Dialect with an Attitude

Language and Criticism in New Egyptian Print Media

Jacob Høigilt

Introduction

Recent years have seen some fresh winds blowing over the print media landscape in Egypt. Comics and monthly magazines have mushroomed, and the images and stories they convey are often unusual, to say the least: In a parody of superhero comics, a sex-crazed Santa Claus starts harassing women in Cairo and is challenged by the ridiculous figure ‘Super-Mac’; Sponge Bob puppets are used as a cover for a drugs mafia in an absurd criminal story involving a lost Chinese tourist; and the hostesses of a Salafi TV channel are interviewed about their policy of always wearing the *niqāb* (full face veil), complete with pictures of the black apparitions sitting at the news desk. These are some of the stories from *Tūk-Tūk* and *Iḥnā*, a comics series and monthly magazine that have been among the most visible on a rapidly evolving print media scene during the last few years.

A combination of two features stands out in these publications: a willingness to take on controversial social and political issues, and a tendency to do so in the vernacular (*‘āmmiyya*) to a great extent. Thus, the story about the sex-crazed Santa Claus is a humorous take on the serious issue of sexual harassment in Egypt’s cities, and the interview with the *niqāb*-clad TV hostesses is an attempt at giving voice to a section of Egypt’s women who are often seen as simultaneously reactionary and oppressed. Many of these stories are written in *‘āmmiyya*, and this is significant. According to the model of diglossia *fushḥā* is the default when writing. This fact raises the question of to what extent and for which purposes these publications use *‘āmmiyya*.

This chapter examines the relation between content and language in *Tūk-Tūk* and *Iḥnā*. I ask: When is *‘āmmiyya* used, and which social implications does it have?

The approach is informed by Heller’s (Heller 2008) focus on process and practice rather than autonomous structures in order to explain language change and the relationship between agency and structure. I argue that increasingly, individuals and print publications employ the low variety in writing, and that they do so intentionally and for specific purposes. Their aim is not

necessarily to subvert the linguistic and political order (Heller's "structure"). Instead, their writing betrays a strategy of carving out a "third space" for themselves (Bhabha 2004; Bhatt 2008) that makes it possible to engage critically with Egyptian politics and culture without signalling rejection and alienation from it.

Data was gathered in three ways. Having read *Iḥnā* on and off for some years, I chose three issues (September, October and November 2011) for a detailed analysis. This was an interesting period to investigate. First, the magazine had consolidated its profile by then and become part of a visible new trend on the cultural scene. Second, since after the Egyptian uprising in January–February 2011 a glossy magazine like *Iḥnā* could choose either to focus on entertainment and uncontroversial news, or it could jump headlong into politics. To a great extent, it chose the latter. These three issues comprised 76 articles all in all, which I coded for language variety, genre, and author. Selected articles were analysed in detail to discern the pattern of alternation between varieties and investigate the link between content, genre and language in more detail. *Tūk-Tūk* does not lend itself to a quantitative approach, since the magazine is shorter and the stories longer. Here I looked in detail at each of the four issues (4–7, 2012) I had managed to obtain, searching for consistent alternation patterns. In addition to text analysis, I have drawn on observations and reading of numerous publications from several longer and shorter periods of field work in Egypt between 2006–2012 – this was a period when the new, informal culture of writing seemed to explode in Cairo. During fieldwork, I also interviewed the editors of the publications studied here about their work and their thoughts on language and society. Finally, the findings are interpreted on the background of the Cairo survey about practices and attitudes to *fushā* and *‘ammīyya* among literate Cairenes, part of the *Language Change in the Arab World* research project (see Kindt and Kebede this volume). The survey offers valuable information about the language ideological climate in Egypt against which specific writing practices can be measured.

It needs to be noted at the outset how few Egyptians actually read magazines like these. Only two percent of the survey respondents had even heard about *Iḥnā* and *Tūk-Tūk*, and the number of people who read them was statistically insignificant (less than one percent). This extremely low figure must be seen relative to the very low percentage of Cairenes who read printed publications at all – in the same survey, only 16 percent answered that they read newspapers every day (among 18 to 34-year-olds the figure was ten percent – and keep in mind that this was in the midst of a revolutionary process where print publications proliferated to an unprecedented extent). In general, books and magazines are read by very few people in Egypt, so the print media field as

a whole (excepting only the most well-known dailies) is a restricted field. However, *Iḥnā* and *Tūk-Tūk* are unorthodox challengers within that field, which makes them interesting case to study. Furthermore, various print media have historically played an important role in Egyptian politics, including during the present transition, so their importance should not be underrated.

The Social Context

The fact that Arabic is one of the most well-known cases of diglossia does not mean that the low variety has not been used for writing. Particularly in Egypt, there is a long tradition of writing the vernacular in certain genres, notably poetry. Recent research has showed that vernacular literature in the late 19th and early 20th century contributed significantly to the development of popular Egyptian nationalism (Fahmy 2011). Doss and Davies have documented that literature in dialect is an integral part of the literary heritage of Egypt (Doss and Davies 2013).

However, in modern times, and especially after the *naḥḍa*, there have been strong cultural restrictions on writing Arabic. *Fuṣḥā* has immense symbolic value because of its status as the language of revelation in Islam (Haeri 2003) and its link to pan-Arabism (Suleiman 2003). Despite radical reform suggestions by some Arab nationalist thinkers, a highly conservative attitude to Arabic has prevailed into the present. This may be connected to the crashlanding of Nasserism, which encouraged popular culture (Mejdell 2006:210). After this period, conservative authoritarianism prevailed in many Arab countries, and conservatism has also marked language policies (Shaaban 2007:701). John Eisele has identified what he calls a “dominant regime of authority” in discourse about language in the Arab world, characterized by four central themes: unity, purity, continuity and competition (Eisele 2003).¹ According to this regime, Arabic (meaning *fuṣḥā*) unites all Arabs and should therefore be a single language for a single culture; it is in competition with foreign cultures and languages and needs to be protected from contamination by them and also by Arabic dialects, which represent corruptions of the norm; and for unity and purity to be achieved, it is necessary to preserve the classical linguistic system. Taken together, the emphasis on the *fuṣḥā*’s association with Islam and Arabism and the dominant regime of authority, we have a full-fledged dominant language ideology, in the sense of dominant “cultural conceptions of the

1 See Aboejezz, this volume, for a more detailed discussion of Eisele’s notion.

nature, form, and purpose of language, and of communicative behavior as an enactment of a collective order.” (Gal and Woolard 2001:1)

Consequently, writing practices that deviate from the norm are subject to criticism from the cultural and political establishment. In a recent example, prominent Egyptian philosopher Hasan Hanafi laments what he claims is Egyptians’ tendency to communicate in foreign languages and *‘āmmiyya* instead of *fuṣḥā*, blaming Western neoliberalism and ultraconservative Islam for having alienated Egyptians from their true linguistic identity (Hanafi 2013).

Hanafi’s lamentations indicate that the dominant language ideology does not enjoy hegemony. As Doss, Mejdell and Rosenbaum show *‘āmmiyya* is being used quite freely in advertisements, popular magazines, short stories, novels and poetry (Doss 2006:57–62; Mejdell 2006; Rosenbaum 2000). Mejdell has also found that *‘āmmiyya* is not seen to be as corrupting as it once was among Egyptians (Mejdell 2008). Of particular interest is Doss’s examination of a youth magazine named *Party* which is comparable to *Iḥnā*, the magazine subjected to analysis in this article. It uses the colloquial Arabic for much of its content. Doss describes it as a celebrity news magazine with focus on pictures more than text, and as employing borrowed words and expressions from English, often in Latin script. (Doss 2006:59) She comments that “the style is quite close to oral productions and the orthography close to the phonetic realization and quite far from the ‘norm.’” (Ibid.:61)

Party was an indicator of a trend in which two new and interesting media have appeared in Egypt: comics for grown-ups and glossy periodicals for young adults, with varying weightings between pure entertainment, ads and more substantial editorial content. The most prominent examples, which also form the cases of the present article, are the comics series *Tūk-Tūk* (the title refers to the small motorcycle-taxis in Cairo’s poorer neighbourhoods) and the monthly magazine *Iḥnā – sōṭ gīl bi-ḥālū* (We – the voice of an entire generation). These publications do not shy away from treating contentious issues in Egyptian society, like sex, politics and religion. They both exhibit a large amount of writing in *‘āmmiyya*, as well as a great deal of alternation between some form of *fuṣḥā* and *‘āmmiyya*. In light of the summary and conclusions cited above, the following questions present themselves: What language variety is used when? What is the correlation (if any) between language choice (*fuṣḥā* or *‘āmmiyya*) and content? What kind of language ideology underpins the practices of code-switching found in these two publications?

Language Practices in *Iḥnā* and *Tūk-Tūk*

Iḥnā was published from 2004 until December 2012, when it was discontinued, probably for economic reasons. It costs five Egyptian pounds – five times the price of a newspaper – but considering the fact that it is coloured throughout and written on good-quality paper the price is not outrageous: A similar publication described by Doss cost 10 pounds in 2002. Judging from the advertisements, the target group is relatively well-off people in their 20s to 30s. There are advertisements for Virgin Megastore, Blackberries, mobile phone subscriptions from Ettisalat, electric shavers for females and upscale clothes stores.

The three consecutive *Iḥnā* issues chosen for analysis (September through November 2012) give a snapshot of *Iḥnā* during a volatile period in Egypt. At this time, political cleavages in post-Mubarak Egypt had become quite clear. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which had stepped in when Mubarak was ousted, had recently relinquished power (on 30 June) to the elected President Muḥammad Mursī of the Muslim Brothers, thus – at least nominally – ending a period of military rule. During the SCAF's reign, however, the Islamist and non-Islamist camps had become polarized, and deep mistrust against the other had taken root in both groups. While non-Islamists suspected the Muslim Brothers of entering into secret deals with the military in return for being able to set Egypt on a conservative, illiberal social and political course, the Islamists accused their adversaries of conspiring with foreign powers to deprive Egypt of its Islamic identity and cause further chaos in a society that desperately needed stability in order to prosper.

Iḥnā had to navigate this chaotic and volatile political landscape, and the thrill of it was evident when I met the then editor in late 2011. He had apparently been steering *Iḥnā* on a course towards more “serious” content, away from celebrity news and towards political articles, interviews and feature articles that treated prominent social, cultural and political issues. The profile was not particularly confrontational or angry, but rather open, on the border to naïve, when treating Islamism, the job market and the movie scene. Compared to a 2010 issue I had read earlier, it was becoming a much more interesting and engaging magazine.

The editor had clear views on the magazine's language policy. All of it was to be written in an accessible style, and much of it in the colloquial, with the aim of attracting readers who did not normally read much. He was of the opinion that *ʿammiyya* was easier to read for most people than *fuṣḥā* and thus served this policy well. At the same time, the staff was concerned not to violate the integrity of *fuṣḥā*, and there were strict orthographic guidelines to be followed. For example, the letter *◌* /ha/, which is the colloquial future prefix, was not

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إهنا
صوت جيل بحاله

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خمس جبهات

ملف خاص عن أزمة الكهرباء

من أول قناة تلفزيونية للمتقبات فقط:
المجتمع رافض التعامل معنا!

إهنا مش مجلة مثليين!

المتحدث الرسمي السابق لحملة الفريق شفيق
أحمد سرحان:
مرسى لازم يأخذ فرصته كاملة!

اشترى اتصالات
سمارت فون
الحكم وادخل
على النت براحتك
بجنيه 1 بس في اليوم

FIGURE 7.1 Front page of *Ihnā*, September 2012. Advertisements for one of Egypt's main mobile phone companies, Ettisalat, frame the title page. The headlines read (from the top): Special feature: the electricity crisis / From the first TV channel for niqab-wearing women only: "Society refuses to relate to us!" / *Ihnā* is not a gay magazine! / Ahmad Sarhan, official spokesman for the campaign of General Shafiq: "Mursi must be given the full chance."

FIGURE 7.2 Genres in *Ihnā*

joined to the verb, since the corresponding future prefix in *fuṣḥā* is س /s/. The practice of not joining /ha/ to the verb was seen as a way of signalling that it belonged to a different grammatical system than what is commonly used for writing.² The staff I interviewed had little to say about the reasons for sometimes choosing *fuṣḥā* over *ʿammiyya* or the other way around. Before I had the opportunity to meet with them a second time, the magazine was discontinued, and it has proven very difficult to get in touch with the former staff. However, good indications of the reasons for choosing one variety over the other can be found by looking closely at language and genre in the three issues of *Ihnā* I have studied in detail.

The content in *Ihnā* spans almost the broadest conceivable range, from an article about the ten most famous haircuts in international football, via humorous reflections on the traffic jams in Cairo to serious and critical comments on President Mursī's performance.³ The magazine is highly diverse. Below is a table that shows the distribution of articles across identified genres.

The three issues studied contained 76 content items that could be coded into a genre category. As can be seen from the figure above, *Ihnā* allows for many genres, from news reports to poetry. However, the majority of pieces are either opinion pieces or personal reflections, followed by feature articles and inter-

2 Interview with Karīm al-Dugwī, Cairo, 10 April 2011.

3 Muḥammad Mursī is a member of the Muslim Brothers and served as president in 2012–2013. He was ousted in a military coup enjoying large popular support in July 2013.

FIGURE 7.3 *Language variety and genre in Ihnā*

views. *Ihnā* exhibits three main linguistic styles: predominantly *fushā* (sometimes with a word or expression in ‘*āmmiyya* here or there’); predominantly ‘*āmmiyya* (with a few lexical or grammatical items from *fushā*); and alternation between ‘*āmmiyya* and *fushā*. In the latter case, truly *mixed* sentences are rare. Alternation occurs on paragraph level, or one section of an article is written in ‘*āmmiyya* and another one in *fushā*. Occasionally a writer inserts words and expressions in English (in Latin and/or Arabic script), but not to such an extent that it is meaningful to code for it.

Using the three main linguistic categories, the distribution of articles is as follows: 56 percent are written in ‘*āmmiyya*, 23 percent in *fushā*, and 21 percent in alternating language. As its title promises, *Ihnā* is predominantly an ‘*āmmiyya* magazine,⁴ but the amount of *fushā* is far from negligible. The significant amount of texts written in *fushā* or mixed style raises the question of which variety is used for what genre. Figure 7.3 above shows the correlations between genre and language code. There is not much of a clear pattern. Only two out of ten genres are written purely in ‘*āmmiyya*: poems and advice articles. The rest exhibit mixing to a greater or lesser degree.

Overall, ‘*āmmiyya* is the dominant variety. In the three most frequent genres, ‘*āmmiyya* is clearly used much more than any of the other two. Interviews are a somewhat special case. They seem to be written along set lines: the introduction to the subject is mostly written in *fushā*, while the interview itself seems to be reproduced more or less verbatim, and in ‘*āmmiyya*. The verbatim

4 *Ihnā* is the ‘*āmmiyya* variant for the first person plural pronoun. The *fushā* equivalent is *nahnu*.

reproduction of dialogue in most of the interviews in *Iḥnā* gives the impression of journalistic inexperience; *Iḥnā*'s staff are young and often recently graduated students. In the following text, taken from an interview with two musicians, the journalist suddenly became uncertain whether she remembered to switch on the recorder, and she later added this to the interview text. The example serves as a good illustration of the low level of professionalism, the informality of the text, and the conventions for writing 'āmmiyya. The whole passage is clearly meant to be read in the colloquial, as seen from the *b* (ب) prefix before the verb *yisaggil* and the insertion of a glottal stop (*hamza*, ء) over the letter *alif* (ا) in the word 'no' (لا):

ثانية واحدة أتأكد إن كان ب يسجل ولا لا
أحيه!! ه نعيد تاني كل ده
(تأكدت) لا خلاص تمام ب يسجل

Just a second to make sure whether it records or not.

Shoot!! Are we going to repeat all that?

(Having checked) No, it's OK, it's fine, it records.

Iḥnā 2012-10, p. 33

As a rule the articles with alternating language have narratives in *fushā* and dialogue/interviews in 'āmmiyya. Some have a word or expression thrown in that is in 'āmmiyya in otherwise *fushā* articles, but not to the extent that one can talk about code-switching (for an example of switching, in a Creole text, see (Sebba 2012)).

In any case, with the two exceptions of poems and advice articles, genre does not provide a clear criterion for which code is used. This is not a robust finding by any standard, considering that only 76 articles were coded. Analyses of larger datasets are clearly needed to be able to state anything with authority. However, from the admittedly scant data analysed here it seems that the type of content is not crucial for which language variety writers choose. The type of medium also does not explain the language patterns on its own, since monthly magazines are not new to Egypt, but have a long history and have been written in *fushā* all along.

What then is the plausible explanation for the variation in code? Personal taste should not be discounted. Some writers in this magazine simply tend to write more in *fushā*. This goes for the last editor, Maryam 'Abd al-Jābir, for example. Her editorials and personal reflections are all written in *fushā*. To some extent, the seriousness of the issue at hand seems to contribute to

the choice. It would be very strange to see the *Iḥnā* article about the 10 most famous haircuts in international football in *fuṣṣhā*. On the other hand, it can be seen that political comment and culture articles may appear in both *fuṣṣhā* and *‘āmmiyya*.

However, we must look outside the magazine itself, at the context, to find the best explanation for the distribution of varieties in *Iḥnā*. I argue that the choice between *fuṣṣhā* and *‘āmmiyya* is to a great extent about *stylistic models*. Through the press and a spate of recently published books, a new and young style has grown increasingly popular in Egypt recently: *al-adab* (or *al-uslūb*) *al-sākhir* (sarcastic literature or style, see Håland this volume).⁵ This term designates essays, biographies and novels written in a humorous, often self-ridiculing style, and which often, but not always, treat serious issues in a light-hearted way: It is social criticism with a smile. Consider the example below, which is written entirely in *‘āmmiyya*. The title is: عايز ديمقراطية؟ خدا! (You asked for democracy? There you go!).

The author of the article clearly intends to educate his readers about democracy, a serious issue if ever there was one. A central part of the article is devoted to the problem of majority rule, which he treats in a humorous manner:

يعني تخيل أنك مسافر مع ثلاثة أصحابك شرم الشيخ وقرروا إنهم ه يشغلوا طول الطريق ألبوم
تامر حسنى فى العربية بدل محمد منير. عذاب، صح؟ بس ده حكم “ديكتاتورية” الأغلبية بقى.

Like, imagine that you're going to Sharm al-Shaykh with three of your friends, and they have decided to play a Tāmir Ḥusnī album all the way in the car instead of Muḥammad Munīr. Torture, right? But there's the tyranny of the majority for you.

JOSEPH NASR, “You asked for democracy? There you go!”, *Iḥnā* 11, 2011, p. 39

The tone is humorous, and Nasr uses everyday situations and examples from pop culture to talk about a serious issue. There are many such examples in *Iḥnā*, and so the choice between *‘āmmiyya* and *fuṣṣhā* to a great extent seems to be a function of how close the writer wants to stay to the sarcastic, witty style. I will return to the social significance of this style and code choice below, but

5 Calling it “new” may be overstating the case. Fahmy (2011) shows how vernacular humour was coupled to politics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Well-known and beloved writers like Bayram al-Tunsi employed a similar style in the interwar years, but it went into decline from the 1950s. The current wave of works represents a revitalization of this vernacular and humorous literature.

let me first introduce another publication that raises the same issues, but in a different way: The independent comics magazine *Tūk-Tūk*.

Tūk-Tūk is a comics magazine aimed primarily at young adults (there is a “keep away from children” warning on its front page). Its first issue came just as the Egyptian uprising in 2011 started, and the 10th issue was released in March 2014. Conceived of in 2009, it is a collaborative effort by a group of Egyptian artists to create a comics series instead of a one-off production, of which there are by now quite a few in Egypt. Muḥammad Shinnāwī, who is the main editor of *Tūk-Tūk*, explained the aim:

We wanted to make stories, not only newspaper cartoons, for grown-ups, light stories in *‘ammiyya* about real issues in the street – not pedagogical stuff. Also we wanted to export an Egyptian way of drawing. I went to France at some point and saw the fanzines there. I really liked them, and so the idea of *Tūk-Tūk* was born. We wanted to include stories of a social nature, from the street, and real things that had happened to the writer-drawer. (...) It would contain themes relating to government, to the family, all the traditions – we want to challenge them.⁶

Tūk-Tūk consists mostly of graphic stories, but there are also purely textual pieces, including the introduction to each issue, some personal stories, and presentations of famous musicians that the editors like and want to make known to their readers (famed *Fado* singer Cesaria Evora, for example).

The content ranges from the amusing through the absurd to dark social realism. In one of the more surreal stories, an Egyptian peasant gets kidnapped by the CIA because of his ability to milk his cow using his “third brain” – a technique he learnt through a religious program on Egyptian television. More seriously, the whole of issue seven is devoted to issues concerning women, where two of the stories treat the problems of rape and domestic abuse in explicit ways, highlighting the lack of institutions to deal with these crimes in the proper way. The common denominator of all the stories is that they depict the under-privileged sections of Egyptian society in the city and the countryside. These are all stories from the Egyptian street, which is rarely treated with empathy in the Egyptian press.

Some variation notwithstanding, the linguistic pattern in *Tūk-Tūk* is rather consistent and easier to discern than in *Iḥnā*. Textual pieces are generally written in *fushā*, while almost all of the text in the graphic stories is written

⁶ Interview with Muḥammad Shinnāwī, Cairo, 10 December 2012.

FIGURE 7.4 Excerpt from *Tük-Tük*, issue 7, p. 19. The story is about ways of escaping from a dreary life. The main character uses drugs and mass media, while his friend smokes water pipe incessantly.

in *‘āmmiyya*. The use of either variety is not based on any thought-through ideological approach; unlike in *lḥnā* there is no fixed language policy. Instead, the instincts of the authors and the main editor determine the variety, and the result shows that *‘āmmiyya* is generally thought to be best suited to *Tūk-Tūk*. In the words of editor Muḥammad Shinnāwī:

This kind of magazine wouldn't work with *fuṣḥā* [mish hayimshī ma‘ al-*fuṣḥā*]. We want a magazine that depicts reality, a magazine that is funny and at the same time critical – criticising society. It is not logical to use *fuṣḥā* when you depict people walking the streets, poor people. A beggar talking in *fuṣḥā*? That's a joke.⁷

When I asked why parts of his texts about musicians were written in *fuṣḥā*, he was not able to explain why right away.

I just started writing it in *fuṣḥā*. It is perhaps a bit more cultural than the other stuff. But the words of the songs are written in *‘āmmiyya*. It's like when I wrote about Shaykha Rimitti [a famous Algerian *rai* singer]. She sings in Algerian dialect, and I translated it into Egyptian dialect (...). But the biography is in *fuṣḥā*, because that is the professional [sic] part of the article.

As the quote shows, *Tūk-Tūk*'s editor is not out to overturn the dominant language ideology. Later in the same interview, he expressed the idea that *fuṣḥā* is “more serious and accurate” than *‘āmmiyya* – an important part of the dominant language ideology outlined above. *Fuṣḥā* is his preferred variety if he wants to explain serious issues. By his own account, the choice of variety is triggered by artistic concerns (depicting social reality) more than a specific social or political project. The same attitude was voiced by another prominent Egyptian comics writer, Magdī al-Shāfi‘ī, who authored Egypt's first fully-fledged graphic novel, *Metro*, which also depicts life at the fringes of urban Egyptian society. al-Shāfi‘ī stated that the problem of mainstream Egyptian comics was that it employs a language that is not truthful (*ghayr ṣādiqa*), for comics is a popular (*sha‘bī*) art form, so one should employ the language that is used in the street.⁸ It would seem that for these prominent figures on the Egyptian comics scene the choice of variety is not correlated with a specific style, as in *lḥnā*,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Interview with Majdī al-Shāfi‘ī, Cairo, December 11, 2012.

but is rather determined by genre. Comics stories are written in *‘āmmiyya*, but purely textual content within each issue is written in *fuṣḥā*, according to the dominant rhetorical logic.

However, when probing a bit deeper it nevertheless becomes apparent that there is an element of social and political criticism to the choices made. Both Shinnāwī and al-Shāfi‘ī aim to show the underbelly of society. Their treatment of this environment implies social and political criticism of the state of human rights, corruption and sexual harassment. In general, the attitude to sexuality is open-minded and explicit, in contrast to the taboos on this topic in most public discourse. Their very project is critical and challenges the elite culture of public writing and reading. As Shāfi‘ī states, his aim is to be a popular (*sha‘bī*) artist: “I want to reach out to ordinary people.”⁹

Functions of the Code/Content Combination

The previous section has shown that the choice to write in *‘āmmiyya* is motivated by different factors in *Iḥnā* (style) and *Tūk-Tūk* (medium and genre), but that they share the tendency to treat serious social and political issues in the vernacular idiom, which is a break with established practice. Both publications also challenge public morals: *Iḥnā* had several of its articles censored, and issues of *Tūk-Tūk* have been removed from the shelves in bookstores after complaints by customers who thought they were inappropriate. In other words, there is clearly a socio-political dimension to the language/content combination in these two magazines. In this section, I will suggest that the combination has three socio-political functions in the Egyptian context: It gives voice to the little man/woman, it reflects and expresses a culture of urban informality, and it creates a hybrid space of cultural and social criticism. As I will show, the latter two functions connect the Egyptian case to wider sociolinguistic trends.

Giving Voice to the “Little Man/Woman”

It should be noted at the outset that both *Iḥnā* and *Tūk-Tūk* aim to entertain their audiences; neither are high-brow publications in any sense of the word. *Iḥnā* features several interviews with movie actors and other celebrities, and many of the stories in *Tūk-Tūk* are simply funny and absurd, carrying no obvi-

⁹ Ibid.

ous social or political message. However, to the extent that a critical edge is visible, it seems that the publications aspire to represent marginalized groups in society. Thus a main character in *Tūk-Tūk*, who appears in most issues of the magazine, is a lower middle-class parking lot valet with a wife and two children. This character embodies values of charity, kindness and solidarity. He and his family give refuge to a Chinese tourist who has fallen victim to trafficking; he fights and outsmarts a gang of street thugs; and he frets about the danger of his wife being subjected to sexual harassment in the street. (In a feminist twist, the wife is subjected to nothing of the sort when she goes out alone to buy the groceries. Instead she frightens all the men in the neighbourhood into subdued silence with the help of a broomstick and verbal abuse of any would-be harasser.) Other stories in *Tūk-Tūk* feature lonely people in the megalopolis of Cairo and alienated youngsters escaping the dreariness and hopelessness of their lives with drugs (see figure 7.4 above). *Iḥnā*'s approach to social criticism is different; after all, it is a glossy entertainment magazine filled with ads and intended to generate a profit for the publisher, and its focus is mostly on the middle and upper classes. Within these constraints it clearly aims to challenge both the readers and the powers that be. One issue features a long interview with women who work for an Islamic TV channel and wear the *niqāb* while on air. These women and the channel they work for was reviled and ridiculed in the mainstream Egyptian media, but *Iḥnā* makes a point of giving them the opportunity to explain their choice without forcing them to answer provocative questions. *Iḥnā* has also focused on the problem of deadly family feuds in Upper Egypt, an issue that has caused suffering to thousands of Egyptians but is seldom treated by the Cairo-focused media. After the revolution, *Iḥnā* opened its pages to eyewitness accounts by ordinary Cairenes who had experienced or seen torture and harassment perpetrated by the police and military. This was a bold move, since press freedom deteriorated sharply soon after the military took power in Egypt in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising.¹⁰

In different ways, then, *Iḥnā* and *Tūk-Tūk* give voice to groups and concerns that are marginalized in mainstream media discourse. While the comics of *Tūk-Tūk* make visible and empathize with the millions of poor and struggling urban Egyptians, *Iḥnā* makes a point of focusing on groups that are anathema to many in the middle and upper classes, such as ultraconservative Islamic activists and hard rock-loving teenagers who are (wrongly) accused of being satanic

10 *Iḥnā* was discontinued at the end of 2012, ostensibly for economic reasons. Given its clear stance against the military and for demonstrators throughout 2011–2012, political pressure might well have played a role, but this has not been confirmed by anyone the author spoke with.

worshippers (in the October 2012 issue, cf. LeVine 2008:62–68). Both magazines do so in a vernacular style that represents a break with dominant written media discourse, and their stated aim for the choice of code is to depict social life truthfully and reaching out to people who feel estranged from the high variety, which is nobody's mother tongue.

Expressing an Urban Culture of Informality

The vernacular style of *Iḥnā* and *Tūk-Tūk* also lends itself to interpretations of a less overt political kind which are nevertheless tightly connected to the question of language ideology. First, they reflect, first and foremost, an urban environment, employing the main urban dialect and contributing to a *culture of informality*, and this is where they fit into a larger picture discernible in Cairo in the early 21st century. For even if the variety of publications and the number of publishing houses exploded after Egypt's 2011 revolution, the publishing industry had been revitalized well before that exhilarating moment. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, new publishing houses such as Mīrīt and Dār 'Ayn appeared that brought new and unconventional authors onto the literary scene, and the established publisher Dār al-Shurūq soon followed suit. The sarcastic literature described above is part of this trend. This development coincided with a new bookstore culture. Several new bookstores have appeared in Egypt's urban centres Cairo and Alexandria in recent years, often sporting a café as part of the shop, many of them hosting literary and other cultural events. The new and young literature sold in appealing café-bookstores has an atmosphere of coolness about it, reinforced by the interior design of the stores as well as the cover designs of the books on display.

One well-known example is the bestseller *Taxi* by Khālīd al-Khamīsī, which consists of the author's conversations with taxi drivers during rides in Cairo in the early 2000s.¹¹ The conversations, reproduced in *ʿammīyya*, touch on a host of aspects of Cairo (and Egyptian) life, all well-known to any Cairene, conveyed with a sense of humour that make them an appealing and easy read. The same is true of other popular books, such as *Ayza atgawwiz* (I want to marry) and *al-Rigāl min Būlāq wa-l-Nisā' min Awwal Fayṣal* (Men are from Bulaq and women are from Faysal street) – a play on John Gray's bestseller *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*.

11 The first edition was published in 2006. By 2009, it had reached its 14th edition, a remarkable feat in a market characterized by very low sales figures.

FIGURE 7.5 Title page of *Men Are from Bülāq and Women Are from Faysal Street* by Ihāb Mu'awwad, published in 2012.

Characteristically for the new literature, they deal with serious social issues in a humorous and straightforward way, and they are often written in a mix of *‘āmmīyya* and *fuṣḥā* or sometimes almost exclusively in the former variety. The last few years have seen a steady stream of such literature, whose characteristic graphic design now dominates many display windows in the biggest bookstores in Cairo and Alexandria.

Seen as parts of this larger picture, *Iḥnā* and *Tūk-Tūk* add to a cultural phenomenon that is associated with humour and/or informality and that involves an increasing amount of *‘āmmīyya* in published writing, usually seen as the domain of *fuṣḥā*. The text producers of *Iḥnā* and *Tūk-Tūk* are certainly not out of touch with the general linguistic climate among ordinary literate Cairenes, to which their publications cater. The survey we carried out in 2013 clearly shows that the general public accepts *‘āmmīyya* in written discourse, and that most indeed employ it themselves quite frequently (for details, see Kindt and Kebede this volume, and Kindt, Høigilt, and Kebede 2016). I do not include figures for the three age cohorts in table 7.1 because the differences are minimal.

To the extent that the writers in *Iḥnā* and *Tūk-Tūk* aim to reach out to more literate people than currently read printed material, they seem to have judged the situation well, as 74 percent find *‘āmmīyya* easier to read than *fuṣḥā*. The increase in *‘āmmīyya* publications co-occurs with its frequent use in daily life, as shown in table 7.2. It also comes at a time when TV shows have grown more informal, characterized by increased use of dialect, at the same time as they have taken on serious issues.

The increase in *‘āmmīyya* publications may said to be part of global sociolinguistic developments. The Egyptian case can be compared to that of late-modern European societies, where informality has become a public ideal. As Kristiansen et al. state:

Increasing use and acceptance of features from big city vernaculars (and from capital city vernaculars in particular) may well have been a general trend of Western societies since the 1960s (...). In the case of Denmark, attempts at explaining this trend have linked it to the development of an omnipresent media universe and this universe's remarkable turn from strict formality to ardent preoccupation with 'doing informality', a performance that draws heavily on the 'casual' image of low-status urban speech.

KRISTIANSEN, GARRETT, and COUPLAND 2005:14

The Cairene dialect is not necessarily 'low-status', since diglossia entails a functional divide where to some extent different scales of status apply for the

TABLE 7.1 *Attitudes to written ‘ammīyya in greater Cairo*

	Yes	No	Do not know/ no opinion	Total	Sample size
It is easier to understand things written in ‘ammīyya	76	24	–	100	2,308
‘Ammīyya has a place as a written language	57	30	13	100	2,198

TABLE 7.2 *Frequency of writing in ‘ammīyya*

	Every day	At least once a week	At least once a month	Once or twice per year	Never	Total	Sample size
Total	35	29	12	3	21	100	2,385
18–34	39	30	13	4	15	100	1,309
35–49	30	31	11	3	26	100	720
50–64	30	22	11	3	33	100	356

‘high’ and ‘low’ variety. However, it certainly conveys a ‘casual image’, and it does coincide with a clear turn to informality across Egyptian media.

The Creation of a Third Space of Criticism

So far, I have established that *Iḥnā* and *Tūk-Tūk* feature a great amount of written ‘ammīyya, that they do not shy away from social and political criticism, and that they are part of a wider text culture of informality that is gaining acceptance in the public sphere. To some extent, then, they can be seen as symptoms of a quiet challenge to the dominant language ideology, which extols *fushḥā* as the uniting and superior language of the Arabs and has scant regard for ‘ammīyya, and whose result is a “general resistance to having [the dialects] used in writing.” (Suleiman 2004:72) Interestingly, in contrast to the iconoclastic and loud discourse of the radical language reformers in the first half of the

20th century today's publications simply go ahead with their radical writing practices, against orthodoxy, without making a fuss about it or even reflecting much on it – they just do what feels best and most authentic for their rhetorical purposes.

This is not to say that their practices are not important. On the contrary, this quiet challenge to the *fuṣḥā*'s near-monopoly over the written domain, and the public's embrace of it, show that in terms of language ideology, written Arabic is more nuanced than is commonly thought. Paul Kroskrity (Kroskrity 2004) makes two observations that are of particular relevance in this regard. First, he states that language ideologies in a society are multiple, because social divisions are multiple. Second, language ideologies are productively used in the creation and representation of various social and cultural identities.

The findings above bear out the relevance of Kroskrity's first point for written, and not just spoken, Arabic. While existing contributions on spoken Arabic show the many-faceted social dimensions of *fuṣḥā-ʿāmmiyya* and intra-dialect relations, the written language has not enjoyed the same attention. To the extent that written Arabic has been the object of sociolinguistic inquiry at all, the literature remains focused on *fuṣḥā* and the ideology surrounding it. The results presented here give reason pay more attention to the unofficial Arabic literacy practices and language ideological landscape. Kroskrity's second point allows us to connect the case of written Arabic in Egypt to other contexts and to cultural theory. If the writing style of *lḥnā* and *Tūk-Tūk* is constitutive of a language ideology that equates the use of *ʿāmmiyya* with authenticity, informality, wit and social criticism, how might we make sense of its place in the wider picture of contemporary Egyptian culture and society?

At this point, results from research on written language in bilingual contexts can illuminate the Egyptian case. Writing about code-switching between Hindi and English in India, Bhatt (Bhatt 2008) notes that it reflects social struggles, and writers'/speakers' switch between (typically two) codes express their position in relation to these struggles. Bhatt draws on Homi Bhabha (Bhabha 2004) to argue that when prominent English-language newspapers in India employ Hindi words and phrases, they create a 'third space,' a discursive space that is shared symbolically by those who imagine themselves in-between: neither traditional nor necessarily modern. This third space offers them "the possibility of a new representation, of meaning-making, and of agency." (Bhatt 2008:182)

Similarly, Saxena (Saxena 2011) observes that bilingual (Malay/English) Bruneian youth use different languages in unregulated and regulated settings. The Arabic-based Jawi script is associated with Islamic settings and formal affairs. Youth from affluent English-language homes conform to the standard use of Jawi in regulated settings, such as in school and formal letters. However, when

communicating with friends on digital media like mobile phones, they employ code-switching, informed by global English as well as local Malay, but always written in Roman script. Saxena's findings show how youth negotiate identities with their language and script choices. Importantly, she notes that this code-switching "had not been learned in the regulated, institutional spaces of their lives but had been learned within their peer group and through participation in social networking sites and in computer-mediated communication. What we see in their digital literary practices is an illustration of the ways in which the global seeps into the local (...)." (Saxena 2011:290)

Both Bhatt and Saxena draw attention to the informal, unofficial nature of this code-switching, and its association with youthful culture and values. These are characteristics that are found also in the new Egyptian printed publications under study here. Bhatt's evocation of Bhabha's 'third space' hints at an interesting socio-political dimension to the Egyptian informal written language. For Bhabha, the concept of third space opens up a critical space for cultural difference, hybridity and translation instead of diversity and possibly antagonism (Bhabha 2004:28–57). Exactly the intention to translate between cultures and to open a critical dialogue by using difference creatively seems to mark the cultural productions analysed in this paper.

In *Tūk-Tūk* the cultural translation is obvious. Its main editor freely acknowledges his debt to French fanzines and other contemporary European graphic art to create stories about contemporary Egyptian society. And the mix of *fūṣḥā* and *ʿammīyya* in the magazine's presentations of famous Arab and international musicians serves to translate and encourage contact: he translates the lyrics of songs in other Arab dialects and European languages into Egyptian dialect, while the presentation of the musician is written in *fūṣḥā*. As for *Iḥnā*, its nearly unrestrained play with combinations of genres, content and code is evidence of a refusal to let the genre or the issue at hand determine the tone and the style of writing. By treating serious issues like democratization and conservative religion in a playful and informal language, the writers encourage hybridity and translation between high and low, conservative and liberal cultures and idioms.

Bhatt's remark about the element of social struggle apparent in code-switching is also highly relevant to the Egyptian case and introduces an aspect of written *ʿammīyya* that is more socio-political than cultural. A persistent feature of Egyptian elite discourse before and after the 2011 revolution has been its xenophobic attitude. This attitude, prevalent under Mubarak to shore up his legitimacy, has been supported by the ruling military elite and the Islamists after February 2011. In this discourse, activists and demonstrators critical to the powers that be (before June 2013 the Islamists; after the 2013 coup the military

leadership) are described as people who have dubious connections to “foreign” elements and agendas harmful to Egyptian national interest. In this climate, the choice to publish critical articles and stories in a mix of *‘āmmiyya* and *fushā* is interesting. Many of the writers belong to a stratum of society that is multilingual, and where especially English is widespread both in speech and writing. There are and have been English-language publications that resemble *Iḥnā* in many respects, such as *Campus* and *Cairo Times* magazines. By opting to write in Arabic script and for a large part in the Cairene urban vernacular, *Iḥnā*’s contributors at once reach out to an audience that is wider than the cosmopolitan Anglophile crowd and simultaneously place themselves within the Egyptian Arab identity sphere. In this way, their choice of code helps them navigate a complex cultural and social landscape and signals that they are in-between: they do not subscribe to the high-blown nationalist rhetoric of the elite, but nor do they wish to place themselves outside the national community, and this is signalled by their writing in their native language instead of a foreign one.

Hirschkind has noted a related development in the Egyptian blogosphere, where religious differences are overcome and a critical ideology developed through a common, unifying language marked by codeswitching between *fushā* and *‘āmmiyya*. In the blogosphere, he notes, there is “recognition of the necessity of creating a language of political agency capable of encompassing the heterogeneity of commitments – religious and otherwise – that characterize Egyptian society.” (Hirschkind 2010:144) For Hirschkind, the use of written colloquial is about more than authenticity:

[M]ost obviously, its distance from the writing styles of other textual media signals a judgment on the illegitimacy of Egypt’s political institutions (...). Such writing highlights its independence from the dominant discourses of Egyptian political life that circulate via print and televisual media.

HIRSCHKIND 2010:146

This may be overstating the case, as there are in fact several printed media in Egypt that have for many years now published critical articles written in *fushā*. And in light of the generally tolerant attitude towards *‘āmmiyya* evidenced in the survey referred to above, its use is perhaps not as strongly politicized as Hirschkind claims. However, as I have tried to show in this section, it seems probable that written *‘āmmiyya* has the potential to be used in a boundary-breaking and critical sense, and that the writers of *Iḥnā* and *Tūk-Tūk* have seized on this opportunity.

Conclusion

We have seen that explanations vary for why *‘āmmiyya* figures prominently in new print media in Egypt. In *Ilhnā*, the association with a ‘cool’ humorous style – sarcastic literature – is important, while in *Tūk-Tūk* the perceived requirements of genre and the medium of comics itself play a big role. Regardless of the motivations, both publications contribute to a trend that sees *‘āmmiyya* become more visible in the domain of written discourse, reserved for *fushā* according to the classic model of diglossia. This development may have far-reaching consequences in both the language system and the social sphere in the long run. In this article, I have focused on three immediately visible cultural and social functions of *‘āmmiyya* publications. First, they give voice to marginalized groups from different social strata in Egypt, and uphold an ideal of popular authenticity by treating issues close to the Egyptian street in a vernacular idiom. Second, they contribute to making the public sphere more informal. In fact, they belong to a vanguard in this respect, since *‘āmmiyya* is far less visible in the printed than the spoken domain of the public sphere. Third, when the liberal content and informal language of these publications are seen together, they communicate a desire to criticize contemporary Egyptian society while holding on to a popular, authentic identity. These publications are expressive of a language ideology from below that legitimizes the use of the vernacular in print to treat serious issues. Writing in *‘āmmiyya* opens a third space in which authors can introduce thoughts and issues alien to mainstream culture, without placing themselves outside it. In this way, the new *‘āmmiyya* publications contribute not only to a slowly changing language ideology that erodes the clear-cut functional divisions implicit in the concept of diglossia; they may also contribute to a change in the tone and content of written public discourse in Egypt.

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