



CORRIGENDUM

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**Marginal Linguistic Systems (Animal Calls, Child-Directed Language) and
Political Folklore in Lebanon.
Two Case Studies**

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Abstract

This paper takes a sociolinguistic approach to the analysis of the informal usage of two words from modern Lebanese political discourse; repeated animal call (donkey braying) “hā,” and the hypocoristic forename “Roro,” borrowed from the French. The paper demonstrates how these lexical characteristics of the Lebanese dialect reveal similarities to what Charles Albert Ferguson termed marginal systems within languages. The paper is supplemented by graphical representations and other extra-linguistic data.

1. Methodological Perspective¹

This paper employs a sociolinguistic approach to the analysis of data from Lebanese oral and written—mostly, but not exclusively unofficial—political discourse, showing similarities to what Charles A. Ferguson termed “marginal systems within languages” and “animal calls [...] or child-directed speech.”² Like Ferguson, Boris Uspienski analyses marginal linguistic systems and defines them as a

separated lexical enclave which is characterized by phonetics differing from the norm, and also specific grammatical properties which seem abnormal in the background of a given language; one counts among them, for example, onomatopoeias, different forms of

¹ The data and photos in this article were collected in Beirut, Beit Meri, Bsharri, and Mar Sha`ya during my Agence universitaire de la Francophonie post-doctoral fellowship at the Institut français du Proche Orient (IFPO, Beirut, 2008-2009.) Part of the material was presented in an unpublished lecture titled “Anti-Arabism Among Lebanese-Christian Militias in Contemporary Propaganda Materials (1975-1990) in Standard and Dialectal Arabic; A Sociolinguistic Approach” (London, UK: London School of Economics, Anthropology Department, February 4, 2010) and (Washington DC: USA, Third Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA), November 6, 2010.)

² Charles A. Ferguson, “Baby Talk in Six Languages,” in *Language Structure and Language Use: Essays by Charles A. Ferguson*. Selected and Introduced by Anwar S. Dil (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971), 113.



*expressive lexis, so called "child words" (nursery-words), forms of calling to and fighting off animals, et cetera.*³

Dialectal Arabic call to animals, animal calls, and baby talk⁴ frequently have the form of reduplication, that is, inter alia, CvCv and C₁V₁C₂ C₁V₂C₂(v)⁵. We quote here for example⁶:

1. calls to animals: *sa'sa'* "arrêter un âne en criant sa'sa'" (to stop a donkey by shouting sa'sa'); *ġa'ġa'a* "appeler (les chameaux) à l'eau en disant ġi'ġi'" [to call (camels) to the water by saying ġi'ġi']⁸; *qasqasa* and *qaşqaşa* (to call a dog)⁹;

³ Boris Uspienski, *Historia i semiotyka (History and semiotics)*. Polish translation: Bogusław Żyłko (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 1998), 68 (English translation A.P.).

⁴ I use the term "baby talk" as a synonym of the term "child-directed speech", this is in Ferguson's meaning "any special form of a language which is regarded by a speech community as being primarily appropriate for talking to young children and which is generally regarded as not the normal adult use of language.", Ferguson, "Baby Talk in Six Languages", 103; for the use of baby talk in political dialectal production in Lebanon, see Arkadiusz Płonka *L'idée de langue libanaise d'après Sa'īd 'Aql* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 2004), 128.

⁵ In more general context, Henri Fleisch, writing about the repetition of a bilateral element in Classical Arabic, stresses that: "Elle [this repetition - AP] donne du vocabulaire expressif, figurant ou évoquant des mouvements, des sons, des bruits particuliers ou caractéristiques, des phénomènes de lumière, des impressions particulières des sons et d'une manière générale toute action qui a retenu, nourri ou amusé l'attention", Henri Fleisch, *L'arabe classique. Esquisse d'une structure linguistique* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1956), 102. We give here some verbs of the type (ta-)C₁aC₂C₁aC₂a with their chosen meanings: بربر *barbara* (to babble noisily, to jabber); باصباص *başbaşa* (to wag بذببه *bi-danabihī* its tail); باطباط *baţbaţa* (to quack [duck]); هدهد *hadhada* [to rock, to dandle (a child)]; لال *la'la'a* and تلال *tala'la'a* (to shine, to sparkle); خلخل *halhala* (to shake, to convulse) and تخلخل *tahalhala* (to be shaken, to be rocked); خنخن *hanhana* (to nasalize, to twang); خشخش *haşhaşa* (to clank, to clatter, to rattle); دلدل *daldala* (to dangle) and تادل *tadaldala* (to hang loosely, to dangle); ذبذب *dabdaba* (to swing, to dangle); رحرح *rahraha* (الكلام *bi-l-kalām*) (to equivocate, to speak ambiguously); عطعط *aţ'aţa* (to clamor, to yell); تمرمر *tamarmara* (to murmur, to grumble); مصمص *maşmaşa* (to suck, to sip and turn around in the mouth); نزنز *naznaza* [to rock, to dandle (a baby)]; نشنش *naşnaşa* (to bubble); غرغر *ġarġara* (to gargle); شعشع *ša'sa'a* (to shine); تكتك *taktaka* (to bubble); تعتع *ta'ta'a* (to stammer, to shake); طنطن *tañtana* (to ring [bell], to hum [insect], to clang); ولول *walwala* (to cry "woe"); زلزل *zalzala* (to shake) and تزلزل *tazalzala* (to quake [earth]); all examples and their meanings from Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan (New York: Spoken Language Services, 1976).

⁶ We note vowels as they are in their original texts.

⁷ Fleisch, *L'arabe classique*, 102.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Albert Kazimirski de Biberstein, *Dictionnaire arabe-français contenant toutes les racines de la langue arabe, leur dérivés, tant dans l'idiome vulgaire que dans l'idiome littéral, ainsi que les dialectes d'Alger et de Maroc*, vol. 2 (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1860), 737 and 755.



2. animal calls: *ḥafḥafa* (*maṣdar*, the sound of hyena); also verbs like *hawhaw* (to bark, for example in Egypt) or *nawnaw* (to mew)¹⁰;
3. baby talk: *wawa* (hurt)¹¹; *qūqū* and *kūkū* (sleep)¹²; *kūku* (fowl, pigeon)¹³; *nūnu* (small)¹⁴; *'aw'aw* and *ba'ba'* (to frighten)¹⁵.

In this context, we will now describe:

- (a) the repeated animal call (donkey braying, Leb. *šahnū'a*) used in Lebanese political folklore as a pejorative re-interpretation of part of an adversary's honorific nickname (Ar. *laqab*);
- (b) the hipocoristic forename *Roro* used as a Christian identity tag.

It is worth noting here that native speakers of Arabic dialects outside Lebanon (and even some Lebanese people) often have no pragmatic competence in inferring the political connotations of the examples quoted below.

¹⁰ Animal calls quoted from: Kees Versteegh and others (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006-2009; further: *EALL*): s.v. "Sound Symbolism"; see also *nawnaw* (cat), Ferguson, "Baby Talk in Six Languages", 108.

¹¹ *EALL*, s.v. "Reduplication" and Frayḥa, *The Village*, 33.

¹² Frayḥa, 33.

¹³ Adrian Barthélemy, *Dictionnaire arabe-français (Dialectes de Syrie, Alep, Damas, Liban, Jérusalem)* (Paris: Geuthner, 1935-1969), 732.

¹⁴ *Nūnu* "'petit", dans le langage des mères et des nourrices. *bebbo nūnu* "petit bébé", Barthélemy, 857; see for cats *sūsu* and *lūlu*; Jean Lecerf, "Littérature dialectale et renaissance arabe moderne," *Bulletin d'études orientales*, no. 3 (1933): 84, note 5.

¹⁵ Frayḥa, 33.

2. Animal call and hypocoristic forename *Roro*: Lebanese political aspect

2.1. Animal call (donkey braying, Leb. *šahnū'a*)



Figure 1. *Hā hā hā hā kīm*, Beit Meri, April 4, 2009

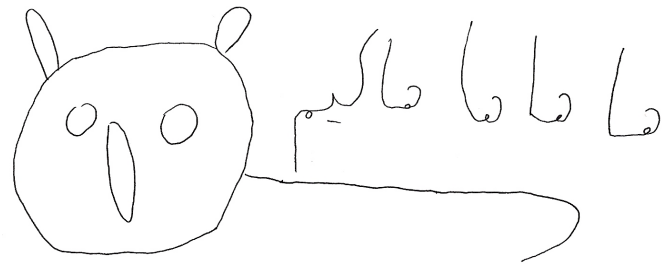


Figure 2. *Hā hā hā hā kīm*

Figure 1 above, and its Figure 2 sketch, represent the repeated animal call (donkey braying, Leb. *šahnū'a*) *hā* ending with the word *kīm* (here: donkey), written above an animal drawing. This expression in Lebanese political folklore has here a direct link to Samir Geagea, leader of *al-Quwwāt al-lubnāniyya* (the Lebanese Forces, LF), Christian militias, now a political party. The intention of the quoted slogan appears to have been a reinterpretation of Geagea's *laqab* (sobriquet): (*a*)*l-ḥakīm* (the Doctor/the Wise Man as in Figure 3:



Figure 3. Bsharri, March 6, 2009

(*al-ḥakīm*).¹⁶ This derogatory expression is used, in both oral and written forms, by the adversaries of the LF. I noticed this, for instance, among followers of *at-Tayyār al-waṭanī l-ḥurr* (the Free Patriotic Movement), Michel 'Awn's partisans in Beit Meri.

This reinterpretation of the *laqab* enters into a wider group of anti-Geagea political slogans, such as:

*Ya ḥmār! Ya bhīm! nšalla m'abbad ya ḥakīm!*¹⁷
[You jackass! You idiot! Let's hope you're in for life, Doctor!]¹⁸

¹⁶ On the Figure 3: *As-sūrī 'aduwwu-ka. Al-qā'id. Al-ḥakīm. 'Imbarāṭūr aš-Šarqiyya* (The Syrian is your enemy. The Chief. The Doctor [Samir Geagea] is an emperor of Eastern part [that is to say: Christian Beirut]), initials LF, three signs of delta in the circle [here: symbol of the LF], forename *Roy* and the swastika.

¹⁷ Samir Geagea stayed at prison from 1994 to 2005, condemned for his activity as LF leader.

2.2. Hypocoristic forename *Roro*

Roro is an abbreviation of the forename *Robert*, used in Lebanon as a diminutive equivalent to France's *Bébert*. In Lebanon *Roro* is also a hypocoristic form of *Roger* and other common first-names. This form is marked emotionally. It has a hypocoristic tender function, but can also have a pejorative *fils à papa* (daddy's boy) connotation. Thanks to the reduplication of the syllable, it also has a mnemonic function: it is easy to remember. In Lebanese *Roro* does not exist in the plural form.¹⁹



Figure 4. *Sako, Pipo, Karen, Roro*.
'Ayn er-Remmane, January 6, 2009

Similar hypocoristic forms are numerous in the case of Arabic and foreign forenames.²⁰ To wit, there is *Koko* for *Carlos*, *Christian*, *Claude*, *Claudia* or *Colette*, but also for Armenian first-names such as *Kevork* or *Krekor*. *Riri* is also used for *Rīma*, *Zuzu* for *Joseph*, and *Toto* for

¹⁸ See other Samir Geagea's pejorative nickname *Ṣāḥib al-'aqdām at-tahǧīriyya* (the one who provoked the expulsions) in his false obituary, analyzed in Plonka: "Fonction idéologique du vocabulaire de parenté dans la fausse nécrologie de Samīr Ġa'ǧa'" in *Leaders et partisans au Liban*, edited by Franck Mermier and Sabrina Mervin, (Paris: Karthala, 2012), 314.

¹⁹ Ferguson remarks that "Of all the noun- or adjective-like words on the list [in Arabic baby talk - A.P.] only three have feminines: *bubbu*, *kuuku*, and *nuunu*; none has a plural", Charles A. Ferguson, "Arabic Baby Talk," in *Structuralist Studies in Arabic Linguistics*, Charles A. Ferguson's Papers, 1954-1994, ed. Niloofar Haeri, and R. Kirk Belnap (Leiden-New York-Köln: Brill, 1997), 185; but see in this section plural *fufuwēt* pejoratively about homosexual or effeminate men. Ferguson mentions also "two formations applied to words of normal Arabic which result in nicknames or pet names much used in baby talk. One is the hypocoristic *-o* of Syrian Arabic, the other the reduplicative patterns *CuuCu*, *CiiCi* applied to proper names.", Ferguson, *Ibidem*, 187.

²⁰ Outside of the Arab World, see for example in Turkish hypocoristic forms *Memo* and *Memi* from *Mehmed*, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. CD-rom Edition, s.v. "Ism". These forms, written by Fleisch with long vowels /ē/ and /ī/, are also observed in Lebanon, see for Ba'abdat: *Mēmo*, *Memī* (little Mary), Henri Fleisch, *Études d'arabe dialectal* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1986), 165; in more general context, see hypocoristic forenames with repetition of the syllable: *Lulu* from *Louise* or *Žožo* from *Joseph* and *Josephine*, *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics*, s.v. "Nicknames".



Antoine. More rare are *Jiji* for *Jihād*²¹ and *nunu* and *tutu*—used ordinarily for cats and dogs—and *fufu* (pl. *fufuwēt*), used pejoratively in reference to homosexual or effeminate men.²² We also find the repetition of the syllable in hypocoristic forenames in other Arabic dialects like, for example, *Fīfī* for *Faṭma* or *Zīzī* and *Zūzū* for *Zēnab* in Egypt.²³

As Figure 4 shows, *Roro*, *Sako* or *Pipo* carry meanings of the hypocoristic first name of a young boy. In other words, it is not unusual for someone named *Robert*, *Roger* or *Roy* to write graffiti with his hypocoristic forename. However, my interlocutors, former Christian LF militiamen confirm that in the case of *Roro* there can also be reference to the common Lebanese nickname *roro*.²⁴



Figure 5. Fern esh-Shebbak, October 10, 2008



Figure 6. *Roro* in an abandoned monastery. Mar Sha'ya, November 16, 2008

²¹ See other hypocoristic forms as *Lello* and *Lilo* from *'Ilyās*; *Ṭanṭun* and *Ṭansa* from *Ṭanyūs*; *Žado* and *Žad* from *Žihād*; *Nažnaž*, *Nažo*, and *Nažžūta* from *Nažāh*; *Sako* from *Sarkīs*; *Pipo* from *Pierre*, and also from relatively rare use in Lebanese first names (forms unused by broader group of native speakers): *Dandan* and *Dano* from *Adon*, and *Karo* or *Melk* from *Melkar*.

²² Cf. also a hypocoristic form *fūfu* from *Fu'ād*, Ferguson, *Arabic Baby Talk*, 187.

²³ *EALL*, s.v. "Reduplication".

²⁴ In *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace & Conflict* [further: *EVPC*] Sanja Magdalenic, writing about the relationship between folklore and war, remarks: "The existence of particular projective folk characters was indicated in the lyrics of marching chants during the Vietnam War: "Jody," a reference to a trainee's nonprofessional life, the trainee's car, his girl, or his sister; "Charlie," a personification of the military/civilian enemy, "Slippery Sam," a marine soldier who fights against "Charlie," and "Mama," a character who is addressed to approve the use of violence", [*EVPC*], ed. Lester R. Kurtz and Jennifer E. Turpin (San Diego: Elsevier. Academic Press, 1999), s.v. "Folklore".



I also noticed *Roro* written on the walls in the East Beirut district Fern esh-Shebbak and in an abandoned monastery in Mar Sha'ya above the monastery of the Antonine Maronite Order of Saint Isaiah. This desolate place was turned into an unofficial prison in the 1990s.

In order to correctly decode all the meanings of hypocoristic forms in the Lebanese political praxis, one must keep in mind their historical context and remember, for example, that, in 1975, Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt was accused by Lebanese Christians to have spoken with contempt about *toto* (< Antoine) and *zuzu* (< Joseph); that is to say, effeminate Christians pervaded with Western culture, who wouldn't have a fighting chance in a showdown with Lebanese Muslims and Palestinian adversaries (presumed more Arabized, and therefore more virile).²⁵

With the passing of time also *Roro* gained a new connotation, mostly as a graphical representation of an identity tag used by Christian militias.²⁶ *Roro* became their *ħarake* (sobriquet). It is synonymous with a Christian defender of Lebanon. *Roro* is supposed to instill fear,²⁷ in the manner of other terms such as *aş-Şalībiyyūn* (The Crusaders), which acquired

²⁵ Fadia Nassif Tar-Kovacs, *Les rumeurs dans la guerre du Liban: les mots de la violence* (Paris: CNRS, 1998), 207, see also Płonka: 2004, 128.

²⁶ *Roro* and also *Roy* (see Figure 3) are written as graffiti in the Latin alphabet, even if they are accompanied by slogans in Arabic script; see also the slogans like "Arab=Animal" written in Latin alphabet, collected in Eastern "Christian" district in Lebanon by Maria Chakhtoura between 1975 and 1977. Chakhtoura emphasizes that using of the Latin alphabet by Christians, in this case, was a refusal of Arabic script (more generally Arab culture), Maria Chakhtoura, *ħarb aš-ši'ārāt. Lubnān 1975-1977. La guerre des graffiti. Liban 1975-1977* (Beirut: Dār an-nahār li-n-Našr, 2005), 76-77. Non-linguistic elements such as swastika, *aş-Şalīb al-mašūb*, this is LF cut cross, associated with *Roro* and *Roy*, are decisive factors in interpretation of these forenames. Swastika seems to be used as an identity tag referring, inter alia, to the pejorative slogan *Falanżiyye-fāšiyye* (Phalangists-Fascists), in Lebanon a dysphemism for members and partisans of *al-Katā'ib al-lubnāniyya* (The Lebanese Phalanges). As Nassif Tar-Kovacs remarks "il y a eu effectivement une période, courte il est vrai, vers la fin de 1975, où la croix gammée était badigeonnée partout sur les murs des régions chrétiennes et où, tout d'un coup, Hitler et Mussolini faisaient figure de héros, de modèles à suivre", Nassif Tar-Kovacs, 76-77.

²⁷ Gilseman, analyzing the meaning of masculinity in Lebanon and the term "young men" (Leb. *š-šebēb*), in the chapter *Joking, Play and Pressure*, describes the young men's attitude: "We know how to be shebab, how to abuse and fight (*sabb wa qatl*)' was the often-used formula which expresses the cultural archetype of how to exert pressure on others.", Michael Gilseman, *Lords of*

related quotations and cultural meanings.²⁸ In post-war Lebanon these graffiti would often disappear, presumably erased by law enforcement agents, only to reappear overnight.



Figure 7. Furn ash-Shubbak, October 7, 2008 *aṣ-ṣalībiyyūn* (The Crusaders)



Figure 8. The same place, October 10,

2008

The decoding of the meanings of these political graffiti requires context into which their specific connotations must be placed. In that sense, this sort of political language remains fluid and divergent in modern-day Lebanon. This instability brings new qualities to Lebanon's spoken political jargon, as this modest study has shown, frequently leaves some perishable traces in the language²⁹.

the Lebanese Marches. Violence & Narrative in an Arab Society (London, New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996), 207.

²⁸ For the use of this term during the two years' war in Lebanon (1975-77) see Nassif Tarkovacs, 62-63.

²⁹ I thank Ken Lovatt for very useful remarks concerning the English version and Hanna Siemaszko for translating fragments of the text.



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