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From 'I love you, habibi' to 'Oh My God Habibi, it's not that hard!': What Address Terms Tell Us about Relationships and Culture

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ABSTRACT

The address term *habibi* is one of the most frequently used terms by the Arab community. Literally translated, 'habibi' and the feminine version *habeebti* mean my love or my dear, however, use of this word extends to far more figurative uses than literal ones. Personal address terms are fertile grounds for examining interpersonal relationships and by extension examining the culture as a whole. This study examines the different functions invested in the term 'habibi', where four major codes were identified through interviewing participants and taking part in participant observation. The data were analyzed using Hymes' speaking framework and a grounded theory approach. Through primary-cycle coding, I identified the following codes: maintaining a relationship/closeness, politeness, showing compassion, and saving face. All of these codes belonged to more general codes of familiarity, solidarity and unity, all of which belong to the larger overarching theme of harmony. The implications of this study suggest that key terms of address such as 'habibi' are important to study because of the relational information they contain, as well as the invested cultural values which will ultimately help us understand how members of a given cultural group communicate.

Introduction

Every culture uses different terms of address depending on variables such as age, sex, social ranking and of course the relationship between the people communicating. Terms of address are loosely defined as “words used in a speech event that refer to the addressee of that speech event, [and] can be extremely important conveyors of social information” (Killean 1988, 230). This is to say that address terms contain social information that is not explicitly stated throughout interactions. One of the first things children are taught is how to properly address others and understand the

significance of doing so. When interacting with others, “receiving the appropriate term is considered to be one of the most important ways” (Killean 1988, 230) of establishing and maintaining relationships between speakers. Moreover, “in the act of addressing others, speakers evoke personal identities and define the nature of the relationship existing between themselves and those addressed” (Fitch 1991, 2). Not only are personal identities and relationships invoked, but broader cultural values are also present when using terms of address.

In other words, language is socially meaningful: “the broader linguistic issue of language in interaction creates and displays social relationships and identities” (Kiesling 2004, 2). Address terms not only have different uses and possess several meanings, but are also “acknowledged to be one of the most interaction-oriented utterances among humans” (Afful 2007, 1). Understanding the functions of a widely used address term will indicate cultural patterns embedded within it, and as a result will lead to a “better understanding of how everyday language-in-interaction is related to widespread, enduring cultural discourses” (Kiesling 2004, 2). Therefore, we consider personal terms of address as being the “public index of the relational imperatives of a speech community” (Fitch 1991, 2). The study of these terms allows us to recognize and define the cultural beliefs and themes within which meaning is negotiated (Fitch 1991).

Even though address terms are important carriers of cultural values, in the Arab world they continue to be under-researched. Not only address terms, but any sort of published studies about “communicative phenomena in the Arab region have been scarce” (Feghali 1997, 2). Looking at the Speech Communication Association publications, we can see that in the 1980s only five articles were related to communication in the Middle East, and none of those articles addressed any Arab cultural patterns (Feghali 1997). One notable exception is an exhaustive study on Egyptian terms of address by Dilworth B. Parkinson (1985), in which “the author deals with a number of terms included under chapter headings like “family terms”, “terms of respect”, “friendly and joking terms” and “terms of abuse” (Abu-Haidar 1987, 106).

However, even throughout this thorough analysis of Egyptian address terms, no special attention was paid to the term *habibi*; arguably one of the most widely used term of address between Arabs. ‘*Habibi*’ and its feminine form *habeebti* mean approximately, my love; my beloved; my sweetheart; my darling. The word ‘*habibi*’ is derived from the word ‘*hub*’ which means love. The ‘*habeeb*’ is then the dear/lover/beloved and the added “*i*” for the masculine form or “*ti*” for the feminine form are the possessive suffixes, used when referring to a specific person.

There is no universal definition for an Arab: “the term ‘Arab’ becomes strange and baffling when you dig into just what it means” (Feghali 1997, 5). However, there are certain values present when Arabs communicate, since “communication[n] embodies a social experience and ritual that involves sharing knowledge and emotions” (Al-Kandari and Gaither 2011, 6), thus connecting Arabs through their communicative style. Furthermore, there is such a large vocabulary repertoire available for Arab speakers that the specific use of ‘*habibi*’ “may encode several types of social information as well as implications about the relationship between the speakers” (Reynolds 1989, 145). Since Arabs infuse nearly all forms of communication with emotions, the choice of one word over another implies specific affective meanings. (Al-Kandari and Gaither 2011). That is to say, “it is the selection of that address term, rather than others which might have been used, which conveys meaning” (Fitch 1991, 3). By using the term ‘*habibi*’, speakers are conveying certain meanings that would otherwise not be available with another address term. However, until now no study has focused on what functions ‘*habibi*’ performs within society and what it says about the culture.

‘*Habibi*’ is a term used, and quite often overused, in most Arabic-speaking countries. It has infiltrated all sorts of conversations and communicative events. Use of the word is not questioned, but rather accepted, to the point that Arabs utter it unconsciously. That said, some people do notice it: comedians

make fun of the exaggerated use of the word; YouTubers welcome new viewers with a “Welcome, *Habibi!*” video, and bloggers write about the widespread use of the term. In this way, its overuse can be a point of debate. In a blog post titled “Stranger or not, you’re still my *habibi*”, Fatima Abounassif (2012) writes: “I admit that ‘*habibi*’ can get pretty annoying sometimes because of its lack of meaning... it no longer has an aura [,] it no longer means anything.” Although this blogger may believe that it no longer carries meaning, the fact that ‘*habibi*’ is so common among Arabic speakers in a variety of different communicative events tells us that certain cultural values underlie the use of the word. What is most interesting to note is that the term is so deeply embedded in the culture, and its use is so automatic, that users may believe it serves no function, when, in fact, it is more likely that the values implied by ‘*habibi*’ have been ingrained in the culture for so long that we don’t even realize they’re there. This important address term clearly carries meaning about interpersonal relationships, but also contains traces of cultural values that are shared across the Arab countries.

Due to the various uses and meanings of ‘*habibi*’, it is necessary to understand the pragmatic use of the word, that is, to understand the meaning of ‘*habibi*’ in interaction. Pragmatics, an area of study in linguistics, sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistics, allows us to look beyond the literal meaning of an utterance and consider the context of the interaction and how meaning is constructed; interpret layers of meaning beyond what is literally suggested and focus on implied meanings (University of Sheffield 2009). In order to understand the different functions of the term ‘*habibi*’ and what this says about the culture, I seek to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the different pragmatic functions and meanings of the word ‘*habibi*’?

RQ2: What does the use of ‘*habibi*’ indicate about the values of Arab culture?

Methods

Overall Design

For my study I collected data using three different approaches: media studies, participant observation and semi-structured interviews with ten participants over the course of four months. I used multiple sources of data and research methods because all of these combined can give more multifaceted descriptions and perspectives. They are a form of triangulation, which “is an important way in which a qualitative researcher establishes the credibility of his or her study” (Lincoln and Guba quoted in Baxter and Babbie 2004, 318).

Media Studies

In addition to the participant observation and interviews, I supplemented my study by analyzing the use of ‘habibi’ in media, specifically on TV shows. “The media reflect and portray [...] forms of culture” (Fourie 2011, 355), and whether fact-based or fictitious, media reflect back the surrounding culture and are therefore fertile grounds for analysis. I narrowed my focus to two Egyptian TV shows; the popular 2001 show *Haj Metwalli’s Family* and the more recent 2014 hit show *Dalaa Banat*. Both series are light hearted drama series with quite a bit of comedy, or what could be considered comedy-drama television series, which provide examples of language use in quasi-naturalistic settings.

Participant Observation

Being a native of the culture and the language has given me the advantage of witnessing and participating in the use of ‘habibi’ for many years. At the beginning of my study, I adopted the role of complete observer, which allowed me to include more people in my study, in addition to the interviewees. Any time that I heard people using the term ‘habibi’, I would write it down as raw data. However, for the majority of my research, specifically for four months, I took on the role of ‘participant-as-observer’, whereby I engaged with the participants and would wait until they

used the term. I would then ask them about their use, after which I informed them of my study. Since ‘habibi’ is used unconsciously and spontaneously, knowing about my study did not seem to affect their use of the term. Furthermore, since I myself am a native and belong to the culture, I used ‘habibi’ in different events and was able to record my interlocutors’ reactions or reciprocal behavior. In addition, the participant-as-observer role allowed me to ask questions right after the term had been used and was still fresh in participants’ minds. Although I do belong to the culture, I did not take my own explanations for granted, and so I would wait for any *in vivo* (that is, ‘live’, spontaneous) language to come up and then elicit explanations of the meaning of ‘habibi’ in that situation. Being a participant-as-observer allowed me to “go beyond reports that rely on the five senses – of what they see, hear, taste, touch, and smell – to what they also intuitively feel” (Tracy 2013, 109). Yet at the same time, I could also take a step back and take notes, ask questions and leave. In total, I observed about 20 different interactions with ‘habibi’, and only stopped recording the events when I reached saturation point, which is to say, no new information was forthcoming.

Interviews

Over the course of four months, I conducted ten informal, semi-structured interviews with Arab friends and family. Even though Arab is hard term to define, for “Arab is not a race, religion, or nationality” (Feghali 1997, 5), for the sake of my study, I define as Arabs all those who are fluent and capable of speaking the Arabic language and belong to Arab countries. With my participants, I was aiming for a maximum variation sample so that I could get a wide variety of responses and interpretations; to this end, I spoke with people of different nationalities (including Moroccan, Libyan, Lebanese, Egyptian and Saudi Arabian), different professions, and different age groups (from 19 to 65). All participants were natives of Arab countries, users of the word ‘habibi/habeebt’ and spoke the language fluently. The widespread use of the word ‘habibi’ across all borders, “indicate[s] that native Arabic

speakers share common features of communicative style” (Feghali 1997, 13), and thus the various Arab cultures share certain meanings behind the use of the term.

Half of the interviews were in English, and the other half in Arabic, which I then translated into English. One of the interviews was a focus group of four participants, which allowed the participants to discuss the topic more in depth and was beneficial since “group interaction aids respondents’ recall and stimulates embellished descriptions of jointly experienced events” (Tracy 2013, 169). Interviews took place either at the university campus or at home, lasting between 10 minutes and an hour. Since I was conducting qualitative research, and my aim was to find out what the natives had to say about ‘habibi’, the semi-structured nature of the interviews gave me and the participants more freedom to pursue topics that I had not planned on asking but came up during conversations. However, my research question limited the scope of what we talked about because I had already narrowed down my focus to the point of wanting information about one key term. Member checking and making explicit comparisons between participants’ responses are two other advantages which come from semi-structured interviews (Baxter and Babbie 2004).

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data from my interviews and field notes, I first used Hymes’ ‘speaking’ framework and focused on ‘rules’ – why someone used ‘habibi’ in that instance, ‘norms’ – how the other person perceived it, and ‘goals’ – what was achieved by the term (Hymes 1972). Secondly, I used the grounded theory approach, involving the constant comparative method, in order to code the data and determine the functions of ‘habibi’ (Baxter and Babbie 2004). Then I engaged in primary-cycle coding and searched for all the different functions and looked for associated terms in the data that could be grouped together under a code, and found the following: removing negativity, reducing intensity/tension, (re)establishing closeness, integrating into the Arab

community, increasing intimacy, being polite, expressing feelings, asking for favors, maintaining a relationship, establishing solidarity, saving face, greeting someone you care about, showing compassion, remembering someone fondly, softening the blow and using the term reciprocally.

To illustrate how one instance of ‘habibi’ can fit under several primary codes, I draw on two examples of ‘habibi’ found in Arabic TV series. In *Dalaa Banat*, Heidi is a wealthy upper-class woman, who due to unusual circumstances has to go live with Korea, a straightforward lower-class woman. Both clash from the very first moment, but ultimately they grow to love one another. In episode 4, minute 25:43, Korea gives Heidi some of the leftover food in the fridge and tells Heidi that since she lives with them, she should eat what they eat, and drink what they drink. Heidi answers her with “habeebti, I don’t eat from this disgustingness, I would vomit.” In this instance, the codes of softening the blow, saving face, removing negativity and reducing tension/intensity all apply. Another example of multiple codes applying to one use of ‘habibi’ is when Korea gets out of prison after having spent a year there, and sees her fiancé Ibrahim for the first time. Although she doesn’t use the word ‘habibi’, she tells him how much she had missed him and how she had wished she could get out of jail, if only for five minutes, just to see him. Ibrahim responds to this with “habeebti, habeebti ya Korea”. In this case the following codes apply: (re)establishing closeness, increasing intimacy, expressing feelings, maintaining a relationship, greeting someone you care about and using the term reciprocally (although she didn’t use the word, Ibrahim used the word ‘habeebti’ to reciprocate her expressed sentiments to him.) Given that many of these codes were overlapping, I went through constant comparative approach and secondary-cycle coding. Eventually, I was able to re-group them into four codes, with the ‘saving face’ code having several strategies (Fig.1).

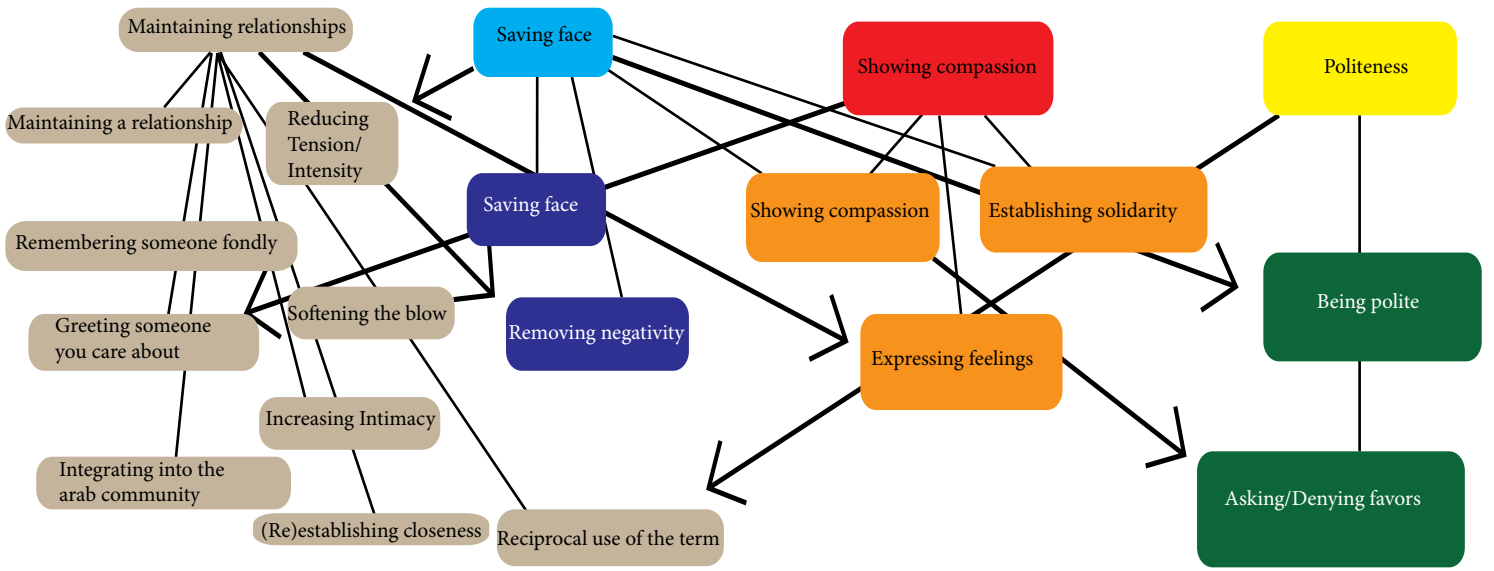


Figure 1: Mapping out the 16 primary codes and regrouping the overlapping ones into four main codes.

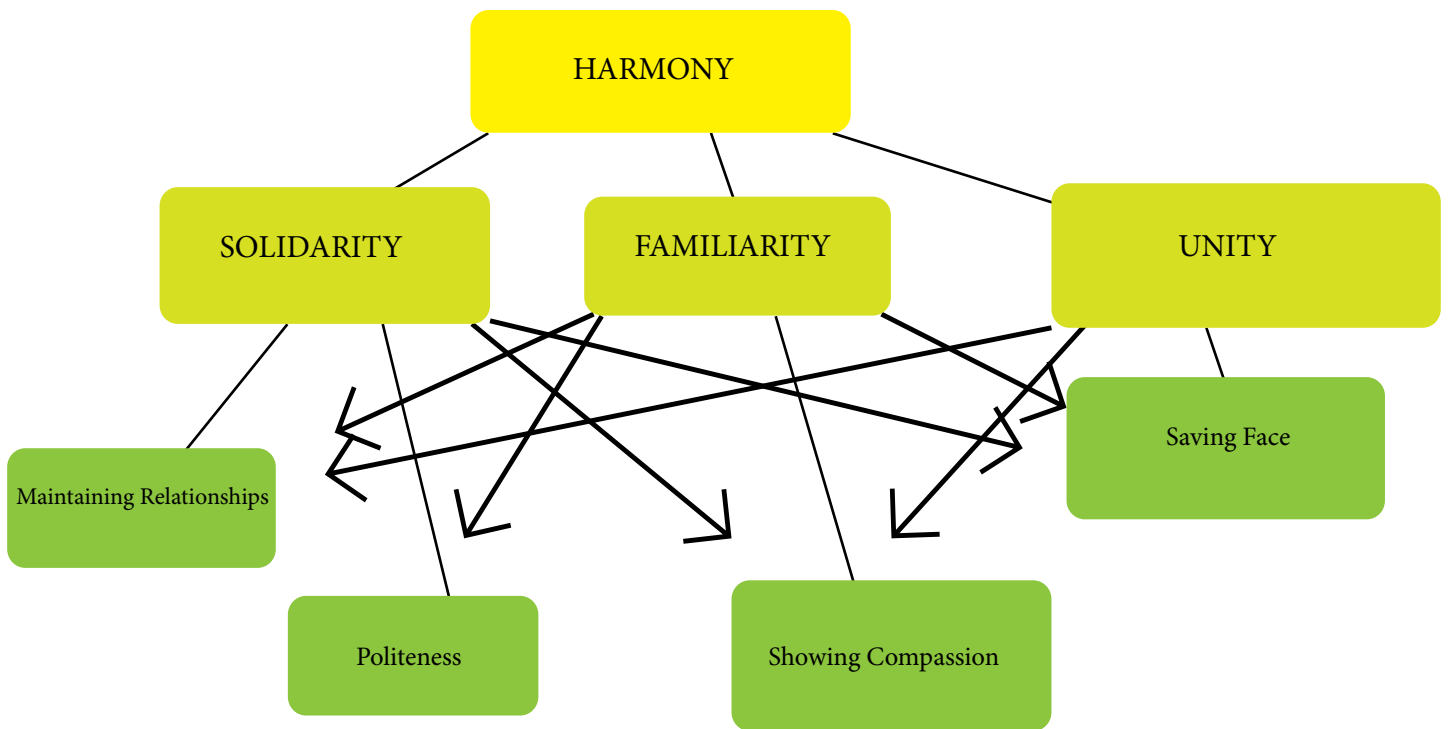


Figure 2: Illustrating how the 4 primary codes connect to the cultural theme of harmony.

These four codes then served the more abstract third-level codes of familiarity, solidarity and unity, which in turn belonged to the overarching cultural theme of harmony (Fig. 2). My belonging to the Arab culture helped me understand interactions and interpret meanings more accurately; however, I also checked with participants to see if they agreed with my terminology and coding process to make sure I was correctly analyzing the data.

Findings: Unveiling the Unexplored Functions of “Habibi”

Four main functions of ‘habibi’ emerged from the data: maintaining relationships/closeness, expressing politeness, showing compassion, and saving face.

Maintaining relationships/closeness

This function seems to be the most obvious and literal use of the word ‘habibi’. For every single one of my interviews, whenever I asked the question, ‘What is the function of the word ‘habibi’?’ all participants said it was to make someone feel close to you, express your feelings to them, show them how much you value and care for them, and let them know that even if you don’t see them very often they are still very dear to you. A common way ‘habibi’ is used, other than in normal conversation, is during greetings. In the Arab world, greetings are “very important indices of appropriate socialization, the measure and type of relationship existing between interactants, as well as the means of ensuring the sustenance of the binding fabrics that hold the community together” (Nwoye 1993, 1). Therefore, you must ensure that you greet people warmly and from the heart and make sure they know you’ve missed them, even if it’s a quick hello; by using ‘habibi’ you convey to them much more meaning than with ten other words. Shortly after I decided to study the functions of ‘habibi’, my close friend Dana saw me on campus, and called out to me using the term ‘habeebti’, so it made me curious as to how she was using it in this particular situation. She explained to me that “even though I may not see you as often as I’d like, I use the term ‘habeebti’ with only you and one other friend whenever I see you because it’s

important for me to keep our friendship as strong as it was, and when I use ‘habeebti’ I am trying to convey that to you, show you that I care.” And then after leaving for our respective classes, indeed I felt like our friendship was still intact and that we were still close friends, in large part because of the continued use of ‘habeebti’ between us without any hesitation or awkwardness.

I found similar uses of ‘habibi’ in several TV shows, where ‘habibi’ was often part of the greeting. In *Haj Metwalli’s Family*, Metwalli is married to four women, the first three of whom get along well. In Episode 8, when his first wife, Amina, gets sick, Namatalla, the second wife comes to visit her and see how she’s doing (min 0:05). At this point, Namatalla had only just married Metwalli and they were still relative strangers. However, when it came time to greet each other, they greeted each other warmly and used the word ‘habeebti’ several times. Amina uses it first and says “Welcome, welcome, I swear it is as if the Prophet Himself has visited us, ya Namatalla! Welcome ya habeebti!” To which Namatalla answers, “May God increase/add to your blessings, ya habeebti.” Here we see how two women, who are potentially positioned in a relation of competition, greet each other effusively and use ‘habeebti’ to maintain a close relationship with each other.

Politeness

This second function of ‘habibi’ serves to help you come across as polite and tactful. By ‘politeness’, I am not referring to social rules of behavior such as letting someone go through a door first, but instead “the choices that are made in language use, the linguistic expression that give people space and show a friendly attitude to them” (Cutting 2002, 45). Across cultures, it is common for speakers to “respect each other’s expectations regarding self-image, take account of their feelings, and avoid face threatening acts” (ibid.), and throughout Arab cultures, the word ‘habibi’ helps accomplish these goals. From what I observed, participants tend to use ‘habibi’ when asking for something because the term

invokes the closeness you share and is more likely to get the other person to do what you need from them. Specifically, the word *labaqa*, meaning tact, came up several times during my focus group, and was one of the most common explanations for the use – or non-use – of ‘habibi’. All focus group participants agreed that use of ‘habibi’ would be appreciated as signaling good manners. Following the maxim of tact, the speaker’s intention is to maximize the benefits for others, thus ‘habibi’ aims to make others feel more comfortable and at ease; it is part of positive politeness and attends “to the hearer’s interests, wants and needs” (Cutting 2002, 49).

An example of using ‘habibi’ to make others feel comfortable can be found in *Dalaa Banat*, in episode 13, minute 23:05. Marwan is upset with an art dealer, because the art dealer believed that Marwan was trying to cheat him in a deal, when Marwan proposed to exchange a car for a painting of the same worth. Having only met him that day, the two were practically strangers. Then the art dealer had Marwan’s girlfriend arrested, because the car was in her name. Later, when he discovered that Marwan was innocent, he offered a compensation of a million Euros, and said to Marwan “my brother Marwan, habibi, we will pay you 1 million euros, this is to apologize and satisfy you.” Seeing as the art dealer used a “deliberate, situated and contextually appropriate expression of consideration for the feelings/face-needs of the addressee” (Davies, Haugh and Merrison 2011, 114), we understand that ‘habibi’ was performing politeness in this case.

Furthermore in the focus group interview, Suzan said that “when I use that word I am welcoming you, and trying to be nice and gracious; I am trying to embrace you as a person.” This means that through ‘habibi’ you are capable of turning a stranger into someone familiar, or bring them closer to you. In other words, ‘habibi’ is used as a positive politeness strategy, which aims to “demonstrate closeness and solidarity, appealing to friendship [and] making other people feel good” (Cutting 2002, 48). Lastly, it is also polite to reciprocate the use of the word, so if someone

calls you ‘habeebi’, it is polite to answer them in kind, whether it is ‘habeebi’ or another term of endearment such as ‘ya omri’ (my life) or ‘ya roohi’ (my soul)..

Showing Compassion

In this particular function Arabs use the term more consciously and carrying more of its literal meaning, which is my love/dear. Often when Arabs talk to one another, their ways of communicating are filled with emotions, and if something bad has happened to the speaker, they will tell you in such a way to elicit a compassionate response from you (Al-Kandari and Gaither 2011). The listener must then respond in an appropriate way, expressing genuine sympathy to show them you care and make them feel validated. One way to accomplish this is to use ‘habibi’. More often than not, it is the older Arab women, mothers and grandmothers, who use the term in such a way, since they are the ones expected to be kind and understanding. For example, when I told my mother about staying up all night studying, only to come back and sit down again in front of the computer in the morning, she said “Poor you, my habeebi, inshAllah God will help you in everything, just trust in God.” Although she can’t do much to help me, she will come around every once in a while to check up on me to see how it’s going. Her actions paired with her words, most importantly ‘habeebi’, show that she is supporting me however she can. She is showing compassion and letting me know that she is right there with me every step of the way. Her use of the word ‘habeebi’ is important because not only does it let me know that she loves me, but also that I am in her thoughts; thus, I feel her solidarity with me.

In addition to this example, there were several instances of the use of ‘habibi’ to show compassion in *Dalaa Banat*. In episode 5, Korea, the main character, has just witnessed her fiancé, Ibrahim, get hurt in a street fight and rushes him to the hospital. Once he’s in the operating room, she crumbles to the ground and starts crying desperately. Her uncle is there with her and tries to calm her down and comfort her in any way he can (min 6:30).

Crouching next to her on the floor, he puts his arm around her and says “God have mercy! God have mercy! It’s okay, habeebti, why don’t you go on and go home and keep your aunt Sundus and your cousin Gamalat company? Suka (her friend) and I will spend the night here and I will keep you updated by phone.” Korea’s uncle is showing her compassion and consideration through his actions and through the use of the word ‘habeebti’.

There are two further examples in Episode 2, where ‘habibi’ is used to transmit sympathy to the other. In this case, Korea’s aunt Sundus, who is a little mentally unstable, gets lost when Korea accidentally left the door open. Ibrahim and Suka are helping her find her and Korea is once again desolate (min 20:15). Ibrahim takes her hand and kisses it and says “Ya habeebti, calm down, calm down.” And although “verbal explicitness in sex-related terms like love and honey [...] are condemned among adult speakers [in Arab communities] of the opposite sex and tolerated among speakers of the same sex” (Farghal and Shakir 1994, 249) unless they’re officially married, Ibrahim still calls Korea ‘habeebti’ because he is trying to convey his understanding and compassion. Lastly, also in Episode 2, Nader’s fiancée, with whom he was deeply in love, all of a sudden leaves him for another man and leaves the country. Nader is heartbroken; he won’t answer his phone, go to work, leave the apartment... and his older sister is trying to motivate him and get him out of this state (min 10:59). She says “Ya Nader, ya habibi, you have to go on with your work and your life.” She even suggests they go on a vacation and is trying her best to let him know she is right there with him and is supporting him.

Saving Face

Even though participants did not realize it when they used ‘habibi’ for this particular function of saving face, it was in fact one of the most common uses. Arguments, requests, denials, demands, criticisms and other communicative events can all be considered face-threatening. The term face refers to “an

individual’s claimed sense of positive image in a relational and network context[;] face in essence is a projected image of one’s self in a relational situation”(Boden 2008, 131). In other words, face represents “the confidence of society in the integrity of moral character [...and] loss of face occurs when one fails to meet the requirements of one’s position in society” (Burek 2010, 46). Problems arise since individuals may lose face in many ways, and although not all cultures lose face the same way, losing face is still a serious issue, so communicators have to be mutually aware of face-threatening acts.

Face is thus the identity that is “defined conjointly by the participants in a setting” (Boden 2008, 131), and is of great importance to Arabs, since if they have an active role in defining the other person’s face then they will always ensure to not threaten the other’s face or make them look bad. Although most people try to maintain a balance between autonomy and approval, this greatly depends on their culture. In relation to this study, Arabs belong to a collectivist culture, where people focus on meeting the need for inclusion and are more other-oriented, and therefore concentrate less on the self-face. “In collectivist cultures the honor of the group is the most important aspect in human interaction [and] to avoid losing the honor of the group, people’s behavior will be dominated by the avoidance of losing face” (Boden 2008, 132), in any given situation. Even though all cultures are concerned with face, there are varying degrees of concern. In most Western societies, which are ‘low-context’ cultures, meaning that context is relatively unimportant to the way messages are communicated, “one is not offended when met with contradiction” (Burek 2010, 55) and is therefore not concerned about losing face in that particular situation because “the place that face issues hold in low-context cultures is not nearly as important as in collectivistic cultures” (Burek 2010, 54). However, in high-context cultures, where a great deal of communicative meaning is inferred from the context, a “negotiator’s nightmare is loss of face [...] and the individual will do everything to ensure it will not happen (Burek 2010, 55). This helps explain why a term like ‘habibi’ is so popular

across all Arabic-speaking countries and why people use it so frequently even when the term would not be deemed appropriate in its literal meaning, for example, during arguments.

This means not only that any communicative event can be considered face-threatening, but also that Arabs may even be offended by certain communicative expressions which could be harmful to the relationship. It is important to not threaten someone's face, since it can be "degrading and considered as shameful to someone's reputation in society because it relates to individual honor and pride" (Al-Kandari and Gaither 2011, 7). So, naturally in conversations between Arabs, this particular function is most prevalent, especially since many participants don't want to risk threatening the other person's face and therefore use several strategies to save face. Throughout the data, 'habibi' was often used to soften a blow and mitigate tension whilst saying something somewhat harsh, the aim being to keep things smooth and maintain the peace for the sake of the relationship. Softening the blow and ultimately saving face was achieved through three strategies; protecting the other's negative face, protecting the other's positive face and protecting the self's positive face. The positive face is characterized by one's desire to be admired, accepted and generally well liked by others (Brown and Levinson, 1978). In contrast, the negative face is related to one's freedom; the desire to not be imposed upon (Brown and Levinson, 1978). Seeing as "high-context individuals are more concerned with trying to save the face of the opposing person and value inclusion (respect and approval)" (Burek 2010, 54), we can see how the three face-saving strategies that 'habibi' performs fit seamlessly together, since they are concerned with protecting the other's face and one's own positive face.

A particularly face-threatening communicative event for both participants is asking for favors, because it threatens both the asker's positive face, and the other's positive and negative face. In the following example, I was able to see how 'habibi' was used to protect the self's positive face, and the other's negative and positive faces. When Sofia, Lidia and I were sitting together during lunch, Sofia had an appointment in about 45 minutes, and didn't feel like going. Since Lidia had come to school with a car, Sofia asked her if she could give her a ride to the clinic and used 'habeebti' as the first word in her request, to which Lidia answered "Oh, habeebti, I'm so sorry but I can't! My mum told me to pick my sister up and I wouldn't have time to do both! So sorry, habeebti!" Lidia had to use 'habeebti' to deny Sofia's favor because she really didn't want to say no, but had no option. Also, she made sure to give a valid excuse and apologize several times, so that Sofia wouldn't take the denial personally. So, in this case we can see how Sofia used 'habeebti' to protect Lidia's negative face, and make sure she wasn't imposing and giving her the chance to say no. And on the other hand, Lidia was trying to protect Sofia's positive face, her need for approval, appreciation and inclusion; by using 'habeebti' she was able to transmit those feelings much more efficiently. However, Lidia was also trying to protect her own positive face, her need to be liked and accepted, because she didn't want to lose face in front of her friends and risk coming across as uncaring. In this interaction, we see how both participants are concerned with the other's face more than their own faces. Thus, we can see how in "collectivist cultures, face is concerned more about what others think of one's self worth, especially in the context of one's in group" (Boden 2008, 132). In other words, how we come across to others, especially to those close to us, is a significant aspect of identity and very important, relationally speaking.

There were several instances when participants used the word 'habibi' in somewhat heated situations. High tension, loud voices and irritated family members would not seem to be the typical setting for using the term of endearment 'habibi'. Yet after I had seen this happen a number of times, it became clear that 'habibi' was not used to coax the other person to see things their way; rather, the word was used to make surrounding words less harsh, in other words to soften the blow and save face. One afternoon I was passing by a friend's house, and once inside I found Sara showing her mother how to use a program online, and growing exasperated, she repeated for the third time "Mama... habeebti, it's not that hard! Didn't I just tell you that this is the number of the base and you just have to type it in?" Sara's mother followed her instructions and did not get upset at her tone or response, because 'habeebti' was used in this situation to 'sugarcoat' the snapping tone and ultimately to protect her mother's positive face. In contrast to "U.S. Americans' self-reliant and "individual-centered" approach to life, social life in the Arab region is characterized by "situation-centeredness", in which loyalty to one's extended family and larger "in-group" takes precedence over individual needs and goals" (Feghali 1997, 8), and therefore the relationship is placed above the participants; it is more important than you and me. Sara was striving to protect her mother's positive face and above all to not harm the relationship.

Habibi: Striving for Harmony

All of these different functions answered my first research question, and have given me a better understanding of what 'habibi' is used for. However, the data were telling me more: all of the functions seemed very similar and had common features. Therefore, I went through the codes again and synthesized them into more abstract third-level codes of familiarity, unity and solidarity. These three codes were coded with terminology found in the data. More than one participant told me that 'habibi' functions to maintain solidarity between the in-group, that is, Arabic speakers. We use 'habibi' to relate to one another, to be united against the

out-group, in hopes that the term will bring us closer to each other. However, 'habibi' is also used because we believe that there *should* be this easiness and informality between Arabs, a certain familiarity that erases barriers between us. Lastly, these third-level codes were also very similar and all belonged to an overarching cultural theme: harmony. Seeing as Arabs are members of high-context cultures, where they seek to repair and build relationships, many expressions of respect and courtesy are included throughout interactions (Burek 2010). As a result, "high context communication is primarily concerned with maintaining face and group harmony" (Burek 2010, 54-55). In other words, Arabs seek to establish and maintain that harmony above anything else.

Seeing as 'habibi' is a term used by all Arabs regardless of where they are from, it suggests that 'habibi' represents a unifying cultural theme shared by Arabs everywhere. Harmony serves to protect the social realm from disruption and maintain interpersonal relationships, as well as collective identities intact. In a culture where pride and honor are of great relevance and importance, it is integral to the well-being and functioning of the society to maintain the harmony between the people, and 'habibi' is one way that harmony is invoked and maintained.

Conclusion: Understanding Cultural Values through the Looking-Glass of Habibi

This study has looked at the different functions that the address term 'habibi' serves, along with discovering the cultural theme behind the use of the word. Address terms in themselves are very important and evoke personal identities, as well as relational and cultural values (Fitch 1991). It was surprising to find that no one has already conducted a study specifically on such a popular term, especially considering the importance of address terms. So, I decided to focus on the different functions of the word, and what these functions implied. The results show that 'habibi' is more than just a term to call your loved one, for it serves multiple functions, including: saving face, showing compassion, being polite and tactful, and maintaining the relationship. All of these

functions are very similar and for good reason, since they belong to higher codes which are more descriptive than functional. The codes of familiarity, unity and solidarity were terms used by the participants to describe the purpose of using the term 'habibi'. Furthermore, these three codes belong to and function to maintain the larger cultural theme of harmony. Making sure that there is no tension, negativity, or ill feeling is a priority for Arabs; nothing should disrupt the harmony of a situation, and one way to diffuse tension is through the use of the word 'habibi'.

Throughout my study, many of the explanations and conclusions resonated with the existing research related to the cultural theme of 'honor versus shame'. The notion of 'face' is highly salient in Arab interactions for various reasons. As a high-context, other-oriented culture, one can interpret the "honorable and modest self-presentations in the public sphere as structured masks worn for social approval" (Abu-Lughod 1985, 253). "The discourse of honor belongs in the public arena of everyday" (ibid.), for Arabs "desire to project an image of strength and capability, or conversely to avoid projecting an image of incapability, weakness or foolishness" (Burek 2010, 55). Under the honor code, Arabs "seek to appear potent, independent and self-controlled" (Abu-Lughod 1985, 253) to others, for what truly matters is how others perceive them. The fear of shame among Arabs is so powerful because the identification between the individual and the group is far closer than that in the West due to the fact that "high-context collectivistic cultures believe that every action and decision affects the group" (Burek 2010, 53), and therefore demonstrating why "group-harmony is of utmost importance" (Burek 2010, 54). Among Arabs, the importance of the group weighs heavier than the importance of an individual. If an individual is in a position of shame, they then lose their influence and power, and through that person, the entire group is shamed similarly. If an Arab is humiliated before the group, or commits a social blunder, it results in a group shame. Losing face, and facing shame, is a serious matter "that will, in varying degrees, affect a person's ability to function

effectively in society" (Burek 2010, 46).

The implications of this study are that terms of address are to be studied and analyzed more carefully, for they carry interpersonal relational information as well as socio-cultural values. Terms of address and in this case 'habibi' are important communicative phenomena to study because they are influenced by cultural themes and values. Also, since they provide valuable information about socially constructed notions of persons and their relationships, we have a lot to gain when we understand the use of a particular address term (Fitch 1991). In this case, there are dozens of personal address terms similar to 'habibi' available for Arabs to use, however, 'habibi' is the word used and shared by all the different Arabs around the world, and carries implications about the values shared by Arabs everywhere. Therefore, by the specific use of 'habibi' "we can come to understand how system[s] of expressive practices fraught with feeling, system[s] of symbols, premises, rules, forms, and the domains and dimensions of mutual meanings[...] are invoked in everyday conversation and behavior" (Feghali 1997, 27). Understanding the scope and importance of such a term gives valuable perspectives into a culture's values, and provides knowledge on how to communicate with Arabs and better understand their communicative patterns.

This study of 'habibi' raises promising directions for future research. An interesting pattern that I discovered, which was beyond the scope of this study, was why the term 'habibi' is far more popular and frequently used than the female version 'habeebti', even between female participants. Not only that, but in music videos where the singer is a man, he sings to his female loved one and refers to her with the term 'habibi' as opposed to the female term. When out of curiosity I asked several of the participants why they thought this was, responses were all along the lines of never having thought about it, suggesting that the flexible gendering of 'habibi' would be worth studying. Another suggestion would be to look at how non-Arabs perceive, understand and

potentially use the term. My study was only focused on native Arabic speakers' perspectives. Finding out how foreigners, such as non-native Arabic speakers or those who are friends or neighbors with Arabs perceive the term and then examining whether any Arab cultural values are being transmitted through the use of habibi would be worth looking into. These are some suggestions for future research that would help our understanding of Arabic language and culture and enrich the observations in my research.

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ENDNOTES

1. For the sake of brevity, I shall only be using the masculine generic form, 'habibi', throughout the paper, unless 'habebti' is specifically used in the data under discussion.
2. All of the participants' names are pseudonyms.

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