Breaking Hashtags and the Mother Tongue: Transgressive Language as a Feminist Tool in the Context of the 2019 Lebanese Uprising

Caline Nasrallah

Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal

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Abstract

This thesis examines the different ways in which English and Arabic queer and feminist language addresses its target audiences in the context of the 2019 uprising in Lebanon, and how these operations occur through the bilingual hashtags used on the Megaphone News Instagram platform. The study is based on an analysis of hashtag patterns examined on Megaphone and explores what specific words such as feminism, queer, and sexism mean in each of English and Arabic, as inferred through the Megaphone hashtags and the relative content. I then build on these patterns to examine more deeply how Arabic addresses readers affectively and English does so more theoretically, before proposing the concepts of breaking and queering not only language but also hashtag spaces to render them more inclusive. Using additional Megaphone examples, I finally frame the use of transgressive language as liberatory within protest contexts, highlighting the importance of queer and feminist language as a liberatory tool.

Résumé

Cette thèse s'attarde sur les différentes approches dont se sert le langage queer et féministe pour s'adresser à ses publics cibles, à la lumière des manifestations d'octobre 2019 au Liban. Ces approches se font au moyen de hashtags bilingues utilisés sur la plateforme Instagram de Megaphone News. Ma recherche se base sur les tendances linguistiques qui apparaissent sur ladite plateforme et aborde les significations de mots spécifiques comme féminisme, queer et sexisme en anglais et en arabe, en fonction du sens véhiculé par les hashtags et le contenu relatif. Par la suite, je m'appuie sur ces tendances afin d'étudier de manière plus approfondie comment l'arabe s'adresse aux lecteurs sur le plan affectif, tandis que l'anglais le fait d'un point de vue plutôt théorique. Ensuite, je propose l'utilisation des concepts de *breaking* et *queering* non seulement en termes de langage mais aussi d'espaces hashtags en vue de les rendre plus inclusifs. Enfin, en me basant sur d'autres exemples puisés dans la plateforme de Megaphone, j'établis que le langage transgressif joue le rôle d'une force libératoire dans le contexte des manifestations et met en lumière l'importance du langage queer et féministe comme outil de libération.

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Introduction

When the protests broke out in Beirut on October 17, 2019, life as we knew it would be changed forever, not only in terms of the political or economic implications of the uprising—though these have been violent—but also in terms of community and an openness to people who had previously been othered mainly by their sect and class. The legacy of October 17 is that it brought together the different strata of Lebanese society, quite literally putting them face-to-face with each other on the streets of Beirut as protests erupted all over the city. These people, though all Lebanese, living amongst each other in a tiny country, had rarely mingled with each other in this way; on the contrary, they would actively avoid each other and stick to their own micro-communities, the borders of which have lingered from the Civil War (1975-1990). In the thirty years or so that elapsed between the war and these protests, sectarian tensions have not waned, and co-citizens have retreated so far away from each other that they no longer even speak the same language.

The clashes that occurred on October 17 and onwards can best be exemplified by the meeting between the inhabitants of Achrafieh, many of whom are wealthy, upper-class, and Christian, and the inhabitants of Khandaq el-Ghamiq, mainly of working-class, Shiite backgrounds. These communities, though living adjacent to each other and separated only by "the Ring," an overpass connecting the western and eastern sides of the city, lead completely separate lives, with few physical intersections. Indeed, there are only few intersections between the two communities, whose vast class disparity—and sectarian belonging—ensures that "coexistence," the word that Lebanese officials often use to describe sectarian division, is limited to being in physical proximity to each other.

It is highly symbolic that the meeting point between these communities was the Ring, which during the Civil War was located along the demarcation line separating the predominantly Muslim West Beirut from the predominantly Christian East Beirut. The post-Civil War bubble had exploded, and Lebanese citizens had suddenly become aware that they were not necessarily enemies; they could—or rather, they had to—come together and cross sectarian lines to fight what had always been their common enemy: the state. But because they had lived separately for so long, communication was difficult on multiple levels, not the least of which was language. Though people all speak a shared Lebanese Arabic, a large part of the upper and middle class mix their speech liberally with English and French and read and write mostly in those languages with very little capacity in Arabic. On the other hand, the working and lower class speak mostly Arabic with little facility in English or French. These linguistic dynamics were naturally replicated during the protests, which meant that language had to develop for communication to be successful, and this leads me to an essential part of this thesis: the Megaphone News platform, whose content related to feminism and queer issues I analyze in different ways in the three chapters that follow.

People living in Lebanon are subjected to multiple levels of oppression daily, and feminism and queer issues have long been at the bottom of the ladder of priorities. National debate or even conversation about these issues is lacking, and this is exacerbated by the social separation that occurs according to class, sect, and race. The various communities that are contained within the larger whole inhabit vastly different realities and therefore have different priorities, rendering an inclusionary, comprehensive national debate very difficult to achieve. Not everybody's voice can be heard equally, and the idea of an urgent topic of conversation is unlikely to be uniformly agreed upon. In this sense, social media in general and the Megaphone

News Instagram page in particular have emerged as an equalizing space where people have the ability to voice their opinions on matters they deem imperative. The fact that Megaphone posts about queer and feminist issues means it has created a virtual space for these discussions. However, having these types of conversations online can make it seem as though these topics are prioritized in a way that is not necessarily mirrored in real life; the social media bubble can turn into an echo chamber where like-minded people encourage constructive dialogue. It is not surprising for queer and feminist issues to gain traction online because it is one of the few spaces where these issues can be talked and published about in Lebanon.

The uniqueness of Megaphone as a space for debate in the Lebanese revolutionary context explains the importance of studying the language being used in these spaces, as they represent one of the few places where these discussions can be collectively had and archived. Social media as a tool has enabled people to have conversations on a much wider scale and encourage the development of discussions they deem important, as members of a society in which everything is against them as people, before being against them as members of marginalized communities. The country is crumbling and inhabitants have no economic rights, no access to their money in the bank, no social rights, and very limited access to medication and hospitalization; they have lived through one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in history, for which no one has been held accountable, hyperinflation hit 211.43% as of May 2022, women are subjected to violence on a daily basis with murders happening almost every week, Syrian and Palestinian refugees are subjected to racism and discrimination—not to mention the modern-day slavery of the kafala system, the deep classism and sectarianism in society and oppression of marginalized groups.[1]

1. The statistics were found on "Lebanon Inflation Rate June 2022 Data - 2008-2021 Historical - July Forecast," Trading Economics, June 20, 2022. https://tradingeconomics.com/lebanon/inflation-cpi.

But when there is no hope for the future and the present is so bleak, and these conversations on feminism and queer rights are still being sustained, studying how language is being used can be a step towards laying proper linguistic groundwork for generations to come, as it can help elucidate why specific words are used in specific ways, generating a more comprehensive understanding of how language operates and relates to identity, political or otherwise.

In this thesis, and based on the above, I will study these linguistic operations by examining the use of queer and feminist hashtags on Megaphone News posts published between October 2019 and March 2021. I study these hashtag spaces in order to show how feminist and queer information is disseminated in each of English and Arabic, looking into the linguistic patterns that appear and what they reveal about the differences in communication in each of these two languages. Through these differences, I infer what specific queer and feminist terms mean in one language versus the other, so as to better understand how communication is targeted and on what basis: are the words operating in the same way across language, or do they mean different things in each? And is information framed similarly in English and Arabic, or is the message being conveyed through different angles? I do so while remaining aware of the impossibility of a perfectly translated message, as language is imbued with cultural and local specificities rendering identical translations difficult if not impossible to achieve. The fact that my review of the hashtags on the Megaphone News posts in question revealed systematic patterns of decontextualization, which I address in detail in Chapters One and Two, elucidates how information is framed differently in each language, and this leads me to discuss the importance of queering hashtag spaces by breaking with the consistent pattern of decontextualization that Megaphone presents. My larger goal is to focus on feminist and queer

language as a liberatory tool, one that can help survive the impossibility of life: queering language and queering spaces is necessary for reality to be survivable, and the importance of queering reality to navigate the impossibility of life in Lebanon is an essential point that I discuss in this thesis, while also arguing for the viability of queering language and hashtag spaces as tools to make online communication about queer and feminist issues less derogatory and more constructive.

Throughout this thesis, I use the umbrella term LGBTQ with a general hesitation and only for smoothness of reading. Over the course of my research but more importantly thanks to personal conversations I've had with trans individuals in the Lebanese community, I have learned that many people have a deep discomfort with lumping different sexual and gender identities in one term as LGBTQ does. This contributes to erasing the very diverse experiences that people who identify with these categories have, as well as the oppression that they often face from each other. Indeed, gender and sexuality scholar Surya Monro explains this idea in her 2020 article "Sexual and Gender Diversities: Implications for LGBTQ Studies," stating that LGBTQ as a universalist term groups together lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, which may make it seem like their concerns are shared, but that these kinds of approaches "may inadvertently subsume or marginalize the specificities of individual or group experiences" (317). In that sense, less universalist approaches may be more useful in addressing the oppressions and concerns specific to the less visible group.

Megaphone News as the Embodiment of the Demarcation Line

I use the Megaphone News platform as the primary source for my study because it emerged in conjunction with the revolutionary protests of 2019 as a popular independent alternative news

source publishing in both Arabic and English. Though it was founded in 2017, its activity picked up and its publications proliferated along with the protest movement. The fact that it posts bilingually is part of what makes it "alternative": by doing so, it made efforts to bring together disjointed sections of Lebanese society, embodying in the process an abstract demarcation line along which previously othered co-citizens began to meet and communicate. Megaphone was trying to talk to both sides at the same time, which is why the study of its content is so important.

There are no other platforms that operate in the same way that Megaphone does. Similar sources on Instagram include Daraj Media, Daraj Media English, Middle East Eye, Daleel Thawra, and Thawra Map, but none of these publish content bilingually or as often as Megaphone. In the case of Daraj, for example, it has two separate accounts, one that posts in Arabic and the other in English. The content is not the same, however, which means that the two languages cannot be taken or studied as translations of each other. Middle East Eye is not focused on Lebanon in specific and publishes more regional news, and Daleel Thawra and Thawra Map do not post about daily news; rather, they post more frequently when a certain incident occurs and support is needed on the street, or when corrupt politicians are seen and shamed in public. In that sense, Megaphone is quite unique as a source offering a wealth of information that is largely bilingual. It reports on news almost in real-time, with analysis pieces coming out soon after. It has become a go-to source of information among October 17 supporters, and its importance on Instagram is that social media grants it access to a large chunk of the youth who don't watch mainstream news on TV. Since the protests first broke out, Megaphone has often posted about issues that mainstream media does not pick up on, and this has garnered it a large following. This following includes a segment of society that does not follow or trust mainstream media, and that is interested in the "alternative" news being published

on Megaphone. Megaphone has also made use of its presence on a visual platform such as Instagram by cultivating an instantly recognizable visual identity, which makes it easier for its content to go viral because people start to share it without necessarily reading the entire captions to see if they agree with the post or not.

On its website, Megaphone describes itself as a "not-for-profit news platform that demystifies Lebanese politics for people who feel alienated by the approach and editorial directions of partisan mainstream media."[2] By engaging different voices which may have previously been excluded and getting them to join the conversation, it aims to "foster public accountability at a time of ever-pressing economic and political crises."[3] The inclusion of new voices furthers Megaphone's goal of "deconstructing dominant narratives and stigmas, […] particularly those targeting marginalized groups that are too often excluded or stigmatized by traditional media," and these groups include refugees, migrant workers, and the LGBT community.[4] This means that Megaphone has been actively contributing to the debate on feminist and queer issues at the national level by posting about these issues bilingually, shedding light on marginalized communities and the intersections of oppression that they face.

The importance of Megaphone is that it made a large part of the supporters of the October 17 uprising realize that language is one of the only things that can bring us together as Lebanese citizens inhabiting very different realities according to our respective class and sect. This was translated into a growing desire among these revolutionaries to start speaking and typing more Arabic, and this was reflected in real time on the Megaphone platform, which offers a vast

2. "Megaphone: Our Story." Megaphone: Independent Digital Media Platform. Accessed May 20, 2022. https://www.givingloop.org/megaphone.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

wealth of linguistic and translation activity to be studied. Because it is the first major platform to publish so copiously about issues that partisan mainstream media doesn't address, it uses language that hasn't yet entered the mainstream—terms related to queerness and feminism that weren't widely used in Arabic before, though they might be quite common and familiar in English. The wide reach that Megaphone has—5.3 million monthly viewers and readers and a total of 260,000 followers across all its platforms—highlights the importance of studying its linguistic developments and patterns, as these influence while simultaneously being influenced by the targeted linguistic communities.[5]

Methodology and Approach

My study of the Megaphone News platform focuses specifically on its use of hashtags, and even more specifically on hashtag patterns that I discovered upon examining and comparing Megaphone's posts in both Arabic and English. I have chosen to focus on hashtags and hashtag patterns because they are the most obvious site of linguistic difference in Megaphone content. While their captions are mostly the same and present the same information, the hashtags are sometimes completely different, offering insight into how each language operates and addresses its readers. Megaphone has its own website as well as social media accounts on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and two WhatsApp groups in which its content is shared—one sends out the Arabic content, and the other the English. I have based my study on the Instagram platform in particular because it offers much more direct engagement than the rest.

Because Megaphone hashtags are sometimes very different in English and Arabic, the difference in how linguistic communities are addressed on the platform is visible through these

5. As of July 17, 2022. "Megaphone: Our Story." Megaphone: Independent Digital Media Platform. Accessed May 20, 2022. https://www.givingloop.org/megaphone.

tags since they are the only parts of the content which clearly and plainly reveal discrepancies between the two languages. Examining the differences between Arabic and English hashtag use shows how communication changes depending on the perceived audience, as the hashtags "summarize" and offer a searchability function to increase the content's reach and engagement. Indeed, as social media linguistics scholar Ruth Page (2012) explains, hashtags are a tool that increases content visibility and connects content to each other through its searchability function. Therefore, the hashtag is a rich site of analysis because it does not only act as a broadcasting device (Page 2012) but also allows users to "make certain contextual assumptions accessible to their readers," which would bridge the gap between the user's—Megaphone's—"cognitive environment and the potentially disparate cognitive environments of the readers," as proposed by linguistic scholar Kate Scott (2015, 12). Scott thus frames the language, the information, housed in the hashtag as a topic-marker guiding readers' "inferential processes when interpreting the utterance" (2015, 13). In that sense, the tags highlight the main ideas of the content in question while hinting at "certain contextual assumptions," guiding the reader "to the intended overall interpretation in the most efficient and economical manner" (14).

This reinforces my suggestion that Megaphone addresses its readers of English and Arabic differently through its use of different hashtags in each of these languages, since, as Scott (2015) argues, the contextual assumptions would also change with the changing tags. The choice of tags therefore reveals, in some cases through as little as one word, differences in the way that information is framed in English and Arabic. This is made especially relevant when the word being used as a tag is one that does not circulate widely in mainstream Arabic press, such as كويريّة. This is not only an uncommon word in Arabic but also a highly taboo topic across most

communities in Lebanon—one that is not even spoken about, let alone reported on without negative connotations.

In order to conduct my analysis of the Megaphone News queer and feminist hashtag patterns, I began by thoroughly examining Megaphone's Instagram timeline from October 17, 2019 to March 31, 2021. The main terms that I set out to study are feminism (نسويّة), sexism (أبويّة, ذكوريّة), women's rights (حقوق المرأة), domestic violence (العنف الأسري), and queer (كوير/يّة), as these are commonly used categorical markers in this timeframe. However, as I read through these posts, another term stood out because of the context in which it was used: language (لغة). While I had not initially intended to include it in my study, I found its context to align with my analysis of language as a liberatory tool and therefore added it to the list of studied hashtags.

While these hashtags were frequently used in the sense that there is a rich amount of content to study in the October 2019-March 2021 timeframe, I do not mean to suggest that they were used consistently and repeatedly throughout this timeframe. It is important to remember that Megaphone is a prolific news platform that posts multiple times a day, so against the totality of posts published during this timeframe, those related to feminism and queer issues were not that numerous.[6] While this is itself worthy of study, it is not an idea that I pursue in this thesis.

I take the beginning of the uprising—October 17, 2019—as a starting point for my study not only because it is a major marker in recent Lebanese history and in the collective political consciousness, but also because, as mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction, it is the marker of a major shift that occurred within many Lebanese people. The popular slogan الثورة على النفس أوّلاً is evidence of this collective mood of revising preconceived notions, of changing oneself on the path to changing society. This then opens the door for revolting against the ruling class. The cracks created through this movement, even if until now they only exist on the

6. In the timeframe of my study, the number of posts related to feminism and queer issues is 111.

linguistic plane, via the use of queer and feminist terminology in increasingly mainstream locations, are creating spaces for marginalized communities.

I close with March 2021 so that two International Women's Days could be covered—2020 and 2021. And while I had initially only meant to trace the usage of the words mentioned above and examine any development in language and/or translation, the length of the timeframe allowed me to identify patterns and trends in the hashtags that are worth analyzing. It became clear that there were specific times of the year, incidents, and recurring themes that led to the proliferation of feminist and/or queer language on Megaphone. International Women's Day was one recurring theme, for example, and I decided it was a good point to close the research window for this study.

Discussions about and reporting on LGBTQ and gender non-conforming people is a possible step leading to more general inclusion in society, and this kind of reporting has proliferated since October 2019 on platforms such as Megaphone. Inequalities are being voiced as women and gender minorities speak up against oppression. As more of these people enter the world of media representation, new—or newly used—terms have been needed to discuss issues that did not previously occupy these journalistic spaces. I would like to highlight here the equal footing and causal relationship existing between inclusion, visibility, and language, none of which can exist without the other. James Baldwin echoes the importance of language as a political "instrument, means, and proof of power" in his article "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me What Is" (1979), positioning it as the "most vivid and crucial key to identity" that "reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity." It is important not to overlook, however, the dangers that visibility can bring in countries like Lebanon, where homosexuality is illegal and highly taboo in

society, as per Article 534 of the Penal Code which prosecutes "any sexual intercourse against nature" (Human Dignity Trust).

Al-wad' as a conceptual framework

My study was shaped by the data I drew from my examination of posts on the Megaphone News platform. The textual analysis of the hashtags and their discrepancies oriented my analysis and the direction that it took. My conceptual framework from the outset was also shaped by *al-wad',* the constantly disruptive reality of the sociopolitical situation in Lebanon, and the way in which queer theorist and gender and women's studies scholar Ghassan Moussawi (2020) uses it as a critical analytical lens and conceptual framework in his work. It is also an integral part of my study. I avoid speaking back to the West, which means I avoid binaries that position local contexts as either Western or non-Western, modern or traditional, secular or nonsecular, or liberal or non-liberal. These binaries all retain the West at their core and are not only problematic but inapplicable in the context of Lebanon because their scope is so limited that it cannot "account for political practice outside of its relation, and opposition, to imperial orbits," as stated by Marxist theorist Fadi Bardawil in his book *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation* (2020, XVI). *Al-wad',* however, recontextualizes identity, strategies for survival, and visibility into the Lebanese reality, in which navigating and surviving *al-wad'* often means using queer strategies (Moussawi 2020) to avoid being marked as suspect. This cannot be understood or applied using Western notions of queer existence or subjectivity because the entire framework is different and often requires invisibility rather than a linear narrative of progress.

Indeed, the intelligibility of gay identity is not a notion that fits into the context of Lebanon which is constantly underpinned by *al-wad'*. I do not make this comparison between gay rights in the West and in Lebanon to imply that what is applied in the West needs to be applied in Lebanon. Expecting such manifestations of linear progress in LGBTQ rights puts forth the assumption that Lebanese—or Arab—societies are adhering to the neoliberal trajectory followed by the West. But modernity and progress cannot be used as frameworks to study the "cosmopolitan potential of cities, since modernity itself depends on the exclusion of certain people—Muslim, working-class, gender-nonnormative and trans individuals, as well as refugees and migrant workers—who are defined as outside modernity" (Moussawi 2020, 158).

My analysis of the language used on Megaphone and the patterns I identify is based on a sociopolitical reading of the context in which the language in question was used. Once I situate it socially and politically, I can better understand why it was used and the function it is intended to fulfill. I then use breaking as a methodology and praxis to try and conceptualize different linguistic avenues working toward solidarity. There is an intimate link between myself and the research and study I conducted, as I did not engage in the writing of this thesis as an observer or third party but as a Lebanese woman with a personal tie to the country in which my family and friends reside. The stressful, complicated situation the country is steeped in is not limited to the boundaries of Lebanon; though I am privileged in that I do not carry the full weight of *al-wad'* in my everyday life, I still carry it within me, and it shapes the work I do and ensures that my analysis is connected to reality.

Theoretical Framework

Queering and breaking the mother tongue

To build a theoretical framework for this thesis, I use and develop the concepts of queering language, as theorized by gender studies scholar Sara Mourad (2013) and breaking language, discussed by literary translator and scholar Michelle Hartman (2019). This allows me to create a way of reading the Megaphone posts related to feminism and queer issues in a deeper and more contextual way.

Mourad's thought-provoking article "Queering the Mother Tongue" poses necessary questions about the relationship between language, translation, and queer identity, starting from the unease that many Lebanese people feel when it comes to talking about nonnormative sex and sexuality in Arabic. These are ideas that I grapple with in my own study while analyzing the Arabic terminology used in queer and feminist hashtags. Mourad's article emphasizes the need to decenter the West when it comes to studying gender and sexuality in contexts such as Lebanon, and positions academic writing as part of the knowledge production that is enmeshed in global power relations. She thinks through the few representations of erotic desire in Arabic and questions the influence that globalization has had on local discourses of sex, while maintaining that the use of English words related to sex and gender does not mean that these identities are imported. Mourad historically contextualizes the Eurocentric, orientalizing notion that societies in the Arab world are inherently repressive as remnants of the colonial era, which is when laws against homosexuality were instituted, and goes on to address older, classical Arabic terms that were used as designations for same-sex desire.

She does, however, acknowledge the various limitations of these terms and suggests a solution of "queering the mother tongue," which would entail using words that are transgressive in some way—she offers an explanation for "queering" that consists of creating words by mixing two languages, or mixing feminine and masculine words together. The transgression would thus

either operate at the linguistic level by queering, for instance, an English word with an Arabic one, or at the gender level by queering a masculine term by adding feminine suffix or prefix, or vice versa. The resulting "amalgamation of multiple languages and genders encodes a new and local form of queer embodiment" (Mourad 2013, 2540). I will be using this notion of queering language in my own study to propose ways to reclaim or reshape queer terminology to make it less derogatory and more representative of people's identities and the complexities they embody.

Mourad does not only suggest these terminological avenues of queering language but also addresses the elephant in the room, which is the problematic aspect of writing about local intimacies in English—"writing about one's own culture in a foreign language" (2013, 2542). She therefore pushes the queering of language further to include critical reflection on monolingualism as it operates in the mother tongue but also in academic languages. Decentering the West would mean speaking back to our own communities, in our own languages, to allow our research to travel beyond the closed circle of academia and be more accessible to the people who constitute the subjects of this research. In my thesis, while I work through Mourad's ideas of queering a mother tongue and put them in conversation with Hartman's (2019) notion of breaking language, I actively use Arabic words and excerpts without necessarily providing translations, to the extent possible, in my own attempt to queer this academic space and language.

In her book *Breaking Broken English: Black-Arab Literary Solidarities and the Politics of Language*, Hartman offers a deep study of "breaking" language and how it operates. Consistently emphasizing the relationship between power and language, whereby any analysis of language would require a study of who holds the power in society, she simultaneously positions language as deeply personal and tied to the self. She asserts that being able to question oneself

within one's own cultural framework and language "allows you to define who you are on your own terms, literally and metaphorically" (2019, 42). Tying this back to power, she explains how a strong definition of self is powerful because it allows people to work together across difference. From the outset, Hartman's work is intimately related to Mourad's questioning, as they both think through questions of the relationship between language and identity, though in different contexts. The concepts that Hartman and Mourad discuss provide frameworks within which I propose different linguistic solutions that aim for solidarity.

Not unlike Mourad, Hartman's quest to make language more representative of marginalized communities—thus identifying their power—stems from a belief that the languages available to us to discuss sensitive issues, like race, are impoverished. Her suggestion of breaking language, which I use in this thesis and put in conversation with Mourad's theorization of queering, consists of breaking words or soundscapes of texts to open them up to additional nuance and complexity. She rejects the idea that "broken" language is passive and highlights the generative ability of active breaking. Breaking language would make the medium the message while tapping into the power and creativity held within this framework. I borrow this concept while thinking through ways to open up not only words but hashtag spaces to become more inclusive and comprehensive.

Hartman (2019) explains that breaking language can be done by drawing on spoken languages and vernaculars, slang, and accents, but also by mixing languages (53). It can occur at the grammatical or linguistic level, or also within a text as a whole by using multiple languages within it. Speaking about Arabic specifically, she states that mixing English and Arabic in a text would appeal to many speakers of both languages because "they will relate to bilingual thought processes and natural code switching" (64), which is very relevant to a segment of the Lebanese

community that already mostly uses English and Arabic interchangeably when talking about sex and sexuality. Hartman takes this one step further, however, and describes such breaks in language as interventionist tools that have the capability of "producing their own knowledge through language" (137). Applied to this thesis, then, the Arabic breaks I use to queer the monolingualism of academic language would also constitute breaking, echoing and invoking multiple layers of meaning for speakers of Arabic.

While queering and breaking are not interchangeable terms and do not perform the same work, I use these concepts and put them in conversation with each other to study the use of language and the patterns that emerge from hashtag spaces on Megaphone because they both offer radical, queered ways of thinking about language and how to use it to reclaim power. Their works and ideas help me further the discussion on contextually specific queer and feminist language used as topic markers on social media, and how these operate within English and Arabic linguistic communities when they address the communities differently.

Al-wad' and transgressive language as affect

Moussawi's pioneering 2020 book *Disruptive Situations: Fractal Orientalism and Queer Strategies in Beirut* has also helped me conceptualize what progress in queer rights might look like in the context of Lebanon, while thinking about breaking and queering language as markers of progress. Moussawi situates *al-wad'* as a premise against which everything in society must be positioned and theorizes different queer strategies that could be used to navigate life in Lebanon amid *al-wad'*. The best English approximation for *al-wad'* would be "the situation," a term widely used in post-civil war Lebanon to "refer to the shifting conditions of instability in the country that constantly shape everyday life" (2020, 5). It is, briefly put, a description of the status

quo, but the complexity it brings is the constant feeling of unease and anxious anticipation of what might happen next. Indeed, *al-wad'*—in comparison to which "the situation" fails to capture the complexity and layers of nuance that come along with *al-wad'*—brings about an "affective state of uncertainty" (23) that becomes the only familiar thing in a society in which nothing about the present and future can be surmised. Moussawi's work fills a gap in Lebanese queer studies by providing tools to navigate life in Lebanon, as stated by his interlocutors. This method of "democratizing" knowledge is much needed in a context, such as Lebanon, in which queer strategies for survival cannot be imported from the West since the situation is so uniquely different. The strategies he relays provide frameworks in which I situate the importance of using queer and feminist language online, in a way that takes into account the intricacies of the local context.

Moussawi addresses the notion of visibility and states that its definition changes as *al-wad'* continues to shift everyday realities and conditions. In that sense, "who is marked and in what contexts" fluctuates (108) with the developments of the geopolitical situation. These negotiations are based on the level of threat that visibility will bring. Indeed, in Beirut, visibility is "negotiated primarily in relation to context and gender, class, ethnicity, immigrant status, political identification, and religious sect" (135) and is rarely a good thing for marginalized communities, as it makes them into more of a target and marks them as suspect. His discussion on the dangers of real-life visibility elucidate why I target the importance of online visibility and how queer and feminist language impact it.

The liminal, shifting state of *al-wad'* constantly reveals the power relations at play, which are embodied by the constant tug between colonial afterlives and the modernity they purport to bring forth. For the purpose of this study, modernity would signify a linear narrative of progress

whereby queer rights are constantly evolving—in the sense of liberal democracy, of "human rights as vectors of imperial violence cloaked in ideologies of liberation" (Bardawil 2020, XIII). Indeed, there is no sense of linear progress in the context of gay rights in Lebanon, not in the way that the West has—arguably—delineated in its neoliberal framing of what progress should look like in gay rights. In the Euro-American context, this progress is framed in a linear way, in the sense that notions of tolerance and improvement are gauged through increased visibility of Western-style gay identities and performance or neoliberal projects and ideologies that produce identities that are prepackaged, "commodified, and ready for consumption" (Moussawi 2020, 2). Moussawi argues against using this kind of mainstream gay visibility to determine the level of freedom of expression in Lebanon and to gauge signs of "national/cultural progress of places and people" (107). These are all ideas that frame and ground my study, as they provide alternatives to Western gay ideology and center the specificity of the local Lebanese context, which is necessary for an analysis of the language used to describe this context.

Still centering *al-wad'* as the conceptual framework for his theorizing, Moussawi suggests that bubbles are an example of a queer strategy that marginalized Lebanese communities have resorted to in order to temporarily escape the disruptive chaos of life in Lebanon. He explains bubbles as fleeting ways to retreat from the reality of the situation and posits them as temporal rather than spatial, moving away from the "location or the concept of safe spaces as a privileged site of understanding LGBT life and mobilizations" (2020, 138). He argues that the bubble provides what community fails to offer. His notion of bubbles as a queer strategy helps me in my analysis of the importance of online queer and feminist visibility, which culminates in my own framing of social media as a bubble.

I also rely on scholar Tarek El-Ariss's 2018 book *Leaks, Hacks, and Scandals: Arab Culture in the Digital Age* to continue studying the power of transgressive language, while taking into account the primacy of *al-wad'*. El-Ariss focuses on the performance of *shatm* and *qillat adab* as models of affective protest that contain liberatory power and potential, which conceptually ties into my use of Moussawi's work by providing additional ways to think through the power of language on social media. El-Ariss characterizes the Arab activist blogger as a leaking subject, one who produces "an affective textuality and imagery online that keeps the audience titillated, outraged, and informed" (2018, 59). The leak that El-Ariss discusses is a manifestation of the connection between protestors and the digital world, but he makes the important distinction that no matter the extent to which these online leaks encourage and incite further protests, it is not social media alone that enables a political movement to potentially topple autocratic regimes. The counternarrative refuting the idea that social media has the lion's share of power and influence asserts the essential role of traditional activism and the mobilizations of civil society.

El-Ariss rejects this false binary, however, that positions the digital and the traditional as opposing parties, and urges instead the critical investigation of the "intertwinement of digital culture, new writing, and the critique of power emerging from sites and practices that are local and global, tied to online leaks […] and to the traditional practices of *fadh* and scene-making both online and on the street" (59-60). In that sense, the "leak" of the protestor-activist-blogger creates an intimate link between what happens on the street and what is posted online, as technology becomes a sort of extra limb granting more visibility. He characterizes this link as "a relation of immediacy that unsettles the boundary between technology and its users" (60). This analysis is helpful to my reading of the transgressive language used on Megaphone News posts

related to the revolutionary protests and provides a background that my framing of this language as liberatory fits into. El-Ariss also highlights the importance of using transgressive, abrasive language in these leaks to confront the oppression of the state and the political establishment, as this kind of language violates the codes of morality and propriety, or *adab*, imposed by the state, and as a result manages to communicate the urgency of the leak. This kind of transgression can be framed as *qillat adab*, and the language itself as *shatm*, and it is needed to scandalize the situation: El-Ariss explores these practices and performances as models of affective protest and contestation (61). These methods of analysis can be used to study the protest scene in Lebanon in October 2019 and onwards, examining specific Megaphone News posts containing manifestations of *shatm* and *qillat adab* and reading them through a liberatory lens.

I therefore use the article and three books discussed here to analyze the hashtag patterns on Megaphone and propose linguistic avenues for making language operate in more inclusive ways that aim for liberation and solidarity across difference. The final article whose analysis provides a basis for my arguments is Dina Georgis's 2013 "Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame in "Bareed Mista3jil."" Georgis addresses the groundbreaking importance of the book *Bareed Mista3jil: True Stories* (Meem 2009), which consists of a collection of narratives of Lebanese lesbian, bisexual, and queer women and transgender persons. She examines the characteristics of the narrativized queer community while thinking through conditions of Western imperialism, globalization, remnants of the colonial era, and life in Lebanon amid constant disruption—*al-wad'*. Acknowledging the importance and influence of the West on Arab queer identity, she resists framing these identities as either Western and "modern" or Arab and "traditional," in a way that is reminiscent of Mourad's arguments.

Not unlike Moussawi, Georgis positions *al-wad'*, the local political and cultural context, at the center of identity development. She uses affect to understand how the members of the queer community in Lebanon survive the difficulties of their everyday lives, finding in storytelling an affective function of conveying one's reality in a smoother, more digestible way. This framing of storytelling to affectively render difficult news is helpful to my analysis of the way Arabic hashtags operate on Megaphone, and Georgis's ideas, in conversation with Mourad's and Hartman's, lead me to position the Arabic language in the Megaphone hashtags as operating affectively and to think about the English hashtags more theoretically.

Other works also influenced my thinking without necessarily offering specific insights to help develop the theoretical framework of this thesis. Bardawil's *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation* (2020), for example, touches on the importance of the generative ability of translation in the revolutionary context, as it leads to the global circulation of texts. Bardawil describes the 1960's and 1970's Leftist movement in Lebanon as belonging to the post-Civil War period that represented the cradle of his "generation's political consciousness" (2020, XIII), during which "militants, thinkers, novelists, playwrights, poets, and musicians […] became a site of deep political-affective investment" (XIII). The similarities between his description of that time and the present moment provided me pathways to conceptualize the political-affective reality in Lebanon, which I use in conjunction with his ideas on translation to study the bilingual Megaphone hashtags and the generative nature of translation on this platform. While they do not apply to my study, Bardawil's analyses resonate with the general outlines I work with.

I also work with ideas from queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003). Her work on affect helped me understand Moussawi's premise of *al-wad'* as an affective reality and thus clarified the idea of using affect as a general framework against which other ideas are grounded. The two works speak to each other in this sense, and while I do not work directly with Sedgwick's ideas, they cemented my understanding of affect while also pushing me towards conceptualizing shame as a generative force. Thinking through how one can come to understand oneself through shame guided me in my thinking about queering and breaking Arabic queer terminology, as I was more able to understand the generative function of reclaiming or reshaping derogatory terminology through queering and breaking by tapping into the shame within them as a creative impulse.

The *Gender Dictionary* (Lebanon Support 2016) acted as an additional source for Arabic terminology related to gender and sexuality, and I used it to verify whether specific Arabic terms I encountered on Megaphone News appeared anywhere else. Such terms include queer/كوير , gender/جندر , feminism/نسوية , and sexuality/جنسانية . In a similar vein, *Bareed Mista3jil: True Stories* (Meem 2009) consistently came up as a reference throughout my research, and while I do not use any specific ideas or terminology laid out in the book, it reinforced my understanding of Arabic terminology related to nonnormative sex and sexuality as being inadequate and confirmed the unease that comes with using this terminology. Moreover, gender and sexuality scholar Sahar Amer's 2012 article "Naming to Empower: Lesbianism in the Arab Islamicate World Today" provided some background to older Arabic terms used to designate queer desire and identity, but while Amer lauds these terms as more authentic than more recent ones, I refute this idea and avoid celebrating the past as a marker of authenticity. Her ideas further ground my thinking

about the importance of queering and breaking language as frameworks for gender- and sexuality-related language that is more representative.

While conducting my research into hashtags and how they operate linguistically, I could not find any scholarly work that focuses on the language in bilingual hashtags and compares how each addresses its targeted readership. The research that does exist addresses the operational functions of hashtags as a tool and does not consider the actual language used within the hashtag spaces. Michele Zappavigna, a linguist focused on social media discourse and ambient affiliation, focuses on the linguistic side of hashtags in her 2015 article "Searchable talk: the linguistic functions of hashtags" only insofar as it relates to aiding the searchability function of hashtags. Her work deals with the different ways that language can target additional platform users through the various connections that hashtags make with content; they are not only topic markers that add complexity to posts by highlighting ideas that might not otherwise clearly stand out, they also create ambient affiliations with other content that share the same hashtag and even operate on the interpersonal level by aiding visibility and participation. There is therefore a gap in research that addresses how bilingual hashtags operate *linguistically*, not functionally on the social media platform in question, and how these linguistic operations convey information differently according to the cultural and sociopolitical context of each language—in this study, English and Arabic. This gap also extends to research conducted on the way that queer and feminist language is used on social media platforms, through hashtags, to attract users and/or engage in meaning-making. My study attempts to fill this gap by relying on Mourad and Hartman's theorizations of queering and breaking language as a background against which I conduct my study of queer and feminist hashtags.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is divided into three chapters, each of which touches on language as inherently linked to a form of social justice in which people are better represented, in which everyone is recognized as equal across difference. I argue in the chapters that follow that using transgressive, breaking, and queered language is a (re)generative process, one which establishes grounds for deeper links in society. Especially on social media, which could be viewed as "an archive of the present—a central space where queerness is expressed, represented, and sometimes censored" (Mourad 2013, 2540), the circulation of reclaimed or new queer terms is central to ensuring online visibility, which would eventually translate into improved social justice for people inhabiting marginalized sexual or gender identities. Indeed, it is necessary to commit to "language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language that has been made to work against us" (Lorde 1984, 43).

In Chapter One, I identify and study the hashtags used on Megaphone News posts related to feminism and queer issues within the set timeframe (October 2019-March 2021). I begin by explaining the use of hashtags, their different functions, and the communities they create, before turning the focus to Megaphone and laying out the hashtag patterns that I identified while conducting my study. As a first step, I list the hashtags that are obviously related to their posts' content, which allows me to infer definitions for these terms in each of Arabic and English. The terms are feminism, نسويّة, sexism, أبويّة, ذكوريّة, women's rights, حقوق المرأة, domestic violence, and العنف الأسري. Then I move on to the posts whose hashtags are not as obviously related, or whose tags reveal a discrepancy when looked at in relation to the content of the relative post. Comparing these usages to the previously inferred definitions allows me to propose how these

terms are used by Megaphone in English and/or Arabic, and in what contexts. As a final step, I address the tags that are different in each language, though they are mentioned on the same post, analyzing what gets highlighted in each language.

In Chapter Two, I focus on the hashtags that are different in each of English and Arabic. I think through the reasons for these differences by using a framework of affect theory, suggesting that the Arabic tags, which have a pattern of focusing on names of people involved in controversy instead of other contextual aspects of it, are fulfilling an affective, storytelling function to ease the intake of news (Georgis 2013). I then think through Hartman's (2019) theorization of breaking and apply it to the hashtag space, whereby the use of theoretically precise Arabic tags would constitute the instance of breaking the hashtag space because it breaks with the consistent pattern of decontextualization. The pattern of decontextualization is explained in comparison to the parallel tags in English, which are more contextual than affective. I also touch on the unease with using Arabic terminology related to nonnormative sex and sexuality and offer as a solution the generative potential of breaking and queering language (Hartman 2019; Mourad 2013).

Finally, in Chapter Three, I move on to a discussion of the liberatory power of transgressive language, be it breaking and queered or offensive, as in *shatm* (El-Ariss 2018). I build on the ideas elaborated upon in Chapter Two related to the importance of using breaking and queered Arabic terminology to better represent the flexibility of identity. This allows me to argue that using this vocabulary in a more widespread manner online could constitute an important marker of progress in social justice that is adapted to the context of *al-wad'*. I position online visibility as different from real-life visibility in that it does not bring about the threat and danger of embodying a visibly marginalized identity on the street. I then suggest that social

media could represent one of the bubbles that Moussawi frames as a queer strategy to navigate *al-wad'*, explaining the similarities between the two and also touching on the drawbacks of conceiving of social media as a bubble (2020). Lastly, I discuss the importance of transgressive, offensive language that is directed against the state and the role it plays in creating and sustaining affective models of protest (El-Ariss 2018), linking El-Ariss's theorization of *shatm* and *qillat adab* to specific Megaphone posts that include اللغة as a hashtag. I read the Megaphone posts relationally with El-Ariss's analysis to prove the liberatory power of transgressive language.

Chapter One: Hashtag Patterns on Megaphone News

A thorough review and cataloguing of Megaphone News posts between October 2019 and March 2021, which relate to queer and feminist issues, revealed clear patterns of hashtag usage.[7] In this chapter, I examine these patterns closely to expand the understanding of how hashtag assignment contributes to different communities of knowledge, and hence the conversations being sustained within these communities, in both English and Arabic. I will argue that—through hashtags—information is presented differently to the readers of each of these two languages by Megaphone. Arabic posts use a decontextualized version of events that I argue hinders the development of a consistent and constructive presentation of feminism and feminist issues in Lebanese society. It does this by focusing on the specifics of an event—names of people involved in controversy, the setting, etc.—rather than highlighting narratives and how they are interconnected. These posts also suggest different definitions for certain commonly used tags, which prevents the emergence of consistent definitions and thus deeper analyses. The English hashtags, on the other hand, are used in a more consistent way that pinpoints the theoretical issues at hand and connects the dots between the various intersections of feminist, sociopolitical critique. I begin this chapter with a general analysis of hashtags and the different functions they serve, while touching on the publics created—intentionally or otherwise—by the repeated use or absence of certain hashtags. Next, I study the Megaphone hashtag patterns by tracing the contexts in which specific tags are used. Further, I present and analyze the different types of discrepancies these hashtags present, using this information to better understand how news is conveyed differently to English and Arabic readers.

7. See Appendix for the links to all the Megaphone posts discussed in this thesis (pp. 141-51). The links are listed in chronological order, with the date of each post listed beside the respective link. The reference itself shows whether the post is in Arabic, English, or both.

Hashtag Functions and Communities

As Zappavigna (2015) states, an "important dimension of social media discourse is its searchability" (274). The hashtag is key to this as it is a form of "social tagging" (274) that allows platform users to add nuance and dimensions to their posts. Simply explained, the hashtag can be described as a "topic-marker" (277), but that must not take away from its ability to add complexity to social media texts. Indeed, when a hashtag is included in a social media post, no matter the platform being used, the user is actively deciding to link the post to others that share the same hashtag, and this connection could be around a specific topic, an event, or a theme (Highfield & Leaver 2014). Another social media researcher and expert, Alexander Halavais (2013), explains that the hashtag affords a way to indicate textually "keywords or phrases especially worth indexing" (36). It can provide additional or more complex dimensions to the main content being published, as it is also used as a marker of topics that do not immediately stand out through the content (Zappavigna 2015).

These analyses suggest that hashtag choice is not random, in the sense that the hashtag is always somewhat connected to the meaning of the post—either the meaning that stands out immediately, or one related to a wider context of understanding. This is an important notion that will be recalled later in this chapter, in relation to specific tags that seem loosely connected to the content, helping to infer wider contextual meanings of certain tags. While this does not necessarily mean that everyone who uses a specific hashtag has the same intention for its use, including how it is put in conversation with other posts, this is nonetheless still reflective of certain filtering and/or grouping practices.

Practices of filtering and grouping have been dubbed “conversational tagging” by scholars Huang, Hornton, & Efthimiadis (2010). They show how this promotes the searchability of a post and positions it within a specific discourse, such that it joins the conversation in “quasi-real-time” (Zappavigna 2015, 274). They have shown how this in turn leads to the creation of “ambient connections”: the posts that are in conversation with each other at this level of metadata are all present, at the same time, on the social media platform, even though they could belong to different accounts and be separated by user (274). The function of this metadata is not simply limited to searchability; it becomes a mirror and catalyzer of social relations, transforming from an organizer of information to a “social resource for building relationships and communities” (274). The active community-building aspect of the hashtag constitutes the basis of the framework I will use for my exploration in this chapter of the patterns revealed by Megaphone’s choice of hashtags and what they reveal about the communities included in the discourse on one hand, and what Megaphone is contributing to the discourse in each language on the other.

In terms of the kinds of meanings that different types of hashtags perform, they range from specifying a specific post’s semantic domain (for example, #sexism, #womensrights) to linking it to an existing collective practice known by users and used for the specific purpose of contributing to this discourse (for example, the common hashtag #FollowFriday whose purpose is to suggest an action to the user), and even to expressing an emotion about the post itself (for example, #tootired) (Zappavigna 2015). These linguistic functions reveal different types of approaches to searchability, either as terms that are directly related to the post’s topic or as metacommentary, and they also reveal the existence, real or not, of an “imagined audience” (Litt 2012) that also shares the same feelings or attitudes towards something within the wider orbit of

whatever the post is tackling. Such an audience is rendered no less important by its potential (non)existence; indeed, the very possibility of being real is enough to push any online conversation forward as social media users insert themselves into a world of ambient affiliation—of metacommentary—where their opinions are being juxtaposed with others'—imagined or not. The common aspect among the different hashtag functions elucidated above, however, is essentially the enhancement of searchability and the facilitation of conversation and engagement on the platform in question. But because of the way that posts are aggregated by hashtag, there is no linear or "turn-taking" dimension to the interchange that occurs on social media, which makes the conversation quite different in shape and trajectory to what it otherwise would look like in real life, or offline conversation (Zappavigna 2015, 275).

What is undeniably important in hashtag use is the communities that are created when a specific hashtag is used repeatedly not only by the same user, but by multiple accounts over a period of time. This makes the hashtag instantly recognizable—and therefore, searchable by people who want to join or even merely witness the conversation.[8] Indeed, as digital scholar Adam Mathes (2004) elucidates, this process of social tagging contributes to the collective social organization of information on the platform in question, leading in turn to the creation of a "folksonomy—a combination of 'folk' and 'taxonomy'" (3-4). A folksonomy is never static, fixed; it is constantly being updated and regenerated as social media users continue to use a specific hashtag, contributing to the discussion at the metadata level (Highfield & Leaver 2014). In that sense, a folksonomy is not pre-organized or determined, rather it is constructed at the pace

8. When discussing Instagram specifically, a visual platform on which the image component of a post is also of critical importance—as opposed to a more text-based platform such as Twitter, for example—it could be argued that the relationship between the hashtag and the graphics of the post would also need to be studied to gauge more clearly the point behind including specific hashtags. This, however, does not apply to my study, as mine is a purely linguistic one, unrelated to graphics and having nothing to do with the connection between the text (caption/ hashtags) and photo components of a post.

of collective hashtag use. Hashtags can, therefore, lead to the creation or emergence of communities that are formed promptly following a certain event.

Some might argue, however, that this immediacy exists only for text-based platforms such as Twitter: on Instagram, and on the Megaphone News page in particular, it is not the immediacy of the hashtag that stands out. Instead, the hashtag is useful because it aggregates news into units, or posts, that are in turn linked to the wider contextual scope they individually belong to through the hashtags chosen.[9] In other words, the publics created through hashtag use on Instagram do not share the immediacy or urgency of those created on Twitter; theirs is a more ambient affiliation. And while it is true that the social nature of hashtag emergence hinders the rapid adoption of a unified hashtag for given themes (Highfield & Leaver 2014), which could cause a lag or a splintering of the discussion, this does not directly apply to Megaphone because, as my study shows, their use of specific hashtags is consistent throughout the timeline I am exploring.

Megaphone's hashtag use can be explained as creating virtual communities that are bound by topic or theme, and not necessarily by time-sensitivity. The hashtags are general and thematic (#womensrights, #sexism), and are contextualized as related to Lebanon through the addition of other hashtags such as #beirut, #lebanon, or more contextually specific markers related to the event itself. This helps increase the reach of the message. In light of this, there do not exist any "competing publics using different hashtags" (Bruns & Burgess 2011) because the public in question is being studied through one sole Instagram platform, which means that there are no issues around splintered hashtags and ensuing splintered communities. What might create some splintering, however, is the changing, by Megaphone, of an adopted hashtag, since

9. On Instagram, news is not shared at the real-time pace of Twitter. It is, compared to a text-based platform, a more ambient space in which news is shared and aggregated without urgency or primacy, rendering the primary hashtag function one of categorization and aggregation, contributing primarily to searchability.

ultimately hashtags are language and language is anything but static: as movements evolve, so does the accompanying language and in turn the prominent hashtag. A prime example of this is Megaphone's initial use of the "الثورة امرأة" hashtag, which later became "الثورة أنثى".

The (virtual) communities brought together by these hashtags are not only Megaphone's followers, but the followers of hashtags who join the wider virtual discussion. They are not, therefore, ad hoc issue publics (Meraz & Papacharissi 2013) emerging as hashtags go viral, but a more consistent ambient fluctuating presence: by adopting a unified thematic hashtag, it is an "imagined community of users who are following and discussing a specific topic" being addressed, and this community is different from that of the platform's followers (Bruns & Burgess 2011, 9).Their separation here is not meant to be understood as divisive, but the opposite: the different communities overlap, no matter how they ended up at a specific post/ hashtag. And keeping in mind that not all hashtags are meant to lead to the creation of communities, and therefore do not all necessarily embody intentionality (Highfield & Leaver 2014), their intentionality in this case is defined by their intentional use by Megaphone as markers of theme or category. In this context, intentionality indicates the purposeful grouping of posts sharing the same hashtag, putting them in conversation with one another.

What interests me in this study is how intentionality differs from one language to another—what part of the message is highlighted in English and Arabic within nearly identical posts published bilingually. Moreover, what message *can* be highlighted in each of those languages, based on the readerships of each. This will be addressed in more detail below. The discussion of intentionality leads to the notion of attention (Tufekci 2013): I explore what the intentional use of a certain hashtag for different posts—and therefore the grouping of these under one umbrella—aims to highlight. I do so to gauge where it intends to direct public attention, and

how it is orienting this attention by grouping the posts in question together under a specific hashtag.

Knowing that hashtags enhance the visibility of a message, content marked by a hashtag is more likely to go viral because the post becomes "more searchable than plain texts alone" (Small 2011). It becomes accessible not only to the followers of a page but to the ambient affiliated community that will reach the post through the hashtag. This visibility matters insofar as it allows content to attain symbolic power, facilitating the spread of information more rapidly and to a wider audience. But virality in this sense is inherently bound to virtuality, potentially limiting the spread of the discussion to the online sphere with no immediate need to be translated into the concrete world. While the existence of issues in the concrete world is what pushes them to be represented online, their online presence demonstrates no immediate call to action. By call to action, I do not mean to suggest a literal, explicit call to accomplish a specific task; it could be something as simple as the way information is presented.

I argue that in the case of Megaphone, when hashtags are not used uniformly, resulting in information being presented inconsistently across language/s, feminist topics are not always framed as such, and constructive discussion is often aborted prematurely—because necessary links have not been made. In that sense, potential virality is limited to virtuality, since the online representation of crucial feminist debates is not presented, across language, in a manner that translates any sense of urgency. The isolation of topics and an absence of connections being made where they *already exist* become all the starker when contrasted against the hashtags used in the allegedly identical post of the other language.

In what follows, I explore how the choice of hashtags in each language leads to information being framed differently in English and Arabic, prompting each readership to react

differently to the same post. Linking this back to virality and meaning-making, the different presentation of supposedly identical posts causes the content of each language to go viral for different reasons. These different reasons and different reactions that readerships have are what hinders the extrapolation, in readers' minds, of the topics they are reading about into the world around them. I will discuss this in detail, with examples from Megaphone, in the sections below.

I begin by establishing what the different hashtag patterns are, which in turn allows me to infer loose definitions of specific, frequently used hashtags through an examination of the contexts in which they were used. I then study the significance of the absence of these tags from posts whose topics are inherently related to them, before moving on to the posts that presented completely different hashtags in each language. These discrepancies are the basis of my argument that Megaphone expresses information differently to the readers of Arabic and English, via its choice of hashtags. By choosing different topic markers in each language, Megaphone is implicitly admitting and perpetuating the fact that the same piece of information goes viral for different reasons according to the language it is presented in, which in turn reveals that different linguistic communities have different understandings of specific terms and concepts. By consistently presenting certain information differently to different language communities, I propose that Megaphone is actively hindering the development of a constructive, comprehensive, and intersectional discussion across Arabic and English—and thus limiting virality to virtuality.

Megaphone News Hashtag Patterns

A review of Megaphone's hashtag use between October 2019 and March 2021 reveals different patterns of disconnect in the relationship between content and hashtag choice. I begin by laying out the instances in which the choice of tag for a post is obvious and coherent, allowing me to

infer, to a certain extent, Megaphone's definitions of the terms used as hashtags. By "obvious," I mean that the choice of tag is either directly or clearly related to the main topic or theme of the content in question; it is a term that would be immediately thought of in relation to the content. In most cases, the term is used in the caption, either once or multiple times, or the content of the caption is itself a manifestation or example of the term. For instance, a post from December 15, 2020 including #sexism uses the following language in its caption: "Saad used sexist vocabulary throughout the episode to demean women," and "He repeatedly linked a woman to "her husband, her friend, or her brother."" Sexism, in this case, is an obvious topic marker, as the term is mentioned in the caption, which also includes a real-life example of sexism unfolding in the media. In that sense, the tags act as topic markers while simultaneously setting up loose definitions of what Megaphone considers as belonging to those categories—through this post, it becomes clear that Megaphone considers topics related to misogyny to be sexist. I work through a series of such examples to explore what different contexts specific terms were applied to and what scope they encompass. These terms include feminism, نسويّة, sexism, أبويّة, ذكوريّة, women's rights, حقوق المرأة, domestic violence, and العنف الأسري.

Afterwards, I move on to the hashtag choices that are less obvious. In some cases, highly relevant and related hashtags—which have all been individually used by Megaphone—are not included together, but used separately in posts, despite the fact that they seem to be inherently related. In other posts, there seems to be a certain discrepancy between the content of the article and its hashtags. In these cases, for example, relevant tags are absent or the ones that do exist are either contextually misleading or seem too general for the topic. To illustrate this point, for example, a post from April 5, 2020 about the economic collapse includes نسويّة among its hashtags, even though the post does not seem to be related to writing about the collapse from a

feminist angle. The juxtaposition of these types of hashtag patterns against the "established" definitions inferred from the first set of tags allows me to explore more deeply the differences in context warranting the use of these tags by Megaphone, and hence to gain a better understanding of what gets categorized as feminist, but also what doesn't—and why.

In the final section, I study the posts that revealed discrepancies in their hashtags across the two languages of the platform, Arabic and English. Here I analyze what different aspects are being highlighted in each language and which remove the issue from wider contexts by emphasizing other aspects, which may be less important. Keeping in mind that Megaphone is bilingual, the hashtags I discuss are in both English and Arabic. Over the period under study here, Megaphone's posting practices consisted of either publishing separate posts for each language, with hashtags in the respective language, or one post including the two versions of the caption and tags. In other cases, Megaphone uses bilingual hashtags for posts that were otherwise monolingual. My discussion draws out how the posts and hashtags in different languages complement and contrast with each other, and I pay special attention to the different social and political contexts of each language and their respective communities of knowledge.

Obvious hashtag relation

This section addresses the Megaphone posts between October 2019 and March 2021 that include hashtags whose relation to the posts' content was deemed immediately obvious, as per the methodology elaborated above. I lay these out by term, for both English and Arabic. I have chosen the terms to focus on by going through the posts published within this study's timeframe and marking those that have tags or content having to do with feminism, women's rights, and queer rights, and then aggregating these by theme and language to be able to pick up on

linguistic patterns. First, I explore the contexts in which specific terms appear as the primary hashtag on posts. I then continue exploring different moments in which these same terms are used as hashtags alongside other terms that are thematically relevant to these tags.[10]

The term feminism first appears as a hashtag on October 7, 2020, on a post detailing a week of threats to female journalists in Beirut. It is again used as a hashtag on two posts discussing recent sexist comments, first on December 3, 2020, made by Lebanese pop star Najwa Karam, and second on December 14, 2020, when a sexist narrative was again broadcast on a Lebanese political talk show: "A lawsuit is akin to a girl who lost her virginity if it is not kept confidential." On January 19, 2021, a post about "legal kidnapping" and the institutionalized violence against women imposed by the patriarchal system includes feminism in its hashtags, along with #custody and #lebanon. On March 22, 2021, feminism is also included as a hashtag on a post announcing the passing of the pioneering Egyptian feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi. Based on this array of posts, feminism in English can encompass issues ranging from violence against women, both physical and institutional, to sexist discourse and pioneering women writers.

In Arabic, نسويّة is used as a hashtag on November 2, 2019, on a post describing the surreal scene of feminist chanting mixed with Rayess Bek and Sheikh Imam songs and a mosque's call to prayer during a protest. The hashtag is accompanied by the slogan "الثورة امرأة". On November 18, 2019, نسويّة is used twice in the hashtags of one post (ثورتنا نسويّة/ نسويّة), which was about the contributions of women to the revolution. The hashtag الثورة أنثى is also used. This marks the first time the slogan switches from "the revolution is a woman" to "the revolution is

10. For example, taking feminism to be the main thematic marker, thematically relevant terms include women's rights, queer rights, and sexism, because they all belong under the same wide umbrella of feminism.

female"—the latter became widely popular during the protests.[11] On the same day, those three hashtags are again used on a separate post, also about women's demands and their participation in the ongoing protests. A post was published on February 27, 2020 about the space that male assaulters take up in feminist marches and in public and virtual places, with the tags #مجتمع-مدني, #تحرّش, and #نسويّة. On March 4, 2020, نسويّة is used as a hashtag on a post about women's feminist identities and the importance of being aware of discrepancies in privilege among women. On March 7, 2020, نسويّة is used as a hashtag on a post questioning the long-lasting nature of male privilege. The posts on this day were all under the umbrella of International Women's Day, as were those on March 9, 2020—only one of which contains a variation of نسويّة as a hashtag (مسيرة نسائيّة). On June 13, 2020, نسويّة is again a hashtag on a post about the sexist and misogynistic reaction to the revelation that Mahmoud Darwish had a daughter out of wedlock. On July 10, 2020, it is used as a hashtag on a post about the absence of women's sanitary pads from the state's list of items to be subsidized amid the country's economic freefall. On December 14, 2020, نسويّة is included as a hashtag on a post about sexist discourses on a political talk show. On January 19, 2021, a post discussed in the section above, about "legal kidnapping" and the institutionalized violence against women imposed by the patriarchal system, has نسويّة as a hashtag, as well as #حضانة and #لبنان.

As these examples show, #نسويّة interestingly appears more frequently than #feminist—as though a wider array of topics is considered by Megaphone to be feminist, in Arabic. These include feminist chants and contributions to the protests, women's demands in the context of these protests and economic freefall, feminist identities, the patriarchy, International Women's Day, and assault—both physical and institutional—against women. While it is clear that نسويّة is

11. As discussed above, this is an example of an instance where Megaphone switched the adopted hashtag. This change can be considered natural, as it mirrors the slogans being chanted in the widespread protests at the time.

used as a thematic marker more often than its English counterpart, this does not necessarily reveal a discrepancy in what it means to both linguistic communities: in addition to the bilingual English/ Arabic posts, the timeframe of the study contained other posts published only in Arabic, as they link to full articles written by Megaphone contributing journalists. These are not translated and therefore appear only in Arabic, increasing the instances of نسويّة.

Moving on to sexism, it is used as a hashtag on December 15, 2020, on a post discussing sexist vocabulary used on a talk show. It is used as a hashtag once more on March 10, 2021, on a post about the sexist way Lebanese sexologist Dr. Sandrine Atallah was treated—also on a talk show. As a response to this bullying, Dr. Atallah then spoke to Megaphone on March 15, 2021 about sexual education, and sexism is used as a hashtag on this post. In between those two dates, on March 12, 2021, it is also included as a hashtag on a post discussing yet another round of sexist comments made on Lebanese national television: "[…] sexist comments […] Ghanem doubled down by responding to MP Fadi Saad's comment that 'the revolution is riding political parties,' with the comment 'the revolution is female.'" The common thread that runs through all these posts is that sexism is defined, on Megaphone, as misogynistic remarks made against women by male authority figures on talk shows.

The Arabic equivalents to sexism, as I have identified them and traced their use on Megaphone, are أبويّة (from patriarchy) and ذكوريّة (from masculinity). They are used interchangeably throughout the study's timeframe. On October 24, 2019, ذكوريّة is used as a hashtag in a post about Gebran Bassil, a political figure who is widely hated by supporters of the October 17, 2019 uprising in Lebanon—he is also the son-in-law of President Michel Aoun, who has amassed his own share of opponents in the country. In this case, ذكوريّة is closer to patriarchy than sexism. On July 29, 2020, #ذكوريّة is used on a post that was also about Bassil, but this time

related to his sexist comments as he compared the increasingly dire situation in the country to an "ugly woman." On October 3, 2020, both #ذكوريّة and #أبويّة are used on another post relaying sexist comments made by another Lebanese politician, here Elie Ferzli, then-Deputy Speaker of the Parliament. On December 17, 2020, #ذكوريّة is used on a post about how sexist narratives are detrimental to women in the wider structural system of the country.

This overview reveals that Megaphone's definition of أبويّة and ذكوريّة has to do with contexts similar to those previously mentioned for the English term, sexism, but also contexts relating to the patriarchy more widely, be that linked to the political establishment or the patriarchal structure of politics which is anti-feminist and harmful to women.

Therefore, feminism and sexism have been established, through the hashtags, as being two distinct categories that encompass their own set of political and social issues. These definitions are, however, consistent across language, effectively creating ambient thematic worlds for each of these terms, in which sociopolitical issues exist as separate from other issues in society. The feminism category, in English and Arabic, includes topics ranging from women's participation in the public sphere to the violence of the patriarchy and sexist narratives. Sexism, on the other hand, has to do with sexist discourses in the media, but also with the patriarchal political establishment and the misogyny of the regime. Naturally, the themes pertaining to each of these terms and concepts seem to be similar—ultimately, feminism and sexism are inherently related conceptually, but the way that Megaphone uses them distinctively reveals that each term pertains to very specific parts of these concepts. In so doing, by separating concepts and themes that are inherently bound to each other, Megaphone is contributing to the scattering of even the earliest stages of a much-needed national feminist debate.

Another hashtag that is used frequently throughout the study's timeframe is women's rights, either as the primary marker of theme or alongside other thematically relevant hashtags. I address in this paragraph the posts in which it is the main thematic hashtag. On October 10, 2020, Megaphone posted about student protests "denouncing domestic violence and sexual assault […] The latest of these crimes to be revealed was that of three men burning Zeinab Al Hussaini (14-year-old) alive." The hashtags on this post are #AUB (American University of Beirut, whose students were staging the protest), #protest, #beirut, #lebanon, and #womensrights. Moving on to December 21, 2020, a post about that week's "parliamentary session highlights" has the following hashtags: #law, #domesticviolence, #economy, #students, #lebanon, and #womensrights. On March 18, 2021, a post discussing the "global increase in crimes against women" also counts women's rights among its hashtags.

Women's rights (حقوق المرأة) also appears as a hashtag in some of Megaphone's Arabic posts. On November 4, 2020, a post was published in which inclusive feminist and gender-related language, which has only recently begun to be used more widely on progressive Arabic-language platforms, is used: "عابرات النوع الاجتماعي" (trans women) and "عاملات الجنس" (sex workers). It is important to mention that this language is used here in the context of the international UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which calls for the protection of women and girls from violence and discrimination. The post was contextually localized, however, through the mention of Lebanon-specific women's rights issues such as the call for a unified personal status code, a nationality law, and a "legal framework for protecting women from domestic violence, sexual assault, harassment, and discrimination against trans women, sex workers, refugees and asylum seekers." The hashtags on this post include #حقوق-المرأة, #العنف-ضد-المرأة, and #لبنان. The following month, on December 21,

2020, on the day that the Law to Criminalize Sexual Harassment and [for] Rehabilitation of Its Victims was passed in Lebanon, Megaphone published a post linking back to an article, a letter written by a female journalist to her younger, 20-year-old self, the age she was when she was assaulted—she comforts the younger version of herself by telling her that she is not alone, and that no young woman will ever feel alone again in the face of predator professors. The post has the following hashtags: #حقوق-المرأة, #عنف, and #تحرّش. On March 18, 2021, a post about a global increase in crimes against women also has #حقوق-المرأة among its hashtags, along with #العنف-ضد-المرأة. This was around the time that Sarah Everard, a British woman, was raped and murdered by a UK police officer while she was walking home. Based on this, in an Arabic-speaking context, women's rights include issues having to do with gender identity, including trans identity, and violence against women.

Domestic violence, though a major theme throughout the study's timeframe, is only used once as a hashtag, on February 24, 2021, when a case of domestic violence was reported: "Domestic violence again: the attempt on Rania Al-Baba's life," with the hashtags #domesticviolence and #lebanon. Al-Baba's husband had brutally assaulted her because she "demanded her financial dues from him." Her husband went into hiding after this attempted murder, but Al-Baba filed a complaint against him and informed police officers of his whereabouts. In Arabic, العنف الأسري is also used as a hashtag only once, on the same post, which contains the content in both Arabic and English.

The posts described above do not include the only instances in which the hashtags discussed are included; they are the posts in which those hashtags appear as the primary thematic markers, in the sense that they are directly related to the main content, the main idea of the post:

for example, on a post discussing the racist murder spree that a man perpetrated against his wife, a Syrian family—including their children—and other Lebanese men, #عنصريّة is the primary content marker rather than #feminism. Even though the content is also inherently feminist, racism is more centralized to the immediate issue at hand. Concluding this subsection on obvious hashtag-content relation, I lay out the posts that include more than one of those hashtags, widening the scope of the terms' definitions in each language to better understand and refine their definitions on Megaphone.

The tag نسويّة is very often presented alongside عنصريّة, جرائم, and ذكوريّة, and a few times with كويريّة. This expands the definition, in Arabic, of feminism to include issues of custody, of racism, of crime against women, of sexism, and of queerness and gender identity. On November 6, 2019, for example, a post was published, linking to an article, about the illogical narratives of treachery that the regime invents for itself. The image part of the post includes the following title, "المجد للمندسين والمندسات", alluding to the people who were joining the revolutionary protests and behaving in ways that the ruling class deemed insubordinate or disrespectful. The political establishment was heavily policing (figuratively and literally) the tone that the protests had taken on, focusing specifically on protestors' outrage. At the time, this manifested in the breaking of ATM's and the facades of bank buildings, as these had become defunct—and are now even more so—in light of the economic collapse and the crumbling of the banking sector due to endemic corruption. The ruling class also reacted vociferously to the widespread chants against Gebran Bassil, which practically became the soundtrack to the revolution. Authorities clamped down on these chants claiming they were inappropriate and lacking in morality and virtue—completely disregarding what had led the population to such anger and outrage in the first place. I elaborate on this to provide some background to this Megaphone post and its caption, which reads:

السلطة عقيمة وغير قادرة على جعل سرديات التخوين التي تختلقها متناسقة منطقياً. لكن السرديات السلطوية تتفق على اعتماد النقاء الخطابي والسياسي والجنساني والمواطني كأساس للتخوين.

The ruling class was negatively labelling the مندسين and مندسات, not only by using language that carries negative connotations, but also by attaching narratives of treason to these people, based on a sense of national purity that is completely imagined. The fictitious national purity they were attempting to establish as a standard has consistently been honored only in the breach—the regime itself has never adhered to any purity, be it discursive, political, gender-related, or civic. It therefore is an inappropriate standard against which to label protestors as guilty of violation.

Circling back to the post itself, it includes the following hashtags: نسوية, كويريّة, حقوق المرأة, جنسيتي كرامتي, نظام الكفالة, اللاجئين, and الاغتراب. This array of hashtags is quite typical for that period of ebullience at the beginning of the revolution, when people were full of fresh anger and energy and were speaking up against the connections between these injustices and unjust systems of oppression. A post on February 20, 2020, discussing a feminist analysis of the protests going on, includes the hashtags كويريّة and نسويّة. On April 23, 2020, there were two posts about a racist crime that had occurred in the Lebanese town of Baakline. A man murdered his wife and eight other people, five of whom were Syrian. The first post, which links to an article, has a simple headline and the following hashtags: نسويّة, كورونا, عنصريّة, and جرائم. The second has a more elaborate caption, "...لا يجوز اختصار الجريمة بالنظام الأبوي وبالعنصريّة", and three of the previous post's hashtags: عنصريّة, جرائم, and نسويّة. While this issue is certainly a feminist one, in the sense that it is related to "honor killings" and crime rooted in patriarchal ideas, it is interesting that Megaphone chose to highlight these posts, and not others, as such, though many others are much more obviously related to feminism, such as those related to domestic violence and harassment,

laid out earlier.[12] I do not make this distinction to criticize the inclusion of feminism where it doesn't immediately seem to belong; my point is to underline that it seems that Megaphone is advocating for its further use in some contexts where it does not "obviously belong." I would then pose the question as to why it is not then being similarly included in all relevant contexts, in order for more readers to see the word and link the concept to other issues and then widen their own understandings of what feminism means.

On November 19, 2020, there is a post, which links to an article, about identity and gender dysphoria (ديناميكيّة الهويّة وديسفوريا العابرين والعابرات جندريّاً), in which the journalist writes about the need for a new social contract with trans women and men. This was published following the publication of a study by the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality (AFEMENA). The post includes the hashtags العابرين والعابرات جندريّاً, كويريّة, نسويّة, and جنس. A post from January 15, 2021 about the importance of believing survivors of sexual assault and exposing harassers includes the following hashtags: تحرّش, العنف, نسويّة, and سوشال ميديا. On January 20, 2021, Megaphone posted about the relationship between media scoops and custody issues. While the media frequently ignores social justice issues, it rushes to cover stories that can be turned into scoops—an example of this is the story of Ghina Al-Bayat, a Lebanese woman who managed to be reunited with her newborn baby daughter because of the media pressure applied after her husband had kidnapped the baby and forbidden his wife from seeing her. This post has the following hashtags: الحضانة, نسويّة, ذكوريّة, إعلام, and لبنان. On January 21, 2021, another post focusing on the different types of discrimination that women are subjected to, specifically custody issues and the legal cover given to patriarchal authority, includes the following hashtags:

12. The term "honor killings" is not mentioned anywhere in the posts. In fact, the posts themselves include no details as to the nature of the crime committed. I read the full-length article that one of the posts links to in order to obtain this information. I mention this to provide further evidence as to why this post does not immediately stand out as feminist.

الحضانة, نسويّة, ذكوريّة, عنف, التمييز, and النساء. On January 29, 2021, a post about COVID-19 quarantine measures was presented through a gendered lens, touching on the increase in cases of domestic violence due to lockdown measures. The hashtags include the following terms: العنف, كورونا, ذكوريّة, and نسويّة.

The four examples laid out above reveal the orbit in which feminism can exist in Arabic. It is consistent with the definition inferred from the posts that include #نسويّة alone, but the posts including نسويّة alongside other contextual markers are more numerous. This means that seeing feminism beside other markers relevant to each post could help expand readers' definition of نسويّة and expectations about where to find it, thus aiding the establishment of intersectional links across these issues in society.

While many posts addressing violence against women and custody issues are categorized as feminist, as seen above, these do not include all mentions of violence published throughout the study's timeframe. Indeed, terms related to violence—specifically تحرّش, جرائم, and عنف—are also presented together and once alongside ذكوريّة. On September 23, 2020, a post on harassment includes these hashtags, among others: جنس, تحرّش, and جرائم. On October 16, 2020, Megaphone posted about a case of sexual harassment with the following terms, in this order, as hashtags: ثورة, تشرين, لبنان ينتفض, لبنان, بيروت, تحرّش, and ذكوريّة. The order of the hashtags is noteworthy because those related to the revolution came first, before harassment and sexism and in the absence of feminism. While this could be related to the fact that the revolutionary protests had just broken out and therefore had more primacy over the other hashtags, this could also be read as proof that the revolution was what created the space for these issues to be discussed and highlighted. This

set of hashtags discussed did not include any mentions of feminism, even though these terms and themes have appeared alongside feminism and have been part of its scope.

Moving on to another set of hashtags having to do with queerness and the LGBTQ community, the tags lgbtq and lgbtqia are used multiple times, in English, even on Arabic-language posts. Interestingly, these are consistently used in the absence of #feminism, as though they are separate issues that are wholly unconnected. On October 27, 2020, Megaphone posted, in Arabic, about the head of the Lebanese Catholic Media Center, who "accused the BBC of mistranslating Pope Francis' latest remarks around homosexuals," with the hashtags lgbtq and lgbtqia, in English. On November 19, 2020, a post about the "necessity of representing marginalized groups in media" includes #press, #lgbtqia, and #lebanon. On March 15, 2021, a post about the Catholic Church not blessing same-sex marriages includes #lgbtqia, #samesexmarriage, and #CatholicChurch in the English part of the post. These all reflect the trend that became clear as I conducted this tracing of words: feminism and queerness are represented differently in posts, thematically speaking, as if they are not interconnected. An important observation here is the frequency with which the English terms lgbtq and lgbtqia are used to categorize posts on queerness in Arabic: a deeper discussion on this phenomenon will be taken up in the following chapter.

This use of English-language hashtags for Arabic posts does not indicate, however, that no terms are used in Arabic to designate queerness. The common hashtag كويريّة is included with أبويّة in a number of posts. On January 8, 2020, كويريّة is the only hashtag on a post about homophobic narratives. On January 29, 2020, a post about the passing of Suzy, one of the most prominent faces of the trans struggle in Lebanon, has كويريّة and أبويّة as hashtags. On June 15, 2020, a post on queer activist Sarah Hegazy's loss of life to suicide contains كويريّة in the

hashtags. Another post about Hegazy was published on June 17, 2020, with كويريّة used in the hashtags. A post on March 6, 2021, about the arrest of a queer activist in Tunisia includes كوير as one of the hashtags. These last two sections consistently present queer issues and topics as wholly separate from feminism, in English and in Arabic.

To sum up, the linguistic hashtag patterns laid out in the section above reveal that, overall, the definitions inferred from the posts with obvious hashtag-content relation are consistent by term across language. Feminism and نسويّة, sexism and أبويّة/ذكوريّة, women's rights and حقوق المرأة, and domestic violence and العنف الأسري are used to categorize issues belonging under similar themes in English and Arabic. The Arabic terms were used more frequently than their English counterparts, and in some cases widened the defined scope of their respective category, but this does not seem to be due to Arabic being more inclusive; it is simply the result of many posts being published in Arabic alone, without an English translation. Definitions are consistent across language, and terms are presented as separate, but they share common issues and intersections. This might be expected, seeing as they all belong under one thematic umbrella. The fact that they share definitions is not surprising. What is surprising is the fact that they are presented as separate to begin with, and that generative links are not actively constructed to cement their relationship to each other. In the section below, I examine the wider scope given to these terms by Megaphone through hashtags whose connection to the relative content is not immediately obvious.

Less obvious hashtag relation

This next section tackles the few instances in which the hashtags used were not immediately obviously relevant to the posts' content. I determine this by taking into account the language

included in the caption and what it indicates about the post's context. This is important because it sheds light on the reasoning behind hashtag use on Megaphone; in trying to understand why a certain tag is used by trying to connect it to the caption, relational frameworks and deeper contextual relationships can be inferred. I begin with the posts that mention نسويّة without being as clearly related to feminism as most of the other posts categorized as feminist are. I then mention two posts that either present relevant hashtags but lack more obvious ones or include a hashtag seemingly not directly related to the topic.

On January 13, 2020, نسويّة is used as one of the hashtags on an Arabic-language post linking to an article on Megaphone's website: this piece is about the Metropolis cinema in Beirut, more specifically the cinema's waiting area, which the journalist says witnessed " أوّل نقاشاتنا ففي الجنسانية، المال، الوعي واللاوعي". The other hashtags on this post include سينما, الحرب الأهلية, بيروت, فن, ثقافة, لبنان ينتفض, لبنان يثور, and لبنان. This array of tags establishes a wider framework of what the post addresses, or the thoughts that fed the writing of the article, and thus offers a cross-section glimpse of the wider contextual belongings of the content. While some of the tags—such as cinema, art, and culture—seem to be more directly to-the-point of the topic of the article, it could be described as feminist because the discussions being had at the Metropolis waiting area were based on a feminist framework, or had a feminist backdrop.

Another example occurred on April 25, 2020, where نسويّة is included in the hashtags of a post that doesn't immediately seem to be about a feminist topic; it focuses on the economic collapse and the general blaming of social issues on the lower classes. The other tags are جرائم, تكنوقراط, and طبقيّة. The same applies to a post from May 5, 2020: نسويّة is used as a hashtag on a post about the state's racism towards Palestinians, alongside العنف, طبقيّة, ميديا, حقوق المرأة, لبنان ينتفض, and لبنان. I argue that this broadens, even further, the definition of feminism in Arabic to

include wider political discussions that touch on art, the economic collapse, classism, and racism. Because the tags لبنان ينتفض, الحرب الأهلية, طبقيّة, جرائم, and العنف are also used here, I suggest that Megaphone is implicitly revealing the use of a feminist framework in the discussion of sociopolitical issues post-Civil War and post-revolutionary protests. The adoption of a feminist framework is what marks the moving on from the Civil War era to the more inclusive, intersectional era following the widespread protest movement.

Moving on to March 5, 2021, a post about a Human Rights Watch report stating that "criminalizing harassment is not enough" was published, shortly before International Women's Day. The report criticized the Lebanese law criminalizing sexual harassment that was passed shortly before, as it viewed the law as insufficient in the absence of preventive measures. The post includes the hashtags #hrw, #lebanon, and #iwd (International Women's Day). While the hashtags are not irrelevant, more relevant ones could have been included, knowing that many other posts include hashtags such as women's rights, harassment, violence, violence against women, and domestic violence—in both languages.

On June 11, 2020, كويريّة is used as a hashtag in a post linking to an article that was written in response to novelist Salim Barakat's revelation that the late Arab poet Mahmoud Darwish had confided in him that he'd had a daughter out of wedlock, with a married woman. Arab social media was in a frenzy, as the news had prompted a sexist and misogynistic reaction from people. The other hashtags on the post include جسد, شعر, ميديا, محمود درويش, سليم بركات, فلسطين, لبنان, and بيروت. The content of this post does not immediately jump out as related to queerness; it would more readily seem to be categorizable as feminist, or as having to do with patriarchy and sexism. However, even those tags are not present; they focus instead on the poet and novelist, where they are from, and the worlds in which they work—media and poetry. Body is even

included, which is understandable since the issue does touch on the human body and its reproductive functions, but nowhere is there any hint of deeper analysis as to what kind of discussion would need to be had following such a widespread sexist reaction.

An analysis of these posts demonstrates that there is no linear way to understand the reasoning behind hashtag use on Megaphone. I do argue, however, that نسويّة seems to be used when it is not immediately related to a post's content because it offers an intellectual framework to build the new, post-Civil War and post-revolution society that the Lebanese youth who participated in the protests want to create. It is presented as the foundation needed for a more just and inclusive society. The presence of الحرب الأهلية twice and لبنان ينتفض three times in the tags mentioned in this section increases this ambient affiliation of feminism with the Civil War and 2019 revolutionary protests. These ideas are all in line with the contexts that نسويّة has been shown to be used in throughout this study The fact remains, though, that نسويّة is absent from posts that are directly relevant to it, namely that of Darwish's daughter and the HRW report on sexual harassment. It is unclear why this is the case, especially since the posts include more than one tag. Though not consistent enough to form a pattern, the absence of feminism from these tags bolsters my argument that, in some cases, Megaphone presents issues in a decontextualized way, by including tags whose relationship to the content is not immediately obvious or by failing to include the most seemingly relevant tags, such as نسويّة in the above.

Disconnect between content and hashtags

The decontextualization that I argue Megaphone contributes to through its inconsistent use of hashtags is further presented below. Having laid out in the two previous sections the obvious and less obvious hashtags and inferred the definitions thereof through the contexts in which they are

used, this section will now delve into the area between, into the posts that present a certain disconnect between their content and tags, in the sense that either relevant tags are missing, or the ones that are used seem contextually misleading or too general, or totally different hashtags are used in each language, in what are supposedly identical translated posts.

This disconnect is a rich site of analysis because a great deal can be inferred from absence—I question why one term is chosen over another, what the difference in terms reveals about which aspect of the post Megaphone wants to foreground instead of another, and what this pattern ultimately means at the level of national discourse. I use the inferred definitions above to study this in-between space—the definitions being the contexts in which specific tags, like نسويّة for example, are used. When the same or similar contexts are posted about, but their "corresponding" tags are not used, I analyze what is used instead to understand the reasoning behind the absence—and what it uncovers about the direction in which certain discussions are taken. I begin by studying the posts in which relevant tags are absent before moving on to those with discrepancies in their tags. These discrepancies are of two kinds: either the tags included are inexact or superficial, in the sense that they address the basic parts of the post without really marking its essence, or they are totally different in English and Arabic. I propose that these discrepancies expose the differences in the linguistic cultural baggage of each language, such that Arabic focuses on the specifics of an event rather than its theoretical essence, continuously presenting issues as decontextualized and isolated. Recalling the idea suggested above about virality being limited to virtuality, such instances of decontextualization contribute to this limitation because the isolation of incidents, especially theoretically, hinders the establishment of necessary connections and, in turn, a sorely needed debate.

Absence of relevant hashtags

There are a number of posts in this study's timeframe that are feminist in content but whose hashtags do not include any mention of feminism, whether in Arabic, English, or both. The topics of these posts range from women's empowerment to the new issues facing women in light of the economic collapse in Lebanon, women's marches, feminist activism, gender equality, sexism, and mothers' right to custody. Though these topics are all inherently and directly linked to feminism and have all been previously categorized as such by Megaphone, the term is conspicuously absent from their hashtags. It is crucial to remember that the function of a hashtag, as defined by linguist Michele Zappavigna (2015), is to represent "*one instance* of a more complex discursive situation" (emphasis mine), and that it can be combined with other hashtags to "sharpen the focus of the post" and to indicate that the content belongs to a discourse about something specific while also being related to particular concerns about this discourse (276). I use this conceptual framework for hashtags to analyze the perceived absence of relevant tags in the posts I highlight below.

To begin with, on October 24, 2019, Megaphone posted about how Mia Khalifa, the Lebanese former porn star, had influenced people's understanding of the concept of shame and shifted it to those in government who actually should be shamed. This post has no mentions of feminism, despite its clearly feminist content, and the hashtags include تظاهرات كويريّة (queer protests) and الثورة امرأة (the revolution is a woman). The issue of shame being used against someone for misogynistic reasons can be understood as the very definition of sexism and what feminism seeks to abolish; the redirecting of that shame onto a corrupt ruling class while simultaneously reclaiming your power as a woman is a concrete embodiment of what many feel

feminism seeks to accomplish. And yet neither feminism nor sexism are among the hashtags used for this post.

Another post that was deemed neither related to feminism nor to sexism has to do with the contexts in which sexist and misogynistic comments were made by Lebanese politicians and/or members of the media. On November 13, 2020, Megaphone posted about former Minister of Interior Mohammed Fahmi, who banned food deliveries on Sundays as one of the COVID-19 related measures he implemented, felt to be random by the Lebanese population. The post reads, "[…] And when asked about the motive behind banning deliveries on Sunday, he had his sexist answer at the ready: 'Let women cook.'" The term does not, however, appear in the hashtags, which are #womensrights, #beirut, and #lebanon. This stands out because Megaphone usually does include sexism as a hashtag on posts tackling sexist comments made by prominent figures in society. Its absence from this set of tags suggests a randomness and inconsistency in Megaphone's hashtagging practices at best, but also hints at a deeper problem of placing the onus on women when the issue is really coming from men. By including women's rights and not sexism, it can be argued that women are being highlighted as the party whose rights need to be granted passively, instead of marking the issue as sexist, which would require an active response from men.

Additionally, many posts that are purely about issues or events related to women lack any mention of feminism. International Women's Day is one such example. On March 7, 2020, several posts were published for International Women's Day, but not all of them mention feminism in their hashtags. The following day, multiple posts were again published for International Women's Day, discussing aspirations for a civil personal status law, the feminist opposition to the regime, women who have been subjected to the brutality of the patriarchal

system in Lebanon, and a feminist march. None of these have any feminism tags, though #IWD is used consistently throughout. On March 9, 2020, a video was posted for International Women's Day without any reference to feminism. Another relevant example from June 14, 2020, is a video of a woman who, in the first few seconds, introduces herself as a feminist activist. The absence of a feminism hashtag raises questions, especially since the speaker herself explicitly eliminates the separation between herself and the term in the first seconds of the video.

As these examples consistently recur across different themes and in both languages, I argue that they are not accidental; there seems to be an intentionality behind specific hashtags being absent or misleading. I propose that this intentionality is due to one of two things: it either reflects a lack of wider contextual understanding such that deeply feminist issues are seen as wholly separate from it, or it is counter-intuitive, avoiding the mention of specific terms as topic-markers so that social media users—the members of the respective linguistic communities, each with their respective cultural baggage—do not avoid posts with the hashtag.

This argument is further evidenced by the following examples, such as a post from October 20, 2020 that presents politics and feminism as unrelated. It discusses a group of women who "marched from Verdun to Ain El Tineh in Beirut to protest corruption and demand that Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri step down." Megaphone simply mentions that it was a women's march, with no additional information as to why it was specifically a women's march. There is no mention of feminism either in the caption or the hashtags. And on November 4, 2020, a post about "International agreements to protect women and girls from violence and end discrimination against them" was published by Megaphone. The English hashtags are #humanrights, #hrw, and #lebanon, while the Arabic tags are حقوق المرأة, العنف ضد المرأة, and لبنان. Interestingly, the English tags do not focus on women's rights but mention the more general

"human rights," though the Arabic includes both women's rights and violence against women. While the language used here for the hashtags is definitely relevant to the content of the post, the fact that such clearly feminist content is not classified as such raises questions about the contextual belonging of language on this platform—and, by extrapolation, within the two linguistic communities. Megaphone repeatedly presents women's rights and demands as separate from feminism, creating a chasm between the concepts that hinders the development of necessary connections that would lead the way to constructive conversations.

This trend continues as feminism is also absent from two posts on February 10 and 12, 2021, both about the Saudi feminist activist Loujain Al-Hathloul, who'd just been released from prison. The first post simply states that she had been released, while the second states: "Women who scare Bin Salman: Saudi women activists conquer Bin Salman's prisons, while others are confronting them from within, waiting for freedom." Both of these posts' hashtags are either Bin Salman's and Al-Hathloul's names or just the two countries, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. On March 20, 2021, a post about a Mothers' Day march and the victims of the August 4 Beirut port explosion only includes hashtags related to the blast and the revolution—in both languages. On March 31, 2021, Megaphone posted about the impact of COVID-19 on inequality between men and women, with the following hashtags: #COVID19, #genderequality, #lebanon, and #كورونا.

Even though gender equality is the very definition and goal of feminism, there is no mention of feminism at all in the posts referred to above. If the argument for the exclusion of feminism is that only a limited number of hashtags is being used, that still reveals that even in digital paratextual spaces, feminism is easily relegated in favor of other hashtags that perhaps are believed to garner more traction, considering that engagement is the whole point of a hashtag: Who do I want to bring here? What kind of crowd am I writing for? What do I need to do to

attract readers? As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, hashtags are essential as a tool because they are what redirect people to specific posts. They aid searchability but also mirror and catalyze social relations, simultaneously categorizing information and building relationships and communities, as determined by Zappavigna (2015).

Thinking of hashtags in this way, as having an active community-building function, renders the inconsistency of how information is presented both across language and within the same language more problematic. As discussed in the above, when issues are separately categorized as something—for example, feminist, sexist, or having to do with women's rights—they are made to seem unconnected, as if they are not all inherently intertwined. This becomes even more dire when the disconnect occurs not across theme but language—when issues are presented differently in each of English and Arabic, because the communities being built through the hashtag are built on different foundations, making constructive discussion and debate that much more difficult. This type of disconnect will be addressed in the following section.

Before moving on to the hashtags presenting discrepancies across language, there is another section of posts that are not categorized as feminist to be studied, those regarding mothers' right to custody. The hashtags attached to these posts instead remain limited to referencing the Ja'afari court—the court that rules on matters of personal status for Shiites and Druzes. On February 28, 2020, there were two different posts tackling the same topic of women's custody and their protests against the Ja'afari court. One has the hashtags صور and المحكمة الجعفرية, while the other includes غضب الأمّهات and حضانتي ضد المحكمة الجعفرية. The following day, on February 29, 2020, a post was published about a protest demanding "that women's custody of their children be more just," with only the following hashtags: #lebanon, #revolution, and #lebanoninrevolt. On March 1, 2020, the Ja'afari court tag was used again in the caption of a

post whose hashtags include غضب الأمّهات, حضانتي ضد المحكمة الجعفرية,[13] and لبنان ينتفض. In a similar vein, on December 12, 2020, a post about mothers protesting the Ja'afari courts' decisions regarding child custody has the following hashtags: لبنان, لبنان ينتفض, and المحكمة الجعفرية, in an additional example of Megaphone using terms related to the revolution, or to the specific court in question, instead of more relevant feminist terms. On February 1, 2021, a post about "mothers fighting for their children's custody" has custody among its English hashtags and حضانتي ضد المحكمة الجعفرية, لبنان, and المحكمة الجعفرية as its Arabic ones. Finally, on March 22, 2021, a post in the context of Mothers' Day but specifically about mothers voicing their right to custody of their children to the Ja'afari court has the following hashtags: #mothersday, #lebanon, #المحكمة-الجعفرية, #الحضانة, #لبنان, and #حضانتي-ضد-المحكمة-الجعفرية. When the hashtags focus on naming the court and the specific issue of mothers' custody without positioning them within a larger narrative of women's rights and feminism, custody issues remain outside the already marginalized sphere of women's rights in Lebanese society. Even online, the conversation is not being triggered because no deeper links are being made across issues and themes.

While it could be argued that, as a news platform, Megaphone may simply want to report on issues without necessarily delving deeper into them, the fact remains that feminism and feminism-related hashtags are inconsistently used as topic markers, and this inconsistency is reflected in the linguistic communities being built through their affiliation with the hashtags. The choice of tags being used—whether their inconsistency and inexactness are taken to be intentional or not—reveal a general lack of contextual understanding of what feminism is and means, as evidenced by the presentation of feminism, sexism, women's rights, and more specifically mothers' right to custody as mutually exclusive issues. The inconsistency hints at an

13. The actual hashtag on the post is حضانتي ضد المحكمة العسكرية and not حضانتي ضد المحكمة الجعفرية. (It says *military court* and not Ja'afari court.) I have used my discretion to assume it was a typo.

intentionality whose aim is to attract more social media users to posts by avoiding terms that are contentious in a patriarchal society, but it also exposes differences in *how* the two linguistic readerships search for certain news items. The choice of tag both shows what words are likely to be stuck in readers' minds after having heard about an event and perpetuates this connection by enforcing it through the tag. The section below will touch on this in more depth and detail.

Discrepancies in hashtags across language

Below I analyze the posts whose hashtags are not consistent across the two languages. The questions that guide this section include: What is being highlighted in each language? In what are the highlighted points different? How is this affecting the reception of the news item by the readers of each language? I include examples of these discrepancies and analyze what the discrepancy reveals in each case while keeping in mind what terms have been used by Megaphone to describe similar situations, as laid out in the sections above. Not all the discrepancies were the same, however. I divide them into two parts, the first examining posts whose hashtags are vaguer in one language than the other, and the second analyzing posts that present totally different hashtags in each language, despite having otherwise identical content.

Inexact hashtags

The posts in this section all have to do with domestic violence. I list them here in contrast to the other posts, laid out above, that address this same issue, most including the hashtag #domesticviolence and/or #feminism. What stands out in this section is that neither of those tags are used for these posts, which instead include vaguer contextual markers that only touch on certain shallow, surface-level aspects of the content.

The first, posted on February 1, 2021, was about Zeina Kanjo, whose husband murdered her by suffocating her. It has no hashtags. Four days later, on February 5, 2021, another post about Kanjo has no mention of domestic violence—or any kind of violence—in its hashtags, which are limited to لبنان, القضاء, and زينة كنجو. This is an example of a total decontextualization of events by focusing on names instead of the wider systemic issues at play, an issue I explain is recurrent on Megaphone. There is no reference to domestic violence on these posts, which are about an extreme form of domestic violence, a murder, even though this hashtag appears on other posts. I argue that this decontextualizes and isolates deeply intertwined events and issues, as it focuses on the superficial specifics of an event rather than its essence. Such practices also give events an air of atemporality—failing to categorize problems of the same nature as deeply intertwined makes it more difficult for readers to automatically register them as connected under a wider umbrella of feminism and women's rights. When such sensitive issues are disseminated inconsistently, it suggests an intentionality—as discussed above—or a lack of contextual understanding.

The same points apply to a post from February 9, 2021, when Megaphone reported on another case of domestic violence in which a man attempted to murder his wife: he savagely attacked her "with a metal glove and knife stabs to the back." She had tried to divorce him and was fighting with the Ja'afari court to secure alimony for herself and her five-year-old daughter, but the court kept delaying and seemed to "be in collusion with the husband […] after he had refused to divorce her." The hashtags are #domesticviolence, #lebanon, #عنف, #لبنان, and #المحكمة-الجعفرية. The Ja'afari court was deemed more relevant than domestic violence in Arabic—and while violence is among the Arabic hashtags, it was not specified what kind, even though the post is about a woman who suffered at the hands of her husband. Finally, on February 12, 2021,

a bilingual post briefly summarizing that there were “5 women killed by domestic violence in January” has only one hashtag, in Arabic: اسمها جريمة. This hashtag, which translates to “it’s called a crime,” is indicated on the post as “trending in Lebanon” on the day of publication. While this explains why it was used, to increase engagement, it does not explain the absence of other tags which could have further categorized the post thematically. This corroborates my argument that Megaphone’s inconsistent tagging practices decontextualize and isolate events by interrupting connections that exist between their content.

Different hashtags in English and Arabic

The posts that lack relevant hashtags contribute to the decontextualization of major issues in society, but another more obvious form of decontextualization can be surmised from comparing the English and Arabic tags—which supposedly should be identical—of some posts. As a reminder, the relevance of a tag is determined by comparing its use or absence to the respective definitions inferred above. In the following section, I lay out the posts that use very different hashtags in translation, despite having otherwise identical content. The discrepancies in the hashtags of these posts not only reflect that hashtags sometimes fail to adequately categorize posts’ content. They also reveal the wider social patterns and attitudes when it comes to the specific issues relative to each post. I argue that specific terms, such as feminism, are alluded to differently in English and in Arabic, such that the use of feminism in English does not necessarily warrant a parallel نسويّة in Arabic. I also propose that Megaphone’s Arabic hashtags focus on singular events, on very specific parts of these events, instead of their contextual theoretical belonging, and in so doing Megaphone reflects the different cultural baggage of each readership such that Arabic readers are more likely to remember/ focus on these singular aspects

instead of the bigger-picture debate. By perpetuating this pattern through its hashtags, Megaphone is contributing to the scattering of a constructive dialogue and thus the implementation of real social change.

To begin with, on October 7, 2020, the same post has different hashtags in each language. It was about "A week of threats to women journalists." The English hashtags consist of journalism, politics, feminism, Lebanon, and Beirut, while the Arabic ones are صحافة وإعلام, سياسة, لبنان, بيروت, and لبنان ينتفض. It is noteworthy that, while otherwise including mostly the same terms, feminism is only among the English hashtags, while the Arabic alone includes لبنان ينتفض. This reveals a certain parallelism between the two terms/ languages, in which feminism and لبنان ينتفض are put on somewhat similar planes. Suggesting that لبنان ينتفض is therefore similar in meaning to feminism, I propose that there is perhaps a connection in the power of both of these terms to disrupt. Further, I question whether what is considered feminist in English is simply not always feminist in Arabic. In my examination of the posts and hashtags below, I lay out how these feminisms are different, and why.[14]

When the speakers of two languages like Arabic and English have different relationships to certain terms—like feminism—this is reflected in the way they retain, interact with, and search for information and content. This in turn impacts the way that Megaphone chooses its hashtags in each language to best align with the linguistic community's habits, but, as mentioned above, it also produces these habits through consistently presenting these hashtag discrepancies. This means that nothing is being done to change how people view and understand certain feminist concepts. Instead, issues categorized as such are decontextualized and isolated.

14. I ask this not against the backdrop of a one-size-fits-all feminism, but along the lines of an intersectional approach that is looking straight at the ways in which language is used and how that affects the understanding and performance of certain terms—especially in multilingual communities where identity (and the performance thereof) could change as one switches between languages. An identity code-switching of sorts.

On October 10, 2020, a post about a student protest against domestic violence also uses different hashtags in each language. While the English hashtags are #AUB, #protest, #womensrights, #beirut, and #lebanon, the Arabic are #لبنان-ينتفض, #لبنان, #زينب-الحسيني, and #النادي-العلماني. Zeinab Al Hussaini is the name of a 14-year-old girl who was burned alive by three men. Her name is used as a hashtag, with no other tag mentioning domestic violence or assault/harassment, despite the previous use of such terms to categorize very similar content. As for النادي العلماني, it is the name of the student club that organized the protest at AUB. This is another instance of the trend identified earlier in this chapter, whereby the names of people involved in controversy are highlighted instead of the controversy itself.[15] In Arabic, the victim's name and that of the university club are used as hashtags. However, rather than the English post using a mirror of this, it includes women's rights. This is another example of Arabic content focusing on singular events, positioning them as fixed in space and time and connecting them directly and solely to the people involved in the event, constricting their scope and limiting it to these separate individual events. Indeed, studies have suggested that hashtags are involved in "interpersonal dimensions of meaning-making such as supporting visibility and participation" (Zappavigna 2015, 277) supporting the claim that divorcing such manifestations from the systemic structural problems that cause them only makes content take on an atemporality and suspended-ness that is highly problematic.

On October 27, 2020, a post about the head of the Lebanese Catholic Media Center and his comments about the LGBTQ community has different hashtags in each language, even though they are listed on the same post. The English hashtags are #lebanon, #lgbtqia, and #popefrancis, while the Arabic ones are #مشروع-ليلى (Mashrou' Leila, a Lebanese band with two openly gay members) and #لبنان. It is telling that the name of a band who'd previously been

15. In the subsection entitled *Inexact hashtags*, p 65.

embroiled with this priest was given space in the hashtags over, for example, كويريّة, which has been used and is much more closely related to the content of the post. It is indicative of the affective relationship in the Lebanese imaginary between Mashrou' Leila, a four-person band with two openly gay members, and this specific priest, who stirred up so much controversy over the band in 2019 that a concert of theirs, at the Byblos International Festival, had to be cancelled—to the point that any mention of this priest in relation to disparaging and bigoted comments against the LGBTQ community immediately harkens back to the band. Sara Ahmed's (2004) theorization that emotion and affect are collective and socially constructed and do not belong to individual people can help to elucidate these affective relationships. As they are socially constructed and socially maintained, other emotions thus can also be socially constructed, by using metadata such as hashtags, to categorize and mark the topics of posts in socially meaningful ways, not only reflecting on them truthfully and critically but using them to contribute to a constructive narrative and dialogue. Hashtags contribute to "coordinating activity and commentary" and do not only have a categorization function (Zappavigna 2015, 278).

In the same vein, a post from November 13, 2020, about homophobic narratives on TV includes the English and Arabic versions in the same post and has no hint of anything related to queerness in the hashtags. These are instead limited to: لبنان, لبنان ينتفض, and مرسال غانم—the name of the political talk show host during whose show the homophobic comments were made. This is, once again, an example of a discussion becoming centered on the people involved in it and not on the actual issue which is being discussed. Refocusing people's attention in this way (and so consistently) makes it more difficult for constructive narratives to take over, and thus more difficult to propel queer and feminist rights forward. Keeping issues separate from each other, at least in the cybersphere, decontextualizes them and this at once both feeds and is fed by reality.

Similarly, a post from December 3, 2020, discussing sexist remarks made by Lebanese popstar Najwa Karam uses different hashtags in English and Arabic. While the English tags are #najwakaram, #feminism, and #lebanon, the Arabic ones are #نجوى-كرم, #لبنان, and #جعفرتوك— JaafarTalk, the name of the talk show she was on. This could simply be an inconsistency. But even if it was unintentional, it is part of a pattern on Megaphone, and it reflects the different cultural baggage of each language's readership, and thus the different cultural values understood to be held by speakers of each language. JaafarTalk is chosen as a category over feminism, which quite clearly hints at what the Arabic readership is likely to retain or search for when it comes to this issue.

Additionally, the parallel positioning of feminism and جعفرتوك is reminiscent of the earlier parallelism between feminism and لبنان ينتفض, reaffirming the emergence of a consistent pattern in which Megaphone addresses its Arabic readership differently than its English-speaking one, substituting feminism for more surface-level, event-centric terms. Indeed, on a post from December 15, 2020, about the repeated use of sexist vocabulary on a show, there is a parallel discrepancy between the used hashtags. The English ones include sexism, feminism, and Lebanon, while the Arabic ones are لبنان, نسويّة, الجديد, and أبو طلال. Abu Talal is the name of the character on the show during which the sexist comments were made, and Al-Jadeed is the name of the channel broadcasting the show. The absence of the sexism hashtag in Arabic raises questions about what is deemed ذكوري/ أبوي in Arabic, as opposed to what is considered sexist in English. This is further reinforced by the way that the ذكوري/ أبوي hashtag has been shown to be used in Arabic, in the examples above. It is deemed more relevant to tag to the figures of Gebran Bassil and other male politicians in the country than it is to problematic narratives that they and others have espoused. This suggests further male-centricity in a context that is allegedly more

focused on women, and thus redirects attention back onto men, once again marginalizing women. The fact that Abu Talal is included as a hashtag over sexism also corroborates this: the name of the character on the show (and the name of the TV channel) is here deemed more worthy of mention than the problem of widespread sexism. This continues the trend of naming a person involved in controversy instead of the controversial topic itself.

A post from December 21, 2020, about the highlights of the parliamentary session of that day, also reveals a discrepancy in the hashtags. The English tags include: #law, #womensrights, #domesticviolence, #economy, #students, and #lebanon, while the Arabic include: #قانون, #طلاب, #اقتصاد, #حقوق-المرأة, and #لبنان. The domestic violence hashtag is not used in the Arabic set. Similarly, on February 9, 2021, Megaphone posted about a woman whose husband had attempted to murder her while they were embroiled in Ja'afari court delays over alimony for herself and her daughter, and the term عنف is used as a hashtag in addition to لبنان and المحكمة الجعفرية, as opposed to the English tags, domestic violence and Lebanon. The Ja'afari court hashtag is consistently used in cases of domestic violence and custody battles, often in the absence of other, arguably more pertinent, categorizations. Even in this specific example, in which domestic violence is included among the English tags, the Arabic opts for the simple hashtag "violence," without further specifications. This is another manifestation of the pattern in which Megaphone contributes to the decontextualization of news items by focusing on the parties involved without making the same connections for the readers of the two languages. This means that those searching using Arabic tags will reach a post through totally different, less pertinent topic markers. Moreover, those reading the Arabic post will then also have this same experience of retaining different, potentially less constructive parts of the content.

The naming of people involved in controversy instead of focusing on the controversy itself is repeated on two posts from March 10, 2021, in which Megaphone addressed the way that sexologist Dr. Sandrine Atallah was bullied on national television, but the posts' hashtags are very different. The first post, which is solely in Arabic, is linked to a longer article going into the details of the controversy. In short, Dr. Atallah had been bullied on the show "ع غير كوكب" (On Another Planet), hosted by Pierre Rabbat and broadcast on the MTV Lebanon television channel. The hashtags on this post have nothing to do with sexism—or even feminism—and are limited to a mere listing of the people and platforms involved: #ع-غير-كوكب, #ساندرين-عطالله, #بيار-رباط, #لبنان, and #mtvlebanon. The second post, however, which tackles the same topic, was published bilingually and has more pertinent hashtags, though they still differ between the two languages. In English, they are as follows: #sandrineatallah, #media, #feminism, #sexism, #mtvlebanon, and #lebanon, while in Arabic, they are limited to: #ع-غير-كوكب, #ساندرين-عطالله, #بيار-رباط, #لبنان, and #نسويّة. Although the Arabic hashtags do include نسويّة, they continue the pattern of being centered around famous names and figures instead of wider concepts that would need to be discussed in order for progress to be made. Still on the topic of Dr. Atallah, a post from March 15, 2021, uses sexism, sex education, and Lebanon as its English hashtags, while the Arabic ones are ساندرين عطالله, لبنان, and توعية—or awareness, as opposed to توعية جنسيّة (sexual awareness), which was used by Megaphone in other posts, in one more example of general tags being used, focusing on different aspects of the content in each language and contributing to a conceptual disconnect in how information is presented.

A post from March 12, 2021 reflects, again, a discrepancy in its bilingual hashtags that reveals a conceptual and contextual difference in content dissemination: the post is about more sexist comments made on national television, and while the post itself includes identical texts in

Arabic and English, the English hashtags include #lebanon and #sexist, while the Arabic ones are لبنان, لبنان ينتفض, and الثورة أنثى—showing once more that the focus in Arabic is on the content of what had been said during the talk show, not the wider conceptual problem of the prevalence of sexism in Lebanon and the media.[16] This is made all the more stark by the side-by-side listing of bilingual hashtags that are worlds apart in meaning and impact.

This phenomenon is not limited to feminism and sexism but also extends to LGBTQ rights, as the hashtags on a post about the Catholic Church not blessing same-sex marriage, published on March 15, 2021, also show the difference between how Arabic and English readerships are targeted: while the English hashtags are #lgbtqia, #samesexmarriage, and #CatholicChurch, the Arabic ones simply mention #الفاتيكان and #البابا-فرنسيس. This reveals how dominant religion is perceived to be in Arabic-speaking Lebanese society, if we understand hashtags to be "topic-markers" that enhance searchability (Zappavigna 2015, 274). In English, it seems that it's assumed that people would search either for same sex marriage or for the Catholic Church, but in Arabic, they'd search for the Vatican or the Pope to see what he said—thus prompting the centering of religion and religious figures as opposed to the actual content of the announcement. The emphasis is shifted to the Pope doing the saying and not on building a discussion around the subject matter of what he said. The hashtag rhetorically implies that "there is an ambient audience […] who agree with the point being made" and who "might potentially search for or use" the same hashtag (Zappavigna 2015, 277).

Conclusion

16. The guest made a comment that "the revolution is riding political parties," to which the host Marcel Ghanem responded, in a typically sexist and misogynistic way, "the revolution is female."

A common thread running through the examples laid out above is that similar situations of sexist discourses on TV shows have different hashtags attached to the Megaphone posts about them. While the situations and the discourse are often similar in content, they are not all deemed sexist. We can here recall the example of Najwa Karam, in which her sexist discourses on a political talk show are simply filed under #feminism, even though they are almost identical in content to other posts that include the sexism hashtag. This reveals an inconsistency in how news is disseminated, be it in an abstract conceptual way—whether something is considered feminist or sexist, etc.—or a more concrete linguistic way—what words are being used in each language. Analyzing these discrepancies is important because they reveal that the very basis of crucial issues in society is being presented differently to the different publics using these two languages. Readers of English will see the connection between what Pierre Rabbat says on his show, for example, and the wider issue of sexism and misogyny, while the Arabic readers are directed to the names of the people involved, without links to a larger conceptual understanding of why something is being critiqued or is wrong. This reveals a contextual and conceptual disconnect in how information is presented in different languages and hinders the development of a collective understanding of how these issues intersect in society.

It is also important to underline that although feminism might not have been mentioned frequently in the posts that fall within the overall timeframe of the study, the use of feminism/-ist is much more frequent than any other terms related to queerness or gender, with queer rights always showing up as part of feminist rights. I do not make this distinction to imply that they are not included in feminist rights. Rather, I am proposing here that embedding one within the other perhaps makes it seem that the message could be delivered more implicitly, more smoothly, less

controversially. This may make the issue more palatable, or more easily acceptable, because it stands out less when accompanied by feminism than it otherwise would on its own.

As I have shown in this chapter, hashtag discrepancies on Megaphone reveal that Arabic consistently presents issues in a decontextualized way by using topic markers that are superficial in comparison to the supposedly equivalent markers in English. While hashtags provide a form of social categorizing that has introduced new ways to search social media networks, which means that their main function is to mark precise and general topics and to "be used to search for information," another key function is that they are "used to track or coordinate conversations around that domain" (Zappavigna 2015, 288). Their function has thus expanded the potential of words and meaning-making because when they aggregate posts, they determine the key words that will reference certain topics (Zappavigna 2015). In that sense, the different linguistic communities in Lebanon are directed to different resources and are presented different conceptual frameworks through these tags. Feminism, already marginalized in the sense that it is not a widely addressed topic in the media, is marginalized further through the fractioning of the various topics it touches on—sexism, women's rights, domestic violence, queer rights, etc.—and this fractioning is intensified by the ensuing tagging discrepancies across language. The influence that hashtags have over the linguistic contexts of specific issues must not be undermined. Hashtag choice can determine the direction that certain narratives take, and taking note of these discrepancies allows us to delve deeper into the relationship between identity and language, but also the relationship between identity and translated language. The following chapter will be devoted to a study of breaking and queering language—concepts that will be explained in depth—so as to expand it and give it room to carry additional nuance and complexity, allowing it to better represent the complexity of the identities it represents.

Chapter Two: Breaking and Queering Language

The analysis of Megaphone News posts and hashtags discussed in detail in Chapter One demonstrates how Arabic and English are used differently in the presentation of feminist and queer issues in Lebanon. The languages are used in different ways and this suggests a conceptual break between them, a break that positions English as more theoretical in addressing readers and Arabic as more affective, considering the way that English hashtags highlight the relative conceptual issues and systemic patterns of oppression while the Arabic tags center specific people involved in these patterns. This begs the question of how the definition of each of these feminist and queer terms changes across language: words do not mean the same thing in every language, even if they are fully terminologically equivalent, because of the cultural and contextual baggage that comes along with each. But thinking of the impossibility of a total equivalent becomes even more complex when content on platforms such as Megaphone is framed differently in each language through the vastly different hashtags.

In this chapter, I suggest that using the notion of breaking language (Hartman 2019) can offer a framework within which to study these hashtag spaces and differences between Arabic and English. I argue that using thematically accurate terminology in Arabic queer and feminist hashtags—such as كويريّة on a post discussing queer issues—constitutes the instance of breaking. While "accuracy" may seem incompatible with the conceptual framework of breaking, I do not mean that the accuracy would break the words themselves; rather, I suggest that using such theoretically relevant terms as categorical markers in Arabic breaks the hashtag space because it is breaking with the systematic pattern of decontextualization discussed in Chapter One. By breaking the hashtag space as such, the definitions of Arabic queer and feminist terminology widen in scope to encapsulate different, additional contexts.

The hashtags, then, in addition to being facilitators of content searchability, have a linguistic function whereby the actual words being used as tags perform the action of breaking the hashtag space—by breaking with the pattern of decontextualization—to include wider sociopolitical definitions to the terms themselves. This occurs through the implicit relationship established between the term used as a tag and the news item it is annexed under. The fact that Megaphone posts in both English and Arabic allows for a comparison of tags which leads to a deeper understanding of how Megaphone frames its content differently in each language, knowing that a true equivalent can never exist: the issue is not that the perfect equivalency was not attained, as it never truly can, but rather that Megaphone amplifies this non-equivalency by choosing vastly different hashtags in each language.

I suggest that this translation is—as framed through the tags—either decontextualized or, in contrast, an attempt at breaking language. While it can be argued that the Arabic tags are not decontextualizing per se because they simply highlight and contextualize different notions, my framing of this decontextualization is contingent on the parallel English tags that go straight to the heart of the theory relative to the news item at hand. By thinking through breaking language in this way, I show how the decontextualization of Arabic news items on Megaphone ends up perpetuating the patterns of oppression it had been aiming to interrupt by shedding light on them in the first place. In this system, breaking language adds necessary nuance to content and helps frame issues in ways that are closer to the theoretical ideas being conveyed.

In building my argument about decontextualization and breaking in relation to translation and the use of hashtags, I have drawn on the domestication/foreignization dichotomy that translation theorists such as Lawrence Venuti have discussed (1995). This theoretical framework has influenced my thinking and analysis of translation in general and these kinds of translation

problems in particular. However, it does not work well as a model or paradigm for my study, though I have drawn upon it in some ways. For example, the domestication and foreignization framework encourages us to think about the extent to which a text has been adapted to the target culture and how this is done. While domestication entails the adaptation of text to the culture of the target language, foreignization challenges this by choosing ways to maintain the un-familiarity of the text to the target reader. Domestication proposes to render the text more understandable, by naturalizing it to the readers' expectations. In so doing, it often loses nuance or information from the source language, as it privileges harmony. In brief, domestication lets the reader stay home, while foreignization sends the reader abroad (Venuti 1995). Venuti has characterized foreignization as a more ethical choice for translators, maintaining texts' specificities and idiosyncrasies rather than erasing all points of tension for seamless assimilation into the target culture. One of his major contributions to translation studies was the articulation of the choice between domestication and foreignization as ideological in nature, with foreignization as the more ethical option (1995). Many scholars of Arabic-English translation have agreed and argued for this, drawing on Venuti's analysis (Booth 2003; Boullata 2003; Hartman 2012).

In the case of these hashtags, I propose we read their language as *language*, not just as terminological translations of each other. This entails thinking about words as they operate within their relative sociopolitical contexts and the roles they take on. In that sense, the Megaphone decontextualization trend that focuses on domestic violence victims' names rather than domestic violence itself, discussed in Chapter One, could be viewed through a different lens, such that—despite its decontextualizing function—it still furthers a specific narrative like creating affective relationships with these victims. I suggest that this trend can be considered a

sort of storytelling which aims to present violent information in a more easily digestible way, relying on postcolonial and sexuality studies scholar Dina Georgis's (2013) analysis of storytelling as a "key to how one comes to work through and bear injuries" (239). Thus, even while being a translation that could be analyzed through the domestication/foreignization framework, language is also intimately and affectively connected to its local context. So even though the Arabic content is decontextualized via its hashtags that don't put it in conversation with systemic and systematic sociopolitical issues, this decontextualization itself contextualizes parts of news items that are more affective, giving the hashtag space a storytelling function to ease the intake of news (Georgis 2013).

Below, I use six Megaphone News examples published in Arabic, that I identified in Chapter One as presenting a pattern of decontextualization, to think through the ways in which their hashtags operate. I analyze them through the framework outlined above, drawing on the concepts of domestication/foreignization enriched with ideas of affect, storytelling, and relative sociopolitical context. I chose posts that address a range of issues including domestic violence, queer issues, and sexism.

The domestication/foreignization binary is useful in this instance because it helps elucidate that decontextualization could be considered a symptom of domestication, but I push this thought forward by considering the actual terms used and the different affective relationships they build—intentionally or otherwise—with the Arabic readers. In that sense, I frame decontextualization as brushing against domestication: it removes nuance by creating a different kind of affective relationship with readers, while glossing over or ignoring the actual issue at hand.

If viewing decontextualization as a form of domestication, breaking the Arabic hashtag space then emerges as the foreignizing alternative, as elaborated above, through using queer language and queer terms, such as كويريّة when discussing queer issues, as thematically and theoretically accurate categorical markers. In that sense, the "precise" use of such terms is in itself foreignized because it is breaking with the inconsistencies of the platform, which are laid out in Chapter One. I therefore consider foreignization to be equivalent in meaning and creative impulse to the breaking of language, adding dimensions to queer and/or feminist terms and expressions that would not be possible in a rigid, binary structure. And while precision could be argued to apply to any set of terms, in this case, I justify my use of the word precise by intending it to signify terms that are inherently related to the *theoretical* issues at hand rather than more event-specific parts of the content such as the names of the people involved, for instance.

Breaking Language and the Importance of Online Visibility

The concept of breaking language that I use in this study was developed by Michelle Hartman in her book *Breaking Broken English: Black-Arab Literary Solidarities and the Politics of Language* (2019). She suggests that breaking language, or drawing on "spoken languages or vernaculars, slangs, mixing languages, language play, accents," is a way to expand words to give them room to hold more meaning and nuance, all while rejecting the notion that these "creative and non-standard languages" are "broken" (53). In that sense, the language can be seen as constantly break*ing*, as opposed to broken, and, contrary to what the term suggests, the breaking of language is in a "dialectic relationship with solidarity […] even if they seem to be opposed" (54). Breaking is not meant to evoke an image of something shattering; rather, it is intended as a metaphor for solidarity, in the sense that a more flexible language is more capable of truthful

representation of diverse groups of people without trying to ground them in false universals. Breaking language allows us to "learn from others in understanding where struggle is located" (54): the words that are being actively broken and stretched out pinpoint the exact linguistic—and, by extrapolation, societal and political—moments of tension that need relief.

These moments of tension are represented on Megaphone by the Arabic queer and feminist posts whose hashtags decontextualize them instead of making generative links between and across prevalent issues in Lebanese society. Having placed decontextualization and domestication on somewhat the same sphere, as elaborated above, the domesticating translation practice thus stands out as a remover of nuance and context, which is in line with what Venuti (1995) argues. It does not effectively render the message from the source language, English, into the target language, Arabic. It may render individual terms accurately, such as feminism and نسويّة and sexism and ذكوريّة/ أبويّة , but the message, the context, and the wider sociopolitical background against which content is situated is not transmitted with these terms.

In this chapter, I argue that the queered, non-normative identities of Lebanese LGBTQ and marginalized people must be represented by breaking language in order to ease the tension that haunts queer and feminist Arabic terminology. I show how foreignized, or breaking, language can be read as a form of queered language. As discussed in the Introduction, the more widespread use of queer Arabic terminology online would increase the virtual visibility of these communities, which is not equivalent to real-life visibility in that virtuality presents less threat. This online visibility would be attained—in the scope of my study—through the use of queer/ed language in relevant contexts in ways that are not derogatory: for instance, through "precise" queer and feminist Arabic hashtags that create links across issues in Lebanese society. This kind of visibility is an invitation to discuss and learn, or at least a declaration, a self-assertion.

However, the simple use of queer language in virtual locations, like Megaphone, is not enough to attain constructive virtual visibility. Queer Arabic language carries negative connotations, which I discuss below. This means that merely using this language does not in itself constitute a positive step towards constructive online visibility. This reinforces my argument that breaking both language and the way that language is used in Arabic Megaphone hashtags is a necessary step to construct generative links across queer and feminist content. In that sense, the break is both conceptual and terminological, not only breaking words but breaking with Megaphone's pattern of consistent decontextualization by using "precise" feminist and queer hashtags.

I demonstrate this break by giving examples from the Megaphone posts mentioned in Chapter One to illustrate how the decontextualization of feminist and/or queer issues in Arabic can be read as a domesticated translation strategy, in the sense that, via hashtags, the news is being brought home to the reader by making it pass implicitly, like storytelling (Georgis 2013), instead of creating a break that jolts readers into thought. I then argue for this break, which could be understood as a type of foreignizing strategy, while giving examples of foreignized Megaphone content related to queerness. For the purpose of this study, I take foreignization to represent any Arabic content whose hashtags do not frame it "implicitly"—these are the tags that mark queer content as such instead of glossing over the term by using a different tag that highlights more event-specific parts of the news item, decontextualizing it in the process.

To further my arguments in this chapter, I argue that it is also important to "break" Arabic terms themselves, so that they may better represent the queer identities they describe. I do not only rely on Hartman's (2019) breaking language to develop my theorization here, but add to it Sara Mourad's (2013) ideas of "queering the mother tongue" and her exploration of the

relationship between queer translated language and identity. Mourad asserts that the flexibility of identity must be honored by a commitment to working towards a flexibility of language, a flexibility that can be achieved by queering, or breaking, Arabic terms. I provide some examples of queered terms that Mourad cites in her article "Queering the Mother Tongue" (2013), as well as additional examples of queered/broken terms being revived and reclaimed by queer Arabs. These terms have been posted on Takweer, an Instagram account that posts bilingually about "Exploring queer narratives in Arab history and popular culture."[17]

This relational reading of Mourad and Hartman allows me to explore the social and linguistic, conceptual and terminological breaks, embodied by "precise," theoretically accurate Megaphone hashtags that ensure the delivery of equivalent content to readers of both English and Arabic, as well as by the more widespread use of terms that have been reclaimed, or broken/queered, to better describe queerness and identity that is constantly queer*ing* itself in the Lebanese context.

Decontextualization as Affective Storytelling

I argue that the decontextualization of Arabic feminist content on Megaphone, which is achieved by using different hashtags in Arabic than those used in English—therefore framing content differently, as discussed in the previous chapter—can be read as a symptom of a domesticated translation practice that addresses the Arabic readership through affective storytelling (Georgis 2013). This entails the absence of feminist and queer terms since the hashtags included instead are focused on more event-specific terms, like the names of domestic violence victims on posts

17. Takweer is a prime example of a broken term: it uses the English "queer" in Arabic verb form: it takes an English noun/verb, turns it into an Arabic verb, and transliterates it back into English such that the result is itself a broken and queered term combining two languages. The links to the Takweer posts mentioned in this chapter are included in the Appendix.

discussing instances of such crimes. I base my argument on Georgis's (2013) analysis of stories as "the emotional strategy for surviving difficult experience" (239). I suggest that Megaphone's use of decontextualizing hashtags, like names, can be considered a sort of storytelling as the reader develops an affective relationship with the content through this process. This "bringing home" of the information—since it is being presented implicitly, as a story, as opposed to more starkly by clearly stating the actual problem—is how I ground my argument that this is a domesticating practice.

Although social issues *are* being addressed, because Megaphone is posting about them, the use of hashtags nonetheless reveals a pattern of consistent decontextualization of these issues. What is being contextualized instead is the specifics, like the names of the victims. Below, I think through questions like what it means to focus on names, and what these patterns reveal about the way Arabic functions and addresses its readers compared to its English counterpart. I do so by providing examples of Arabic Megaphone content that I show to be decontextualized. As in Chapter One, this analysis is based on hashtag use. However, before analyzing these posts, I first lay out the unease that comes with using feminist and queer vocabulary in Arabic, in order to better understand why this vocabulary is not used in the hashtags and, based on that, to surmise why the decontextualization pattern appears to begin with.

Unease with Arabic terms

In the Introduction of *Bareed Mista3jil: True Stories*, a bilingual collection of personal stories written by lesbian, bisexual, queer and questioning women and transgender persons from different regions across Lebanon, there is a note on language detailing that the stories were either transcribed from interviews conducted with the storytellers and then written out into narrative

pieces, or written by the storytellers themselves—in English, before being translated into Arabic (Meem 2009, 6-9). This is not only because the writers felt more comfortable writing in English, but also because of a terminological unease with writing about sexuality in Arabic. Arabic terms related to sex and sexuality do not always convey the intended meaning and nuance, be it because the terms themselves are derogatory in nature or because they are simply not widely used in conversation. Mourad touches on this when she explains how many middle- and upper-class Lebanese grow up as "Arabs with a hybridized Western education—minus sex ed classes," and that as a result, for many, "sexual knowledge is shaped by foreign media consumption" (2013, 2534). Indeed, there are very few local representations of sex and sexuality in Arab mass media. Even in *Bareed Mista3jil,* the authors themselves expressed being more comfortable writing in English, "especially because the Arabic version would be written not in dialect but in classical Arabic" (Georgis 2013, 238).

Interestingly, the community of queer people represented in *Bareed Mista3jil* developed ties and relationships with each other online, using not Arabic, but "Arabish," a way of transliterating Arabic with a Latin keyboard (Georgis 2013, 238), which shows how early on the queer community's communication was hybridized, both in location and language. In that sense, digital spaces can determine or impose the use of a certain language. This informal style of transliterating Arabic in Latin letters was "originally born from limited access to an Arabic keyboard and from limited support for Arabic characters on the internet" (Georgis 2013, 238), proving how space influences the way that language is used. In my analysis I borrow Mourad's (2013) conception of spaces that could even be defined by topics of conversation—so while a digital space (accessed through a computer or a smartphone) could de facto impose a language

on users, usually English, certain topics of conversation, such as sex or feminist issues, could also impose English as the de facto language that will sustain a discussion (2541).

This linguistic unease with Arabic, evidenced by the preference of English when discussing sex and feminism, leads to a tension in discussing certain topics in the language perceived as inadequate: here, talking about nonnormative sex and sexuality in Arabic. The challenge of translating specific sex-related terms like "wetness" is given as an example, as well as the rendering of gender-neutral English terms into Arabic, a language defined by contributors to *Bareed* as having a "rigid 'gendered' nature," making it difficult to recount "the stories that focused on gender identity issues" (Meem 2009, 6-7).

While *Bareed Mista3jil* has been lauded by scholars like Georgis (2013) as an attempt to acquaint readers with stories about what same-sex sexuality looks like in Arabic in Lebanon, it still reaffirms the inadequacy of Arabic in suitably conveying these stories. Mourad (2013) states that when the magazine *Barra,* which discusses homosexuality, and sexuality more broadly, in Arabic, was launched in 2005, many people were excited to read it because it touched on these issues in "not just any Arabic": it did so in colloquial Lebanese dialect (2533).[18] This is mirrored in *Bareed Mista3jil*'s Introduction, which also details that the writers voiced being more comfortable expressing themselves in Lebanese dialect than formal, Modern Standard Arabic (Meem 2009, 6). This corroborates the fact that formal Arabic is understood by many people to be inadequate for conversations about feminist topics including sex and gender. Thus, one can extrapolate that this unease extends to discussing feminist topics in Arabic, especially considering that "women's rights and sexual freedoms are imagined as Western imports and threats to national sovereignty" (Georgis 2013, 236).

18. Barra is the colloquial Lebanese Arabic term for "out."

Mourad continues to give different examples illustrating this inadequacy and unease: it is more common, for instance, to use the English word "sex" in everyday conversation in Lebanon instead of the Arabic جنس, which contributes to "cultural practices of meaning-making that inform broader questions about global cultural influences on local discourses of sex" (2013, 2534). Filling these linguistic gaps by tapping into other languages is by no means exceptional; indeed, using such practices of collage and/or translation is quite common, especially in Lebanon where identity is most likely to be grasped in English or French "because that's where these words exist more freely and where we find Internet pages and papers written about sexuality" (Meem 2009, 7). Knowing that, "for reasons beyond their control," many people in Lebanon learn French and English along with Arabic in schools and universities established by missionaries (Mourad 2013, 2534), it is not uncommon for Lebanese to become acquainted with terms related to sex and sexuality in French and English before—or instead of—Arabic. As mentioned above, many Lebanese are first acquainted with sexual knowledge and sexual vocabulary through foreign media (Mourad 2013, 2534), with the Internet, social media, and streaming platforms being primarily English spaces. This is, however, directly tied to class, as the prevalence of French and English in people's daily lives depends on their socioeconomic context, which determines their access and exposure to these languages—not only by way of education systems, but even through their level of access to Western media, "movies, series, and music" (Mourad 2013, 2533).

Efforts to familiarize people with Arabic words related to sex and gender have been made in Lebanon, as in other Arab contexts (Mourad 2013). Two specific examples include Issue 0 of *Barra* magazine, which included a glossary of terms in Arabic, and more recently the *Gender Dictionary*, which offers bilingual explanations for sex- and gender-related terminology. There is

also an increasing number of digital spaces joining in these efforts, such as Instagram pages dedicated to discussing gender and sexuality in Arabic, to promote this terminology over more commonly used English words. Some of these pages include but are not limited to Takweer, Shabaket El Meem, Haki Nasawi, Mashrou Alef, NO2TA, wikigenderar, thisismotherbeing, alQaws, and Mauj.[19] There are also older sources that worked on circulating Arabic sex- and gender-related terminology, including but not limited to the glossary of terms related to sexual identity published in 2008 by Aswat, the Palestinian Feminist Center for Gender and Sexual Freedoms, which Sahar Amer mentions in her 2012 article "Naming to Empower: Lesbianism in the Arab Islamicate World Today."

While efforts have recently increased in the online world to use Arabic as a language of communication, as evidenced, for example, by the social media pages listed above that address issues of sex and gender in Arabic, English remains more terminologically accessible. The availability of Arabic keyboards and Arabic-language software and dictionaries on smartphones may have made it easier to type in Arabic online, but it has not solved the issue of the non-availability of Arabic terms to use without being derogatory or insulting. Mourad (2013) elaborates on the terminological aspect of English accessibility especially when it comes to sex: she explains that some terms either do not exist or are not widely used in Arabic, such as S&M and drag—though this does not by extension imply that the signified do not exist in Arab or Lebanese societies (2541). The words that do exist are often either archaic or carry derogatory nuances, such as شاذ and لوطي, which makes it easier to understand why the queer community has gravitated away from these terms and towards their English counterparts such as gay and lesbian. The more recent, arguably non-derogatory, terms like مثلي/ة to denote homosexuality have not fared well either among queer Arabs, which may be explained by Amer's (2012) reminder that

19. See Appendix for reference links.

the "expression *junusiyya mithliyya* had been coined from Arabic translations of Freud that were made in the 1950s," and that when Freud used the word "*Homosexualität* over a hundred years ago, he was constructing it as a mental illness, a pathology of deviancy requiring long-term psychoanalysis, aversion therapy, and at times even electroshock in order to be "cured"" (385-86).

Going back to the notion of spaces, Mourad cautions against falling into a binary trap "with Arabic connoting a more local space and English marking a more international one" (2013, 2541). The failure of Arabic to offer adequate queer and feminist terminology must not be taken as instruction to simply gravitate towards English; I argue here that breaking and queering Arabic is an important tool that can expand the terms available to make them more flexible, better adapted to the identities they represent. In the below, I narrow down this discussion on the unease with Arabic to specific Megaphone queer and feminist content that I frame as decontextualized through its hashtags, analyzing why the tags operate the way they do by relying on Georgis's (2013) ideas of storytelling and affect. I then go on to propose the importance of breaking language as a viable alternative to inadequate terms.

Hashtags as markers of decontextualization

In the previous chapter, I argued that Megaphone systematically decontextualizes its Arabic feminist and queer content through the use of different hashtags in English and Arabic. Moreover, in this chapter, I suggest that the pattern of Arabic decontextualization could be considered a symptom of a domesticated translation, in that it brings news items home to readers by making controversial content pass more implicitly and with less friction than it otherwise would have had it been fully equivalent to its English counterpart. In my analysis, however, I

attempt to adapt these linguistic theories of domestication to better respond to the ways in which language operates, because although the hashtags are translations of each other, they also stand as individual terms in their respective languages and carry sociopolitical baggage that affectively influence the way that they are received by their respective readers.

I propose that, because the decontextualizing Arabic tags are consistently the names of either victims of violence or of people embroiled in controversy, this characterizes the content as a story by creating a sort of affective relationship with these people. The mention of names, while decontextualizing in contrast to the English hashtags, chooses to contextualize different aspects of the content, aspects that bring the news items closer to the readers by establishing a relationship—whatever its nature—with the bearers of these names. As such, turning the content into stories brings "narrative coherence and understanding to existence, which in psychoanalytic thought is key to how one comes to work through and bear injuries" (Georgis 2013, 239). In that sense, the names affectively create a story, offering readers ways to digest social conflict, and in so doing, reveal how people in Lebanon are negotiating and navigating the sociopolitical difficulties in the country. Georgis (2013) offers this framework by suggesting that "stories offer psychic consolation to hard to digest experience or social conflict" (239).

This pattern of naming names is reminiscent of the #SayHerName campaign, launched in 2014 by the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) and Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies (CISPS) to "bring awareness to the often invisible names and stories of Black women and girls who have been victimized by racist police violence."[20] Including victims' names grants them visibility and sends the message that their lives matter, while reminding the reader that the victims are real people. In the case of Megaphone, this line of reasoning could be applied to content related to domestic violence, but it is not only that type of content whose tags

20. See: "Say Her Name." AAPF, https://www.aapf.org/sayhername.

include names rather than issues. The inclusion of names extends to instances of sexism and homophobia as well, as I lay out below, which reinforces the problematic aspect of these tags, despite the ways in which they could be helpful, because prioritizing names over theoretical links, particularly when the names are not those of victims, contributes to the decontextualization of systemic issues in society.

Georgis does, however, offer additional concepts to work with while thinking through the names as stories, in content that is not discussing victims of violence. She states that, "In the process of reading a story, we potentially make contact with the conflicts and difficulties that haunt the plot or the existing narrative" (2013, 240). In the case of Megaphone, then, I argue that using names as hashtags on feminist and queer Arabic content not only decontextualizes the issues being discussed but also contributes to the spectral aspects of this content: focusing on names relegates the theoretical and conceptual issues to a secondary rank, framing the content as stories instead of highlighting the points of contact with conflict and difficulty—the issues themselves. Readers' main contact is with the names being emphasized, the *story* of the people involved, thus transforming the wider, systemic concepts into ghosts haunting the narrative.

Affective storytelling, as presented by Megaphone

In order to focus in depth on the dynamics of language in the posts, I have identified six Megaphone posts published in Arabic to explore in detail in what follows. I chose posts that report on a range of issues to investigate a range of topics: domestic violence, queer issues, and sexism. I discuss these posts in relation to their hashtags and compare them to their English-language counterparts to be able to pinpoint the differences in the ways that each language

addresses its readership, showing in each case where and how the Arabic can be read as decontextualizing, affective storytelling.

Beginning with domestic violence, a post from February 5, 2021 reporting on the murder of a woman by her husband, only uses hashtags limited to the name of the victim, Zeina Kanjo, along with the more generic لبنان and القضاء. The decontextualization here is evidenced by the focus of the tags on the name of the victim instead of including domestic violence among them. What makes this stand out more is the fact that other posts about domestic violence do include the term as a tag, or at least some hint to violence or assault—as seen in Chapter One.[21] As explained above, this focus on the name of the victim could be understood as a reminder that these are real people suffering the real consequences of gender-based violence, encouraging readers to relate to these issues on a personal level. In the process of doing so, the news item becomes more like a story, narrativizing "the experiences of existing in a world that is inhabited by the imposition of norms, by the traumas of war, religion, and secularism, […] by the present-day political dramas of the region, by the World Wide Web, and by the proliferation of other diverse media" (Georgis 2013, 239). The prevalence of domestic violence in Lebanese society is intimately linked to religion and the imposition of patriarchal norms, but the violence underlying this content is implicitly relegated to a secondary level by focusing the "story" on the victim herself. This is where the discursive violence of decontextualization really stands out, because it limits the Arabic reader's understanding of or exposure to the systemic nature of violence against women in Lebanese society. By addressing readers in a storytelling manner, perhaps to ease the intake of such heavy content (Georgis 2013), Megaphone is perpetuating the shallow thematic links being formed in readers' minds.

21. See: Chapter One, page 47.

So while the English hashtags connect the dots and constructively create links across these issues, Arabic does not operate in the same way, as it addresses readers affectively by conjuring the impression of storytelling. It could be argued, however, that the English tags not focusing on the individual people decreases the visibility of these victims, in which case the Arabic in contrast would be operating in a generative way in relation to its specific local context. In either case, the affective undercurrents of each language as it relates to its cultural baggage have their respective pros and cons, framing content differently and impacting society in different ways. This could possibly explain why translation is such a thorny process, and why equivalent communication across language is so difficult.

Similarly, posts related to queer issues present, through their hashtags, the same pattern of systematic decontextualization when published in Arabic, also via a focus on the names of people embroiled in controversy rather than highlighting actual societal problems. This falls in line with my argument that Arabic addresses its readers in an affective storytelling manner. Three posts having to do with queer issues illustrate this. On October 27, 2020, Megaphone published a post about the head of the Lebanese Catholic Media Center and his homophobic comments about the LGBTQ community. The Arabic hashtags are مشروع ليلى and لبنان. It is crucial to remember that Mashrou' Leila was not even mentioned in the news item—and that they exist rather in the Lebanese collective consciousness when it comes to the specific priest in question because he had previously spewed such vitriol against them that they had to cancel a concert in Byblos, Lebanon. The inclusion of the band's name in the hashtags over any other term related to queerness or homophobia is evidence of how the tags are relying on affect to communicate with readers, since, as mentioned in Chapter One, there is an affective relationship in the Lebanese imaginary between Mashrou' Leila and this priest.

This pattern elucidates the ways in which the tags speak the readers' language, in both English and Arabic, in order to fulfil their function of bringing in more social media engagement—their main function as social media searchability tools. The language that is used in the tags, and how this language operates, both influences and is influenced by the sociopolitical reality in whose orbit it exists.

Another example that is also about homophobic narratives in the media, from November 13, 2020, has the following tags: لبنان, لبنان ينتفض, and مرسال غانم, the name of the talk show host during whose show the comments were made. Again, the focus is on the specific names and not the systemic problem of homophobia. The third example from March 15, 2021 is a post about the Catholic Church not blessing same-sex marriage. The Arabic tags are الفاتيكان and البابا فرنسيس. The affective communication here occurs on two levels: that of names—Pope Francis—and that of religion, whose dominance in Lebanese society is reinforced by the inclusion of the Vatican as a tag over queerness or homophobia. And while it could be argued that the Vatican and Pope Francis are highly relevant to the post's content since it addresses a declaration made by the Catholic Church, comparing the Arabic tags to the English ones—LGBTQIA, same-sex marriage, and Catholic Church—clarifies my argument of how Megaphone relies on affective storytelling through its Arabic hashtags to communicate with Arabic readers. The authority that religious institutions hold in Lebanon must not be undermined, as "sectarian belonging is marked by virtuous practice and regulated by the fear of shame" (Georgis 2013, 243). This in turn illuminates why religious tags would be chosen over terms in Arabic like LGBTQIA and same-sex marriage, which are controversial and indeed regulated by shame.

In the same vein, Megaphone posts dealing with sexist content are also decontextualized through their Arabic hashtags that focus on surface-level terms and names. For example, a post

from December 3, 2020 rehashing the sexist comments that Lebanese popstar Najwa Karam made on a talk show includes her name, لبنان, and جعفرتوك as hashtags, in another display of centering people and talk show names over the societal problems that are being posted about. When compared to the English tags—Najwa Karam, feminism, and Lebanon—the storytelling aspect of the Arabic stands out in the same way that was argued above, by centering names of figures and shows with whom/which the public has an affective relationship—because the names and shows are popular and have massive followings.

This pattern is repeated on a post from March 10, 2021: this one addresses the bullying of sexologist Dr. Sandrine Atallah on a national Lebanese talk show called "ع غير كوكب" (On Another Planet) hosted by Pierre Rabbat. The show is broadcast on the national MTV Lebanon television channel. As in the previous example, the tags on this post are limited to the names of the people and platforms involved and have no hint of sexism. They only include ع غير كوكب, ساندرين عطالله, بيار رباط, and لبنان. The affective storytelling here is defined on the same basis as in all of the above; the inclusion of these names reinforces my argument that stories are the way the content is being framed, rather than being framed conceptually or theoretically like it is in English with the tags that include mentions of sexism and feminism. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this begs the question of how the definition of each of these feminist terms changes across language, especially since each language operates in its own way, and according to its own context, as I have laid out.

Having analyzed some examples of Arabic Megaphone content through an affective lens, I suggest further that the concept of breaking language (Hartman 2019) can help provide a way to understand Arabic as more hospitable to the intricacies of feminist and queer language and therefore combat the decontextualization that occurs. I propose that this break can occur both in

the hashtag space and in the terminology itself, by using conceptually and theoretically accurate hashtags—as opposed to the decontextualizing, affective storytelling tags—and by thinking of ways to render language more flexible.

Breaking Language and Hashtags as the Alternative

Power relations between English and Arabic cannot simply be ignored or overcome, especially considering colonial legacies, afterlives, and imperial gay epistemologies. But as Georgis argues for the necessity to "make conceptual room for sexualities lived in between East and West, lived in process and not yet fully conceived" (2013, 248), there is a parallel argument to be made for doing the same for language. Breaking and queering language is a possible solution, as these practices make room for wider conceptualizations by expanding and adding complexities to words (Hartman 2019; Mourad 2013).

In this section, I suggest that breaking hashtag choice in Arabic Megaphone content related to queerness and/or feminism can be done through choosing tags that are theoretically accurate topic markers, either as standalone tags or as translations of their English counterparts. Their accuracy is determined through their precision, by being context- and content-specific instead of being framed affectively, as in the examples laid out above. I give examples to show that Megaphone already does use these kinds of accurate tags—just not with all of its queer/feminist Arabic content.[22] Then, thinking through Hartman's (2019) concept of the break, I propose that in the hashtag sphere, the break occurs when precise queer and feminist Arabic tags are used. Though an argument could be made for the opposite—that using "precise" language is the opposite of breaking it—the distinction I make here is that the hashtag *space* is what is being

22. These types of discrepancies in hashtags are explored in depth in Chapter One.

broken, in relation to what it usually does: taking the pattern of decontextualization as the norm, using theoretically precise tags constitutes a break with what was to open the hashtag space to deeper critical links across issues instead of it representing an affective, storytelling space.

Here, the break is conceptual rather than linguistic; the words themselves are not being broken, the Arabic spaces—both physical (digital) and conceptual—in which they are used are being broken, in the sense that using queer and feminist Arabic terms to categorize content as such is a break in the way that language is usually used on Megaphone, in contrast to the more prevalent pattern of systematic decontextualization explored in the previous section and chapter. I suggest that this break, which leads to content being categorized as feminist and queer instead of having an affective function, in turn leads to the wider use of queer and feminist terms, at least online, resulting in the higher visibility of these issues. After arguing for a conceptual break, in this way, I move on to discuss the importance of breaking the actual terms themselves (Hartman 2019) and put these ideas in conversation with the concept of queering the mother tongue (Mourad 2013).

Breaking Arabic Megaphone hashtag spaces

While there is a pattern of Megaphone decontextualizing Arabic feminist and queer content through the use of theoretically imprecise hashtags, I suggest that the posts that include precise tags as theoretical and conceptual markers can be understood as fulfilling the breaking function that Hartman (2019) discusses. The importance of this lies in the fact that, by breaking with the decontextualizing norm that most hashtags uphold, the use of theoretically accurate language in the tags mirrors the sociopolitical issues on the ground and facilitates the establishment of links

across these issues rather than addressing readers affectively to make the message pass in a more digestible way (Georgis 2013).

The hashtag كويريّة is an example of a theoretically precise marker when it is used to categorize posts touching on issues having to do with queerness or homophobia in society—as opposed to using names to create an affective relationship or reinforce religious authority and regulation (Georgis 2013, 243). Below I provide examples from Megaphone in which كويريّة is used either as the only hashtag or along with others as a precise topic marker.

The tag كويريّة is used, throughout my study's timeframe, on a total of ten Megaphone posts. Among these ten posts, only eight are actually immediately related to queer issues, while the remaining two can only be associated with queerness by extension. I discuss each of these posts below, explaining why—in all ten cases—using كويريّة as a tag represents breaking the hashtag space, in comparison to the decontextualized content laid out in the above section. I do not list the posts chronologically; instead, I group those that can be analyzed in similar ways together.

The first time كويريّة is used as a hashtag is on October 24, 2019, on a post discussed in the previous chapter about Mia Khalifa, the former Lebanese porn star, and the way she helped influence people's definition of shame, shifting it from herself and the hate she received when working in the porn industry to the Lebanese political regime, which she posits actually deserves this hatred and shame. The tag does not appear as is—it is used as an adjective, تظاهرات كويريّة, to describe the protests. While the relation to queerness and/or queer issues is not immediately apparent, it can still be understood that queer protests are meant to advocate for intersectional feminist issues in Lebanese society, and not just economic and political demands related to the

overthrow of the regime. These issues include—though are not limited to—women's rights and queer rights, which as discussed above are deeply intertwined.

The link between women's rights and queer rights is further reinforced by the other tags on the post, المرأة and امرأة الثورة, which establish the connection between women's rights and the queer characteristic of the protests that were breaking out at that time. They asserted an intersectional analysis, demanding gender equality, queer rights, abolishing the kafala system, and an end to the endemic corruption of the political establishment—among other things—all at the same time. In that sense, the كويريّة tag contributes to the breaking of the hashtag space because it relays the essential meaning of the content instead of adhering to the general pattern of decontextualization. It conveys the political reality of the time instead of, for instance, focusing on Mia Khalifa's name and the controversy around her, which would have been a way of affectively addressing readers and priming a different part of the content, one that removes it from its inherently queer, political context. By highlighting the message being sent, no matter how foreign it might feel to some Arabic readers, كويريّة is quite literally embodying its meaning: it is queering/breaking the hashtag space to open Arabic readers' minds to different realities that they may not have previously seen, thought of, or supported.

This post—and the next—is different from the rest that will be discussed in this section because it is one of two posts that do not immediately address something related to queerness, but I suggest that the كويريّة tag still fulfils its breaking function in this case because it makes the reader think outside the box and see the word "queer" as a verb, leading right to the heart of my study: it is only by queering language, by making it more flexible and foreignized, that this language will become a truthful representation of the reality it describes.

The other post from my study's timeframe that includes كويريّة as a hashtag without a clear reason is from June 11, 2020. It links to an article about the novelist Salim Barakat revealing that the late Mahmoud Darwish had a daughter out of wedlock. At first glance, there is no relation between having a daughter out of wedlock and queer issues, but upon reading the actual article that the post links to, it becomes clear why كويريّة figures among the tags. The final paragraph of the article reads:

> فقد قرأنا ما أساله سائل قلمه وحبره من كلام وقصائد وحشو وغيره وغيره. أمّا سوائله التي سالت في فجوات نساء عاديات أو شاعرات أو عاملات جنس، فلا نعرف شيئاً عنها. تصوّروا لو أنّ محمود درويش ناك رجلاً، سيكون أسهل أن نعتاش مع فكرة سائله الذي ذهب إلى الصرف الصحي ولم يُنتج ابنة. وسيكون أسهل أن لا نقرأ مقالاً لصديقه يخبرنا سرّ صديقه. وربّما كنّا سنقرأ خرائيات الذكور العرب من المثقّفين الذين يعتبرون نَيْك الرجال بعضهم لبعض تقليلاً من الرجولة.

With this ending, the author criticizes Barakat for revealing his friend's secret and for putting so much importance on Darwish's "fluids" (i.e. semen), whose movements and trajectory we, the general public, know nothing of—and why should we? The relation with كويريّة, however, becomes clear when the author suggests that, had Darwish had sex with a man instead of a woman, it would've been easier for "us" to live with the fact that his fluids went to waste and did not produce a daughter—because in that case there would have been no secret for Barakat to divulge. This raises the question of who the author means by "we": is it the Arab reader? If so, what is the assumption that the author is making about what the Arab reader is going to identify with? Is it that the average reader is assumed to be sexist and misogynistic? He continues to say that perhaps, had it been a case of men having sex with men, we'd have to read instead about the opinions of "cultured Arab men" who think that having sex with men diminishes a man's virility and masculinity. The assumption that the author makes in his claim that the average reader is sexist, misogynistic, and homophobic reveals how pervasive these issues are in Lebanese societies, and Arab societies more generally. It is the critique of homophobia included in his

article, however, that helps explain why كويريّة is included among the post's hashtags, and its inclusion is indeed breaking the hashtag space because it is being used as critique of the homophobic narratives the author is naturally expecting. The next post I discuss also addresses different manifestations of homophobia in Lebanese society.

On January 8, 2020, كويريّة is the only tag on a post reporting on homophobic lyrics that were sung during a New Year's Eve party, amid calls for boycotting the singer in question, who is anti-woman and homophobic: the caption reads: "فما الذي يجعل من الشيخ كارهاً للنساء والمثليّين؟". The tag can be considered to be breaking with decontextualization because it hints at queer rights instead of focusing on the name of the singer and establishing an affective relationship with him, as is the case in other posts such as the one mentioning Pope Francis. On June 17, 2020, كويريّة is also among the tags on a post about Sarah Hegazy, an Egyptian lesbian activist, losing her life to suicide and the barrage of homophobic comments that ensued. Two days earlier, on June 15, 2020, another post also dedicated to Hegazy uses كويريّة in its hashtags. This post laments the untimely passing of Hegazy while proposing that the death of queer and trans people in Arab societies is a form of survival, in the sense that, in death, they would be surviving whatever future form of torture, mental or physical, they might have been subjected to. In these two posts, كويريّة breaks with Megaphone's pattern of decontextualization and names instead a major theoretical aspect of the posts it is included in.

On another note, the hashtag كويريّة is used on a post from November 6, 2019 about the false narratives of purity that the political regime was trying to invent for itself to set itself apart from the violent protestors it was clamping down on.[23] The inclusion of كويريّة along with other tags also indicating oppressed groups of people in society (women, migrant workers, refugees) breaks with decontextualization by being a theoretically and thematically accurate topic marker

23. More details and context related to this post can be found in Chapter One, page 48.

and not focusing on different aspects of the post that would further conceal these members of society who are largely ignored so as not to be dealt with—when they are not being attacked and oppressed. Similarly, on January 29, 2020, كويريّة is included as a hashtag on a post announcing the passing of Suzy, a Lebanese trans woman who was one of the most prominent faces of the transgender struggle in the country. The post honors her and wishes for her legacy to effect long-lasting change towards a more just state. It can be argued that the very framing of this post in a positive light can be conceptualized as a break in a society that does not treat the members of any visible minority fairly. While queer and trans are not synonyms, the former being a sexual orientation and the latter a gender identity, and the members of each group suffering from different types and varying levels of oppression (even from each other), "queer" can be taken as a verb in this instance to define a wider, more inclusive society for all who share in similar and joint struggle.

On a post from February 20, 2020, the hashtag كويريّة could also be viewed as a verb form. The post discusses the queer spaces that spontaneously popped up during the protests, calling for equality for all marginalized groups in society. These spaces, however, soon turned "kitsch" and adhered to the abstract symbolism of "the revolution is female," the popular revolutionary slogan that people happily—and unthinkingly—adopted during the protest outbreak. The use of kitsch in this post is meant to illustrate the happy-go-lucky manner in which people coopted this slogan, which was widely used during protests across the Arab world. The cooptation occurred by plastering the slogan onto the Lebanese protest scene without really thinking about what it means, at its essence, or who it includes. [24] It was ignorantly and selectively adopted, with only normative women fitting into the category of "female" it defined,

24. A comprehensive article about the history and travels of this slogan has been written by Lebanese feminist journalist Maya Ammar. See: "الثورة ليست أنثى" .مايا العمّار Daraj, July 31, 2020. https://daraj.com/51384/.

who, even while fitting into it, continue to lack basic human rights, as women in Lebanon are subjected to both the physical violence of men and that of a patriarchal system which doesn't allow them to pass on their nationality to their children. Using كويريّة on a post like this breaks with decontextualization because, looked at as a verb, it actively breaks this normativity that protestors return to—the normativity that is being criticized in the post itself—thus embodying the act of breaking the Arabic hashtag space. Additionally, because كويريّة is used alongside نسوية in this post, it widens the orbit that feminism exists in and adds much-needed nuance and intersectional dimensions to feminism in Lebanon as represented on Megaphone.

The term is also used as a hashtag on a post from November 19, 2020, which addresses the need to start better understanding and treating trans people in Lebanese society. It figures alongside جنس, نسويّة, and العابرون والعابرات جندريّاً, all of which fulfil the function of breaking because instead of decontextualizing, they point to issues and people in society who are usually—in a best-case scenario—ignored. The very use of this type of inclusive, non-derogatory language is a step towards a safe type of digital visibility which, I argue in the following chapter, might be a marker of progress in social justice in the absence of deep-rooted change in how Lebanese people in society at large view and treat marginalized, nonnormative sexual and gender identities.

The tenth and final post I discuss is from March 6, 2021, about the arrest of Tunisian queer activist Rania Amdouni. The use of كوير as one of the hashtags contributes to framing the post and its content in a theoretically accurate manner, avoiding the decontextualization that would have resulted from using Amdouni's name, for example, as Megaphone has proven to have a pattern of doing. In addition, the tag can constitute a break because, similarly to the previous post, it uses non-derogatory language in specifying the issue at hand. The use of

precise, queer hashtags to categorize queer and feminist issues breaks with the otherwise consistent pattern of decontextualization, as represented by the queer and/or feminist Arabic content on Megaphone that is framed in a more narrative, affective way that hinders the creation of meaningful intersectional feminist links across issues in society. In the following section, I use this analysis while thinking through ideas of breaking language (Hartman 2019) and queering it (Mourad 2013).

Breaking and queering language, conceptually and terminologically

While the above elucidates how the concept of breaking (Hartman 2019) can be applied to Arabic queer and feminist hashtag spaces, I continue this thread of analysis in this section to think more deeply about breaking language terminologically, putting Hartman's ideas in conversation with Mourad's (2013) theorization of queering the mother tongue.

Hartman provides a useful analogy that makes it easier to understand how breaking language can be beneficial and why expanding terms in this way is important to render them more representative of the people/identities they describe. She summarizes the process as "making the medium the message," which she states is "another way of underlining the generative ability of creative languages" (2019, 44). Acknowledging that "thoughts and feelings, words and concepts are unequal and not identical" (226) makes the translation process feel futile, since the inequality of words, and the differences in the power relations of languages, make it difficult to convey sensitive ideas like sexual and gender identity. Indeed, translation theory suggests that "all translations are interpretations and therefore never free of ideologies, relations of power, and the inequality of systems of social organization" (226), which gives translators the

power—and the responsibility—to infer the meanings of words as they operate within their local contexts to then decide how to translate them (226).

In that sense, using breaking "as a methodology and praxis" (2019, 79) to reclaim political agency—considering that language is inherently political—allows marginalized communities to take certain terms and reshape them to better fit their needs. Hartman suggests that breaks can be made by "using the word in a way that can be a noun or a verb or both," thus "breaking grammar and the rules of grammar" (2019, 95), while Mourad offers a similar solution of queering words and reflecting critically on monolingualism in "both our native and academic languages" (2013, 2542). An example of queering—and breaking—that Mourad gives is the term boyah, used in the Arab Gulf. Boyah, a term used by butch lesbians to refer to themselves, is a mix of the English boy with the Arabic feminine suffix -ah. The power of this term lies in its double-transgression: it breaks with normative femininity in its reference to butch women, and it also breaks with monolingualism because it is a mix of two languages (Mourad 2013, 2540). It is a queered term, in the sense that the Arabic female suffix -ah both queers and breaks a word that is otherwise English and masculine (2540).

My argument here is that the terms in need of breaking are often problematic in some way. In the case of queer Arabic language, many terms are outdated and/or derogatory, which leads to people avoiding them when trying to refer to themselves or others. For example, the Arabic شاذ literally means deviant, while لوطي carries negative religious connotations, associating same-sex practice with Lot. Amer (2012) proposes the re-adoption of older Arabic terms for lesbian from classical Arabic poetry and prose so as to use more "authentic" designations of queer desire and identity. As Mourad has argued, however, this suggestion both "discredits

emergent queer identities on the basis of linguistic impurity" and "redefines authenticity as a celebration of the past" (2013, 2538-539).

I propose that breaking and queering constitute similar ways of understanding and interpreting language, going deep into the complexities and nuances that result from the different social, political, and cultural contexts in which people are living. As a practice, they render language more flexible and malleable, all while moving away from the adoption of inadequate terms and designations. Perhaps the answer is not reclaiming old words used to describe queerness but queering/breaking terms to valorize the breaks, which Hartman (2019) characterizes as "positive, generative sources for manifesting other kinds of breaks that reimagine society, liberation, and freedom" (53).

This kind of linguistic hybridity becomes increasingly pertinent when thought of in parallel to Amer's (2012) description of Arab lesbians as "active advocates in the endorsement of the essentially hybrid nature of their identity" (391). She reminds readers that "the Web producers of the online magazine Bintelnas […] have adopted the linguistically and culturally hybrid name of Mujadarra Grrls to describe their intercultural identity" (2012, 391-92). The hybridity of the choice of name is explained as representing the traditions that nourish them and connect them to their roots (Mujadarra), while the "Grrls" part of their name "represents the influence of late twentieth-century urban U.S. culture on our lives" (392). This is also an example of queering and breaking, because the name combines words from two languages while also breaking the spelling of one word to "highlight the hybrid dimension of Arab gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transgender individuals" (392).

The break creates "generative links in a solidarity context," all while questioning the definition of this solidarity across different "texts, contexts, times, and locations" (Hartman

2019, 241-42). The languages at our disposal to discuss issues of feminism and gender and sexual identity in Arabic are impoverished, which suggests the need to find "alternative ways of thinking about and expressing" these notions to "give insight into building communities and solidarities between communities" (226). Translators must practice agency in making these political decisions regarding what words to use and how, as none of these choices can ever be separated from actively emerging theory—which also influences politics and social organization. This is where the importance of the break is most highlighted: it pinpoints the precise elements of language that are untranslatable and prompts translators to think more deeply about the issues being discussed and shape them in more truthful ways.

In addition to the examples of queered/breaking terms I have included above, there are also recent efforts to reclaim older, sometimes derogatory designations for queerness. The Takweer Instagram page, an account that explores "queer narratives in Arab history and popular culture," has posted several examples of Arabic words used to describe "tomboys," "sissy boys," and lesbians. I mention them below as suggestions of words that could be reclaimed or queered/broken, while remaining conscious of the need to avoid limiting authenticity to the revival of the past.

I begin with a Takweer post that references old Arabic designations for lesbian. The term الظريفات, or الظراف, signifies "the cute ones." It is the Arabic term for cute or witty, and it was used "in some ancient Arab cities among Arab lesbians to refer to each other," as the post mentions. The post also makes the connection between the similar nuances to ظريفة and gay: using ظريفة to refer to a lesbian is "coincidentally similar to the way the word "gay" is used in its original meaning to refer to a person who is happy."

Meanwhile, the tomboy, or "المسترجلة" الفتاة, is "a girl who exhibits characteristics or behaviors considered typical of a boy, including wearing "masculine" clothing and engaging in games and activities that are not considered to be "feminine."" The post dedicated to this term offers several terms used across the Arabic-speaking world to refer to tomboys—it also specifies that the terms can be used endearingly or in derogatory ways. The terms include: Hassan Sabi (حسن صبي) from West Asia, Aisha Rajel (عيشة راجل) from North Africa, Boya (بوية) from the Gulf Region, as seen above, and Mohammad Walad (محمد ولد) from Sudan.[25]

The sissy boy, or "المخنث" الفتى, is "often used as a derogatory term to refer to a boy or man who has effeminate mannerisms. It is also linked to being weak or feeble, as society problematically links being effeminate with weakness." The post offers different terms used to refer to "sissy boys" from across the Arabic-speaking world and specifies that they are all derogatory. It does, however, also mention that the post is not an encouragement to use the words; it is instead an attempt to "resist and challenge the dominant narrative around effeminate men and boys, and to reclaim power of such hurtful terms." The terms include: Na'nou' (نعنوع) from West Asia (meaning loose, swaying), Maye' (مايع) from West Asia/ the Gulf Region (meaning fluid), Zamel (زامل) from North Africa, Tante/Tanta (طنط/طنطة) from West Asia (from French *tante*; aunt, queen, pansy), Foufou/Fafi (فوفو/فافي) from West Asia (meaning sissy), 'Eyal minaswin (عِيَلْ مِنَسْوِن) from Egypt (meaning an effeminate person), and Barantha (برنثه) from the Gulf Region.[26]

While these terms for "sissy boy" are indicated as derogatory, there is an interesting parallel to draw between the attempt at reclaiming them and the widespread circulation of " لوطي

25. The definitions and spellings are taken as is from the Takweer Instagram post. The reference can be found in the Appendix.

26. The definitions and spellings are taken as is from the Takweer Instagram post. The reference can be found in the Appendix.

مش مسبّي" during the revolutionary protests in Lebanon in October 2019 onwards. Not only was it chanted by protestors, it also can also still be found graffitied onto walls in public spaces in Beirut. This is an example of the attempts to destigmatize queer Arabic language, which has been supported by the publication of posts like the ones I describe above. Further examples of attempts by Arab queer activists to either reclaim or offer alternatives to derogatory terms include the 2010 campaign in Lebanon for the International Day Against Homophobia: Lebanese queer activists claimed "Eh ana shadh (yes I am a deviant)" in order to try and reclaim the word شاذ, which is highly derogatory and is usually swapped for the more politically correct مثلي, the Arabic translation of homosexual (Mourad 2013, 2537). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, however, going back to the roots of where مثلي comes from reveals that it is not free of derogatory nuance either.

When it comes to the translation into Arabic of English terms related to queerness, Mourad asks whether there is a certain guilt associated with the act of translation because it might hint at a cultural inauthenticity. She questions if "the foreignness of these signifiers betrays the foreignness of what is signified" (2013, 2535). Agreeing with Mourad that the Lebanese queer community is not by default inauthentic or imported just because the terms used to describe it are inadequate, I reiterate that the foreignness of the signifiers—which, as elaborated in this chapter, can be addressed through a methodology of queering and/or breaking—does not reflect an equivalent discomfort with queer identity, which people inhabit in queered ways to best navigate their specific local contexts (Moussawi 2020). As Mourad states, "A commitment to recognize the fluidity of sex must come with an equal commitment to theorize the fluidity of language" (2013, 2543). The following chapter will address the importance of the visibility of this language, as well as its liberatory function, positioning it as an

important marker of progress in social justice amid the disruptive sociopolitical reality of Lebanese society (Moussawi 2020).

Chapter Three: Transgressive Language as Liberatory

In the previous chapter, I laid out and discussed the importance of breaking and queered Arabic queer and feminist hashtag spaces on Megaphone—as opposed to the decontextualized presentation of these issues in society, when compared to the parallel English tags. Furthermore, I worked through breaking and queering language as a suggestion to reclaim queer and feminist Arabic terminology. In this chapter, I build on these ideas to argue that, amid the widespread and unavoidable disruptiveness of Lebanese sociopolitical reality, described as the self-evident, self-explanatory *al-wad'* (Moussawi 2020), the use of such reclaimed, non-derogatory terms constitutes a marker of progress in social justice to be advocated for. With the disruption of *al-wad'* constantly preventing queer and feminist issues from taking a central place in national debate, I explore the possibilities for queered/breaking language to be more integrated in Arabic online spaces, thus turning these spaces into temporal places of retreat that users seek to temporarily escape *al-wad'*. I explain how social media can in that sense be understood as a bubble, which Moussawi (2020) frames as an example of a queer strategy that can be used to navigate the disruptive Lebanese reality.

This idea of social media as a bubble is especially pertinent because, a few weeks prior to the drafting of this chapter, there was a major controversy in Lebanon over a Beirut Pride banner with rainbow roses that was placed in the mostly Christian, upper-class neighborhood of Achrafieh in Beirut. The banner was vandalized by a group of people who call themselves the "lord's soldiers" (جنود الرب) and was met with unprecedented escalation as the caretaker Interior Minister "issued a 'very urgent' circular regarding 'the ban of gatherings aimed at promoting sexual deviancy.'"[27] In doing so, he used slurs and obscenities in referring to the marginalized LGBTQ community but also incited people against this community. The circular was met with

27. The link to this post can be found in the Appendix.

anger and condemnation, and a protest started being organized, but it was soon cancelled because of fears of safety after threats were made both offline and online: some gay-friendly spaces were raided by armed police or "conservative" religious extremists, and other gay-friendly spaces were being called out online, with people inciting violence against them.

This is a clear manifestation of how publicity stunts prioritizing visibility, whose incompatibility with the Lebanese context is discussed at length in the Introduction, can put people in real, life-threatening danger by turning them into targets.[28] It can also reinforce the notion that visibility caters to Western neoliberal ideologies, like gay pride, and cannot do any good for the marginalized communities in question. This frames my suggestion that these stunts might instead be replaced by queered strategies of visibility that take *al-wad'* into consideration—namely, online visibility that can be attained through the wider circulation of queer debate using breaking and queered language, and the conception of the online sphere as a bubble to which users retreat for comfort. Reading—and, in turn, using—such language online can turn social media into a safe(r) space that is more equalized in terms of class and racial disparities and can therefore even become a virtual place that people retreat to for an escape from their daily lives which are plagued by *al-wad'*. I argue that the comfort in this space is achieved by using queered and breaking language because it is non-derogatory, incorporates additional notions that work toward solidarity, and better represents the people it describes.

Understanding the dangers that come with visibility leads to the realization that LGBTQ people in Lebanon need to navigate their daily realities in ways that afford them the least amount of conflict, and these navigation strategies shift with the continuous changes of their nebulous reality, as the "shifting and contextual processes of othering in Lebanon" are inherently informed by geopolitics (Moussawi 2020, 73). As discussed in the Introduction, geopolitics is inherently

28. See: Introduction, p. 22.

related to gender and sexuality, in the sense that the complexities thereof determine people's visibility, and therefore their level of perceived threat, which in turn dictates how they must navigate the different parts of their lives in Lebanon (78). Visibility is always measured against the normative in society and thus mainly depends on class, gender, ethnicity, and immigrant status (135). Knowing that *al-wad'* constantly shifts the importance of these different markers of identity, I draw upon Moussawi's conceptualization of *al-wad'* as a critical analytical lens in this chapter, a lens through which everything in society becomes contrasted against a constant state of uncertainty (2020, 161). The affective anxiety renders the need for bubbles more acute, which falls in line with Moussawi's argument that the bubble emerges or is created because the need for it arises from *al-wad'* (137). In that sense, the conceptual framework for this chapter is defined by the disruptive, hazy nature of *al-wad'*.

As explained in the Introduction, the Western, neoliberal framing of progress in gay rights is not applicable in Lebanon—if it is indeed applicable anywhere. In light of the absence of markers of progress in the realm of gay rights, the use of non-derogatory, queered/breaking queer terminology concretely emerges as a possible way to advocate for non-derogatory, online visibility, which is more adapted to the context of Lebanon because it takes the threat of *al-wad'* into account. In that sense, even when Lebanese use words in English such as "lesbian," "gay," "bisexual," or "transgender," for example, to describe their identities, they are not necessarily ascribing to the Western definitions of these identities, because "when we actually examine the everyday lives of people, their subjectivities have complex layers of identification and are unsettled" (Georgis 2013, 237). It is difficult to define Arab sexualities, as this would entail trying to "make sense of the historical entanglements of precolonial traditions, colonization and sexual shaming, and gay epistemologies in the lives of present-day Arabs" (Georgis 2013, 237).

Both Georgis and Moussawi agree, however, that queer and nonnormative Arabs navigate their sexual and gender identities by negotiating the sociopolitical contexts they live in—in other words, *al-wad'*. I concur and do not conceptualize LGBTQ communities as always interacting with Western conceptions of what these identities are supposed to look like, whether resisting or adopting them. I echo Moussawi (2020) in rejecting this dichotomy and asserting that the majority of LGBTQ communities in Lebanon "understand their sexual subjectivities to be intertwined with their class, gender, and religious sect" (10).

Given the complexities that frame queer life in Lebanon, and having established the danger of visibility, which, as Moussawi (2020) states, "should never be the end goal of an LGBT community, particularly since certain bodies—gender nonnormative and racialized—are always marked and, hence, more visible" (124), I propose that the wider circulation of breaking/queered non-derogatory language can be understood as an important marker of progress that is adapted to the Lebanese reality, in which *al-wad'* is an important factor. In what follows, I reinforce Moussawi's framework by laying out the specific dates—and thus, sociopolitical contexts—during which posts with the hashtag كويرية were published on the Megaphone News page during the timeframe of my study from October 2019 to March 2021. I further propose that these dates work to ascertain the lack of a temporal linearity and attest to the primacy of *al-wad'*. They also reveal the social and political contexts that warranted the publication of the queer news in question and therefore elucidate the triggers that prompt online visibility. This substantiates the assertion made by Arab feminist researchers Nadine Naber and Zeina Zaatari (2014) that queer experiences cannot be separated from political ones.

The attainment of such online visibility would thus make social media a bubble, which Moussawi (2020) characterizes as a queer strategy for navigating life amid *al-wad'*. This bubble

emerges as a response to *al-wad'*. He distinguishes "bubbles" from "communities" in that bubbles are "liminal and precarious spaces where people retreat and recharge so they can continue with their everyday life," while communities "have been conceptualized as longer-term spaces and relations that engender a sense of belonging" (137). He also characterizes bubbles as temporal rather than spatial, "an interruption or a form of suspension that provides temporary relief since they can burst at any moment" (138). The temporal nature of the bubble renders less important the physical location or the notion of "safe spaces as a privileged site of understanding LGBT life and mobilizations" (138). A temporal space that users can access to retreat and recharge, social media can provide temporary relief to users who access it to avoid—for a while—the disruption of their physical location.

This chapter thus proposes that queered/breaking language can be used as a marker and vehicle of social justice, similarly to the relief that social media users feel when they access a temporal bubble. This language can transgress normativity to include multiple, varying identities. Knowing that "LGBT subjectivities in Beirut are about a classed and gendered fashioning of the self that is strategic in its response to both context and issues of safety amid precarious situations" (82), the social media bubble thus emerges as an equalizing space in which class, race, and sect do not necessarily frame the user's experience in the way that it would in actual physical spaces that are always governed by class and gender privilege (145).

This idea of language as a safe haven brings me to the final argument of this chapter, which ties together the threads of ideas related to the importance of different functions of language discussed in this thesis. I suggest that the desire to use language in ways that better represent locally contextualized identities, as laid out with queered and breaking language, can liberate people from the shackles of derogatory language used to refer to them. I argue that

language that is transgressive is potentially liberatory in nature, not only as breaking/queered language can open up more space and work toward solidarity, but also in that transgressive language directed against the oppressive state can be a liberatory, "affective model of protest and contestation" (2018, 61), as characterized by scholar Tarek El-Ariss as *shatm* and *qillat adab* in his book *Leaks, Hacks, and Scandals: Arab Culture in the Digital Age*.

In what follows, I extrapolate on El-Ariss's analysis of *qillat adab* and how it plays out in the public sphere as the citizen-activist rebels against the sanctity of the state to the context of the Lebanese uprising of 2019, so as to better define the liberatory aspect of such language. Interestingly, and in the same vein, the only Megaphone posts that include #اللغة are related to this kind of desacralization of the state amid the ongoing and worsening freefall of socioeconomic rights. I use these Megaphone examples to solidify my argument about the relationship between the use of transgressive language, liberation and self-actualization. Indeed, as scholar of politics and language Geneva Smitherman states in her book *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture and Education in African America* (1999), "There is a fundamental, dialectical relationship between language and power, between language and oppression, and between language and liberation. Surely it is only the unwise who consider language a 'mere' instrument of communication" (153-54). I elaborate on this below.

Breaking/Queer Language as a Marker of Progress in Social Justice Amid *Al-Wad'*

As discussed above, the prevalence of *al-wad'* implies that the normative baseline of reality in Lebanon is characterized by disruption that is not only continuous but shifting: while disruption is the only constant, the type of disruption is not always the same, as it shifts along with the development of the geopolitical situation. *Al-wad'* is, therefore, a condition of everyday life, one that necessitates the elaboration of "queer tactics or strategies that become necessary under such

disruptive conditions" (Moussawi 2020, 6). These tactics do not necessarily have to do with LGBT identities—rather, they are related to practices of navigating everyday life, whose instability follows that of *al-wad'*. In that sense, since *al-wad'* is constantly shifting and impacting different communities in different ways depending on who is being othered by the situation at hand, the queer strategies being elaborated for survival also have to evolve in tandem to keep up with these developments, for marginalized communities to be able to negotiate daily life in ways that keep them safe.

With life being so non-linear, and with the complexities of Lebanese society meaning that the mirroring of any kind of Western, imported linear trajectory of queer rights is inapplicable, I suggest that using such queer and broken language as discussed in Chapter Two more widely on social media and digital spaces can be considered an important, adapted marker of queer rights in Lebanon. In the below, I demonstrate how Megaphone posts with the hashtag كويرية prove the non-linearity of the discussion of queer rights by taking note of the dates on which they were published and the accompanying sociopolitical reasons for their publication. As a next step, I discuss online visibility as a queer strategy adapted to the Lebanese context, before framing social media as a bubble that users retreat to (Moussawi 2020), as described above.

Non-linearity, as demonstrated through Megaphone

The posts I analyze in this section all have the hashtag كويرية and were all discussed in the two previous chapters. I discuss them here not in chronological order but rather by the reason for their publication—while some are related to specific events related to queer rights, others are related to the revolutionary protests and not to any other specific event. As mentioned earlier in the Introduction of this thesis, activity on Megaphone proliferated in that revolutionary period

and Megaphone offered itself as an alternative news platform that spoke the language of the street and stood in opposition to the mainstream, politically affiliated media channels, reporting on queer and feminist issues in a way that is not meant to denigrate or attack—which was virtually unheard of in Lebanese media before Megaphone.[29]

The revolution-related posts, published when the protests were still fresh and dynamic, appeared on November 6, 2019 and February 20, 2020. The former, which I discuss in detail in Chapter One, is about the failure of the state to establish a logical narrative for the "purity" of citizens' discourse, politics, and gender that it claimed needed to be respected.[30] Through its hashtags, it ties together feminism, queer rights, women's rights, citizenship rights, the kafala system, refugees, and immigration, in a clear attempt to solidify the links that exist across all of these issues. The latter, discussed in Chapter Two, touches on a feminist analysis of the queer spaces that were organically appearing during the protests before they were coopted and drained of their meaning by attaching their goals to empty slogans and symbolism.[31] This corroborates Naber and Zaatari's (2014) claim that queer issues cannot be separated from the political, not only because they are inherently linked to the revolutionary protests, but also because the very fact that these issues are being discussed in the media is a political statement on its own.

The event-related posts, on the other hand, were published in tandem with the occurrence of instances of homophobia or queerness-related events. They were posted on the following dates: October 24, 2019, January 8, 2020, January 29, 2020, June 11, 2020, June 15, 2020, June 17, 2020, November 19, 2020, and March 6, 2021. While these posts have been discussed in depth in the previous chapters, I offer the reader a brief reminder of the specific context of each.

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29. See: Introduction, p. 7.

30. See: Chapter One, p. 48.

31. See: Chapter Two, p. 102.

The post from October 24, 2019 is related to Mia Khalifa speaking up about the concept of shame and redirecting it to the political establishment which is deserving of being shamed. The post from January 8, 2020 is about the Lebanese singer who had made homophobic and anti-woman statements during his New Year's Eve party. The post from later that month, January 29, 2020, is about the passing of Suzy, an icon of the trans movement in Lebanon. The post from June 11, 2020, is about the Salim Barakat article that disclosed the fact that Mahmoud Darwish had a daughter out of wedlock. The two posts from June 15 and 17, 2020 are related to Sarah Hegazy's loss of life to suicide. The post from November 19, 2020 is related to the publication of the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality report about needing to establish a new social contract with trans women and men, and the final one, from March 6, 2021, is related to the arrest of feminist queer activist Rania Amdouni in Tunis.

This set of posts differs from the first in that they are connected to specific sociopolitical events and not the revolution in general, but they are all aligned in that the reason for their publication is inherently political. When looking at the dates, however, there is no obvious pattern or linearity to be extracted. Instead, they follow *al-wad'*, in the sense that queerness becomes especially othered and suspect when the political situation develops in a way that renders them more marked and more visible (Moussawi 2020, 108). This reinforces Moussawi's proposal that *al-wad'* is the premise against which everything unfolds in society and that it solidifies the non-linear trajectory of queer debate. Following Moussawi's (2020) analysis of *al-wad'* as requiring queer strategies in order for marginalized communities to be able to navigate it, I suggest that online visibility—as opposed to real-life visibility that makes marginalized people more marked, more suspect, and thus puts them in danger—is one of those potentially valuable queer strategies.

Online visibility as a queer strategy

In this section, I argue that the more widespread use of queer and breaking language, as discussed in Chapter Two, constitutes a marker of progress in social justice as relates to queer rights in the context of Lebanon. When thought of in contrast to real-life visibility, online visibility is a safer strategy for the introduction of queer debate into the mainstream and can be an example of the queer strategies that Moussawi (2020) discusses. Never only about sexuality, these queer strategies are "relationships of power that are also used in managing everyday-life disruptions amid *al-wad'*" (2020, 106), all while avoiding the potential—and likely—conflict that would arise from real-life visibility. As he has argued visibilities are "volatile, highly contextual, and almost always about multiple and intersecting factors," including gender, class, and sect (108). This, however, becomes less of an issue in digital spaces because of the equalizing nature of these spaces. *Queering* visibility in this way, by priming the online over the physical, would in a sense be an embodiment of what *al-wad'* already does, "which is to disrupt, contest, and reinscribe boundaries" (108), thus providing a creative way of understanding and reconceptualizing notions of visibility.

The idea of community itself is thorny in the Lebanese context because LGBT communities in Lebanon are not uniform or always welcoming of others, and there are many inequalities reproduced within them due to the exclusionary nature of "gay-friendly spaces" that continue to mirror the "racialized and normative classed and gender performances" that exist in society (70). It is important to mention, however, that such normative performances do not exist only in Lebanon but arguably in all societies—nonnormativity gives people outsider status no matter what communities they are moving in. In the context of Lebanon, marginalized positions

are always dictated by class, gender, and sexuality, and stand in contrast to cosmopolitanism, which means that even in safe spaces like gay-friendly locations, people embodying marginalized class and racial identities are discriminated against and excluded, as there is no avoiding "the entanglement of the political in the multiple webs of the social fabric" (Bardawil 2020, 145). The discrimination does not only come from within these spaces, however; even when these communities do meet and interact in gay-friendly spaces, one still needs to contend with the "exclusionary and violent practices enacted by the Lebanese state and people, particularly against women, transgender individuals, refugees, and migrants" (54). The prevalence of these practices is often shadowed by widespread neoliberal narratives about Beirut's exceptionalism, with the city often being described as the gay haven of the Middle East (Moussawi 2020). But this very cosmopolitanism of the city is maintained through the violent policing of subjects who are viewed, and treated, as outsiders to cosmopolitanism (68), the subjects who embody any kind of nonnormative existence.

Social media as a bubble

Having discussed the dangers that can come with physical gathering and posited social media as a temporal space that can be accessed as a place of retreat for users to recharge and temporarily escape from the disruption of *al-wad'*, I propose that it can constitute one of the bubbles that Moussawi (2020) argues are types of queer strategies used to escape the physical chaos that *al-wad'* creates. It lives up to what the bubble is supposed to do: it "suspends, interrupts, and does various things for different people, which community fails to provide" (138), by embodying an equalizing space where people can communicate and exist without fear of persecution by their own community or the people outside it. Indeed, the bubble is not intended to suppress people's

identities, but "time and space amid *al-wad'*" (139), in the sense that people do not have to attempt to embody different, less marginalized identities by trying to fit into the deeply classed and racialized prototype that is seen as more normative and fits into the idea of cosmopolitanism. However, the precariousness of the bubble needs to be emphasized, because it does not negate the existence of *al-wad'* but simply glosses over it or renders it invisible for some time (147).

It is also necessary to clarify that while the bubble can be positive, it can also reproduce "already-existing hierarchies within the larger society and community" and thus contribute to a denial among users of the reality of *al-wad'* (138). The limitations of this bubble include the fact that marginalized communities do not always have access to a smartphone/computer/the Internet, and there is also a linguistic barrier whereby "cultural capital such as fluency in English or French" (72) could grant people access to more—or less—queer spaces online, since, as discussed throughout this thesis, there is a general unease with using Arabic to discuss gender and sexuality. This could lead to the bubble reproducing the exclusions that users accessed the bubble in order to avoid. Conceptualizing the bubble as types of counterpublics, which, as stated by queer theorist Michael Warner, mirror the "contradictions and perversities inherent in the organization of all publics" (2002, 81), reinforces the notion that privilege continues to operate within these queer bubbles because even the bubble perpetuates the inequalities and discrimination that exist in society. Indeed, Moussawi stresses on the fact that "not everyone has access to temporary protections or bubbles as a way to retreat from *al-wad'*" (2020, 137).

He likens the affective unease produced by *al-wad'* that connects people who have to navigate it to a "thickness in the air," as described by queer theorist Sara Ahmed (Moussawi 2020, 139; Ahmed 2013, 10). Ahmed further claims that this thickness, these shared affective feelings of unease, do "not only heighten tension, but they are also in tension" (2013, 10).

Extrapolated to bubbles, which may provide temporary relief "at the microlevel" (Moussawi 2020, 139) by indeed providing safe spaces for conversation and discussion, they may still unwittingly reproduce the classed exclusions of physical community gathering by imposing English or French as the lingua franca.

Thinking about the hashtags and the language used within these social media bubbles leads me to reiterate the importance of queered and breaking Arabic language, as it is a way to reclaim Arabic terms and therefore encourage more discussions on nonnormative gender and sexuality in Arabic. This would also ease the linguistic barrier that prevents non-English or French speakers from accessing the bubble that social media embodies. However, contemplating the function of hashtags in the bubble paints them in a different light because even though the bubble is affectively made into one by the communities who seek refuge in it, all users of the social media platform in question also have access to it. This raises the question of who social media content is being written for: for the bubble, or for everybody? And in the case of the Megaphone hashtag pattern that decontextualizes through using names of people involved in the controversy or issue being reported on, does using the name make the space into more or less of a bubble?

In the context of Lebanon, using a name as a hashtag could be argued to be doing both those things—making the bubble bigger and smaller. It makes the bubble smaller because it is hyper-focusing on a specific aspect of an issue, which not many people might relate to; for instance, using the name of a domestic violence victim as a hashtag could reinforce a smaller bubble because people might not want to read about it, or simply not care. On the other hand, the name could be widening the bubble if viewed through the affective, storytelling lens discussed in

Chapter Two by trying to reach a wider audience by making difficult news easier to digest (Georgis 2013).

Transgressive Language as Liberatory

In the introductory part of this chapter, I propose that transgressive language that expresses anger against the state and disillusionment with its supposed sanctity—referred to by El-Ariss (2018) as *shatm* and *qillat adab*—can be analyzed as a form of liberating, affective protest (61). I argue that this is applicable to the context of the 2019 Lebanese uprising, during which protestors spoke up against the state and used *shatm* online to break down whatever dignity the state believed it had or could lord over its citizens. El-Ariss defines *qillat adab* as language that can be "decried or dismissed as vulgar and offensive," as words that are "uncivil, disrespectful, impolite, rude" (61). He characterizes it as "practice and performance that is amplified by new media technology yet coincides with, is grounded in, and arises from local, affective models of protest and contestation" (61).

In Lebanon, this was exhibited through chants against political figures which used rude and offensive language and dominated both the protests and also online posts that decried the situation on the ground and incited more people to join the uprising. This can be seen as a manifestation of what El-Ariss discusses, as the performance of protesting was further galvanized and amplified by technology through the use of social media. Megaphone News is one example of this, and it is important to recall here that it started out as a page that informed people of where protests were going on and needed more support, deepening its relationship with and connection to the uprising.

According to El-Ariss's (2018) theorization, *Qillat adab* includes *shatm*, or cursing, "wherein nothing is taboo" (64). Attacking the state and desacralizing it is an affective operation predicated on the dialectic of *shatm*, positioning the citizen taking part in the practice of *shatm* as "the vindicator and defender of the one who is treated unjustly […] regardless of his or her political affiliation" (68). The Lebanese citizens participating in the rude, impolite, and disrespectful calling out of the politicians in power thus place themselves in a position of violent encounter with the state (68), one that is not only affective but physically violent, as the state plays out its anger on the street, during protests, through its furious clamping down on protestors and use of live bullets, rubber bullets, tear gas, batons, and metal rods.

Below, I identify and analyze manifestations of *qillat adab* during the revolutionary protests, by analyzing Megaphone News posts that perform this transgression. These posts all include #اللغة and are the only ones that include this hashtag in my study's timeframe, solidifying the intimate relationship between language and affective liberation.

Qillat adab as an affective model of protest

By engaging in *qillat adab*, El-Ariss (2018) proposes that the "activist-blogger"—which in my study consists of the Lebanese protestor posting about and engaging with the protests, be it an individual citizen or a platform like Megaphone—is releasing him/herself from the "disciplining project […] of the liberal state" (61). This release occurs because the practice of confrontation, of raising consciousness and awareness of the violence of the state, is not meant as an intellectual pursuit engaging with the public sphere and seeking to "heal a fragmented subject and nation," but as an emphasis on, an exposing of the "state of fragmentation that is both bodily and political, digital and narrative, emerging from the intersection of the Internet and the street" (61).

This online publicization of the violence occurring on the ground "moves and interpellates a new public who cannot turn away from the fiction of scandal" (61). This is true for both bodily violence and the violence that the state inflicts through social, economic, and political means.

This back and forth between the real-life protests—the street—and the digital sphere—social media—creates an "affective economy of insult, *qillat adab*" (63) that marks a loss of control by the state as offensive content proliferates online. It also "exposes leaky boundaries, both political and bodily," as protestors' rage leaks from within them to the online world through posts, and as the leak of the "legitimizing fiction" of the state is exposed (63). This leak of protestors' anger online can be understood as "scene-making (*fadh*)," an affective way of expressing political discontent and confrontation (63). El-Ariss argues that *fadh* often highlights the power of the "slighted and the disenfranchised," the underdogs, who have no other way to express their anger than through protesting in the street and online—especially since there is virtually no "recourse to a system of justice" (70).

Qillat adab and *shatm* thus merge to produce political agents who express their fury through desacralizing the state and calling out all its acts of violence, both those that led to the protests in the first place and those being acted out during the protests to try and clamp down on them. In this situation, nothing is taboo, and no one in power is off-limits from insult. Indeed, the agency and power that come from this act of insulting the ruling class "ushers in equality that turns the vulgar and uncivil confrontation online into a political system of exchange" (64).

The act of insulting transformed during the Lebanese protests into a chant—among others—directed against Gebran Bassil, the leader of the Lebanese Free Patriotic Movement who is also the son-in-law of President Michel Aoun. Both these figures are widely hated by supporters of the October 17 uprising for many reasons, especially the corruption and

mismanagement of public funds that led to the extreme deterioration of the electricity sector and the stalling of cabinet nominations. A Megaphone post from October 24, 2019—seven days after the outbreak of the uprising—mentions the prevalence of this chant, called *Hela Ho*, and how intensely protestors were cursing Bassil and Aoun. The chant mimics the tune of a popular folk song and is essentially meant to both insult Bassil by cursing at him and refer to his utter lack of achievements in the country. This chant became popular extremely quickly, and the Megaphone post in question ties the chant with the liberatory function of this cursing—the *shatm* and *qillat adab*:

> "شتم أعراض الأب والصهر والعائلة بمشهد فرويديّ مدهش شكّل حالة تحرّر جماعيّة من هذه العائلة المفروضة فرضاً"
>
> (Cursing the disease brought on by the father, the son-in-law, and their entire family, in an astonishingly Freudian scene and expression of collective liberation from this family forcibly imposed on the country.)[32]

The relationship drawn between the cursing and collective liberation falls in line with what El-Ariss argues, and with my own framing of transgressive language as having a liberatory function. The use of offensive and insulting language becomes an affective model of protest that continues even after the actual protests on the ground have dispersed, and *qillat adab* emerges "as the framework for a political engagement involving the leaking mouth and heart of the abrasive blogger" (El-Ariss 2018, 64).

The importance of this online expression of anger has to do with the importance of digital consciousness, which El-Ariss describes as involving an "affective transparency" that captures "a visual and political moment "on the street" that needed to be shown online" (76). By expressing online the violations committed by the state, protestors-activists-bloggers use digital

32. Translation my own.

consciousness to get other people interested in politics, thus contributing to the formation of conscious political subjects (76). This political subjectivity is, therefore, constituted through the affective, insulting speech whose aim is to desacralize the state and, in the process, achieve liberation through language.

Megaphone and the desacralization of the state

The post discussed in the previous section touches on the relationship between *shatm* and liberation. I include in the below additional Megaphone posts that also elucidate and solidify this relationship through their use of the hashtag اللغة. By connecting disrespectful and offensive—in other words, transgressive—language to ideas of liberation, the power of this type of language becomes undeniable as it works to create conscious political agents.

The first post in this study's timeframe that includes the hashtag اللغة is from November 9, 2019. It discusses the act of cursing and what message it sends when done in public spaces, as opposed to in closed circles:

> يتمّ الشتم عادةً في الأماكن الخاصة وأمام الأشخاص المقرّبين. ولكن عندما أصبح الشتم مستخدماً في الأماكن العامّة، تحوّل إلى طريقة لاختبار الثقة.

The post, which links to an article, frames cursing in the public sphere of the revolutionary protests as a test of trust, whereby protestors were instinctively looking for ways to establish trust among each other—and cursing the political elite indiscriminately was one of these instinctive reactions. The article also details such acts of cursing—of *shatm* and *qillat adab*—as personal tests that people would run on themselves to see just how brave they really were, just how badly they wanted to implement change. The intimate relationship being established here between the weight given to performing transgressive language and the belief that it can effect change cements the liberatory nature of such language. The article continues to elaborate the importance

of these “tests” by stating that protestors would wait to see if the people next to them would also mimic their cursing in order to discern whether they shared the same pain, whether they were equally determined to change the status quo. The step is described as inevitable, especially considering how rampant sectarian ideology has been throughout the past thirty years after the Civil War but also leading up to it. Sectarianism continues to be so invasive that it has given us the illusion that it is impossible for us to unite across sectarian belonging. These ideas prove just how powerful transgressive language can be on the path to liberating oneself of the filth of the state.

The following post is from November 10, 2019, and it also describes the effect of cursing on sectarian leaders in the country. This post links to an article as well, which compares popular slogans of the Syrian and Lebanese uprisings:

> بشار وجبران وباقي زعماء الطوائف، سيعيشون مع الشتائم التي سخرت منهم،
> سيحملونها معهم إلى مخادعهم المحصّنة، ستؤرّق لياليهم وتتسرّب إلى أحلامهم.

The article confirms that the *qillat adab* performed in the street is proof that the protestors have overcome the fear of cursing the sanctity of the state and are determined to destroy it. The cursing is not only meant to challenge the authority of the state, which continues to be imposed through violently clamping down on protests; it also challenges whatever social etiquette was expected of people in the past, whatever moral and social codes the state would use to repress citizens. This clearly delineates a before- and after-, with the outbreak of the October 17 protests embodying the point of no return. The author of the article continues to explain that the *Hela Ho* chant, discussed above, is aimed directly at the person deemed the most arrogant and most racist symbol of the regime. In doing so, it completely destroys all the layers of power and prestige that the regime built for itself.

The importance of the curse, the *shatm*, is the power it gives citizens to desacralize and shatter the authority of the symbols of the repressive state against which they are protesting. Indeed, one of the subtitles in the article is "الشتائم تعلن القطيعة مع الماضي", reinforcing this break with the past to which there can be no return post-October 17. And the author also mentions that even if the ruling elite were to stay in power—which it has—they will still be acutely aware of the *Hela Ho* from the comfort of their bubbles. The *qillat adab*, therefore, proves itself to be a model of affective protest that pierces through the boundaries separating the public and private spheres, as sectarian leaders are forced to live with the curses that rained down on them (and continue to do so). Because even though the curses may not topple regimes, they still mark a clear break with a past in which fear was among the driving forces behind people's behavior. The ability of transgressive language to eliminate, or alleviate, fear is where its liberatory drive comes from.

The third post is from November 14, 2019, and it includes the hashtag تابو along with اللغة. It asserts that the state's condemnation of the protestors' use of curse words is indicative of its fear of these protestors' self-liberation:

> فإنّ شجب العهد ورموزه والثورة المضادة لاستخدام الشتائم من قبل الثائرين يعكس خوفهم من تحرّر الثوار الذاتي.

Like the previous posts analyzed in this section, this post is a preview of a full article, which joins the previous examples in consolidating the intimate link between transgressive language—especially in periods of open conflict—and the overcoming of social taboos and self-censorship for fear of social or political retribution.[33] The main taboo that the state is afraid of citizens no longer respecting is its sanctity and its leaders, especially—according to this article—when it

33. The links to all these articles, as well as the ones mentioned below, can be found in the Appendix.

comes to the resistance: meaning Hezbollah, and Hassan Nasrallah, who embody the Lebanese resistance against the occupation of Palestine by Israel. Indeed, when the cursing, *shatm*, and *qillat adab* reached Hezbollah, the party tried to reassert its sanctity by forcing those who cursed the resistance to apologize in videos that circulated over social media, as the article details. This reimposition of authority once its sanctity has been broken is a form of violence clamping down on the affective protests which are embodied by *qillat adab*. All of these forms of affective, linguistic violence—be they directed at the state or at protestors—emphasize the crucial role that language plays but also the liberatory potential it contains. The state is threatened by people's self-actualization, and it has proven, through its actions detailed above, that it is concerned about citizens achieving this self-actualization through transgressive language.

The people upholding hegemonic structural systems make conscious choices, and enforce them, as to what language can be freely used, and this is not only proof of the importance of language but also shapes people's rights and freedoms. Large numbers of activists and protestors have been, and are still actively being, summoned to military courts in Lebanon, due to language they use online.[34] Clearly, therefore, enforcing of the sanctity of the state through linguistic purity does not only apply to the protests on the street but also encompasses content being published online. I argue that this threatening nature of transgressive language only adds to its liberatory power.

The next post that uses the hashtag اللغة was published on August 5, 2020, one day after the Beirut port explosion. The post opens with "وداعاً للغة", a goodbye to language, and links to an article:

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34. See: "Protesters' Military Trials Spark Outcry in Lebanon" The Arab Weekly, November 23, 2020. https://thearabweekly.com/protesters-military-trials-spark-outcry-lebanon,
and "Lebanon: End Military Trial against Comedian and Drop All Charges." Amnesty International, June 23, 2022. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/06/lebanon-end-military-trial-against-comedian-and-drop-all-charges/.

> وداعاً للّغة: هلال شومان يكتب عمّا يستحقّونه: حثالة. كلّهم حثالة. وكلّهم يعني كلّهم. من جديد، لا يستحقّون أكثر من هذا السطر المبسّط. لا يستحقّون إلّا ديماغوجيّة الاتهام الكامل، وإلا هذه الثنائية: نحن وهم.

In the same breath, the author calls the entire political establishment scum (حثالة) and unwaveringly declares that there is nothing problematic about this generalization, repeating the popular revolutionary slogan "كلّن يعني كلّن" (All of them means all of them). The author states the only binary the country will stand for: us versus them, as language fails (تسقط اللغة, as the article reads) and only the basest words will do to describe these criminals in power. In saying that, the author is implicitly acknowledging the power that *shatm* still holds even when language feels like an impossible tool to use because it can never convey how tragic the situation nor how deep people's anger is. The author lists all the crimes that the state has committed vis-à-vis its citizens, in what can be understood as an attempt to emphasize the criminality embodied by the regime and perpetuated by its consistent lack of re/action. The crimes and the state's dampened reaction to them highlight the importance of using transgressive language, whatever transgression means depending on the context at hand, in order to affectively communicate the gravity of the situation.

The crimes are listed as follows: a civil war, targeted assassinations, bombings, stealing people's property by law, stealing people's votes through rigid, limiting electoral laws, election fraud, passing deals under the table and then defending failed projects, stealing social aid and gifts, skirting responsibility and then asking people to grow crops on their balconies, paralyzing the country for months on end to gain control over petty ministries in a petty government, armed conflict in the streets of Beirut, Tripoli, and elsewhere, collusion to seize depositors' money from the banks, smuggling money abroad amid strict capital control rules from the banks, crushing and destroying mountains, burying the country in garbage, poisoning lakes and rivers, illegally

building on and privatizing the seashore, institutionalizing the corruption of all government projects over thirty years, examining young men's rectums in police stations to determine if they are gay, depriving mothers and women of their rights, a lethal kafala system, protecting a system that is incredibly violent against women, again and again…

These are all things that the state has done—and they all embody *al-wad'*—and yet all it can do, after one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in history, is treat the massacre like an event—but the author makes a poignant distinction here: it is not an event (حادثًا), but a crime (جريمة), proving once again the importance of using effective, transgressive language that exposes the violence people are subjected to every day.

The final post that includes the hashtag اللغة appeared on September 7, 2020 and is also related to the Beirut port blast. It links to an article, like the other posts in this section. The caption reads:

> سامر فرنجيّة يكتب عن الثورة والانفجار، عن الانتماء والفقدان: تحوّلنا من جماعة الثورة إلى مجموعة ترثي وتودّع نفسها، مدركةً أن القنبلة التي ألقيت عليها قضت على كل شيء. بأقل من سنة، تعلّمنا الانتماء لشيء لم يعد.

It describes the pro-October 17 protestors as having been transformed from a group of revolutionaries to a group of people mourning and saying goodbye to themselves and each other in a country that is no longer habitable, acutely aware that the explosion that ripped through the city decimated everything—physically and morally. The author writes that between the outbreak of the revolution and the port blast, citizens were given less than a year to learn to belong to something that now no longer exists. This hopelessness is shared by many Lebanese people, especially those whose relationship with the country had only just found some stable ground with the outbreak of the protests in October 2019.

This article is mostly about grief, sorrow, heartache, and an inability to belong, and thus the link to language is not immediately clear. However, there is still a thread of linguistic power that shines through when the author references the impact of the uprising, and the inherent relationship that transgressive language had with the breaking of so many barriers throughout the protests. However, this language no longer has this power because of the depth of desolation the country was, and continues to be, plunged into. This serves as a stark reminder that no matter how important affective protest is, and no matter how much power it truly wields, it cannot be the only tool to stand in the face of such an oppressive, repressive, criminal, illegitimate regime.

Al-wad' takes primacy above all else and is responsible for changing citizens' priorities on a daily basis. As the situation continues to deteriorate, people navigate the maze of difficulties in which they reside in different ways each day, depending on what crisis takes most precedence and demands immediate attention.

Conclusion

It is not by coincidence that I end this thesis on such a negative note. While it started out with a deep desire to understand the Arabic and English languages and/in translation and how each operates differently according to context and local specificities, while also keeping in mind how these changes impact the performance and elaboration of identity, it quickly turned to politics and the oppression of the Lebanese state. This is not surprising, as I have elaborated multiple times throughout these three chapters that language is inherently political and exposes where power lies in society. In a way, I have come full circle, as the Introduction started out with a discussion about the October 17, 2019 uprising and the undeniable influence it has had on the supporters of this revolution—whether or not one agrees to call it that, something else, or considers that it failed. No matter how it affected or failed to affect the social, economic, and political reality in the country, it will always mark a major turning point in Lebanese people's collective political consciousness, at home and abroad. The way the state has deployed economic hardship to subdue its citizens has played an incontrovertible role in crushing the protest movement, as the "blockage of revolutionary practice" becomes tied to the "disjunction between the economic infrastructure and the political superstructure" (Bardawil 2020, 129).

While studying language is necessary and queering and breaking offers ways to think about alternatives, it can feel superfluous and self-indulgent given the situation on the ground; these are ideas I have struggled with deeply throughout the drafting of this thesis, which I often felt to be pointless, not capable of effecting any worthwhile change. However, while language cannot fix every problem in society, it still holds the power to make people feel seen, especially marginalized and nonnormative communities. Reclaiming derogatory terminology and using processes of queering and breaking are steps I have argued are essential to finding our way back

to an Arabic language that we can feel at home in. Hashtag practices may not seem important on the surface but the underlying thought processes and linkages being made through them are crucial to the shaping of a more inclusive society that does not oppress women and other marginalized communities.

Language can be used to break barriers of fear, it can be used as an affective model of protest, it can be broken, breaking, and queered for the people it represents to feel comfortable using it, it can trigger debates and prompt people to think about things they haven't necessarily thought of before, it can be used in a storytelling manner to report violent news in a more digestible way, it can categorize and summarize, it can create temporal spaces, bubbles, to which people retreat for some relief—but it cannot eliminate *al-wad'*, it cannot eliminate the need for retreat and relief. It cannot eliminate the sectarianism that constitutes "the backbone of the Lebanese political structure, one of the main sources of identification of Lebanese citizens, and a mask covering class exploitation" (Bardawil 2020, 130).

The irony of writing this thesis in English, from the Global North, is not lost on me. There is a kind of paralysis that comes with doing this type of work, one which I have attempted to circumvent by queering and breaking the text through the inclusion of Arabic words and excerpts, keeping in mind the context that this work is speaking back to.

Perhaps the main takeaway for this thesis is the same as that of the October 17 uprising: الثورة على النفس أوّلاً. Revising, rethinking, and revolting against the frameworks that underpin our lives and our linguistic practices holds liberatory potential that will free us of the binds of a static reproduction of what has always been.

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“ الطبيب الشرعي ذكر أنّ ابنتي تعرّضت للخنق على يد زوجها’، هكذا علّق محمّد والد زينة كنجو أمس الأحد على الجريمة التي أودت بحياة ابنته التي قُتلَت خنقاً أوّل أمس السبت’/‘The Medical Examiner Stated That My Daughter Was Strangled by Her Husband," Said Zeina Kanjo's Father Mohammad on Sunday Night about the Crime That Took His Daughter's Life.” Instagram. Megaphone News, February 1, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CKv78s-slcg/.

“من ليليان شعيتو إلى غنى البيات، بدأ العام ٢٠٢١ بقصص أمّهات يكافحن من أجل حضانة أطفالهنّ/ from Liliane Cheaito to Ghina Bayyat, 2021 Began with Stories of Mothers Fighting for Their Children's Custody.” Instagram. Megaphone News, February 1, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CKw1AlWKAhe/.

“ ادّعى النائب العام الاستئنافي في بيروت زياد أبو حيدر، أمس الخميس، على ابراهيم غزال زوج زينة كنجو، بجناية المادة 549/ من قانون العقوبات (القتل العمدي) والتي تصل عقوبتها إلى الإعدام on Thursday, Beirut's State Prosecutor for Appeals Ziad Abu Haidar Charged Ibrahim Ghazal, the Husband of Zeina Kanjo, with Intentional Homicide as per Article 549 of the Penal Code, Which Carries a Death Sentence.” Instagram. Megaphone News, February 5, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CK6PQq6sVI5/.

“تعرّضت الشابة لارا ش.، صباح اليوم الثلاثاء، لاعتداءٍ وحشيّ من قِبل زوجها/ Lara Sh. Was Savagely Assaulted by Her Husband.” Instagram. Megaphone News, February 9, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CLEhz8xMLGf/.

“أُفرجَ مساء اليوم الأربعاء عن الناشطة السعودية لُجَين الهذلول/Saudi Activist Loujain Al-Hathloul Was Released on Wednesday Evening.” Instagram. Megaphone News, February 10, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CLHxIOlspFR/.

“غالباً ما تُلَفلف قضايا العنف الأسري في لبنان/ Domestic Violence Cases in Lebanon Are Often Covered Up.” Instagram. Megaphone News, February 12, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CLMqiO6MWFC/.

“Saudi Women Activists Conquer Bin Salman's Prisons.” Instagram. Megaphone News, February 12, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CLNFXEKsDP_/.

“ناشطات سعوديات تغلّبنَ على سجون بن سلمان.” Instagram. Megaphone News, February 12, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CLNIsUssaLz/.

“تعرّضت رانيا البابا (44 عاماً)، السبت الفائت، للاعتداء والضرب من قبل طليقها/ Last Saturday, 44-Year-Old Rania Al-Baba Was Assaulted and Beaten by Her Ex-Husband.” Instagram. Megaphone News, February 24, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CLrANstsZgi/.

“مع اقتراب يوم المرأة العالمي، فنّدت ‘هيومن رايتس ووتش’ قانون تجريم التحرّش الجنسي الجديد في لبنان/ as International Women's Day Draws near, Human Rights Watch Released a Report on Friday Criticizing the New Lebanese Law Criminalizing Sexual Harassment.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 5, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMChqlisqej/.

“ تداعى عدد من النشطاء والمنظمات الحقوقية في تونس إلى التظاهر، اليوم السبت، رفضاً لاعتقال الناشطة الكويريّة رانيا العمدوني/A Number of Activists and Human Rights Organizations Called for a Protest in Tunis on Saturday, against the Arrest of Queer Activist Rania Amdouni.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 6, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMFCt9Xs72f/.

“لا تزال الأحوال الشخصيّة في لبنان خاضعةً لـ١٥ قانوناً مختلفاً لا يحقّق أيٌّ منها المساواة بين المرأة والرجل.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 8, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMKDm1vstIk/.

“Personal Status in Lebanon Is Still Subject to 15 Different Laws, None of Which Achieves Equality between Women and Men.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 8, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMKD9Edsu8Y/.

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“The Journey to Pass a Civil Personal Status Law in Lebanon Has Been Going on since Its Independence.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 8, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMKLGmUM9L8/.

“دارين أبو سعد: أنحتفل؟ نحتفل، نعم، لكن لا بما يريد لنا النظام أن نحتفل به، فولكلوريّاً، بل نحتفل بنضالنا.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 8, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMKkUNyqCJ6/.

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“في اليوم العالمي للمرأة، ميغافون تتذكر النساء اللواتي واجهن عنف النظام الأبوي في لبنان/ on International Women's Day, Megaphone Remembers the Women Who Faced the Brutality of the Patriarchal System in Lebanon.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 8, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMLKnuQKfXf/.

“مسيرة اليوم العالمي للمرأة التي نظّمتها مجموعات من الثورة في بيروت/International Women's Day March, Organised by Different Activist Groups in Beirut.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 9, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMMMWCSHdYn/.

“سمير سكيني يكتب عن حلقة ‘ع غير كوكب’ التي استضافت الدكتورة ساندرين عطاالله.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 10, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMPjaKDKGMI/.

“بعد الهجوم الذي شنّه الإعلامي بيار ربّاط بمعاونة ضيوفه الدائمين، خلال حلقة ‘ع غير كوكب’ الأحد الفائت، وانتقادهم للمحتوى الذي تقدّمه المختصّة في علم الجنس الدكتورة ساندرين عطالله، عاد ربّاط اليوم ليعتذر، بصيغة التبرير.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 10, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMPlgIDsuFK/.

“Pierre Rabbat and His Permanent Guests Launched an Attack on Sexologist Dr. Sandrine Atallah.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 10, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMPlkc4shkJ/.

“كما درجت العادة الأسبوعية، لم تسلم حلقة ‘صار الوقت’، أمس الخميس، من التعليقات الذكوريّة/ as Usual, the Weekly ‘Sar El wa2et’ Episode on Thursday Was Not Free of Sexist Comments.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 12, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMU09PbHvMi/.

“أصدر الفاتيكان مرسوماً يوضح أن الكنيسة الكاثوليكيّة لن تبارك زيجات الجنس الواحد/the Vatican Issued a Decree Clarifying That the Catholic Church Will Not Bless Same-Sex Unions.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 15, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMcaEQIsQx-/.

“من بعد ما تعرّضت للتنمّر على الشاشات، الدكتورة ساندرين عطالله تتحدّث إلى ميغافون عن التوعية الجنسية/ after Getting Bullied on National Television, Dr. Sandrine Atallah Discusses Sexual Education with Megaphone.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 15, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMdCc8rq-KW/.

“A Number of Rallies Took Place Last Week to Protest Violence against Women.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 18, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMkmajmMduJ/.

“انطلقت اليوم مسيرة للأمّهات في بيروت/On Friday, a Mothers' March Began in Beirut.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 20, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMpk99bn_ap/.

“نظّمت ‘الحملة الوطنية لرفع سن الحضانة’ وقفةً احتجاجية أمام المحكمة الجعفرية في بيروت/The National Campaign to Raise the Custody Age Organized a Sit-in at Beirut's Ja'afari Court on Sunday.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 22, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMuGOhsHA4T/.

“توفيَت الكاتبة نوال السعداوي (٩٠ عاماً)، أمس الأحد.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 22, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMuk0p3K1cw/.

“Nawal El Saadawi Passed Away on Sunday.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 22, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMulqHpK-AG/.

“دارين أبو سعد: رحلت نوال السعداوي تاركةً خلفها إرثاً نسوياً نتعلّم منه ونبني عليه.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 26, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CM46GB2Kj2C/.

“جائحة كورونا تزيد اللامساواة بين النساء والرجال/ The Covid-19 Pandemic Increases Inequality between Men and Women.” Instagram. Megaphone News, March 31, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CNFc3oVMKVl/.

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Instagram. Megaphone News, June 25, 2022. https://www.instagram.com/p/CfOdG_zspi5/.

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"غالبًا ما تستخدم كلمة 'مخنث' كمصطلح ازدرائي للإشارة إلى صبي أو رجل لديه سلوكيات أنثوية/The Word Sissy Is Often Used as a Derogatory Term to Refer to a Boy or Man Who Has Effeminate Mannerisms." Instagram. Takweer, November 4, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CV27gg9McAI/.

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