

Fuck me *bil 'Arabi*:

The Sexed Arabic Sociolinguistics of Queer Women in Lebanon

By
Salma Yassine

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Supervisors: Dr. Nadia Jones-Gailani and Dr. Adriana Qubaiova
Second Reader: Dr. Hannah Jane Loney

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Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned, **Salma Yassine**, candidate for the MA degree in Critical Gender Studies declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

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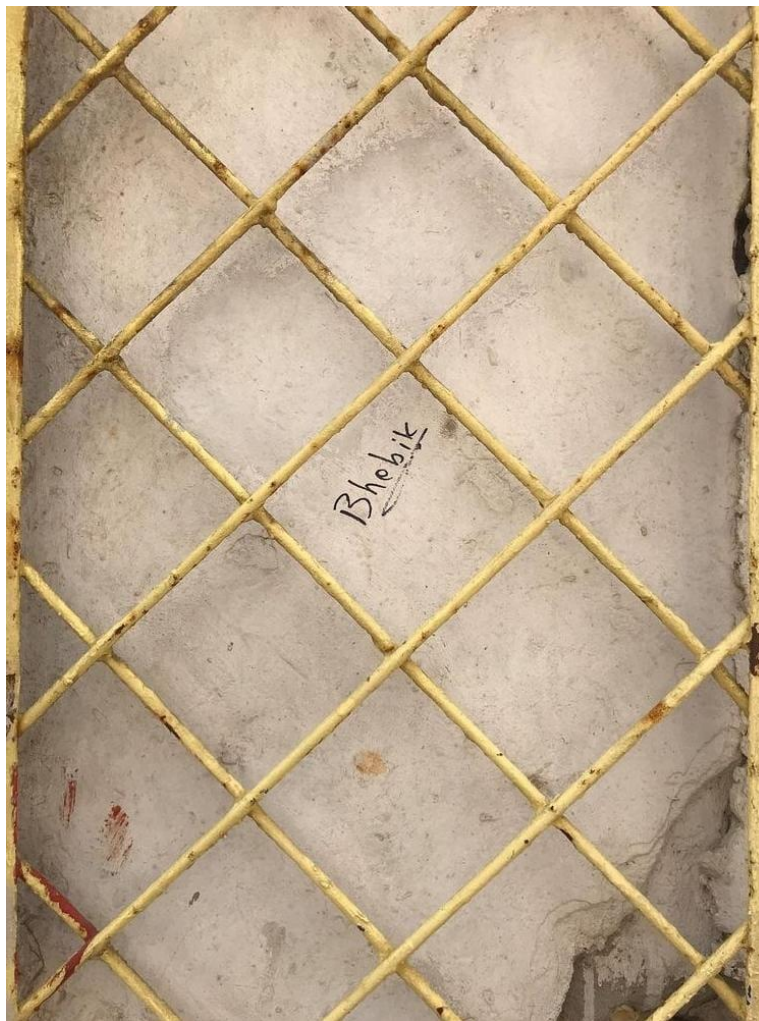
This thesis is dedicated to all the women, the lesbians, the gays, the queers, the nonbinary folks, and the trans* folks who shaped me. To my late grandmother, my partner, and my friends. To little Salma, her queerness – and quirkiness.

للسّاحقَات

للّعابرين والعابرات

Notes on Transliteration

Throughout this thesis, I use my own transliteration system which is the byproduct of a combination of standardized systems of transliteration together with Arabish (or 'Arabizi) as the main transliteration system across different Arab social media platforms. Arabish/'Arabizi is the system of writing Arabic with Latin letters while adding numbers instead of Arabic letters that have no Latin equivalents due to their phonetic features.¹ Instead of using numbers, I use [''] for the letter 'ayn / ع and I use ['] for a hamza / ء . This was a deliberate choice in order to make my research accessible to people about whom and for whom this study is written.



*Figure 1 Photo taken by me in Beirut, Lebanon (2019).
Translation from Arabish/'Arabizi: "I love you (feminine addressee)".*

¹ Dina Georgis (2013) argues that *Bareed Mista3jil*, the first anthology written about the experiences of queer women in Lebanon, was partly and deliberately written in Arabish as a radical and subversive act to render the choice of language relevant to the experiences of the queer women about whom the book was written.

Abstract

This is a study about language, sex, and the self at the intersection of queerness. This thesis is an interdisciplinary study that is built on sociolinguistic analysis, coupled with data extracted from 14 ethnographic online interviews with queer women from Lebanon. Throughout this thesis, I rely on queer and feminist theories to build and support my analysis. I argue that there is an entrenched interconnectedness between sex, Colloquial Arabic, and the queer Arab self. Within an overarching frame of analysis, I argue that sexed Arabic is a subversive tool of resistance for some queer women in Lebanon, and that sexed Arabic is a site of love, pleasure, and productive pain through which queer women in Lebanon reconfigure, reclaim, and subvert hegemonic structures of power. Therefore, sexed Arabic is a focal point of catharsis that is integral to the formation and articulation of a queer Arab self in the Lebanese context. At the intersection of queerness, sociolinguistics, and the self vis-à-vis the intersection of pain, pleasure, and power, sexed Arabic is rendered a site of queer catharsis for many queer women in Lebanon. Those intersections are heightened within sexual Bondage, Discipline (or Dominance), Sadism (or Submission), and Masochism; therefore, the unique dynamics of power exchange and pain interplay within sexual BDSM render it a radical method of subversion through which derogatory discourses of sexed Arabic are reclaimed with pleasure.

Keywords: Queer Sex – Language – Lebanon – Arab – BDSM – Pleasure – Pain – Power.

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Introduction



Figure 2 Photo taken by me in Beirut, Lebanon (2018).

[Do not kill your language] was permanently displayed at the entrance of a jewelry shop that I used to frequent on Beirut's Hamra Street. I remember being greeted by this imperative statement the first time I walked into the shop. My immediate response was "Uff" as in "damn!" The owner of the shop smirked, looked in my direction, and said "these days, no one speaks Arabic anymore". This experience was transformative for me as it happened around the time I was thinking of declaring my second bachelor's degree in Arabic Language and Literature. This perpetual question of the Arabic language – and its futurities, amidst English and French – never left me. The question of Arabic became more persistent throughout my queer awakenings, and even more persistent when embodying my queerness and translating this embodiment through sex. Hence, this is a study about sex, language, and the queer self.

Key Definitions: Sex, the Self, and Language

This is a sociolinguistic study through which I build my analysis on data extracted from 14 ethnographic online interviews by situating it within an integrated queer and feminist theoretical framework. In this study, I define sex as a relational practice that is built on the interplay between language and acts. Sex can be intimate, embodied, casual, emotional, pleasurable, and many other things – or the lack thereof – depending on the individual

personal experiences of the 14 queer women whose stories constitute the basis of this research. I tailored my analysis of each sexed encounter/act based on the definition of the queer woman by whom this encounter/act was experienced. In line with defining sex as a relational act, I analyze the (queer) self as a locus in relation to the other; I also explore the interplay between self, identity, and language in a queer and Arab context by alluding to the ways they intersect yet do not entirely overlap. I approach the self from a queer linguistic theoretical approach rather than a psychoanalytical or philosophical one. I find the “tactics of intersubjectivity” as theorized by Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2004) to be highly compatible with my interdisciplinary approach of the self in relation to queer identification. According to Bucholtz and Hall (2004) “intersubjectivity” as a theoretical term “emphasizes that identification is inherently relational, not a property of isolated individuals. Thus, tactics of intersubjectivity may position the self, the other, or (most often) both” (p. 494). I approach language, and in the context of this research, the Arabic language (Lebanese Colloquial Arabic, unless stated otherwise) as a performative mediator between sex and the self in a queer context.

Why Studying Sexed Arabic Matters: Why Sex and Why Arabic

Scholars of sexuality predominantly discussed sexuality as identities and sexual orientations. Thus, most of the existing literature focuses on the politics of identity, but there are not many studies that deal directly with the most basic of questions, which is “what is sex for you?”. As this is the first study of its kind, my research matters because it fills an evident gap in the academic realm of Arabic sociolinguistics and studies on queer sex in the Arab world, specifically those that focus on the experiences of queer women. Therefore, studying queer sexed Arabic sociolinguistics, with a focus on Lebanon, is integral to expanding research on Arab queerness. Beyond the academic significance of my research, I perceive this thesis to be a space made possible through an exchange of lived sexed experiences of gender and sexuality, which bridges queer-feminist theory and practice.

Mediums of Sexed Knowledge for Queer Women in Lebanon

Most of the women with whom I spoke told me that their sexual – and (later) queer awakenings – happened through foreign languages: English and/or French. The mediums through which sexed knowledge was channeled for my interlocutors include: pornography, Erotica (poetry and literature), films, media (TV programs and series), social media, school-organized initiatives such as lectures and workshops, and parental guidance, all of which have their linguistic, sociocultural, and financial limitations.

When asked about the languages in which my interlocutors watch porn, the vast majority expressed confusion, followed by giggles, and asked: “*le fi porn bil ‘Arabi?’*” [Is there even porn in Arabic?], which clearly explains the lack of normalized exposure to sexed content in Arabic, whether in hetero or queer contexts. The sexed content broadcasted on Lebanese media channels not only remains predominantly heteronormative, but it also stigmatizes and pathologizes nonnormative sexualities (Touma Sawaya and Beayno, 2021). In relation to the sex education initiatives organized by some schools in Lebanon, all queer women who had the chance – and privilege – of attending them told me that they were heteronormative, conservative, and sexist since they mostly discussed protection, disapproved of premarital sex, while refraining from mentioning anything related to pleasure – specifically women’s pleasure. Moving on to social media platforms, most of my interlocutors had a positive experience with social media since it offered them the possibility to virtually connect with other queers – virtual community building; yet, there were always the looming threats of privacy and safety.

What do these mediums tell us then? Based on this very brief overview of the mediums through which queer women in Lebanon first encountered sex, I argue that the languages that mediated their initial exposures to sexed content fundamentally impact the ways in which they express themselves and their queer subjectivities during sex.

Overview of Chapters

In the first half of Chapter 1, I locate the consensual exchange of power within sexual BDSM as a subversive dynamic that opposes the bigger nonconsensual/oppressive power structures in Lebanon. I explore perceptions of Arabic as “rough” and “aggressive” due to its reception

as a language of cultural, societal, familial, religious, and political authority, through which many queer women in Lebanon came to explain pain, discipline, and punishment. Therefore, I argue that through a consensual replication of the power dynamics within queer sexual BDSM, Arabic becomes the language through which pain is reclaimed and reconfigured as a site of pleasure during sexual BDSM. Therefore, sexed Arabic is the linguistic channel through which the transference and derivation of pleasure intersects with consensual pain-play. Arabic then becomes an intrinsic linguistic mediation within a sexed space of subversion for some queer women in Lebanon.

In the second half of Chapter 1, I explore the hindrances that come with naming and/or referring to genitalia, specifically female genitalia, in Arabic. I analyze the sexed instances within which queer women in Lebanon feel an aversion from Arabic due to triggering or uncomfortable emotions that emanate from the association of naming genitalia in Arabic with sexual harassment, catcalling, and abuse. I then analyze the patriarchal, sexist, and misogynistic extensions of *'ayb* as a conception that often frames honor around female genitalia. Since many queer women who name/refer to their (and/or their partners') genitalia in Arabic found it to be erotic and pleasurable, I argue that naming the “shameful” body/body part using the same language in which it was deemed “shameful” – Arabic – makes way for a process of reconfiguration and reclamation of that which shames the (queer) body and the (queer) self.

In Chapter 2, I further expand on the notion of shame from a cultural perspective beyond the parameters of naming genitalia as explored in Chapter 1. While themes of “dirtiness” and “vulgarity” coincide at many instances due to their interconnected relationship with “shame” as a common theme, I choose to tackle them in separate chapters because perceptions of Arabic as “shameful” and “vulgar” are manifested in relation to naming female genitalia in specific, which also falls under the theme of Arabic as “heavy” as discussed in Chapter 1. Meanwhile in Chapter 2, I explore “shame” in relation to “dirtiness” instead of “vulgarity” which is mostly linked to slurs, insults, and curse words such as *sharmouta* [whore] as well as the acts of fucking and being fucked in Arabic – both of which are shaped by negative sociocultural perceptions of sex and sex work. In Chapter 2, I argue that the “shameful” elements of sexed Arabic can be used as a productive tool of reclaiming and exchanging pleasure within the dynamics of consensual sex, and more prominently during kink/BDSM due to the unique elements of pain and power and the manner in which they intersect with pleasure.

In the first half of Chapter 3, I look into the failures, lacks, and hindrances of sexed Arabic as a “humorous” and “funny” language that is not taken seriously, specifically when referring to the lexicon of sex toys. I study the alienation, estrangement, and “cringe” when delving deeper into the status of Modern Standard Arabic as opposed to Colloquial Arabic in the contemporary sex lives of queer women in Lebanon. I argue that there is an evident schism between the Standard (MSA) and Colloquial (CA) forms of Arabic, which reflects the perpetual awkward presence of MSA in both sexed and non-sexed settings. Since most of the Arab queer and feminist knowledge is currently being produced through Modern Standard Arabic, I argue that this is not sufficient for the formation of a queer Arab selfhood that is capable of deriving pleasure from a linguistic form that resembles it. Therefore, I suggest a potential solution for this schism/conundrum/dilemma, which is the Colloquialization of a queer feminist lexicon of sex that is derived from the lived sexed experiences of queer women in Lebanon.

In the second half of Chapter 3, I look into the critical place of French in the sex lives of queer women in Lebanon, and by building on Yasmine’s (32) quote as a focal point of departure – “no one wants to sleep with a Frenchie” – I interpret this phenomenon as an anti-classist and decolonial stance. By analyzing the dynamics of sexed French and sexed Arabic (CA) within the Lebanese context, I argue that through the domination of sexed French within the powerplay of sexual BDSM, sexed Arabic has the potential to play an emancipatory, liberatory, and decolonial role in sex by disciplining sexed French – and all that it represents, predominantly the past French Mandate in Lebanon.

In chapter 4, I examine the emotional potential of sexed Arabic as a language of love, desire, and yearning. I look into mixed perceptions of this emotionality as it relates to pain and pleasure. I conclude that Arabic is a fundamental sociolinguistic element in the sex lives of queer women in Lebanon, as it plays an essential role in the embodiment of the act of sex and the self, as mediated through sexed Arabic.

As an overarching argument, I argue that sexed Arabic is indispensable for the formation and articulation of a queer Arab selfhood in the sexed context of Lebanon. I argue that sexed Arabic is not only a site of pleasure during queer sex but is also a subversive tool of resistance in the reconfiguration and reclamation of the structural oppressions that are channeled and indoctrinated in this language. Therefore, at the intersection of queerness, sociolinguistics, and the self vis-à-vis the intersection of pain, pleasure, and power (within

and outside, but especially within the context of BDSM), sexed Arabic is rendered a site of queer catharsis for many queer women in Lebanon.

Methodology and Research Design

My First Finding: “Truth or Dare?” in Vienna

This thesis comes to life from my personal need to understand the ways in which I perform my sexuality as a Lebanese lesbian woman. As someone who is very fond of the Arabic language and its cultural-performative manifestations, questioning sexed Arabic and its agency to shape me as a queer Arab never left me. Initially, this project is the byproduct of a question that a queer Arab friend asked me during a “Truth or Dare?” game night in Vienna. Her question was something along the lines of “How do you speak during sex?” or “What languages do you speak during sex?”. I was baffled because I realized how tongue-tying it is to attempt to answer. I answered, nevertheless, and that was my first finding – I codeswitch between Arabic and English while strictly using Arabic to express love and other heightened emotions. This finding resonates with many friends I know, whether Arab queers in the diaspora or queers residing in Lebanon, which is why I am investigating it further as a collective queer and sexed experience with Arabic.

Research Methods and Positionality

This is a sociolinguistic study that relies on virtual ethnographic data collection and is situated within an integrated queer and feminist theoretical framework. To research this topic, I utilized a qualitative method of data collection. I conducted in-depth semi-structured online interviews with 14 queer women from Lebanon. I used qualitative research methods as a feminist practice because they focus on the lived experiences of interlocutors which are often overlooked in quantitative methods of data collection (Hesse-Biber, 2012). With the rise of incorporating virtual technologies into research methods, online interviews have been proven to be effective methods of feminist praxis in the de-hierarchization of power dynamics between researchers and interlocutors (Linabray and Hamel, 2017). I used Zoom as a virtual platform for my interviews while both audio and video features were turned on, which allowed me to engage with my interlocutors’ verbal and gestural cues. Due to the ongoing electricity and internet crisis in Lebanon, some of my interlocutors had to intermittently turn off their video feature. At the beginning of each interview, I emphasized that my interviewees must be present in a comfortable and fully safe space during our virtual time together to

ensure their safety and mine and to provide a level of comfort, privacy, and therefore trust that would allow them to unrestrictedly talk about their sex lives. Keeping in mind the long power cuts and internet issues in Lebanon, I tried to be as flexible as possible with rescheduling interviews. I conducted the interviews between 21 February 2023 and 19 April 2023. The duration of the shortest interview was 46 minutes and the that of the longest interview was 4 hours and 40 minutes, with an average duration of 2 hours for the rest of the interviews.

I obtained oral and written consent from all my interlocutors. In the Informed Consent Form which I electronically sent to them, I included a brief description of my topic and mentioned that my interviewees have the full right to request that I partially or fully remove their interview from my analysis until 1 May 2023. I provided my contact information as well as my supervisors' institutional emails to ensure that my interviewees have the contact information of professors who are overseeing my thesis and can therefore contact them if they require further assistance. After obtaining consent from my interlocutors, all interviews were recorded and stored safely. I then transcribed and thematically coded all the material.

I used snowball sampling to reach out to my interlocutors. First, I contacted my queer friends who reside in Lebanon via social media (WhatsApp and Instagram) and email asking them if they are interested in having an interview with me about the topic. Then, I asked those who consented to take part in this research to put me in touch with their queer friends and acquaintances to whom I reached out on the same social media platforms and via email. All my interlocutors were born, raised, and currently reside in Lebanon with the exception of one interlocutor who was not born in Lebanon but has lived in the country since she was an infant. Most of my interlocutors belonged to a middle-class socioeconomic background. All of them completed their high school education, almost all of them earned a bachelor's degree or equivalent, and a few earned a master's degree or equivalent. While some of my interlocutors preferred identifying as nonbinary or genderqueer, and others preferred identifying as lesbian, bisexual, or *suhaiyyi*², all of them clearly mentioned that they are comfortable identifying with the joint labels of “queer” and “woman” – “queer woman”.

² Terms such as “*suhaiyya*” (Modern Standard Arabic equivalent of “*suhaiyyi*” in Lebanese Colloquial Arabic), which literally translates to “[a] woman who has sex by grinding” (Amer, 2012, p. 384), date back to Arab medieval times and can be reclaimed and used instead of translations of Western terms. Sahar Amer (2012) argues that such terms belong to a time when attitudes toward female homosexuality were more progressive than they are often imagined to be; therefore, using the terminologies that belonged to that temporal realm is a source of pride when used in contemporary times.

Throughout our conversations, we reflected on the affirmative role of labels, yet we questioned the restricting and confining dilemma that comes with adhering to them. Some found solace in the fluidity that the term “queer” offers, specifically when referring to the sex and sexual acts in which they engage, regardless of the gender(s) of the people with whom they have sex.

I chose pseudonyms that are representative of and sensitive to the interviewees’ backgrounds, specifically their religious beliefs. I asked those who identify as genderqueer to choose ones that they deem representative and comfortable. Mitchell Duneier (1999) not only talks about the importance of using pseudonyms to protect our interlocutors’ identities from a sociological point of view but also emphasizes masking certain details that might render them easily identifiable, even when anonymized by a pseudonym. Lebanon is a relatively small country that is shaped by a collectivist and extended familial structure to a far extent. So, people from all across the country know each other through a web of social connections which is an aspect that should not be overlooked or underestimated but rather carefully navigated. Thus, I made sure to selectively blur certain personal details about my interlocutors that might reveal their identities when combined, such as address/geographical location, profession, familial details, among others.

Emerson et al. (1995) speak of the importance of the researchers relying on the interlocutors’ input to derive the meanings they wish to incorporate into their work. Throughout my interviews, I used this method by asking my interlocutors about how they define certain terms, and most importantly how they define sex. Sex is a very personal and sometimes intimate experience and I do not wish to approach my research topic with prejudices or assumed definitions on behalf of my interlocutors. I analyzed the input of each interlocutor based on the definition they provided. For instance, if someone does not consider sexting as a form of sex and shared their experiences with sexting and language use, I disregarded the subsequent data from my analysis because it does not fall within the parameters of sex.

My interlocutors come from different educational backgrounds (private and public institutions; English-medium and French-medium institutions), religious and spiritual beliefs, political sects, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The queer women I interviewed were between the ages of 23 and 42 (8 women were in their 20s, 5 women were in their 30s, and 1 woman was in her 40s). Even though snowball sampling as a research method is not often

representative of the targeted sample, it has been proven effective when attempting to reach non-heterosexual women (Browne, 2005). This limitation in my snowball sampling allows me to reflect on the Lebanese-ness and middleclass-ness of my sample given that I myself am a middle-class Lebanese queer woman. My sample is not restricted to Lebanese people; it is rather inclusive of non-Lebanese people who were raised and are currently residing in Lebanon. However, 12 out of 14 of my interlocutors are Lebanese, 1 interlocutor is Palestinian, and 1 interlocutor is Lebanese-Armenian but does not speak Armenian. Most of my interlocutors belong to a middle-class and upper-middle-class socioeconomic standing. Most of them are bilingual (proficient in Arabic and English or Arabic and French), while some of them are multilingual (proficient in Arabic, English, and French). Due to the linguistic hybridity in Lebanon and my positionality as a 23-year-old middleclass Lebanese researcher using snowball sampling as a research method, I was unable to conduct interviews with Syrian or Syrian-Lebanese queer women since snowball sampling did not enable me to connect with Syrian communities that are often reached through NGOs and similar initiatives. I was also unable to reach queer women who are monolingual (only speak Arabic as a native language) which would have enriched my data collection.

Reflecting on my positionality as a queer Arab researcher producing queer-feminist knowledge in English at an academic institution founded in Central and Eastern Europe, I imagine the different possibilities of channeling my work had it been produced in my native language, Arabic. This work is written about and for the women whose queer and sexed experiences constitute the base of this thesis. Yet, this work is also for the women who will not be able to access it due to language barriers. On another note, I often felt the restricting urge to adhere to a rigid lexicon of academic English to be taken seriously in the scholarly world as a queer researcher writing about sex and language. During the editing stage, I tried to colloquialize my writing style whenever possible so that it reflects my arguments.

Care Ethics

Throughout my interviews, I relied on my feminist ethics of care (Tiidenberg, 2019; Johansson and Wickström, 2023). Sex is a triggering topic for many, especially for those who have experienced abusive and traumatic incidents. To ensure that my interlocutors were comfortable throughout our interviews, I frequently reminded them that they have the right to not answer any of my questions and to stop the interview or reschedule it at any moment, for

any given reason. While I could not know what may or may not be triggering for my interviewees, I tried to avoid triggering topics as much as possible and frequently mentioned that we can pause or postpone the interview at any point if they feel triggered. This practice aligns with Eli Clare's notes on trigger warnings as "tools for self-care and collective care" (2017, p. xx). I honor the openness and trust with which some women shared traumatic sexual experiences that impacted their language use, which I deliberately choose to exclude from my analysis out of respect to them and their stories.

Reflexivity: A Queer Catharsis

Lorraine Nencel (2014) describes feminist reflexivity as the process of distributing power between the researcher and the interlocutors in a nonhierarchical and collaborative manner where the research process becomes a shared learning process. I describe this research project as a site of queer catharsis. Through our conversations, my interlocutors and I created a queer feminist safe space within which we shared our stories, identities, and experiences. We laughed a lot, cringed a lot, and sent many virtual hugs. I had the honor to meet some of the fluffiest, sweetest, and grumpiest cats and dogs. This thesis allowed me to reconnect with many friends who were present throughout my queer awakenings. It also allowed me to meet new people who became close friends with whom I connect on a deep level by sharing my interests and whereabouts. The fact that the longest interview was almost 5 hours long shows the extent to which we all felt the need to talk about this topic, to share our sex lives, and to bond over our interconnected intimacies, desires, and tongues (pun intended). One of my interlocutors called our interview a *subhiyyi*, which is a traditional Arab custom of having morning coffee with one's neighbor. A *subhiyyi* is a custom that is mostly common among women, and it allows them to bond through spending quality time in each other's company. I consider every conversation that made this thesis happen to be a *subhiyyi*, in all the power and intimacy that a *subhiyyi* holds. I perceive this thesis to be a personal and practice-based feminist act before being an academic endeavor, because it created a safe space for our queer and sexed stories to be told in languages that resemble us.

Chapter 1: Own me *bil 'Arabi*: Attitudes Towards and Perceptions of Arabic during Queer Sex

Ma'le tkoun t'eele, ma'le. Ma it's a passionate language. Enno le kel shi baddo ykoun zhour w vanilla ya 'ne? Enno nehna mesh vanilla... Nehna 'alam mentek ekhtna kel yom. Enno le badna neje nehna nratteb el 'omour.

It's okay if it's heavy, it's okay. It's a passionate language. Like why should everything be flowery and vanilla? We're not vanilla. We're people who are being fucked every day [literal meaning: our sister is being fucked; figurative meaning: we are oppressed], so why should we pretend that things are more proper than how they seem?

As we were discussing the common negative perceptions of sexed Arabic as a heavy language, Michelle (37) was getting more frustrated by the second. In a very stern tone, she said that not everything has to be flowery and vanilla, because we, as people from Lebanon, are suffering on a daily basis, so there is no need to make things lighter than how they seem. I was intrigued by how she applied the power and pain dynamics of sexual Bondage, Discipline (or Dominance), Sadism (or Submission), and Masochism (BDSM) to the deteriorating economic and political situation in Lebanon, except that the suffering derived from the latter is non-consensual. Based on several observations from the interviews I conducted, I find it fundamental to explore BDSM to analyze the performative linguistic and sexual patterns that queer women perform in order to subvert and dismantle hegemonic structures of oppression in Lebanon through a consensual exchange of power, pain, and pleasure.

In my understanding and subsequent analysis of power, I rely on Michel Foucault's (1980) theoretical work on the conception of power and how it operates on multiple levels that "interact, intersect, and support each other" (p. 72). Foucault (1980) argues that "In reality, power in its existence goes much further, passes through much finer channels, and is much more ambiguous, since each individual has at his disposal a certain power, and for that very reason can also act as the vehicle for transmitting a wider power. The reproduction of the relations of production is not the only function served by power" (p. 72). In this chapter, and the broader context of my thesis, I locate the queer body and the queer self as the vehicles through which power is mediated and channeled vis-à-vis language. In this chapter, I analyze how and why sexed Arabic is posited as "aggressive", "rough", and "vulgar" when queered. By tracing the discursive markers of these terms from a sociolinguistic lens, I show how sexed Arabic is often associated with derogatory discourses of harassment and abuse that establish and maintain structures of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity in the Lebanese

street. However, by applying Foucault's conception of power (1980), I argue that the consensual dynamics of sexual BDSM allow the queer self, as embodied and performed by the queer body, to subvert oppressive power structures using that same language of oppression – Arabic.

Arabic as “Aggressive” and “Rough”

By looking into the media and self-censorships in erotic Arabic discourses, Sara Mourad (2013) explores different tensions with sexed Arabic. She approaches questions of translation/translating sexual categories, transliteration, and the adoption of western sexed terminologies from a productive angle that challenges “binary understandings of English/Arabic, foreign/local, experience/language, authentic/translated” (Mourad, 2013, p. 2543). Mourad's work on “queering the mother tongue” is crucial to my analysis because she tackles the question of the accessibility and availability of certain sexual terminologies in English and the lack thereof in Arabic such as those related to the discourse of sadism and masochism and drag (p. 2541). I examine this lack of accessibility that Mourad briefly touches on, yet I argue against it based on the findings I derived from my interviews. My data collection proves that Arabic offers a more diverse jargon for sexual BDSM. Several of my interlocutors perceived sexed Arabic to be “aggressive” and “rough”. Most of them also considered sexed Arabic to be “heavy”; this heaviness was often associated with them feeling that the language is “odd”, “strange”, and “foreign”. Some characterized it as a “violent” language that is difficult to navigate and exchange during sex. Others considered this violent aspect to be a facilitator during sexual BDSM.

Sexed Arabic triggers unwanted emotional associations for some queer women in Lebanon. For example, Eliane (28) links the “harshness” in Arabic to her childhood memories and upbringing. She talks about English being “softer”, “sometimes when I speak up and when I share my thoughts, they are harsh *bil 'Arabi* [in Arabic], *fa bjarreb masalan esta 'mel el Englizi la koun* [so I try to use English to be more] gentle *aktar, ta ma esta 'mel el 'Arabi* [so I won't have to use Arabic] because [it's harsh] *'ese. Maba 'ref la 'enno eza nehna rbina bi 'ayle eza 'ayyato 'alayna bi 'ayyto bil 'Arabi, so mabadna nesta 'mel el 'Arabi kermel ma nhes bi asewe* [I don't know if it's because we were raised in a family where they would yell at us in Arabic, so we don't want to use Arabic to avoid feeling its harshness]”. In this case, Eliane (28) reverts to English as a linguistic tool that softens the harshness of

Arabic during queer sex. English becomes a linguistic shield that allows her and her sexual partner(s) to escape unwanted feelings that might be accompanied by unpleasant childhood memories.

While sexed Arabic can be triggering for some, it is used as a productive linguistic tool of pleasure for many. Max (23) codeswitches between Arabic and English during sex but states that “*lamma ykoun aktar* [when it’s more during] choking, spanking, *bkoun ‘am behke bil ‘Arabi* [I would be speaking in Arabic]”. Similarly, Ranim (34) predominantly uses English and French to communicate during sex; however, she prefers using Arabic when dominating and giving orders during sexual BDSM “*la ‘enno* [because] it’s more intense *bhes* [I feel] [...] It’s rougher and also it’s the language of authority that we’re used to, so *btel ‘ab aktar ‘ala el* [it plays more on the] sensorial memories *aw* [or] sensorial *osas m ‘awwadin ‘alaya* [things we’re used to], habits”. The “authoritative” tone of Arabic matches the power dynamics involved in a sexual BDSM setting from a dominant’s perspective, therefore rendering the process of giving orders in Arabic more practical. While Eliane (28) and Ranim (34) share similar sensorial experiences with Arabic, Eliane finds the “roughness” of sexed Arabic to be triggering while Ranim finds it highly pleasurable; aside from personal differences that are unique to each person and their journey with (queer) sex, the focal point of difference between the two is sexual BDSM or the lack thereof. Therefore, I argue that the power and pain dynamics orchestrated within sexual BDSM are compatible with the “roughness” of sexed Arabic as a performative mediator. In order to further support my analysis, I refer to the case of Nour (25), who experiences a clear linguistic schism between her use of Arabic and English when engaging in different types of sex.

Nour (25) mostly uses English during “vanilla sex” or sex that lacks “roughness” in her opinion, which she links to her visual exposure to films and other media content. She also mentioned that some of her earliest exposures to the concept of sex was through Young Adult English/American literature. Thus, her understanding – and therefore practice – of “vanilla sex” were channeled through the English language. Meanwhile, she reverts back to Arabic when engaging in “rougher sex” or sexual BDSM, specifically when being in a dominant position, in order to express intense emotions such as aggression.³ According to Deleuze

³ “When it’s more vanilla, it’s more English, and when it’s more rough, it’s definitely more Arabic. [...] I believe that I talk vanilla in English because I’ve only read and watched sex when it’s about love. *Bil* [in] movies *w el* [and the] series ... I love romcoms, and they’re always in English, I think that’s why *bilja2 la hol l kalemet* [I refer to these words]. Whereas *bil ‘Arabi* [in Arabic], I have a theory about it. *Fi ‘endik* [there’s a] part *min el* [of the] aggression love, like *ktir bheb l shakhes* [I love the person a lot] – badde *okhbto* [literally: I want to hit them

(2014), there is the need for the presence of a categorical sadist who is performing the act of inflicting pain through roleplay therefore taking on the role of an aggressor. In this specific case, since Nour associates the use of the Arabic language with aggression, the roleplay entails the switch to Arabic in order to perform the act of categorical sadism. Nour (25) further expressed that Arabic makes it easier for her to “possess” and “own” the other person within a consensual sexual BDSM setting. She added that she mostly spoke English with her ex-partner because she was in a submissive position most of the time, “that’s why *ma kent ehki ‘Arabi* [I didn’t speak Arabic], because I did not get to experience the power, you know? I was always the sub, I was always receiving”. Power play during sex is not necessarily initiated, exerted, or performed by the dominant, since the submissive is equally involved in this exchange of power (Henderson-Espinoza, 2018); however, Nour (25) linked power to dominance, and linked the establishment of both to speaking Arabic during sex.

For some of my interlocutors, Arabic represents a religious and conservative upbringing with which they no longer identify. Michelle (37) had a sexual partner whose relative is a nun, so they engaged in roleplay that involved religious wordplay. Her partner wore a nun’s habit and she used the rosary beads to choke her while giving her orders related to taking communion in Arabic. They subversively played on what she called the “sweet guilt of religion”. She also derived pleasure while (coincidentally) masturbating to Arabic Christian hymns such as “*Haqqan Qam* [He has Risen]” during Easter street-celebrations in her neighborhood. Since Arabic was the initial linguistic channel through which Michelle was religiously indoctrinated, it is intrinsic for her to mediate power in that language when subverting the “sweet guilt of religion” during sexual BDSM. Therefore, I argue that sexed Arabic is cathartic for some queer women, as it can be a productive linguistic means to subvert a conservative religious upbringing through certain sexual practices.

/ figuratively: I want to fuck them] – I love that. Like once I’m deep in the feels, when I’m so fucking enraged with love, or lust, or anything at all, I talk in Arabic because I go back to... *ya ‘ne bhes enno* [I feel that] my childhood... *enno* [that] love and aggression to some extent is in our Arab society. Like if you love someone *fi* [there’s] this toxic space between you, so *deyman fi hal* [there’s always this] toxic love at some point during your childhood, so your childhood is in Arabic. So, I think for me, it may have some sort of relation with it. *Deyman fi* [there’s always] this aggression *ma’ el* [with] love, *deyman fi* [there’s always] this line of toxicity that we’re raised on in our society” (Nour, 25).

Arabic as “Heavy” and “Vulgar”: (Un)Naming Genitalia

One of the prominent themes that were prevalent among my interlocutors was characterizing Arabic as too “heavy” to be exchanged during sex. The first characteristic of this “heaviness” is linked to the “vulgarity” that comes with a derogatory discourse associated with female genitalia. Meanwhile, the second characteristic is related to the phonetic and lexical difficulties associated with utilizing the Arabic terms for female genitalia during sex, which in their nonderogatory context are mostly available in Modern Standard Arabic and not Colloquial Arabic.⁴ The third characteristic of the “heaviness” of Arabic is linked to the scarcity of exposure to a normalized and positively-connotated public discourse on female genitalia, especially in the media, which creates an alienation and sense of strangeness towards them.

Eliane (28) feels an aversion towards Arabic due to experiencing a feeling of “cringe”, which is a colloquial term used to denote a sense of discomfort, embarrassment, and rejection towards something or someone. Eliane (28) experiences an intense sense of discomfort when hearing terms such as “pussy” and “vagina” in Arabic and does not feel comfortable using them.⁵ Terms that refer or relate to female genitalia in Arabic are part of a discourse that she labels as “vulgar”. This derogatory discourse often resurfaces as a “street-discourse” that involves the catcalling and harassment of women. This discourse also targets men and is particularly insulting for/among them since it typically involves referring to the act of non-consensually “fucking” their female family members (mother, sister, wife). Common

⁴ Please see an elaborate discussion on Modern Standard Arabic in Chapter 3.

⁵ “*Enno bhessa t’ili ya ‘ne eje oul la sahebte enno “badde elhaslik kessik”, bhessa ktir t’ili Bhes enno metel yemken kelmet “lick” is better. “Lick” is going to turn me on aktar men “badde elhasik”. Kamen there are other points that all revolve around “kessik”. Hole el kalimet el vulgaire el aalam bi our culture byesta ‘mlowa kermel msabbet yaane “badde nik kess emmak” [...] ma fiki testa ‘mliyon in bed because bita ‘mle cringe bil takhet. Ya ‘ne eza aletle sahebte “badde elhaslik kessik halla”, ana ben ‘az, bensedem. Bas eza bet ‘elle “I so wanna go down on you right now”, beshlah deghre. So, gharib kif tari ‘et el English is different than the Arabic w gharib kif nehna rekkbet bi rasna enno kelmet “kess” w “mahbal” it’s very... t’ili. W la ‘enno ma men ‘oulon, mannon normalized ‘ena bi Lebnen, fa ma mnesta ‘melon. Although el ‘Arabi ma khasso, ‘anjad ma khasso, ya ‘ne nehna ‘anjad ‘am ne ‘ze el ‘Arabi bi hay el tari ‘a. Ma badde bayyen zalame men el shere ‘w ella “yo ‘borne kessik”. [I feel like it’s very heavy to tell my partner “I want to lick your pussy”. I feel like the word “lick” is better. “Lick” is going to turn me on more than “Arabic for: I want to lick you”. Also, there are other points that all revolve around “Arabic for: your pussy”. These vulgar words are used as curse words by people in our culture like “I want to/will fuck your mother’s pussy”, you can’t use them in bed because you would cringe during sex. If my girlfriend were to tell me “Arabic for: I want to lick your pussy now”, I would be triggered and shocked. But if she were to say “I so wanna go down on you right now”, I would undress immediately. So, it’s weird how English is different than Arabic, and it’s weird how it’s engraved in our minds that words such as “pussy” and “vagina” are very... heavy. And because we don’t say them, they’re not normalized in Lebanon, so we refrain from using them. Although, it’s not Arabic’s fault, honestly, it’s not its fault, because we are really hurting the Arabic language in this way. I just don’t want to seem/sound like a harasser/man on the street when referring to my girlfriend’s pussy]*” (Eliane, 28).

expressions such as “*kess emmak/ik/kon*” [literal translation: your mother’s pussy] and “*kess ekhtak/ik/kon*” [literal translation: your sister’s pussy] are curse words that are used to express anger and establish dominance and power over others (El Khoury, 2015). This also entails impurifying women by penetrating their virginity, which dishonors them and the men in their families (Abu-Odeh, 2010). When analyzing this discourse, there is a more sexist and patriarchal connotation to it, since it is used to emasculate and scar the honor of the man whose female relatives are involved in the insults/curse words/slurs; this sociocultural misconception assigns men the responsibility to protect the bodies and honor of their female relatives, which posits them in a position of ownership (Abu-Odeh, 2010). Thus, women’s perception of certain body parts becomes tainted with the aggressive harassment-related connotations that are embedded with culturally common insults, curse words, and slurs. Language plays a significant role in one’s perception of their body because “We understand our bodies through our mother tongues and other languages that we acquire with time” (El Khoury, 2015, p. 10). Therefore, if not able to reclaim the usage of such terms, some queer women might find it particularly uncomfortable, difficult, and “heavy”/burdening to refer to their own as well as their partners’ body parts, specifically vulvas and vaginas, using terms such as “*kess*” given that the latter is associated with heteronormative aggression and harassment. “When the koss becomes a public playground for undesired emotions, the vagina “canal” passively delivers violence and aggression instead of giving pleasure and life to its rightful owner” (El Khoury, 2015, p. 8).⁶ Therefore, saying and/or hearing these terms can become triggering rather than erotic, even when used in a pleasurable sexed setting.

It is even more shameful for women to do that, which falls within the parameters of ‘*ayb*’ as a concept. ‘*Ayb*’ is a broad term that encompasses a set of actions or behaviors that are deemed shameful from an Arab cultural perspective; understandings of ‘*ayb*’ differ from one Arab society to another and is measured differently based on age, gender, religion, and other factors (Abu-Lughod, 1986 and Odgaard, 2022).⁷ The literal translation of ‘*ayb*’ is “defect”, yet the closest translation of the Arab cultural understanding of this term would be a combination of “shame” and “taboo”. Fayed Badarna (2019) argues that the culture of ‘*ayb*’ radically influences and impacts our behavioral and emotional patterns and expressions. Despite that, Eliane (28) personifies the Arabic language by claiming that the language is not at fault when it comes to these negative associations. The patriarchal, sexist, and misogynistic

⁶ “*Koss*” is a variation of “*kess*” in Lebanese Colloquial Arabic based on different regional dialects.

⁷ Please see an elaborate discussion on Arabic as “Shameful” in Chapter 2.

structures that defend and maintain such discourses in Lebanese private and public spaces and contexts of harassment are to be blamed and held accountable for this problematic relationship between some (queer) women and sexed Arabic.

When looking at this vulgarization from a different perspective, it is significant to explore the productive, seductive, and erotic potential that can be yielded from the reconfiguration of this discourse, which is experienced when “vulgarity” and “trashiness” become a site of lust, pleasure, and excitement. However, it is worthy of noting that these pleasurable encounters with naming genitalia in Arabic and labeling these encounters as “more primal” and “dirtier” were mostly common among practitioners of BDSM. Therefore, I argue that there are certain performative (sexual-linguistic) qualities within the dynamics of kink/BDSM that are rendered more pleasurable and enhanced when mediated in Arabic, which is not the case in “vanilla sex”.

As someone whose first bachelor’s degree is in English and second bachelor’s degree is in Arabic Language and Literature, I was very intrigued to find out that languages can be classified as “heavy” and “nonheavy”. And being entirely infatuated with the intricacies of Arabic, I was even more intrigued to witness Arabic being labeled as “heavy”. So, I looked into similar experiences that my interlocutors share with sexed Arabic in an attempt to dissect this heaviness and interpret whether it is a matter of language in its entirety or an issue of discourse as socially constructed. Shams (42) is fluent in Arabic, English, and French but predominantly uses English during sex and makes an effort to use a few words and phrases in Arabic if her sexual partner(s) prefer(s) Arabic. She uses French in very rare cases. When comparing her levels of comfort with the three languages, she mentioned that she is mostly comfortable using English and added that “*bil Farance yemken hes hale a’al cringe men el ‘Arabi w khassatan esta ‘mel ba’d el kalimet la’enno el Farance rah ykoun shway arib men el Englizi* [Speaking French, I might feel less cringed than Arabic, especially when using certain words, since French might be a bit closer to English], the Latin words are different than... *enno el ‘Arabi already t’il hol el “bathar” w “mahbal” w maba’re shu... w “qadib”* [Arabic is already heavy, like “clitoris”, “vagina”, and – I don’t know what – “penis”]... anyway *el legha rah tsahhele la’enno el kalemet hek w la’enno lafz el ahrof hek* [the language will make it easier for me because these words are like that and the pronunciation of letters is like that], it will make it easier for me to communicate in French.” When naming the Arabic terms for “clitoris”, “vagina”, and “penis”, Shams got very flustered, which clearly reflected how we both felt towards the strangeness of these terms due to the fact that these are Standard and not

Colloquial terms and therefore add a layer of alienation that is additional to the already existing layer of the derogation. In Shams' case, "heavy" mainly entails Arabic being phonetically challenging and burdening to be used during sex. Another intriguing element in Shams' quotation is that she specifically referred to the three terms "*bathar/clitoris*", "*mahbal/vagina*", and "*qadib/penis*" when giving examples, which is in line with my previous analysis of Eliane's (28) discourse on the derogatory aspects of this "heaviness".

Even though Lina (37) and Michelle (37) share a similar familial, religious, and educational background and belong to the same age group, Lina feels uncomfortable using sexed Arabic, specifically when referring to genitalia, but Michelle does not experience any discomforts or difficulties when referring to genitalia during sex, "*Hatta kessik b'oula* [I even say "your pussy"]. *Kessik* [your pussy] is my favorite word. *Enno el 'alam kella around kelmet kess. Enno ktir helwe el kelme. Shu el meshkle?* [The entire world revolves around the word "pussy". But it's such a beautiful word, what's the problem with it?]. This entails that even when queer women have similar backgrounds, their perceptions of sexed Arabic differ greatly based on their personal experiences and sexual practices, particularly when it comes to the usage of specific terms.

When asked about some of the terms and phrases that she would never say in Arabic, Clara (23) replied saying "*bas* [only] when we speak about genital parts. *Manne m'awwade sammeyon bil 'Arabi* [I'm not used to naming them in Arabic] orally, *enno* [like] my clit *aw* [or] my vagina." She added that she would not use terms such as "*kess*" meaning "pussy" in Colloquial Arabic during sex but might use it after sex with someone with whom she feels very comfortable. This falls within my aforementioned frame of analysis regarding the lack or scarcity of exposure to female genitalia being used in a normalized and unstigmatized manner. Therefore, while some of my interlocutors mentioned that they would never refer to female genitalia in Arabic during sex, others stressed the importance of being very comfortable in a sexed or non-sexed context to be able to use such terms with more ease. Similarly, Tala (25) stated that she has never used the term "*kess*" during sex but has used it to refer to someone's genitalia before or after sex, which complements my upcoming analysis on the different usages of sexed Arabic during the act itself versus outside the parameters of sex.⁸ She said that this schism is due to the negative connotations associated with this term in specific which signal "being so thirsty over someone *bas* [but] in a very lusty way... *ya 'ne*

⁸ Please see an elaborate discussion on Talking about Sex vs. Having Sex in Chapter 3.

[like] in a very hookup way [...] *hatta bas n'oula "badde kessik" aw "atini kessik"* [even when we say "I want your pussy"] I don't wanna say it's a half-joke *bas* [but] it sounds like a translation... like a poor English translation or a poor French translation, *ya'ne la hal daraje nehna ma mnemlok loghatna*, [we don't own our language to the extent that] it doesn't sound like something we are genuinely saying in our mother tongue". Despite the negation in her phrasing, Tala's initial thought was to refer to these terms in Arabic as a "half-joke", which entails that using sexed Arabic to name female genitalia is not taken seriously to the extent that it can sound funny.⁹ The semi-humorous element in the abovementioned examples is interconnected with Tala's perception of them sounding like poor translations of English or French as foreign languages commonly spoken in Lebanon, even though there is nothing syntactically or semantically wrong with these phrases. She considers them "ingenuine" in her mother tongue – Arabic, because they are rarely normalized in contexts that are not sexist, misogynistic, patriarchal, or derogatory and because most of the exposure to and interaction with sex education occurs in English or French rather than Arabic which creates an alienation towards the Arabized version of this knowledge and makes her feel as if Arabs/Arabic speakers "don't own [their] language" or perhaps sexed language in specific.

Some of my interlocutors who are usually uncomfortable with using sexed Arabic mentioned that they are able to tolerate hearing it more when they are in a heightened state of arousal during sex. Based on this general observation, I argue that being extremely aroused during sex lightens the heaviness of Arabic and makes it easier to digest without experiencing discomfort while engaging in a sexual act. It is also significant to note that in addition to the element of arousal, elements such as the sexual dynamic between partners, the tone of voice, and the manner in which words are said – for instance, whether they are exchanged in a playful or erotic manner – play a role in how partners receive and perceive sexed Arabic.

"Kesse mesh msabbe" / "My pussy is not a curse word"

Arguably, the October 17 Revolution of 2019 played a significant role in reshaping the national memory of the Lebanese people. It partially recuperated their relationship with the Arabic language as a means of collective belonging (Díez, 2021), which was achieved through Arabic being an accessible means of articulating a shared revolutionary vision. The

⁹ Please see an elaborate discussion on Arabic as "Funny" and "Humorous" in Chapter 3.

revolution also constituted a critical moment of queer visibility, which was achieved through multiple forms that include but are not limited to chants, graffiti, public discussions, and queer organizing (Younes and Bailly, 2020). Younes and Bailly (2020) shed light on the concepts of queer self-censorship and the systematic discrimination against queer and trans* women in Lebanon and how they impact the ways in which queer and trans people experience certain spaces and perform their queerness and transness in these spaces. Through creative chants, songs, and repetitions, (queer) protestors were able to voice their demands and overcome the fear inflicted upon their bodies while being inclusive of marginalized communities. Alongside chants, graffiti played a very significant role in marking the demands of the revolution as permanent sites of resistance on the streets. What makes graffiti special is the fact that it is more permanent and more fixed than other forms of resistance. It creates a form of an archive that is accessible to the public. In this sense, it is a continuous form of resistance. The voicing of chants and expression of graffiti appeared in Arabic, which was significant in the context of Lebanese national belonging and resistance within a broader Arab context. Some of these chants and graffiti featured statements such as “*louti mesh msabbe*” [faggot is not a curse word] and “*kesse mesh msabbe*” [my pussy is not a curse word]. These expressions were also marked on Beirut’s walls before the revolution (El Khoury, 2015). I also witnessed them being featured on protesters’ posters and in chants during Beirut’s Women’s March in 2019. However, the Lebanese revolution placed them within an intersectional feminist framework of resistance that is inclusive of economic demands, political demands, as well as demands for equality. Fayed Badarna (2019) argues that many societies fear criticizing culturally widespread sexist curse words using feminist tools in order to avoid being accused of subscribing to western agendas; however, he argues that the Lebanese protests represented a public criticism of the abovementioned curse words in a subversive feminist manner that aims to change the popular sexist discourse.

I argue that the element of queer visibility and activism while using Arabic as a common language for resistance and revolt allowed queers in Lebanon to reclaim a language that has been used as a tool for their oppression and stigmatization. Thus, being exposed to these expressions in a revolutionary context where their meanings and connotations have been reconfigured allowed for the possibility of a sociolinguistic catharsis to be experienced by some queers and women. I argue that this exposure to a positively connotated sexual discourse and queer discourse was accentuated by the simultaneous growth of sex-positive and queer-positive content delivered in Arabic on social media platforms across the Arab

world. These intertwined factors amplified the process of reclamation, “so, recently, I also learnt to reclaim the word *kesse* [my pussy] because like I was always so ashamed of using it. Because we always learn to be so ashamed of our body parts [...] It’s a fucking body part. Like why do I have to go all smooth about it and all careful? Like it’s there” (Laure, 24).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, some of my interlocutors perceived Lebanese Colloquial Arabic to be “aggressive”, “rough”, and “heavy” for different reasons, which rendered using it uncomfortable and uneasy when engaging in queer sex. These reasons include but are not limited to having negative associations with Arabic during childhood or a religious/conservative upbringing as well as the lack/scarcity of a normalized exposure to sexed Arabic. In specific, when naming or referring to (female) genitalia during sex, some of my interlocutors experienced a heightened level of discomfort with sexed Arabic, which is linked to these terms being used as sexist and misogynistic curse words, slurs, or insults that are meant to objectify, violate, and exert dominance over women’s bodies in the public and private spheres. I argue that the Lebanese revolution as well as social media content in the past half-decade contributed to a heightened queer visibility and exposure to queer-positive and sex-positive content in Arabic, which plays a role in reshaping some queer women’s experiences and their comfort levels with sexed Arabic by reclaiming it.

Throughout this chapter, I argue that derogatory sexed Arabic is reclaimable, and has the potential to be a site of pleasure for many queer women in Lebanon. This reclamation of sexist, misogynistic, and patriarchal curse words, slurs, and insults is conditional upon the utilization of these lexicons and discourses in a safe and consensual setting. I further argue that kink/BDSM constitutes a unique sexed realm within which the reclamation of derogatory terms can be facilitated through practices of degradation and humiliation as well as consensual exchanges of power and inflictions of pain – all of which intersect at the self, language, and sexed pleasure.

Chapter 2: The “Dirty” and “Shameful” is (not) Sexy: Attitudes Towards and Perceptions of Arabic during Queer Sex

As she lit another cigarette and got comfortable on her bed halfway through our almost 5 hours long interview, Tala (25) proceeded to tell me about her personal experience with non-consensually being called a *sharmouta* during sex.

Recently, I was hooking up with this person [...] literally *sa'alne so'al enno* [he literally asked me] “do you wanna do this...?” *shi* super cringe *w bil ekher alle sharmouta* [it was something super cringe, and in the end he called me “*sharmouta*”/“whore”] [...] *Enno ana* [like] I don't enjoy someone calling me *sharmouta* [whore] [...] *Enno* [like] how would you assume that this will turn me on? *Enno* [like] this word is usually very degrading, *bas rejjel yesta'mela bikoun 'am yestarkhes mara w kif eza rejjel akbar mennik 'am yesta'mela ka' enno* [when a man uses this term, he would be objectifying and monetizing women, let alone a man who is older than you and calling you *sharmouta*/whore as if] he is asserting his masculinity over you. It's so disgusting [...] The fact that he was so confident using it... *Hatta yemken law 'ala bil Englizi yemken kenet bala'ta shway* in the sense of ok *b'oul enno jeyeba men el porn masalan, bas enno t'elle yeha "sharmouta"*... [Maybe if he said it in English, I would have stomached it a bit in the sense that I would assume that he heard it in porn for example, but to call me a *sharmouta*...]. *Enno bro eza enta btethayyaj eza bet'ayyetle sharmouta, ma elak ha' testa'mela abadan la' enno fi* [like bro, if you get horny when calling me a *sharmouta*, you don't have the right to call me that at all, because there is] this fantasy among – again *ma badde* [I don't want] to generalize *bas enno* [but] – Arab men to sleep with a *sharmouta* [...] *Bas enno* [But] why does the concept of *sharmouta* turn them on so much? I think men also like to sleep with someone that is very sexually active because they think it's flattering, *enno 'enda khebra w* [that she is experienced and is] liberated *w* [and] I think that unconsciously they label her as a *sharmouta*, even in the best ways possible, still *fi* [there's] this misogynistic patriarchal remnant. *Enno le ana ma feye elo sharmout masalan? Aslan shu yaane sharmout?* [Like why can't I call him *sharmout* for example? What does *sharmout* even mean? (*sharmout* [man-whore] is Arabic masculine for *sharmouta*)]. It doesn't mean anything.

It is a common trope among my interlocutors to perceive Arabic as a “dirty” language that is specifically pleasurable to use in sexual BDSM settings. The “dirtiness” of sexed Arabic is often linked to “vulgarity”, which is a theme that is thoroughly explored in Chapter 1, specifically in relation to naming genitalia. This “dirtiness” is also often accompanied by a sense of “shame” that is linked to several factors such as one's family and upbringing, the dominant discourse of harassment in Lebanon, and the “strangeness” or “unfamiliarity” that some queer women feel towards the place of Arabic in their queer sex lives. In this chapter, I explore the themes of “dirtiness” and “shame”. I argue that these two themes are interlinked and built on sociocultural elements that are similar to a far extent. Throughout my analysis, I explore the ways in which my interlocutors navigate the “dirtiness” and “shame” they

experience towards certain linguistic utterances and sexed acts. I then argue that many of my interlocutors are able to reclaim the derogatory language whose original purpose is to subjugate, objectify, and harass (queer) women. This reclamation happens through the reconfiguration of meanings through sexual practices that render derogatory language a space for queer sexual pleasure.

Arabic as “Dirty”

Dalia (27) enjoys being called *sharmouta* [whore] and explains that “*sharmouta* comes in two contexts, either degrading *aw enno* [or] like just someone very sexual – not in a degrading way – but more in a slutty way versus whore, bitch, whatever”. *Sharmouta* [whore] as a curse word was initially used to refer to female sex workers. This is due to certain negative social perceptions that condemn sex work and deem it immoral and/or shameful (Reda, 2020; Slim et al., 2020). It then evolved to refer to sexually active unmarried women. Contemporary interpretations entail that *sharmouta* and its equivalents like *ahbe*, *‘ahra*, and *manyouke* are used by a person (any gender) to degrade or hypersexualize women, regardless of whether they are sexually active, and regardless of whether the act for which they are being degraded is sexual. These terms are commonly used as curse words in Arab countries/among Arabic speakers and can differ across regional dialects; for example, *sharmouta* is more common in Levantine countries while *ahbe/qahba* is more common in Gulf countries.

In the opening quotation, Tala (25) felt enraged when a man called her *sharmouta* in the context of casual sex without obtaining her consent prior to that. She located this anger and discomfort within the negative connotations associated with the term *sharmouta* which is commonly used as a curse word. Her unease was accentuated by the age and gender identity of her sexual partner who was a cis man in his mid-40s. She felt disgusted and subjugated by how he was asserting his toxic masculinity in a heteropatriarchal manner which was conveyed through the typical usages of this term which objectifies and monetizes women/sex workers. I was stunned when she told me that she would not have minded hearing the curse word as much had he said it in English because she would have assumed that it was something he came across in pornography and was trying to imitate or reenact what he saw/heard in order to fulfill a fantasy. This posits the curse words typically used in mainstream pornography as imported western ideologies that do not necessarily correlate with the ideologies and connotations embedded within local/regional equivalents of these

terms. My interlocutors considered the local/regional curse words to be “dirtier”, “heavier”, and “more intense” than the mainstream western (English/American) equivalents such as “bitch/slut/whore”. Therefore, when used non-consensually, Arabic curse words would be deemed more violent and offensive than non-Arabic ones. Therefore, the transference of meaning differs across languages when it comes to curse words; non-Arabic/non-native curse words do not carry meanings that are as culturally translatable and relevant to native Arabic speakers as Arabic curse words do. Given this comparison, I argue that Arabic curse words are felt on a level that is deeper than non-Arabic curse words, whether in a positive or negative manner, since they carry sociocultural meanings that are not equally transferred when translated. Here, language is used as a tool of shaming the self by projecting sociocultural understandings of what is deemed shameful and morally unacceptable.

In a somehow angry and inquisitive tone, Tala questions the impossibility of calling a man *sharmout* [masculine of *sharmouta* / literal translation: man-whore]. She expresses that this impossibility stems from the lack of connotation for this term. Even though there is nothing linguistically wrong with this Colloquial term, there is an evident lack in a cultural meaning associated with it, which renders it impossible for a man to be a whore in an Arab sociolinguistic and cultural space. One exception to this line of analysis would be the terms “*manyouk*” or “*manyak*” in the Lebanese colloquial dialect [literal translation: fucker (fucks someone else) / closest non-literal translation: fuckboy]. In both of these utterances, the man is the doer/initiator of action who is framed in a position of power vis-à-vis the “very sexy slutty woman that’s in [his] bed and [he] can do whatever [he] want[s] with her”, as Tala mentioned. Another exception to my earlier argument would be the term “*mentek/byentek*” in Lebanese Colloquial Arabic [literal translation: gets fucked (is fucked by someone else)]. This term is often used as a derogatory term for gay men who are penetrated by other men – “bottoms”. This is due to the shame associated with being fucked/penetrated, particularly among gay men, which is a topic that Najmabadi discussed in the context of Iran (2013). Both gay men and sex workers are stigmatized in similar ways (Mahfoud et al., 2010; Wagner et al., 2013), since sex – specifically penetration – is used as a tool of communicating power against them. Both are expected to be subdued by hegemonic masculinity in sexed and non-sexed settings.

Dalia (27), who predominantly uses English, stated that she reverts to a mix of English and Arabic during kinky sex “because the practices kind of came with roleplays and there’s a degrading aspect to them so I remember using Arabic during *hol el* [these]

experiences – ‘*Arabi w Englizi ya ‘ne* not exclusively ‘*Arabi* [both English and Arabic, so not exclusively Arabic]’. She added that Arabic is the dominant language for her during sexual BDSM which is linked to her experiences with pain-play, and she enjoys being called *sharmouta* [whore] by her sexual partners, regardless of their gender identity. Yasmine (32) narrates a very similar experience:

During BDSM sessions or during rougher insulting or humiliating aspects of consensual sex, it’s really nice to say... *enno helo l msabet bil ‘Arabi ktir* [curse words in Arabic are very nice]. They’re nice and dirty. They’re heavier than English or French. *Enno eyyem bseb bil* [sometimes I curse in] French, that works as well, *bas enno el msabet bil ‘Arabi hek ‘enda wazna* [but curse words in Arabic are heavy] [...] It depends on the person and *akid hol el eshya bikouno* [of course these things are already] agreed upon and we know what would trigger the person, what are no-no words *w hek* [and such]. So, the words that I would never say in social settings, I would say in BDSM sessions. I can say “*sharmouta*” [whore], for instance, or “*bethebe hek ya sharmouta?*” [do you like this, whore?]. I think it’s intense and nice.

Therefore, in a feminist kinky sexed setting, or during sexual BDSM in specific, Arabic curse words such as *sharmouta* become pleasurable linguistic tools that resemble the power dynamics and consensual humiliation and degradation that often accompany the act. I argue that since terms such as *sharmouta* are socio-culturally tainted in Arabic, it is intrinsic to reclaim these terms in the same language through which these terms were granted the power and authority to shame the body and the self. I argue that consensually degrading and humiliating using the same language and discourse that is used as a tool of (nonconsensual) shaming renders *sharmouta* and its equivalents a possible site of pleasure, eroticism, and sexual liberation when used during consensual kinky sex.

Through the interviews I conducted, I observed that sexed derogatory discourses can also be cathartic in many ways, since they subvert social norms and conservative standards of (sexual) behavior, especially when queered. Therefore, I argue that queering the definitions and social connotations of *sharmouta* combats the shame that accompanies it and allows the partners involved in the sexual act to reclaim the curse word and the acts of *sharmata* (Arabized gerund referring to the actions performed by a *sharmouta*) through pleasure. However, this catharsis is conditional upon obtaining consent from all sexual partners involved in the sexual act and deriving pleasure from humiliation and/or degradation.

On Fucking and being Fucked *bil ‘Arabi*

Throughout my thesis, I locate queer sex at the core of catharsis. Based on the interviews I conducted, I argue that queer sex generally, and queer BDSM as a feminist tool specifically, create new pathways for processes of reclamation and reconfiguration, eventually leading to healing and catharsis (Airaksinen, 2018; Hammers, 2019). I further argue that this queer catharsis is not only built on the sexual level, but also on the linguistic level, meaning that fucking in Arabic during sexual BDSM can be more cathartic than fucking in other languages for native speakers of Arabic.

Some of my interlocutors experience terms such as *nikni* [fuck me (masculine addressee)]/*nikini* [fuck me (feminine addressee)]/*nikouni* [fuck me (plural form – gender neutral form)] in a manner that is similar to how they experience the term *sharmouta* [whore]. While some found fucking and demanding/wanting/desiring to be fucked in Arabic to be arousing, erotic, and intense, others found it to be triggering, uncomfortable, and offensive. Michelle (37) exclusively uses Arabic during sex with rare instances of codeswitching to English upon her partners’ requests, which urges her to accommodate to their preferences even if it makes her feel restricted. “*Sahebte akhada ktir wa ’et ta tet’abbal “badde nikik” aw “nikini”. Ktir. Ktir akhada wa ’et.* [It took my girlfriend a lot of time to be able to accept me saying “I want to/will fuck you” or “fuck me”. A lot. It took her a lot of time]. *Fi eyyem bet’ele enno ana manne edra hes bi kelmet “nikini”, ‘eyze shi like “fuck me”* [Sometimes she tells me: I’m not able to feel the word “*nikini*/Arabic for: fuck me (feminine addressee)”, I need to hear something like “fuck me”]. *Bseer ana masalan* [So, I would say] “I wanna fuck you baby so hard” (in a mocking and humorous tone)”. [...] *Enno oulili “nikini” ma t’oulili “fuck me”.* “*Nikini, nikini la jowwa... badde ekhtene’ bi ta’emtik*” (she places her hands around her neck to enact choking) *hek oulili.* [Say “*nikini* (Arabic for: fuck me)”, don’t say “fuck me”. *Nikini, nikini* to my core... I want to suffocate in your taste”, say it like that]. Great, “sit on my face!” (in a mocking and humorous tone).

Michelle is a very witty person whose narrations were often accompanied by funny gestures and comical facial expressions. I remember us laughing a lot throughout our conversation; no wonder she called our interview a “*subhiyyi*”, which is a traditional Arab custom of bonding with neighbors, mostly women, over coffee. We burst into laughter after she said “I wanna fuck you baby so hard” and “sit on my face” which were meant as jokes in which she mocked the mainstream western pornographic script. Her humor is quite

subversive since not only does it convey her criticism of the influence of mainstream pornography, but it also locates the discomfort and repulsion that some (queer) women feel towards fucking and being fucked in Arabic. Michelle's partner asks her to use "fuck me" instead of "*nikini*" during sex, because she is unable to feel or relate to the term when used in Arabic. Michelle (37) justifies that by saying, "it's triggering *eza baddik nehke feya* [if we are to talk about it], it is triggering *ka kalimet* [as words]. They are triggering. *Yaane min menna ma t'arrad la taharrosh?* [Who among us never experienced harassment?] *Min menna ma seme' hol el kalimet tosta 'mal ka msabbet?* [Who among us never heard those terms as curse words?] *Min menna ma seme'on bi taree'a ktir negative?* [Who among us never heard these words in a very negative manner?]. Her rhetorical questions summarize the dilemma that comes with using such terminologies, specifically when it comes to the act of fucking. Terms such as "*nikini*" [fuck me (feminine addressee)] or "*badde nikik*" [I want to/will fuck you (feminine addressee)] mainly target women and are often used in contexts of catcalling, abuse, and harassment. They can also target men in contexts of tainting/offending their honor which is conveyed through the very common expressions "*badde nik kess emmak*" [I want to/will fuck your mother's pussy (masculine addressee)] or "*badde nik kess ekhtak*" [I want to/will fuck your sister's pussy (masculine addressee)].¹⁰ In all these cases, the man/masculine is the doer who is penetrating the woman/feminine who is the receiver, to whom the act is done, regardless of whether the act is consensual. Therefore, if not able to reclaim these terms, women experience difficulties and resentment towards them, particularly in a sexed setting.

As discussed in this chapter's concluding subtopic titled "Concluding Remarks on Reclaiming Derogatory Language and Breaking Boundaries", queer women experience an additional layer of difficulty with embracing these terms due to the heteronormative connotations attached to them, which is expressed by many of my interlocutors. However, some of my interlocutors, notably Michelle (37), enjoys "fucking" and "being fucked" in Arabic. Based on her input, I argue that expressing the act of fucking and demanding to be fucked in Arabic is indispensable for her in the sense that the English equivalents cannot be deemed equally intense replacements. Therefore, expressing and asserting herself in Arabic when "fucking" and "being fucked" is radical to her experience of a heightened state of pleasure, as if the Arabic version is "real" and "authentic" while the English version is "fake" when felt, which is a theme that I thoroughly elaborate on in Chapter 3. Michelle (37)

¹⁰ Please see an elaborate discussion on the concept of "honor" in relation to Arabic curse words in Chapter 1.

proceeds to say that she would want to hear her partner say “fuck me” in Arabic – hence the title of my thesis – rather than in English, because by fucking her in Arabic, she is capable of reaching her “core” as she phrased it, meaning a layer of depth that no other language can allow her to reach during sex. Michelle (37) wants to “suffocate in [her partner’s] taste”, meaning that the last sensation that she desires to feel before hypothetically “dying” is the taste of her partner. I interpret being fucked to the core and the suffocation/death when fucking/being fucked by another in Arabic to be a connection with the authentic self, which is constituted through language and mediated through (queer) sex.

Since terms such as *nikini/nikni/nikouni* [fuck me] carry loaded and shameful connotations, many of my interlocutors refrain from saying them during sex. However, they are able to say them or think of saying them while fantasizing if they are not in the presence of somebody else/a sexual partner. For example, Eliane (28) told me that she has never said *nikini* [fuck me (feminine addressee)] or *badde nikik* [I want to/will fuck you (feminine addressee)] to any of her sexual partners and she does not see herself saying them in the future. However, when I asked her about the language(s) in which she fantasizes, she replied saying, “*afkare kellon bil ‘Arabe. Ya ‘ne hatta eza badde fakker bi rase b’oul ‘uff shu ‘abele de’fiki*”, “*bedde nikik*”. [All my thoughts are in Arabic. Even if I’m thinking to myself, I say “oh, I so want to touch you”, “I want to fuck you”]. I never felt it *bil Englizi* [in English]. It was all naturally Arabic.” I was shocked by the fact that she uttered the expression “*bedde nikik*” [I want to fuck you (feminine addressee)] when giving me examples of how she fantasizes alone, keeping in mind that she stressed that she would never utter those words during sex. When I pointed my surprise to her and asked about the difference in her language in those two sexed settings, she clarified saying “*bfakker feya bil ‘Arabi, bas ta eje oula la hadan bwejjo sa’be ktir. Bas in my fantasies eh eyleta ktir bi rase. Bas it’s bayne w ben hale w afkare w ahleme... yaane mahadan ha yesma ‘a w y’ele* “what the fuck, Eliane” *aw yedhakle aw yestaghreb*. [I think of it in Arabic, but when it comes to saying it to someone’s face, it’s very difficult for me. But I’ve said it a lot in my fantasies, when it’s only me, myself, my thoughts, and my dreams... so no one would hear me and say “what the fuck, Eliane” or laugh or be weirded out]. I think what’s inside your mind is just for you and it’s the safest place”. Therefore, when there is no one/sexual partner/audience to judge her use of these words and label them as *‘ayb* [shameful, taboo] or offensive, she is able to say them comfortably. I deduce that the use of such terms or the lack thereof not only depends on the comfort levels of the person saying them/enacting them, but also on how the sexual partner(s)

receive(s), perceive(s), and react(s) to hearing these terms. Thus, I argue that expressing the desire to fuck and be fucked in Arabic is subject to an external critic, which is regulated according to social standards and judgements, but not necessarily to an internal critic that derives pleasure from the fantasy/act when escaping the censorship of the external critic.

Sometimes, the duration of knowing sexual partners makes a difference in one's comfort levels when it comes to the reception of derogatory sexed Arabic. Dalia (27) reflected on her first-time sexual encounters and stated that she feels more comfortable with using sexed Arabic when she has gotten used to the person or managed to build a deeper connection with them, because "*kaman bil 'Arabi enno* [also in Arabic] it does feel dirtier, so I feel like maybe I need *heke* [like] a sense of feeling like this person passed a first checklist situation, *enno* [like] I feel more comfortable with them. [...] And if someone also that I've just met – when I remember it's also just cis men – *eza hada 'am y'elle "badde nikik"*, "*badde 'a'mel fiki hek*" [if someone is telling me "I want to/will fuck you", "I want to/will do this to you"], and we kind of just met, I feel uncomfortable with that. It makes me cringe. [...] *Bas* [but] when it's someone I have feelings towards and there's like an equal footing where we're both playful and we're there and we kind of have a familiarity, I don't cringe at it. I'm good, great, I'd be welcoming". Therefore, comfort and familiarity with sexual partners positively influences the reception of sexed Arabic by some queer women and allows them to enjoy the "dirtiness" of Arabic in an arousing manner. The (im)balance in power dynamics between partners, which Dalia described as an "equal footing" or the lack thereof, is an added layer which impacts this reception. This balance or equal footing was lacking between her and some of her sexual partners who were cis men, which made her uncomfortable.

Yasmine (32) told me, "when I'm sleeping with men, it becomes like 20 times harder, you know? *Enno matalan eza hada be'elle "badde tmossili ye*" [for example, if someone tells me "I want you to suck it"], it's hard not to get offended by that even though it's a very good, sensual, and lovely act. *Bas enno* [but like] when a man says that to you, you're kind of like "ew, wait, what do you mean?" Therefore, hearing sexed Arabic – particularly when it comes to terms that were often labeled as "dirty" by my interlocutors, such as "*nik*" [to fuck] or "*moss*" [to suck] – becomes more difficult and can trigger feelings of disgust if these terms and expressions are being reiterated in a cis-heterosexual context. This does not necessarily apply for queer sexual encounters among women and gender nonconforming folks. For instance, Stephanie (25) explained that she would feel more comfortable using sexed Arabic

with women than men. She associates using “dirty” Arabic terms with being submissive to her sexual partner(s); therefore, since she is comfortable submitting to women but not men, she unconsciously links her language use to the different power dynamics she shares with her sexual partners. Similarly, Max (23) discussed the difference in power dynamics when having sex with people of different genders, “*ma* ‘ [with] cis-het-male, *bteje aktar men mahal enno* [it’s more like] ‘macho alpha male wants to fuck small girl’. *Enno bteje bi mahal power dynamics enno howwe alpha jeye ynikik w ente jeye testa’ble enno hayda dawrik* [like it’s stemming from a place of power dynamics where he is an alpha who is coming to fuck you and your role to be the recipient]”. Max mentioned that this difference in power dynamics negatively influences her comfort levels with derogatory sexed Arabic when having sex with men, yet positively impacts her comfort levels with derogatory sexed Arabic when having sex with women and gender nonconforming folks. Thus, I argue that it is sometimes easier to use sexed Arabic – specifically terms that are perceived as “dirty” – in queer sex because of the subversive dynamics which are not typically present in heteronormative sex that may sometimes carry heteropatriarchal expectations. Therefore, a queered and consensual exchange of power, whether within or outside the parameters of sexual BDSM, subverts the heteronormative connotations and gendered/sexed roles attached to the acts of fucking and being fucked in Arabic.

Arabic as “Shameful”

Based on the interviews I have conducted, many of my interlocutors perceived Arabic as a “shameful” language to be used during queer sex, regardless of whether the discourse is that of humiliation/degradation or not. This shame is not necessarily experienced in an unpleasant or uncomfortable manner since it can play a positive factor in the person’s and/or partner’s/s’ arousal. For example, Laure (24) finds the shameful to be sexy, “I think that’s where it becomes sexy, like in the shame”. In this subtopic, I examine shame from a cultural rather than a psychoanalytical perspective and I argue that shame is associated with an experience of detachment, be it a detachment from the queer body, the Arabic language, or the upbringing.

Dina Georgis (2013) looks into the multilayered factors that are unique to the Lebanese society which tend to shape the daily lives and sexual/romantic experiences of queer women residing in Lebanon. Georgis (2013) examines shame and pride in *Bareed*

Mista3jil, the first published queer anthology about the experiences of queer women in Lebanon while basing her analysis on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Elspeth Probyn's theoretical works on shame. As cited by Georgis (2013), Probyn explained how shame is physically manifested through blushing and other bodily reactions, while Sedgwick argued that shame is constitutive of (queer) identity formation and criticized the discourse of queer activism which posits shame/oppression as opposed to pride/liberation. Sedgwick argued that shame is not a destructive element that must be eradicated but is rather a productive element that creates the potential for vulnerability and (self-)love because it allows us to deeply connect with others. Georgis provides an intricate and multilayered examination of Arab shame and its role in the formation of queer Arab subjectivities. She conceptualizes the Arab concept of '*ayb*' as what is considered immoral according to certain social standards and argues that it is more problematic or difficult for a behavior to be labeled as '*ayb*' (socially immoral) than *haram* (religiously sinful), which is why Arab social norms are intensely feared (Georgis, 2013). I apply Dina Georgis' take on on shame and queer Arab subjectivities to explore how shame is sexually experienced and linguistically navigated when utilizing sexed Arabic among queer women in Lebanon.

When I first shared my research prompt with Leyla (30), she told me that my thesis is an opportunity for her to reflect on her own thoughts, feelings, and acts during sex. This reflection was evident through the calm pauses she often took between utterances. When I asked her about the frequency of her usage of Arabic during sex, she took a long pause followed by a deep sigh and said:

Not too often, and I think that's due to the fact that the stigma... and the shame that comes around female sexuality, so I think my distance from the Arabic language during sex comes from my distance to my body in our culture, in society. So, by distancing the language, I'm distancing my body from myself and during sex, this is not something that I can do [...] Arabic distances me from my own body as if I am dissociating, and I think I need to inhabit this language in order to properly inhabit my own body.

I loved the imagery that Leyla described when talking about the act of distancing versus inhabiting. I envisioned her being torn between two ends: sex and language, provided that she could embody either element. By distancing herself from Arabic, Leyla (30) lets go of all the ideologies that are represented by and created through this language which allows her to be present – as opposed to being distant or dissociating – during the sexual act. She associates sexed Arabic with discourses of female sexuality being tainted with stigma and shame/ '*ayb*',¹¹

¹¹ Please see Chapter 1 for more analysis related to the topic of '*ayb*' [shame/taboo].

which signals an evident lack of a positively-connotated public discourse of female sexuality in Arabic, and the Arab world. Therefore, through mostly using French and rarely using English with her partners, Leyla is able to feel closer to herself and engage her body in the act of sex by deviating away from the shame that comes with Arabic. I argue that language is an intrinsic tool that can either shield or expose the body and the self during sex. In Leyla's case as well as many others, Arabic solidifies the manner in which heteropatriarchal subsets of society and culture subjugate women and their sexuality through language.

Ranim (34) was sitting in her kitchen, basking in the sun when a fluffy dog interrupted our conversation about the sexual act of going down on somebody. After a few pets, she resumed to tell me that she uses all three languages during sex with a preference for English and French:

Bas yemken [but maybe] I would feel more shame using Arabic so I would use a language that is not my native language to detach from the act itself and to be able to orgasm easily. *Bhes kamena fi hayda el layer yale byel'ab bi estekhdem el logha el 'Arabiya...* *Bhes enno la'anno el 'Arabe* [I also feel like there's this layer that plays a role in using the Arabic language... I feel because Arabic] is more linked to the upbringing, the childhood, the family, the parents, the norms, the tradition, the culture, the *khara* [shit]... it's always... *enno ktir sa'abouwa 'alayna la ne'dar nousal lal nashwe bil 'Arabi...* [like they made it so difficult for us to climax/orgasm in Arabic]. *W la'anno fi el* [and since] pop culture and porn culture *bil loghat el tenye* [are made available in other languages], it feels much easier to express that kind of discussion in that language *la'anno awwal shi* it's in *shu ana m'awwade 'ale w kamen betba'edne 'an edtar ehke 'an el mawdou' hayda bi hay el logha* [because, first, it's in a language that I'm used/exposed to, and it also distances me from being forced to talk about this topic (sex) in that language (Arabic)].

Ranim (34) finds it crucial to experience a detachment from the act of sex in order to be able to orgasm easily. However, this detachment is conditional upon her using a language that is not her native language (Arabic), therefore she resorts to French and English. I interpret hiding behind foreign languages as a compulsory reinforcement of the politics of the Arab(ic) closet that are established and maintained through language as a tool of sociocultural indoctrination and censorship. Similar to Eliane's (28) and Nour's (25) perceptions of Arabic as discussed in Chapter 1, Ranim (34) links Arabic to essentializing elements such as her family and parents. When listing the different elements with which she associates Arabic, her tone kept getting higher and more intense with each listing. She ended the list with "*khara*" [shit] which signals a critical stance towards societal, cultural, and traditional expectations and projections which are often indoctrinated and passed down in the native language, Arabic. I was stunned when she linked the hindrances brought about by Arabic to the process

of orgasming. I was fascinated because an orgasm represents the highest form of sexual ecstasy and is considered the peak of pleasurable sexual experiences for some but not all people who can and choose to orgasm. In Ranim's case, this climactic pleasure is restricted due to native language use and the weight that this linguistic symbolism carries. She also justified this distance by the availability of sexual content through popular and porn cultures in foreign languages rather than Arabic.¹²

Based on the interviews I conducted, I argue that this linguistic, and sometimes sexual, detachment is necessary for some of my interlocutors in order to consequently be able to detach themselves from the shame that is engrained in elements such as the upbringing and social/cultural norms. This detachment is necessary for them to be able to feel present during the act of sex. As I have argued above, this compulsory sexed and linguistic detachment necessitates the denouncement of the "queered mother tongue" as Sara Mourad phrased it (2013). Therefore, speaking foreign/non-native languages or partially codeswitching between English/French and Arabic within the same utterance becomes an outlet for some queer women through which they create safe, non-triggering, and pleasurable sexual experiences. I detected several patterns of shame that were similar among my interlocutors; however, it is important to note that shame manifests differently when it comes to each interlocutor based on their personal experiences with elements such as childhood, family, social/cultural norms, and religion, among others. Based on my interlocutors' experiences and circling back to Georgis' theoretical work on shame (2013), I argue that Arab shame – as experienced by some queer women in Lebanon – is a productive point of intersection that makes way for a collective state of vulnerability and inspection into the queer Arab self and how this self performs both linguistically and sexually during sex.

Stephanie (25) connects experiencing shame to the scarcity of exposure to positive sexual content in Arabic. She told me about a recent experience she had with online dating which she instantly remembered when reading the thesis topic summary that I sent her before scheduling our interview.

I was on Tinder, and I matched with a couple, a guy and a girl [...] I was talking to the guy *w kenna 'am nehke enno* [and we were talking about] what we both like and don't like. It was a very safe environment, very nice. And then, he just started telling me about the dynamics that he likes during sex, and he said *enno* [that] he likes to hear very specific things... *bas* [but] in Arabic (she giggles). *Ma bshouf hale 'am oulon, 'arefte?* [I don't see myself saying them, you know?] The words were a bit more... *enno* [like]

¹² Please see a discussion on Mediums of Sexed Knowledge for Queer Women in Lebanon in the Introduction.

he was in a bit of a power-dominant position, and he likes to be told stuff from a submissive in a certain way *bas bil 'Arabi* [but in Arabic]. *Enno bshouf hale 'am oulon bil Englizi bas bil 'Arabi ktir haset hale ghalat* [Like I see myself saying them in English, but in Arabic, I felt so weird/wrong] *Bhes* [I feel that] it carries a lot of – unfortunately, *bhes enno* [I feel like] saying things in Arabic like this, because they are not said and you don't see them a lot on TV, *enno* [like] Arabic TV shows, it feels like it carries a bit of shame. *Enno fi shwayet taboo bil mawdou'* [Like there is a bit of a taboo when it comes to this topic]. *Bas enno* [but in] English or American TV shows, there's a lot of concepts of sex. It's a big topic in a lot of shows so it's easily talked about. So, the fact that it's easy to talk about is easy to replicate in a bedroom. *Bas bil 'Arabi* I think *sa'be ktir oul hol l osas la' enno wala marra sheyfeton* [but in Arabic, I think it's really difficult for me to say these things because I've never seen them] in terms of society. I asked him what type of words he wants me to use. He said, "I know it's very basic *bas nikni* [but fuck me (masculine addressee)] is very nice to hear". I was like I do not hear myself saying this. *Enno* [like] the only contexts in which we hear this are not really nice contexts. They're looked down upon let's say. Sex work is looked down upon in the Arab world, you hear it a lot in that type of environment.

In the Introduction of this thesis, I elaborate on the direct link between my interlocutors' exposure to sexual content in foreign languages and their comfort levels with using those languages during sex. Since Stephanie (25) was not exposed to positively connotated sexual content in Arab media, she felt "*ghalat*", which literally translates into "wrong" but can also mean "weird", when asked to express herself sexually in Arabic by a potential sexual partner. While she initially linked her discomfort to the power dynamics that posit her partner (cis man) in a dominant position and herself in a submissive position, she later told me that she does not mind saying these terms – notably "*nikni* [fuck me]" – in English. She elaborates on this discomfort by linking it to the channels and mediums through which she was familiar with the different usages of this term, and one of them was sex work, which is highly stigmatized in the Lebanese society, with some exceptions. Therefore, even when occurring in a consensual sexed setting, Stephanie (25) felt like her body was being objectified and monetized by this man's sexual fantasies which included "fucking" her in Arabic, yet she did not feel the same way towards "being fucked" in English. I link Stephanie's (25) different attitudes towards "being fucked" in Arabic versus "being fucked" in English to Tala's (25) different attitudes towards being called "*sharmouta*" in Arabic versus being called "whore" in English. Earlier in this chapter, I argued that Tala's different attitudes were due to local/Arab(ic) curse words being perceived as "dirtier", "heavier", and "more intense" than the mainstream western/English equivalents. I draw on parallels between this line of argumentation and Stephanie's case to argue that fucking and being fucked in Arabic is more "shameful" than fucking and being fucked in English since there is a co-constitutive and interconnected relationship between sex, language, and the self, as demonstrated in my

overarching argument. I argue that it is fundamental to examine this disconnect through the act/practice of sex and how the latter is linguistically performed in order to theorize on the hindrances that disrupt the embodiment of a queer Arab self in relation to the grander scheme of queer Arab identity politics.

Navigating Levels of Shame through Codeswitching

As briefly mentioned above, some of my interlocutors were able to navigate the sexual discomfort often stemming from shame by codeswitching between Arabic and English/French. Codeswitching is the linguistic process of alternating between two or more languages in the same utterance; it typically occurs among bilinguals and multilinguals. There are many reasons for codeswitching, one of them is finding it easier to express certain thoughts in another language (Eldin, 2014). According to Eldin (2014), “Discussing emotional and sexual topics in the Lebanese community is ‘easier’ when it is discussed in a language that is different than the native Arabic language of the society” (p. 80). Eldin (2014) argues that people in Lebanon speak English or French when talking about sexual and emotional topics because it is more convenient for them to talk about these ‘taboo’ topics in a non-native language. I partially agree with Eldin’s argument about the discomfort that comes with discussing sexual topics in one’s native language/Arabic which was evident among many of my interlocutors. However, based on the interviews I conducted, I argue that this discomfort can be overpowered by intense emotions such as love, yearning, and missing; thus, this overpower allows the queer women I interviewed to use their native language/Arabic when expressing themselves sexually. I completely disagree with Eldin’s second argument regarding speaking about emotional topics in Arabic being an uncomfortable process, since most of my interlocutors considered Arabic to be an “emotional” language, which is a subtopic thoroughly discussed in Chapter 4.

Eliane (28) used to speak only in English during phone sex until she had a long-distance relationship during which she felt intense emotions like love and yearning towards her partner. She told me the story of how she called her partner:

Msekt l telephone w bezkor ktir mnih I was so shocked bi nafse, bas ad ma kent hamle ahasis tejeha eltella “ana ktir ‘abele de’ fiki w ktir ‘abele ’o’btik w hottik ben edayye la’ enno ktir shta’ telik”. So, hkiton bil ‘Arabi w ma hkiton bil Englizi. I used to sex talk with her in English bas ktir alil bil ‘Arabi. Enno atte’ kalimet ‘Arabi enno masalan

“*‘abele emskik w hottik hadde w hek just to touch you’*. *Shefte atashet! Ya ‘ne bbalesh bil ‘Arabi w bkaffe bil Englizi.*

[*I grabbed the phone, and I remember very vividly that I was so shocked at what I was about to do. But because of the deep emotions that I was feeling towards her, I told her “I so want to touch you [to touch in a sexual way, usually but not always means touching one’s/someone else’s genitalia] and I so want to hold you between my arms because I missed you so much.” So, I said them in Arabic and not in English. I used to sex talk with her in English but very rarely in Arabic. Like I would throw in some Arabic words here and there. Like for example, “I want to hold you as you lie next to me and like just to touch you [to touch in a sexual way]”. See, it got fragmented! Because I started with Arabic and then continued in English*].

The excitement and surprise were evident in Eliane’s voice, hyperactive gestures, and facial expressions as she was sharing this experience. This fragmentation to which she was referring is the linguistic process of codeswitching as defined above. The codeswitching in the example she gave caught my attention since she codeswitched only when expressing a desire that is explicitly sexually connotated: “*I want to hold you as you lie next to me and like just to touch you [to touch in a sexual way, usually but not always means touching one’s/someone else’s genitalia]*”. Even though her entire discourse was sexual since it was in the context of phone sex, this was the only utterance that was explicitly denoting the sexual act of touching somebody else. Some of the other examples that she mentioned later on, like “*Uff shu shta ‘t la jesmik!*” [O, how I miss your body!], are more sensual than sexual. Since she did mention the (Lebanese Colloquial) Arabic equivalent of touching in a sexual way in her earliest example “*de ‘fiki*” [touch you], I argue that her intense feelings of yearning and love overpowered the shame derived from the sexed Arabic expression and allowed her to express herself without codeswitching to English. I want to shed light on the fact that one of the remaining two instances of codeswitching to English is when she said “I used to sex talk with her in English” due to the awkward/uncommon phrasing, and potentially shameful connotations that would have resulted from saying it in Arabic, since the Arabic version is not normalized or commonly used. Based on these observations, I argue that connecting to an authentic self that is able to embody queer sex in Arabic and derive pleasure from this embodiment is accentuated when infused with heightened emotions of love, yearning, and desire, which aligns with the dynamic interaction between language, sex, and the self.

Concluding Remarks on Reclaiming Derogatory Language and Breaking Boundaries

In conclusion, in this chapter I explored how and why sexed Arabic is sometimes labeled as “dirty” and “shameful” by my interlocutors. I conclude that my interlocutors’ feeling of shame when using Arabic during sex is linked to several elements such as one’s childhood, upbringing, family, social and cultural norms, and traditions, all of which can be associated with heteropatriarchal elements and trauma. I argue that this shame can be overcome with distancing and detaching oneself either from the Arabic language or the act of sex, since these two elements are mutually exclusive for some queer women. I also argue that the shame experienced during queer sex can be diluted or navigated through codeswitching between English/French and Arabic, in general, and codeswitching from Arabic to English/French when referring to sexually explicit content, in specific. My interlocutors classified derogatory sexed Arabic within the category of “dirty”, specifically when it comes to the usage of specific terms such as “*sharmouta*” [whore] or expressing the act of fucking “*badde nikak/nikik/nikkon*” and demanding/wanting/desiring to be fucked in Arabic “*nikini/nikni/nikouni*”. Many of the queer women I interviewed did not feel comfortable with these expressions because they are typically used in heteropatriarchal contexts of abuse and harassment, so using them would entail a replication of these triggering experiences. However, others considered these expressions to be very erotic and pleasurable when used during sex and this was conditional upon them being able to reclaim these expressions in a consensual sexed setting, which aligns with the cathartic potential of (re)building a queer self in Arabic. Some of the queer women I interviewed have never used these terms but can possibly see themselves using them in the future. Shams (42) told me about the process of healing that she needs to experience before being able to reclaim this derogatory discourse:

I haven’t used them, *bas* [but] I could see myself using them, depending on the person, what is happening, how I’m feeling... it’s possible. *Bas kamena* [but also,] part of it is also me overcoming what culturally “*nik*” [to fuck] means and how I’ve been exposed to it, so there’s some healing that I need to do about using the term “*nik*” [to fuck] before I actually use it in such an intimate setting... *enno* [like] intimate and very personal experience. *Badde koun ana merteha enno* [I need to be comfortable that] I have reclaimed the word and I can use it so nonchalantly *enno* [like] it doesn’t mean any of all the things that I’ve heard about this word in the past, culturally and socially and... *yaane hole kelon tkhattayton* [meaning that I have overcome all of these things]. I’ve reclaimed it.

Based on Shams’ emphasis on needing to overcome all that is associated with this stigmatizing discourse before reclaiming it – and her dire need to heal – I argue that a reconstruction at the semantic level of this discourse is necessary; this will occur when new positive connotations are associated with these terms when queered during sex. I further

argue that many queer women in Lebanon are challenging patriarchal sexed structures by redefining language on their own terms, through queer sex. Lastly, and circling back to the radical need to heal, I argue that queer sex, Arabic, and a healed self intersect at a cathartic point of sociolinguistic reclamation and reconfiguration.

Factors such as the gender of the sexual partner(s) as well as the duration of being with them played a role in how my interlocutors perceived these expressions and whether they felt comfortable with using (saying and hearing) them during sex. For example, some queer women were comfortable using derogatory sexed Arabic with women but not men, and vice versa, and some needed to establish a strong foundation with their sexual partner(s) across a period of time to be able to feel comfortable using these terms with them in a sexed setting. As a general observation, I noticed that the usage of derogatory sexed Arabic was more common among practitioners of kinky sex, and specifically sexual BDSM as a subset of kink. Max (23) told me that “*abel kenet kelmet ‘khazze ‘ne’*”¹³ *aw ‘khazz ‘ini’ enno hek*

¹³ I would like to take my analysis further by delving deeper into the negative connotations of the term “*khazze ‘ne’*” [tear me apart (masculine addressee – with a sexual connotation)]. Even though Max (23) did not mention the linkage which I’m about to explore, I instantly understood why she felt this term is triggering, as it constituted a formative experience for my generation, specifically throughout high school. This term became popular through the Lebanese renowned comedy show *Mafi Metlo* which was first aired in 2013 and was continued for 7 seasons. The show featured a parody titled “*Majdi w Wajdi*” [Majdi and Wajdi]. Majdi and Wajdi are two gay men who are attributed hyperfeminine characteristics and are constantly depicted as hypersexual. According to Touma Sawaya and Beayno (2021), “By portraying a hypersexual image of gay men, the show contributes to the stereotype present in Lebanon with regards to their outlook on homosexuality. The hypersexualizing of gay men feeds into the association between the concepts of homosexuality and “dirty” or “unnatural” sexual intercourse” (p. 129). The show gained a huge popularity among people from different generations and reinforced stereotypes about LGBTQIA+ individuals – specifically gay men – in Lebanon. I remember very vividly the homophobic jokes that my classmates would replicate throughout middle school and high school. I am not sure why, but “*khazze ‘ne w rja ‘lazze ‘ne’*” [tear me apart and then glue me together (masculine addressee – with a sexual connotation)] was one of the most common homophobic expressions among teenage boys in my class. I do not think it was linked to the specific episode of *Majdi w Wajdi* that I am about to analyze, but I choose to focus on the content portrayed in this episode due to its significance in the context of my research. The episode starts with Majdi and Wajdi telling their best friend about their most recent sexual experience (MTV Lebanon, 2015). They are portrayed as traumatized yet sexually satisfied/pleasured. We learn that they had catcalled a handsome man while they were shopping for groceries (cucumbers and zucchinis in specific, due to their sexualized connotations) and ended up at his place. The next scene features them handcuffed on a bed waiting for the man to whip them. The man comes with a long stick and says, “you don’t know what awaits you [...] first, I will undress you and tear your clothes apart [...] you will roam the streets naked for people to mock you [...] this is to teach you how to harass people and men on the streets”. Through this very quick turn of events, we witness the sexual dynamic switch from a consensual to a non-consensual one. We see Majdi and Wajdi being abused by this man, and as he starts tearing Wajdi’s clothes apart, Wajdi screams “*ma tkhazze ‘ne’*” [don’t tear me apart], which is part of how the term became popularized as a homophobic joke. At the end of the episode, Majdi and Wajdi tell their best friend that it is not enough that the man (non-consensually) whipped them and tied them up, they wanted him to finish what he started – alluding to the act of penetration. There are so many problematic elements to stop at and contemplate in this episode when it comes to stereotypes, generalizations, homophobia, abuse, etcetera. To mention a few of the highly problematic messages that this episode sends: gays are freaky because they enjoy kinky sex, gays are hypersexual harassers, gays deserve and enjoy abuse and (non-consensual) punishment. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that “*khazze ‘ni/khazz ‘ini’*” [tear me apart (with a sexual connotation)] is triggering for some queer women, until reclaimed during consensual sex. In Max’s case, this was achieved through feminist sexual BDSM

ta'melle cringe, *bas fi marra* [previously, the term “tear me apart (masculine addressee – with a sexual connotation)” or “tear me apart (feminine addressee – with a sexual connotation)” used to make me cringe, but there was this one time when] my partner at the time *aleta* [said it] and I was like ok, weird, I like it a lot”. Therefore, the gender identities of sexual partners and the different sexual dynamics involved during sex play a role in how some queer women deconstruct and then reconstruct the meaning of some derogatory terms in sexed Arabic.

which I interpret as a countering and reconfiguration (Hammers, 2019) of the misrepresented nonconsensual kinky elements featured in the show.

Chapter 3: The Lacks and Failures of Sexed Arabic: The Untranslatability of Modern Standard Arabic and French during Queer Sex

In this chapter, I examine the linguistic failures of queer sex in the Lebanese context, and I argue that there is a lack in the lexicon of queer sex in Lebanon. First, I investigate perceptions of (Lebanese and Palestinian) Colloquial Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as “funny” and/or “humorous” when used during sex. I justify these perceptions by the evident discrepancy between Modern Standard Arabic and Colloquial Arabic, and how the exposure to sexed content is mainly channeled through Modern Standard Arabic. I locate my analysis at the intersection of sex, language, and the self within a queer framework. I argue that this linguistic schism in the queering of the Arabic sexed discourse and lexicon is merely intellectualized but is not embodied, enacted, and mediated through the queer body and self in the Lebanese context. I also argue that queering the lexicon and discourse of Modern Standard Arabic or a semi-Colloquialized version of it is not sufficient. Consequently, I argue for the necessity of queering the discourse and lexicon of sexed Colloquial Arabic (CA), which is intrinsic for the embodiment and not only the intellectualization of the queer self in a Lebanese-Arab context. Then, I draw on parallels between MSA and the French spoken in Lebanon, and I argue that both languages are similarly received and perceived as too formal and standard(ized) to be used during the act of sex. I end this chapter by looking into the negative perceptions of the French spoken in Lebanon as an “effeminized” and “gayified” language, yet I argue that sexed French has the potential to be a productive element during sexual BDSM.

There are many recent attempts at revolutionizing and queering Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) to render it a more inclusive and gender-neutral language. These attempts are channeled through queer feminist academic journals and creative platforms such as [Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research](#) and [JEEM](#), a website that produces content on gender, sex, and sexuality in Arabic. Despite the immense progress that is made possible through this ongoing queer feminist work which produces and disseminates queer-feminist knowledge on a pan-Arab level, this progress mostly remains within the confines of the written and the academic script of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). It is significant to note that there have also been many similar initiatives on Arab social media platforms, many of which are local Lebanese accounts. What I have observed/what is visible in the lexicon used by these social media accounts illustrates the trend in Modern Standard Arabic, or rather a

semi-Colloquialized version of Modern Standard Arabic that falls in between the two forms. To clarify, there are two variations of the Arabic language: Modern Standard Arabic, which is the standard form of the language that is common across the Arab/Arabic-speaking world and Colloquial Arabic, which is spoken differently in different regions of the Arab/Arabic-speaking world (such as Maghrebi Arabic, Levantine Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, etcetera). Within the regional dialects, there are local dialects that are specific to each country (for example, Lebanese Colloquial Dialect) and within each country, there are region-specific dialects (for example, Northern Dialect, Southern Dialect, etcetera). The linguistic phenomenon of having two varieties of the same language, and in this case Arabic, is defined as “diglossia” (Albirini and Benmamoun, 2022). MSA or *Al-Fusha* is the formal Arabic written and spoken in literary contexts, news and broadcasting channels, some formal media outlets, government and official paperwork, literature etcetera.

Perceptions of Sexed Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)

As mentioned above, there is a clear distinction between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Colloquial Arabic in the Lebanese society. MSA is the language that students in Lebanon learn in schools and universities, mainly in the form of grammar and syntax, literature and poetry, as well as academic and creative writing. Meanwhile Colloquial Arabic is the Arabic spoken in daily and ordinary conversations in informal settings. In Lebanon, people mainly speak Lebanese Colloquial Arabic as a dialect, which is what I focus on throughout my analysis in this thesis. Palestinian Colloquial Arabic and Syrian Colloquial Arabic are two dialects that are spoken by Palestinians and Syrians in Lebanon. All these three dialects share similar linguistic characteristics due to the cultural and geographic proximity of Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria within the Levantine region of the Arab world.¹⁴

In the context of my research on queer sex and the Arabic language, I was curious whether MSA is spoken in any sexed context, such as during role play. The initial reactions I got from every queer woman I asked about whether she ever spoke MSA during sex were either laughter, confusion, or a combination of the two. Their perplexed reactions were usually followed by them either picking on the question or creating hypothetical sexed scenarios in which they spoke MSA and laughed at those scenarios – all of which was very

¹⁴ The Levantine region includes four countries: Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Jordan.

entertaining to witness, as a researcher, and as a queer woman who loves Arabic in all its forms (perhaps with the exception of sexed MSA).

When asked if she ever used *Al-Fusha*/MSA during sex, Tala (25) told me:

Uff, akid la' [Oh wow, of course not] (she bursts into laughter). *Fusha* [MSA] is the opposite of sex. I don't think *Fusha* and sex go hand in hand together. These are two opposite things that will never meet, that will never coincide. *Enno shu masalan "uridu an udaji'aki"?* *enno ma rah tezbab* [Like for example, "I want to sleep with you"? It won't work] (says it in a mocking tone and continues to laugh) [...] It's really, I would say, it's anti-erotic, I'm sorry...

Tala (25) believes that MSA does not belong within the parameters of sex at all and considers it to be "anti-erotic". The hypothetical scenarios that she gave as examples were very cringey because they sounded too animated and robotic, perhaps because I associate animation with Spacetoons' content being dubbed in MSA, as mentioned earlier in Dalia's case. I found it interesting that she felt the urge to apologize at the end, as if feeling guilty for criticizing MSA, yet her feelings were valid and commonly experienced by all my interlocutors with marginal exceptions. The lexicon of MSA used when visualizing those hypothetical scenarios – notably the term *udaji'* (noun: *mudaja'a*) – is very heteronormative, since by definition, it means a man sleeping with a woman, even if they do not have intercourse ("مُضاجعة," 2010-2023).

Laure (24) told me that she has never used MSA during sex, "honestly, for me, *Fusha* belongs in books. It is also so formal to a point where also I'm a bit scared of experiencing it in real life". Laure talks about *Al-Fusha* as an alienated/ing and isolated/ing language that she fears encountering in her daily life due to the exposure to MSA which remains confined in academic, official, and formal contexts. Shams (42) shared similar reflections on the space of MSA in her sex life when answering the question "Have you ever used *Al-Fusha* during sex?", "In sex? No (while laughing). It's almost like *Fusha* is another language. Like it's a fourth language for me, almost... because we only use it in writing and in reading. *Bas ta ehkeya, mesh rah tetla' abadan* [but when it comes to speaking it, it's not possible]. Never gonna do that". It is a common trope that my interlocutors laugh when I ask them about *Al-Fusha*. Given that Shams is professionally involved in the production of queer and feminist knowledge in Arabic (mostly in MSA), I was intrigued by how distant she feels from the language, which makes her rank it as an (almost) fourth language. However, she justified this discrepancy by mentioning that she interacts with *Al-Fusha* only within the domains of reading and writing, which complements my recurrent analysis on the strict schism between

the professional/formal existence of sexed Arabic and the intimate/private sphere of sexed Arabic. Shams touched upon a minor exception that might unintentionally feature the usage of *Al-Fusha* during sex, which is when using common Arabic words that are originally in MSA and have not been fully colloquialized into the local dialects, which I refer to as the semi-Colloquialization of MSA.

Max's (23) perception of sexed MSA constitutes one the few exceptions throughout my interviewing process:

El 'Arabi el Fusha ktir cringe. Ana hada ktir bi nakket during sex aw during foreplay. So, eza jeye bi mahal fi spark w fi dehek bi nafs el wa'et, ma 'oul esta'mel el Fusha ka manyake. Enno "ela mata sa antazer?" (we both laugh), hayda el jaw el 'am, never seriously ya 'ne.

[Modern Standard Arabic is very cringe. I'm someone who jokes around a lot during sex or during foreplay. So, if I were with someone and there's a spark between us, and we're laughing, I might use MSA as a joke. Like "till when I shall wait?" (we both laugh), that's the general vibe, but I'd never use it seriously].

Even though MSA was mostly regarded as "funny", "humorous", and "cringe" when used during sex, Max's experience proves that it can sometimes play a productive role in breaking the ice and making the sexual dynamics/energies more intimate and enjoyable. However, these exceptions occur when sexed MSA is intentionally and consciously used as a humorous and/or accentuating literary and poetic element. I deduce that in the queer context of Lebanon, MSA is never used in an unforced, unintentional, and unconscious manner during the act of sex due to its secluded space.

Arabic as "Funny" and "Humorous": (Un)Naming Sex Toys

One of the themes that remained prevalent and consistent across almost all my interviews is sexed Arabic (MSA and CA) being perceived as "funny" or "humorous", specifically when referring to sex toys. One of my interview questions inquires into what language(s) my interlocutors use to refer to sex toys or the act of using them while not necessarily naming them in a direct manner. Most of my interlocutors were surprised and confused about the possibility of naming or referring to their sex toys in Arabic. Many of my interlocutors engage with conversations around (queer) sex in a consistent manner since they work in fields related to sex education, sexual health, and sexed knowledge production. I was initially shocked when some of the sexual health educators that I interviewed replied saying "what

even is a dildo in Arabic?”. I noticed that there is a strict separation between the Arabic they use professionally, during educational sessions for example, and the Arabic they use sexually. They said that they know these terms in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) but have never thought of incorporating them in their sex lives when speaking Lebanese Colloquial Arabic or Palestinian Colloquial Arabic.

My line of argumentation throughout this thesis is built on the premise that speaking Arabic during sex drastically differs from speaking Arabic when talking about sex outside the parameters of the act itself. My conversation with Yasmine (32) was constantly circling around a clear distinction between professional sexed Arabic and personal sexed Arabic:

I think because my work kind of distances me from the act itself, so I’m not actually very vulnerable when I’m doing it for work. It’s not coming from an emotional place; it’s coming from a very rational place. And I think also because Arabic is ‘*anjad* [really] technical. *Ya ‘ne* [so], to me, the word clitoris, the word “*bathar* [clitoris]”, it’s more of an internal organ than a pleasure organ. *Ya ‘ne* [like] I don’t think it’s very well thought out. [...] So, I have more time to rationalize and think when I’m working rather than when I’m fucking and I’m vulnerable and I’m in the moment, in the heat in the moment.

As clearly demonstrated by Yasmine (32), professional sexed Arabic creates a distance between the speaker and the act of sex, therefore this detachment from sex itself allows the speaker to talk about sex in Arabic with ease and comfort.¹⁵ However, this is not the case when it comes to the “vulnerable”, and “heated” act of “fucking” during which the speaker is not detached or shielded from the act of sex, which requires a reversion to foreign languages. On another level, Yasmine’s professional use of sexed Arabic is mainly channeled through Modern Standard Arabic, unlike her personal use of the language.

When asked about how they refer to sex toys, some women asked me to look up the Arabic translations of different sex toys: dildo, strap on, vibrator, etcetera. I remember cringing when reading through the different translations in MSA. At first, I thought it is because I have never referred to sex toys in Arabic during sex, specifically not in MSA. This conundrum was often coupled with a collective feeling of cringe that transcended the screen separating me from my interlocutors. Many reflections later, I noticed that my cringe and discomfort towards the Arabic terms for sex toys was due to how heteronormative and phallogentric these terms are. For example, the first translation that came up for “strap on” was “*qadib jildi*” [literal translation: leather penis], the first translation that came up for dildo was “*qadib istina ‘i*” [literal translation: artificial penis], and the second translation that came

¹⁵ Please see an elaborate discussion on detachment, queer sex, and Arabic in Chapter 2.

up for dildo was “*dasar*” which is a term that neither I nor any of my interlocutors have ever heard of before. Clara (23) told me that she does not know how to refer to sex toys in Arabic. So, when I mentioned some of the mainstream terms that are used to refer to dildos and strap-ons, she told me: “*bas qadib gher shi bi rase. Qadib yaane shi hadid* (she clenches her fist). It’s violent [but I think of *qadib* as something else (note: “*qadib*” is the first word of the two-word term used to refer to dildos and strap-ons)]. It’s violent”. As mentioned earlier, “*qadib*” has several literal translations and the most common one is “penis”. Two of the other literal translations of *qadib* are “rod” and “stick”. Clara considered the Arabic lexicon of sex toys to be “violent” due to the multilayered connotations associated with this term, since rods and sticks are often used in contexts of violence, abuse, and aggression. While the sexual meaning of *qadib* is not used at all in the context of sex (whether hetero or queer) since it is in MSA and not CA, the nonsexual meaning of *qadib* as a rod/stick is commonly used in certain Lebanese regions.

I believe that the feeling of cringe and extreme discomfort that my interlocutors and I felt towards the Arabic terms for sex toys, which constitute a pleasurable part of sex for me and many of them, is due to their formal and medical connotations as well as their direct etymological association with penises; not only penises, but specifically artificial or “fake” versions of a “real male penis”. These phallogocentric intonations reinforce compulsory heterosexuality as a violent structure that posits heterosexuality as the default, normal, and innate sexual orientation for women (Rich, 1980). As defined by Adrienne Rich, compulsory heterosexuality deems any sexuality that exists outside the parameters of this delineation unnatural and deviant (1980). Judith Butler (2004) refers to the dichotomy of the original versus the copy in relation to gender performativity. The original is often perceived as the real and primary that produces the copy which is the fake secondary other. Butler applies this dualism to compulsory heterosexuality in relation to lesbian performativity. The latter is labelled as a feigned and failed copy of original masculine performativity according to the claim that a lesbian – particularly a tomboy – can never equate to or replace a man, which is evident in the literal Arabic translations/equivalents of different sex toys. Butler (2004) dismantles the original versus copy binary distinction by stating that, for the existence of the original, the copy is a prerequisite; therefore, the original is measured by its lack, and its worth is valued through examining its respective copy. This citation is referred to as a consistent and continuous process of mimesis – imitating the other. Butler argues that all gender identities are authentic, therefore primary and original, as long as they are consistently

and repetitively (unconsciously and desirably) performing/citing/mimicking; otherwise, they would cease to exist.

Naming tools of pleasure/sex toys after male genitalia – “artificial penis” not only glorifies penetration as a prerequisite for pleasure, but also insinuates that women’s pleasure revolves around male genitalia and penetration. This naming then invalidates queer sex between and among women since it posits sex that involves male genitalia as “real/original sex” versus sex that does not as “fake/copied sex”. By applying Butler’s theoretical work to the context of my research, I argue that using the mainstream Arabic translations of sex toys is uncomfortable during queer sex, specifically between and among queer women, first because these terms are made available in Modern Standard Arabic which is not the spoken form of the language (Colloquial Arabic), and second because of the heteronormative and phallogocentric connotations that come with them. Thus, a distance, detachment, and sometimes aversion from the body or the act of sex occurs when the naming of tools of (queer) pleasure carries invalidating, triggering, and/or alienating feelings. However, I argue that Colloquializing and queering the sexed lexicon and discourse of MSA can be used as an effective tool of reclamation and reconfiguration.

In my opinion, possible solutions to this sexological and sociolinguistic conundrum in a Lebanese queer context include but are not limited to: collectively working on the creation of a feminist and queered Colloquial Arabic lexicon of sex toys, sex games, and sexual practices that is based on the lived experiences of queer women, and finding creative ways to play around these terms, which is what some of my interlocutors attempted to do. My first suggestion about reconfiguring the Arabic sexed lexicon has been proven to be effective, since for example, the mainstream translation for masturbation used to be *al-istimna*, which makes it exclusive to folks having male genitalia. Yet, the recent feminist discourse around Arab sexualities and sex have popularized the term *al-imta* ‘*al-zati*, which literally translates to “self-pleasuring”.

Dalia (27) refers to her vibrators exclusively in English because the names of sex toys are not widely known in Arabic, so people are not used to them.¹⁶ She finds it odd to use the Arabic terms “*la’ enno kamen bel ‘Arabi bibayno heke* sentences rather than... *Enno Spaceton shway...* (we both laugh)” [because in Arabic, they sound like sentences rather

¹⁶ While I have not discussed this topic with interlocutors who identify as straight women, I assume that my analysis can be carried over to them as well during self-pleasure, or perhaps when using sex toys in a sexed heterosexual setting. However, this remains an assumption which requires a separate contextualized analysis.

than... They sound a bit like Spacetoon... (we both laugh)]. Dalia justified this lack in the Arabic discourse of sex toys by stating that the Arabic terms are rarely used. I link her statement to my earlier argument about sex education in Lebanon being heteronormative, phallogentric, and exclusive, specifically when channeled through parental guidance and school classes/lectures.¹⁷ Dalia also mentioned that she finds referring to sex toys in Arabic to be weird/cringey because they sound unnecessarily lengthy. Compared to English, the Arabic/Arabized equivalents of sex toys have more syllables in them – for example, *al-qadib al-istina'i* versus dildo – thus, they are more difficult to navigate, especially in a sexed setting. Lastly, which I found to be very interesting yet hilarious, Dalia told me that the names of sex toys in Arabic sound like they are extracted from Spacetoon. Spacetoon is a pan-Arab television channel for children that mainly broadcasts animations. I grew up watching Spacetoon and know exactly what it means to watch your favorite cartoons dubbed in Modern Standard Arabic and feel like you are entering a world of fantasy that is completely out of touch with reality. I will elaborate on the schism between what feels real, relevant, relatable (Colloquial Lebanese/Palestinian Arabic) and the lack thereof (Modern Standard Arabic) in Chapter 4. However, Dalia's reference to Spacetoon – a children's television channel – renders sexed Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) a language that sounds “juvenile”, “funny”, or “unserious” when used during sex, which is a subtopic to be elaborated on in the following subtopic. The theme of “juvencility” as an odd sensation was also touched upon by other interlocutors.

Ranim (34) told me that she would never refer to sex toys in Arabic. “*La2, akid ma rah oul el hazzaz, enno bwa'ef bi arde. Bye bye... Khalas, ma 'ash badde. Helle 'anne...* (we both laugh)” [No, of course, I wouldn't say “vibrator”. I'd freeze in my place. Bye bye... Enough, I don't want to have sex anymore. Get off me...]. She proceeds to make a joke by saying something that she would hypothetically never say to her sexual partner(s): “*baddik beslik batharik?*” [do you want me to kiss your clitoris?]. Most of my interlocutors, including Ranim, found the Arabic terms for sex toys to be “funny”, “cringey”, and a “turn-off”. I argue that this aversion from sexed Arabic is due to the fact that these terms are used in educational and medical contexts. Therefore, they sound either technical or pathologizing when used during the act of sex, as opposed to being used when talking about sex whether in a sexual health clinic, medical facility, counselling session, or awareness lecture/workshop.

¹⁷ Please see a discussion on Mediums of Sexed Knowledge for Queer Women in Lebanon in the Introduction.

Similarly, Yasmine (32) told me “I don’t know the names *bil ‘Arabi* [in Arabic], it’s unfortunate”. So, we Googled what dildo is and the translations that popped up were: “*dasar*” and “*al-qadib al-istina ‘i*”. Her immediate reaction was “I think they’re too technical. It sounds like a pap smear, not a fuck” and we both laughed. Even though Yasmine is involved in the production of sex-positive content in Arabic, she expressed that she does not know the names of sex toys in Arabic. What she meant is that she does not know the Colloquial equivalents, simply because there is no Colloquial lexicon for sex toys that is agreed upon or set in stone in the Lebanese (queer) society, aside from the few attempts at Colloquializing the MSA lexicon for sex toys which remain heteronormative and phallogocentric. These attempts of colloquialization occur when linguistic features of MSA are replaced with linguistic features of Lebanese Colloquial Arabic, for example when saying *‘adib ‘istina ‘e* or *el-‘adib el-‘istina ‘e* instead of *al-qadib al-istina ‘i*. I support my argument by referring to a feminist, queer-inclusive, sex-positive, and kink-positive podcast that is hosted by a Lebanese sexologist, Dr. Sandrine Atallah, who referred to the vibrator as “*hazzez*” and “*el-hazzez*” [semi-Colloquialized versions of *al-hazzaz* in MSA] and referred to the dildo as “*el-qadib el-istina ‘i*” [semi-colloquialized version of *al-qadib al-istina ‘i* in MSA] in an episode about sex toys and games (Atallah, 2021). Meanwhile, her guest discussant in this episode, who is a Lebanese Psychosexual and Relationship Therapist, mostly referred to the sex toys in English (Atallah, 2021).

Yasmine (32) told me that together with her partner, she is trying to find fun ways to translate things that are not necessarily set in stone like sex toys. Therefore, the active process of experimenting with new linguistic possibilities opens new horizons for experiencing sexual pleasure in one’s native language when using sex toys.

Keeping in mind that Michelle (37) speaks Arabic consistently during sex, I asked her about the words that she exclusively says in English. Her immediate response was: “*yemken* strap on. *‘Anjad. Bas.* [maybe strap on. Really. Just that]” (we both laugh). She continues to elaborate on how she refers to sex toys:

Ana ya b’ellon el al‘ab ya b’ellon enno “shu ‘abelik ayya lon ya mahdoume?” Bsir enno I play around that ya ‘ne enno “bi ayya wahad ‘abelik tenteke el layle?” aw “ayya ‘yes ‘abelik?” hek... Fa ma ‘oule ‘oul strap on enno “jibi el strap on” masalan.

[I either call them “toys” or ask my partners “what color would you prefer?” So, I play around that, like “which one do you want to be fucked with tonight?” or “which size do you want?”, like that... So, I might say strap on, like “grab the strap on” for example].

Through the examples that Michelle and Yasmine shared with me, I conclude that it is possible to play around the rigid Arabic lexicon of sex toys. In this case, Colloquial Arabic can be linguistically and sexually playful during queer sex. Thus, I argue that by playing with and around a new Colloquial lexicon and discourse of sex, and in this case sex toys, it is possible to not only overcome but also eradicate the aversion, cringing, and juvenility that are experienced when using MSA or a semi-Colloquialized version of it to refer to sex toys. I argue that deriving pleasure from and during the act of sex, be it with or without sex toys, is conditional upon being able to derive pleasure from the language used to facilitate, perform, and enact sex. I further advocate for the necessity of experimenting with the existing – heteronormative and phallogentric – Arabic lexicon and queering it in a manner that resonates with and adheres to the Colloquial discourse in Lebanon. This opens a variety of possibilities to queer the local and regional dialects within the parameters of the national.

Between the Effeminate and a Sexed Linguistics of Decolonial Emancipation: The Critical Place of French in the Sex Lives of Queer Women in Lebanon

“I do think in French, and I do fantasize in French *bas* [but] people make fun of me a lot. *Enno* [like] no one wants to sleep with a Frenchie. I’ve grown out of French in bed”. Yasmine (32)

The place of French is critical in the sex lives of the queer women I interviewed. First, I will provide a brief historical contextualization of the French Mandate in order to pave the way for an integrative theoretical-analytical discussion on how this colonial power impacted and implicated the linguistic nature of Lebanon across time; thus, I examine the agentic colonial domination of the French language over the native Arabic language. France mandated Lebanon between 1920 and 1943 (Traboulsi, 2007). After the constitution was implemented in 1926, Greater Lebanon was renamed to become the Lebanese Republic, its flag was the French flag with a cedar in the middle, and most importantly, French was enforced as an official language alongside Arabic (Traboulsi, 2007). Lebanon also endured a sectarian civil war between 1975 and 1990 (Salloukh, 2019).

Some women told me that they find French to be highly arousing, flirtatious, sexy, and erotic. Two of the women I interviewed exclusively moan and orgasm in French – “*oui, oui bébé*” [yes, yes baby]. On the other hand, some women expressed a sense of disgust and aversion from using French during sex: “*Bil* [in] French *nya*’ [ew], oh my God. *Ya ‘ne eza* [so,

if] I'm watching a porn clip *w se'abet tele' bil* [and it happened to be in French] French, I would mute it. I can't stand French. I think it's so cringe". This is the testimony of Tala (25) who grew up speaking French in her household, went to a French Catholic school, and explicitly told me that she thinks and feels in French. I was surprised because women who had a positive interaction with French since childhood enjoyed using French during sex. When asked about this problematic relationship with sexed French, she elaborated saying:

Maybe la'en bi Lebnen kenno y'oulo enno el shakhs li byehke Farance enno gay aw loute. Enno it was ktir gayified w ktir enno softy w soft boy w enno el "rejjel" byehke 'Arabi [...] Bas mabaaref eza I associate it with being effeminate and like heke bala shakhsiiyyi aw heke meye' ktir, ma'a' enno ana bheb el maye'a, ma 'ende meshkle, bas mesh bel legha.

[Maybe because in Lebanon they used to refer to people/men who speak French as gay or homosexual (derogatory term). Like it was very gayified and very like softy and soft boy. And a "real man" would speak Arabic [...] So, I don't know if I associate it with being effeminate and having a weak personality, and even being a "sissy". I like sissiness, I don't mind it, but not when it comes to language].

I link Tala's perception of French as "gayified" vis-à-vis "effeminate" to what Max (23) told me, "French is too soft for my liking". It is a common stereotype among Lebanese people who do not speak French to perceive French as an "effeminate" language that sounds soft and sexy when spoken by women but sounds repulsive when spoken by men. This gendered binary distinction reinforces an idealized femininity for women and an idealized masculinity for men. From a heteronormative perspective, masculine men are straight/straight-passing, which posits "effeminate" men – or men having feminine characteristics – as not-straight, which is signified by the derogatory Lebanese Colloquial term "*louti*". According to Ghassan Moussawi, Lebanese hegemonic masculinity equates homosexuality with the absence of masculinity (2011). A "real man" according to Lebanese standards is a man who is visibly masculine, and thus (visibly) heterosexual. Even among gay men in Lebanon, effeminate men are shunned and stigmatized for not adhering to celebrated standards of proper manhood (Moussawi, 2011; Gagné, 2011). Therefore, bears (hairy and muscular gay men), for example, are considered to be "natural, not like gay" because they adhere to heteronormative ideals of Arab masculinity (McCormick, 2011, p. 86). This aversion from femininity within gay communities is defined as "sissyphobia", which is common among straight-passing/straight-acting men who thrive to assert their masculinity at the expense of degrading other men's femininity (Eguchi, 2011). Consequently, I argue that Tala's negative attitude towards sexed French stems from the Lebanese society's stigmatization, shaming, and derogation of homosexuality, which happens to be associated with speaking French.

When it comes to the failures in the translatability of sexed French, I noticed similar patterns between perceptions of sexed French and sexed Modern Standard Arabic. Among the queer women who had recurrent interactions and exposures to French whether in the household or at school/university, I noticed a common consensus that French is too formal and standard. This shared formality between MSA and French is due to the fact the French to which my interlocutors were exposed was academic and formal rather than casual and colloquial, which is why Max (23) told me that “French is where the real cringe happens”. I link this cringe to my earlier analysis on MSA as cringe because of the schisms and detachments that exist between what feels natural – colloquial – and what feels imposed – standard. Thus, I deduce that there is a schism between the formal/standard/academic French that some queer women in Lebanon are exposed to in schools and the informal/colloquial/sexed French that would typically be used in sexed contexts by native speakers of French. Based on this deduction, I argue that there is a lack or disruption in the translatability of sexed French from a language to a performed act, meaning that the channel through which (queer) sex is linguistically enacted and performed must be sexed on a colloquial linguistic level rather than a formal/standard/academic linguistic level – which is the case of French and MSA in Lebanon.

I circle back to the opening quotation in this subtopic and delve deeper into the connotations and repercussions of “no one wants to sleep with a Frenchie”. In my following analysis, I demonstrate that there is a classist and elitist translatability of French in Lebanon that manifests in the act of sex. I argue that despite the prevalent negative perceptions of sexed French, the latter can be used in a productive manner that allows some queer women to derive pleasure from the sexed acts, games, and roleplays that come with utilizing sexed French – and dominating it.

Ma'oule li ma'e testa'mel French bas byestafezne ktir fa byetla' Hussein 'al French. Hek bsir hes enno "ah ya zghiri, shu elte ya mahdoume ya zghiri?". Bsir heke enno bfout bi mood manyake ktir m'ayra in a good way. La' enno baddo yeje lifestyle ma'o lal Français bi Lebneen, saraha. Ana ble'ya enno it's a classist thing. Enno fi class m'ayyane btehke Français, w eza btehke bil takhet wadeh enno privileged ente eh "ta'e ta rabbiki".

[My sexual partner might use French, but it annoys/triggers me a lot, so Hussein shows up when hearing French during sex. I'd feel like “what did you just say, sweetie?”. I'd enter a mood of fuckery in a good way. Because there's a certain lifestyle that comes with French in Lebanon, to be honest. I find it to be a classist thing. Like there's a certain class that speaks French in Lebanon, and if you speak it in bed then you are privileged, so “come, let me discipline you”].

Michelle (37) embodies the persona of Hussein during sex, specifically during sexual BDSM. Hussein plays the role of a man who performs toxic masculinity as a “*rejjel fahel* [a fucker/virile man]” yet reverses stereotypical characteristics that come with this role. For example, Hussein wears dentelle/lace underneath a masculine attire, “Hussein *beheb yentek* [enjoys being fucked/penetrated], Hussein is always bisexual”. Hussein is a replica of a typical *shalamasti* [witty fucker] who governs the Lebanese street and partially adheres to conventional ideals of masculinity, which are channeled through Lebanese Colloquial Arabic. Yet, Hussein enjoys submission, bottoming, and being penetrated as much as he enjoys dominance, topping, and penetrating.

Through my subsequent analysis, I argue that Hussein’s “disciplining” of his sexual partners who speak French during sex is a liberatory act of decolonial emancipation. Rosemary Sayigh argues that Lebanon suffers from a dilemma of Arab-French bilingualism that she refers to as a “split personality” linguistic phenomenon (Sayigh, 1965, p. 121), which she explains as the state of being torn between the East and the West. She claims that Lebanese Christians, alongside the French as an ex-colonial power perceived Lebanon as a passage between the East and the West, “through which civilizing ideas and techniques reach the Arab hinterland” (Sayigh, 1965, p. 122), which falls within an Orientalist discourse. Quoting Edward Said’s groundbreaking theoretical work, “Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (1978, p. 3). Said explains how Western discourses posit the East/Orient as a feminized and supine Other that is penetrable by the West/Occident (1978). “There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated” (Said, 1978, p. 36); therefore, the supineness and penetrability by which the East/Orient is characterized renders it submissive to the West/Occident.

By locating my analysis within this theoretical framework and sexing it, I argue that when Hussein dominates and “disciplines” his French-speaking sexual partners during sexual BDSM, he counters the disciplinary politics and actions implemented and enacted by the West (France) on the East (Lebanon). The term “*rabbiki*” (noun: *tarbiya*) as mentioned above by Michelle/Hussein not only entails disciplining, but also refers to the process of upbringing/raising a child (in MSA and Colloquial Arabic). So, when a child is referred to as “*bala terbeye*” in Lebanese Colloquial Arabic, it means that they are “not well-mannered”.

Notably, the Lebanese Colloquial expressions “*ta ‘e/a ta rabbik/i*” [let me discipline you] or “*badde rabbik/i*” [I will discipline you] entail punishment. Based on this lexical discursive analysis, I argue that an emancipatory sexed linguistics of liberation is made possible by reversing the nonconsensual colonial power dynamics of domination situated within the binarism of East and West and enacting it within a consensual sexed BDSM setting. Dominating the sexed linguistics of the foreign, elite, and privileged “Other” reverses the politics of Othering through their submission. I argue that through the roleplay and powerplay dynamics of sexual BDSM, decolonizing the Lebanese-Arab self and identity is possible when French is dominated and disciplined by the sexed Arabic lexicon and discourse.

Robyn Henderson-Espinoza (2018) has a very intriguing take on the logic of dominance within kink/BDSM. Their theoretical work destabilizes the conventional contours of who holds power within dichotomies of dominants and submissives vis-à-vis tops and bottoms. They argue that power “stems from the margins of the margins, or bottom space” (Henderson-Espinoza, 2018, p. 287). They build on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s seminal work “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and Marcella Althaus-Reid’s theoretical work on sex and perversion in order to argue that bottoms/margins/others hold the power and agency upon their reception of masochistic erotic pain that is inflicted by the dominants/centers/institutions – which is what they define as “topping from bottom space” (Henderson-Espinoza, 2018). I apply this theoretical entanglement to the Lebanese queer context of sexual BDSM, and I argue that even when Hussein enjoys being fucked/penetrated [“*beheb yentek*”], he is “topping from bottom space”, from “the margins of the margins”, at the intersection of power, pain, and pleasure. I further argue that when Hussein bottoms, he tops (and dominates) from bottom space not only through the sexual act but also through the linguistic act of “disciplining” and silencing the French spoken by his sexual partners. Therefore, and circling back to Spivak, not only does the subaltern speak, but it also disciplines.

Henderson-Espinoza (2018) emphasizes the significance of adopting an intersectional approach that is inclusive of race, class, gender, sex, and sexuality when subverting the passivity that is conventionally linked to bottom space and erotically decolonizing the power situated at the margins. I find this intersectional approach to be necessary and fascinating, yet I do not find it sufficient when applying it to the (sexed) context of Lebanon, which is why I rely on Adriana Qubaiova’s theory of cross-bracing (2019). Qubaiova (2019) initially builds on Kimberle Crenshaw’s intersectionality (1991) and Jasbir Puar’s (2007) assemblages in her theorization on cross-bracing “in which dominant discourses of power meet, intersect and

brace to reproduce each other” (p. 15). She argues that “cross-bracing captures not only the structure in which friction occurs but also multitude forms of power travel, resistance and support that constitute the entire interaction” (p. 10). By studying the interplay between sociocultural, religious, political, economic, and educational factors that impact the use of Arabic in the lexicon and discourse of queer women in Lebanon, I situate my analysis in larger power structures that are built on frictions between institutions such as religion and the nation-state in relation to local and non-local modules of sexuality. I study the tensions in the dynamics that dictate the cross-braced connectedness between these different socio-sexual factors. Therefore, by applying a “cross-braced” structure, I argue that through asserting himself in Arabic during sexual BDSM, Hussein disciplines French in all that it entails. French signifies the French mandate, the classism that comes with being able to afford going to a (typically private) French-medium school to learn French, and the anti-Arab Phoenician ideology that is instated and indoctrinated using the French language.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I looked into the lacks and failures within the sexed linguistics of queer women in Lebanon. Based on my earlier arguments, I conclude that the production of sexed and queered knowledges in Arabic does not equate to the utilization of these knowledges in spoken form during sex. This linguistic imbalance when it comes to sexed Arabic is due to two main schisms that are interconnected. The first schism lingers between the spoken and written forms of Arabic, Colloquial Arabic (CA) and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) respectively. The second schism is situated within the two domains through which queer women in Lebanon interact with sexed Arabic: the professional domain within which they use Modern Standard Arabic or a semi-Colloquialized form of it, and the personal domain within which they use Colloquial Arabic. Therefore, the reasons why some queer women in Lebanon experience an aversion towards the existing lexicon and discourse of sexed Arabic is due to its standard form (MSA) which creates a distance between themselves and the act of sex. I have argued that in order to negotiate this tension with sexed Arabic and create pleasurable means of fucking in Arabic, we must experiment with a queer-feminist colloquial lexicon and discourse in order to render sexed Arabic a language that resembles our queer selves.

I further traced parallels between MSA and the French spoken in Lebanon to argue that they are similarly perceived as formal, detached/ing, and distanced/ing when sexed due to the discrepancy between the academic French taught in Lebanese schools and the French spoken as a native language. Of course, there are minor exceptions to this conclusion which are represented by interlocutors who consider French to be their mother tongue and therefore feel comfortable fucking in French. At the end of my chapter, I examined negative perceptions of sexed French as an “effeminate” and “gayified” language that falls victim to Lebanese hegemonic masculinity. Lastly, I argue that powerplay between sexed French and sexed Arabic can yield a productive dynamic within sexual BDSM, through which the erotics of pain and pleasure, discipline and punishment, and domination and submission make way for an emancipatory and decolonial queer sexed politics.

Chapter 4: Love me *bil ‘Arabi*: Attitudes Towards and Perceptions of Arabic during Queer Sex

I think if someone feels very familiar to me and I love them in an intense way, I say it in Arabic because it’s a language that resembles our bond. I said many times that it would be impossible for me to fall in love with someone who doesn’t speak Arabic. Even if we don’t speak it during sex, Arabic is a language we speak in the spaces, music, and moments we share and these emotions – I cannot speak about these things in any other language (Leyla, 30).

It was common among almost all my interlocutors to perceive Arabic as a language that accentuates a heightened level of emotionality when expressing love, humor, and desire during sex. In this chapter, I analyze the theme of Arabic as an “emotional” language that is predominantly used when expressing emotions such as love and yearning. I then explore the link between sexed Arabic and desire when analyzing the theme of Arabic as “sexy” and “erotic”. In between those two sexed spaces, I examine the intersections of love and poetry as devoid of “sexy”/erotic elements. I conclude my chapter by drawing on linkages between Arabic as a native language and elements of “realness” and “authenticity”. Based on these interconnections, I argue that there are mixed positively-connotated perceptions of Arabic and that these perceptions are located at the intersection of love, pain, and desire as prominent themes. In the larger frame of my thesis, I argue that expressing extreme emotions in Arabic is central and formative to the embodied sexed experiences of some queer women in Lebanon.

Arabic as “Emotional”: On Loving, Desiring, and Yearning in Arabic

Regardless of whether Arabic was the first language for my interlocutors and regardless of whether they felt comfortable using Arabic during sex, almost all of my interlocutors expressed that Arabic is very emotional; “when it comes to strong emotions, *byeje el ‘Arabi* [Arabic is] number 1”. There was a common consensus among my interlocutors that Arabic is the premium and “top tier” language used to express desire, love, missing, and yearning – “*badde yeke*” [I want you (feminine addressee)], “*shta ’t hes fiki*” [I miss feeling you (feminine addressee)]. As demonstrated in the opening quotation, love in Arabic is not only transmitted and expressed through the spoken, but also through what remains unspoken such as the music and the spaces that bring together queer women who speak Arabic. I argue that

love in sexed Arabic is mediated through a collective identity that is mediated through a shared language of mutual understanding.

While this is a qualitative not a quantitative study, it is significant to note that 13 out of 14 of my interlocutors found it more “intense”, “elevated”, “meaningful”, and “sentimental” to express love in Arabic during sex by saying “*bhebik/bhebak/bhebkon*” compared to “I love you” and “*je t’aime*” [French for: I love you]. The only exception to this overwhelming majority was an interlocutor who agreed with the previous statement as long as it is outside the contours of sex, since she strictly uses English during sex with minor exceptions such as when expressing pain. Despite the common consensus that expressing love in Arabic is the highest form of loving, some of my interlocutors found it difficult to express this emotion in Arabic because it is “heavy”.¹⁸ A comparative linguistic study conducted on the semantic deviations¹⁹ detected in Arabic versus English proverbs that tackle the theme of love showed that Arabic contains more frequent semantic deviations than English when conceptualizing love (Hashem and Muhi, 2021). The study also proved that Arabic love proverbs were characterized as more argumentative and imaginative than English due to their extensive inclusion of figurative linguistic features (Hashem and Muhi, 2021). While MSA and CA occupy separate spaces in the Lebanese context, proverbs bridge both forms of Arabic since they constitute didactic lessons based on lived experiences. Thus, I argue that Arabic allows for a space of experimenting with love expressions that is broader than the space allotted by English, hence its elevated presence in the sex lives of queer women in Lebanon.

Lina’s cat was really curious about our conversation and was roaming around the space every now and then. I could see a slightly wiggly tail from the screen, followed by tiny jumps attempting to chase the light emanating from behind. Meanwhile, Lina and I were discussing the intersection of love and sex, vis-à-vis expressing love during sex.

Switching to Arabic is really cute or it touches something, *ya ‘ne* [so] it gives it an extra tone. It’s like, for me, *Englizi* [English] is the neutral, and if you want to give it the extra thing, you go to ‘*Arabi* [Arabic]. But that extra thing could be cute, humorous, emotional, *hek “bhebik” enno* [like “I love you”] I have this feeling... It accentuates, so if you’re being vulnerable, and you’re saying I love you but ‘*am t’ouliya “bhebik”*

¹⁸ Here, the term “heavy” is positively connotated when used in the context of referring to the expression of love/loving in Arabic. However, I explored the theme of Arabic as “Heavy” in Chapter 1, where the term was negatively connotated, specifically in the context of naming and referring to genitalia.

¹⁹ Semantic deviations are deviations in the meanings of utterances, which often take the form of figurative language (such as similes, metaphors, hyperboles, etc.) in order to convey a multiplicity and multilayering in meanings.

[but you're saying it as "*bhebik*" (Arabic for: I love you – feminine addressee)], it makes you even more vulnerable saying it *bil 'Arabi* [in Arabic].

Lina (37) mostly speaks English during sex with minor exceptions of using Arabic. When I asked her about the few things she only says in Arabic, she instantly replied with "*bhebik* [I love you – feminine addressee], of course, because it's something else". She told me that Arabic "hits differently" when the sex is emotional, so expressing love, yearning, and desire is more intimate in Arabic. Given this association with Arabic being vulnerable and intense, some women tend to dilute the intensity/concentration/heaviness of Arabic with either reverting to or codeswitching to other languages, which is what Tala (25) referred to as "hiding behind" French when she does not want to "overwhelm the person with our mother tongue" because revealing the level of intimacy would be subdued by speaking "the language of others".²⁰

Throughout my interviews, I observed that interlocutors drew a clear distinction between the Arabic used to express "graphic" things during sex and the Arabic used to express "emotional" things during sex.²¹ According to my interlocutors, "graphic" sexed Arabic encompasses referring to genitalia or physical/bodily acts such as fingering, penetration, licking, sucking, etcetera; meanwhile, "emotional" sexed Arabic encompasses expressing love, yearning, and flirting. Critically observing this dichotomy, I argue that "graphic" sexed Arabic equates to the act of fucking, whereas "emotional" sexed Arabic equates to the verbal expression of a variety of emotions – notably love and yearning.²² I

²⁰ Complete quotation: "*Eyyem el ghazal bil 'Arabi byetla' ktir awe* [Sometimes flirting in Arabic comes off as really strong/intense], so the French version of it would be way more watered down, *heke* [like] toned down *enno* [so,] it's easier to stomach. So, sometimes this is where I hide behind the French. It is, I think, when I don't want to be too much, or I don't want to overwhelm the person with our mother tongue. It's another level of intimacy than saying those *bi leghet ghayrna* [in the language of others]" (Tala, 25).

²¹ Example 1: Eliane (28):

"*Ya'ne kelmet bhebik... hole el kalimet* that are just *heke* emotional *b'oulon bil 'Arabi bas el osas yale byen 'addo sex enno "nikini" aw "hotte osba'ik" aw "shedde" b'oulon bil Englizi mesh bil 'Arabi*. [Words like I love you (feminine addressee)... like these words that are just emotional, I say them in Arabic, but the things that count as explicitly sexual like "fuck me (feminine addressee)" or "finger me (feminine addressee)" or "harder", I say them in English not in Arabic]."

Example 2: Yasmine (32):

"*Ktir ahyan* for me to receive graphic descriptive words *bil Englizi. Ktir bfaddelon bil Englizi*. [It's much easier for me to receive graphic descriptive words in English. I prefer them much more in English]."

²² To further support my argument on the discrepancy between the act of fucking and the verbalization of emotions, I quote Ranim (34) who predominantly speaks English and French during sex with minor exceptions in Arabic:

"Sex for me does not necessarily mean emotions. So, *bil 'Arabi el mshabrah, ana w 'am ba'mel wahad, eza 'am 'abber 'an shi khasso bil* sexual act, I would use English or French – "harder", "slower", "you're so wet", "fuck me". And then when I want to express emotions *bil* act, *enno fiyi oul "ente ktir helwe"* actually *bil 'Arabi bas* when I want to express love *aw hek*, I would use Arabic as the elevated language.

[Sex for me does not necessarily mean emotions. So, in vernacular Arabic, when I'm fucking, if I'm expressing something related to the sexual act, I would use English or French – "harder", "slower", "you're so wet", "fuck

further argue that there is a schism between the act and the speech – a schism between fucking in Arabic during queer sex and loving in Arabic during queer sex, which are neither mutually exclusive nor mutually inclusive.

Based on the observations on which I elaborate above, I argue that perceptions of sexed Arabic drastically differ when used during queer sex that involves love (or emotional sex) as opposed to queer sex that does not involve love (or casual sex). I noticed that during emotional sex, Arabic was perceived as “erotic” while English was perceived as “platonic”; however, during casual sex, Arabic was perceived as either “cringe” (usually) or “erotic” (rarely) and English was perceived as either “neutral” (usually) or “erotic” (rarely). Consequently, I argue that when love is involved in sexual acts, perceptions of Arabic are transformed from being “cringe” into becoming “erotic”. This significant transformation occurs due to the destabilization of “cringe” as an averted reaction to explicitly sexual lexicons and discourses, which my interlocutors referred to as “graphic”. Therefore, love works as a stabilizer or diluter of the difficult emotions that come with sexed Arabic; love becomes a pathway into rendering sexed Arabic an “emotional” and “erotic” linguistic space rather than an uncomfortable or alienating one, which contributes to an emotional and erotic catharsis within the queer self.

The theme of Arabic as a “poetic” language was common among my interlocutors, yet Stephanie (25) was the only one to emphasize that it is poetic but certainly not sexy. Stephanie’s (25) first language is English; she almost exclusively speaks English during sex, yet she told me “I speak Arabic when I wanna say something poetic not something sexy”. Again, there is a clear distinction between what is deemed fit for sexiness and arousal (English) and what is deemed emotional and poetic when sexed (Arabic). I argue that English is posited as sexy because of the mediums and templates through which many queer women in Lebanon come to know sex and sexuality, such as pornography, erotic literature, films, and TV series, which are often channeled through English as a sexed and sexy language.²³ Meanwhile, from a more contemporary perspective, Arabic is posited as poetic (but not sexy) because the Arabic love poetry taught in Lebanese high schools mostly falls under the genre of *al-ghazal al-‘uthri* [closest approximate translation of the genre: Idyll] and not *al-ghazal al-‘ibahi* [closest approximate translation of the genre: Erotica], despite the Arabic literary

me”. And then when I want to express emotions *during the act*, I would say “you’re so beautiful/gorgeous” actually *in Arabic*, but when I want to express love or something along the lines of that, I would use Arabic as the elevated language]”.

²³ Please see a discussion on Mediums of Sexed Knowledge for Queer Women in Lebanon in the Introduction.

and poetic heritage being rich in *al-ghazal al-'ibahi*/erotica. Therefore, the sexed and erotic genres of Arabic poetry taught in the Lebanese education system are censored and “sanitized” in a sense, even in Modern Standard Arabic. Consequently, I argue that this censorship of Arab(ic) erotica, even in its Standard form (MSA), contributes to the erasure of a pleasurable and sexed embodiment of the language and rather confines it to a secluded, platonic/poetic, and desexualized realm.

My interlocutors considered Arabic to be a “turn-on” and “hotter” than English and French for a variety of reasons. Arabic was considered arousing and erotic when used as a change from the mainstream or the usual “because Arabic is not the go-to thing” as mentioned by Shams (42). For Max (23), Arabic accentuates her state of arousal when she notices that her partner(s) is/are aroused when hearing her speak in Arabic; I interpret this as a linguistic transference of arousal through sexed Arabic that is exchanged between two or more people.

Many of my interlocutors used Arabic when flirting with someone in a sexual and romantic manner, as opposed to using English when complimenting them in a platonic manner. Michelle (37) draws a clear distinction between English as platonic and Arabic as erotic:

Enno “ente ktir helwe” ‘ala “jeldtik ktir helwe” ‘ala “ktir ‘abele ta‘mtik” aw enno “manne msad’a ousal ‘al bet w shalhik”, “‘abele etfarraj ‘alayke”... Bas masalan “you look great, this looks really sexy on you”. It’s not flirting for me. Aw’at eza hkit bil ‘Arabi bala ma rakkez, ba ‘ref enno badde hayda el shakhes.

[Like “you’re so beautiful”, “your skin is so beautiful”, “I’m so craving your taste”, or like “I can’t wait to get home and undress you”, “I want to watch you”... But for example, “you look great, this looks really sexy on you”. It’s not flirting for me. Sometimes, if I speak Arabic without noticing, I realize that I desire this person].

I argue that this schism between the platonic/English and the erotic/Arabic renders Arabic the primary channel through which queer women’s erotic selves are asserted and performed. This Arabized expression of desire among women is an active creation of a language of queer pleasure.

Arabic as “Real” and “Authentic” vs. English as “Fake” and “Impersonal”

Throughout my conversations with my interlocutors, speaking and hearing Arabic during sex was often referred to as more “real” and “authentic” than other languages, mainly

English, which were referred to as “fake”. In sociolinguistics, there is an interconnectedness between nativity, realness, and authenticity (Eckert, 2003). Based on the diversity of their experiences and the different sexed contexts within which they used different languages, I infer that the “realness” and “authenticity” of Arabic are characterized as more meaningful, expressive, truthful, and honest than foreign languages, even among those who consider their first language to be English or French.

The common multilayered characterization of English being “fake” and “overused” among my interlocutors is linked to several associations. When asked about the language she feels most comfortable using, Tala (25) replied with a wide smile saying, “*Akid akid akid akid akid ‘Arabi* [for sure, for sure, for sure, for sure, for sure, Arabic]” (we both laugh). After asserting herself five consecutive times, Tala (25) associates comfort with Arabic for being “personal” as opposed to English being “impersonal” and “cliché/mainstream” due to it being overused. She also considers English to be a “professional”, “administrative”, “utilitarian”, and “dry” language. To further elaborate on the prevalent exposure to sexed content in English when compared to Arabic, I refer to Clara’s take on the language in which she feels most comfortable, “*Halla’ ana berteh aktar bil ‘Arabi la’ enno bhes enno* [I feel more comfortable using Arabic because I feel that] it’s not fake. English is more used *bi kil shi* [in everything] that we consume”. Clara (23) creates a dichotomy between sexed English and sexed Arabic. She considers sexed English to be “fake”, which in turn posits sexed Arabic as “real”. If the fakeness stems from the overabundance and overconsumption of sexed content in English through fictitious channels such as media and literature, then the scarcity of exposure to sexed Arabic is constitutive of its “realness” which is experienced firsthand. This realness also stems from the active and deliberate reconfiguration and negotiation of how these terms are queered within sexed experiences.

Even though Dalia (27) mostly uses English during sex, she still characterized sexed English as inauthentic, “*Besta ‘mel Englizi hatta* [I use English even] when I’m moaning. *Enno* [like] I use “fuck” a lot. I use “God” a lot. [...] During sex I get distracted by the fact that I’m saying “fuck” and “oh my God”, *enno le ‘am oulon?* [I wonder why I’m saying them]. They don’t sound authentic to me, anymore at least. They sound *hek shway* [a bit performative”. According to J. L. Austin’s speech act theory, a performative utterance is an utterance that in and of itself does an action; it performs what it states (1975). Examples of performative utterances include promising and apologizing. Jacques Derrida (1982) argued that the performative, as originally theorized by Austin, is citational in the sense that “Every

sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable” (p. 12). Butler’s theoretical work on gender performativity builds on Austin’s and Derrida’s theorizations on performativity by arguing that gender is enacted by performative acts. Butler (1993) argues that performativity is not confined to an act, but rather it is a reiterated set of acts that are constantly repeated. By looking into the entanglements of performativity as theorized by Austin, Derrida, and Butler, I argue that using sexed English in a queer Lebanese context sounds performative because the vast majority of (queer) sexual exposure to pornography, literature, and the media is made available in English.²⁴ Therefore, as illustrated through the case of Dalia (27), the citation and reiteration of the sexed content that is channeled through the English language is a performative speech-act. And due to the lack of exposure to positive sexed content in Arabic, which is the native language of most of my interlocutors, I deduce that this sexed performativity occurs outside the parameters of an authentic self that is constituted through Arabic.

On a similar note, Max (23) experiences a sense of alienation and dissociation when using English during sex. She told me that English feels like “it’s straight out of a porn movie”, which complements my earlier analysis on the exposure to sexed content being indoctrinated through foreign languages, specifically English. When comparing her arousal and comfort levels with different languages during sex, Max told me: “For me *el ‘Arabi* [Arabic] lately, it’s turning me on *aktar men el* [more than] English *la’unno el English ktir generic w ktir b’eed* [because English is very generic and very far] ... *bta’rfe kif lamma tehke ‘atoul bi leghtik bekoun aryah? Fa lamma tkoune ‘am tehke bel English, bethese halik enno barrat halik, metel ka’ennik bi film* [you know how it feels comfortable when you always speak in your native language? So, when you speak in English, you feel yourself being outside yourself, as if you are in a film]”. Max feels a distance from herself when speaking in English, as if she is trapped in a film frame through which she is observing herself. This alienating distance represents a state of discomfort that does not allow her to embody herself during the act of sex. Therefore, when compared to Arabic, the latter allows her to reach a heightened state of arousal that the “genericity” of English fails to provide. I argue that the English spoken as a second language constitutes a hindrance and disruption in a sexed Lebanese context, because it prevents its (nonnative) speaker from embodying

²⁴ Please see a discussion on Mediums of Sexed Knowledge for Queer Women in Lebanon in the Introduction.

themselves through the act of sex. Judith Butler argues that language is a focal point of departure from which our bodily conceptions are constituted and signified through meanings (1990). Building on Butler's theoretical work, Catherine Nash's conception of embodiment is constructed on the premise that "For queer theorists, language and discourse are central to the constitutive understandings of subjective experiences of embodiment" (2010, p. 586). Building on Judith Butler's theoretical work on language as a focal point of departure from which our bodily conceptions are constituted, I argue that sexed Arabic is integral for an embodied experience of sex for some queer women in Lebanon.

When I first asked Michelle (37) about what language(s) she speaks during sex, she told me that Arabic occupies her mind, fantasies, and sex life. Michelle repeated the expression "I can't relate" three times while referring to sexed English:

Bil 'Arabi, ktir bil 'Arabi, la' enno I have very specific fantasies w deyman bil 'Arabi. Ma 'ende el English bi rase. I can be very turned on, ya 'ne fiyi koun ktir mhayaje, w hada y' elle jemle bel English w hessa jeye men film. Ma hessa. I can't relate ya 'ne. Enno "I wanna fuck you so hard" (says it in a mocking tone while imitating someone). La' oulili "badde nikik la tsarrkhe". Maba 'ref oulili shi tene. Ya 'ne ktir mosta 'maleen el kalem el English la ele enno shakhseyyan, I can't relate. Mabhesa authentic. I can't relate. Fi banet ktir behkeyon bil 'Arabi bi reddo bel English, fa ana bsir enno bi noss el shi bettalla' feya b' ella oulili li eltee bil 'Arabi, enno 'ayze esma 'a bil 'Arabi.

[Arabic prevails because I have very specific fantasies and they're all in Arabic. English does not exist in my mind. I can be very turned on, like I can be very horny, then someone says an expression in English, and I feel like it's extracted from a film. I don't feel it. I can't relate. Like "I wanna fuck you so hard" (says it in a mocking tone while imitating someone). No, tell me "I want to/will fuck you until you scream". I don't know, just say something else. I personally can't relate to English because it's overused, I can't relate. I don't feel like it's authentic. I can't relate. I speak Arabic to a lot of girls, and they reply in English. So, I stop in the middle of the act, I look at them, and I tell them "Repeat what you just said, but in Arabic. I need to hear it in Arabic"].

She considers English to be a turn-off during sex because she is unable to relate to it, feel it, or embody it. Sexed English creates a disruption, not only in her levels of sexual arousal but also in the act of sex itself since she often pauses and asks her partners to repeat what they say but in Arabic. She considers English to be overused and overconsumed in the media, specifically in the film and porn industries. She does not consider it to be authentic or genuine and thus cannot connect with it on a sexual level. Consequently, I argue that sexed Arabic is a necessary linguistic pathway for some queer women in order to enter an embodied state of relationality and relatability that allows them to feel present during the act of sex as well as to derive pleasure from it.

Expressing Extreme Emotions: On Pain and Ecstasy / Orgasming in Arabic

Ranim (34) speaks all three languages during sex, English, Arabic, and French. Yet, she considers Arabic to be “the most elevated and pure” language, “When I stop thinking, when I stop using my mind in the act, *ya ‘ne bas koun khalas* [like whenever I’m just] surrendering to what my body is feeling, *aw* [or] it’s sending messages to my brain *bala ma ana koun* [without me] interfering in it with my consciousness, *bhes el ‘Arabi byetla’, howwe li byetla’* [I feel like Arabic prevails, it’s the one that prevails]”. Ranim’s experience is characterized by a schism between her conscious and unconscious thinking. She finds herself reverting to Arabic when she loses herself within – and to – the act of sex, as well as the sexual partner(s) involved in the act. She labeled this process of letting go as a state of “surrender”, which I interpret as a sexual and linguistic surrender and alignment with a true self. This linguistic surrendering of power prevails when expressing emotions such as pain and love, and when climaxing/orgasming during the act of sex. Similarly, Eliane (28) told me “I don’t remember *enno hekye bil* [speaking in] English after I orgasm. [...] *Yemken la’ enno berja’ la asle enno bkoun merteha w mertkheye w* [Maybe because I revert back to my origin when I’m feeling comfortable and relaxed and] I feel so vulnerable”. Eliane talks about a distinctive point of return to her “origin” that is facilitated by a vulnerable and climactic state of arousal. This shift to the “origin” is characterized by the process of reverting back to a default mode, which is entirely in Arabic. Therefore, some queer women announce climaxing or reaching the highest form of ecstasy in their language of “origin”, Arabic.

Pain was another prominent emotion that was predominantly expressed in Arabic among women whose first language is Arabic; meanwhile those whose first language is English or French expressed pain in those languages. Some of my interlocutors referred to common Arabic expressions of pain such as “*shway shway*” [literal translation: bit by bit; figurative translation: slow down] and “*khalas*” [literal translation: enough; figurative translation: stop] as irreplaceable in any other language, to the extent that they used them with non-Arab/non-Arabic speaking sexual partners. Some interlocutors, including those who almost exclusively speak English during sex, explicitly mentioned finding it more pleasurable to say *a’wa* [harder] when receiving pain during kink/BDSM, such as in the case of spanking.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I argued that there are certain sexed emotions that are experienced and embodied in a heightened manner when spoken in Arabic as a native language such as love, yearning, desire, pain, and ecstasy. Arabic has the potential to accommodate to a wider terrain/lexicon of emotions, as shown in the image below (arabicwords_0, 2019). The diagram also demonstrates a co-constitutive connectedness between four major emotions within the broader realm of love, which are: love, pain, madness, and obsession/extreme infatuation. Therefore, and by circling back to Butler’s theories of performativity (1990;1993), I argue that embodying these emotions during sex is elevated when performed or enacted through the Arabic language, which I analyzed earlier in relation to love and pain which happen to intersect at “burning desire”. Lastly, by linking the intersection of pain and love at “burning desire” to my earlier analysis on the eroticism of Arabic, I argue that erotic Arabic is mediated between pain and love, which explains why it is especially productive and pleasurable to use this language during pain-play dynamics of sexual BDSM. By circling back to Chapter 1, I argue that Arabic is a productive linguistic tool of inflicting pain and deriving pleasure within the realm of sexual BDSM. Using (sexed) Arabic as a language that accommodates varied degrees of love, pain, madness, and obsession/extreme infatuation, queer women are able to rewrite scripts of love, pain, and pleasure through connecting with themselves on multilayered emotional level that is not translatable to foreign languages.

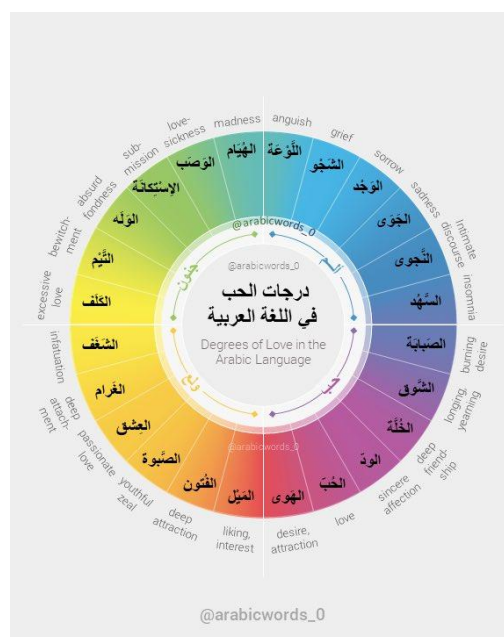


Figure 3 Source: arabicwords_0 (2019)

Conclusion



Figure 4 Photo taken by me in Beirut, Lebanon (2017).

I have always been drawn to street art, what it has to say while a lot remains unspoken. I am drawn to the subversion it carries within a visibility that permeates the surveillance of the public. Back when I first moved to Beirut in 2017, I remember mapping out the city through walls rather than streets. I had vividly memorized what was inscribed on certain walls to the extent that I was able to identify those that had been painted over or modified with time. This photo was one of the first few among my collection of Beirut's walls. I was with my friend, Malak, roaming around the Saint Nicolas Stairs at Gemmayzeh when *el- 'Arabi mesh 'ayb* [Arabic is not shameful/taboo] caught my eye. As I have explained throughout this thesis, the solidification of *'ayb* in Arab societies in general, and Lebanon in specific, extends beyond its closest approximate translations into English: shame and taboo. This expression remained imprinted in my memory throughout my journey of delving deeper into the question of language and its agency to shape our bodies, selves, and identities – and the way these intersect. “Arabic is not *'ayb*” questions the authority that *'ayb* has over our perception of Arabic as a native language, and therefore strips *'ayb* of its proclaimed performative hegemony. I begin my introductory chapter by questioning the place of Arabic in

contemporary Lebanon. Then, throughout my analytical chapters, I locate Arabic within the sex lives of queer women in Lebanon. Lastly, I choose to begin my concluding chapter with this subversive statement due to its overarching centrality in each of my chapters, particularly in the second chapter.

In the interdisciplinary framework of my sociolinguistic study, coupled with data extracted from 14 ethnographic online interviews with queer women from Lebanon, I rely on queer and feminist theories to build my analysis. Situating my study at the intersection of sex, language, and the self in a Lebanese context, I argue that there is a cathartic interconnectedness between queer sex, Colloquial Arabic, and the self. Within an overarching frame of analysis, I argue that sexed Arabic is a subversive tool of resistance for some queer women in Lebanon, and that sexed Arabic is a site of love, pleasure, and productive pain through which queer women in Lebanon reconfigure, reclaim, and subvert hegemonic structures of power. Therefore, sexed Arabic is a site of catharsis that is integral to the formation and articulation of a queer Arab self in the Lebanese context.

Lastly, I choose to conclude my thesis by analyzing a quote from Michelle (37) who, throughout our interview, repeatedly mentioned how uncomfortable her women sexual partners feel when they hear Arabic during sex. I was curious if this was the case when she has sex with men, so she started by telling me about her experiences with dominating men:

Ana ktir b'atfeh shabeb w b'ellon enno "enta btaaref enno kil shi 'abelak ta'mlo feyye ana ha a'mlo fik. Yaane eza enta baddak tnikni, baddak tetwa'a' nikak. W eza bethes kelmet nyeke sa'be 'lek baddak tehseb enno fi osba' aw tnen rah yfouto bi tizak". [...] Layke 'lel el banet li byehko bil 'Arabi w baddon ktir wa'et ta ybalshe yehko bil 'Arabi. El shabeb byehko aktar 'Arabi la' enno it's vulgar, I think. It's intimidating kamen. They like to intimidate bi kalimet kbiri, ana hek bshoufa. Enno howwe bas y'oul "ayre" behes enno ayro akbar shi bil kawkab. 'Anjad mertehin aktar la' enno t'ili w henne they own it. Fa wa'ta yle'o hadan ma byetzahzah eddem kalemton... w bsir ello "badak tshuf ayya er 'abelak yfout bi tizak el layle". Hon byenhar. Enno wa'ta testa'mle el kalimet 'alayan ktir byenharo. Ktir byetfeja'o hatta wa'ta teje tsakhfeyon bi mahal aw ma te'badeyon jadd bi henne shu 'am bi'oulo aw enno thaseseyon enno "bravo bravo bravo habibi" (she says it in a mocking tone – while clapping). Matetkheyale adde henne beseero submissive. Matetkheyale adde byenkesro. Ktir byenkesro. Ya'ne it's fun for me hayda el practice bil tehdeed, very fun for me. W ana bna'eyon huge w 'adal w heke enno ba'den faj'a biseero ktir submissive ma' kebron w ma' 'eemeton, fa ktir byenkeser shi feyon wa'ta tejeyon bi nafs el mostawa, bi nafs el lexique, bi nafs el attitude.

[I usually pick up a lot of guys, and I tell them: "are you aware that everything that you desire to do to me, I will do to you? Meaning that, if you want to fuck me, expect me to fuck you. And if you feel that the term "fucking" is difficult for you, you have to expect that there's a finger or two that will be shoved up your ass" [...]] Look, it's so rare to come across girls who speak Arabic during sex; girls usually need a lot of time to start

speaking Arabic during sex. It's more common for guys to speak Arabic because it's vulgar, I think. It's also intimidating. They like to intimidate with big words, this is how I see it. Like when a guy says "my dick", he feels like the world revolves around his dick. Guys are more comfortable because Arabic is heavy, and they own it. So, when they find someone who is not weakened by their words... Like I would tell a guy "we'll see which dick you'll want me to shove up your ass tonight". Guys collapse when you turn their words against them. They are shocked when you ridicule them and don't take them seriously. You'd be like "bravo bravo bravo habibi [Arabic for: my love; "habibi" here is used in a patronizing way]" (she says it in a mocking tone – while clapping). You cannot imagine how submissive they become. You cannot imagine how broken they end up. So broken. So, this practice in specific is fun for me, very fun for me. And I usually pick up huge muscular guys who suddenly turn submissive, despite how huge and tough they appear. So, something breaks in them when you meet them at the same level, the same lexicon, the same attitude].

Michelle uses degradation and humiliation to assert her dominance when penetrating men during sexual BDSM. She renders them submissive and “breaks their will” by turning their own discourse against them, therefore stripping them from claiming ownership of sexed Arabic. This act of breaking is fueled by the agency of language to mend – or break – the self. According to Barker (2013), BDSM allows its practitioners to challenge heteronormativity and structural inequalities through the active choosing and consenting to play with power dynamics, fantasies, and parodies. Through her practice of sexual BDSM, Michelle (37) subverts stereotypical sexed gender roles that posit men as dominant/penetrators and women as submissive/receivers from a heteropatriarchal lens. Michel Foucault argues that “The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces” (1980, p. 74). Foucault further examines the transgression encapsulated within the challenging of hegemonic power structures. From this theoretical angle, I argue that Michelle’s practice of kink/BDSM is mediated through a feminist subversion of power dynamics that allow her to dominate an entrenched extension of oppressive power structures in the context of Lebanon. Notably, Michelle finds it crucial to utilize the same level of intimidation, the same lexicon, and the same attitude when reversing gendered sexual roles within a BDSM dynamic. Thus, I argue that when dominating men, Michelle not only fucks them in/using Arabic, but also fucks the hegemonic masculinity and heteropatriarchal structures that are embedded within sexed Arabic. I further argue that sexed Arabic becomes a tool through which sexual BDSM as a feminist practice becomes a site of catharsis for some queer women. Therefore, the master’s tools can indeed dismantle the master’s house (Lorde, 1979).

Appendix

Interview Guide

N.B. I codeswitched between English and Arabic (Lebanese Colloquial Arabic) when conducting my interviews, and I adjusted my language use to the preferred language(s) of each interlocutor.

- 1) How old are you and where were you born and raised?
- 2) Tell me a bit about your educational background: private or public school/university, French or English-medium school/university, religious or secular school/university, etcetera.
- 3) What languages did you speak during your childhood (with family and friends)?
- 4) Do you consider your family to be religious, and would you consider yourself to be religious? How has this influenced your language use in general?
- 5) How do you identify in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation, and what pronouns do you use? Are you comfortable identifying with the joint label “queer woman”?
- 6) How do you define sex? In other words, what counts as sex for you?
- 7) How did you first encounter sex education and in what language(s) did these initial encounters happen? For example, pornography, literature, school, parents, etcetera.
- 8) Do you communicate during sex? If so, how often do you talk with your sexual partner(s), and what do you talk about? Can you give me a few examples?
- 9) In what language(s) do you think or fantasize about sex? And what languages do you feel most comfortable using during sex?
- 10) Do you actively think of what you say during sex, or does it come naturally to you?
- 11) How often would you say you use Arabic during sex? For example, does it depend on the mood or the sexual partner?
- 12) How do you feel when you speak Arabic during sex?
- 13) How do you feel when you are spoken to in Arabic during sex?
- 14) Do you use English and French during sex? How often?
- 15) Do you codeswitch to other languages during sex? When? To what languages?
 - a. Possible follow-up question: When do you feel the need to codeswitch when having sex with somebody who understands Arabic/is an Arab?

- b. Possible follow-up question: Why do you think you codeswitch to other languages during sex?
 - c. Possible follow-up question: Have you ever maintained the use of Arabic without any instances of codeswitching during sex?
- 16) Compare your levels of comfort when having sex with somebody with whom you can speak Arabic versus someone with whom you have to use a language that is not Arabic.
- 17) Do you think the location of where you have sex matters? Does it affect your language use? How?
- 18) Do you sometimes choose not to say certain Arabic words during sex? If so, what are some of these words? Why do you refrain from saying them in Arabic?
- 19) What are some of the terms that you use to flirt during sex?
 - a. Possible follow-up question: Do you use different languages when flirting with sexual partners who identify with different genders?
- 20) Do you sext? If so, in what languages?
- 21) Do you orgasm? If so, what are some of the things you say when you orgasm?
 - a. Possible follow-up question: Does it differ when having sex with partners who identify with different genders?
 - b. Possible follow-up question: Does it differ when having sex with partners who know Arabic/are Arab and partners who do not/are not?
- 22) Do you practice kink/BDSM during sex? If so, in what language(s) do you speak during those practices?
- 23) Do you use sex toys? If so, what languages do you use to refer to them/while using them?
- 24) Have you ever used *Al-Fusha* (MSA) during sex? If so, how and in what contexts?
 - a. Possible follow-up question: Why do you think you are not comfortable using *Al-Fusha* during sex?
- 25) Reflect on how you used to communicate when you first started having sex versus now. Are there any differences? If so, what are they?

Glossary of Terms

BDSM: subset of kink / acronym for Bondage, Discipline (or Dominance), Sadism (or Submission), and Masochism.

Bondage: refers to practices that involve physical restriction such as binding and cuffing.

Bottom: represents the recipient / follower / submitter of power in the sexual act.

Colloquial Arabic: The spoken form of Arabic, which encompasses different dialects. In the context of my thesis, I analyze Lebanese Colloquial Arabic with minor references to Palestinian Colloquial Arabic, where relevant.

Discipline: refers to practices that involve punishment and taming.

English-medium schools: Lebanese schools that teach English as a second foreign language alongside Arabic.

French-medium schools: Lebanese schools that teach French as a second foreign language alongside Arabic.

Kink: refers to sexual practices that are considered “nonnormative”.

Masochism: refers to the process of deriving pleasure from receiving pain.

MSA (Modern Standard Arabic): The written and Standard form of Arabic, which is used in literature, the media, official papers, etcetera.

Pain-play: BDSM practices that revolve around the exchange (infliction and receipt) of pain.

Powerplay: refers to the exchange of power during BDSM practices.

Sadism: refers to the process of deriving pleasure from inflicting pain.

Sexed Arabic: Arabic spoken during sex.

Top: represents the inflictor / leader / holder of power in the sexual act.

Vanilla: refers to sexual practices that are considered “normative” or nonkinky.

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