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ARAB NATIONAL IDENTITY IN ONLINE HUMOUR: SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

This paper deals with the peculiarities of language code choice as a means of national self-expression in the Arabic social media humour (in particular, in memes and jokes). In the globalized online communities, humour can play a pivotal role for the rapprochement of in-group members based on a certain type of their identity (national, social, gender, etc.). In this study, the notion of Arab national identity refers to the entire Ummah and, on the other hand, to the representatives of different Arab countries as well. It is reflected on the Arabic language variation online and beyond. This research revealed diverse language attitudes conveyed within the “self – other” binary opposition. The analysis of over 1,000 online posts (Egyptian, Iraqi, Moroccan, and other) showed that the commonality with the in-group members is expressed with the language code which is considered the closest for the recipients. It is indicated to the predominance of colloquial varieties (territorial dialects, sociolects, youth slang) with the variation in their written transmission. Modern Standard Arabic is used as well, sometimes with minor deviations from the norm or with the colloquial lexis insertions. Both explicit and implicit lexical tools (colloquial and slang words, precedent lexis, etc.) are utilized to stress the uniqueness of “self”. Different codes are used to create the contrast between “self” (all Arabs / a certain Arab country) and “other” (all non-Arabs / the West / a certain Arab or non-Arab country, etc.). The studied varieties were also affected by the sociocultural context, topics of posts, communicants’ situational roles, the technology, and so forth. The results of this investigation ascertained that the Arabic language form used in the humorous posts is an integral part of the communicants’ identity as it demonstrates their belonging to a national group with its specific sociocultural, political, and historical background.

Keywords: Arab national identity; language code; meme; “self – other” binary opposition; social media humour

Introduction

The language of online communication is as diverse and versatile as it is in the real-life environment. With the development of digital technologies, artificial intelligence, metaverse (virtual reality) and so forth, social interactions have been transformed as well. The amount of information online and the number of users is constantly growing. It inevitably led to the creation of various groups that unite communicants based on their interests, age, gender, nationality, etc. Online communities can recreate social relations and establish their own interactional and linguistic norms. D. Nguyen and K. P. Rose indicated that “becoming a major member of the community means accepting its norms” [Nguyen and Rose 2011, 76]. Crucially, verbal behaviour has become an important criterion for the distinguishing between “self” and “other” in the absence of other visual

information. The “self – other” binary opposition and its invariants (we – they, human – non-human, norm – deviation, personal – public, male – female, etc.) hold a special place in the sociolinguistic studies because of the axiological nature of this phenomenon. The conscious or unconscious use of a certain language code (the most valuable for the speakers at both ethical and aesthetical levels) creates a sense of habit, solidarity, and closeness [Tyshchenko 2000]. Hence, verbal behaviour can be considered a proven tool of self-identification in the online space.

The notion of identity, collective or individual, is quite flexible. The collective types of identity are related to such variables as age, gender, social class, occupation, territorial, ethnic or national affiliation, etc. [Suleiman 2003, 5]. These types do not exist exclusively within their specific categories, but can be interchanged, since the collective identity involves a certain number of people who can alter their status to fit in the environment. An even more complex identity functions in the online communities where users can create a unique (often anonymous and/or fake) image that will be perceived by others. An online user invents his identity adapting it to the needs of a group that include their language code as well.

Humour as a means of national self-expression in the online communication

Even though such identity types as “ethnicity” or “nationality” are considered fixed, they are not permanent in terms of the language use. A person can acquire features of a certain nationality or lose them, for example, when changing his/her residence [Bassiouney 2020, 106–107]. As for the national identity of the Arab world representatives, the definition of this notion is ambiguous. On the one hand, Y. Suleiman emphasizes the importance of the Arabic language as a determining factor in the commonality of the Arab national identity [Suleiman 2003, 7]. On the other hand, the Arab region encompasses vast territories with different ethnic groups that tend to demonstrate their national and cultural uniqueness. Also, we should not underestimate the importance of paternal bonds. “Arabs from different countries define themselves according to the tribe they belong to, the family they belong to and finally the country they belong to” [Bassiouney 2020, 107–108].

This attitude affects their code choice in the social media communication. However, the expression of national identity online differs from the real-life situations. This type of identity can be influenced by global trends, the users’ personal aspirations, stereotypes, ability to represent themselves in a certain language code, etc. J. Androutsopoulos argues that the geographical factor is important as it influences the use of dialects in the digital space. Nonetheless, non-speakers of a dialect can use it as well in order to emphasize their belonging to the group and the informality of communication [Androutsopoulos 2011, 295]. This proves the transience of identity types by language means. Hence, the social media groups (on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc.) are considered communities of practice, often united around particular topics, trends, and interests. In-group members can situationally acquire new identity types and rapidly adapt their language behaviour to the changing context, e.g. when the topic of one online post is different from the overall content.

Today online community members have an opportunity to post their content (create groups, entertainment sites, fan pages, etc.), tag their interests and other people, comment on the posted information and much more. The access to such services contributes to the idea of importance of each community participant and reinforces social ties between them [Paloff and Pratt 2007, 7–8]. The humorous content is widely utilized for that specific reason, i.e. to create a certain sociocultural connection between communicants. In the informal online communication, humour is used as a part of communicative creativity. It helps overcome spatial barriers enabling the rapprochement of community participants

[Marone 2015, 62–63]. Humour does not only carry the important sociocultural information, it also provides the development and maintenance of social relationships, reduces the feeling of insecurity in a conversation and facilitates the communication in general.

The Arabic online humour is investigated in terms of computational linguistics [Mekki et al. 2022], communication studies including the gender and age aspects [Haider and Abbas 2022; Lesmana 2021; Banikalef et al. 2014], and so on. However, the language of social media humour as a means of national self-identification requires a more in-depth analysis. The significance of study of the Arabic language variation on the social media within the scope of humorous content is related to its effect on the overall comprehension of the natural language development and its further change in the digital space, the code choice in the non-regulated informal communication, the principles and tendencies of code switching as a means of self-identification; it enables a better understanding of the Arabic sociocultural context as well and, thus, facilitates the effective intercultural communication in both professional and ordinary life.

The **goal** of this investigation is to determine the features of language codes utilized in the social media humour for the expression of Arab national identity, in view of the language variation in the online communication.

In this research, we applied a complex interdisciplinary approach that combines elements of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and communicative analysis. This methodology allowed us to cover both linguistic and extralinguistic aspects of online humour and to determine the distinguishing features of code choice that reflects the national identity of Arabs from different countries. We analysed lexical, morphological, and graphic peculiarities of humorous posts regarding the contrast between the standard and non-standard Arabic varieties, as well as the respective differences between the colloquial varieties online. The code switching and the insertion of a different code elements were studied within the “self – other” binary opposition and its invariants (we – they, Arab – non-Arab, etc.).

In order to explicate the code choice in the correlation between the Arabic variety and the national identity we examined over 1,000 humorous samples (including memes and jokes of various forms) posted on the Egyptian, Iraqi, Jordanian, Syrian, Moroccan, and Tunisian online communities such as ‘*Arab mīmī*’¹, ‘*Ijī tmūt bi-ḍ-ḍahk fābūr*’², ‘*Maroc36*’, ‘*Nukat ‘irāqīyya tmawwit*’⁴, ‘*Nukat maṣriyya*’⁵, ‘*Nukat tūnisīyya hhhh*’⁶, ‘*Nukat tūnisīyya*’⁷, ‘*Nukat sūriyya*’⁸, ‘*Nukat urduniyya*’⁹, ‘*Te9echab*’¹⁰, ‘*Yawmiyyāt sūrī ‘a-l-ḥājiz*’¹¹, and others¹².

The majority of titles of the studied communities contained direct indications to the recipients’ nationality (for instance, Facebook pages “*Nukat sūriyya*” (Syrian jokes), “*Nukat urduniyya*” (Jordanian jokes), “*Yawmiyyāt sūrī ‘a-l-ḥājiz*” (Diary of a Syrian at a checkpoint), and others). However, some communities have unique titles with the implicit indexes of a certain identity that require additional sociocultural and linguistic knowledge. For instance, we observe the use of a mixed code (the Moroccan youth slang) in the name of a Facebook page “*Te9echab*” (tag a lad / a young man). The provided phrase is typed in Latinized Arabic (also known as Arabizee). It contains the English loanword *Te9-* “tag” and the Arabic word *-chab* (*ṣāb*) transliterated according to the French phonographic norm (the Arabic letter *ṣīn* is conveyed with the French letters “ch”). It is possible to identify the Moroccan roots of the given community through its content. The language of humour is influenced by age, gender, social class, and other factors. It should be mentioned that the majority of the Arab world population is young [Bassiouney 2020, 129]. Hence, the youth slang has an unprecedented influence on the language development and change in the digital space.

R. Bassiouney argues that the modern sociolinguistic approaches to Arabic involve the investigation of language peculiarities utilized by speakers to perform their identity, in particular, in the media discourse [Bassiouney 2020, 133]. From this point of view, it is essential to examine indexes utilized by social media users within a particular language code as they are associated with the meanings formulated under the influence of cultural,

political, social, ethnic, and other features of a community. This means that communicants evaluate language variables and codes, take a specific stance towards objects, and re-interpret that information based on their own sociocultural, historical, and political background [Bassiouney 2020, 133]. In the social media, online communities are represented by Arabic speaking users from different countries. Every national, social, and cultural group tends to demonstrate its exclusiveness as compared with “others” (e.g., Moroccans are opposed to “other” Arabs, Spaniards, etc.). On the other hand, there also exists the all-Arab national identity pattern which can be used to contrapose Arabs to “all others”, i.e. non-Arabs. Interestingly, this frequently affects the code choice in the humorous posts. The non-standard Arabic varieties utilized for the expression of national identity involve territorial dialects, prestigious sociolects (prevailing in big cities), youth slang, etc. It should be noted that colloquial varieties are mainly not regulated and not unified in the written form. It causes the variation at the lexical, grammatical, and phonographic levels in the online communication.

The humorous communication can occur in different forms, such as jokes, sarcastic comments, memes, etc. Since memes are considered an integral part of the social media content, they deserve a special attention in this paper. Meme is an element of online culture, often represented with a multimodal text, combining verbal and non-verbal components (an icon, an animated picture or a short video). They frequently indicate to some precedent information. One of the key traits of memes is the ability of replication and the further spread. With the development of internet technologies, memes have become not only a means of entertainment, but they are effectively applied in the online marketing strategies, as well as in the propaganda [Enverga 2019, 317–318]. The “weaponized” communication components, such as memes, jokes, rumours, are utilised in the manipulative narratives both online and beyond and require a detailed study in terms of discourse analysis (linguistic and extralinguistic).

The language of memes might seem simplistic as it is supposed to be perceived by a vast majority of online users. However, the implicit language tools that lie underneath a direct text message of such humorous posts contain hidden concepts and meanings of a certain identity type. Understanding this code means comprehending the complex socio-cultural and political context, people’s moods and different tendencies that can affect the public opinion. This is especially important for the traditional societies, in particular in the Arab region, as they often have restricted opportunities for the self-expression and, thus, use additional language instruments for the emotional release.

Language peculiarities of the “self – other” opposition in humorous posts



Fig. 1

The code of humorous posts contains specific nationally marked language elements. For instance: “*is-sūriyyīn min wēn jābū kalimat sarrī marrī...*”⁸ (where did the Syrians get the phrase *sarrī marrī* “back and forth”...) (see Figure 1). In addition to the direct index *sūriyyīn* “Syrians”, the above phrase has an implicit element – the expression *sarrī marrī* which is estimated as exclusively Syrian by the in-group members. Another instance is found in the Iraqi content: “*il-‘irāqī min yišūf ‘indak bezūna lāzim yagūl lak dīr bālak...*”¹ (An Iraqi, when he sees you with a **cat**, he has to tell you, “Be careful...”). In addition to the colloquial words (pronoun *min* “who”, verb *yišūf* “he sees” and others) commonly recognized among Arabs, we observe the use of a colloquial Iraqi lexeme

(*bezūna* “cat”). Two graphemes, **k** (the Arabic letter *kāf*) and **g** (the Persian letter *gāf*), convey the phoneme **g** that substitutes the letter *qāf* in the standard Arabic verb *qāla* “he said” for Iraqi Arabic online.

In memes and other humorous posts, foreigners, their culture, laws, habits are frequently depicted within the opposition of “we – they”, that helps identify the in-group members. Comparisons with other countries and nationalities cover various topics from all spheres of life, such as the political and economic situation in a country, social relationships, the level of income, work, student life problems, marriage, etc. Such elements of the context affect the language. The code-switching between standard and colloquial Arabic also indicates to the speakers’ language skills, their education, worldview, and so forth. The predominance of either Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or the colloquial varieties (local dialect, sociolect, slang, etc.) in the examined content is influenced by the aforementioned factors.

The “self – other” binary opposition is envisioned in the humorous content with both explicit and implicit language tools. Explicit means expressing the national identity are represented primarily with the lexicon denoting countries, cities, nationalities, and other proper names. It should be noted, that these lexical tools are explicit from the native speaker’s point of view, since these verbalized elements of Arab culture are used to emphasize “self” for the in-group members. Simple key phrases enable the further creativity and distribution of humorous posts. For instance: *fī Sūriyā* “in Syria”, *ammā Sūriyā* “regarding Syria”, *aš-Šām* “the Levant”, *bi-l- ‘Irāq* “in Iraq”, *inta bi-l- ‘Irāq* “you are in Iraq”, *rūḥ li-l- ‘Irāq* “go to Iraq”, *māzā yumayyiz al- ‘irāqī* “what distinguishes an Iraqi”, *Tūnis* “Tunisia”, *iḥnā fī l-Urdun* “we are in Jordan”, *al-maḡribī* “Moroccan”, *al-mašrī* “Egyptian”, *fī l-Aswān* “in Aswan”, *Maḥmūd min Ṭanṭā* “Mahmud from Tanta” and so on.

Some implicit means are easily comprehensible from the context, e.g. a community’s name and its frequently posted content involve lexemes directly indicating to a country’s name. These expressions are related to the previously provided information – *faqaṭ hunā* “only here”, *ammā ‘an-nā* “concerning us”, *bass niḥnā* “only us” and so forth. Such phrases are insufficient, unless the iconic part visualizes the information, a specific feature inherent only to a certain country or an ethnic group. Hence, the recognition of “self” and “other” occurs via additional implicit lexical instruments, i.e. colloquial (*yišūf* “he sees”, *bezūna* “cat”, *wēn* “where”, etc.), slang (*in-net* “internet”, *rāwter* “router”, *allaqa* “he was hanging”, etc.), and precedent lexis (“*Day ‘a dāyi ‘a*” (“A remote village” (Syrian TV series name)), *ma ‘arakat Wādī al-maḥāzin* “Battle of the Wadi al-Makhāzin” (the battle in which Morocco defeated Portugal and its allies in 1578, etc.)). Visual non-verbal components, e.g. a country flag, recognisable movie and TV show characters, pictures of certain locations, and other precedent information are used as well (see Figure 2, Figure 3).



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Language variation in the Arabic social media content is determined by the need to express the in-group members' identity. However, the expression of "self" is not carried out through a fixed Arabic variety of a particular online community. Since the social media group members are united mostly conditionally, they often define their roles based on different factors. The code choice is influenced by the context, i.e. topic and genre of the post, the communicants' roles (age, gender, social status, country of origin, etc.), their language skills, etc. In the humorous content, colloquial varieties of the Arabic language are mainly used to describe "self". However, when depicting "others", e.g. imitating the official media discourse, the standard language can be utilized to create the contrast or additional expressivity of the post.

The linguistic analysis showed that the national identity can be conveyed through the following types of "self – other" binary opposition:

1. We (the Arab Ummah) – they (the rest of the world / the West / a certain country).
2. We (a particular Arab country) – they (the rest of the world / the West / a certain country).
3. We (a certain Arab country) – they (the rest of the Arab world / a different Arab country).

In the examined content, we also observed the concept of a unique nation/country/ummah, which was conveyed without the obvious opposition to "others".

This may be demonstrated as follows:

1. We (the Arab Ummah) – they (the Western world). The contrast between the Arab countries and the West is emphasised in the humorous posts about the difference in the quality of life, mentality, gravity of problems in the Arab countries in comparison to the Western world. In this case, "others" or "they" are anchored with repeated key phrases, e.g., *fī Ūrūbā* "in Europe", *fī duwal mutaqqaddima* "in the developed countries", *laday-him* "they have", etc. The statements concerning "other/them" are conveyed in MSA or in a variety comprehensible throughout the Arab region. Minor errors repeatedly appear in MSA and the insertion of colloquial lexis is noted as well. For instance, a misspelled lexeme *fushā* "literary / standard Arabic" is typed with *ta-marbūṭa* instead of *alif maqṣūra* (see Figure 1). The identity of all Arabs as one Ummah is generalized and, thus, its expression occurs at the standard code level.

In the social media, the online slang words are frequently inserted into other standard and non-standard codes. For example: "*Fī d-duwal al-mutaqqaddima bi-yqūlū innu illī b-yuq'ud 'alā n-net li-muddat 4 sā'āt fī l-yawm b-yibqā mudmin. – Ḥaḍrita-k ihnā law in-net faṣal ḥams daqāyiq bi-nqūm naṣumm fī r-rāwter*"²⁵ (In the developed countries, they say that those who sit on the Internet 4 hours a day become addicted. – Sir, if the Internet disconnected for five minutes, we are sniffing the router). The given sample of text contains elements of online slang, such as the loanwords *rāwter* (English *router* instead of the standard equivalent *muwazzi*) and *net* (English *net* instead of the standard variant *intirnit*), slang expressions *b-yuq'ud 'alā n-net* "he sits on the net" (Arabic also uses the preposition *'alā* "on") and *in-net faṣal* "the net disconnected". The metonymical expression *naṣumm fī r-rāwter* "we sniff the router" in which the concept of sniffing food is transferred to the equipment also indicates to the lowering of the language level as compared to the part depicting "other / them". The whole phrase "*law in-net faṣal ḥams daqāyiq bi-nqūm naṣumm fī r-rāwter*" ("if the Internet disconnected for five minutes, we start sniffing the router") is based on the hyperbolization that enables the humorous effect.

Since memes can reflect the society's attitude towards global sociopolitical changes, the topic of Russian aggression against Ukraine is represented in the Arab online humour as well. For instance, a meme depicting Russia's war against Ukraine does not contain any indication to Ukraine itself, but it emphasizes the double standards in the global politics, e.g. concerning the invasion of Iraq (see Figure 2): "*Ġazawnā l-'Irāq li-anna*

'inda-hā nawawī – *Ya 'nī b-tahjumūn 'alā rūsiyā? – Inta majnūn? rūsiyā 'inda-hā nawawī*"³ (We invaded Iraq because it had **nukes**. – Does it mean that you are attacking Russia? – Are you crazy? Russia has nukes). The opposition between “self” and “other” is conveyed in different language codes. “Other” (the West) use MSA, while the part about Arabs (“self”) is expressed with the colloquial variety (the verb *b-tahjumūn* “you attack” contains the non-standard preformative *b-*). Additionally, we observe the simplification of MSA: the lexeme *nawawī* is used as a substantiated adjective meaning “nuclear weapon”. It can be translated with the English slang equivalent “nukes” or the Ukrainian “ядерка” (*yaderka*).

2. We (a particular Arab country) – they (the rest of the world / a Western country). In this type of opposition, the uniqueness of a particular nation is stressed with an indication to various cultural, social, economic and other features. For example, the statement about the Moroccan concept of courage and the lack of fear of “others”: *“ilā kullī man yufakkir fī l-ḥarb ma'a l-Mağrib... hādū ġeyr aṣ-ṣabbāga mazāl mā šuftūš al-quwwāt al-musallaḥa!”*¹⁰ (To everyone who thinks about a war against Morocco... These are only the painters; you have not seen the armed forces yet!). The code-switching between MSA and a non-standard variety takes place as follows: addressing to the “other” occurs in the standard language, but the part identifying Moroccans (“self”) is expressed with the colloquial Arabic. In particular, the colloquial lexeme *mazāl* “still, yet” is used instead of the MSA verb with the negative particle – *mā zāla* “he continued”, the demonstrative pronoun *hādū* “these” (instead of *hā'ulā'i*) and the verb in the negative form *mā šuftūš* “you have not seen / you did not see” (instead of *mā ra'aytum / lam taraw*) refer to the colloquial language.

The opposition of “we – they” can also be conveyed through the comparison of glorious past with the present situation, for instance, in Morocco and Portugal. We observed the simplification of MSA in the following post: *“āḥir marra rabiḥnā Isbāniyā wa l-Burtuġāl kāna f-ma'arakat Wādī l-maḥāzin fī 986 hijriyya”*¹⁰ (The last time when we beat Spain and Portugal was in **the Battle of Wadi al-Makhāzin** in 986 AH). It should be noted that the long vowel reduction in the preposition *fī* “in” to just one grapheme *f* (or the syllable with the short vowel *fī*) also reflects an online tendency of the standard code simplification. The comprehension of this joke requires the extralinguistic knowledge of precedent information about the name and the outcome of the Battle of Wādī l-maḥāzin. It is also crucial to know the time and the occasion on which this post was made – the 2018 football World Cup. The recipients must identify such religious and cultural indexes as the lexeme *hijriyya*, since it contains an important semantic meaning (it refers to the Islamic calendar) for the adequate interpretation of this text.

Football fans rooting for their national teams or certain players use colloquial Arabic with the slang elements for the national, social, and religious self-expression. For instance: *“Muḥammad Ṣalāḥ law istamarr 'ā-l-waḍ' dā jamāhīr Līfirbūl ha-yṣallū ma'ā-nā t-tarāwīḥ is-sanā-dī”*⁵ (If **Muhammad Salah** continues to do this, **Liverpool fans** will perform the **Tarawih prayer** with us this year). The first implicit lexical tool identifying the Egyptian football supporters is connected to the name *Muḥammad Ṣalāḥ* (the famous Egyptian player). The metonymical phrase *jamāhīr Līfirbūl* “Liverpool football club fans” (literally, “Liverpool’s audience”) belongs to the football fans’ slang. This meme is conveyed in Egyptian Arabic (the pronoun *dā* “this” is the major distinguishing trait here). In addition to the football slang, we observe that the colloquial phonetic features are transferred to the online slang too. In particular, the preposition *'alā* is written in the reduced form of letter *'ayn*. It is connected to the following lexeme that starts with the article *al-* and results in the united word form *'ā-l-waḍ'*. Moreover, the text also contains a religious index – the phrase *ha-yṣallū t-tarāwīḥ* “they will perform the Tarawih prayer”. The herein example demonstrates the complex identity of online users representing themselves as Egyptians, Muslims, and Muhammad Salah’s supporters at the same time.

We observed attempts to emphasize the uniqueness of a certain nation through the distinctive features of folk and mass culture, daily life, and other. For example (see Figure 3): “*hādīhi ṣ-ṣūra laysat fī Swīsrā / wa-lā fī l-Māldīfz / hādīhi ṣ-ṣūra fī Maṣr na ‘am fī Maṣr / wa-tahdīdan fī madīnat Ṭantā / fī maḥall Dusūqī li-ṣ-ṣirāfa / muta ‘alliqa ‘alā l-hūta*”⁵ (This picture is neither from Switzerland, nor from the Maldives. This picture is from Egypt. Yes, from Egypt. From the city of Tanta, to be exact – from **Dusuqi’s currency exchange point**, it is hanging on the wall there). It should be noted that this joke is filled with the genuinely Arabic stylistic peculiarities, in particular, the excessive detailing. The text in MSA is an imitation of the social media posts that call for the attention to the Arab world instead of the admiration for the “other” (the non-Arab beauty). Detailing and repetitions, typical of the oral discourse, intensify the humorous effect (from Egypt, yes, from Egypt, from the city of Tanta, to be exact – from Dusuqi’s currency exchange point). Repetitions are used to convince the recipient of the post’s credibility (not Switzerland, and not the Maldives, Egypt, yes, Egypt). The common name for a small Egyptian shop / kiosk / currency exchange point (Dusuqi’s point) is used for the aforementioned purpose as well. A relevant landscape image serves as an additional humorous tool, since it contains the precedent information, i.e. a commonly recognized poster must have been hanging and attracting the visitors’ attention in a typical kiosk.



Fig. 4

The national identity can be expressed without any direct indication to “other”. In this case, a particular trait is emphasized in order to separate an Arab country / nation from the rest of the world. For example, the concept of “suffering” in the Moroccan perception is conveyed in the implicit opposition to “others”, i.e. anyone who does not share this feeling, for instance, government, non-Moroccans, etc. (see Figure 4): “*hal tu ‘ānī min am-rād jinsiyya? / al-jinsiyya al-maḡribiyya*”¹² (Do you suffer from **sexually** transmitted diseases? / No, from the Moroccan **citizenship**). In the given meme, the standard code serves as a tool imitating a serious situation / conversation / news / advertising etc. The humorous effect is achieved through the play with the homonym *jinsiyya* that has two meanings – the noun “citizenship” / “gender” and the adjective “sexual” (both refer to the feminine gender).

In turn, jokes about internal problems of a particular country can also contain a hidden opposition to “other” (e.g., non-residents of a country). For example: “*wuṣūl fātūrāt kahrabā’ li-ṣ-ṣaḥṣ fī Aswān li 15 alf juneyh / leyh? li-muṣāḡḡil mufā’il nawawī*”⁵ (A resident of Aswan receives a power bill for 15 thousand pounds / For what? For turning the nuclear reactor on?). The code switching occurs between MSA (“other” – unclear, it can be a power company, government, etc.) and the non-standard code (“self” – an ordinary citizen). The given text uses a colloquial lexeme *leyh* “why / for what” and the active participle *muṣāḡḡil* “the one that turns on / starts”. The latter belongs to the standard code; however, its utilisation indicates to the colloquial Arabic grammar (in particular, the predominant use of participles instead of verbs). It should be noted that the standard code in the given text contains simplifications typical for the spoken language as well (the preposition *li-* is chosen over *ilā* – “*wuṣūl... li-ṣ-ṣaḥṣ*” instead of “*wuṣūl ... ilā ṣaḥṣ*”).

3. We (a certain Arab country) – they (the rest of the Arab world / a different Arab country). In order to show the contrast between two different Arab countries or to emphasize one’s uniqueness, communicants can mock the language variation itself. Hence, the humour refers to the level of metalanguage. For example (see Figure 1): “*bi-l-fuṣḥa: dahāban wa iyyāban / bi-l-‘āmmiyya: rāyeh jāy / is-suriyyīn min wēn jābū kalimat*

*sarrī marrī*⁷⁸ (In the standard language – *dahāban wa iyyāban* (back and forth) / in a colloquial language – *rāyeh jāy* (back and forth; *lit.* gone came) / where did Syrians get the expression *sarrī marrī*?). All three examples mean “back and forth” but the expression *sarrī marrī* is attached to the Syrian dialect by its native speakers. It aims at demonstrating their language uniqueness. Interestingly, in the provided post, we observe that Syrians separate themselves from two other categories of Arabs based on their language: the Arab and Muslim Ummah speak *al-fuṣḥa*, Arabs throughout the region use the commonly recognised and comprehensible code – *al-‘āmmiyya*, while Syrians have their own distinguished dialect.

The stance towards differences in the level of life and wealth in the Arab countries is also reflected in the humorous content. Such middle-income countries as Morocco, Egypt, or Jordan and Palestine are compared with the Gulf region. For instance: “*fī-l-ḥalīj al-fulūs ‘inda-hum bi-r-rukba... wa fī Tūnis aš-šahriyya mā tilḥaqš ‘alā uḥta-hā...*”⁷⁷ (In the Gulf, they are rolling in the money... while in **Tunisia** the monthly salary is irregular...). This joke also migrated to the Palestinian content: “*fī l-imārāt ‘inda-hum milyārāt... wa fī Filasṭīn muflisīn min al-faqr...*”¹² (They have billions in the Emirates... while in **Palestine** they are penniless from poverty...). The stylistic features of the following texts deserve a special attention – the hyperbolization is used for the emotional expressivity (*al-fulūs bi-r-rukba* “rolling in the money” (literally – “money up to the knee”), *fī l-imārāt milyārāt* “in the Emirates, they have billions”, *fī 20 qarḍ wa-fī r-rawj* “there are 20 loans and a loan from relatives” and so forth) in the given meme.

In memes imitating news, the code choice is affected by the topic. However, the preferable variety in the studied content was MSA. For example, the permission to drive a car for women in Saudi Arabia was ridiculed in the following meme: “*awwal ḥādīṯ saba-bu-hu imra’a fī s-Sa’ūdiyya ba‘da s-samāḥ li-n-nisā’ bi-qiyādat as-sayyārāt*”¹¹ (The first accident caused by a woman in Saudi Arabia, after women had been allowed to drive cars). The text is attached to the picture of an overturned vehicle. As this post imitates the online news headline, it is conveyed in MSA. In the given sample, Saudi female drivers are indirectly juxtaposed to the drivers of other Arab countries / the rest of the world.

Conclusions

The provided study showed that the Arab national identity can be expressed in the humorous content within different types of the opposition between “self” (the Arab world / a certain Arab country) and “other” (the rest of the world / the West / a Western country / another Arab country / all Arab countries / other). The linguistic analysis of memes revealed the encoded cultural, social, political, historical and other information about a certain nation (Egyptian, Moroccan, Syrian, etc.). Thus, nationally, socially or culturally significant lexicon (colloquial words, social media slang words, precedent lexis, etc.) is used to describe “self” (a national group) combined with the key phrases that emphasize their uniqueness. It led to the use of colloquial Arabic or MSA interspersed with the colloquial lexis. “Others” are frequently depicted in a different code (a higher level of Arabic than in the description of “self”, i.e. MSA or other).

Despite the predominant use of spoken varieties, that are closer to the native speakers in the informal communication, the switching between the standard and non-standard codes occurs as well, since it creates the contrast between “self” and “other”. Hence, the language of modern Arabic humour in the social media has features of natural speech utilized in the heterogeneous sociocultural environment under the influence of technology. The herein research also confirms the use of informal variants of the language as a tool of national self-identification in the online discourse. However, the code choice is rather flexible and related to the speakers’ social roles, the topic and genre of posts, general interests of the online community members, and other factors. This is also the reason for the dynamic development of non-official register in the conditions of active inter-dialect

and inter-language contacts in the global media space, which leads to the expansion and change in the modern Arabic use. The ongoing impact of modern technologies on the development of language situation in the Arab region implies the further sociolinguistic investigation of Arabic online discourse and, in particular, inter-dialect contacts in the online communication, the connection of social media slang with the existing Arabic varieties.

¹ ‘Arab mīmī. Il-‘irāqī min yiṣūf ‘indak bezūna lāzim yagūl lak dūr bālak... [Image] 9 March 2018 // Facebook. Available at: www.facebook.com/arabmemefans/photos/a.287830021288354.67273.252429921495031/1871564659581541/?type=3&theater (accessed June 12, 2023).

² Ijī tmūt bi-d-ḡahik fābūr. 2018 // Facebook. Available at: www.facebook.com/137397660214364/photos/a.137438576876939.1073741828.137397660214364/222707315016731/?type=3&theater (accessed June 12, 2023).

³ Maroc36. Ġazawnā l-‘Irāq li-anna ‘inda-hā nawawī... [Image] 3 March 2022 // Facebook. Available at: www.facebook.com/36Maroc/photos/a.517592151668523/5040227746071585/ (accessed June 10, 2023).

⁴ Nukat ‘irāqīyya tmawwit. 2023 // Facebook. Available at: www.facebook.com/نكت-عراقية-تموت-1725472390807361 (accessed May 21, 2023).

⁵ Nukat maṣriyya. Fī d-duwal al-mutaqaddima bi-yqūlū innu illī b-yuq‘ud ‘alā n-net li-muddat 4 sā‘āt fī l-yawm b-yibqā mudmin... [Image] 24 April 2018 // Facebook. Available at: www.facebook.com/hassan19970hy/photos/a.815621628468768.1073741829.726455797385352/1872455902785330/?type=3&theater (accessed June 12, 2023); Nukat maṣriyya. Hāḍihi ṣ-ṣūra laysat fī Swīra wa-lā fī l-Māldīfz hāḍihi ṣ-ṣūra fī Maṣr... [Image] 1 June 2018 // Facebook. Available at: www.facebook.com/hassan19970hy/photos/a.815621628468768.1073741829.726455797385352/1911875718843348/?type=3&theater (accessed May 21, 2023); Nukat maṣriyya. Muḥammad Ṣalāh law istamarr ‘a-l-waḍ‘ dā jamāhīr Līfīrbūl ha-yṣallū ma‘ā-nā t-tarāwīḥ is-sanā-dī. [Image] 25 April 2018 // Facebook. Available at: www.facebook.com/hassan19970hy/photos/a.815621628468768.1073741829.726455797385352/1873968332634087/?type=3&theater (accessed June 12, 2023); Nukat maṣriyya. Wuṣūl fātūrāt kahrabā’ li-ṣaḥṣ fī Aswān li 15 alf juneyh... [Image] 24 May 2018 // Facebook. Available at: www.facebook.com/hassan19970hy/photos/a.815621628468768.1073741829.726455797385352/190343339687586/?type=3&theater (accessed June 12, 2023).

⁶ Nukta tūnisiyya hhhh. 2020 // Facebook. Available at: www.facebook.com/نكتةتونسية-ههههه-1730786917152469 (accessed May 21, 2023).

⁷ Nukat tūnisiyya. Fī-l-ḡalīj al-fulūs ‘inda-hum bi-r-rukba... [Image] 6 April 2021 // Facebook. Available at: www.facebook.com/noktatonis/photos/a.449833668532125/1791304384385040/?type=3 (accessed June 10, 2023).

⁸ Nukat sūriyya. Is-sūriyyīn min wēn jābū kalimat sarrī marrī... [Image] 10 January 2018 // Facebook. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/682668528504939/photos/a.749610491810742.1073741829.682668528504939/1387182334720218/?type=3&theater> (accessed June 19, 2023).

⁹ Nukat urduniyya // Facebook. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/nokat.2ordnia> (accessed June 18, 2023).

¹⁰ Te9echab. Ilā kulli man yufakkir fī l-ḡarb ma‘a l-Maḡrib... hādū ḡeyr aṣ-ṣabbāḡa mazāl mā ṣuftūṣ al-quwwāt al-musallaḡa!! [Image] 12 May 2018 // Facebook. Available at: www.facebook.com/te9echab/photos/a.1593234537381600.1073741828.1592101827494871/1728150127223373/?type=3&theater (accessed June 10, 2023); Te9echab. Āḡīr marra rabiḡnā Isbāniyā wa l-Burtuḡāl kāna f-ma‘rakat Wādī l-maḡāzin fī 986 hijriyya. [Image] 18 June 2018 // Facebook. Available at: www.facebook.com/te9echab/photos/a.1593234537381600.1073741828.1592101827494871/1800838793287839/?type=3&theater (accessed June 10, 2023).

¹¹ Yawmiyyāt sūrī ‘a-l-ḡājiz. Awwal ḡadīṭ sababu-hu imra‘a fī s-Sa‘ūdiyya ba‘da as-samāḡ li-n-nisā’ bi-qiyādat as-sayyārāt. [Facebook post] 27 September 2017 // Facebook. Available at: www.facebook.com/syria.hajez/photos/a.562175523895551.1073741829.559036830876087/1423387664440995/?type=3&theater (accessed June 10, 2023).

¹² Kūmīk zanqāwī. Hal tu‘ānī min amrād jinsiyya?/ al-jinsiyya al-maḡribiyya. [Image] 6 August 2018 // Facebook. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/2037555679824330/photos/a.2037>

564003156831/2137089156537648/?type=3&theater (accessed June 12, 2023); Roujeeb. Fī l-imārāt ‘inda-hum milyārāt... [Facebook post] 4 December 2018 // Facebook. Available at: www.facebook.com/Roujeeb/posts/2465316096843898/ (accessed June 10, 2023).

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A. O. Кучеренко

Арабська національна ідентичність в онлайн-гуморі: соціолінгвістичний аспект

У статті розглянуто особливості вибору мовного коду як засобу національного самовираження в арабському гуморі соціальних медіа (зокрема, у мемах та жартах). У глобалізованих онлайн-спільнотах гумор може відігравати ключову роль для зближення членів групи за певним типом їхньої ідентичності (національної, соціальної, гендерної тощо). У цьому дослідженні поняття арабської національної ідентичності стосується всієї арабської умми, а з іншого боку, представників різних арабських країн також. Це відображено в арабськомовному варіюванні в Інтернеті та за його межами. Проведене дослідження виявило різні мовні установки, що передаються в межах бінарної опозиції “свій – чужий”. Аналіз понад 1000 онлайн-дописів (єгипетських, іракських, марокканських та інших) показав, що спільність із членами групи виражається мовним кодом, який вважається найближчим для реципієнтів. Вказується на переважання розмовних різновидів (територіальних діалектів, соціолектів, молодіжного сленгу) з варіюванням у їхній письмовій передачі. Вживається також сучасна стандартна арабська мова, іноді з незначними відхиленнями від норми або з розмовними лексичними вставками. Для підкреслення унікальності “своїх” використовуються

як експліцитні, так і імпліцитні лексичні засоби (розмовні та сленгові слова, прецедентна лексика тощо). Різні коди використовуються для створення контрасту між “своїми” (усі араби / певна арабська країна) та “чужими” (усі неараби / Захід / певна арабська або неарабська країна тощо). Досліджувані різновиди також зазнали впливу соціокультурного контексту, тематики дописів, ситуаційних ролей комунікантів, технології тощо. За результатами цієї розвідки встановлено, що форма арабської мови, використана в гумористичних дописах, є невіддільною частиною ідентичності комунікантів, оскільки вона демонструє їхню належність до національної групи з її специфічним соціокультурним, політичним та історичним підґрунтям.

Ключові слова: арабська національна ідентичність; мовний код; мем; бінарна опозиція “свій – чужий”; гумор у соціальних медіа

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