## Critical Multilingualism Studies
an interdisciplinary journal

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# PERCEPTIONS OF TRANSLANGUAGING AND SOCIAL IDENTITY OF HERITAGE LEARNERS IN AN ARABIC CLASSROOM

**Abstract:**

The field of Heritage Language (HL) education has recently gained more ground in applied linguistics and teaching (Dávila, 2017). A considerable amount of research focusing on Arabic Heritage Learners (HLLs) has raised conversations around translanguaging practices and their effects on language learning progress for heritage language learners (e.g., Abourehab & Azaz, 2020; Al Masaeed, 2020; Albirini & Chakrani, 2017). Other studies found value in HLLs' sense of belonging to their heritage communities and how this may positively affect their learning process (e.g., Sehlaoui, 2008). This study investigates the effects of both translanguaging practices and social identity theory on the experience of Arabic HLLs in the classroom. Following a mixed-method design, ten participants were recruited for the study where two questionnaires on translanguaging and social identity were conducted followed by interviews. Contrary to previous research findings, results of this study indicate that Arabic HLLs hold mixed perceptions of translanguaging practices, while they categorize themselves as members of their heritage communities.

**Keywords:** Heritage language learners ◆ translanguaging practices ◆ self-categorization ◆ social identity

## Introduction

Arabic is one example of heritage languages in the U.S. (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003). It was designated by the U.S. government as a critical language in 2006, and, since then, enrollment in L2 Arabic classes, for both heritage and non-heritage students, has increased in

the U.S. over the past decade (Al Masaeed, 2020). With Arabic being a multiglossic and multidialectal language (Hillman, 2019), it is important to integrate this intercultural awareness and multidialectal competence in pedagogical practices beyond the traditional debate of teaching standard Arabic and certain dialects. Translanguaging, a pedagogical concept allowing learners to employ their full linguistic repertoire, has been advocated as a means to accommodate these needs in in bi/multilingual settings (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Galante, 2020; Yilmaz, 2019). It challenges traditional language hierarchies and divisions between standard and dialectal varieties, creating a social space where learners can draw from their diverse language backgrounds, personal experiences, and histories (García & Li Wei, 2014). Recent research highlighted some benefits translanguaging practices in and beyond language classrooms in knowledge construction, meaning negotiation, and identity affirmation. (Abourehab & Azaz, 2020; Al Masaeed, 2020; Trentman, 2021).

Arabic programs in universities struggle with the decision of teaching the standard written form of the language or the dialectal form (and, if they decide to teach dialects, which one they should pick). Most programs choose to primarily focus on MSA in classes (Shiri, 2007), because most Arabic textbooks are MSA-oriented, with minor focus on one or two dialects of Arabic (usually Egyptian and Levantine). A large population in Arabic classes consist of HLLs of Arabic who vary in their ancestral lineage (their parents and extended families come from different Arab countries), and thus it is common that multiple students in a class have been exposed to different Arabic dialects. Additionally, since HLLs do not receive formal education in their heritage language while growing up, they often experience less, if any, exposure to Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Therefore, Arabic HLLs often enroll in Arabic language classes at the university level in order to learn MSA (Albirini, 2014). In this context, Arabic HLLs generally come to class with limited prior knowledge of MSA, and partial proficiency (usually speaking and listening) in one specific dialect of Arabic (Ibrahim & Allam, 2006). This opens the room for translanguaging between students and teachers or among students themselves, which is worth exploring to inform classroom instruction and curriculum design.

The present study is guided by two theories: translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2011; García, 2009; Li Wei, 2018), and social identity theory (Norton, 2000; Tajfel, 1981). Due to Arabic's transglossic and heterogeneous nature, this study, first, explores Arabic HLLs attitudes towards and perceptions of translanguaging (the interplay between their dialectical linguistic repertoires while studying MSA in college). Then, it investigates how they mobilize their social identity through their translanguaging practices.

## Literature review

### *Translanguaging practices and learning*

In their paper, Azaz and Abourehab (2021) explore teachers' ideologies and perspectives on translanguaging pedagogy. They initially found teachers hesitant to accept it as legitimate approach, but they did not completely discard it; they occasionally implemented aspects of it in their classrooms to accommodate learners. While the field of Arabic language instruction has faced wild controversies regarding teaching standard Arabic and marginalizing dialects, interest has increased in recent years to provide space for language varieties and dialect integration. Thus, translanguaging has been proposed as a transformative pedagogy that goes beyond dialects and allows learners to utilize all their linguistic resources in bi/multilingual classroom settings (Creese & Blackledge, 2010). Garcia (2009) defines translanguaging as the implementation of more than one language in the language learning process. In that sense, translanguaging is a meaning-making process (Vaish & Subhan, 2015) that allows one language to reinforce the other, which results in more understanding in both languages (Lewis, Jones, & Baker, 2012). According to Garcia et al. (2017), translanguaging in education means using the learner's full linguistic repertoire, which makes it an inclusive process of drawing on all language practices brought to class by students from different language backgrounds to develop new language practices while maintaining the old ones (Garcia & Kano, 2014). For example, in the context of the current study, Arabic HLLs might use their first language (e.g., English), and their dialectal Arabic knowledge (e.g., Egyptian Arabic) to develop the new language they wish to learn (e.g., MSA).

Empirically, translanguaging has been investigated in terms of meaning-making, knowledge acquisition in class, negotiating power, protecting minority languages (e.g., heritage languages), boosting motivation, achieving learning goals, and learning literacy skills (Cenoz, 2017; Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Duarte, 2018; Hornberger & Link, 2012; Wang, 2019). While monolingual pedagogies see students' additional languages as invalid resources of knowledge, translanguaging pedagogies value and promote the integration of those languages because they can result in more learning (Kamwangamalu, 2010). In fact, translanguaging ensures that students bring their entire linguistic repertoires to classroom interactions (Rivera & Mazak, 2017).

Al Masaeed (2020) examined translanguaging practices within the Arabic language. His study focused on translanguaging in an Arabic study abroad program to explore how participants used multidialectal practices in their interactions with native speakers of Arabic during their program. The analysis showed how the participants preferred translanguaging practices (i.e.,

through using multiple dialects of Arabic) to using only MSA. Albirini and Chakrani (2017) is another example of a study that focused on Arabic HLLs. They examined Arabic HLLs ability to use their L1 (English), their dialectal knowledge of Arabic, and their MSA knowledge in the construction of narratives of personal experience. They found that participants switch back and forth between MSA, dialect, and English in their construction of narratives.

Abourehab and Azaz (2020) conducted an investigation into the implementation of pedagogical translanguaging in the realm of community/heritage language education. Their study revealed that learners actively employ their diverse linguistic capabilities, which encompass various Arabic dialects and English. This active utilization of language resources is observed within a classroom setting that predominantly emphasizes the use of the standard Arabic variety as the primary mode of instruction, adhering to a monolingual approach. Furthermore, the authors highlight that learners sometimes engage in multidialectal practices to acknowledge and express their dialectal identities as heritage learners. The article contends that community/heritage language learning environments offer valuable opportunities for translanguaging, enabling heritage language learners to navigate their identities and develop their language skills.

Trentman (2021) approached translanguaging in study abroad experiences calling upon language programs to adopt a plurilingual philosophy, which is exactly the norm in study abroad context as opposed to the prevailing monolingual language ideologies in the classroom.

Given that these previous studies did not present learners' views on their linguistic practices in Arabic, the present study aims to give voice to learners to reflect on their classroom practices and how they affect their lives beyond the classroom.

*Heritage language learners' identities and translanguaging practices*

Defining heritage language learners (HLLs) is not an easy task because many variables come into play depending on the purpose for defining them (e.g., socio-political status, identity, and policy) and the definition might vary depending on language background, proficiency, ethnicity, or ancestry (Hillman, 2019). For instance, Valdés (2000, p.411) defines HLLs as those who were "raised in homes where a language other than English is spoken and who are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language". Hillman's study in 2019 delved into the identity of heritage language learners (HLLs) and their self-perception and positioning. Utilizing interviews, observations, and recorded classroom interactions, Hillman demonstrated that the labels assigned to heritage learners often did not accurately reflect the students' self-identities. This disconnect had tangible effects on their involvement and roles within the

classroom. In light of these findings, Hillman offers suggestions to create a more meaningful and inclusive educational experience for heritage language learners.

Within the past few decades, several researchers have made notable contributions to the fields of heritage languages and heritage language education research (e.g., Fishman, 2001; Kelleher, 2010; Polinsky & Kagan 2007; Valdés, 2000;). Heritage language learners do not only bring their linguistic repertoires to class, but they also bring their rich identities. According to Leeman, Rabins, and Román-Mendoza (2011), heritage language education has always been connected with the identities of the students. Worthy and Rodríguez-Galindo (2006) indicated that HLLs are expected by their families to value and nurture the literacy skills of their heritage language alongside the local language (e.g., English). From the family's perspective, maintaining the heritage language can enhance their children's connection to the family and support their ethnic identity (Cho, 2000). Lee (2002) concluded from interviews with Korean-American university students that heritage language proficiency was directly connected to cultural values and ethnic identity. Furthermore, the hybrid cultural background heritage learners often have may lead to different linguistic practices that result in creating new forms of knowledge (Kearny, 1995; Marsh, 2005). For instance, Gregory and Williams (2000) conducted a study examining the literacy practices of multilingual immigrant families in London, and they found that heritage learners learned to speak the dialect of their heritage language, the standard form, and the local language (English).

**Social Identity Theory**

According to Norton (2000), identity refers to a person's understanding of his/her "relationship to the world, how this relationship is constructed in time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p.5). Similarly, Joseph (2006) defines identity as a category to which a person belongs. He points out that one can belong to several social categories according to their gender, ethnicity, nationality, cultural heritage, age, occupation, and social status. In that sense, identity is not fixed. Instead, it is fluid and might change overtime (Norton, 2000). Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) is a major social psychological theory of intergroup relations and group processes that explains the individual's self-concept and how others treat him/her. A social identity is the feeling of belonging to a social group, which is in turn defined by the sets of attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs of a group of people. A member in such a group is called an *in-group* member, while an outsider is called an *out-group* member. Identity is, therefore, tied to a sense of belonging, a feeling that one is an "insider"— or that one is not.

There are two important processes involved in social identity theory: self-categorization and social comparison. The former means that the self is related to a specific social category, and the latter means to label the person who categorizes him/herself as an in-group or an out-group in relation to social categories. The process of self-categorization leads to producing a new version of the person. This new version is seen through the eyes of the group. A person tries to adhere to the group norms and attributes so he/she can be considered an in-group member. Thus, HLLs can consider themselves in-group or out-group members of heritage language and culture groups based on their connection to the heritage culture (Oakes, 2001).

In the context of Arabic HLLs, Sehlaoui (2008) investigated the social identity of Arabic HLLs in the United States and highlighted the importance of culture and social demands to maintain heritage languages. In her sociocultural linguistic study, Engman (2015) examined the role of religious identity for second-grade Arabic language learners at a K-12 Islamic school. Findings show how young Muslim learners drew on their religious identities in Arabic class to support and strengthen their academic and social identities. Al Rifae (2017) examined adult HLLs identity in the classroom through using religious terms. Interview results showed that HLLs considered the classroom an opportunity to present a correct image of their culture, unlike the negative one projected by Western media. Hillman (2019) explored how Arabic HLLs navigate their linguistic and cultural identity. Findings from interviews and participant observation suggested that the identity of Arabic HLLs was very complex and constantly evolving. Although they felt a sense of pride in their linguistic and cultural background, Arabic HLLs grappled with issues of proficiency and belonging within their heritage community.

Aside from the linguistic aspects of HLLs, previous studies on HLLs' identity (see He, 2004; Hornberger & Wang, 2008; Lee, 2005, 2010; Li Wei, 2011; Makoni, 2018; Maloney & De Costa, 2017; Ortega, 2002; Pavlenko, & Blackledge, 2004; Valdés, 2005; Yilmaz, 2018) have dedicated considerable attention to HLLs ' individuality and unique identities in the classroom. For instance, Dávila (2017) found that HLLs use their heritage language to strengthen their ties with their multilingual communities. In addition, previous research confirms the importance of identity, among other factors like motivation and self, for HLLs (Kim, 2017; Kurata, 2015; Mori & Calder, 2015). HLLs might feel they represent not only the language they inherited from their parents, but also the culture of their heritage community. Moreover, HLLs might experience identity conflict. They are often challenged with representing and maneuvering both their heritage culture and the dominant culture of the society they live in (Qin, 2006).

The scarcity of studies that examine the social identity of Arabic HLLs is apparent in the field. Even though some studies use social identity as a guiding theory in their studies, they do not explicitly examine the element of in-group vs. out-group memberships of Arabic HLLs. Therefore, this study intends to address this specific aspect of self-categorization in the social identity theory, with a focus on adult Arabic HLLs. One thing to note here is that identity is a fluid concept which is subject to change (Norton, 2000). Therefore, the social identity of HLLs is neither fixed nor limited to self-categorization. In fact, in addition to self-categorization, there are many intersecting aspects of social identity (e.g., emotions, social comparison, religion, status, etc.). However, in the current study, we choose to focus solely on HLLs self-categorization as in-group or out-group members of their heritage communities.

Taken together, previous studies that explored translanguaging pedagogical practices and learners' translanguaging practices provided evidence that applying translanguaging practices had a very positive effect on the language learning experience. However, most studies usually focus on translanguaging practices in the context of two or more languages. Since research has indicated that translanguaging practices help HLLs to advance in their learning by relying on their entire linguistic repertoire to achieve their desired communication goals (e.g., Said & Zhu, 2017; Albirini & Chakrani, 2017; Al Masaeed, 2020), this study examines those practices by Arabic HLLs in the classroom and extends the examination to how translanguaging can help those learners bring their social identity to the classroom.

In this study, the term "HLLs" refers to those students who: (a) were raised in a home where Arabic was spoken, (b) have partial proficiency in the heritage language (Valdés, 2000), and (c) have cultural connections to one or more Arabic dialects (Kelleher, 2010; Polinsky & Kagan 2007). We expand the research on translanguaging by exploring the practice not only in terms of different languages (Arabic and English), but also within the Arabic language itself. That is, we investigate how Arabic HLLs rely on their dialectal knowledge when learning MSA to translanguage between dialectal Arabic, English, and MSA, in addition to the effect of their social identity as heritage learners on their learning experience.

From the review of the literature above, it is apparent that previous research on HLLs in general, and on Arabic HLLs specifically, is lacking in two main points: 1) translanguaging practices using L1, dialectal knowledge, and MSA; 2) the social identity concepts of *in-group* vs *out-group* members. Thus, the present study investigates those two areas guided by the following research questions:

> RQ1: What are HLLs attitudes/perceptions towards translanguaging practices in their Arabic classroom, homes, and heritage communities?

RQ2: What are the types of translanguaging practices Arabic HLLs use in the Arabic classroom?

RQ3: How do HLLs implement translanguaging to present their social identities in the Arabic classroom to enhance their learning of MSA?

## Method

*Participants*

This study focuses on Arabic HLLs in a large public Midwestern university. The program mainly focuses on teaching MSA, with a minor focus on dialects like Egyptian or Levantine. Participants of this study were part of two first-year Arabic classes: Arabic 101 and 102, which were offered consecutively in Fall and Spring semesters. At the time of data collection, classes were held online via Zoom. In Arabic 101, heritage students start with little to no prior knowledge of MSA and some oral proficiency in an Arabic dialect (the one they picked up at home), usually limited to household surroundings. In Arabic 102 students build on the knowledge of MSA they developed in Arabic 101. The first-year classes consisted of a total of twenty-two students, ten HLLs and twelve non-HLLs. The total number of Arabic HLLs who participated in this study was ten (N = 10). Their questionnaire responses constitute the quantitative analysis section in this study. Of the ten participants who took the questionnaires (details below), three agreed to be interviewed to talk further about their responses.

### *Participants profiles*

The first participant, Hadeel (pseudonym), was a female, sophomore student. She was tied to the Arabic language and culture through her father's side of the family. Her father was Palestinian, and he resided in the Middle East along with several family members. Hadeel was born and raised in the United States of America, and she has been to the Middle East a number of times to visit her father and family members. She grew up speaking English, with very little exposure to Arabic. The second focal participant, *Alexa* (pseudonym), was a female, freshman student. Her father was from Iraq and emigrated to the U.S. when he was in his thirties. Her mother is an Iraqi-American who was born and raised in the U.S. and has never been to the Middle East. Alexa was born and raised in the U.S., and she was brought up in a Chaldean/Arabic-speaking household where her family communicated mostly in Chaldean and Arabic. Both being Semitic languages, there are many similarities between Arabic and Chaldean. Before starting the Arabic program, Alexa could communicate in Chaldean and Iraqi Arabic but had very little knowledge of MSA. The third focal participant, *John* (pseudonym),

was a male, freshman student. His parents emigrated to the U.S. from Syria. He was born and raised in the U.S. in a household that used Arabic as the primary means of communication. Also, John has been to Syria many times in his life. Thus, he has a strong command of his Syrian dialect, with little knowledge of MSA. Table 1 below summarizes the participants' profiles.

**Table 1**. Participants' profiles

| Participant | Gender | School year | Family background | Arabic family dialect(s) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hadeel | Female | Sophomore | Palestinian father, American mother | Palestinian |
| Alexa | Female | Freshman | Iraqi/Chaldean parents | Iraqi |
| John | Male | Freshman | Syrian parents | Syrian |

*Authors' positionality*

Although both of us, the authors, are not heritage language learners, we share a very similar heritage background with the participants, including cultural aspects such as food, clothes, customs, and traditions. In terms of the responsibilities towards heritage communities, both of us first came to the U.S. as international graduate students. This aspect of our identity allows us to understand the responsibility the participants might feel related to sharing their heritage culture with the American society. This connection we have with the participants help establish a good rapport with them, as we are not outsiders and we can relate to their cultural experiences. On the classroom level, I, the first author, am a teaching assistant in Arabic classes. Therefore, my face was familiar to the participants as they were used to seeing me in their zoom meetings every day. This makes me, in a sense, part of their Arabic learning experience and makes it easier for the participants to share incidents that happen in class, knowing that I would easily understand the context. On the instructional level, we, the authors, adopt a communicative approach in class where the target is to help students communicate their ideas successfully. In that sense, we favor fluency over accuracy in class and permit students to use translanguaging practices, especially in their first year, to achieve their communicative goals and to create a comfortable non-threatening classroom atmosphere. However, we sometimes are bound by

program policies to focus on MSA in class. This demands we point out to students the nuances between dialectal Arabic and MSA.

*Data sources*

This study follows a sequential mixed-method design (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003; Creswell 2005). The quantitative part of the data was 9-point Likert scale questionnaires consisting of two parts: (a) students' self-categorization regarding how they perceive themselves in relation to their heritage communities, and (b) translanguaging perceptions and attitudes. The questionnaire categories were 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Moderately disagree, 4=Mildly disagree, 5=Neutral, 6=Mildly agree, 7=Moderately agree, 8=Agree, and 9=Strongly agree. Qualitatively, the main data source was semi-structured interviews with three participants; however, we also relied on participants' class notes and ethnographic observations of their classroom interactions. This information allowed for qualitative data triangulation. Table 2 below summarizes the data sources and data collection timeframe.

**Table 2.** Data sources

| Method | Data source | Timeframe |
|---|---|---|
| Questionnaire Survey | Two 9-point Likert scale questionnaires on Qualtrics <br><br> Background information such as personal information, education background, language learning background, travel experiences, reasons for learning Arabic, etc. | One month after the semester started |
| Classroom observation | Arb 101 & 102: fieldnotes and videorecorded classroom observations focusing on student-student interaction and student-teacher interaction. | 4 weeks |
| Class notes | Notes taken by students during classes or during studying Arabic. | 4 weeks' worth of notes |
| Interviews | Two 30-minute video-recorded interviews with each participant (total 6 interviews for all participants). First interview focused on participants' identity and connection to their heritage communities, while the | First interview: after taking the questionnaires and background survey. |

| (See Appendix A for interview questions) | second interview focused on participants perceptions and attitudes towards translanguaging in and outside of class. | Second interview: 4 weeks after the first interview. |
|---|---|---|

*Data analysis*

Quantitatively, descriptive statistics of questionnaire responses were generated and tabulated. Qualitatively, a thematic analysis method was adopted in analyzing the data. After collecting all data, we examined the qualitative data sources concurrently for emerging themes related to the participants' translanguaging practices and social identity. There was more than one cycle of data analysis. The first cycle of the analysis aimed to obtain an overall understanding of how the participants identified themselves in class and outside of class in relation to their heritage communities and how connected and well-received they thought they were by their peers, teacher, and community members. During the second cycle, we highlighted multiple excerpts (including class notes and classroom observations) of the data and labeled them into two general categories: translanguaging practices and social identity. During the third reading, we generated more detailed themes including: Translanguaging as the norm in HLLs' homes, Translanguaging as weird, Not mixing as a way to gain access to the community, and mixing as a way to nurture social identities in the Arabic classroom.

**Results**

*Students' attitudes toward translanguaging*

Results of the translanguaging questionnaire, summarized in Table 3, answer the first research question which focuses on Arabic HLLs' attitudes/perceptions towards translanguaging practices in the Arabic classroom . Since 9-point Likert scales were used, the minimum value participants could pick was 1 and the maximum was 9. The statement *My home dialect helps me in studying MSA* received the highest rating (mean = 7.1), and the statement *While writing, I sometimes mix between all three: MSA, my home dialect, and English* received the lowest rating (mean = 3.5). This indicates that students find translanguaging beneficial in their studying experience. However, they seem to be skeptical of using it in their writing. Looking at the confidence intervals (CIs) of the first three statements in comparison with statement number twelve, it appears that the upper CI for statement number twelve is lower than the lower CIs for the first three statements.  This might be an indication for statistical difference in how participants view mixing the three languages. Participants seem to be more comfortable

alternating between the three languages in studying or in class participation, more than writing. This difference is understandable because the written form of Arabic is generally expected to be in MSA. Also, writing assignments are often more high-stake than other activities such as speaking or group work.

By checking the mean scores of the responses in Table 3 below, it appears that participants generally believe that using their entire linguistic repertoire helps in studying MSA. However, their reaction to actually using their home dialect or English yields more towards *Neutral* (5) or *Mildly agree* (6) on the Likert scale.

Table 3. Results of the translanguaging questionnaire

| No. | Questionnaire Items                 N = 10 | Mean | SD | 95% CIs |
|-----|---------------------------------------------|------|-----|---------|
| 1 | My home dialect helps me in studying MSA. | 7.1 | 2.18 | [5.22, 8.98] |
| 2 | While studying, I sometimes translate MSA words to English. | 6.6 | 1.84 | [5.46, 7.74] |
| 3 | When I do not know a word in MSA, I refer to English. | 6.5 | 1.78 | [5.40, 7.61] |
| 4 | While studying, I sometimes translate MSA words to my home dialect. | 6.0 | 2.36 | [4.53, 7.47] |
| 5 | I often alternate between my home dialect and MSA in class. | 5.8 | 2.70 | [4.13, 7.47] |
| 6 | When I do not know a word in MSA, I refer to my home dialect. | 5.4 | 2.84 | [3.64, 7.16] |
| 7 | While speaking, I mix between MSA and my home dialect. | 5.3 | 2.67 | [3.65, 6.95] |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | I find it OK in the classroom to mix MSA with my home dialect and English to get my message across. | 5.1 | 3.21 | [3.10, 7.11] |
| 9 | While speaking, I mix between all three: MSA, my home dialect, and English. | 5.0 | 2.83 | [3.25, 6.74] |
| 10 | While speaking, I mix between MSA and English. | 4.6 | 2.95 | [2.81, 6.42] |
| 11 | While writing, I sometimes mix between MSA and my home dialect. | 4.6 | 2.67 | [2.93, 6.27] |
| 12 | While writing, I sometimes mix between all three: MSA, my home dialect, and English. | 3.5 | 2.51 | [1.95, 5.05] |

Note 1: SD = Standard Deviation, N = Total number of participants, CIs = Confidence Intervals.

Note 2: the Likert scale is 9-point

To gain more insights regarding the participants' attitudes towards translanguaging, three students were interviewed after they took the questionnaire. Analyzing interview responses, it became clear that the students' positive conception of translanguaging is connected to their heritage background. Being born and raised in the U.S., the three participants grew up using a mixture of dialectal Arabic and English in their households. The degree of each language varies depending on the family's connection to their heritage background. For example, two of the participants, Alexa and John, were more exposed to Arabic in their household than the third participant, Hadeel, whose father moved to the Middle East when she was a child, depriving her of direct exposure to Arabic at home, as she maintained her connection with her father in a

long-distance setting. Data below show the gradual development of participants' perception of language mixing and translanguaging.

When asked about their opinions about mixing Arabic with English while growing up, they all expressed positive attitudes. Excerpts 1-3 show how they considered mixing helpful.

### Excerpt 1: Mixing at a young age

> I think it's totally fine. I actually grew up speaking like ArEnglish. It's common in my house to say," I'm going to El Hammam" or "I'm going to go Hammam" (El Hammam = the bathroom). (John)

In this excerpt, John mentioned that mixing Arabic with English was normal in his household, and it was "totally fine". The term "ArEnglish" in itself is a representation of John's habit of using his linguistic repertoire since he was kid.

### Excerpt 2: Mixing without noticing

> When I was younger, my family spoke a mix of English, Arabic, and Chaldean. And when I was younger, I didn't realize that there was a difference between Arabic and Chaldean. So, when I would speak to somebody who only spoke Arabic and I would throw in a Chaldean phrase, they would look at me like I was crazy. Because we mixed all three of them, I thought Arabic and Chaldean were interchangeable. And I realized early on it's not. (Alexa).

Contrary to John, who was well-aware of his mixing practices, Alexa mixed between Arabic and Chaldean without noticing. Thinking that Arabic and Chaldean were "interchangeable" shows how mixing languages was the norm in the family.

Hadeel's case is a little different from John and Alexa because she did not grow up with her father in the same place. Her connection with her father was long-distance. Thus, her exposure to Arabic was less than that of Alexa and John.

### Excerpt 3: Mixing was helpful

> Growing up, hearing my dad mixing, whenever he would throw English and that's the only time I could understand. So when I was younger, it was helpful. (Hadeel).

In this excerpt, Hadeel expresses how helpful it was for her that her father used English in his Arabic conversations to communicate with her. With her little exposure to Arabic growing up, mixing Arabic with English was "the only time" she could understand her father.

The following excerpts display the change in the participants' attitudes towards mixing languages after growing up and attending formal education in their heritage language.

### Excerpt 4: Mixing is not a thing

| Interviewer | Now that you are studying Arabic at school, what do you think about mixing MSA, dialect, and English? |
|---|---|
| John | I think it needs to be a really big distinction cause I know in the working world and the Arabic world in general, you're kind of crazy for doing that because it's not something that's super common. Uh, you don't really hear people talking in Shami (Syrian dialect) and FusHa (MSA). Like that's not a thing. |

At this stage, John holds a strong negative position towards mixing. He believes that there has to be a strong distinction between dialectal Arabic and MSA because native speakers do not usually mix between them in their speech. Alexa has a similar opinion too.

### Excerpt 5: Mixing hinders learning

Once you start getting to a certain point, mixing them (MSA, dialect, and English) is just kind of weird and probably hinders your growth too, just because you're going to rely on mixing all of them and not rely on fully understanding and being able to speak in one dialect. If we're just mixing all different kinds of dialects, that kind of makes us sound like we don't know what we're talking about Even if we have a good understanding of the language. (Alexa).

Alexa's negative attitude towards mixing can be summarized into two words: "Weird" and "hindering". For her, a good understanding of only one dialect is better than mixing dialect with MSA and because that would mean that one does not have a strong hold of the language.

Like John and Alexa, Hadeel also thinks that mixing MSA, dialect, and English would sound unnatural. She explained the rationale of her opinion as follows:

### Excerpt 6: Mixing is unnatural

If I travel to an Arab country, I think I would try to just speak in a dialect of that country. I definitely wouldn't try English because that wouldn't work.

It is important to notice that John and Alexa's shift in attitude towards mixing could be due to the heritage community socio-cultural influence they experience through their interaction with their families and heritage community members. In addition, the excerpts above are mainly focused on the concept of language mixing in "the Arabic world in general" (Excerpt 4). This

explains the positive views towards translanguaging participants expressed earlier in the questionnaire. It appears that there is a major difference between the learning context, where translanguaging happens, and the broader social context, where language mixing happens.

The second and third research questions addressed the types of translanguaging practices Arabic HLLs use in the Arabic classroom, and the implementation of translanguaging to present social identity in the Arabic classroom. Shifting to the classroom, translanguaging practices appear to be present in the participants' learning experience. All three participants appear to be using translanguaging practices in their Arabic classroom. A sample of their class notes in Figure 1 below indicates that they implement translanguaging practices while learning. Figure 1 shows how the participants use an array of translanguaging practices (e.g., English, MSA, dialect, and transliteration) to fully capture the information provided to them in each class they attend.
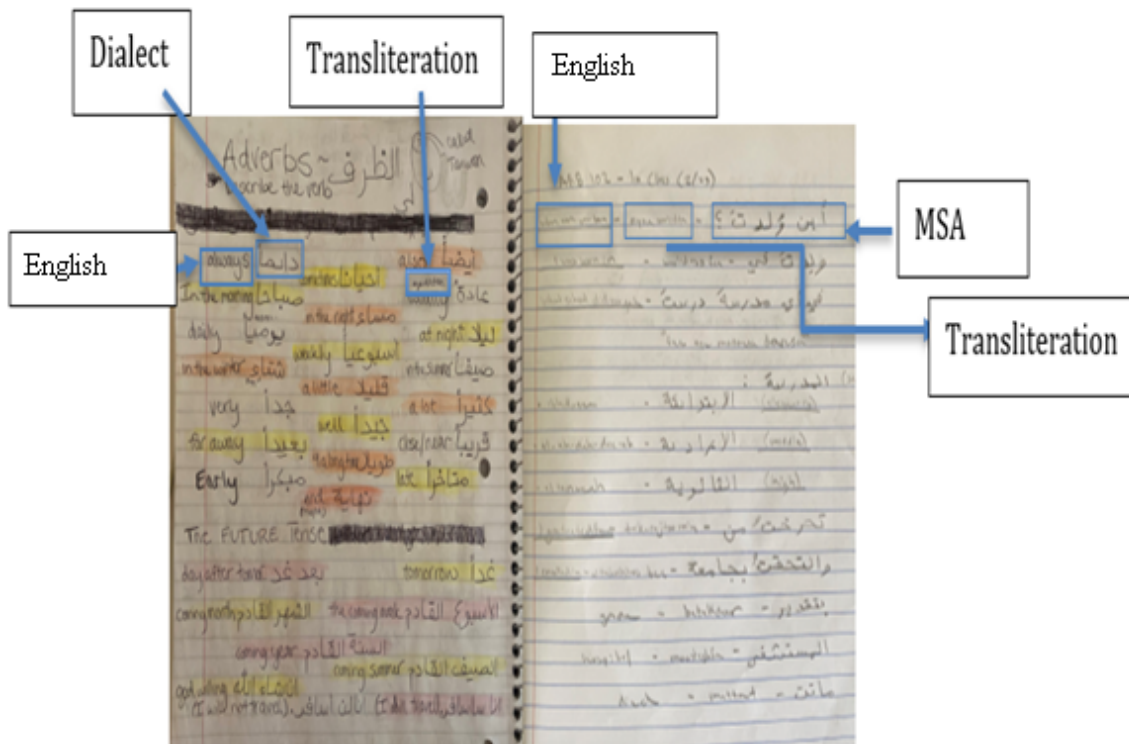


**Figure 1.** Examples from the participants' class notes

Examples of their class notes indicate that despite stating in the interviews that they aspire to steer clear from translanguaging in their future social lives, all three participants do use translanguaging practices while learning.

*The connection between social identity and translanguaging*

Before checking how HLLs mobilize their social identities in class, it was necessary to check whether they consider themselves in-group members of their heritage community or not.

*Students' self-categorization as in-group members of the heritage community*

Descriptive statistics in Table 4 and their visual representation in Figure 3 below show the range of responses the participants gave to the questionnaire on their social identity and self-categorization. Results indicate how much students value their connection to their heritage culture. This is evident in item one *I am proud of my heritage culture* (mean = 8.8). Also, students' self-identification as Arab (mean = 8.4) or Arab-American (mean = 8.1) is higher than their self-identification as American (mean = 7). However, the overlap in the CIs of items 2, 3, and 4 indicates that there might not be statistical difference between them. Nevertheless, results indicate that, generally, students tended to self-categorize themselves as in-group members of their heritage community.

Table 4. Results of the Self-categorization questionnaire

| No. | Questionnaire Items                     N = 10 | Mean | SD | 95% Cis |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------|------|------|--------------|
| 1 | I am proud of my heritage culture. | 8.8 | 0.42 | [8.54, 9.05] |
| 2 | I identify as Arab. | 8.4 | 0.97 | [7.79, 9.01] |
| 3 | I identify as Arab-American. | 8.1 | 2.02 | [6.84, 9.35] |
| 4 | I identify as American. | 7 | 2.45 | [5.49, 8.51] |
| 5 | I consider myself a representative of my heritage society. | 6.6 | 2.41 | [5.11, 8.11] |
| 6 | I seek opportunities to share my heritage culture with people. | 6.5 | 2.51 | [4.95, 8.04] |
| 7 | I always think of my heritage community before I do something opposed to the values they cherish. | 5.8 | 2.49 | [4.25, 7.35] |
| 8 | I consider myself an expert of Arabic culture. | 5 | 2.00 | [3.76, 6.23] |
| 9 | I feel embarrassed when I don't know the answer to questions related to my heritage culture. | 4.3 | 2.36 | [2.83, 5.77] |

Note 1: SD = Standard Deviation, N = Total number of participants, CIs = Confidence Intervals

Note 2: the Likert scale is 9-point

**Social identity and translanguaging**

During the first interview, participants were asked to elaborate on their responses in the questionnaire regarding how they identified themselves; Arab, Arab-American, or American (Items number 4, 5, and 6 in Table 4). The three participants had similar answers. Excerpt 7 is one example of how they responded to the question.

**Excerpt 7:** Self-identification as more than only American

> Saying that I'm just entirely American kind of disregards my whole culture, my whole background, and a huge part of who I am. Yes, I live here. Yes. I was born here, but I just don't really see that as describing who I am. I just like to say, if somebody asks Who I am, I say I'm an Arab-American, I'm Arab, my family comes from Iraq. I live here, but I don't really have cultural ties to America as a culture. (Alexa)

John and Hadeel's responses were similar to Alexa's. They all expressed their strong appreciation for where their families came from and wanted to acknowledge this part of their identity. Refusing to identify as only American displays not only their strong connection to the culture, but also their strong desire to master the Arabic language so they can connect to their heritage on all levels.

In the interview, participants were asked about their perception of translanguaging if they went to an Arabic speaking country. The following excerpt from John is an example of their perception:

**Excerpt 8:** Fear of categorization as an outsider

> If I am in an Arabic speaking country, I would try to use Shami. if Shammy something I feel like I can't use in that situation, let's say I only knew 50% of what I want to say in Shami, I think I would switch over to FusHa, even though FusHa is not really spoken in the Arab world.

> I know speaking English is one of those things where it can go either way. As we were younger whenever we traveled to Syria, my mom would say try not to speak in any English, because they could tell we're American and, you know, prices go up. So, I think it would be smart to use FusHa just because everyone knows FusHa.

> So even if you can't fully use the dialect, they would just think that you couldn't speak it because you are Egyptian or something like that. I would think that'd be a smarter move. (John)

In this excerpt John tried to respond to the imagined scenario of using Arabic in an Arab country by ranking his linguistic repertoire to match community expectations of him and also how he would like to be perceived. John thought that speaking the community dialect should be the top priority, followed by MSA. Even though he is aware of the formal nature of MSA, he preferred using MSA to English. He remembered his mother's advice against speaking English in Syria as locals would label him as "American" or an outsider, which comes with serious consequences including higher prices.

Since all three participants expressed strong connection to their social identities as Arab and Arab-American, they were asked about how their development in learning Arabic opened new doors for them in their heritage community (e.g., family and friends). When John was asked about implementing what he was learning in class with the Arab community, his response was the following:

**Excerpt 9:** Gaining access to the community

> Now I'm able to write in texts in my family group chats, on Facebook, and people are noticing and they're like, "Oh, wow! you understand! And you can read and write now!" Now it's kind of there's a new connection. It's like no more of that disconnect. I'm not on a different level of writing or speaking or understanding than they are. I mean, obviously I'm still learning, but we're growing closer. (John)

John expressed his joy of getting closer to his family and circle of Arab friends by being able to text in Arabic. As a HLL of Arabic, he only had speaking and listening proficiency in Syrian Arabic before studying MSA in class. With his writing skills improving in MSA, he could compose texts in Arabic to communicate with his family and friends via online platforms (e.g., Facebook). John's ability to construct texts in Arabic, and not mixing Arabic with English, could be understood as an access card to be an in-group member of the Arab community.

**Mixing as a way to nurture social identities in the Arabic classroom**

The connection between the participants' social identities and their translanguaging practices was apparent in the MSA classroom. Classroom observations data show that the participants drew on their dialectal knowledge in the MSA classroom on multiple occasions. For example,

in one of the classes Alexa was asked to describe a picture of a man drinking water. Below is the classroom conversation between Alexa and the teacher:

Teacher: Alexa, matha yaf3al hatha arrajul?

*What is this man doing?*

Alexa: hwa yashrab mai?

*He is drinking water*

Teacher: hwa yashrab maa'. mai is Shami and maa' is FusHa.

Alexa: hwa yashrab maa'

While composing the sentence, Alexa used the dialectal variant of water Mai, instead of Maa' in MSA. The teacher then corrected her providing the MSA variant of the word, then he explained the difference to Alexa.

In the interview, I asked Alexa to comment on this classroom interaction and this how she replied:

It was like a small difference between Mai and Maa'. In such cases, teacher usually will mention if it sounds like a little bit different that there are different ways to say it. So then. Like everyone kind of understands that there's not just one way to say something (Alexa).

Incidents of mixing dialect with MSA by HLLs occurred repeatedly during classroom observations (e.g., *Lakan* instead of *Lithalik = therefore*, *Hasssa* instead of *Al'aan = now*). This point is addressed thoroughly in the discussion section below.

## Discussion

In this study, we examined translanguaging practices of Arabic HLLs and how those practices mobilized the social identity of the participants.

Participants show a shift in attitudes to the concept of using their full linguistic repertoire depending on the setting. On the one hand, they do not favor mixing languages when communicating with their heritage community, especially in the Arab world. Participants perceive mixing as an obstacle that hinders their full integration into the heritage community as in-group members. On the other hand, their attitude towards translanguaging practices in the MSA classroom is positive because they use it to push their learning experience forward.

Data reveal that while participants were exposed to home dialect and MSA mixing in their households, they are currently against the idea of mixing MSA with dialects or with English in their social lives. At the same time, they incorporate translanguaging practices in their learning of MSA in class. Due to their experience with their extended families in the Middle East, participants were almost completely convinced that mixing is "not a thing" (Excerpt 4), meaning that native speakers of Arabic do not mix between MSA and dialect. From their point of view, mixing as a communication strategy would hinder their progress in mastering Arabic in the future. However, participants did not reject translanguaging in the classroom. Examination of their class notes and classroom observations show how HLLs depended on translanguaging practices in their learning of MSA, which goes in line with previous research (e.g., Al Masaeed, 2020; Albirini & Chakrani, 2017). The question that presents itself now is why participants had such mixed perceptions of mixing languages as a social phenomenon while they still translanguage in their MSA class. We believe the answer lies in the participants' objectives from the Arabic class. Being in the first year in the Arabic program, they are starting their MSA learning journey from scratch, and they are making use of their entire linguistic repertoire to advance in their learning. This aligns very well with Wang (2019), concluding that her focal participant implemented translanguaging practices (by using English and Chinese in her notes and social media posts) to improve her comprehension of her English class material. Additionally, we believe the participants' negative attitude toward mixing MSA with dialect in their communication with their heritage communities reflects their future aspiration of Arabic proficiency, not their current status. The three Arabic HLLs aspire to achieve native-like proficiency in Arabic in the near future to become fully integrated in their heritage communities (whether in the U.S. or with their extended families and social circles abroad).

These attitudes towards mixing languages as a social phenomenon and translanguaging in class could also be explained in light of the influence of the heritage community on Arabic HLLs. According to Wen (2011), HLLs may desire to learn their heritage language due to socio-cultural influences. Many studies (e.g., Chao, 1997; He, 2008; Li & Duff, 2008) have argued that HLLs seek to connect with their heritage cultures through learning their heritage languages. The influence of the Arabic heritage community could be sensed in the participants' attitude towards mixing languages socially. John, Alexa, and Hadeel expressed their appreciation of their heritage culture and how they cherished this part of their identity, which motivated them to study MSA in the first place. Therefore, they wish not to be perceived as outsiders in their heritage communities. Since all three communicate regularly with their heritage community (e.g., immediate, or extended families in the Middle East), they were influenced by the perceptions of that community's views on people who mix their dialect, MSA, and English. In

spite of the fact that translanguaging practices and language mixing are very common in the U.S. Arabic heritage community, John's description of mixing as "not a thing", Alexa's as "weird", and Hadeel's as "wouldn't work", project the desired view of the extended heritage community (outside the U.S.) on the matter. This influence is shaping the participants' learning objectives, as they aspire to reach a level where they can master MSA for formal use and communicate orally only in the dialect of their heritage communities and avoid mixing between the different languages they know. In their opinions, if they do not mix, they will not sound "weird". Data reveal that the participants' personal language ideologies are even stricter that the real-life linguistic practices of the Arabic heritage community in the U.S., where language mixing is frequent. By adopting strict(er) language ideologies, participants aspire to reach full integration in their heritage communities, not only in the U.S., but also in the Arab world.

Results also manifest the connection between the participants' social identity (in-group vs outgroup members self-categorization) and translanguaging. On the one hand, questionnaire responses reveal that students proudly value their heritage backgrounds and consider themselves in-group members of their heritage communities. Qualitative analysis of interviews indicates that there is a positive connection between the three Arabic HLLs' Arabic classroom experiences and their social identity as in-group members of the Arab community. When they were younger, with little exposure to Arabic, they felt fine mixing Arabic and English in their day-to-day interactions with their families (Excerpt 1). However, growing up, they started to become more aware of their Arab heritage and wanted to nurture that side of their identity. Noticing the positive reaction of their families when they can write online messages and Facebook posts in Arabic (Excerpt 9) and identifying as Arab or Arab-American while refusing to identify as only American (Excerpt 8) indicate how important it is for the three Arabic HLLs to be in-group members of their heritage communities. In a sense, this would go against mixing Arabic with other languages (e.g., their L1 English). Interestingly, their self-categorization not only constituted their negative opinion on mixing MSA with English, but also extended to opposing the idea of mixing dialectal Arabic with MSA. On the other hand, class notes and classroom observations provide evidence that HLLs do implement translanguaging practices while learning MSA in class. This implementation could be seen as a manifestation of the participants' social identity in class. In other words, translanguaging practices could aid HLLs mobilize and showcase their social identities in the classroom. For the participants, translanguaging in the MSA classroom provides them with an opportunity to celebrate their heritage identity in class. However, it seems like participants only use translanguaging in their beginner courses till they reach a level of proficiency where they do not. This reflects their ultimate objective of full mastery of Arabic (MSA and dialect).

Finally, translanguaging practices seem to be used heavily by Arabic HLLs in their classroom interactions. These practices may be used by students as a short-term solution to their low language proficiency at the beginner level. The participants state repeatedly that they hope they can reach a level where they function perfectly in their heritage communities without mixing MSA, dialect, and English. This no-mixing aspiration might be indirectly imposed on the HLLs by social identity classifications of members of heritage communities. In other words, and due to the diglossic nature of Arabic, Arabic HLLs are conscious of the fear of being categorized as outsiders if they mix between an Arabic dialect and MSA in the future (Excerpt 8), as Arabic L1 speakers rarely mix dialect and MSA. Nevertheless, the fact that they still use translanguaging practices at their beginner stage of learning shows that they find value in using their whole linguistic repertoire to improve their learning experience.

**Conclusion**

This study aimed to examine the translanguaging practices of Arabic HLLs in MSA classroom, and how HLLs mobilize their social identity into the classroom through such practices. Following a mixed-method design, the data revealed that Arabic HLLs have mixed perceptions of the idea of using their entire linguistic repertoire depending on the setting. In their social lives, and despite being surrounded by translanguaging in their households from early ages, participants believe that mixing MSA, dialect, and English in their communication with their heritage community would threaten their in-group membership in the community and label them as outsiders. However, HLLs see value in translanguaging practices in the classroom because they serve their learning goals at the beginner level. Additionally, HLLs use translanguaging practices to bring their social identity to life in MSA classroom. By incorporating their dialectal knowledge with their MSA learning, they stand out in the classroom as heritage learners. Findings of this study could encourage more researchers to investigate the diglossic nature of Arabic and its effect on Arabic HLLs in the classroom. Another possible future study would attempt to measure the effect of translanguaging practices on HLLs progress in language learning. Through using quantitative and qualitative measures, results might reveal how effective, or not, translanguaging practices are in the MSA classroom. Teachers can benefit from these findings by adapting their classroom instruction to be more inclusive and sensitive towards HLLs, implementing informed classroom management and curriculum design.

Taking a multidialectal lens in delivering Arabic language instruction, recent discourse has identified translingual pedagogy as a legitimate and inclusive approach in facilitating Arabic instruction. Allowing heritage learners to take full advantage of their linguistic repertoire is

likely to motivate them and provide a safe place for them to engage with the teacher and their non-heritage peers. Such an environment can help them affirm their identity in class and share their perspectives that will likely enrich the cultural component and invite meaningful negotiation. Teachers can rely on their intuition in taking advantage of translanguaging moments as learning episodes and a scaffolding strategy to get learners to connect and link what they know with the new knowledge they are constructing. Implementing translanguaging pedagogy in the Arabic classroom provides a learner-centered approach that values students' linguistic diversity, promotes language development, and fosters a positive language identity. It can create an inclusive and engaging learning environment that empowers students to use their native languages and/or home dialects as a resource for acquiring Arabic proficiency. Embracing translanguaging as a legitimate pedagogy in Arabic language instruction requires a dialogue between teachers and researchers to integrate concepts of inclusive pedagogy and social justice in the process of curriculum development and course design. Finally, teachers need to integrate the topic of Arabic language ideologies in their curricula. This would create a conversation between teachers and students about real-life practices of Arabic in the U.S. and the Arab world context. Such a conversation would clear any misconceptions students have about Arabic practices in real life.

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## Appendix A

## Interviews Questions

1. How is your Arabic study experience going so far?

2. What are your objectives of studying Arabic? Short-term and long-term?

3. What have you achieved so far?

4. What's next?

5. How is the class dynamic going? With the teacher and other students.

6. When you are asked a question (to read something or the meaning of something) how do you usually feel or react?

    a. what if you do not know the answer?

7. In class, does it occur to you that you are more experienced in Arabic than your classmates? Why? Why not?

8. In what ways you try to engage with Arabic outside of class (campus, community, social networks, etc)

9. How close (or distant) are you to the Arab community?

10. How do you feel the Arab community perceive you?

11. How you identify yourself: Arab – Arab/American – American?

### Translanguaging

1. How often do you use your home dialect while studying? In what ways?

2. How beneficial you find your dialect in class?

    a. Do you use it while taking notes? Assignments? Conversation?

b. And how do you do that in writing? (transliterate?)

3. What are the best ways to use your dialect to help you improve your Arabic studying (either in class or outside of it)

4. What's your opinion on mixing MSA with dialect (and English)

5. How do you feel when you use your home dialect (in class or outside? Is there a difference?)