between. As he put it,

I have these characteristics of not being American; I have these characteristics of not being Palestinian. I'm somewhere in between these two things. It's this weird drifting in between both that I can't really latch on to one or the other completely. (Marwan)

As these students make clear, identity is not fixed, but nor is it entirely adaptable. It is a complex and shifting "pathway" through dense ideological, religious, and cultural ideas and affinities.

7.5 Conclusion

While learning Arabic creates positive change in learners' attitudes, regardless whether it is a foreign, heritage, or semi-heritage language, the data point to the fact that there are differences in the nature of these changes. In the case of FLLs, learning Arabic eliminates negative stereotypes, creates a more favorable attitude towards the language and its speakers, and raises their level of motivation and curiosity in the language and the Arab region. In the case of HLLs, some have changes in identifiers; some feel an increased responsibility to represent their culture in the most accurate and positive way; and many show an increased level of pride in their identity. The HLLs' identity struggles and shifts are manifested in the classroom through a range of emotional responses from sensitivity to humor about their religion and a desire to show the best of their culture to their fellow FLLs.

In the next chapter, I further examine the dynamic of two groups of students learning Arabic in one class, i.e., FLLs as one group, and HLLs as the second. I also discuss, from the students' points of view, the advantages and disadvantages of this type of learning situation.

CHAPTER 8

HERITAGE AND NON-HERITAGE LEARNERS' VIEWS ON LEARNING ARABIC

IN A MIXED CLASSROOM

8.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, I examined how different types of Arabic learners—FLLs, HLLs, and S-HLLs—understood and felt about their use of God-expressions or, in some cases, their refusal to use them. I further addressed how the Arabic learning experience, particularly its cultural aspect, influenced learners in different ways. However, what helps or hinders learning in the classroom is also a significant component of this research and, as I noted in Chapter 7, the question of how LLs of varying linguistic and cultural backgrounds feel about learning Arabic together in the same classroom still remains. Hence this chapter focuses on the information I received when asking interviewees about their experiences of being in a mixed classroom and their preferences for learning. Although I focus primarily on the cultural issues that students raised, I also include linguistic issues because, in many cases, cultural and linguistic aspects cannot be teased apart and because linguistic differences among students lead to attitudes and feelings that cannot be ignored.

8.2 The FLLs' Perspective

Almost all the FLLs interviewed preferred a mixed classroom. They believed that the advantages of learning with HLLs outweighed the disadvantages. These advantages include Arabic speaking opportunities, a better understanding of a far-removed and diverse culture, and the ability to first engage with Arab culture and its language in the safety of a classroom, as opposed to the more risky environment of an Arabic-speaking country.

8.2.1 Seeking linguistic and cultural authenticity from HLLs

FLLs spoke about HLLs in terms of the cultural “capital” they brought to the classroom. Although some FLLs picked up the term “heritage learner/speaker” from me during their interviews, they often referred to HLLs as “native speakers,” “Arab speakers,” or “people from that region”—references that suggest linguistic and cultural “authenticity” and acknowledge HLLs’ status as insiders in the target speech community. These labels also demonstrate FLLs’ belief that HLLs are legitimate representatives of that culture and language. In other words, HLLs have more of a say than their classmates when discussing Arab culture or linguistic appropriateness. The data are consistent with those presented in Chapters 5 and 7, in which FLLs seek authenticity and native speakership by employing God-expressions, and most FLLs self-report a limited knowledge of the region and the culture. Hence they look to HLLs for cultural and linguistic “expertise.” For instance, Jack lamented the fact that he had not been able to travel the Arab world and described his desire to talk to Arabic-speaking people such as two hijabi ladies he saw in a Middle Eastern store. However, for both cultural reasons and his limited Arabic proficiency, he was always reluctant to initiate a conversation in Arabic. For him, HLLs provided a window to the region and the culture:

I think it [learning Arabic with HLLs] was very good. Being an American who’s lived in many different cities and been exposed to many different cultures, I’ve just had such limited--aside from doing business with people, in a store or wherever--like limited interaction with the Arabic world. So for me it was definitely a positive because again like I’ve never interacted...which is unfortunate. To have the opportunity to interact with people that are from the Arabic world is great for me. (Jack)

Jennifer, an FLL with a Jewish and Israeli background, appreciated the “authenticity” of her HLL classmates. In response to an interview question about which Arab country she would like to visit, she identified Saudi Arabia and regretted the political and religious reasons that banned her from going there. She wanted to see the birthplace of Islam and that country where “they cut off people’s hands.” However, the closest she could come was talking to HLLs:

One thing I really like is talking to religious Muslims in class. They’re my favorite people to befriend because I love to learn about the authentic culture of their religion...I’m definitely jealous of the people who can speak Arabic way better than me...It makes more sense to me if I’m learning the language, to learn it from people whose culture coincides with that language. (Jennifer)

Jennifer, who wished to be a peace activist, viewed HLLs in class as an “opportunity” for a “trial run,” i.e., creating bonds with people who are often against Israel. She proudly described some success finding common ground with another student in an elementary-level Arabic class:

There was a hijabi girl who sat next to me. We spoke a lot about the different cultures between us, and also about this idea of Westernization among the two cultures and the problems that it creates for both peoples. We actually found a lot of common ground, especially in terms of when it comes to Israel and Palestine, that kind of thing. It was really nice. We developed a very good friendship. We had some very good conversations about religion and politics. (Jennifer)

To some FLLs, the HLLs provide a missing link between abstract information, whether linguistic or cultural, from the textbook and the concrete or “real” information about Arabs and Arabic. Ginette described textbook learning of Arabic as studying language out of context, which

made it feel distant and removed. For her, the HLLs brought the reality of the language into the classroom:

Sometimes when you're studying something, it's so out of context, because we're learning how to speak a language in this very formal classroom setting. With the heritage speakers, when they bring in their knowledge of colloquial expressions or when they talk with each other, you're reminded "Oh, this is language. Language is used to communicate with your friends." It puts things into perspective. Sometimes it [studying Arabic] seems like you're studying rocket science...I feel the Arab speakers will always say "But, my Mom always says blah, blah, blah." That gives us more insight into the culture and the language. (Ginette)

Textbook language instruction is also not as enjoyable as language learning from people who belong to the culture. For example, Christopher described an unusual cultural project for his Arabic class. An HLL invited an FLL to a family wedding, and each reported to the class and showed videos from the event, allowing other students to "live" the experience instead of being taught by the professor, a textbook, or a YouTube video:

I remember last year, one of our presentations, these two girls were partnered up and one of them who was Egyptian invited the other to a wedding because someone in her family was getting married. She showed us some videos and she talked with us about a marriage ceremony happening inside the house and this huge amount of family gathering. That was probably the first time I really saw how exciting of a party it was and how really energetic and lively everyone was. That was very interesting. (Christopher)

Many FLLs affirmed that they seek out HLLs for questions they have related to the culture. Christopher, for instance, wondered whether the mores of one Arab country extended to another:

I remember last year we watched *'asal iswid* (Molasses) [as a class assignment]. There's a lot of presentation of culture in Cairo. I remember talking a little bit with my friend last year from Dubai asking him, "Is it like this anywhere in Dubai?" I remember in the movie we saw how a grown-up man wouldn't use a backpack if he was going somewhere, he would carry those things in a bag instead. I was curious, like why a backpack seems so much more convenient. I asked my friend from Dubai if it was the same like that there. I have enjoyed being able to clarify questions like that. (Christopher)

Nathan, who had lived in Oman for three months, realized that his experience of high school there could not be extrapolated to all Arab high school students and was curious about his fellow HLLs such as Ruba, a Lebanese heritage learner:

I remember, especially when she [Ruba] first joined our class last year, I asked her about her experience in high school in Lebanon, just asking what it was about and what it was like. She would sometimes tell stories about what they would do there and how she learned Arabic, because she learned it when she went to Lebanon. (Nathan)

Such exchanges acted as a "glue" that brought FLLs and HLLs together, triggered by pair work and often continuing during the break or resuming after class.

Class presentations provide fertile ground for curiosity as students are encouraged to ask questions to the speaker at the end of the presentation. When the presenter is an HLL, some questions revolve around the peculiar culture of the country of ancestry. As Kinley explained:

After those presentations, some of us would have more questions than others, and there usually was a time for me to ask questions beyond like the really basic ones. I'd ask like, "Elaborate more on this ritual at home," or "You're not as religious as your parents, even though you wear hijab, you follow the religion, so how does that work with your parents who you just said were really devoted?" That kind of thing. (Kinley)

Although such questions spur HLLs' motivation to search for answers, as discussed in Chapter 7, some HLLs do not have the linguistic and cultural proficiency to answer accurately. Nonetheless, the FLLs seem confident that HLLs will be able to feed their curiosity. What also remains true is that FLLs consider their HLL classmates as cultural resources although the "native speaker" label is problematic given its complicated and controversial meaning and boundaries, as will be further discussed in Chapter 9.

8.2.2 Learning from the diversity of HLLs

As discussed in Chapter 7, the diglossic nature of Arabic and the students' awareness of it enable FLLs to better understand that the umbrella term "Arab culture," encompasses more diversity than unity. The many dialects spoken by HLLs demonstrate "live" the dissimilarities of the Arab world and, although FLLs may not end up mastering such differences, it does bring home to them the linguistic reality of Arabic. Ginette reported enjoying the experience:

It's great to hear different dialects...it's great when a teacher is talking about a kind of expression or something to be like, oh, how is this used here, how is this used here, and so it's culturally very interesting and enriching to have people who can chime in from the way language is used in different contexts.

Some FLLs find classroom input by HLLs to be a source of vibrancy and liveliness. For example, when asked about the benefits or drawbacks of an FLL-only class, Jennifer objected,

“It would be so boring if everyone in there [the class] was like me [an FLL] because you get more than just the language. It would be boring and less nourishing, for sure.” Then, when asked a follow-up question about what she could get that was “more than just the language,” she described learning about a culture and another student’s perspectives on the Middle East:

I got to learn the differences in countries, the nuance differences in countries. This one girl, who’s Lebanese, she is in the Arab sorority, and ours is a Jewish sorority. I knew her last year. I really didn’t even know there was an Arab sorority, so I was really interested in what they did so I looked it up. That was interesting to me. I once invited her to dinner and learned about how she feels about Lebanon and what she feels about the [Palestinian-Israeli] conflict, and how she told me about her friends being affected by it because I saw something on her Facebook. She told me how she felt about Lebanon and what they do in her Arab sorority. I felt like it was interesting to me because it was like almost Arab and Jewish sorority. I felt it would be fun to meet up or do an event together. To me there’s always this kind of--like Jews and Arabs always have this weird tension there. (Jennifer)

FLLs view the diversity among dialects as a benefit rather than a drawback. Christopher, in his beginner course, was uncomfortable studying Arabic with HLLs who were more proficient in the language than he was. However, this discomfort lasted for only a few weeks:

I started to get more comfortable and glad for it in terms of being able to know that there were students around me that could easily, relatively easily, answer questions about an expression or how that might be used differently in Lebanon or in Jordan or in Egypt. (Christopher)

Joshua found that HLLs were also useful resources at language-mixer activities that bring together the Arabic students and Arab ESL students from UCLA extension courses. They must converse both in Arabic and English, but getting started could often be difficult:

They [HLLs] play more of a helping role. I remember when we had the mixer. No one was there to facilitate it so I tried to facilitate it. I knew the majority of the people there were first-quarter learners. I understood what they were, and I was trying to make them feel more comfortable around people. They thought I was an expert in Arabic but I suck. It made me feel good that there was a heritage speaker who was talking with the first-quarter speakers. Another benefit, they can get the class going sometimes if us, non-heritage, don't know what to say. (Joshua)

Arabic instructors are always concerned about the FLL-HLL imbalance in students' proficiency levels and worry that FLLs might be intimidated or bothered by it. However, as the data discussed here demonstrate, FLLs have a different and more positive perspective.

8.2.3 Enjoying a safe learning environment

The discussion of political issues in the classroom can be problematic; hence many Arabic instructors worry that it will cause tension and distress among the students. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is of particular concern because HLLs are expected to side with the Palestinians, especially those of Palestinian heritage, while some FLLs, especially Jews, are expected to support Israel. Fortunately, the FLL interviews revealed that instructors do not have to be so anxious because political discourse in the classroom can be handled in a safe manner. Jennifer, the self-described Zionist, pointed out that, in fact, she had had positive experiences with the Muslim or Arab students when discussing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and her negative experience had been with another American student:

I mentioned that I'm moving to Israel soon. She started talking about how she went to Palestine, and how horrible the conditions are, and how much the Jewish settlements don't fit into the scenery, but the Palestinians fit just well into the scenery, the Jewish colonizers and that kind of stuff. I tried to talk with her about it, like asking her what is this a product of? What's really going on here? She wasn't as open to it as some of the other Arab people...in the class. I thought that was interesting, but not too surprising. In general, I find that people from America are much less inclined to find similarities between the two peoples [Israelis and Palestinians] than people who actually share a stake in it. I've had more productive conversations with the Arabs in the class than the American girl. (Jennifer)

FLLs prove to be very tolerant of differences in opinion with HLLs. Although they can be disturbed by some HLL presentations and remarks, on the whole they consider their points of view as an opportunity for discussion. For example, Marwan gave a presentation in which he talked about how his grandfather had been forced to leave his home and orange groves in Palestine to join the Arab diaspora. Samantha, who is a self-defined Zionist, was both interested and disturbed by the presentation:

I could really understand what he was saying. I know he was in Students for Justice in Palestine. I thought it was interesting. It disturbed me, with the orange groves that he was talking about, and I know Israelis had orange groves too. I can relate that to a lot of families in Israel. Then I thought that's sad, and how he views the Israeli Army as pushing them out, and how much they're impacted by it. Then, on the other hand, I go right back to the other side of campus, and I see that one of my really good friends who was in the IDF [Israeli Defense Force] for seven years, and how she says they go through

training on ethical codes. Of course, I think you can say you're pro-Israel, but that doesn't have to mean that you agree with every single thing that goes on in Israel. If you do, I think you're naïve. We're not angels. We're not devils. We're human beings.

(Samantha)

Classroom discussions and student conversations about contentious issues such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict cannot, of course, solve those issues or change committed minds; however, HLLs provide FLLs with opportunities to view conflicts from different perspectives.

Although the mixed classroom does provide a safe space for learning, it cannot completely mitigate some FLLs' self-doubt concerning their interactions with HLLs. Samantha, for example, worried that the HLLs disapproved of her values and her pro-Israeli stance:

Sometimes I feel like if we [Samantha and the HLLs] become friends on Facebook and I have something on Facebook...The other day I saw that in Israel they are teaching all kids Arabic starting in kindergarten. I posted something about it: "Oh, it's great." Something about Israel I'll put, not too much, but at Friends for Israel we all have to post something together so I'm always like, I wonder if they [the HLLs] don't value it, or if they look down on me, or how they feel about me, and if they think I'm blind to things or if I'm not respecting them and their culture. I worry a lot about that. (Samantha)

This level of student discomfort is slight and not problematic. Samantha's experience demonstrates a respectful and friendly attitude toward HLLs, a desire to present a self-image that will make it possible for her friendship with them to continue, and an ongoing impetus to remember and consider others' points of view.

Finally, the data on FLL humor and irony when using the God-expressions reveal another example of the safety they find in the mixed classroom. First, they do not worry that HLLs will

be offended by, or judgmental about, this humor; rather, the FLLs considered everyone in the classroom as insiders who will get and appreciate the joke. Second, although FLLs describe HLLs as “others,” i.e., “people from that region” and “native speakers,” they feel sufficient equality with the HLLs as fellow learners to make poke fun at the language and culture. Third, FLLs, as exemplified by Kurt and Christopher, feel free to be sarcastic about the phrases in class but are careful about, or even refrain from, their use when studying abroad. As this humor about the God-expressions demonstrates, FLLs are not discomfited by the presence of HLLs in the class with them; instead, they feel free to experiment with the language and culture.

8.2.4 Balancing different levels of proficiency

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Arabic HLLs get exposed primarily to the Arabic dialect spoken at home because of the diglossic nature of the language. At first glance, this would appear to give them an advantage in the classroom over FLLs who have no prior exposure to Arabic. However, HLLs’ grasp of Standard Arabic is problematic. Although some HLLs can achieve a level of Standard Arabic proficiency through such means as Sunday school attendance, their mastery of Standard Arabic generally lags behind their ability to speak the dialect they have learned at home. In this section, I demonstrate that, although the HLLs’ initial language advantage can cause some FLL discomfort, the power dynamic between the two groups settles into an equilibrium in which the FLLs find more rewards than drawbacks to sharing a classroom.

8.2.4.1 Discomfort due to different levels of proficiency

Some FLLs found it frustrating at the initial stage of the learning process, i.e., the first couple of weeks or the first quarter, to be in a classroom with HLLs whose verbal proficiency in Arabic is much greater than theirs. Samantha described the feeling:

At first, I felt like “Gosh, this sucks,” because I feel like it can come naturally to them, and they can just go on and on in Arabic, and then for me I have to practice so much even to get one little vowel right and practice it over and over again. (Samantha)

Niya, who was in fact an S-HLL with Pakistani and Islamic heritage, was so discomfited by having more advanced students in the classroom that she preferred separate learning tracks. The fact that her vocabulary repertoire lagged behind some of her HLL peers bothered her and obstructed her train of thought:

They [HLLs] always want to use these words that they know, and I hate it. This is my biggest pet peeve about Arabic class. Our vocab is very limited, because we’re learning very slowly. They’ll write a sentence on the board, and then, I’m over here, like already trying to learn a different language, already struggling to make sense of everything in my mind, and then they keep throwing words. I get confused like, “Did we learn that word?” “Am I forgetting it? Oh! It’s one of the words we haven’t learned yet, so I don’t have to feel bad about not knowing it.” I really don’t like that...It really messes up my whole thought process. (Niya)

Niya was also uncomfortable making mistakes in front of her fellow HLLs:

Speaking is always a struggle when you don’t know the accent, when you’re not the best at pronunciation. I don’t feel as comfortable trying to learn it, like going through the learning process with Arab speakers watching me. Even if they’re not thinking anything or they’re not saying anything, for them, it’s intuitive, it’s natural. They know how to pronounce things, and they know how to sound Arab when they’re talking. That’s something that I have to consciously learn how to do. Of course, I’m going to mess up, but I don’t feel comfortable messing up in front of them. (Niya)

Moreover, Niya believed that separate classrooms would also benefit FLLs. In fact, she took the position of the FLL-defender when confronted with HLLs' intolerance to repetition and questions in the classroom:

There's this one girl in my class, who is a non-heritage speaker. She struggles a lot with the class, but she works really hard. She's a little bit more behind than other non-heritage speakers, too, because it's just really difficult for her. She was asking a question about something, and these two heritage speakers, they're getting annoyed. They're kind of laughing like, "Oh, God, she has a question again. That one girl who is like not keeping up with us has a question again. Oh, God, we already learned this last week." I get it, her question was a basic question. I was kind of tired of it too, but I know she's learning something completely different. The fact that they had the audacity to be annoyed at that, that really bothered me. This is a learning environment. (Niya)

However, when I asked Ginette, an excellent student who outperformed many HLLs in my class, if she was ever bothered or intimidated by the presence of the HLLs, she made it clear that she never compared herself to them: "No, because I just separate it out. I just understand that they're coming from a totally different place, and they have their own troubles with the language." Even if there was discomfort, it was that "positive discomfort" which usually pushes learners forward instead of deterring them.

Niya was the only student among the FLLs and S-HLLs who preferred the option of a non-heritage class. The fact that she was an S-HLL may explain this difference. Being with HLLs did not provide her with interesting, cultural opportunities because she was of a similar background to some of them; as a result, she focused primarily on differences in language proficiency.

8.2.4.2 A transactional relationship and equal status

FLLs are quick to recognize that the HLLs' strength in dialect and weakness in formal language, particularly grammar, can open the door to relationships of exchange that benefit both groups. As Alfega explained,

I don't see why [having HLLs in the classroom] is bad, to be honest, because they have their own things to learn. For example, I'm learning particular aspects of Arabic, they're learning other aspects of Arabic...I think it's actually a good thing to have both in class simply because you can make group activities or what not that involve both sharing their strengths and learning from each other's strengths. For example, if you pair me with an Arab speaker [HLL], in terms of conversation that other person would help me so much, but then when it comes to grammar, I can help that person so there's those mutual things that we can appreciate from each other. (Alfega)

Jared also expressed the positive aspects of learning alongside HLLs:

If you need help at all whenever you're doing a group activity, it's always helpful to have somebody there who has this more knowledge. Yeah, I think it's really good to have heritage speakers in the class, especially when I took the Egyptian class in the fall quarter. Basically, there were two of us in the class who only went through the 1A series, and everyone else was already done with 102 so they were already in their third year of Arabic. It was very helpful to have the native speakers there.

When some FLLs realize that they have knowledge that is useful to HLLs, the power dynamic of the classroom changes. Rather than feeling intimidated by the HLLs, these FLLs believe that they have equal status. Kurt described his sense of equality this way:

The thing about the heritage peers in our class, yeah, they can probably pronounce the words better. They can say [the Arabic letters] *‘ayn* and *ḥā* better. The first quarter of Arabic 1A, the first skit that we had to do, they probably sounded more natural, but after that, their heritage background has really not helped them. I would argue that I know Arabic grammar better than a lot of the heritage peers so it’s cool and it’s good to have them as a skit partner... They’re going to help you with pronunciation, or once you say a word, they’ll go, “Oh, I’ve heard my mom say that,” but for the most part, *fuṣḥa* (formal Arabic) is like a different language. I just consider them as a peer, like another student.

(Kurt)

Most FLLs are, of course, not aware of the complicated and thorny process through which HLLs lose their heritage language—a process that is often out of their control and which many regret. What FLLs see is that HLLs have a fragmented proficiency and have lost an opportunity to learn Arabic, and whatever circumstances that led to this result, they should have strongly resisted and challenged. As Kurt pointed out,

I was very surprised at how little they knew because just me personally, if I lived in a house with a fluent Arabic speaker for 18 years and they raised me, I would’ve been like, “Hey, can you speak Arabic to me?” I’m not trying to say that they’re lazy or something, but it’s just like, “Really? You need to be in Arabic 1A and your parents are both from Lebanon or something?” It was just surprising; I was like, “Seriously?” (Kurt)

Kurt did not meet “proficient” HLLs in his classes; rather, the HLLs did poorly on tests and asked the FLLs many grammar questions. He found it “completely academically fair” to have both groups together in the same classroom, and his conclusion, which many FLLs echoed

in the interviews, was: “We’re the same. We’re both Arabic students trying to learn this hard language.”

Finally, some students also explained to me that their comfort with having HLLs in the same classroom arose from their familiarity with the situation, i.e., they were used to having Spanish heritage speakers in their Spanish classes. As Kinley explained,

I have a lot of friends who are native speakers of Spanish, who speak fluently, but they can’t really read or write in the language, and they only know the most basic expressions. They don’t really consider themselves fluent. I guess for me because I took Spanish and it’s so common for heritage speakers to be in those classes, it [learning Arabic with heritage speakers] wasn’t something that really struck me. (Kinley)

8.2.4.3 Advanced FLLs

The advanced FLLs believed that the benefits of a mixed classroom were maximized in the advanced Arabic classes. Although they did not dismiss the benefits at the beginning levels of learning, they felt that they enjoyed their HLL partners most when they had the conversational skills to engage with them fully. Mark described this experience:

I really enjoyed having them in the classroom. It gave me very good exposure to different dialects, and I could understand almost everything they were saying for the most part, not all the time. They were great people. They were great friends. I have people who I text all the time to ask how to say things. (Mark)

However, these FLLs also felt that some HLLs were in class levels that were not fair and/or sufficiently challenging for them and suggested more accurate HLL placement tests. As Mark noted,

In beginner and in intermediate classes, it depends on their level, but sometimes I was wondering why certain people were in the beginner class, especially beginner. Beginner was really easy. We hardly did anything in beginner. We went very slowly. It's too easy for them, and I felt like they were just taking it for an easy A, and then they show off how well they can speak. If they are so good they should be in intermediate or advanced. I felt like they are out of place in beginner. (Mark)

In sum, despite a few remarks by FLLs about discomfort they felt about learning with HLLs during the early stage of Arabic learning, FLLs in general viewed the mixed classroom in a positive way. They considered the HLLs' cultural and linguistic contributions to be useful and helpful. Nathan raised a good point when he noted that the HLL presence was not threatening because "you're always going to be around people that know the language better than you or more than you." In this sense, the mixed Arabic classroom can be a safer place to first use the language than an Arab country where strangers may not be as tolerant of mistakes.

8.3 The HLLs' Perspective

While FLLs are in agreement about the benefits of learning in a mixed classroom, HLLs are split on the issue. One group, comprised of six out of the 11 HLLs, was satisfied with learning Arabic with FLLs, saw more benefits than disadvantages to being in the same classroom, and called for keeping the status quo. However, the other group, comprised of five out of the 11, expressed a clear preference for studying Arabic separately in a heritage-learners-only class that was specifically designed for them. Of the three semi-heritage learners, two sided with the first group while one chose separation. In this section, I discuss these findings along with HLL commentary on their experience of learning Arabic with FLLs.

8.3.1 Finding benefits in the mixed classroom

Although some HLLs were conversant in Arabic, they felt that being in a class whose level was lower than that of their proficiency level was advantageous. They wanted to take the class no matter if it included FLLs, because it is important to master the basics of the language. They remarked that they benefitted from the slow pace and repetition required by their FLL classmates when learning the Arabic lexis. Natalia, for example, was able to relearn vocabulary that she had known since childhood but had never been able to analyze, e.g., knowing word origins and literal meanings. Starting from scratch with the FLLs helped her better understand her language:

I thought the mixed classroom was good because we would have to go over things that I wasn't very sure of, or clear about, regarding some Arabic words or concepts that I knew from my background. Even though I already knew them, going over them again helped me understand the information even more. (Natalia)

Shohreh, an S-HLL of Persian heritage, also preferred the micro level of basic instruction. She noted that, if she had the chance to relearn Persian, she would not mind learning it with those learning Persian as foreign language:

It may be that somebody is labeled "native speaker," but what level of native are they? How fluent are they really, or do they even know how to write? It's really difficult. For instance, I'm a native Persian speaker, . . . but I wouldn't mind starting from absolute scratch, because there is going to be stuff that I'll pick up along the way that I didn't know, even though I am a native speaker. It could be beneficial for them [HLLs] to start from that bottom, despite having grown up in a household which constantly speaks Arabic. (Shohreh)

Some HLLs, like their FLL counterparts, viewed studying together as a transactional relationship that is beneficial for both parties. Noha, who had been assigned to the intermediate-level class, soon realized that by skipping the beginning level, she had missed learning essential vocabulary. Most of the time, an FLL could fill that gap for her. At the same time, Noha knew that she was able to supply FLL classmates with words from her Palestinian dialect:

The vocabulary for both of us has increased because they're learning words from me that they never would've learned while I'm learning words that I didn't know...I think that helps expanding our vocabularies. The conversation has to make sense to them, you can't use *`āmmiyyah* [colloquial Arabic] all the time because they won't understand it and they have to think of multiple ways of saying the same word to us. (Noha)

Noha even found that sitting next to an FLL was “better” than sitting next to a HLL because she learned more. She found that working with an FLL created “a beneficial relationship” because they could complement each other in *fushā - `āmmiyyah* (formal-colloquial) language learning. She firmly believed that this complementarity did not exist between two HLLs or two FLLs. Having seen both scenarios in action, she could affirm that both HLL/HLL and FLL/FLL pairings “negated the learning experience.” Moreover, she found that when HLLs sit next to each other, they focus more on each other than the class:

This quarter, I'm not sitting next to a heritage speaker, but there are heritage speakers in a little clump with one another, and you could tell they don't know what's going on. They're having their own little side conversations. They think that they know what they're doing, and they think that they know what they're saying, but when it comes to like the proper use of vocabulary and grammar, they're not doing it right. They can't conjugate the tenses, they're just talking to one another. (Noha)

Noha “definitely” liked having FLLs in an Arabic class, but she suggested that instructors should arrange classroom seating so that HLLs were intermingled with FLLs, rather than sitting together.

Some HLLs also recognized that they were spurred to make a more serious effort by the FLLs, who generally achieved a very good level of proficiency so quickly that they started to offer help to their HLL classmates. Hameed, for example, was motivated by Mark, who quickly acquired Arabic competency in the classroom, to study harder:

There’s a student; I think his name was Mark. He was a genius. This guy knew so many languages. He was fluent in Hebrew and Arabic, basically. He was young,...probably three years younger than me. Yeah, he’s incredible. His Arabic was phenomenal. It was, honestly, inspiring. I was like, “Man, I really wish...” I think that this kid, the one who learned this language in a classroom, knows more Arabic than I do, and that’s insane. It drove me to want to learn more.

At the same time that Hameed was in awe of Mark’s skills, his fellow FLLs generally treated Hameed as mentor, asking him questions and spurring him to put more effort into learning Arabic. When he did not have the answers, he enjoyed the challenge of searching for them:

When people would ask you questions, especially about grammar and different things, you’re really able to see what you didn’t know in your language because you’d have to explain why you say something a certain way, not like, “I don’t know, that’s just how you say it.” It challenged me as a learner of Arabic to know the rules better and to know how to teach them, how to speak about them, and have a little bit more of a deeper understanding of them. (Hameed)

Hameed also noted that, although he could sometimes help FLLs who assumed he knew more than they did, other times he “would struggle just as much as they would.”

8.3.2 Having the opportunity to assert identity

Those HLLs who were sensitive to Western media’s stereotypical images of Arabs viewed the mixed classroom as an opportunity to provide a different perspective to FLLs and to assert their Arab identity. A student exemplifying this attitude was Marwan, who made a presentation about his grandfather— a refugee who had been forced out of Palestine. I asked him if he thought that this story might upset or offend other students. He defended his choice of topic on the grounds that it fit the criteria of the assignment, i.e., Arabs in diaspora, and that it gave him a chance to discuss someone he cared about, rather than some person in history:

I wanted to tell that story because that’s very important to me, not just personally for my own life, but that’s something a lot of people don’t get to hear about so much in academia. They don’t get to hear about these Palestinian narratives, or they heard about them in this pseudo-objective sense in classes they’re taking, in textbooks, and things like that. To hear about another Palestinian, their experience, I think is very important. I try to do that whenever I can. It’s important to consider how people feel and how people are reacting to these things. At the same time, it’s important for others to consider that we don’t have this open platform all the time to talk about ourselves, especially being Palestinian.

Marwan also believed that the narrative in American mainstream media and at schools about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is “slanted” heavily towards the pro-Israeli side. Although he did not want to be “insensitive” to other students’ feelings and he had avoided confrontation, he insisted on telling his story, rather than allowing other narrators, who might be biased, to tell it for him:

As a person who is Palestinian knowing that my community is spoken for constantly and incorrectly by outside people, then I'll take whatever chance I can get to tell my own story...If that makes people uncomfortable, that's a reality that they're going to have to engage with. I don't think it's right for anybody to just go through life, and hearing the same story over and over again, and not really challenging it when a good number of people in the world are challenging it already. (Marwan)

Marwan believed that FLLs' information about the conflict was incorrect because they got it from the media and their families; thus he could not "fault them" completely. At the same time, he also noted that many were so well educated about the history of Palestine and Israel that they could be better informed than he was. Nonetheless, these students could not dispute his and his family's story:

What I do know is what I experienced firsthand. It's hard disputing that stuff. It's much easier to just say my experiences and you [the FLLs] do with it what you will. You can ignore it, or you can try to look into it, like, "Oh, maybe there is something else going on that I'm not aware of." (Marwan)

Arguably, Marwan would not have had the same desire to make the presentation had the class been populated with only HLLs. The FLLs' presence and the possibility of Israeli supporters among them gave his assertion of identity greater salience, meaning, and importance:

That pride thing, it's strong in me when it comes to being Palestinian. Yeah, I want to get up in their faces. I want to tell them, "You can't stop me from making the speech now. I have the floor." It feels good, it's like a platform. Yeah, that's how I feel about it. I feel proud. (Marwan)

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict can polarize any classroom and create hostility among students. Thus many instructors either avoid the subject or try to end discussion of it before tensions mount. Nevertheless, as Safa noted about the topic, “There would always be this careful treading and people subtly expressing their opinions and their pride.” The participants of this study, HLLs and FLLs, were aware of the topic’s provocative nature and they reported approaching it with caution. Fortunately, none of them had experienced a classroom situation that had become unmanageable due to student antagonism and resentment.

8.3.3 Experiencing problems in the mixed classroom

In this section, I discuss the reasons why some HLLs preferred an HLL-only classroom. Their rationales ranged from the linguistic to the cultural and were multi-faceted and interrelated.

8.3.3.1 Different proficiency levels

In addition to teaching HLLs, the instructor of the mixed Arabic classroom must also focus on the FLLs, who need to achieve a level of proficiency that ensures that they can do the necessary work. This can slow down the pace of the class, which can frustrate HLLs. Safa, for instance, felt that this pace put her at a “strong disadvantage”:

A lot of times we would be hung up in class on concepts that were very difficult to grasp if you were a non-native. A lot of class time was spent on working on these basic concepts. I felt like I was slowed down in a way, and that I didn’t have a chance to learn as much new information. I feel like we could’ve covered more material if it was just a heritage group. Like you’d have homework, then the next day you’d talk about it, then you’d have these discussions, and all these things. It’s like, “We get it, we know what the text means, we’ve heard the story, we understand it.” (Safa)

Safa was also annoyed by those times when an FLL would ask a “long” or “detailed” question and the class would get “fixated” on a topic with which she was often familiar. The teachers would answer the questions of these students, but that slowed down the pace again: “That was kind of uncomfortable because like, ‘Could we be doing something better with our time?’ You don’t want it to be unfair for the other people who are trying to learn, but at the same time there’s like thirty other students there.” Safa viewed the slow pace, which occurred because the class was “fixated” on just learning the meanings of words, as blocking learning opportunities for HLLs such as “talking more critically” about an issue and going “more in depth” about texts or topics.

Ruba also preferred a separated classroom and reported difficulties working with FLLs on class projects and presentations:

When we would do the group presentations, and I’d have to be with a non-native speaker, and then she was speaking to me in *fushā*. I wasn’t understanding that. I was speaking in *Shami* [Damascene dialect], so that was kind of an issue. They get confused because they don’t know what I’m saying. I’d say something, and they would be like, “Oh, no! What does that mean?” and they try to look it up in the book, but it’s not in the book because I already know it. (Ruba)

Ruba also believed that FLLs benefit more from a mixed classroom than do HLLs because they learn from HLLs while HLLs do not learn from FLLs: “I can think of advantages for them. They get the benefit of listening to us speak, I guess, at times, but for me, I don’t really see the advantage for us.” Like Safa, Ruba believed that learning with FLLs had hindered her learning:

I think had I been able to work with heritage learners, I think I would’ve learned more, just because it would’ve also given me a chance to brush up on my speaking skills. If

you're in a classroom, and everyone—since they're all native speakers anyway—they have to speak Arabic, that helps them brush up on their speaking skills, whereas in the other class, you can't do that because not a lot of people know how to speak. (Ruba)

Other HLLs suggested that separate classrooms would not only be a better environment for their own learning but also for that of FLLs. Lama, for instance, believed that HLLs may be more inclined to participate and engage in discussions if they were in a separate classroom while FLLs would be relieved of the stress of learning in front of students with much higher levels of proficiency:

I don't know how non-heritage students feel about that [being in a separate classroom], but maybe they would then also feel more comfortable if they're not going to be fumbling through these words that they're learning. It's a very difficult language, clearly, but maybe they might feel self-conscious about it around people who grew up with the language, or at least have this background knowledge of it. Maybe there would be benefits to people being more comfortable in that setting. (Lama)

It is clear that different levels of language proficiency in a classroom affect groups of students differently. Although HLLs do not agree among themselves on the benefits, or lack thereof, of learning in a mixed classroom, it is my experience that most of them tend to “click” together into groups of their own and prefer to do their tasks and assignments together and without FLLs.

8.3.3.2 Discomfort with cultural insensitivity and social stigmatization

A more serious issue in the mixed Arabic classroom is not different levels of proficiency, but the fact that the students generally come from two different backgrounds, i.e., the HLLs and the S-HLLs who have roots in Arab culture and FLLs who do not. As a result of this difference, some

interviewed HLLs were uncomfortable with FLLs' cultural tactlessness and misunderstanding. Thus, for example, these HLLs did not like the sarcasm and humor that FLLs exhibit around the use of God-expressions. The interviews also revealed a hyper-sensitivity to social stigmatization, however subtle or nuanced. Safa, for instance, did not like the way FLLs "fetishize" the Arabic language and the culture.

You also worry about the people who are fetishizing the culture in a way, like "Oh, it's so cool, it's such a beautiful language." It's like kind of a weird way of viewing the culture as well—so mysterious, so distinct, and so fascinating...I appreciated that people saw the beauty in it, but it was also like, "Still, have you made the effort to understand that it's not just a trope or a background? It's very complex, there's good, and there's bad, and there's people who are very friendly and there are people who are not. It's not all as it seems, and it's not all beautiful and wonderful. Or have you made the effort to understand it as a complex culture the way you understand another one? Or is it just this beautiful, exotic thing that you really need to know about."

Although FLLs likely felt that their attitude toward Arab culture was laudatory, Safa clearly found it simplistic and reductive. A similar example was Salameh's story about the way FLLs reacted to *America*, a movie, both comic and tragic, about Muna, a Palestinian who emigrates to the US. In it, Muna's mother offers her a cucumber to take with her. This moment was funny because it played on a motif dominant in quest narratives, i.e., the weaponry that the hero/heroine is given in preparation for the quest. Although Salameh saw the humor in the cucumber's inadequacy, he also envisioned the moment as signifying a kindness, typical of Arab culture, that FLLs could not understand:

Non-heritage speakers can make certain generalizations or just say things off-handedly that aren't true. When we watched *America*, the film...there was the part when Muna was leaving Palestine and her mother gives her the cucumbers as food. I remember everyone was laughing about that. It's funny. You can laugh at it. At the same time, it's only funny because you don't think of that here. That's very normal in Arab culture, very commonplace thing like you're leaving, let me pack you some food, here, I'll give you a cucumber. It's a common thing, and it's just very nice, I don't want you to be hungry. That was one instance where it wasn't terribly offensive, but it just showed that there are some things that are not understood. (Salameh)

Hameed's discomfort with FLLs' cultural insensitivity and social stigmatizing of Arab culture arose when he was asked questions that he either did not know how to answer or were about things that he was not proud of in the first place—questions such as whether it is true that men in Islam are allowed to marry four women or if male believers are rewarded with virgins in heaven.

A lot of things that would come up would be, "Is it true you can marry a bunch of women?" There's stuff like that. I've had that question several times. I've had, "Is it true when you die you get some kind of virgins or forty"...There are things like that that I'm just like, "Uh, man, I'm not even trying to talk about this right now." A lot of times, I try just to change the subject. Those are some of the few instances where I would try to distance myself from, even if it's written straight up said in the Quran, right there, verbatim. I would still kind of be like, "Oh, I don't really know about that. Times were different, blah, blah, blah." I would try to distance myself from things that I don't really agree with...I don't really believe in the whole getting four wives...That one, I actually do have some kind of background, this idea of to treat every one of them the same, which

is basically financially and emotionally impossible. That one, I will address and I emphasize though. I make sure that I emphasize that this is realistically impossible. A lot of men just take advantage of this fact, try to normalize it in a sense. The virgins' one, I can't even explain. I just try to shy away from that, and like, "Look, I don't know anything about that one." (Hameed)

FLLs had employment reasons for learning Arabic, and this was also a cause of discomfort among HLLs. Safa was accustomed to learning Arabic in religious contexts, i.e., reading Quranic texts and learning their vocabulary. Now, however, she found herself in a "secular kind of setting" with people whose motivations were questionable because learning Arabic and about Arab culture could never be "neutral":

We were learning words like the "UN" and "government," like all these different things, "refugees" which sadly are the kinds of words that people associate with the Middle East...It was very interesting to see who was sitting in the classroom there, and why they were doing it. There were a lot of people who wanted to go into international affairs, there were a lot of people who were in the military, I noticed, as compared to other classes. The interest...always felt strange like, "Why are you in this classroom?" "Why are you trying to learn this language?" That was another thing, it made me think, "Oh, there's other reasons for being here." Like learning and knowing Arabic is not a neutral thing. It's very much charged, and there's a kind of capital in knowing it, especially if you're willing to collaborate with certain groups like government groups, military.

There's a huge kind of appeal to that. (Safa)

Similarly, Noha noted that the textbook, *Al Kitaab*, was geared towards those students interested in a government job; in other words, more towards FLLs than HLLs. She found it odd to start

Arabic studies with words such as “officer,” “army,” “translator,” and “embassy”: “There are students taking these classes who are going to end up with federal jobs. That’s uncomfortable because I know what this country’s policy is towards Muslims and Arabs, and especially Muslims and Arabs in the Arab world.” Marwan’s opinion was the same: “It’s very uncomfortable when I know that someone is going to try to get a job in a government that is explicitly against my people, and my background and my heritage. They have this foreign policy that is against us. That’s very uncomfortable.”

Not only do some HLLs feel that the curriculum is geared towards the FLLs, they also feel that some teachers are preoccupied with accommodating the FLLs. For example, Hameed reported being stigmatized for the Arabic he knew prior to learning Arabic in the classroom:

I had one professor, I think she was my first professor here. Basically, from day one, she pulled me aside, and she was like, “I know you’re an Arabic speaker, and I don’t want you doing this and that.” It was like a negative stigma. You’re being stigmatized for having some exposure to the language. I always felt like I was just blackballed as that goofball in class, and I feel like that carried over throughout most of these Arabic classes, when really I’m just trying to learn...and have a good time. It’s like my de-stressing class...a fun group gathering and learning experience as opposed to be sitting in a lecture full of a hundred something students where nobody cares about your opinion or anything like that. I feel like she thought that, “Look, I know you’re one of those troublemakers who are just taking these classes for an easy A, and I’m going to make sure that you’re learning just like everybody else.” I’m like, “Okay, cool. I accept that but please love me.”

Although it is clear that Hameed wanted his Arabic class to be “fun” and may have acted inappropriately, his belief that he was punished for his language skills must be taken seriously. Many instructors who teach in a mixed class do try to ensure that they are fair to everyone and that no students will get a grade for knowledge not learned in the classroom. However, instructors should also be aware that their attempts at fairness may be interpreted as stigmatization.

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of FLLs saw many more advantages to a mixed classroom than disadvantages. They found their fellow HLLs to be a source of enjoyable linguistic and cultural variety as well as a window to a language and culture that most of them did not have access to before. Even when HLLs had a linguistic advantage over them, many saw that as “expected” and did not put themselves in a position of comparison or competition. With the exception of the advanced students who prefer separation at the beginning level, all the students favored the HLLs’ presence.

In contrast, almost half of the heritage learners and one semi-heritage learner out of three opted for a heritage-speakers-only classroom. Their preference was based mainly on slow-pace issues, lack of benefit in pairing up and grouping, and discomfort resulting not only from a curriculum that did not cater to their needs but also increased their suspicion of FLLs’ motives for studying Arabic. However, the other half of the HLLs saw benefits in the mixed classroom: being able to firm up their basic knowledge of Arabic, learning more through working with FLLs, and having the opportunity to demonstrate pride in their heritage.

The data presented above show that a higher number of FLLs and S-HLLs prefer a mixed classroom of heritage and non-heritage learners, while HLLs are almost evenly divided. The data

challenge instructors to develop solutions to problems that involve the mixing of students with different levels of proficiency and backgrounds. The Arabic classroom must be a comfortable and productive space, especially for the HLLs. I address the implications for the Arabic classroom, along with other issues, in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 9

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

9.1 Introduction

The data presented in this dissertation demonstrate that many students use the Allah Lexicon when learning Arabic. On the one hand, some find the God-expressions to be both a tool for overcoming linguistic difficulties and a pathway towards authenticity and native-speakership. For others, using the phrases is the norm due to their Arab or Islamic background. On the other hand, some students are resistant to, or outright reject, using certain religious phrases that they believe are associated with Islam more than others. According to students' backgrounds, the reasons range from a concern with crossing boundaries, to a dissonance between students' religious beliefs and the religion represented in the phrases, to fear of stigma and stereotypes. The data also point to identity changes and struggles among the students due to the Arabic learning experience, thus highlighting the issues that can arise in a classroom of students with a mix of religious and ethnic backgrounds. In this concluding chapter, I revisit the data discussing the significance of the findings in relation to the literature. I also suggest pedagogical interventions for the Arabic classroom and make recommendations for a mixed Arabic classroom that accommodates all its students.

9.2 God-expressions and the Teaching and Learning of Arabic

In this section, I examine student use of God-expressions, both in terms of their usefulness according to learners and their problematic aspects. In addition, I discuss how this usage and its benefits and issues can inform the teaching of this linguistic phenomenon in particular and the language in general.

9.2.1 Arabic religious phrases, fluency, and authenticity

As discussed in Chapter 5, many FLLs find God-expressions to be the perfect tool for normalizing Arabic, both linguistically and culturally. In linguistic terms, student use of the phrases lessens speaking hurdles, which generally include juggling pronunciation, appropriate vocabulary, and grammar in order to produce correct utterances. In other words, for many FLLs, using the phrases is the “grease” that makes the wheels of conversation run smoothly. This finding concurs with the literature that notes how students draw on “frozen,” “ready-made” phrases, “formulaic sequences,” or “conventionalized structures” to function verbally in the target language, especially when mastery has not yet been achieved (Fillmore 1979; Hakuta, 1974, Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Wray 2002). Wray and Perkins (2000) define a “formulaic sequence” as

a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar.

(p. 1)

They argue that these formulaic sequences are stored as whole pieces of information in the brain. Therefore, it is easier and faster for students to resort to them automatically when engaged in a communicative task, i.e., retrieving them for immediate use rather than attempting to produce novel strings of phrases and sentences that demand multiple cognitive processes to complete (Wray and Perkins, 2000). Similarly, Pawley and Syder (1983) argue that

The processing capacity is vital to the language user in his normal situation, when he is required to compose and decode spoken discourse, often under tight time-bounding... Holistically stored sequences have the advantage of being quickly retrievable and of

being familiar to the hearer as well as the speaker. And they have certain advantages in the use of language as a cultural instrument. They provide convenient ways of referring to those concepts that happen to be salient in a particular culture and which are not provided by the stock of unitary lexical items. (p. 218)

Research on formulaic sequences has found a strong relationship between using pre-fabricated utterances and fluency. As Wray (2002) notes, based on Fillmore's 1979 observations on the idiomaticity of language: "A very large portion of a person's ability to get along in a language consists in the mastery of formulaic utterances" (p. 8). Nattinger and DeCarrico (1998) argue that especially in the early stages of second or foreign learning, learners tend to rely heavily on frozen formulas because their linguistic system in the target language is still developing. Similarly, Wood (2010) points to the use of formulaic phrases as a communication strategy that promotes fluency, especially in those who are asked to speak the language before they are ready. Therefore, there is a need to master this type of phrase as a useful communication and production tool in the second language classroom (Ellis, 1996; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Raupach, 1984; Schmidt, 1983; Wood, 2002). Not only does this explain why students rely on using the God-expressions, it also demonstrates the necessity of teaching them.

In addition to improved fluency, some FLLs find that using God-expressions enables them to bridge a gap between Standard Arabic and the colloquial variety that they are learning, i.e., Egyptian Arabic or Levantine. During interviews, they expressed concern that using Standard Arabic in conversations with Arabs would be similar to reading from a textbook, causing them to sound formal and unusual. They felt that use of the God-expressions helped them sound more "authentic" and natural. By employing the phrases, they were thus tapping all of their "linguistic resources" (Blackledge & Creese, 2010) in Arabic—Standard and

Colloquial—to communicate. This student strategy points to the validity of teaching a colloquial variety of Arabic in addition to Standard Arabic. By its nature, the colloquial language would be rich in God-expressions and other formulaic phrases.

Most Arabic programs focus on the teaching of Modern Standard Arabic, which is also known as the “MSA approach” (Al-Batal, 1992). This educational policy arose primarily because of two rationales: the diglossic nature of Arabic, and the erroneous belief that Standard Arabic was the official and “real language” spoken commonly in all Arab countries (Maamouri, 1998, p. 33). There was a conviction among Arabic language educators that teaching a dialect alongside Standard Arabic would require the learning of what Ferguson described as “not two full languages” but at least “more than is generally attempted in a single language course” (cited in Al-Batal, 1992, p. 287), thus creating problems for students who would be confused by the two codes. Moreover, there was the problem of what dialect to teach, given the diversity of language in different Arab countries. Therefore, Arabic dialects were taught separately in special courses for interested students.

This method has shifted with some Arabic programs using an “alternative approach” in which both varieties are taught simultaneously (Al-Batal, 1992). The logic behind this change is based on two reasons. First, when FLLs are taught Standard Arabic and then a colloquial variety, they are learning in the opposite order of Arabic acquisition by native Arabic speakers, who start with the colloquial variety and then learn Standard Arabic through schooling (Ryding, 1995). The second reason for teaching both simultaneously is that FLLs will face a similar confusion to that of native speakers who learn Standard Arabic when they go to school. In other words, confusion is inherent in learning Arabic whether the student is a native speaker or not (Al-Batal, 1992; Palmer, 2007). Finally, some educators argue that FLLs should learn the dialect first and

be exposed to Standard Arabic only later in advanced levels (Al-Batal, 1992; Al-Batal & Belnap, 2006).

As Abdallah (2006) notes, debate on which variety of Arabic to teach FLLs still remains. My experience is that while there is still some resistance to teaching Colloquial Arabic by instructors, native speakers may nevertheless teach in compliance with the policy of the Arabic program or the book they are teaching. These teachers point to the “errors” that students make when mixing both codes. Their argument is perhaps rooted in an ideology, held by many native Arabic speakers, in which the colloquial varieties are considered as “degenerate” and “corrupt” versions of the “real language,” i.e., Standard Arabic (Maamouri, 1998, p. 33).

Although the validity of the simultaneous approach is yet to be researched, the data in this study support its value, an important finding because currently—when the two varieties are taught separately—most Arabic students opt for Standard Arabic and thus miss the opportunity to be exposed to the realities of spoken Arabic. Learning Colloquial Arabic simultaneously with Standard Arabic has four benefits for students. First, as noted above, the use of colloquial sayings, including God-expressions, reduces the formality of students’ speech, and they feel more authentic and natural in conversation. The second benefit is that the lack of uniformity among Arabic colloquial languages makes the cultural diversity of the Arab world more transparent to students, which, in turn, enables them to gain a better understanding of the region and its issues. The third benefit is that Colloquial Arabic increases student confidence and motivation. As Ryding (1995) argues, when learners realize that using Standard Arabic for conversation is not common in Arab countries, they may lose confidence in their speaking ability, which, in turn, will negatively affect their motivation. As discussed in Chapter 2, research on motivations for learning Arabic shows that many students want to develop

conversational skills and be able to speak it abroad (Palmer, 2007, Schmidt, Inbar, & Shohamy, 2004). Finally, punctuating their formal speech with colloquial expressions, which may seem erroneous at first glance, can be an additional skill that the students are acquiring. Thus, the fourth reason for teaching both Standard and Colloquial Arabic is that it enables students to acquire what some researchers (e.g., el-Hassan, 1977; Mitchell, 1978) refer to as Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA), a “third level between MSA and the dialects that draws from both” and which native speakers use “depending on a number of educational, pragmatic and sociolinguistic factors” (Al-Batal, 1992, p. 289). When FLLs speak Standard Arabic but use God-expressions and other phrases from Colloquial Arabic to improve conversational flow and to decrease formality, they are developing a skill possessed by some native speakers. Additionally, Colloquial Arabic gives access to songs, movies, TV shows, etc., which are interesting and useful for learning the language.

Teaching both types of Arabic simultaneously definitely imposes an additional learning burden on students. However, many of them made it clear that the complexity of the language increased their respect for native speakers and improved attitudes towards Arab culture. In addition, their own ability to master two varieties of such a complex language also meant higher self-esteem and a boost in self-confidence. Such findings suggest that Arabic teachers should approach the complexity of the language and its diglossic nature with this attitude: Arabic is fascinating and diglossia is desirable as opposed to Arabic is difficult and diglossia is confusing.

9.2.2 God-expressions and identity

The data establish that learners’ identities were constantly in play, no matter the subject discussed or interview question asked. Using, or refusing to use, the God-expressions was a topic of particular relevance to students’ concepts of self. As discussed in Chapter 6, some FLLs

resisted using certain religious phrases. For instance, Molly firmly refused to use phrases that ‘express religious sentiments’ because they made her uncomfortable, and Jennifer outright rejected their use because she believed that her Jewish religion forbade her from uttering the name of God as expressed in other religions. Some HLLs avoided using the phrases as well. Marwan was concerned about social stigma, and Noha felt mocked and insulted by her FLL peers who used the terms sarcastically. Although it is clear that the religiosity of Arabic raises problems, this section lays out a rationale why secularizing Arabic is not the solution. I delve more deeply into student identity issues and make suggestions to address identity concerns while, at the same time, preserving the use of God-expressions, which are pragmatic and cultural phenomena of Arabic, in the language classroom.

9.2.2.1 Secularizing Arabic is not the answer

Some scholars, such as French Orientalists Paul Balta and Linda Hamoud, argue that a “secular Arabic”—an Arabic that is “detached from Islam”—can solve issues related to Arabic learning and teaching (cited in Morrow and Castleton, 2007, p. 204). For them, religious discourse is based on emotions rather than rational thinking, and Arabic instructors should avoid this kind of language. However, Morrow and Castleton (2007) argue the opposite:

Considering the fact that language cannot be meaningfully studied outside of the context of culture, the desire to create a “secular Arabic” poses serious pedagogical problems. It is politically-motivated pedagogy aimed more at attempting to secularize French Arabs than to teach the Arabic language. (p. 205)

In fact, secularizing Arabic would undermine the primary reason for teaching it, i.e., to create new speakers with the information and ability to communicate with natives in Arab countries. As discussed in Chapter 2, because of the prevalence and high frequency of the use of

God-expressions in Arab culture, if uninformed students are exposed to these phrases in verbal and textual contexts, they will lack the skills required to respond appropriately, to be fluent, and to conform to linguistic and cultural norms and expectations. Thus in terms of FLL goals, there is no valid reason for removing commonly used religious discourse from the Arabic classroom. This lack of validity also extends to HLLs of Arab descent who wish to learn more about their heritage, read the Quran, and be able to connect to family. Moreover, secularizing Arabic raises important linguistic and existential questions: who has the right to decide if a language should be changed or some of its cultural content removed; wouldn't this secularization be "killing" an important part of the language and "murdering" its spirit (Skutnabb-Kagnas, 2001); and shouldn't it be considered an assault on the Arabic-Islamic identity? As Morrow and Castleton (2007) argue, "The loss of the Allah Lexicon is a direct loss of culture, identity, sense of self, individuality and community" (p. 209), and losing this integral part of the language would eradicate a significant form of culture diversity and leave the world in danger of homogeneity (p. 209).

9.2.2.2 Struggling with identity: FLLs and the God-expressions

Norton Pierce (1995) argues that identity is "a site of struggle" (p. 16). For FLLs, these struggles vary from legitimacy in the use of the God-expressions, to dissonance between beliefs and discourse, to rejection and resistance.

Legitimacy-of-use issues emotionally impact both HLLs and FLLs, but the latter are most affected for three reasons: lower linguistic proficiency; fear of being offensive because they are using vocabulary that belongs to Islam, a faith that is not their own; and resistance and/or rejection to the use of religious vocabulary because of agnosticism, atheism, or the strictures of one's own religion. Perhaps issues of legitimacy are most intense when they arise from religious

differences, an area of general sensitivity. Bourdieu's (1977) notion of "legitimate language" is relevant here. He suggests that "we can state the characteristics which legitimate discourse must fulfill, the tacit presuppositions of its efficacy: it is uttered by a legitimate speaker, i.e. by the appropriate person, as opposed to the imposter (religious language/priest, poetry/poet, etc.); it is uttered in a legitimate situation, i.e. on the appropriate market" (p. 650). For FLLs, legitimacy of use occurs only when several conditions are fulfilled. The most important of these is the approval of a community of speakers to whom the terms belong. Leve and Wegner (2002) talk about "legitimate peripheral participation" in language learning: "Master tailors must sponsor apprentices before the latter can have legitimate access to participation in the communities' productive activities," and, similarly, language learners or newcomers to a speech community remain on the periphery until they master the linguistic and cultural rules that prior members set for legitimate discourse (p. 111). Since newcomers to a speech community may receive both positive and negative responses to similar utterances, they must learn how to assess situations and contexts to be judged as legitimate. To help students achieve this goal, instructors need to discuss the social intricacies of the God-expressions, which are highly culture-specific phrases, especially because many learners are confused by them. In addition to teaching the phrases' literal and pragmatic meanings, instructors must explain who uses them, which ones to use, and when to use them. Another strategy is to include those religious phrases that Christian Arabs tend to use or like to hear, e.g., *al-salamu lakum* (Peace to you) instead of *al-salāmu 'alaykum* (Peace be upon you), or those with "Rabb" (Lord) instead of *Allah*. In addition, instructors should stress that the God-expressions are used across the Arabic-speaking world by religious and non-religious people alike. They should also explain that some native speakers expect secular

language from “outsiders,” not because they believe the terms are theirs only, but because non-Muslim outsiders are expected to be secular.

Dissonance between identity and discourse is another area of struggle for students who must reconcile the difference between what they say and that what they believe. One way they deal with that dissonance is through humor. By using the terms sarcastically, to borrow Rampton’s (1995) words, they engage in “language crossing,” which is “code switching into varieties that are not generally thought to belong to them [the learners]. This involves a distinct sense of movement across social or ethnic boundaries and raises issues of legitimacy that, in one way or another, participants need to negotiate in the course of their encounter” (p. 485). One of the main characteristics of language-crossing interactions is that they are playful and contain “elements which lay just beyond the learner’s grasp” and thus “generat[e] a great deal of the entertainment” (p. 503). The fun and humor is entertaining; however, it disguises an identity struggle that is linguistic, religious, and cultural. While sarcasm lessens FLLs’ anxiety, it reveals the mismatch inherent in this struggle and its conflicting identities.

Instructors strive to make language learning an enjoyable experience for students and thus allow FLLs’ humor into the classroom; however, this may come with an unexpected cost as the humor can offend native speakers. In this case, the sarcastic use of the phrases can be considered a case of pragmatic failure. Not only does it point to identity issues and struggles, it also reveals an under-developed pragmatic and “sociocultural competence” (Celce-Murcia, 2008, pp. 46-7). Politeness encompasses good manners and appropriate interpersonal communication (Leech, 1983) and is also a reflection of sociocultural respect and sensitivity. As discussed in Chapter 3, researchers agree on the need for instructors to teach pragmatics explicitly for two reasons: exposure alone is not sufficient for students to pick up pragmatic functions; and

pragmatic errors are more detrimental to communication than other types of errors (Rose, 2005, p. 386). Therefore, it is important for instructors to point out that, while some phrases can be used sarcastically by native speakers, similar mocking by FLLs could be offensive. In addition, students need to understand that certain language, traditions, and habits may have special resonance for some members in the target speech community.

A language's lexicon of swear words can also be a source for learning language pragmatics. As Mercury (1995) argues, students should be able to discern between what is "acceptable or unacceptable in taboo language behavior" because they may "hear and read obscenity around them, and may also be targets of it" (Mercury, 1995, p.35). It is understandable why teachers may shy away from addressing swear phrases in their classroom and it is beyond the scope of this research to discuss the specifics of the "what" and "how" to teach them. However, as Maher's experience with his grandfather's cursing demonstrates, swearing in Arabic can involve many God-expressions. In fact, many polite "God-wishes" (Ferguson, 1983) such as *Allah ywafqak* (May God guide you the right way) can turn to a curse by negating it *Allah lā ywafqak* "May God NOT guide you the right way." Since students' textbooks do not include such nuances, instructors can discuss the negated God-wishes and the context or variables involved in the speech situation, e.g., gender, relationship, age, and formality, which can be part of students' pragmatic learning and competence.

The desire to resolve the dissonance between identity and discourse also played out in the ways that students negotiate membership in communities that differ from their own (Wenger, 1998; Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004). Perhaps this identity negotiation and construction process was most obvious in those cases in which students' religious identity collided with that implied in the language: these students avoided or rejected using God-expressions. For example,

Jennifer did not assume, in her identity as a member of the Jewish faith, that she could use the God-expressions; rather, she requested answers from her rabbi as to whether she was allowed to use them or not. She asserted this identity when she followed her rabbi's instructions, which were that Jews were not permitted to speak the phrases. Similarly, Samantha, a Jewish student, struggled with the identity that she had built, in part, on her grandfather's hard-edged, pro-Israeli stance when she came into contact with the Muslim and pro-Arab identities revealed in classroom discourse. Greater understanding of the complexities of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict made her rethink her own feelings and opinions. Samantha and other FLLs also realized that there was a significant difference between the use of God-expressions by terrorists and that of other Muslims—knowledge that improved their attitude toward Arab culture as they rejected tainted images and stereotypes. As Allen (2007) suggests, the gap in understanding between the West and the Arab/Islamic world is best bridged by studying the “Other” linguistically and culturally: “Our study must involve an engagement with their value systems and senses of identity within their own frameworks, rather than a view through the distorting lenses of our own perspectives (p. 259).”

As the data in this research show, language study can diminish the distance between cultures and enable students to see commonalities rather than differences. Bourdieu (1977) stated that “a language is worth what those who speak it are worth” (p. 652). In light of the data, I can see that the reverse of this statement is also true: people attain worthiness based on the value of their language to those who study it. It is important for Arabic instructors to understand this effect of language learning and recognize that a “take it or leave it” approach to the learning of culture may not be effective; rather, they need to be very sensitive to learners' backgrounds and to the possibility of discomfort when students are asked to use certain God-expressions. This

sensitivity means providing students with linguistic choices and, if possible, alternative politeness formulae, i.e., a greeting other than *al-salāmu ‘alaykum* or a compliment other than *mashallāh*.

9.2.2.3 Struggling with identity: HLLs and the God-expressions

HLLs also have identity struggles when using God-expressions, but in ways that are different from those of FLLs. The most prominent of their struggles stems from the social stigma of their ethnic and religious identity. Using phrases that Westerners associate with terrorism is problematic to them, and their responses range from not using them in public for fear they will be stereotyped to being “obnoxious” by challenging the status quo of racism. Echoing Tajfel (1981), Phinney (1998) suggests that “membership in a disparaged minority group can create psychological conflicts; minority groups are faced with a choice of accepting the negative views of society toward their group or rejecting them in a search for their own identity” (p. 34).

Obviously, the choice of many HLLs, as the data demonstrate, is the latter, i.e., to reject and resist, and their resistance took different forms. Safa rejected the stereotype of Muslim women as backward and oppressed by not only wearing the hijab but also by defending her choice with critical skills and careful argument. Marwan resisted stereotyping by seizing every opportunity to tell his Palestinian story to those who he thought would probably question it. Zine’s (2001) research shows that “Muslim students were not only able to negotiate their religious identities, but to use their identities as a means of resistance to counteract their marginality within secular Eurocentric schools” (p. 401).

It may appear logical that the more stigmatized and stereotyped one’s identity is, the lower one’s self-esteem will be (Tajfel, 1981). However, as Phinney (1991) argues, the evidence points to the opposite: stigmatization and stereotyping often lead to higher self-esteem. Phinney

suggests seeing ethnic identity as a “continuum” between “high” or “achieved” ethnic identity on one end and “low” or “diffuse” identity on the other (p. 194). Some of the essential elements that determine a “high” vs. “low” ethnic identity are the extent of “self-identification as a group member,” “attitudes and evaluations relative to one’s group,” and “ethnic knowledge and commitment” (p. 194). According to their testimonies, many of the HLLs showed high ethnic identity and high self-esteem, i.e., they were proud of who they were, identified as being Arab or Muslim before being American, and rejected assimilation. For instance, Soha, when I asked her how she identifies, said “Muslim first.” Noha questioned the authenticity of an American identity and criticized those women who yield to societal pressures and remove their hijabs. Hameed did not confine himself to verbal assertions of his identity; he also used visual semiotic resources, such as logos on bracelets and shirts, to make that identity available to the public. He even envied me because of my hijab, noting that wearing the scarf is a constant reminder to others of who I am and where I come from. By learning Arabic, all of the interviewed HLLs demonstrated an “interest in knowledge” about their ethnic group, a behavior that is consistent with self-esteem (p. 201).

One defense strategy against negative stereotyping is to distance oneself from stigmatization. As Phinney (1991) reports, minority “individuals may accept some negative images and stereotypes, but feel they do not apply to themselves as individuals,” thus enabling them to create distance between their identities and demeaning images and stereotypes. (p. 198). Hameed, for example, distanced himself from Muslim men who marry four women and those who believe that 40 virgins await them in heaven, and Noha dissociated herself from Saudis when asked about their “oppressive” practices and even defined them as only representing Saudi

Arabia, i.e., not her group. Clearly, HLLs use “distance” to fight against stereotypes but still struggle against the images imposed on their identities.

Most heritage language learners struggle against a stigmatized Arab identity and must also deal with an American identity—two identities that are at odds and, sometimes, clash. As Zine (2001) argues, “Muslim students have multiple identities based on their race, class, gender, and ethnicity that they must negotiate within the context of their educational experiences” (p. 408). Marwan, for example, struggled with a Palestinian identity to which he could not completely “latch” because his American identity was associated with being pro-Israeli. The shifts that Hameed made from being Muslim Palestinian to American when a terrorist attack happened and from being American to Palestinian when the times were calm demonstrated the ways in which his identity, hybrid and fluid, was able to move through social boundaries delineated by insider and/or outsider status.

In contrast, non-Muslim HLLs struggle to separate their identity from that of Muslims because the two are generally conflated in the minds of Americans. Thus Ruba and Marsaly, in order to make their identities seen and available, had to fight against ideas and beliefs that arise from Western ignorance of minorities in the Arab world. For example, Marsayl, a Christian, found herself in identity discussions when other students realized that she was Arab and asked why she wasn’t wearing “that thing,” i.e., the hijab, around her head. Ruba, who had similar experiences explaining her Druze background, bitterly echoed the words of a Christian-Lebanese comedian who joked about people who assume all Middle Easterners are Muslim: “No, there’s Christians in the Middle East, like Jesus!” When I asked Ruba and Marsayl whether they thought it was important for students to learn the God-expressions, both indicated that it was. However, they also noted that these phrases give students the impression that all Arabs are Muslim, that the

textbook lacked representation of minorities, and that instructors need to provide a more holistic view of the culture.

In sum, although HLLs only reported racist experiences outside of the classroom, e.g., Noha's story of her encounter with a police officer, and although they considered their Arabic classes to be safe environments, the ongoing stigmatization and identity struggles take their toll. Arguably, the instability of their own identities contribute to their distrust of the motivations of others, particularly those of their FLL peers as reported in Chapter 8. Another obvious result is that HLLs are highly sensitive to insult and too fragile to be tolerant of FLLs' humor. Although instructors cannot control or handle all HLL problems, this is an area in which they can make a difference. When this type of humor arises in the classroom, they can discuss its appropriateness with FLLs and explain to HLLs that it is not a form of stigma, but rather a release of the stress involved in language learning and the funny or awkward situations that may arise in FLLs' attempt to use the target language.

9.3 HLLs and the Mixed Classroom: Building a Positive Learning Environment

According to Caballero (2017), "Mixed classes can be a challenge but, depending on how they are configured, they can also create opportunities for HL and L2 learners to share their strengths and contribute to each other's learning" (p. 367). Caballero arrived at this conclusion after summarizing what she calls "important gains" from the research done on heritage language learners (such as Carreira, 2012; Carreira and Kagan, 2011; Carreira & Potowski, 2011; Valdés, 2006). The problem for instructors of mixed classes is how to translate this scholarly knowledge into practical methodologies that can help them reach the acquisition goals they set for students. In this section, I discuss the significance of the data in this study to the dynamic of teaching in a mixed classroom and propose practical suggestions for Arabic instructors.

In Chapter 8 I demonstrated, using student input, that the mixed class is an environment where all students, whether FLLs, S-HLLs and HLLs, can learn and benefit from each other. To review, the overwhelming majority of FLLs expressed a preference for a mixed class, as did two of the three S-HLLs. They found advantages in the cultural and linguistic capital that HLLs brought to the classroom. In contrast, HLLs were split on the issue with more of them favoring separate tracks, although more than half acknowledged that the mixed class had benefits for them. Still, HLLs' preference for separate tracks raises a red flag for researchers and teachers and suggests more research is needed in the pedagogical literature. Interestingly, many scholars in heritage languages favor separate tracks for the purpose of meeting HLLs' learning needs (Carriera, 2004; Carriera & Kagan, 2011; Draper & Hicks, 2000; Kagan, 2005; Peyton et al., 2001, Potowski, Dillon, Kagan, McGinnis, & Peyton, 2013; Valdés, 1997, 2006).

Two questions now arise: (1) how do we address the disadvantages or challenges, especially those that negatively affect HLLs in the mixed classroom; and (2) how do we capitalize on the advantages of the mixed classroom, as mentioned by all groups. Both questions must be addressed in order to make the mixed classroom a more positive learning environment for HLLs.

9.3.1 Avoiding censure of HLLs for their “knowledge”

In his interview, Hameed, an HLL, made a mock plea to his Arabic instructor: “Please love me.” This entreaty revealed a tension between himself and his teacher—a tension that he said spilled over to other Arabic courses. Without realizing it, Hameed has reinforced the unfortunate fact that in a university-level mixed classroom, instructors are often trained to be foreign language teachers and “do not have the tools to make the adaptations necessary to meet the needs of both HL learners and students learning the language as a ‘foreign’ language in mixed classes”

(Caballero, 2017, p. 235). Thus instructors tend to view HLLs as obstructive in two ways: (1) to FLLs who may be frustrated in their attempts to master the language because they perceive HLLs as having linguistically “unfair advantages” (Carriera, 2004; Clyne et al., 1997; Kagan, 2005); (2) to themselves by intentionally performing below their linguistic capabilities in assessment tests in order to be in put into a lower-level class where they can get “an easy A” and thus avoid being challenged. (Carriera, 2004). In this latter case, HLLs can complete a course without substantially adding to their Arabic linguistic repertoire.

The data in this research demonstrate that instructors’ view that HLLs’ have a negative influence on FLLs’ learning is inaccurate. In fact, many FLL testimonies attest to the opposite: HLLs are a window to the culture and the language because they demonstrate the variety and diversity of the culture, are living examples of the diglossic nature of Arabic, model pronunciation, and make Arabic for FLLs “within reach” rather than “far removed.” When friendships arise between members of the two groups, FLLs can even come to a greater understanding of Middle East culture and politics. The concept that HLLs can be obstructive to their own learning is not entirely false because some HLLs may deliberately misplace themselves; however, they also can be misjudged by an assessment that does not capture their linguistic situation. Whatever the case, although instructors at the university level are generally highly educated and well prepared to teach, not many are trained to teach a language in a mixed classroom. Therefore, instructors need training in order to better address that classroom’s requirements (Campbell and Peyton, 1998). Carriera and Kagan (2011) make it very clear: “A classroom that either negates the value of the students’ background language acquisition or ignores it cannot be efficient for these students” (p. 59).

9.3.2 “Knowing” the HLL through instructor assessment

The university language learner usually undergoes a formal assessment in order to be placed into a class that matches his or her language ability. However, regardless of its accuracy, instructors need to do their own evaluation and “know the learner” (Carriera and Kagan, 2011, p. 60). Thus, for the Arabic classroom, the instructor should go beyond testing for linguistic proficiency in colloquial Arabic and Standard Arabic to include questions about a student’s connections to the heritage language, family, and community. This assessment information can be used in the development of materials and activities that purposefully address an individual’s identity (Carriera and Kagan, 2011) and can, notably, also benefit FLLs.

According to Polinsky and Kagan (2007), an HLL assessment should include a “three-component testing procedure” as follows: (1) a test or interview that provides information about the learner’s oral proficiency; (2) a short essay to provide information on the learner’s literacy in his or her heritage language; and (3) a biographic questionnaire that may include questions about place of birth, age of arrival to the US, the language(s) spoken at home, etc. (p. 387) (see Kagan 2005 for more details on the questionnaire). These assessment components can be done either before the course starts or on the first day. To avoid burdening instructors, I suggest that they can even assess oral and written proficiency based on student performance early in the course, e.g., the questionnaire can be a take-home assignment that can be returned the next day of class. Even small amounts of data, such as age of immigration to the US, allow an instructor to infer how much a student was likely to be exposed to the heritage language. This, in turn, provides important information about proficiency. As Carriera and Kagan (2011) point out, the older HLLs were when they traveled from the country of origin and arrived in the US, the more likely they are to have a good command for their language compared to those who were born in the US

or arrived at a very early age (p. 48).

Instructors should also meet with HLLs individually very early in the course to have a welcoming discussion that reveals the following: what each hopes to learn; experiences in previous Arabic classes; preferred topics, themes, movies, songs, etc. for class discussion; and those instructor strategies that have led to accomplishments or problems. While these questions can be added to the take-home questionnaire, I believe that asking them in a one-on-one meeting is preferable as it sets the tone for a friendly relationship. Not only is it crucial that an instructor know the HLLs, but also that he or she build a rapport that encourages HLLs to be helpful and productive in the classroom. Proper instructor assessment helps in developing a curriculum that matches the needs of all students.

9.3.3. Developing a curriculum that includes HLLs' learning needs

As pointed out in Chapter 2, the tragedy of 9/11 was the primary factor that spurred an increased interest in learning and teaching Arabic (Al-Batal, 2007; Al-Batal & Benalp, 2006). This tragedy heightened citizen interest in US foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, and resulted in Arabic curricula designed to meet the needs of US students interested in government jobs, international affairs, and diplomacy. Thus vocabulary that revolves around politics is now introduced early in such curricula. Although the *Al-Kitaab* series, used by the students in this study at UCLA, includes different themes that cover a range of cultural and linguistic information, HLLs have clearly noticed a bias in class materials and feel excluded by them for three possible reasons: (1) they are aware that the focus on politics is not part of an ESL curriculum or that of other foreign languages; (2) they already feel a social stigma for belonging to countries that are politically or even militarily in adverse positions with the U.S.; and (3) they are wary of the intent and feelings of their fellow FLLs because, as Safa, an HLL described it,

learning Arabic is not a “neutral” activity, but a “charged” one.

Scholars note that, in general, foreign language curricula are designed, not for students who already know the languages, but for the FLL student population (Carreira, 2004, Polinsky and Kagan, 2007). Thus, when an Arabic class contains HLLs as well as FLLs, instructors need to supplement the curriculum with outside materials that balance the built-in political content. As Noha, an HLL, noted,

This specific curriculum is not targeted at making you learn how to speak Arabic; it’s making you ready to go into politics. Honestly, if I knew that that’s what it was for, I probably wouldn’t have done it. If I had found that out earlier, I probably would have been like, “No, I’ll just learn it on my own.” I’ve gotten a lot out of it so, of course, that’s why I stuck with it. (Noha)

In addition, instructors can create additional content to make the political component of the course useful and more interesting for HLLs by introducing them to vocabulary that will enable them to talk about the Arab region and discuss political issues.

Using outside materials is probably a common practice by Arabic instructors at the university level as this class content adds variety and increases students’ levels of curiosity. However, these materials are not specifically designed to address HLL needs. Carreira (2004) suggests that the “typical” FLLs’ curriculum “does not broach notions of identity that are so important to individuals whose very ethnic authenticity is frequently questioned or negated” (p. 15). Thus supplementary content should support the HLLs’ pride of identity and community and contribute to fighting stereotypes that most HLLs struggle with and bring into the classroom. As the data reveal, HLLs experience an insider/outsider identity in terms of language and culture in significantly different ways than FLLs. In addition, they are very sensitive to the negative

stereotypes that might be associated with their heritage community—stereotypes that force them to hide, or assert, their identities. Therefore, additional content could include, depending on the students' level, materials about well-known past and/or contemporary Arab figures, e.g., famous rulers, poets, mathematicians, architects, singers, etc. These materials could be stories, anecdotes, or even proverbs that demonstrate generosity, fairness, wisdom, mercy, morals, contributions of women, modesty, etc. This content can originate from movies, music videos, even social media, as long as they are authentic, cultural productions that can complement the many inauthentic videos that may seem artificial to HLLs. It is crucial that these materials represent Arab minorities, i.e., their religion and common practices, famous Arab figures, and cultural habits. In other words, this additional content must reflect the diverse cultural and ethnic fabric of the Arab world, including Christians and Druze. The result is a course that is “identity-affirming and empowering... for HLLs” (Carriera, 2004, p. 15).

In Chapter 8, an FLL, Christopher, recalled enjoying a class presentation about an Egyptian wedding which the two presenters, an HLL and an FLL, had both attended and separately videoed. Their dual presentation was an enjoyable and memorable experience not only to Christopher but also to many of the interviewed students. This is what has been referred to in the literature as “bringing the community into the HL curriculum and taking the HL learner into the community to promote identity formation and student motivation” (Camerillo, 2017, p. 366) (In this instance, it also took an FL learner into the community). Other activities they suggest include field trips to community sites and inviting guest speakers from the community. I suggest that instructors ensure that FLLs take part in field trips and listen to guest speakers. Adding assignments that have students report either verbally or in writing on their linguistic and cultural experience is also useful.

Arab or Arab-American guest speakers, who may be relatives of HLLs in the class, can address a variety of topics such as their immigration journey, country of origin, and cultural traditions, e.g., how people dress, practice Ramadan, fast, celebrate Eid or Easter, etc. The guest speaker may also talk critically on political, historical and cultural issues, thus providing a lived example of the culture and region. Although it is best if the guests can speak in Arabic, the linguistic level of students will determine language level. In any case, the teacher needs to work with the guest speaker to ensure that previous vocabulary is activated and the new words demonstrated.

HLLs were considered “native speakers” by many FLLs in this study, one reason being, according to Polinsky and Kagan (2007), that “even basilectal heritage speakers sound native” (p. 378). Thus, given that they are “native speakers,” HLLs’ presentation topics can be similar to those suggested for a guest speaker, i.e., how their family practices their religion, how they dress, how they celebrate holidays, etc. In a “community-based curriculum,” HLLs can undertake such activities as “interviewing family members and members of the community, recording oral histories, and researching both the history of the country and the history of immigration” (Polinsky and Kagan, 2007, p. 378). I suggest that more advanced FLLS might also undertake such assignments, either on their own or in pairs with HLL classmates. Along similar lines, Schwartz (2001) suggests a content-based curriculum organized around themes and based on the students’ experiences and interests.

An important topic for presentation or discussion is HLLs’ stories of bilingualism, i.e., how they acquired English, how they lost (or partially lost) their Arabic, and why they want to re-learn it, as Carriera (2004) suggested for Spanish heritage speakers. The story can be told in all classes from beginning to advanced. As HLLs hold “overwhelmingly positive attitudes about

their HL” (Carriera & Kagan, 2011, p. 45), this topic validates the their experience and supports their pride in who they are. Most importantly, it also enables FLLs such as Kurt, who wondered at HLLs’ meager knowledge of their heritage language and how could they resign themselves to losing it, to see the issue from the HLLs’ perspective. Benmamoun, Montrul, and Polinsky (2010) also note that learning, or re-learning, a heritage language can create a “deficit model,” and instructors should emphasize HLLs’ strengths, not their deficiencies (p. 45). For example, instructors cannot assume that heritage learners have sufficient knowledge to speak on behalf of the language or culture because what they know is often fragmented. As Carriera and Kagan (2011) noted, “[H]eritage speakers fall within a continuum, from rather fluent speakers, who can sound almost like competent native speakers, to those who can barely speak the home language” (p. 42). Many interviewees in this research reported limited knowledge and the need to search for answers when asked questions by their FLL peers, whether linguistic or cultural. To avoid creating that feeling of “deficit,” instructors should avoid asking students to talk on the spot; rather, HLLs should be given assignments that allow them to consult with their parents or the community, find answers, and be prepared to discuss questions.

9.3.4 Making differentiation a teaching approach

The slow pace in the Arabic mixed classroom was a source of HLL complaints during the interviews and demonstrated the invalidity of the “one-class-fits-all” instruction that Carriera and Kagan (2011, p.58) warn about. In order to make this “one class” fit all, the instructor needs an approach that takes into account not only the students’ different learning styles and levels but also their different needs, backgrounds, and identities. One solution is “differentiation” or “differentiated instruction,” defined by Harmer (2007) as “when teachers give students in the same class different tasks to do because they are at different levels” (p.272). As Carriera (2004)

argues, “to best meet the needs of heritage learners, a differentiated, learner-centered approach may be required” (cited in Polinsky and Kagan, 2007, p. 388). In terms of the slow pace issue, this approach has two practical strategies: either using different materials for the two groups of students, or doing different tasks with the same materials (Harmer, 2007). The first strategy, using different materials, suits each group’s level and matches their linguistic and cultural needs. The second strategy, doing different tasks, means creating some assignments that are more difficult than others in order to challenge those students with stronger skills and a lower boredom threshold.

The advanced FLLs in this study believed that separate tracks were better at the beginning level because of the stark differential in initial linguistic ability between FLLs and HLLs. Kagan (2005) provides scholarly support for this opinion from the HLL point of view, arguing that HLLs “do not need to be placed in beginning language classes” (p. 215) because even if they display very limited knowledge and ability in the language, they are still capable of learning the language at a “macro” level (p. 218). Kagan (2005) supports a holistic and global approach that introduces HLLs to larger chunks of language, unlike the “micro” level, which typically suits the FLLs, feeding them smaller pieces of the language such as letters, words, phrases, grammar categories, etc. (p. 218). Carrieria (2012) makes an exception for HLLs who do not have literacy skills in their heritage language; these students can be mixed with FLLs at beginning levels as long as a “heritage focus” in those classes is created and sustained (p. 230). In other words, instructors of Arabic mixed classrooms who use a differentiation approach can combine “macro” and “micro” strategies.

Another differentiation strategy that teachers can use to engage and challenge HLLs is to “exploit” the diglossic nature of Arabic. For example, heritage students who are very

comfortable talking and presenting in their dialect, e.g., Egyptian, may be asked sometimes to talk or present in another dialect, e.g., Levantine. Valdés (2006) describes the situation in which learners “are involved in acquiring an *additional* variety of the same language” as “second dialect acquisition” (p. 249). In Arabic, a *third* dialect acquisition is also possible because students can be asked to learn, in addition to their own dialect, a second dialect and Standard Arabic. In addition to stimulating HLLs with these strategies, instructors can both further challenge HLLs and ease the problem of a slow pace in the mixed classroom by having them sometimes help the FLLs with language issues. Although some HLLs did not feel they benefited from the presence of the FLLs, the data show that others felt a value in being helpful, either formally or informally. Instructors should also be sensitive to student restlessness and make an effort to talk privately with students who appear to find the class pace too slow.

Caballero (2017) notes, based on suggestions and recommendations by many researchers (Benmamoun, Montrul, & Polinsky, 2010; Carreira & Potowski, 2011; Montrul, 2012), that the heritage language field is still relatively young and there is a need for more research to better understand particular instructional methods, their validity and efficacy, and whether building on them will lead to a sound and solid pedagogy. Until such research is available, Arabic teachers need to be positive about, and open to, the challenges of the mixed classroom and to be guided not only by the wisdom of what is known thus far but, most importantly, by their learners and their learners’ needs. In Carreira’s (2004) words, the key remains with teachers, who need “to fit the course to the student, rather than the student to the course” (p.21).

9. 4 Future Research

The nature of scholarly research often means that one starts with a question or two and ends up with much more information than anticipated, but also, many more questions. This has been my

experience. I began this dissertation with questions about the use of God-expressions in the Arabic classroom, and although I settled on some answers, I now find that there is much more to investigate. My first set of questions for future study involves students. Do beginning-level students have the same responses to Arabic religiosity and culture as compared to the intermediate-level students that I interviewed? Do beginning-level students hold similar or different opinions than intermediate level students on studying Arabic together in a mixed classroom? A second set of questions involves instructor beliefs and practices. With regard to the God-expressions, what do Arabic instructors think about teaching them, and how do they approach it? Would it be helpful if textbooks provided information on the phrases, including their origins and evolution? If FLLs are concerned about being offensive when using the phrases, have instructors researched how native speakers from a target region would feel and think about the use/non-use of these terms by outsiders? With regard to classroom differences and tensions, how do instructors handle the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and why? With regard to teaching Standard Arabic and Colloquial Arabic simultaneously, what experiences do instructors have to relate? What are the outcomes, both positive and negative? Which methodological practices work and which do not? Do their positions about teaching two varieties of the language simultaneously change over time and with experience? What wise words do these instructors have for the rest of us?

Clearly, more study is needed to better understand Arabic language pedagogy from both student and instructor perspectives. Theory and praxis have been adopted from the teaching of other foreign languages and, therefore, can be “hit or miss” when it comes the Arabic classroom, which has issues specific and peculiar to the language, culture(s), and region. I am hopeful that this research will provide a small step towards improving the teaching and learning of Arabic so

that students can have less stressful and more positive learning experiences and instructors can be assured of the correctness and efficacy of their teaching practices.

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