

Syria's New Neoliberal Elite:  
English Usage, Linguistic Practices and Group Boundaries

by

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The Damascus branch of Junior Chamber International (JCI), Syria's largest entrepreneurial organization for young adults, held its 2008 annual dinner in a large ballroom in Damascus Sheraton on a December Sunday evening. Banquet tables to accommodate approximately 200 attendees formed a semi-circle around a wooden dance floor and DJ booth. Four projection screens equipped to play video lined the walls, and professionally-printed programs and annual reports sat at each place setting. Members of JCI and their invited Syrian guests – directors of banks, company owners and representatives of global corporations who financially support JCI's charitable activities – arrived in large numbers, dropping their European cars with the Sheraton valet. The attire was business formal; men wore crisp suits and patterned ties and women sported cocktail dresses and elaborate hairstyles.

As the guests took their seats, an hour-long program of speeches and award presentations celebrated the organization's achievements, recognized members for extraordinary efforts and acknowledged the support of Damascus' businessmen and women. A slick video documentary featured local celebrities like television and radio personalities praising the group for its contributions to the community. In English, a Damascus radio celebrity proclaimed, "it's not easy what you guys do, not at all." The outgoing leadership presented formal speeches primarily in Arabic summarizing a year's worth of activities, and reminded attendees of a sense of group affiliation, proclaiming in English that JCI is "all for one and one for all." The screens projected snapshots and



personal information of members who had won prizes such as “the Dreamer” or “the Entrepreneur.”

In between the formal program, the room buzzed with the conversations of members and guests as groups laughed at their tables, individuals circled around the room greeting friends and colleagues and small groups chatted in the corners. Strikingly in this city and country once renowned for being the cradle of Arabic language promotion, all the linguistic performances on display that night prominently featured English. From the intimate conversations between friends to the formal speeches at the podium to the names of the prizes distributed, English words and phrases consistently appeared in the evening’s linguistic output.

During the dinner, an elegant and vivacious JCI member, Lana, seated next to me leaned in to remind me how novel an affair like this was for Syria, stressing that there are very few comparable opportunities for Syrians to gather like this. She told me that a decade prior the very existence of JCI would have been unthinkable, and that the success of the dinner and elaborately displayed local celebrity support for it was just another sign of how much Syria had changed. I replied that I too felt the changes in Syria, as new businesses and activities seemed to appear almost every week. Lana nodded in affirmation. She replied that even Syrians had a hard time keeping abreast of the rapid changes around them. She told me, only half jokingly, that if she stayed home and worked for a month or two, before she went out again, she would have to call around to her friends to ask what had transpired in her absence. And the changes, she insisted, went far beyond superficial developments like new nightclubs and boutiques; it extended

to social norms about marriage, children and employment. Almost anything, she believed, was subject to change in this energizing atmosphere.

Similar articulations of a rapidly changing Syria surfaced in many of the interactions I had in over the course of my eighteen months there. Indeed, it was hard to ignore the flourishing of newness at every level of life in Syria. The consensus seemed to be that change had originated from a series of government-led economic reforms and then spread into an eager population who quickly availed themselves of the new opportunities. Political scientists and economists, working both inside and outside the country, were quick to note that these changes followed a neoliberal turn (see Abboud 2010a, 2010b, 2009; Hinnebusch 2008, 2005; Selvik 2009; Sottimano 2009). Syria has been ruled by the socialist Baath Party since 1963 and by the party's authoritarian father-son figureheads Hafez and Bashar Al-Asad since 1970. This regime has kept a tight, and often violent,<sup>1</sup> grip on the country's political and societal life. The local economy and society, long isolated and closed off to the global economy, quickly embraced global trends and global language demands. With these changes, Syrians suddenly found that leveraging anything global had fresh influence in the local context. JCI exemplifies that trend. Everything about JCI's position in Syrian society – from its status as a local chapter of an international organization to its guests who led international businesses to the centrality of English usage in its interactional patterns – bestowed an indisputable aura of prestige and achievement on the organization, its event and its attendees.

In Syria today, there is a great deal of movement and adjustment as Syrians from various sectors of society respond to these new circumstances by forming and joining

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<sup>1</sup> Here I refer to Hafez Al-Asad's squashing of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama, Syria in 1982 in which he ordered the military to attack the city, resulting in the deaths of approximately 20,000 Syrians

new non-governmental organizations, enrolling in new educational institutions, consuming newly available goods and services, pursuing new private employment and speaking and learning increasingly valuable foreign languages, particularly English. With the excitement and sparkle of the new, however, comes the frustration and alienation of exclusion. As newly acquired English skills and engagement with the norms of an organization like JCI create occasions of social mobility, those same skills and norms also act as social barriers. JCI's annual dinner, for instance, was perceived as unique and new in the Syrian context because it utilized its global connections to create a local sentiment of prestige and exclusivity. The vast majority of Syrians would feel neither comfortable nor welcome there. The economic changes encompassed by Syria's proclamation of a new, neoliberal "social market economy"<sup>2</sup> – permitting foreign investment, private banking and finance, reducing import tariffs and allowing private education – reflect a free market/neoliberal orientation that privileges global exposure. Yet the influx of the global and the localized sense of newness permeate Syrian society in uneven and often alienating ways.

What is clear is that a new and discrete social group is in the process of emerging from the bundle of official and unofficial changes sweeping Syria. The group is composed of individual young Syrians in their 20s and 30s who eagerly adopt the ideological component of neoliberal economic changes. They participate in the new associations, businesses, schools, commercial venues, volunteer campaigns, linguistic resources and social outings enabled by official reform. Numerically, the group does not represent a substantial percentage of society, but the group and its members are visible

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<sup>2</sup> Although there is no clear definition of a "social market economy," it seems to indicate an emphasis on free markets and private sector business. See Chapter 2 for more information.

and influential and thus have an outsized significance, particularly in urban areas. These are the Syrians who have embraced the changes and actively positioned themselves to take advantage of them. Through their shared embrace of the tenets of neoliberalism, their participation in the same institutions and activities and their enthusiasm for all things global and transnational, they develop a feeling of internal cohesion and begin to enjoy external recognition. Of course, such sentiments shift and reconfigure constantly. Individual group members come and go, some members seem central to the group while others hover at the margins, and the group offers plenty of diversity of opinion, origin, life story, social standing, religious affiliation, gender, wealth and every other topic. Yet, I argue that both group members and those outside of it do share the perception that there exists a new social group of young adult Syrians: the new neoliberal elite.

Central to the new neoliberal elite's formation and distinctiveness is its embrace of all things global and new in the Syrian context. Certain of these new transnational entities are particularly marked as being sources of prestige, elite status and social distinction, to follow Bourdieu (1984). The following are the most significant new transnational introductions to Syria, rendered possible and viable by economic liberalization.

- The founding of local chapters of transnational civic associations and NGOs.
- The opening of foreign chains and the import of prestigious foreign goods.
- The increased availability of foreign language learning.
- The establishment of private educational institutions using foreign curriculums.
- The increased number of foreign businesses opening local offices.

- The prominence of the Internet as method for sharing information and communication.

These are the newly-permitted transnational imports that have the most significance for the formation of the new neoliberal elite. It is these new developments that provide the venues in which they associate, the goods through which they differentiate themselves and the information with which they situate themselves as global within Syria.

It is the linguistic/social practices of the group, however, that set its boundaries, allow individuals to negotiate those boundaries, determine what benefits might accrue to the group and ultimately fix the mechanisms of exclusion from it. This dissertation approaches linguistic/social practices as its subject of analysis and proposes that the usage of English is central to all of the linguistic/social practices of the new neoliberal elite. Although I do claim that group members share a global orientation and a localized version of neoliberal ideology, I assert that any claims about social groups are based in how this manifests in the concrete, lived realities of linguistic/social interaction and practice. Making sense of developments in contemporary Syria means devoting analytical attention to smaller-scale phenomenon, such as the JCI dinner described above, Lana's narration of her own experience of change, the social connections reflected in the awards and speeches and the linguistic practices that frame all of these. The emergence of a new social group, Syria's neoliberal elite, is not a story of overarching societal trends. Rather, the group emerges from many series of interactions, instances of linguistic practice and ideologies bundled into and expressed through linguistic choices.

Certainly, elite group-ness is not new to Syria nor is the neoliberal elite the only elite group in Syria today. As I will lay out in more detail in Chapter 2, historically Syria

has had economic elites who came from many different social origins and who acquired their elite status through different means. And neoliberal elites are certainly not the only Syrian group that can claim linguistic/social prestige in contemporary Syria either; we can also speak of religious, political, cultural, intellectual and artistic elites, to name a few. I do argue that the new neoliberal elite differs from other elite groups, past and present, because of its embrace of and orientation toward the ideological underpinning of official economic changes and because of how that ideology also applies to the linguistic mechanisms that underpin its boundaries.

### ***The “New” Syria in Anthropological Perspective***

One of anthropology’s foremost objectives is the establishment of what binds social groups together and what contributes to their formation. This dissertation follows and expands this important anthropological current, by examining a new elite social group emerging under a particular set of historical and political conditions. One of these conditions is that Syria’s top-down political and economic changes have opened the country and society to global, transnational entities in new ways. This mirrors a common anthropological assumption that the world now exists under a state of globalization, which, loosely defined, posits that the newly rapid transmission of mass media and newly increased movement of goods, knowledge and people across national borders has created a newly global imaginary (Appadurai 2001, 1996). The exploration of relations of individuals and groups under globalization manifests in multiple anthropological metaphors for capturing the supposedly new integration of the world order, from scapes (Appadurai 1990) to routes (Clifford 1997) to friction (Tsing 2005).

While these theories do acknowledge an imbalance in such globally rendered relationships, their focus maintains a divide between the local and the global, rather than asserting that all things global must be born through a local context.

Other anthropologists challenge the globalization paradigm at a number of levels. First, following the earlier work of historians of the Mediterranean (see Wallerstein 1995, 1984; Braudel et al 2001a, 2001b), they reject the notion that transnational movement – whether that of information or of people – is novel (Silverstein 2003b). Second, they observe that global resources must be leveraged locally to be influential and meaningful. Silverstein notes that the perception of a condition of globalization actually increases the salience of local ethno-linguistic groups whose “positions in a functional hierarchy of locality” gives them

Relative rights to subtend chunks of the globe’s geopolitical and socioeconomic space-time as maximal realms to which their recognition can aspire. Within each of these fractal orders, there is heterogeneity in the politico-economics of recognition; outside- and-above such a tier, only areal experts know that there is internal difference (550).

Friedman (2002) further emphasizes the inherent uneven distribution of global “flows” and their contribution to local hierarchies and inequalities. Despite claims of transcending borders and boundaries, the transnational social group he labels as “cosmopolitans” represent a social group like any other, one who utilizes global references to establish its position on a hierarchy.

They do not become connoisseurs of the multiple realities of the world. On the contrary they reduce real difference to their own worlds of appropriation. They meet in the same bars and restaurants with other like minded people. They most often marry into the same class and espouse values that accentuate their distinctive character as opposed to the lower orders of social reality (7).

This observation has particular resonance in the Syrian case exemplified by the social and linguistic practices on display at the JCI dinner. The Syrians who participate in a global organization like JCI and consume global products create a social group within the local Syrian context that is defined in part by its global orientation. It is not a different category of social group; it is simply a newly forming local group relying on a newly available set of resources.

Despite the critiques of totalizing theory of global integration, there is no doubt that, in Syria at least, people experience their lives as more connected to transnational entities. One way in which this is true is the introduction of neoliberal ideology into Syria across a variety of political, economic and social levels. Political scientists and economists who study Syria agree that the government enacted a series of changes that fall under the rubric of neoliberal reform (see Abboud 2010a, 2010b, 2009; Hinnebusch 2008, 2005; Selvik 2009; Sottimano 2009). By this, they mean roughly:

the prevailing approach (for now) to government that supplants regulation by law with market forces, and government functions (especially in the service sector) by private enterprise – bring economics and politics together in even more encompassing terms. In its ideological coherence around the primacy of the private sector, the release of organizations and industries from government regulation, the creation of powerful nonstate transnational institutions and global market regimes, and the assurance of the market's self-regulating character . . . (Greenhouse 2010, 1).

Certainly this definition applies to the changes in governance, particularly in the economic sector, seen in Syria over the last decade. Although Syria's regime still retains a heavy hand in all aspects of public life and almost all businesspeople acquire "private" holding only with government connections, Bashar al-Asad's regime has actively promoted private investment and allowed, if not fostered, a private associational sector,



in which avowedly apolitical charities and organizations like JCI can operate (see Selvik 2009).

More pertinent for the questions posed here is how theorists propose that neoliberalism extends beyond the official promotion of free markets and into social hierarchies. David Harvey observed of neoliberal turns in the US and UK in the 1980s that “if the project was to restore class power to the top elites, then neoliberalism was clearly the answer” (Harvey 2005, 90). Greenhouse writes that “the social effects of neoliberal reform are not limited to the vertical relationships between state and society but that they also affect the lateral relationships among individuals – even intimate relationships, as well as communities and intersecting publics” (3). Pierre Bourdieu coins the tongue-in-cheek term “free trade faith” (1998) to refer to utopian beliefs in the healing salvo of neoliberalism held by economists, financiers and government officials. I would argue that such beliefs do not merely reside in the architects and obvious beneficiaries of such policy changes. As is the case in contemporary Syria, adopting the discourse and principles of neoliberal “faith” can be an effective strategy for moving up social hierarchies and a powerful source of group sentiment. Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant observed that the “circulation” of this discourse obscured any historical and contextual to the discourse’s origins and naturalized its global presence (2001). Certainly, the elite group, which this dissertation takes as a subject, makes use of a global product – neoliberal discourse and ideology – to establish leadership in a local hierarchy and to erect the boundaries of this social group.

These theoretical perspectives on the global, neoliberal situation in Syria leave unanswered how global resources and neoliberal “faith” channel into the creation and

maintenance of new group boundaries. To be clear, I never once heard anyone in Syria properly use the word neoliberal. However, this dissertation will demonstrate that their norms of linguistic practice align them, through both lexical insertions and linguistic choice, with a transnational neoliberal discourse and ideology. Ideology, of course, is a complicated, often misused term that carries a bundle of historical baggage and negative politicized connotations (Silverstein 1998). Analytically, however, the term ideology usefully invokes its own “sharedness” and “social-situatedness” as a cluster of beliefs (126-7). That is, ideology refers to a set of related, publically displayed ideas about the world that can be empirically located in specific historical, social and spatial coordinates and that are shared demonstrably by more than one individual through empirical evidence. The Syrian neoliberal ideology – with its discursive evidence – is a social fact of contemporary Syria as its “sharedness” and “situatedness” is produced through specific linguistic practices and elements of its discourse. Claiming to study ideology requires “a fundamental emphasis on the social origins of thought and representation, on their roots in or responsiveness to the experience of a particular social position” (Woolard 1998a, 10).

As much as ideologies encompass social beliefs, they are always necessarily constituted in and of language. There are ideologies about language, ideologies articulated through language and ideologies that combine the two. In all of them, language ideologies are a “mediating link between social forms and forms of talk” (Woolard 1998a, 3). As is the case with the Syrian ideology that privileges English as the language of neoliberal self-development, ideologies often associate linguistic practices “that are deployed in constructing and naturalizing discursive authority” (Briggs 1998,

232) with other kinds of social categories and phenomenon. Such ideologies can be self-directed (“I speak English to develop myself”), used to build up or degrade others (“they don’t even know any English”), or bundled through semiotic processes in which the indexical qualities of a linguistic or social category become compressed (Arabic is backwards so Arabs who speak Arabic are backwards) as in Irvine and Gal’s seminal work (2000). Ideologies are contested, emergent entities whose hegemonic grip on a group or society is a matter of collective perception rather than empirical demonstrability (Gal 1998a, Gramsci 1988). Ideological domination requires constant effort and negotiation across many socio-linguistic domains to preserve the veneer of ubiquity, as this dissertation demonstrates with the Syrian example.

While linguistic anthropology incorporates the ideological dimensions in and of language, one area it neglects is the role that a shared and situated ideology can play in group formation and group identification (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Discrete social groups can coalesce around a common ideological orientation, and its instantiation through ideologically-imbued linguistic practices. Linguistic anthropology presupposes that all social arrangements are born of interaction with the specifics of linguistic practice forming the substance of both social cohesion and social stratification (see Bourdieu 1990; Irvine 2006; Morgan 1999; Silverstein 1998a; Wenger 1998). Linguistic practices are almost always enmeshed in the social ideologies of their context, and thus group formation is necessarily an ideological infused process. In contemporary Syria, these linguistic practices inevitably involve the deployment of a global linguistic resource, English, whose usage is deeply embedded in neoliberal ideological discourse. While the specific methods and contexts in which this takes place will be examined in more detail

in later chapters, here I examine the overarching ideological link between English knowledge and proper usage and the social ideals of Syrian neoliberal faith.

Many theorists have observed that English is often part and parcel of the commoditization of skills that global neoliberal policy and “faith” promote (see Heller 2003; Park 2010; Pennycook 2007, 1998, 1994; Urciuoli 2005, 2003). Monica Heller proposes that English’s ubiquity across the globe detaches it from associations with a particular speech community and renders it “amenable to redefinition as a measurable skill, as opposed to a talent, or an inalienable characteristic of group members” (Heller 2003, 474). I would add that this increases its potency as a foundation for the formation of new social groups and as a linguistic manifestation of social prestige. The global spread of hip-hop and its particular English-based lexicon provides another example of how the global instantiations of English merge with other linguistic practices in local contexts to produce multiple layered indexicalities (Ibrahim, Alim and Pennycook 2009). The authors thus call for a “sociolinguistic of globalization that gives a more central role to linguistic agency on the part of youth, as their appropriations and remixes of Hip Hop indicate that these heteroglot language practices are important technologies in the fashioning of their local/global identities” (7). Although the young people of the Syrian neoliberal elite, with the business attire and corporate jargon, may seem more establishment than upstart, their innovative linguistic practices nonetheless represent a significant “technology” in how this generation merges the local and the global.

Observing the various manifestations of English in social hierarchies around the world, Pennycook describes “the worldliness of English: its relationship to class, education and culture, the materiality of its imposition on students, the implications of

their eventual success in and through English” (Pennycook 2010, 78-9). Social divisions could be drawn around English abilities in any local context worldwide. Joseph Park’s (2010) work on the “English frenzy” sweeping South Korea observes that successful acquisition of language skills can also be read as the achievement of idealized neoliberal personhood:

This article argues for such a reading of the English frenzy by considering the success stories as tales of neoliberal personhood. Through their construction of the figure of the successful learner of English, I argue, the stories represent the learner as a character whose achievements in language learning attest to her grand potential for endless self-development and self-improvement celebrated in the new economy—that is, as a linguistic version of the neoliberal subject (23).

This convergence of the virtues of English knowledge and usage and neoliberal discourse also surfaces forcefully in Syria, as I demonstrate in Chapter 3. English is viewed as both the pathway to personal development and skills acquisition and as the proof that an individual has achieved development and mastered critical professional skills. Bonnie Urciuoli (2010, 2008, 2005, 2003) highlights the power and importance of neoliberal discursive terms in how American college students package themselves as ideal candidates for a neoliberal workforce. This parallels the Syrian example in which new members of JCI and other organizations are socialized into the socially and linguistically correct articulation of their global orientation.

One need not go as far as Korea or the United States to find other examples of the intersection between neoliberal orientation, English language skills and the establishment of prestigious social groups. The Middle East is filled with examples of capital cities that have seen the emergence of neoliberal elites who utilize global orientations and connections and frequent English usage to distinguish themselves within their societies. Ozlem Altan-Olcay describes how the graduates of English-medium, American-

accredited universities in the Middle East<sup>3</sup> join a global network of regional cosmopolitan elites. They then “constitute their distinctions in the local context in terms of their cosmopolitan cultural capital” (Altan-Olcay 2008, 29). She further specifies that by “language skills [she] mean[s] not only an ability to speak excellent English but also a kind of familiarity with particular discourses that came from being associated with them from an early age” (47).

In Cairo, Samia Mehrez takes on the country’s “culture wars” and concludes that neoliberal reforms that encouraged the privatization of education for the wealthy have created a two-tier system. Private, foreign language-medium schools neglect Arabic instruction in favor of the English and French preferred in private sector employment, which is itself also strengthened by Egypt’s neoliberal turn. “Not only have these schools widened the already existing gap between the haves and the have-nots but they have also exasperated social and ideological differences as well” (Mehrez 2008, 103). In other words, students in these schools acquired the linguistic practices, social connections and global ideology necessary to establish social prestige. The parallels with Cairo extend to the rise of globalized consumption patterns. Like the neoliberal elites of Damascus, elite Cairenes order lattes and Caesar salads in upscale cafes (deKoning 2006), as they use English-based linguistic practices to demarcate their social boundaries and index their local elite social status. Rutz and Balkan (2009) describe class production in contemporary Istanbul, a process which they link to neoliberal economic policies, global economic ties and Turkey’s rigorous system of educational testing and placement. As Istanbul became “the central location of Turkey’s integration into the global economy”

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<sup>3</sup> These include American University of Beirut (AUB) in Lebanon, American University of Cairo (AUC) in Egypt and Bogazici University (formerly Roberts College) in Istanbul, Turkey. Chapter 5 will explore the influential role that AUB plays among Syria’s neoliberal elite.

(25), the need arose for “specific occupations that required special individuals with special education” which meant “speaking a foreign language, having a degree from a prestigious university (often abroad), being interested in the business culture, cultivating certain consumption habits” (24). Individuals who possessed these qualifications forged a distinct social group who viewed themselves as like-minded by virtue of their shared linguistic and social practices.

The many similarities to the emergence of Syria’s new neoliberal elite are obvious. Global orientations, foremost of which is fluency in the English terms of neoliberal discourse, combine with local connections, institutional affiliations and heteroglot linguistic practices to produce a new economy of prestige (Bourdieu 1991, 1984). One important difference between my research and these examples – Middle Eastern and beyond – is that the rest all view institutionalized educational settings as the primary location in which these social groups coalesce. In Syria, I contend that newly available private schooling at the primary, secondary and university levels plays a secondary role in neoliberal elite group formation. However, participation in non-governmental organizations, whether entrepreneurship-based like JCI or focusing on volunteer work, provides the most cogent institutional basis for the group’s formation. It is in these settings that the linguistic and social practices to which this dissertation is devoted are most socially forceful and most influential in the creation of the perception of “group-ness” among the new neoliberal elite.

The anthropological concept of social group is notoriously slippery and risks being conflated with social categories such as ethnicity, race or gender (Brubaker 2004). Starting with Pierre Bourdieu (1990, 1977), many analysts have pointed to practices as

the cohesion that bonds individuals into an identifiable group (see Barton and Tustig 2006; DeCerteau 1984; Wenger 1998). Since this move toward practice theory, other theorists have worked to tighten the definition of practice and mobilize it as an effective tool for analysis. As Bourdieu himself asserted, social practices are intricately linked to linguistic practices. More recently, Alastair Pennycook's (2010) work highlights the importance of regarding all practice as both linguistic and localized.

We can consider practices to be bundles of everyday (or not so everyday) activities as we cook, go to school, work, attend religious services, engage in recreational activities and so on. As we have seen, such practices may also involve well-integrated language practices; indeed, many of these practices can only be achieved with accompanying language practices, and some practices, particularly in domains such as schooling, work and religion, may be predominantly language based (26).

Everything happens locally. However global a practice may be, it still always happens locally . . . Being local is not only about physical and temporal locality; it is also about the perspectives, the language ideologies, the local ways of knowing, through which language is viewed (128).

This is certainly true of the situation in Syria. Neoliberal elites participate in bundles of activities: attending entrepreneurship meetings, organizing volunteering campaigns, shopping at expensive malls and private sector employment. In all of these practices, linguistic practices, incorporating interaction, ideologies, perspective and locality, shape these activities and provide the medium through which they are accomplished. It is also true that all practices and their linguistic counterparts happen in the local. Regardless of how Syrians leverage global resources, ideas and languages into these practices, they unfold at the local level. A social group founded upon practice is thus also a local linguistic group. This dissertation unpacks the linguistic practices that underpin this group and how they contribute to its formation, maintenance, inclusivity and exclusivity.



### *Class and the New Neoliberal Elite*

In any theoretical discussion of group formation and elite social status, the terminology of class will be invoked inevitably. Although its usage varies wildly in both academic and popular literature, it generally indicates a teleology of social standing in which individuals are placed into a group along a hierarchy based on an ephemeral equation of wealth, education, social connections, reputation and cultural savoir-faire, or capital, to borrow from Bourdieu's lexicon. In most studies that touched upon it, class seemed to be a static designation and never a research variable. People are locked into social categories with class connotations, a factor which affects their linguistic output (see Bernstein 1975; Gumperz 1982; Labov 1966) their working lives (see Bourgois 1995; Krisman 1987; Lo 1999) or their education and aspirations (see MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977).

In studies of the Middle East, the concept of socio-economic class is almost entirely absent. Scholars tend to focus instead on social divisions along tribal lines (see Abu Lughod 1986; Asad 1970; Barth 1961; Caton 1990; Shyrock 1997), family and clan affiliations (see Fernea 1975, 1965; Joseph 2000, 1999; Kanaaneh 2002; Sharabi 1998) and religious practice (see Deeb 2006; Mahmood 2005; White 2002). Although all of these critical issues involve social status and the uneven distribution of prestige, the treatment of class rests on a general assumption that wealthy, urban people are elite and poor, rural or tribal residents are not. Again, mentions of social class treat it as an eternal, naturalized designation, rather than as a constantly reemerging process of socio-linguistic identification. A notable exception is Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim

who addresses the question of social mobility in his analysis of stratification in Egypt (as cited in Inhorn 2003).

In his body of work, most notably *Distinction* (1991), Bourdieu unpacks the social and ideological mechanisms that groups and individuals can utilize to assign designations based on social prestige and status. Thus, Bourdieu mobilized the concept of class by proposing that it is dynamic, subject to manipulation by social actors and always relative to other positions in the social landscape. Individuals and groups also experience many simultaneous designations as they move throughout different social spaces. As one historian of Syria summarized Bourdieu's position eloquently:

class affiliation is not to be understood as the individual's ontological-economic position within the process of production, but as his analytically defined position in 'social space' (i.e. society), in terms of the relational differences to other positions, and corresponding to the economic as well as the cultural conditions (Schumann 2001, 178).

I follow Bourdieu's understanding of class status as relational because in Syria today individual actors participate in public campaigns and events to establish and display their status in relation to others participating in different roles. There is no absolute status; one must consider such events of relationality to determine where they stand against others. A focus on relational differences also permits an emphasis on the flexibility and mutability of class status. An individual's relationship to others is always in flux; sometimes this results in merely slight changes to status. Other times, as I will demonstrate in this dissertation, it means acquiring a radically different position on a social hierarchy. Yet understanding class status as a variable positionality, always defined in relation to others, allows one to conceptualize how new kinds of economic and

civic possibilities in Syria lead to new kinds of social status and new kinds of movement up and down social hierarchies.

In this dissertation, I have tried to avoid using the term “class,” as much as I could. In its place, I substitute “prestige,” “status” and “hierarchy.” While this may ultimately seem a distinction without a difference, as I wrote I began to feel that such terminology necessitates an increased attention to the relative nature and dynamism of social stratification. Since ethnographically I observed that social status was constantly in flux, constantly being renegotiated and constantly subject to differences of opinion, I want to implement of vocabulary of class status that reflects this lived reality. This entire dissertation is devoted to change and flux in Syrian social hierarchies. Elite and non-elite statuses are neither universal nor eternal designations; rather, they are emergent through interaction, linguistic practice and the performance of ideology (Tedlock and Mannheim 1995). The terms of value in Syria have shifted from privileging Arab nationalism, statist economics and formal Arabic linguistic practices to embracing global connections, economic liberalization and English usage. Such shifts upend previous relational hierarchies and provide opportunities for movement, slippage and realignment. The notion of rigid class stratification cannot accommodate such localized changes, but I would argue that a definition of class that focuses on multiple hierarchies, dynamic statuses and emergent designations of prestige can.

### ***Research Design and Methodology***

The original seed for this research project came along the Beirut-Damascus Highway, a road whose physical trajectory from chaotic and worldly Lebanon to

controlled and isolated Syria mirrored my own research path. Originally, I planned to conduct my dissertation research in Beirut's eastern suburbs, analyzing how impoverished Christians experienced simultaneous linguistic and political marginalization. Yet my experience fleeing from the war of 2006 and the subsequent political instability made working as a foreign researcher there unwise. So, I found myself back out on a metaphorical Beirut-Damascus highway, only this time the signposts on my personal research journey and the actual highway looked far different than I had expected.

In the past, my taxi journeys from these two Arab capitals – separated by only 60 miles, a mountain range, a fraught border and a cultural divide more insurmountable than any physical barrier – felt like moving back in time. Beirut had a frenetic energy and an obsession with anything new and anything global. From mobile phones to conversations in a dizzying mix of English, Arabic and French to rap music to sushi restaurants, Beirut moved from one trendy and exciting import to the next with delirious speed. Damascus, on the other hand, seemed to plod along in a by-gone era of Arab nationalism, with its locally-made products, monolingual Arabic speakers and insularity. In 2003, when such things were readily available in Beirut, Amman and other regional capitals, one had to look far and wide for a mobile phone, an ATM or an Internet café in Damascus.

When I arrived in the fall of 2007, intending to stay for an almost two-year research residence, I found that none of my Syrian preconceptions applied any longer. Gone was the isolated society and economy that privileged socialism over investment, locally produced goods over imports, state intervention over civic action and Arabic over English. In their place was a population that buzzed – often in English – over the new

opportunities in business, education and society and who embraced new social and linguistic practices. Even the Beirut-Damascus Highway had changed correspondingly. Instead of the unsophisticated billboards advertising local Syrian restaurants that marked the entrance into the country, sleek new advertisements promoted German appliances, French clothes and Chinese house wares.

While the changes impacted Syrians in all parts of the capital, from the religiously and socially conservative, lower status area *Souq al-Jumaa*, where I lived, to the upscale commercial center *Shaalan* where I studied and the chicly renovated Old City where I socialized, the aura of change and newness that permeated Syria produced uneven results. While my neighbors of modest means spent time talking over the changes they witnessed and strategizing how they too might acquire more capital and finance their children's English education,<sup>4</sup> the Syrians whom I met in wealthier neighborhoods were actually living these changes. They were acquiring ATM cards, enrolling in English schools, frequenting new leisure venues and finding employment in new private companies. The sense of change in Syria was palpable across social dividing lines, but the actuality of that change was far more limited.

English acquisition and usage immediately seemed to me to be the primary fault line in these changes, and as a linguistic anthropologist, I have learned to be always attentive to how linguistic practice intersects with social differentiation, especially in

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<sup>4</sup> My neighbor's family epitomizes how middle-class Syrians negotiated increased emphasis on English. After two decades as a low-level office manager in Saudi Arabia, the family's father moved them back to Syria to take over a family chocolate shop. The eldest daughter, in her early 20s, earned a degree in biology from Damascus University and spoke English well, but not fluently. The family was actively looking for a husband for her, and I often asked about the hunt. The mother once reported that she had recently received a suitor, but the family rejected him. In an exasperated tone, she informed me that this suitor did not have a university diploma and spoke no English. She explained that such qualifications made him less desirable than their daughter. They viewed their daughter's marriage as an opportunity for social mobility, of which English proficiency was one of the most important markers.

cases of inequality. While almost every Syrian with whom I spoke mentioned their desire to learn English, a much smaller number of Syrians were doing so successfully enough to partake in the new globally-oriented opportunities. I decided to concentrate my research efforts on those “winning” in the new Syrian landscape. Conducting an ethnography of these Syrians could provide the most insight into the social/linguistic mechanisms of elite group formation. In addition, these Syrians who commanded the English, finances, global know-how and social connections to thrive in the new Syrian circumstances had generally spent extensive time abroad and around foreigners so my presence to them was hardly exotic or significant. That way, I felt my own attributes would have less impact on the results of my research, and my research presence would prove less disruptive. In addition, given the restrictive regime’s intense surveillance, I felt that my presence and research project posed less risk to elites, who had vast connections and monetary and social resources to buttress them. By living in and constantly exploring the rest of Syrian society, I could stay connected to these vast divides and develop a more intimate understanding of their production and maintenance.

I situated my research in any and all of the physical locations, institutional organizations and social spaces I could associate with changes to Syrian society and economy. Although these changes are present throughout Syria, I limited my research to Syria’s capital, largest city and epicenter Damascus. I counted any location, physical or conceptual, as relevant if a) English usage was integral to the location’s social profile, b) the location was or was considered new, unique or novel in Syria or c) the location was made possible by Syria’s new economic realities. This list includes: private companies, new restaurants and cafes, nightclubs, new stores, new publications and media, private

educational institutions, parties, dinners and social gatherings of English-speaking elites and new entrepreneurship organizations, volunteerism and civic non-governmental organizations. As my research progressed, certain venues moved from being one of many to the fore of my theoretical and analytic interest. In particular, the entrepreneurship and volunteer organizations became increasingly central as I realized that individuals and groups I encountered in other venues also circulated through these organizations. Other venues like human resources offices of new private sector businesses proved difficult to access.

JCI and its members figure into my data and analysis very prominently. It is difficult to overstate how influential this organization is and how socially formative their linguistic practices are, or the extent to which membership in the new elite is connected to active participation in JCI and visible commitment to the principles which it espouses. Other scholars have asserted “the salience of professional associations in the Arab world as an institutional lens to conceptualize change in authoritarian state–society relations,” and I would add that they also carry a relevance to issues of social mobility and social group formation (Salloukh and Moore 2007). During the course of my research, I was continually astounded by JCI’s saturation among ambitious, educated young people in Damascus. As I attended many of their meetings, I became worried that the JCI membership’s specific orientation would dominate my analysis so I consciously made efforts to observe or interview individuals not associated with the organization. Inevitably, such attempts failed. Individuals who I knew through other means often turned out to be JCI members on temporary hiatus from the organization or joined the organization during my time in Damascus. Many times, I would arrive at a JCI meeting

to find that a Syrian with whom I had met because they had studied in the US or were running a new kind of business joined JCI. The group's deep roots began with the founders whose origins came mainly from the upper elites. They then extended from the elites into the young professionals who comprised the greatest percentage of the rank-and-file membership. Individuals in their 20s and 30s from those social backgrounds were inevitably at most one degree of separation from active JCI members.

I focused my research efforts on young people in their 20s and 30s for several reasons. First, these are my contemporaries, and I found introductions to them and invitations to accompany them easier to solicit. Second and most importantly, this generation seemed to me the most emblematic of the changes underway in Syria. Unlike their parents, who came of age in another era of different social and linguistic values, this generation could and did adapt to the new circumstances to avail themselves of new employment, new educations, new linguistic practices and new organizational affiliations. They were also uniquely positioned to be engaged in both employment in the private sector and in education, whether through supplemental English classes or the pursuit of graduate degrees. Finally, unlike their younger counterparts, who barely remembered Syria's recent socialist economic and political past, this generation of young adults experienced these developments as both different from the past and as the basis for the future.

I relied on the seminal techniques of ethnography to conduct this research, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. My experiences of participant observation, in which the researcher joins the local activity with the least possible disruption and notes how it unfolds, were as varied as the venues I described earlier.



Much of my time was spent at the entrepreneurship organizations, particularly JCI who welcomed my presence and also ignored it more than any other institution. With them, I attended weekly meetings, collected money for injured Gazan children, took field trips to Damascus suburbs, made signs for a children's fair, listened to business lectures, smoked water pipes in cafes, sat through training sessions and many other activities. In addition, my participant observation included shopping trips through Damascus' finest stores, dinners with English students from the British Council, office visits, late-night dancing at nightclubs, visits to private schools, afternoons at the new Western-style shopping malls, art openings and more cappuccinos at Costa coffee than I care to add up. I also logged countless hours hanging around my closest friends' homes, sipping tea, helping care for their children, watching Oprah on satellite TV, plotting romantic developments and gossiping about our lives. For reasons of security and respect, I decided not to include any data directly gleaned from my closest friends, but the time we spent together and the insights taken from their navigation of Syria's new circumstances enriches my research at every turn.

I also conducted approximately 40 semi-structured interviews with young adults who circulated through the sites of my research. I generally framed these interviews – with individuals who were generally already familiar with my presence and research project – by explaining that I was interested in the role that English played in Syria's new economy. I also said that I was interested in what has changed in Syria in the last decade. I began almost every interview by asking them to describe how they learned English, a question that typically elicited lengthy descriptions of their upbringing and education. From there, I would pose follow-up questions about points they had mentioned or branch

into other areas of their lives. Often the most illustrative information would come from topics I had not directly solicited or from lengthy asides that came during these often spirited conversations.

All but three of my interviews were conducted in English. I offered a choice of English, Arabic and French for the interviews, but only those who had virtually no speaking ability in English chose Arabic. Even several individuals who struggled to complete an English interview with me refused to switch to Arabic, which I suspect had to do with embarrassment and a determination to prove their English proficiency. Except for a few interviews, one in which I interviewed a newly married couple as the first guest in their new home and others in offices during the workday, the majority of the interviews took place in public spaces, generally a café. Some interviews were relatively short and succinct, lasting only a half hour, while others turned into far-ranging conversations that spanned up to three hours. I recorded all but two of the interviews because my battery had died – one with the restaurant manager and the other with human resources manager Hadil – and all quotes from these interviews are transcribed from the digital recordings. Any errors in grammar or unusual phrasing are the speaker's own.

All the names of individuals and certain businesses, charities or publications that would automatically reveal an individual's identity are changed. At times, I slightly alter biographical information to further obscure a person's identity. Although Syria's repressive regime apparatus and strict controls over personal speech mean individuals can easily endanger themselves through their opinions, every single person I interviewed had no hesitancy about answering any of the questions I posed. In addition, as I began every interview with an explanation of how I would preserve their privacy by eliminating

proper names and some identifying details, almost every interviewee expressed disappointment at that and encouraged me to use their real names, including their surnames.

In addition to observation and interviews, I recorded and analyzed the written linguistic practices that encased the venues of my research. I purchased society magazines and English-language publications. I photographed store signs, billboards and advertising campaigns. I collected price tags, receipts, fliers and even menus. I amassed brochures, annual reports, evaluation forms, hand-outs and registration forms that appeared at events, businesses and meetings. I analyzed websites, public Facebook pages and news media. Data from all of these sources are integrated into the dissertation and contribute to my analysis.

There is much that I did not and could not do in my ethnography as well. Most of these omissions were necessitated by Syria's strict security state and my precarious position as an American researcher. Although they are not in the practice of stating such policies, as a rule the Syrian government does not tolerate foreign researchers working on contemporary Syria. I conducted this research while in the country on six-month tourist visas and two-month temporary tourist residences. While all my interlocutors and friends knew about my research project, in any encounter with officials, I claimed to be an Arabic student. (I was working part-time with an Arabic tutor.) Ordinary Syrians, even wealthy ones with prestigious jobs, are very skittish about discussing anything remotely political, and I had to studiously avoid anything to do with the regime. I also had to omit recording natural speech because placing a recorder in the midst of a meeting or public venue seemed certain to bring scrutiny, suspicion and censure my way. I opted not to

conduct certain interviews – for instance with professors at Damascus University – because such high-level officials generally receive their posts based on their political connections, and I could not adequately determine whether or not this might endanger my status in the country.

### *Writing in Arabic and English*

One of the central claims of this dissertation is that the fluid boundaries of the new neoliberal elite are constructed in large part through linguistic practices, with the most prominent among them the systematic, patterned mixing of Arabic and English in the same utterances. This linguistic style is so prevalent that much of my ethnographic data involves Arabic-English mixing. While I quickly became accustomed to hearing the two languages together and could easily reproduce the style within a few months, representing these mixed Arabic-English spoken utterances in writing is not so simple. To most accurately approximate the auditory sensation of hearing Arabic and English mixed into a single utterance, I have opted for a slightly unorthodox solution: to write each of the languages in their respective scripts, even in the same sentence.

In all mixed Arabic-English examples in this dissertation, the word order reads from left to right. Although this might initially seem confusing for Arabic readers accustomed to reading Arabic from right to left, it was simply the only way I could navigate between the justification and typeset issues I encountered when typing the two languages in a single sentence. Since Microsoft Word's default alignment is to move from left to right, it was much easier to acquiesce to their tendency than to override it.

To illustrate, I will demonstrate the various issues with an example I use in Chapter 4.

The sentence as I include it in the text, reads:

“*حلوة experience فعلاً هي*.”

If the sentence were written in all Arabic (assuming I replace experience with its Arabic equivalent), it would read:

“هي فعلاً تجريبية حلوة.”

In English, the sentence would read:

“*It is truly a lovely experience.*”

In addition, full English translations of mixed utterances will be included directly after each utterance, in brackets.

This is controversial for several reasons. The first comes into play because the Arabic I am representing is spoken Syrian Arabic dialect. There exists an ideology long held by Arabic linguists that spoken Arabic cannot be written in Arabic script, since it is, in fact, so radically different from standard Arabic and mutually unintelligible across dialects (see Holes 2004). Another reason is that many Arabic speakers themselves, especially when using electronic communication like text-messaging, online chatting or emailing, often represent spoken in Arabic using the Latin script (Palfreyman and Khalil 2003).

Yet I favor this mixed orthographic technique for several reasons. The first is that listening to Arabic-English mixing in person is striking and almost jarring. Syrian speakers retain the phonology of the English words so the inclusion of two phonological and morphological systems into one utterance is an unusual sound. I found that the best way to convey that aural sensation visually was to represent each language in its own

script. Second, I believe that resistance to represent spoken Arabic vernacular in Arabic script is partially a linguistic prejudice against Arabic that reinforces its reputation as arcane, diglossic and fragmented. By choosing to write all variations of Arabic in Arabic script, I want to reinforce the notion that Arabic has a range of registers and varieties, just like any other language in the world. Scholars are increasingly making the same choice, because they want:

a) to make the material accessible to Arabic speakers not trained in or comfortable with phonetic script, and b) to highlight the close relationship among the varieties and registers of Arabic by rendering transparent the correspondence between spoken and formal registers and varieties (Brustad 2000, xiii).

The past trend to write spoken Arabic in Latin script diminishes its stature as a socially legitimate variation of the language and reinforces an outdated notion that formal, written Arabic is always the prestige variety. As other research (see Haeri 2000, 1997, 1996; Mitchell, TF 1986; Owens 2001) and my findings here demonstrate, formal Arabic hardly has a monopoly on prestige among the spectrum of Arabic varieties. Choosing to render all varieties of Arabic in Arabic script eliminates any bias in favor of formal Arabic, instead allowing the multiple layers of contested social meanings of all Arabic varieties to come to the fore.

### *Dissertation Overview*

As this dissertation investigates the particulars of elite social group formation under economic liberalization and shifting local, national and regional priorities, it does so with the conviction that linguistic practices and interactions form the mechanisms of social group boundary formation and maintenance and of inclusion and exclusion. Linguistic practices are not a reflection of a pre-existing social reality nor are they merely

one of many social practices. They underpin and comprise every aspect of social life that contributes to social group formation, maintenance and monitoring. The many changes in contemporary Syria that I identify as integral to the emergence of this elite group come into existence and sharp relief as a set of patterned, situated linguistic practices amongst a collection of social actors. All of the currents I list, from education to marketing to entrepreneurship associations to volunteer campaigns to luxury consumption to social outings, are aggregates of linguistic practices and localized interactions. As such, each chapter of this dissertation examines a specific aspect of the linguistic practices and patterns of interaction within the new neoliberal elite – and those who come into contact with it – to demonstrate how the local incorporation of a global discourse and ideology creates new social hierarchies, divisions and mobility.

Chapter 2 places elite group formation into historical, spatial, social and linguistic context. It begins with an overview of the shifting factors of elite-ness in Syria since it became an independent nation. It also describes the political and economic policy changes that eventually led to the current iteration of economic liberalization, the backdrop for the formation of the new neoliberal elite. It then turns to identifying the specific urban (and occasionally suburban) spaces in which the linguistic practices and interactions of the new neoliberal elite take place. Next, the chapter addresses the intangible social “spaces” in which the social boundaries constructed by the linguistic practices I describe cut across other social connections, such as siblings, extended families, schoolmates, neighbors or old friends. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of linguistic options in urban Syria. It focuses on which linguistic attributes

might convey elite social status and on how lexical items carry the most prestige-related significance in a Syrian conversational context.

Chapter 3 examines how linguistic practices form boundaries of inclusion around the new neoliberal elite in its most important sites: entrepreneurship associations and venues of luxury consumption. Specifically, it examines context-dependent linguistic practices that have shifting referential value depending on the specifics of their instantiation. This grammatical category, called deixis, includes terms like pronouns, chronotopes and terms of relationality. By deploying these terms in specific, strategic contexts speakers can easily define who is in or out of the group, where the group is located and what characteristics define it. The chapter examines linguistic practices in JCI meetings and activities to demonstrate how critical deictic usage is to demarcating elite group boundaries. The chapter then examines the related grammatical category of shifters, which are also wholly or partially context-dependent for their referential meaning. In particular, this chapter mobilizes the concept of strategically deployable shifters (Urciuoli 2010, 2008, 2005) to highlight how context driven the semantic value of words that seem transparent can be. This is the case with the neoliberal discursive terms that circulate among the new neoliberal elite. Although these terms have dictionary definitions, they convey very different social messages depending on where they are used, and how and by whom. They also simultaneously connect Syrian neoliberal elites to neoliberal discourses globally and express the ideological coherence of the group locally.

Chapter 4 explores how individual speakers use linguistic practices to navigate the group boundaries of the new neoliberal elite. They accomplish this through two



important linguistic strategies: style and stance. The preferred neoliberal elite style favors consistent Arabic-English mixing in a single utterance, the insertion of English strategically deployable shifters and the inclusion of English idiomatic phrases and slang. Its social value derives from an opposition from what it is not in a Syrian context. This means it is more socially effective because it contrasts with an assumed monolingual Arabic dominance. Conversational stance refers to a complicated calculation made by Syrian speakers that takes into account previous utterances in the conversation, the socio-linguistic profile of their interlocutors and their own positions within the conversation. If they correctly assess the conversational context, Syrian speakers can thus use appropriate linguistic styles in the situation. By deploying these two techniques effectively, Syrian speakers can align themselves with the new neoliberal elite and make claims to neoliberal authority without facing censure, exclusion or isolation. However, Syrian speakers are acutely aware that any slight miscalculation of stance or misuse of style might result in the inability to find acceptance among the neoliberal elite and the damning charge of “showing off.”

Chapter 5 addresses how elite style and membership in the new neoliberal elite operates in many overlapping marketplaces within Syrian society. Such markets include obvious ones, like those for consumer goods and other economic activities, but also extend to markets for education, employment and marriage. Drawing on the long Bourdieuan tradition of studying how linguistic practices have a value that can be exchanged for other things, this chapter pays close attention to how such exchanges unfold in these significant fields. The chapter also highlights the foundational role that Syrian-style neoliberal ideology plays in governing all such exchanges, just as it provides

the ideological content of neoliberal elite group formation. The ideological consistency of all activities of the neoliberal elite means that the same linguistic practices that earn one social acceptance into the group also have the potential to help speakers profit in business, at schools, in interviews and even in marriage negotiations.

Chapter 6 returns to the context-dependent deictics and shifters outlined in Chapter 3 to assess how those same grammatical categories are equally potent in establishing boundaries that exclude most Syrians. Specifically, it focuses on a ubiquitous and influential strategically deployable shifter (SDS), volunteerism, which references charity campaigns but also indexes an immersion into and familiarity with Syrian-style neoliberal ideology. The concept of volunteerism and participation in it are central to neoliberal elite membership, and the events of volunteering are often important events in which the contours of the new elite become apparent to all participants. Through linguistic practices and resulting social boundaries, the volunteerism trend creates the settings in which non-elites engage in different linguistic practices and are thus set apart from the new neoliberal elite. It is through this central tenet of the new elite's neoliberal ideology and linguistic instantiation of that ideology that certain social divisions in Syria are deepened, illuminated and acknowledged.

Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation by considering the emergence of the new neoliberal elite in light of Syria's highly authoritarian regime. It highlights the ambivalence of neoliberal elites to President Asad, his family and the reforms and policies of the regime more generally. While certain aspects of neoliberal ideology espoused by elites directly contradict the regime's ruling ethos, neoliberal elites are typically apolitical, non-confrontational and even supportive of the regime, at least

publicly. At the same time, their commitment to widespread civic engagement, their participation in less restricted English-language publications, broadcasts and social media such as Facebook and Twitter and their desire to engage globally at numerous levels places them at odds with a regime that tacitly tolerates but discourages such activities. As people in the region around them challenge dictators and enact their toppling, Syrians too have begun to demand reform and change. Yet the neoliberal elite remains privileged by the status quo and, given their rigid social boundaries and sometimes exclusionary linguistic practices, they seem unlikely to lead or even participate in a revolution. Regardless of how they react, an ethnography of these elites that pays close attention to their social/linguistic practices in relationship to the rest of society and to the regime illuminates new social dynamics that will affect the trajectory of this country as it faces a changed region.

## **Chapter 2: Syrian Elites across History, Geography, Society and Language**

In 2005, the Syrian sketch comedy television show *Spotlight* featured a skit depicting a series of married couples unhappily comparing their material possessions to those of their friends and relatives. In the first vignette, a sloppily dressed couple in a shabby apartment bicker dramatically over the wife's frustration that her husband never takes her out to dinner. Her best friend's husband, the wife complains, takes her out to eat at least once a week, if not twice. The scene moves to her best friend and her husband, dressed in casual but neat clothing, eating a large meal at their kitchen table. Yet she too is unhappy, only her gripe is that she does not own a car. She demands a car from her husband, but he replies he cannot afford one and she must take public transportation. The perceived injustice of this incenses her, as her neighbor just received a new car.

Next, we see that neighbor lounging in an elegant living room, watching an English-language movie. Her husband enters the room, offering a new mobile phone. She scoffs at his gift and at his mention of the recently purchased car. He seems perplexed and distressed, asking why those purchases are not sufficient for them to be considered prominent and rich. Yelling in response, she spits out the word *villa*. Her cousin's husband purchased a large villa in an outlying area, and this couple's car and mobile phone pale in comparison. Of course, the next *mise-en-scène*, of that unhappy cousin and her husband in their ostentatious villa reveal that the Syrian villa too is not enough to establish one as elite and provide happiness. "Thanks God" this wife intones

sarcastically in English. Her friend, it seems, has a villa too, but hers is in Switzerland. The prestigious international location of this villa makes the Syrian villa seem provincial, and it fails to secure her the top spot on the social hierarchy. Finally, the episode concludes with the owners of the Swiss villa, but they do not reflect the happy ending one might expect. Instead, the wife has broken her hip skiing in Switzerland, and she lays in bed, moaning over her injury. In a twist, the first wife, who complained about never going out to dinner, is this woman's cousin, and she comes to visit her. The poorer cousin listens miserably as her wealthy relative moans about her bad fortune, recalling the flu in Tokyo and a fever in Paris. Lamenting over the boredom she has experienced as her husband drags her around the world, she imagines how much easier her life would be if she could only stay home all day, like her cousin. Unexpectedly, the skiing victim tells her cousin how lucky she is to be able to rest safe and comfortable at home, eliciting delighted laughter from the first husband, and ending the skit.

The episode encapsulates the contemporary symbols, styles, linguistic choices and personal behavior of elite and non-elite status in Syria. It presents a hierarchy of status in which local, small-scale goods are taken for granted and global goods and travel – made possible the new economic loosening – convey prestige and inspire envy. A villa in Syria is good, but a villa in Switzerland is better. The skit also invokes the important role that linguistic practices which incorporate English play in establishing elite credentials and their connection to coveted global connections. The characters' linguistic preferences help to establish their class affiliations. The first husband, representing the least elite social standing, speaks in an exaggerated form of Syrian Arabic by elongating his vowels and using old-fashioned and somewhat crass idioms. As the characters

progress in status, they increasingly use non-Arabic words (villa, mobile, skiing). The producers calibrate the volume of the English movie to make it clear that the character is watching an English movie, and the utterance “thanks god” accompanies a dramatic hair toss and disgusted facial expression that heighten her pretension. In this episode, the possession of increasing amounts of wealth, the acquisition of global goods and the insertion of English words and phrases are bound together to produce elite social status.

This episode, with its parting moral that the very rich are no more satisfied than their more modest cousins, encapsulates the anxiety and excitement over shifting social hierarchies in Syria today. While in the recent socialist past, the moral of the story might have been a clear condemnation of the insatiable appetites for luxury of the rich and their failure to achieve happiness greater than Syrians of modest means, today the dissatisfaction of those in the middle of Syrian social hierarchies in comparison to those at the top looks less like a satire and more like a realistic rendition of the contemporary social situation. At both official and informal social levels, the class-less ideology of the socialist era has been replaced by a pro-market enthusiasm that regards the accumulation of personal wealth not as a suspect violation of the social order but as a sign of individual achievement and worth. Simultaneously, a social ideology that privileges the transnational influence of English edged out a top-down, state-promulgated ideology that favored Arabic.

### ***Historicizing Syrian Inequality***

Social inequality is certainly not a new development in Syria, the Middle East or the world at large. In the Syrian case specifically, the terms of social distinctions and

inequality have shifted considerably over the last century, during which the country left Ottoman control, fell under the French mandate, achieved independence, endured a series of socialist revolutions and finally transitioned from a statist to a social market economy. The parameters which define social prestige, elite status and local influence continue to mutate and bring in new players, new values and new fault lines for distinguishing between different social groups. Yet, despite this constant flux and the fact that Syria today seems obsessed with and defined by the novelty of its current social iteration, certain themes remain consistent. Most relevant to the dissertation's topic, Syrians often relied on global symbols and access, whether linguistic, educational, stylistic, experiential or relational, to build local prestige and define social differences. In fact, the situation in today's Syria is not unique for its propensity for incorporating the global and transnational into local social orders but rather for the particular contours of the current incorporation and the central role of English language skills in it.

The connections of certain segments of the Syrian population to European powers and influence dates back to the Ottoman Empire's control of the region (see Batatu 1999; Gelvin 2005; Hourani 1991, 1982; Schumann 2001; Thompson 2000). As early as the nineteenth century, a class of educated men emerged through their trade links to Europe and their ideological "affinity for European-style institutions and ideas" (Gelvin 1998, 28). Since the territory now known officially as the Syrian Arab Republic left the auspices of the Empire, the establishment of elite sectors of society showed a strong correlation to their relationship with foreign influences, whether through embracing or rejecting them. During the unpopular French Mandate (1923-1943) and subsequent struggle for independence, nationalist leaders often positioned themselves against

European influences. Syrian independence in 1947 meant the end of direct foreign intervention on Syrian territory, but connections to transnational entities, philosophies and trends would continue to serve as pathway for establishing local prestige. In addition, education acted as a potent symbol for and pathway into elite social status. Notable regional universities with Western affiliations such as AUB or LAU that still act as incubators for elites played the same role during this period (Schumann 2001).

During the 1950s and 1960s, Syria went through a series of political transformations and revolutions – including an ill-fated union with Egypt and several military coups – that left the young country reeling. After the dust settled in the early 1970s, it was the socialist, and increasingly authoritarian, Baath party that controlled the country and structured the political and economic conditions under which social inequality could be created, displayed and leveraged. In discourse and foundational philosophy, the Baath party stood for an end to traditional social distinctions and a veneration of peasants, workers and the otherwise disenfranchised (Hinnebusch 1990; 1989). Yet inevitably the ruling party and the regime established policies and practices that favored certain groups and individuals over others. Volker Perthes' work on political economy in Syria (1995) has demonstrated how the regime's policies, particularly its economic ones, privileged specific social sectors, most notably the urban, merchant bourgeois Sunni Muslims of Damascus and Aleppo. Some were specifically designed to curry favor with other areas of the populations who were particularly resistant to the regime.

In many ways, the Baath party positioned itself as anti-Western, anti-colonial and as the seat of pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism. With a constant emphasis on hostility



with Israel, solidarity with Arab nations and on the symbolic import of the Arabic language, the Baathist regime often expressed animosity toward Europe and the United States. Yet underlying that antagonism was a willingness of all political elites to “adopt the arsenal of Western development categories articulated by the same powers, which they had fought as colonialists” (Sottimano 2009, 7). With their focus on development and modernization, the Baath party’s programs often aligned with Western aid imperatives. Such state-centric and state-sponsored development movements inevitably created their own social divisions and forms of inequality. Certain groups – peasants, workers, minorities and public sector employees – were favored not just in economic policies but also in the forceful discursive propaganda in which the Baath party invested much effort. The Baath party attempted to cultivate its own rival elite class of party leadership that maintained Baath ideology (Hinnebusch 1989). The traditional bourgeoisie, as the Baathists labeled them, did not lose all social and economic advantages during this time, but they faced a situation in which both economic policies aimed at leveling wealth distribution and ideological orientations glorifying the oppressed acted against their direct interests.

When Baathist, Alawi air force general Hafez al-Asad took power in 1970, he inaugurated a “Corrective Movement” that moved the Baath party further away from its socialist ideological roots and toward the promotion of a private sector. He also consolidated his rule, bolstered an extremely powerful secret police force called the *mukhabarat* and turned the Parliament into a rubber-stamping entity (see Seale 1988). These innovations in Baathist, socialist orientation created additional opportunities for economic and social inequality, as it ended the previous goal of achieving social equality

in favor of promoting what many scholars have termed “state capitalism” (see Perthes 2003; Sottimano 2009). Despite a discursive continuity with Baath-era ideologies, Asad from the beginning used government bodies and policies to create a statist economy. He also recognized a need for a private sector, and the regime secretly courted “capitalists” and publicly offered the bourgeoisie a chance to compensate for the sins of the past. Yet the atmosphere for such enterprises was so hostile and the conditions of corruption, structural stagnation and governmental incompetence were so prevalent that the private sector waned, with the exception of light industry and small-scale commerce.

One group of professions did flourish and diversify under Asad and his Baathist policies. Perthes (1991) calls this group “self-employed professionals” and lists among them doctors, lawyers, dentists and engineers. Benefiting from Baath policies that expanded educational training and instituted objective testing for entrance into such fields, these professionals came from a wide swath of backgrounds and were guaranteed incomes greater than educated public sector employees but lower than some merchants and large manufacturers (Perthes 1991, 104). This group of highly educated professionals would become the background of Syria’s elite professional class, and their children would become an integral part of the new neoliberal elite in which this dissertation is interested.

A pivotal irony of the Baath system under Asad is that the relative wealth and influence of the upper class – large landowners, manufacturers and industrialists – actually increased under a system which was ideologically committed to eliminating such a class and nationalizing its holdings (Perthes 1991, 109). The difference was that the established, landed gentry with prominent names ceased to be the only pipeline into this

class. Although many from that group did successfully reposition themselves in the upper echelons under Asad, they were joined by entrepreneurs from merchant families, high-level government officials and a diverse group who leveraged personal connections with those in power (1991). Hinnebusch observes, citing Sadek al-Azm, that the nucleus of this group was the “‘military-mercantile complex’ of Alawi officers and Damascene merchants” (Hinnebusch 1993, 252). The coalescence of those from different societal origins around newly encouraged economic activity was so striking in the 1980s that they were dubbed the *al-tabaqa al-jadida*, or the new class. Like their counterparts several decades later, this group’s cohesion revolved not around sectarian affiliation, geographic roots or familial lineages but around a shared involvement in the highest reaches of economic activity and great wealth. “They are ostensibly cosmopolitan and modern. Religion plays no role for them, nor does ideology. Socialism is all right with them, as long as it is Syrian Ba’thi-style socialism” (Perthes 1991, 36). The difference, of course, is that the new elite discussed in this dissertation share a strong ideological commitment to certain neoliberal principles and social trends (as discussed in Chapter 3). Despite that, one easily can see how this earlier elite group transitioned into today’s new elite.

In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, Asad accelerated the regime’s efforts to strengthen the private sector. The government’s finances floundered during that time period, and the regime shifted the burdens of economic growth to the private sector. The regime distributed contracts to state-maintained monopolies on utilities and heavy industry, rendering several prominent members of the new class dependent on the political status quo for their wealth (Hinnebusch 1993). Yet the private sector remained dominated by relatively few players and mid-level or even management positions at these

firms were mostly unavailable to those outside a few families. Gradually, the regime began implement policy additions that expanded the role of the private sector into new economic areas and permitted the expansion of business. In addition, the discovery of large amounts of oil in the Eastern regions of the country brought an influx of cash into the stagnant economy, which benefited both the state apparatus and the few prominent players in the limited private sector.

One of the most visible and talked-about developments in the Baath era shifting of social hierarchies is the emergence of Alawites as a major component of an elite class. Members of the Alawi sect, a controversial and secretive offshoot of Shi'a Islam, lived in the marginalized and isolated coastal mountains of Syria for centuries. In the 1950s, they were best known to the urban bourgeoisie in Damascus for their willingness to sell their daughters into indentured servitude as domestic labor (Faksh 1984). Yet their fortunes turned dramatically when one from their community, Hafez al-Asad, became the President and dictator of Syria. The Baath party under the Asads has been friendly to sectarian minorities,<sup>5</sup> and no one group has benefited more than their co-religionists. Mohammed Faksh writes that the Baath party's secular orientation provided minorities an opportunity to usurp traditional social hierarchies that place urban Sunni Muslims at the top. "Such a system would certainly weaken the traditional Sunni-urban establishment's hegemony in Syrian political life and, consequently, would eliminate the prevailing political and socio-economic discrimination against heterodox Muslim minorities" (141). Although Baathist ideology accommodated all oppressed groups equally, in practice

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<sup>5</sup> Syria is ethnically and religiously diverse, with a Sunni Muslim majority of approximately 75 percent. Alawites and other Muslim sects number 15 percent, and Christian communities total 10 percent. Ethnically, the country is 90 percent Arab and approximately 10 percent Kurdish and Armenian. (CIA World Factbook).

Asad's policies increasingly favored Alawites, particularly members of his extended family, who were installed in key positions in the security forces, government ministries and other official roles.

In addition to their significant share in influential political positions, the Alawites became figures of social prestige due to their close economic ties with the regime. The Asads distributed lucrative government contracts and licenses to those close to them, and many Alawites used these opportunities to amass considerable fortunes. Suddenly, the backwater community from a peripheral area became a major force in urban society as they moved into Damascus primarily to establish businesses, attend prestigious schools and take advantage of the capital's resources. Eventually, they would constitute an important sector of the new elite described in this dissertation. While privately many descendents of old Damascene families griped about the crassness and arriviste nature of the Alawite nouveau riche, they also became sought after social companions and marriage partners. In a Jane Austen-like twist, several young members of the new elite reported to me that many prominent Damascene families who possessed impressive surnames but lacked the vast wealth of the newly rich Alawites pursued marriages with Alawites for their children. These genteel families could receive a new and much-needed boost of wealth through such affiliations. With such gains in social status, Alawites would eventually become a core component of the new elite and would eventually represent some of Syria's most prestigious and wealthy families.

Under Baathist control, Syria during the late twentieth century venerated the Arabic language as the backbone of Arab nationalism. In fact, the regime instituted educational policy changes that eschewed the teaching of foreign languages and the

instruction of technical subjects in English or other European languages. The medical school, for example, was and is the only medical school in the world to teach in Arabic, rather than English, French or German. Students in government schools could select to study a foreign language at the high school level, but the quality of instruction was notoriously poor. Furthermore, a top-down cultural sentiment regarded those acquiring and deploying foreign language resources as suspect and against the Arab nationalist militancy of the regime. One member of the new elite, whose father and uncles had been very high-ranking Baath party officials, moved from country to country during her early childhood because of her father's position as an ambassador. Her father, highly educated, understood several languages fluently, but she never heard him speak in anything but Arabic and he lectured against what he called "symbols of occupation."

In Syria you can find a category of people who reject foreign languages. My family in fact is leading these people. I belong to a politician family. In my family there's three ministers and two [people] for a long time in the national security.

My father was an ambassador, and he refused to speak in English. Even he understands English, but he refused to speak English. He was a friend of President Asad. When I was a little kid, he explained to me that President Asad speaks six languages but he never speaks one word of English or foreign word. So it was something negative to speak another language.

Between depleted language-learning resources and an environment that could penalize the usage of those languages, the vast majority of Syrians learned and used only Arabic during that period. Only very elite Syrians, who studied at one of the two foreign-affiliated schools or traveled abroad for schooling, acquired any proficiency in other languages.

The one exception to this was the large number of Syrians who received scholarships to study in the former Soviet Union and thus acquired an Eastern European

language, typically Russian. This group included many former and current military and security officials and parents of the many members of the new neoliberal elite. Although Russian was politically and militarily useful during the Cold War, its global geopolitical significance has waned and, with it, its utility in a Syrian context. Interestingly, despite the large numbers of prominent regime officials who spoke Russian, socially Russian did not seem to register as a prestige language like English does today. Rather, prestige adhered to French conversational skills during this time period. One member of the upper elite who speaks English and French told me that the linguistic skills of a Syrian's grandmother were the easiest way to determine if the Syrian was an established elite or nouveau riche. If the grandmother spoke French, one could be certain the family had a long lineage of elite status.

The true sea-change in the causal relationship between government economic policies and social inequality came after the death of Hafez al-Asad in 2000 and the ascension of his son Bashar to the presidency. Bashar pushed a rapid acceleration of economic liberalization begun under his father that concluded in the Baath proclamation of Syria's new "social market economy" in 2005 at a Baath party congress. Although the exact causes of this program are difficult to pinpoint – theories range from Bashar's reformist tendencies to geopolitics after 9/11 to internal regime pressure – the results to which this dissertation is dedicated are somewhat easier to observe and quantify. Official government public statements increasingly referenced "principles of market economy" in the late 1990s (Sottimano 2009, 25). Yet many scholars believe that such discursive openings resulted in very little tangible progress (see Abboud 2010b; Perthes 2003; Sottimano 2009). Others observe that "Syria's turn to the private sector is more than an

economic process; it also involves important ideological and political rearrangements” (Selvik 2009, 42). I would add social and linguistic rearrangements to that list.

According to Selvik, the most significant economic reforms under Bashar al-Asad have been in the finance sector. Private banks began operating in 2004 and by 2007 ten private institutions were issuing credit. Indeed, this sector grew so robustly that by late 2008 it was not unusual to see Lebanese-owned banks advertising home and car loans in upscale neighborhoods. One particularly clever billboard pictured an elderly couple dressed as a bride and groom, with the words “Why Wait?” underneath it. The implication is that young people need not wait to acquire the prohibitively high amount of capital necessary to purchase a residence in the capital, but the reality is that the strict preconditions for a loan make it inaccessible to most Syrians. Private insurance companies received permission to operate in 2005. The Damascus Securities Exchange opened in March 2009 although it currently lists only thirteen publicly traded companies (“DSE” 2010). Import tariffs dropped from 255 to 60 percent, and the list of banned imports reduced from 24 to eight pages long. Finally, the government significantly reduced corporate taxes (Selvik 2009, 47-48). New civic associations, albeit only those which were aggressively apolitical, and specialty publications flourished. The government also opened up the education sector to private investment, particularly at the post-secondary level.

Despite the widespread belief on the part of economic theorists and Syrian businesspeople alike<sup>6</sup> that there is no such thing as a “social market economy,” the term

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<sup>6</sup> The skepticism and lack of consensus over what this meant surfaced during many of my interviews. Several businesspeople asserted that it meant market economy with the socialist tacked on to appease older party loyalists, who still adhered to the party’s original socialist ideology. Others felt the term was purely cosmetic, representing no tangible economic changes.



most likely emerged as a compromise between the Baath party's powerful socialist orientation and Bashar's desire for market-oriented reform. Despite widespread complaints about the slow pace of reform and vast inadequacies in the government, there is no doubt that the new businesses and associations have created new possibilities, social, economic, business and otherwise, particularly for a new rising generation of Syrians. Yet despite the ostensible progress of ending the crippling state control over most economic activities and the promise of corresponding new social innovations, the retreat of the state had a negative side. The regime reduced or eliminated its subsidies on key commodities such as food stuffs, heating oil and electricity.<sup>7</sup> "Price liberalization has meant that some products that are essential to everyday life in Syria are no longer as readily accessible to average families. Market-driven prices have also forced Syrians to draw on their savings to support themselves, as price volatility has undermined the purchasing power of those on fixed incomes" (Abboud 2010b, 13). In other words, the cessation of economic leveling mechanisms means that the gap between rich and poor is likely to expand, as Syrians who do not experience the wage increases of the new private sector face stagnant salaries and rising prices.

There is an ideological component of the new economy that has profound consequences for the shifting of social hierarchies and social inequality. Samer Abboud has written persuasively about that the social market economy is first and foremost a narrative packaged by the government and distributed to the people. One of the fundamental tenets of this narrative is that the private sector and its market mechanisms will now effectively generate affluence and distribute wealth. The government no longer

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<sup>7</sup> At the time of writing in February 2011, possibly in response to upheaval and popular revolution across the region, the government reinstated several key price subsidies (see Oweis 2011).

touts itself as the most effective way to achieve that. Yet despite this new-found confidence in the private sector and in market economy, no measures have been established to ensure or even monitor that this is done effectively. The end result is that, despite the glittering new wealth and official veneration of personal wealth-building, most Syrians have suffered under the new system (see Abboud 2010a). “The post-2000 reforms have not necessarily addressed these structural flaws. Instead, they have disrupted the traditional Ba’athist institutions of social stratification, while creating new ones. In particular, the institutions of social mobility have been disrupted if not entirely destroyed, and this impact has been most felt by poor urban classes as well as rural communities” (17). Just like previous economic and political ruptures provided the conditions for new social orders, this introduction of the social market economy created a new kind of social division, a schism between those who profited from the strengthened private sector and those whose conditions worsened. The move toward economic liberalization carried the additional burden of shifting the responsibility for general social welfare away from the state and onto individuals and groups.

One critical consequence of the economic changes is that they have opened Syria up to transnational goods, services, investment and even ideologies. The introduction of certain of these new transnational flows were by design (foreign capital, foreign goods, foreign technology), and others of these have been an indirect result (foreign civic associations, foreign educational affiliations and foreign languages). The potential to participate in these global trends provides another avenue through which social differentiation occurs and additional resources through which individuals or groups can claim social prestige.

### *Geographies of Inequality – Spatial and Conceptual*

While the economic changes described here have impacted the entire country, they have been felt most profoundly in Syria's urban centers and particularly in its capital, Damascus. Within the sprawling city, the wealthy central neighborhoods have seen dramatic influxes of international shops, entertainment, food, clothing and educational options. The vast benefits and innovations that economic liberalization and globalization have brought are most visible here, and the individuals and groups who have most benefited from such changes congregate in these areas. Writing about Cairo, Diane Singerman and Paul Ammar noted that "the context of larger changes in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century include the emergence of a new spatial economy where . . . the selling off of the public patrimony to enhance the private sector." (Singerman and Ammar 2006, 11) Damascus too has seen the emergence of an altered spatial economy, in which central neighborhoods cater to those who benefit from new economic realities and those who do not are marginalized, for the most part, to peripheral residential areas. At the same time, elite neighborhoods provide the setting for encounters between established elites, non-elites and Syrians who have experienced the new economy in less dramatic ways: as service workers at newly opened luxury dining spots, as low-level office workers or as those consciously taking advantage of new educational, professional, civic and linguistic possibilities to raise their social status. In addition, as I describe in Chapter 3, the newly available consumption in these neighborhoods attracts the curiosity of non-elites, who visit malls and commercial areas to soak in the novelty and grandeur. As such, these areas are the ones in which the fault

lines of social inequality resulting from Syria's new economic reality are most finely drawn. They are also what I consider to be the "site" of my fieldwork and research. This section will provide an overview of the geographies of social prestige and inequality that play out in the center of Damascus.

Certainly no explicit sign-posts exist to label neighborhood or urban spaces as elite or non-elite. Yet many scholars have observed that social, economic and linguistic symbols create virtual signage that alerts residents and passer-through to where a particular urban area stands on a local hierarchy (see deCerteau 1984). In contemporary Damascus, the most salient and powerful symbols are often signage of commercial spaces. Just as linguistic choices, registers and styles are powerful tools for erecting social boundaries; similar linguistic choices in local commercial signage also work to affiliate geographic locations with class designations.

A truncated tour through elite neighborhoods should begin in Shaalan, the central commercial hub of Damascus' upscale areas. The main street of this quarter runs the gamut from an open-air vegetable and spice market to outposts of chic, pricey French clothing chain *Promod*, and a store peddling illegally-imported *Gap* merchandise. The main commercial area also features the headquarters and main branches of all the international banks, a well-known internet café that caters to foreigners and a plethora of swanky cafes, restaurants and coffee shops that serve light meals, pastries and an array of espresso drinks – usually for approximately half of what the average Syrian earns in one day.<sup>8</sup> The British Council, whose role in teaching English to those on the margins of the elite is explored in Chapter 5, is situated a few blocks from the shopping area. Shaalan is a destination that attracts shoppers, diners, leisure-seekers and business people. It also

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<sup>8</sup> The per capita Syrian GDP is \$4800 US or \$13 US per day (CIA World Factbook).

functions as a venue in which young people flush with disposable income can display their acquisitions in this densely crowded area. Whether that takes the form of purchasing French designer shoes, lingering outside on the veranda of a luxury Italian restaurant or driving an imported European automobile around the street while blasting American rap music, Shaalan provides the setting and audience for acquiring and displaying ones global sophistication.

Moving outward from Shaalan, one enters the most prestigious residential areas in the city: Malki, Rawda and Abu Rummaneh. One often has to qualify prices in Damascus as being for expensive *for* Syria, but residential real estate in these upscale areas is as expensive as global cities like New York, London and Hong Kong (Harding 2010). Although all Damascene neighborhoods mix housing and commercial activity to some degree, these three neighborhoods do not have the market-like atmosphere of Shaalan. Instead, they have blocks of stately apartment buildings flanked by green foliage quite rare in this arid city. The restaurants, shops and cafes tucked away on the residential streets cater exclusively to their wealthy neighbors. At the tip of Abu Rummaneh stands Damascus' most expensive and recognizable luxury brand: the *Four Seasons* hotel and its adjacent *Boulevards* shopping mall. This complex represents the most elite commercial area in Damascus, anchored by an elegant open-air fountain courtyard with the international coffee shop chains *Costa* and *Segafredo*. In addition to their functions as centers of prestigious addresses and elite commerce, these areas also host many of the capitol's foreign embassies. Another important neighborhood associated with elites is the almost-suburban district of Mezze. Located in the far West of the city, the area encompasses a storied neighborhood called Western Villas or *villat*

*gharbiya*. Here, the homes are larger, the gardens greener and the streets quieter than in the central neighborhoods. The main highway, or autostrade, that divides Mezze houses some of the city's most well-known restaurants, including many that offer foreign cuisines. Like it does in Malki, Abu Rummaneh and Rawda, identifying Mezze as one's place of residency confers instant prestige and the presumption of wealth.

While these are the areas most often associated with elite status, other areas play a significant role in the cosmology of elite Syrian life. First is Mashru' Dumar, a large planned development of cooperative apartments sprawling across a valley just outside of Damascus. Populated by doctors, lawyers, engineers and other professionals, Mashru' Dumar is the area most associated with Damascus' high-status professionals. Its residents epitomize Syria's new neoliberal elite and those most impacted by the new possibilities for social mobility. Young adults from this area form the ranks of the entrepreneurial organizations, study at the British Council, patronize the newly opened restaurants and pursue employment at private businesses. The recently developed Kfar Suseh neighborhood has emerged as a prestigious address, buttressed by the construction of Damascus' two Western-style mega malls, *Cham City Center* and *Damasquino*. The Christian neighborhood Qassa' in the central Eastern part of Damascus is the residence of much of the minority's wealthiest members. Damascus' touristic Old City, a maze of narrow alleyways and Ottoman-era buildings, provides important entertainment spaces for elites (Salamandra 2004). As old Ottoman houses have been converted into luxurious restaurants, boutique hotels and nightclubs, elites use the Old City as a historic playground, frequenting its venues but living in the more luxurious accommodations in newer parts of the city.

Finally, the trend of decentralization has transformed several outlying new developments into elite spaces. While this has yet to reconfigure Damascus' urban landscape as it has in Cairo (see Denis 2006; Mitchell, Timothy 1999) it may represent the beginning of a trend toward self-segregation among the elite. Many wealthy Syrians have decamped to towns along the Damascus-Beirut highway to the west of the city. Newly rich towns such as Yafour and Sabboura feature large villas with swimming pools and gardens, spacious private country clubs and a large number of the newly established private elementary and high schools that instruct their students in English. Although there are few high-status residences along the Airport Road or the Jordan Highway, many elites traveled these roads daily en route to the exclusive private schools located near them. These areas compose the social space of elites, both new and old, and mark the areas in which the linguistic boundaries, social hierarchies and production of social inequality unfold. As such these spaces are the background for this dissertation, and affiliations to them, events taking place in them and organizations or businesses located within them will surface again and again.

While this summarizes the physical geographic locations of this dissertation, the "site" of the research is actually the social space in which an individual's personal, social and linguistic reactions to Syria's new neoliberal landscape determine their place in Syria's shifting social hierarchies. Social hierarchies are constantly mobile, ever-changing, ephemeral entities, but individuals and groups do consistently recognize social status and register changes to it. As the dissertation will establish in greater detail in later chapters, there is a certain social milieu in which social mobility and changing hierarchies unfold at the individual level, cutting across neighborhoods, extended families and even

siblings. For this group of young Syrians – with sufficient finances and social access to gain proximity to the gains of neoliberalism but not enough to partake automatically – their individualized strategies of advancement often determine whether they move into this newly formed elite group or whether they establish a solid mid-level socio-economic status.

I will offer here a brief sketch of the kinds of social categories salient in contemporary Syria, exemplified by individual tales culled from my ethnographic research. These proposed categories of socio-economic stratification in the social ontology in Syria reflect my interlocutors' perceptions and attitudes about social hierarchy. As this dissertation will explore in much detail in further chapters, the construction of borders of such groups, the permeability of them and the strategies employed to maintain and pass into the groups is a continual and constant process, subject to multiple and simultaneous negotiations.

At the apex of Syrian social hierarchies stand the ultra-elites, those individuals whose elite bona fides are so well-established and without question that they possess elite status automatically. The number of such individuals is rather small, perhaps no more than a few hundred throughout the country. For the most part, they are the children of the “big” businessmen – *al-tabaqa al-jadida* – with wealth that places them among the global elite of almost unfathomable resources. Such family businesses typically encompass many industries with a portfolio that might include a pharmaceutical company, agricultural holdings, hotels and a magazine or two. In order to build such an array of businesses, the family must have close access to the regime or have a close family member in a senior governmental position, so these ultra-elites have the added advantage



of access to political and economic power. Although many of the ultra-elites come from “nouveau riche” Alawite families, they often marry into Damascene families boasting centuries-old prominent family names. Regardless of how recently ultra-elites arrived at their standing, their vast wealth and connections render their elite status virtually unassailable. Regardless of their linguistic styles, social choices or educational pedigrees, these ultra-elites have almost no chance of slipping from their perch on the top. The caveat, of course, is that their preferences – linguistic, social and otherwise – become the top-down standard for what elite-ness means, and aspiring elites must conform to the trends they set.

Members of the ultra-elite appear throughout the narratives of this dissertation. There is Mazen, the founder of his own entrepreneurial organization, publisher of an English-language magazine, graduate of private schools from elementary school to university in Lebanon and heir to a vast business empire. His linguistic styles, ideologies about business, economy and society and personal influence contribute to creating new kinds of social divisions in the new economy, from which he benefits immensely. He establishes a business plan competition in which the rules distinguish between rural, lower-income aspiring businessmen who enter and the urban, wealthy, foreign-educated young people who judge them. He appoints a childhood friend as editor of his English-language magazine, bestowing on that friend a well-paid position and a seat from which to impact media narratives. Another member of the ultra-elite, a young mother from a family related to the President and married to an equally prominent scion, serves on the boards of several private banks, helped to form another prominent entrepreneurial organization and started a charity that promotes the popular “volunteerism” model.

Through her position and efforts, she vocally promotes the notion that individuals must assume the responsibility for building their profiles through skills training and participation in strategic volunteer campaigns in which unofficial actors are encouraged to address societal problems in coordinated efforts.

For those whose birthright does not include a transnational conglomerate but does offer private education, foreign travel, childhood connections to the ultra-elite and financial stability, elite social status is almost but not entirely certain. These elites typically have family names that convey prominence or come from families who were land-owning elites in other provinces, attended one of the few foreign-language private schools alongside ultra-elites and have the resources to partake actively in the burgeoning leisure activities around the city. Their families are likely to own factories, construction firms or other kinds of heavy industry but not at the national and transnational level of ultra-elites. They are also instrumental in the founding and leadership of the entrepreneurial organizations, volunteer campaigns and trainings that define the neoliberal elite. Given their credentials, it is unlikely that young people from such backgrounds would easily lose their elite status. Yet at the same time, they must make certain efforts to maintain their social standing: selecting the proper educational institutions, meaning foreign-language private schools in Syria and universities abroad, assuming leadership positions in companies, being seen at expensive restaurants and using the linguistic style of pervasive Arabic-English mixing.

The life stories represented by this group include Farah, whose father was a prominent general under the former president. Raised in Malki, she attended private schools with her sisters and attended an American university in a Gulf state. Upon her

return to Syria, she entered the managerial ranks of Syria's largest mobile phone company, one of the few women, and joined an entrepreneurial organization, rising to senior leadership positions. In her professional, civic and social interactions, she frequently inserts English terms in Arabic sentences or speaks in English entirely. Her marriage to a young man from an upper middle-class family, discussed in more detail in chapter 5, illustrates the calculations that neoliberal elites make in marriage decisions. Another elite Syrian is an extended family member of a renowned fighter against the French during its mandate period. Jamil grew up between Mezza and Saudi Arabia, where his father held a high-level corporate position. In Syria, he bounced between governmental and private schools, where he learned idiomatic English. He counted among his friends some of the most prominent young men of his generation and of course became prominent in an entrepreneurial organization. He is also a regular at Z-bar and other expensive nightclubs and has the fond reputation of being something of a playboy. As I analyze further in Chapter 4, part of his social appeal to both men and women lies in his ability to produce ironic humor by capitalizing on switches between Arabic and English.

Perhaps the numerically largest portion of the neoliberal elite is comprised of what most closely resembles Syria's version of the upper middle class. This includes Syria's doctors, dentists, lawyers, engineers and other educated professionals who enjoy comfortable incomes, residences in neighborhoods like Mashru' Dumar and educations in private parochial schools. They may not receive the best of foreign language education in their less expensive schools, but they supplement that education with English tutoring or courses at a language institute like the British Council whose social position is

discussed in Chapter 5. Although they do not carry the prestige of other elites, they possess sufficient social, cultural and economic capital to be welcome members of overlapping social circles, civic organizations and expensive venues of consumption and entertainment. They often marry members of more elite classes because their solid educations and respectable family backgrounds make them acceptable partners.

Syrians from such backgrounds compose the social space in which the linguistic and social choices brought by neoliberal changes have the deepest individual impact. These are the Syrians for whom these choices are the most crucial, permitting those who choose on the side of private employment, extensive English classes and entrepreneurial organizations to emerge as part of the new neoliberal elite. For those who chose another language or no language at all, who seek the stable but less prestigious and lucrative public sector jobs or who shun the civic groups as snobby or cliquy, their claims to elite status or attempts to affiliate socially with elites might ultimately fail. Such distinctions cut across neighborhoods, schools and even nuclear families.

The example of a small family from Mashru‘ Dumar illustrates how even siblings might end up on opposite sides of this class divide. The Dumari’s have two children, a son Nabil who followed in his father’s footsteps by studying civil engineering in an Eastern bloc country. Fluency in a Slavic language and experience in a Soviet bloc country was formerly the path to a comfortable and respectable life for his father in the 1960s, but by the time the son pursued the same path it was out of keeping with both local and global economic and social shifts. Back in Syria, he found that gaining an engineering position without English was virtually impossible, and his broken English made him shy and awkward in certain elite social settings. Although he like his sister

knew much of the neoliberal elite from childhood, his education provided him no access to the ideologies of volunteerism and language of entrepreneurship favored by them. In contrast, his older sister Dalal studied French in school but switched to supplementary English classes by her college years – at the most expensive venue, the British Council. She received a degree in administration from a non-university business institute and easily located several positions as an administrative assistant at private companies. Although such positions were not particularly high-level, they paid better than public sector work and placed her in a milieu of neoliberal elites. Socially, her English skills allowed her to mingle comfortably at elite venues and among the embassy parties and gatherings that comprise the Syrian/expatriate social scene in the capital. Dalal and Naibl's differing preparation for and responses to Syria's new circumstances placed them in different sectors of the society.

The final portion of the neoliberal elite originates from the most modest social and economic backgrounds. These members from highly differentiated Syrians in the middle of its social hierarchy typically come from neighborhoods on the outskirts of Damascus, rather than the more exclusive central areas, and attend government schools from the elementary to university level. They enroll in local language institutes, rather than the British Council and are often the only one in their family or friend group to exert concerted effort to join the new elite. Their tenuous connections to elite institutions or individuals derive entirely from their own personal initiative and determined efforts, not from familial connection or proximity through neighborhood, schooling or leisure activities. These are individuals who invest great energy and relative expense into presenting themselves personally, professionally and socially as well-prepared for Syria's

new neoliberal outlook. At the same time, these are the individuals who endure the most risk in positioning themselves as potential members of the neoliberal elite. Their linguistic and social efforts to mingle in the new elite – if not flawlessly executed – could result in rejection or failure to gain acceptance. In addition, they face censure from their families and local communities for the perceived snobbery of adopting elite linguistic styles and abandoning local pursuits for the activities of the neoliberal elite.

Jawad, whose linguistic strategies for upward mobility are featured in Chapter 4, typifies the trajectory of a young Syrian whose risky attempts to join the neoliberal elite succeeded. He lives with his family<sup>9</sup> in a middle-class suburb. His father attended some university classes but did not receive a degree. Jawad attended only government schools and then completed a degree in economics from the government-run Damascus University. He took supplementary English classes at local language institutes that cost far less than the British Council and featured Syrian rather than native English speaking instructors. His siblings, childhood and school friends largely do not speak English nor do they understand the appeal of spending several nights at week volunteering at an entrepreneurial organization and several charities, as Jawad does. As his story unfolds in Chapter 4, he describes the rigorous amount of self-training in idiomatic English, professional skills and social finesse that provided him acceptance into the neoliberal elite and its attendant benefits: a managerial position at private firm, a committee chair position at JCI, friendships with members of the ultra-elite and widespread recognition of him as a visible, social, respected neoliberal elite. On the other hand, he reported facing the disdain of his older friends and family, who accused him of pretension and alienation.

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<sup>9</sup> It is typical for Syrians – both men and women – to live with their parents until marriage, regardless of family wealth and social status.

One can imagine how much more consequential such accusations would have become had he failed in his attempts to move in neoliberal elite circles.

The final two broad categories represent the social spaces in which linguistic choices, knowledge and execution have the most profound social and economic influence. The stakes of their pattern of linguistic performances and social maneuvers are highest for those who do not have the sheer wealth or proximity to regime beneficiaries to guarantee passage into this latest configuration of elite Syrian social class. It is in these families, neighborhoods, schools, offices and public spaces that the linguistic and social practices, described in this dissertation, impact life trajectories with the most impact and effect. As this dissertation moves forward into the social and linguistic practices that shape group formation and new kinds of social stratification, individuals from these broadly sketched categories will be central to the new social organizations, linguistic practices and ideologies that produce changing social hierarchies in contemporary Syria.

### *Locating Prestige in Syrian Arabic*

Just as elite social groups and social practices are located along historical trajectories and geographical swaths, their language usage and linguistic style situates them across a social/linguistic continuum. Among linguists Arabic is renowned for its diglossic divide between formal, classical Arabic and the spoken dialects (see Altoma 1969; Blau 1977; Ferguson 1971; Ferguson, Belnap and Haeri 1997; Ferguson and Fishman 1986; Hary 1996; Kaye 1972, 1970; Parkinson 2003; Parkinson and Farwaneh 2008; Versteegh 1994, 1984), but its range of spoken variations offers an equally

dynamic and complex linguistic field (see Heath 1989; Holes 2001, 1987; Ibrahim 1986; Miller, C. 2007). Although researchers frequently speak of formal Arabic as the prestige variety and spoken Arabic, regardless of which variation, as the low variety, in the contemporary linguistic situation formal Arabic is only imbued with social prestige in a limited set of contexts, usually religious or intellectual (see Booth 1992; Haeri 1997; Messick 1992; Miller, F. 2001). Within the many varieties of spoken Arabic, there are distinct hierarchies of nation, gender, ethnicity and geography (see Haeri 2000; Sawaie 1994; Suleiman 2003; Versteegh 1984). A list of morphological, phonological, lexical and prosodic features work to distinguish the many types of spoken Arabic across a vast set of axes: urban/rural, sedentary/nomadic, Eastern/Western and educated/uneducated.

If one can speak of a unified Arabic dialect of Damascus, Syria, it is generally understood to follow many of the same phonological and morphological patterns of urban dialects across the region. Like all spoken dialects, it is distinguished from formal Arabic in its simplified morphology of verb conjugation, in the elimination of the second and third person feminine plural verb conjugations and in a lexical subset distinct from formal Arabic (Ambros 1977). What distinguishes Damascus Arabic from other spoken, urban varieties is its exclusive use of the negative particle *mu*, certain syntactic possibilities<sup>10</sup> (Brustad 2000) and a wide range of Damascus or Syria-specific lexical words or phrases.

Perhaps the most socially meaningful Arabic phoneme across the Arabic-speaking world is the /q/ [ق]. This is certainly true in Damascus. This phoneme appears in Arabic dialects as both a voiced post-palatal stop and as a voiceless palatal, velar or glottal stop, which renders it equivalent to the phoneme /ʔ/ [ء]. In formal Arabic, this phoneme is

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<sup>10</sup> Brustad points to the unique syntactic possibilities of the indefinite-specific marker /ʃi/ [شي], translated as some in English, which indicates “partial specificity” (Brustad 2000, 27).



voiced, but in Western Syrian and other urban dialects, including Cairo, Fez, Beirut, Damascus, Amman and Jerusalem, it is voiceless. In Bedouin and Gulf state dialects, the /q/ is voiced with tribal, regional and national variations in its voicing (McLoughlin 1982, 7). A voiceless /q/ immediately situates the speaker in an urban context and often in the Levant region (Ambros 1977, 1). This becomes an increasingly salient distinction in Syria as more and more Bedouins and Eastern Syrians migrate to Damascus due to drought and labor patterns. In this context, the voiced /q/ becomes a marker of urbanity and urban authenticity although Damascenes from all social groups use the voiceless /q/ for most words, and certain words do retain the voiced post-palatal stop (McLoughlin 1982, 7). This means that the /q/ carries little absolute meaning or indication of social prestige in the Syrian context. The voiceless /q/ does situate the speaker in an urban context, rather than rural, but beyond that it does not establish a speaker as educated, wealthy or connected.

Sociolinguists also assert that Damascene Arabic contains minimal internal sociolinguistic variation, particularly on the basis of social prestige. They claim that Damascene Arabic represents a remarkably homogenous linguistic field at the phonetic and grammatical levels, suggesting that only specialized lexicons might reflect socio-economic hierarchies (Ambros 1977, 2). Although I too did not observe much variation, there are some paralinguistic features that I would assert do contain socially meaningful variation. “Perhaps a telltale feature of DA may be seen in the intensity and frequency of the peculiar ‘pre-pausal drawl’; at least it is by that shibboleth that speaks of other Arabic dialects often allege to be able to recognize the native of Damascus” (2). While Ambros describes this as a shibboleth for Damascene Arabic speakers across a social spectrum, I

would argue that this para-linguistic feature does represent social prestige-based variation. Educated Syrians do not elongate their phonemes, but lower income, uneducated Syrians often do. In the *Spotlight* episode I described at the opening of this chapter, the first husband, who represents the lowest socio-economic status, speaks with an exaggerated drawl while none of the other characters display it. In the lower-status neighborhood in which I lived, shopkeepers and workers consistently displayed the drawl, but at all other socio-economic levels, the drawl was entirely absent. Even Syrians from more solidly “middle-class” families regardless of whether they mingled in the new neoliberal elite or not, did not exhibit this drawl in speech.

A study comparing the presence of two phonemes in two Damascus neighborhoods offers further corroboration of the lack of prestige-based linguistic variation. It draws on data from two neighborhoods positioned at a distance on the continuum of socio-economic status – one an Old City neighborhood populated by lower income shopkeepers and the other Mashru‘ Dumar which houses professionals and intellectuals. The study’s author examines the presence of the /h/ [ħ] in the third person feminine and plural suffixes and the presence of an emphatic or non-emphatic /r/ [r] phoneme in any context. The study analyzes the variations of the phonemes accounting for gender, age and neighborhood association. While the study finds variations on the basis of gender and age, strikingly the study discovers no significant variation between neighborhoods. It also find no evidence that the realization of the voiced phoneme /h/ or that the multiple realizations of /r/ carry any social significance, nor are they associated with any particular social group. Furthermore, the study suggests that variation in these phonemes is part of “linguistic innovation” that “can spread from city to city” or of

“symptomatic change in progress” (Ismail 2007, 210). In other words, speakers from Damascus neighborhoods with a clear prestige differential do not exhibit any linguistic variation; rather they showed internal variation along generational and gender lines, a finding that is consistent with other studies (see Daher 1998a, 1998b). Another study of service encounters in a variety of Damascene shops reveals consistent features of Damascus’ urban dialect on both the part of the shopkeeper and customer. No linguistic features mark different social groups or hierarchies. Instead, interactions sharing a common linguistic style focus on ritualized exchanges of greetings and information (Traverso 2007, 2006).

Many scholars contend that within geographically specific Arabic varieties, usually anchored by a capital city or regional center (i.e. Cairo Arabic or the Arabic of Northern Lebanon centered around the city of Tripoli) very little prestige-based linguistic variation exists. They explain that the phonological and morphological features of a localized Arabic variety are generally consistent in speakers across all social groups. This assertion is consistent with most descriptions of the linguistic situation in Damascus. This conclusion can be partly attributed to lack of investigation into this variable, because “in contrast to western sociolinguistics, analyses in terms of social class are conspicuously absent from most sociolinguistic studies” (Owens 2001, 442). Yet, given what I observed during my research in Syria and my other extended residences in Lebanon and the conclusions reached when researchers do consider class or social prestige, this might also reflect a real lack of linguistic variation corresponding to social prestige. When sociolinguists do find evidence of such variation, it typically appears at the lexical level – word choice – and in the sorts of vocabulary sets available to speakers.

Given that there is little opportunity for prestige-oriented linguistic variation in spoken Arabic,

it may also be suggested that much class-based variation is reflected not only in use of Arabic, but use of prestige foreign language varieties as well, French in North Africa, and increasingly English in the Middle East . . . It may be the case that in diglossic sociolinguistic profiles education and ethnicity play a more decisive role in defining language variation within Arabic than does socio-economic class (Owens 2001, 445).

While I would not separate education from socio-economic class when determining sociolinguistic prestige, Owens' overall argument is supported by my findings that English inclusions into Damascene Arabic provided the most socially salient linguistic display of elite status.

To describe this phenomenon, Terry Mitchell (1986) coins the phrase “educated spoken Arabic” or ESA. ESA, as Mitchell identifies it, refers to a form of spoken Arabic that maintains the grammar of spoken Arabic as opposed to written Arabic (particularly in the morphology of verb conjugation), that demonstrates phonological regional variation and that is distinguished by the usage of formal Arabic lexical items associated with education, advanced training and specific, prestigious forms of knowledge. The motivations he lists for a speaker to adopt ESA mirror the contemporary social situation of my research:

In times of accelerated and accelerating social change and of popular intermingling on a hitherto unprecedented scale, the users of ESA are motivated, *first*, to proclaim themselves as educated men and women and therefore to converse on topics beyond the scope of a given regional vernacular; second, to ‘share’ or commune sympathetically with other Arabs of similar background, whether of their own or other nationalities; third, to promote the forms of the inter-Arabic koine that are required to meet the pressures of modernization, urbanization, industrialization, mass education, and internationalism; fourth, to maintain enough of the vernacular to fulfill the more private functions of speech and to satisfy the requirements of local patriotism and loyalty (8).

Mitchell operates from the assumption that varieties of Arabic exist along a graduated continuum, not a sharp binary. Drawing on Blanc (1960), Meiseles (1981) and Badawi in Badawi and Elgibali (1996), he observes that the most formalized Arabic of the Koran and of religious practices is at one end, while the daily speech of intimate settings is at the other. The varieties on the formal end are consistent across the Arabic-speaking world while the colloquial varieties vary greatly from country to country or even from village to village. ESA, which stands somewhere in the middle of the continuum, combines grammatical, phonological and morphological attributes of colloquial Arabic(s) with lexical words and phrases from formal registers of Arabic. In this way, as Mitchell described above, the varieties of ESA are both local, by virtue of their nation or city-specific grammar, phonology and morphology, and regional, by virtue of their shared lexicon. If we consider Owens' other contention that prestige is often achieved through the inclusion of English or French words, we can easily see how ESA speakers could use English lexical items in a Syrian koine to simultaneously situate themselves on local, regional and global hierarchies.

This reliance on imported lexical items to convey social prestige may not be as arduous or as incompatible as it first seems. Several scholars assert that the syntax of colloquial Arabic has evolved over the last century to closely resemble the syntax of modern European languages. Clive Holes (2004) lists the “morphologization of verbal and other elements to form a system of modal/aspectual prefixes and auxiliaries in the verb phrase, the development of a periphrastic genitive in the noun phrase, and, in the clause, the fixing of word order” (195) as areas in which Arabic colloquial dialects developed parallel to European languages since the nineteenth century. He traces this

influence from the introduction of newspaper language at the turn of the twentieth century to the influx of technology imperatives later that century; the increasing frequency of subject-verb-object word order replaced Arabic's previous verb-subject-object word order. All of the developments he identifies in this process are prevalent in the Arabic used by neoliberal elites in Damascus. Several of these innovations are frequently paired with English words when standard Arabic morphological suffixes are not available. For instance, Holes notes the increased usage of the possessive particle تبع or /tabaʿ/ which is followed by the noun being possessed (209). Typically, in both formal and colloquial Arabic, possession is expressed through a noun suffix. Morphologically, it can be challenging to affix the Arabic suffixes to English nouns so speakers typically substitute by affixing the possessive suffix to /tabaʿ/ instead. The increased frequency of /tabaʿ/ in spoken Arabic provided a syntactic situation increasingly hospitable to English insertions.

Furthermore, many linguists now observe that Arabic language innovations in response to globalization and technological imports might provide additional linguistic areas in which social divisions might surface through linguistic styles and practices. In particular, the largely English-based lexicon surrounding technology and development has entered into both modern, standard Arabic and spoken Arabic dialects. Arabic has a long history of accommodating foreign loan words, adjusting their phonology and morphology to Arabic (Hasan 2010). Eventually, these fail to be socially recognizable as “foreign” imports, and they become part of the Arabic lexicon. Another class of imported words circulates widely in the lexicon but does not morphologically adapt to

Arabic or only adapt partially to Arabic.<sup>11</sup> This category of words includes many widely used references to technology and social media, including Internet, email, flash, Facebook and chatting. There is also a gray area with such loan words. While that list of technology-derived words is generally transparent to urban or educated Syrians, who have access to the technologies they reference, the words might be incomprehensible to Syrians without such access, even with the words' phonological and morphological accommodation. Still other imported words might also make accommodations to Arabic grammar, but they derive from such specialized jargon (in economics, politics or science typically) that it is unlikely that speakers who do not command English would comprehend them (Abed 2007, 28-31). Yet this gap in comprehension derives from more than just the foreign origins. Other lexical items are composed of Arabic-origin words yet the concepts they denote "are culturally based or represent new technological developments and therefore cannot be understood without understanding the culture and environment in which they grew or without being familiar with the products they signify" (30). The author cites the Arabic rendition of the phrase "checks and balances" and wonders how transparent the phrase is for most Arabic speakers who have never encountered the principle. These points have important social ramifications, as speakers can draw on English words with differing integration into the Arabic lexicon in a conversational context.

As individual Syrian speakers, taking part in historically and geographically specific conversations, negotiate Syria's shifting economic, social and linguistic landscapes, their linguistic choices are powerful tools they can utilize. They have varied

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on imported words and their morphological adaptation to Arabic among Syria's new neoliberal elite, see Chapter 4.

Arabic linguistic resources available to them: formal Arabic, local varieties of spoken Arabic and a range of phonetic, morphological, syntactic and lexical choices.

Increasingly, they also have English lexical items in their repertoire. They can and do take advantage of the linguistic distinction offered by English to fulfill a wide range of linguistic and social goals. As will unfold throughout this dissertation, strategic linguistic choices create powerful social results, including the construction, maintenance, negotiation and buttressing of power social boundaries that help to determine who benefits, and who does not, from Syria's new economic possibilities.

Locating this latest iteration of an elite Syrian social group requires considering a number of intersecting vectors. First, one must examine the recent history of the production of elite social status in Syria, to understand how the new neoliberal elites are both connected to and different from previous elite groups. Next, one must assess the tangible physical locations in which the neoliberal elite interacts and enacts its group boundaries. Although physical spaces require attention, it is the less quantifiable social spaces of families, networks, friendships and neighbors from which a sense of group identification and commonality emerges. Finally, to truly understand how the neoliberal elite's linguistic practices underpin its group formation and boundary maintenance, this chapter surveys the range of linguistic options available to Syrian speakers. By concurrently taking into account all of these factors, one can begin to understand the vast contextual dimensions to the linguistic practices, social boundaries, neoliberal ideology and social status of this new elite.



### **Chapter 3: “We are g-mail addicted”: Deixis, Shifters and Entrepreneurship**

The members of JCI – Junior Chamber International, Syria’s most prominent entrepreneurship organization – were squeezed around a large conference table to participate in its Business Area’s weekly meeting. On this late fall Monday evening, the discussion centered on how best to publicize the group’s upcoming annual Creative Young Entrepreneur Award competition. The group’s chairwoman, a vivacious young business professional from a religiously conservative family named Farah, asked after the Award’s “media plan,” using the English term. A male member responded with concern about the size of the online advertisement. It appeared at a normal size on the Internet browser Internet Explorer, but he reported that it displayed at an unusually small size on the browser Firefox. Farah dismissed his comment breezily with a wave of her hand, the assertion that most Syrians use Internet Explorer and the following statement:

نحن بس use Firefox. [Only we use Firefox]

We are g-mail and Google-talk addicted.

Farah’s deceptively simple declarations neatly encapsulate the linguistic and social strategies adopted by many Syrians in response to the new neoliberal economic policies and ruling ethos. From the context of their utterance in the meeting of a new entrepreneurship NGO, to her use of pronouns to point to an assumed social group of like-minded Syrians to her reference to a prestigious, international technology brand, Farah situates herself and those around her as a discrete social entity whose ability to

adapt to economic realities and familiarity with transnational trends distinguishes them from the majority of Syrian society.

Echoing the implications of Farah's statement, this chapter explores the practices that underpin the emergence of the new neoliberal elite and the formation of its social boundaries. It begins by examining the most salient institutions in which group formation takes places. These include the nascent entrepreneurship organizations which have quickly come to both epitomize the neoliberal elite and provide the most secure path into it. Next the chapter looks at certain local linguistic practices that define, demarcate and erect boundaries around this new social group. It then turns to the linguistic categories that connect such local linguistic practices to transnational ideologies about neoliberalism and those who flourish under it. Finally, the chapter concludes with an examination of other important sites of social group production, conspicuous consumption in the new consumer.

### *Deictics, Shifters and Elites*

The question of which linguistic practices do the work of boundary-building and group-forming and how they do it remains to be answered. In this Syrian case, focusing on the linguistic category of deictics and their deployment in the local Syrian context illuminates how linguistic practices demarcate a new social group. Deictics are a class of words whose meaning is either wholly or partially dependent on its context. These words can therefore shift in meaning depending on the conditions of their usage or utterance. For instance, the words *here* and *there* index completely different concepts depending on who uses them, where they use them and when. "Thus, a single deictic word stands for

minimally two objects: the referent is the thing, individual event, spatial or even temporal location denoted; and the indexical framework is the origo (“pivot” or zero-point) relative to which the referent is identified (the speech event in which the act of reference is performed or some part of this event)” (Hanks 2005, 51). Deictics not only depend on context for their referential value, but they also have the ability to situate both their producer and recipient in context.

Deploying deictics in conversation allows speakers to situate themselves along a number of different axes: geographic, chronological and social. Through this particular function, deictics can be deployed to “index the social differentiation process but also constitute an integral part of a class-structured ideological opposition” (Van Luong 1998, 239-40). Van Luong utilizes the linguistic category of deictics to highlight how Vietnamese Marxists explicitly deployed person-referring forms, or pronouns, to create linguistic and political solidarity and to highlight and reject previous pronoun usage that they felt reflected an older, stratified hierarchy. Still other scholars further analyze how deictic pronouns are used to create in-group/out-group dynamics and to establish social relationships (see Brown and Gilman 1960; Jakobson 1957; Levinson 1997).

Within the linguistic practices of the new neoliberal elite in Syria, there are three primary areas in which deictics serve to mark social group boundaries and establish speakers and listeners with respect to their participation in this new social group. The first is the pronoun pairing of *us/them*, the use of which indexes who is in the neoliberal elite (and the kinds of practices in which they participate) and who is not. The second area is *here/there*, as the inclusion of such terms helps to define where the neoliberal elite group is located and where it is not. The final area of deictic significance is chronological,

*before/now*. This particular set of deictics indexes the modernity of the neoliberal elite and marks the new-ness of the group and its activities. By drawing upon these deictic linguistic resources, Syrians – whether they are included in this social group or not – can situate this group in context, mark its borders and establish its innovative nature.

Many early explanations of deixis assumed speech acts in which the indexical framework was essentially the unspoken context of that conversation. The deictic term *here*, for instance, referred to the tangible and clearly demarcated physical location of the conversation. Personal pronouns such as *you* or *us* referred to present interlocutors or previously referenced individuals or groups. Yet perhaps the most powerful, and slippery aspect of deictic terms is that they also index relationships to ideologies and social networks, rather than merely quantifiable locations and temporalities. Such deictics index a vast bundle of murky associations, unwieldy beliefs and amorphous social groupings. For instance, the deictic pairs of *us/them*, *here/there* and *before/now* also index a complex set of ideologies about Syrian social cosmology. They situate the speaker, not in a quantifiable time or place and not even necessarily in a set of social relations, but within a wide range of beliefs about Syrian society and those in it. The function of deictics fit within the broader linguistic category of shifters, whose functions are explicated seminally by Michael Silverstein. Shifters derive their name “because the reference “shifts” regularly, depending on the factors of the speech situation” (Silverstein 1976, 24). While Silverstein cites deictics as the epitome of shifters, this category incorporates all words that are “uninterpretable referentially without the knowledge of some aspect of the situation” (33). Shifters thus contribute significantly to the same functions of social designation that deictics establish. They

invoke multiple “indexical orders” (Silverstein 2003a) that point to several concurrent contexts or references. Linguistic practices might index several contexts simultaneously, for instance establishing conversational roles locally and situating ideologies globally.

More recently, Bonnie Urciuoli (2010, 2008, 2005, 2003) mobilized Silverstein’s understanding of shifters and indexical orders to propose that certain words with seemingly clear-cut dictionary references actually possess the qualities of shifters. Such words masquerade as being detached from their conversational context, producing the same referential meaning regardless of the situation, yet in reality they “expand with new conceptual formations” (2008). Urciuoli specifically highlights the skills-related discourse of neoliberalism that has spread transnationally in the last decades, including to Syria. To account for how such terms function in regards to both reference and indexicality, she termed them “strategically deployable shifters, or SDSs, a lexical item or expression deployed in different discursive fields so that . . . the salient interpretation of the term depends on the relation of its user to its audience and so shifts with context; in that sense SDSs have shifter-like qualities” (2003, 385). Like deictic words, SDSs can orient the producer and recipient of such words to their location in an ideological word and index a speaker’s relationship to multiples layers of context and ideology.

SDSs are extremely potent in the Syrian venues of my research, and they act to construct local social boundaries and to connect local social groups to transnational movements and trends. Like other seemingly transparent deictics, SDSs index the speakers’ relationship to a transnational bundle of ideologies. Terms like entrepreneurship, volunteerism, skill-building and others establish speakers as part of the social group of Syrians who are oriented towards this transnational discourse. While

words like these do possess universalized dictionary definitions, their reference shifts depending on the context of their usage. For instance, entrepreneurship – the buzz word of Syria’s new neoliberal elite and the epitome of neoliberal ideology’s embrace of individualism (see Harvey 2005) – means something different in Syria than its classic definition of organizing an initiative at financial risk. For Syrians, the term indexes an orientation toward a bundle of ideologies about contemporary Syria that includes entrepreneurship in its orthodox sense but extends far beyond it. As this chapter will explore further, entrepreneurship indexes a willingness to participate in new private sector ideas, to assume personal responsibility for social problems and to believe in personal qualities of preparedness, professionalization, skill-building and responsibility. In America, a disheveled, disorganized, misanthrope could fund and open a pizza parlor and be considered an entrepreneur. In Syria, he could not.

### ***Entrepreneurship and its Associations***

During my almost two years in Syria, I rarely had a conversation with a 20 or 30-something that did not reference entrepreneurship. More specifically, they invoked the widespread participation in entrepreneurship organizations, and how participation in them became something a prerequisite for membership in the neoliberal elite. These organizations are the most important sites in which the deictic linguistic practices described in the previous section contribute to the formation and recognition of the new social elite. In Chapter 2, I described the conceptual social spaces in which the new elite group is taking shape; entrepreneurial organizations are the concrete social spaces. The social and civic lives of upwardly mobile, ambitious young Syrians have been profoundly

shifted in the last decade by the founding and flourishing of two entrepreneurial organizations, Junior Chamber International (JCI) and Syrian Young Entrepreneurs Association (SYEA). The differences and similarities between the two organizations reflect the fact the entrepreneurship in Syria is a contested concept, with various interpretations and manifestations. The fact that membership in the new elite is virtually synonymous with active participation in an entrepreneurship organization demonstrates how central the concept of “entrepreneurship,” with its many permutations, is to how the new elite orients itself along a number of different vectors. These range from the global network of JCI chapters to the group’s local position as a new and prestigious Syrian activity. It is also important to note that entrepreneurship organization does not necessarily refer to business activities but instead to an embrace of entrepreneurship as the organizing principle behind young Syrians’ ambitions, professional advancement and personal lives.

SYEA was the first entrepreneurial organization to begin activities in Syria. Its founders represent the children of the absolute wealthiest businessmen, those most closely connected to and benefiting from the regime. In 2004, it opened with great fanfare at an elaborate kick-off ceremony. First lady Asma al-Asad even attended the celebration, demonstrating both the founders’ prominence and close connections to the regime and the regime’s support of the fledgling organization. The cozy relationship between SYEA and the government has not escaped notice from other Syrians, and SYEA is generally viewed as more compliant with the regime. One young woman, herself from a prominent family with several members who possess very close ties to the regime, noted “SYEA has a strong backing from the government. Asma Asad was at the

opening, and she was backing them. To be honest, people in SYEA are bigger, richer than in JCI.” While SYEA’s entrepreneurial bent places it firmly within the new elite’s practices, its organization and perceived intimacy with regime figures made it seem to be more of a continuation of a entrenched system of nepotism and corruption than an innovative new organization. Still, its emphasis on making young Syrians “job creators, rather than job seekers” and on “create[ing] a new economic environment based on modern entrepreneurial concept” (“SYEA” 2010) places it firmly within the new elite’s values and emphasis on evolving, if not changing, the status quo of employment and civil society activities in Syria.

The organization relies on “sponsorship” relationships as the core of its activities. The founders, wealthy children of wealthier parents and businesspeople in their own right, position themselves as more knowledgeable as those who could benefit from SYEA’s educational programs and competitions for funding. From the beginning, the organization viewed its primary mission as “endeavour[ing] to deepen the culture of entrepreneurship among young Syrians, encouraging them and providing them with the necessary information and experience to launch and continue projects, in addition to financing entrepreneurial activities. Since its launch in 2004, SYEA has become one of the foremost authorities on entrepreneurship in Syria” (“SYEA” 2010). Today, one of its largest projects is the “Eastern Entrepreneurs” contest in which young people from three of the poorest rural districts<sup>12</sup> in Syria compete for seed money for their business plans. SYEA is depicted both by its membership and most Syrians as more local (nationally focused), more focused on business rather than civic activities or volunteer work and

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<sup>12</sup> Eastern here refers to Eastern Syria. The three districts are Deir Azour, Al-Hasakah and Al-Raqqah.



more accepting of the social status quo. Its leadership retains their posts indefinitely, allowing prominent members to remain entrenched in influential positions.

In the following year, 2004, another group of equally prominent young Syrians established the first JCI chapter in Damascus. Like SYEA's founders, many of them were educated abroad and inherited family companies that conducted business globally. Several of them had spent significant amounts of time studying and working abroad, in the US, Canada, England and Lebanon. When they returned to Syria, several of them explained to me in separate interviews that they wanted to bring the professionalism, creativity and skill-training they encountered abroad to their home country. They also felt that Bashar al-Asad's nods to economic opening and pro-technology stance provided them the right historical moment to introduce a new type of civic organization in Syria, where prior to this point the government permitted virtually no civil society associations to operate. Through the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) which already had an outlet in Syria, this group learned of the opportunity to establish a related group for a younger generation. Unlike SYEA, JCI operates under the auspices of international parent group and must adopt its practices, maintain its standards and communicate with its central administration.<sup>13</sup> The group traveled to nearby Amman in the spring of 2004 to meet with the only two Arab JCI branches at that point, Jordan and Tunisia. After for applying for and receiving official recognition from the Syrian government, JCI Syria began operating in August 2004.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The first JCI chapter began in 1915 in Saint Louis, Missouri and by 1944 was established in eight countries. The organization now boasts "200,000 members in 5,000 communities and more than 100 countries around the world" ("JCI" 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Like its parent organization ICC, JCI is registered and operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Economy. This is uncommon for NGOs who generally must register with the Ministry of Labor and Work. It is widely believed that registering under the more forward-thinking Ministry of Economy allows them

After its initial installation in Damascus, the organization spread to other Syrian cities, such as Aleppo, Homs, Lattakia and now Deir Azzor in the country's easternmost region. The organization formed four sub-committees which are assigned a chairperson and hold weekly meetings: business area, community area, individual area and international area. Each area is responsible for creating and executing its own programming. The diverse results include a monthly business lecture series, a business networking event, a children's volunteering fair, lessons in business French, hosting a conference on Syria for JCI members from around the globe and even monthly karaoke nights. To join JCI, applicants must complete a short written application, attend an orientation session and then complete a probation period during which they must attend weekly meetings and officially join a committee and sub-committee. After that probation period, they become full members without any other requirements. In order to maintain active membership, they must attend a certain number of hours of JCI activities per year. There are no interviews or requirements beyond attendance and an age between 18 and 40. The formal application process focuses more on encouraging attendance and participation than on screening potential members.

Active participation in JCI is a time-consuming proposition. Each area holds a weekly meeting that lasts up to two hours. In addition, they offer an almost weekly schedule of additional activities, planning sessions, volunteer opportunities and social outings. Although members are not required to attend more than one area meeting per week, a surprising number of them regularly attend several meetings per week. Day-long weekend retreats, overnight conferences and even international trips from regional or

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more latitude to operate. However, one JCI founder dismissed this idea, stating "As long as you're official in Syria, you're fine."

world-wide JCI events take place quarterly. After most meetings, that concluded around 7 or 8 in the evening, a group of members typically decamp to a nearby café to smoke water pipes, sip coffee, gossip and plan additional activities. All these activities come in addition to the full-time jobs that most members hold. The sheer volume of activities offered by JCI and the time members invested in them means that JCI has the potential to completely dominate and restructure even the daily lives of its members. Yet most members reported genuinely enjoying every aspect of their involvement in JCI, from the satisfaction of the organization's accomplishments to the genuine friendships they developed with other members. In fact, JCI's most substantial impact may be how it reorganizes and reorients the lives of its members. JCI's activities also infiltrate all realms of young person's life: their social lives, their professional development and even their attitudes about achievement, ambition, social change, democracy and fairness. It provides new styles and venues for social interaction, even new ideas about how one could and should forge social connections. Under the guise of business events, JCI was proposing a somewhat radical idea for Syria: that social connections could be engineered and created through JCI's strategies, rather than occur through proximity or familial relationships.

The linguistic output at JCI activities and by its community in other social settings relied on deictics to align the group within Syrian society and on SDSs from neoliberal discourse to position this local social group in connection with transnational ideologies and actors. I attended an example that typified the kinds of new venues in which such linguistic practices played out, JCI's third Business Networking Event in November of 2008. The event, held at Champions Syria's version of a sports bar, offered a speed-

dating format, as one member who had spent years studying and living in Canada described it, to networking. Officials and managers from prestigious companies sat at long tables with brochures and information packets about their places of employment. JCI members or other young professionals, totaling approximately 40 individuals, who registered in advance sat with each manager for a period of 5 minutes before a bell rang, and they moved on to the next seat and the next manager. All attendees, from managers to job-seekers, were dressed in professional attire, some even wearing full business suits. A JCI-hired professional photographer and photographers from the society magazines that constantly document the outings and activities of the upper class snapped photos throughout the event.

The event was structured and conducted with a consciousness of its uniqueness in a Syrian context. The JCI members organizing the event thought of it – both in private conversations with me and in the press release and introductory speeches that framed the event – as a deliberately different form of social interaction. Specifically, it aimed to bring together different social and economic sectors, something that JCI members and other elites perceive as automatic in industrialized countries but sorely lacking in Syria. Consider how JCI’s press release (written entirely in English) outlines the event:

Believing in the role of youth and the importance of contributing to the creation of relations, opportunities and connections in the business society and under the sponsorship of “Money Magazine” JCI continued its work on developing and supporting the business world in the Syrian society by organizing its third International Business Expertise Exchange . . .

This event is in conformity with the chamber’s strategy to espouse the different economic sectors in Syria by presenting them with the opportunity to meet. The JCI is to organize meetings between business owners (or their representatives) which includes brief broad lined introduction to the businesses of the participants and that creates an opportunity for cooperation and new investments between different or similar sectors.

In addition, a prominent JCI member in a leadership position pulled me aside to stress how unusual it was to have this kind of networking in Syria. She mentioned that unlike in Europe or America, “face to face meetings” simply do not take place. While a business networking event is hardly radical, even in the Syrian or Middle Eastern context, its perceived newness and innovativeness reflects the ethos of the new elite. Once again, they view the convergence of (perceived) foreign ideas, new patterns for social interaction and new linguistic styles incorporating English as improving Syria and laying the foundation for its future.

As Syrians interact in these new settings, their linguistic practices become a crucial method for establishing their social position in Syrian society and for indexing whether they are on the correct side of the deictic divides. Are they part of the “we” who adopt the beliefs and activities that index the new neoliberal elite? Can they successfully use SDSs to demonstrate their competence in neoliberal discursive terms? Do they position themselves as engaged in “now” and not mired in social patterns from “before”? The following section previews the type of deictic usage that will appear constantly throughout this dissertation. Far from being limited to the following discussion, it forms the backbone of the linguistic component of social group formation, the construction and enforcement of social boundaries and the local and global orientations of the social group.

### ***Before/Now***

One of the most significant boundaries and source of group cohesion for the new neoliberal elite is its ability to use deictic chronotopes to situate their social group in the

current context. Much linguistic and discursive effort is exerted to establish this group as new, progressive and as part of a present tense that contrasts with a backwards, unenlightened past. This invokes a generational divide between young people and their parents, but it more forcefully imposes a teleological progression onto Syrian society in which previous norms and mores are considered old-fashioned and new styles and stances are appropriate, contemporary and preferred. Such designations exist in a number of different social fields, from dating and romance to business life to language choice. A coffee shop conversation with a young woman Bushra who was raised abroad, educated in international schools and supported by large family wealth demonstrates how these ideas align and how deictic mechanisms facilitate such alignment. She had attended university in nearby Beirut, a city renowned for its liberal nightlife and free-wheeling social scene. She began talking about her personal transition and adaptation to Damascus' relatively more conservative dating and socializing climate. She reported happily that Syria's social norms had relaxed since she arrived, and her explanation conflates chronological passage with social improvement.

The concept of female friend didn't even exist before, but now it exists . . .  
[pausing] What is it in Arabic? صديقة [A friend] No, it doesn't mean girlfriend,  
just female friend.

By associating developments she views as positive (now the term for a platonic friend is available) with an indexical relationship toward the current moment, she situates both herself and the kinds of social changes she seeks in a present tense framework. There is an implicit boundary between the current and the past, which she rejects and replaces with a better today.

This sort of merger between deictic usage and an ideology of innovation and progression appears in discussions of Syria's linguistic landscape. Following the general trend toward using the deictic "now" to invoke an improved, progressive and advanced time period, such discussions associate Arabic monolingualism with the past and competent English usage with the "now," in which neoliberal elites are firmly located. Often such remarks imbued with linguistic ideologies comment on Syria's situation as a country, such as one young journalist, who told me with disdain that "you had a generation of people who were trained in the USSR who speak a language that is now obsolete." More often, however, such chronological deictics are situated in specific contexts of entrepreneurial organizations and elite settings and, as such, index the newness and innovation of such settings. Prior to joining an organization like JCI, individuals might exist in an imagined past in which they lack skills and strong English. Yet after joining, one JCI leader depicted how those same individuals could progress through their improving English skills.

If I meet you in JCI, and I see all the skills you have and I don't have it, I will try to work on myself. I don't know if you noticed, but a lot of volunteers, they didn't speak English or knew only a few words. Now they are able to write emails in English and to speak.

Another member, Jamil, whose background easily confers upon him elite group membership, narrates his own journey to the current context of more open and widespread English speaking. This intersects with other indexical orders in his statement which utilizes deixis in phrases such as "people like me," "other people" and "my society" to align himself in the new neoliberal elite.

Now I see other people who are speaking English. Sometimes I speak just English, just Arabic depending on the people I'm with. For example, the poorer

people, the less fortunate people that I sometimes deal with. With people like me, from my society, I can use English.

In the past, Jamil perceived himself as isolated in his linguistic practices which incorporated extensive English inclusions. The present invoked by his use of “now” however is a more diverse linguistic field in which he must rely on other deictic indicators to navigate additional social dynamics. Now, there exists an “us” (people like me) and a “them” (the poorer people, the less fortunate people) against which Jamil must situate himself, using their ability of command appropriate English as a compass.

### ***Here/There***

A good portion of deictic labor works to situate speakers, listeners and imagined others in a geographical coordinates. In the neoliberal elite context, there is a great deal of concern with comparisons to foreigners, itself a shifter term that typically indexes Western foreigners from developed nations like the United States or Western Europe. One recurring theme is the proximity and related-ness of Syrians to Westerners, summarized by one JCI member who offhandedly remarked to me that “20 years ago, we have a different perception about people in the west. They were considered as aliens, but now it’s much different.” Although Syrians maintain an us/them divide with Westerners, they insist that if one is situated in the context of “now” that here/there divide is flattening.

Syrians can also avail themselves of that geographic juxtaposition to situate themselves and their social group at the regional level in the Arab world. Speakers often used this as a method of comparison, particularly in regard to the level of progress in business practices and economic development. At a JCI business lecture series



presentation by a human resources expert, he used a Syrian “we” to measure up the current state of human resources in Syria against that in other countries in the region. He found Syria lacking, saying “in comparison to Arabic World, جيراننا [our neighbors] are better in other places but there are problems there too.” By deploying these deictics in tandem, the speaker establishes the region as the relevant context of comparison for advancement.

In more casual social interaction, elites utilize the here/there to invoke the particular social restrictions that they face while physically present in Syria as opposed to how they might behave while living or visiting abroad. One afternoon, I was getting a haircut at a small salon in Malki. Given its expensive location, it attracted a wealthy female clientele, who visited regularly for manicures, blow-outs and waxing. Two attractive, fashionably attired women in their 20s sat next to each other at the manicure stations, chatting nonstop as Filipino workers attended to their nails. They spoke in the typical elite mix of Arabic and English in the same utterance although they used more English than Arabic. They seemed to work in the same office, discussing work events and colleagues. Then their conversation turned to one of the women’s engagement and upcoming wedding. The other woman asked if a certain mutual friend, who apparently lived outside of Syria, would attend the wedding. The bride-to-be shook her head and responded that this friend had asked her if “she was running away from her life.” The other responded that “those who have left don’t understand that we don’t do everything here because of the society.” The engaged young woman responded that she “didn’t do it in the formal or traditional way, doesn’t she understand that?” It referred to her relationship, engagement and wedding plans.

In this conversation, the young women invoke an us/them divide based on a here/there geographic binary. They are frustrated by their mutual friend's insistence that as Syrians living in Syria they are trapped in an antiquated system that requires women to marry young and often for family connections, rather than for affection and love. The assumption is that "here," in Syria, one must make decisions to placate the society. Yet these two women push back against that assumption during this conversation, implying that the divide between here and there was not so vast. Just as the here/there divide between Syrians and Westerners seems to be diminishing amongst Syrians, these women indicate that they believe that the here/there divide between Syrians in the country and those abroad is following suit.

### *Us/Them*

Perhaps the most socially powerful deictic maneuver is the designation between "us" and "them." This deictic theme surfaces time and again in this Syrian context, as Syrians used an assumed "we" (only we use Firefox) to situate themselves in a range of social and linguistic options and described "they" to define what they are not (they didn't know). This deictic usage unfolded in a range of contexts, from chatty conversations to explanations I solicited in conversations and interviews, but they emerged most strongly in the activities associated with the new neoliberal elite, like JCI meetings or volunteering campaigns. Often such usage took on a didactic message, as organization leaders or individuals from the most prestigious backgrounds made definitive statements about what kinds of social behaviors, styles and knowledge were required to join the "we." The quote from Farah that started this chapter exemplifies how an individual in a position of

authority – in this case official authority as the chairwoman but in other cases unofficial – makes deictic statements that educate peripheral members of the neoliberal elite on their expected social and linguistic practices. Taken from a JCI leader’s introductory remarks to a business lecture, these statements demonstrate how deictics are often used to help to define the characteristics of this group:

نحن we are in the service industry. [We, we are in the service industry.]

نحن نشتغل كلنا نحن business. [We, we all work in business.]

Like other linguistic practices, this one also uses language choice as a line along which social boundaries are drawn. Transitions into a new elite social space are accompanied by a transition from monolingual Arabic linguistic practices to the Arabic-English mixing that defines elite interactional style. An individual who does not learn and display English knowledge cannot cross the social boundary into the neoliberal elite and will remain as part of “them” rather than “us.” As JCI’s former president lamented to me in his office one day, “the thing that we face in JCI when they come to attend one of our meetings, they say OK I have to learn English first and then join you.” He establishes English competence as a pre-condition for acceptance into the group, both at the formalized level of joining the structured organization of JCI and at the informal social level of being perceived as part of a social group that incorporates formal associational participation but extends far beyond it.

At other times the instances of us/them worked to distinguish anyone associated with the hallmark orientations of the neoliberal elite from the majority of Syrian society. In these interactions, those associated with the neoliberal elite often invoke an imagined monolithic Syrian majority who’s social and linguistic practices differ sharply from those

of the new neoliberal elite. One example came during a JCI Community Area meeting. The members were discussing the newest iteration of their creativity competition for teenagers. Each year, the area sponsors a national competition for government school students in an artistic endeavor. The previous year focused on painting; another year offered poetry. This particular year, the planned topic was acting. A spirited debate took place during one meeting when some of the members questioned whether acting might violate many Syrians' conservative Islamic social norms. There was consensus among the group that acting could be considered “حرام” or religiously forbidden, but that most people would not have a problem with it. The members who voiced concern about the acting component used deixis to distance themselves from those who might object. As one member expressed it in English, “*I don't have a problem, but others might.*” In the end, such objections were overruled, and the group voted to continue with acting. These linguistically-supported social divisions surface in the events and practices described throughout this dissertation.

### ***Shifters, English and Exclusion***

The usage of deictic terms and shifters in venues of the neoliberal elite, particularly entrepreneurship organizations, often overlapped with other critical linguistic practices and preferences of the group. In fact, speakers frequently paired the English and Arabic deictic terms in quick succession. That reinforces how central English-Arabic mixing was to the social group boundaries emerging in the entrepreneurial organizations. Furthermore, when group members relied on shifter terms or SDSs, they almost always chose the English term over the Arabic, to index its connection to a transnational

discourse. This created a certain tension within JCI, for instance, whose need to engage locally clashed with its global orientation. This often played out in the constant negotiations over the amount of English and Arabic usage. Prominent members repeatedly mentioned the inherent conflict between using English as necessitated by JCI's international affiliations and using Arabic to include and welcome local Syrians who did not feel comfortable operating in English. Although they expected prospective members to eventually acquire strong English skills, they also wanted their linguistic practices to be as welcoming to as large a number of recruits as possible. While these decisions were linked to practicality and administrative necessities, they were simultaneously understood and debated as issues of status, exclusion and prestige. One of the original members describes the indecision over language policies in JCI's early years like this:

We suffered at the beginning because the government in order to give us a license and everything needed everything in Arabic in terms of the constitution, the website so we had to work on that. We recognize that a lot of people in Syria speak English but still they are not the majority. If you want to have to proper penetration in society, you need to adapt and you need to translate a lot of things into Arabic in order not to have this as a barrier.

People will be afraid like I don't want to join this organization because I don't speak English or this will be embarrassing if I attend the meeting. I still remember our first meetings in 2005 we used to use English a lot. We found a lot of members are discouraged to participate because they felt if I cannot express myself in English that will be a bit embarrassing.

As Chapter 4 will discuss in more detail, the internal tension between requiring English to connect with other JCI outlets abroad as part of international organization and using primarily Arabic to welcome local members who find constant English usage snobby and challenging persists to this day. Both the interactional style preferred by the most visible and vocal members and JCI's written materials reflect this ambivalence.

A new member orientation I attended epitomized how the organization struggles between using Arabic as means to connect with potential new members who would expand the organization beyond its base in elite society and relying on English terminology and expressions. Held after a standard JCI meeting, the orientation featured the Damascus' chapter's president introducing potential new members to the values, regulations and activities of JCI. The president, Ahmed, came from a well-known and wealthy family, studied in Canada and lived and worked for over a decade in North America. He frequently inserted English lexical items into his Arabic conversations and often resorted to responding to Arabic questions in English. As someone with a reputation for erudition, a prominent family name, well-placed connections and extensive international experience, he was an imposing figure for younger, less sophisticated attendees of the orientation.

The meeting began with the prospective members introducing themselves in Arabic and explaining how they learned of JCI. Except for one prospective member, who had heard of JCI through an NGO for young people, everyone reported that they had become acquainted with JCI “عن طريق” [through or literally via the road of] a friend or coworker who was already a JCI member. Although JCI was clearly expanding its membership, its expansion was still well within the bounds of its current members' existing social and professional networks (which generally overlap significantly). The attendees then filled out an attendance sheet with their name and email addresses, entirely in English. After the introductions, the then chairwoman for the Business Area spoke about the positive impacts of JCI participation in her life, crediting it with helping her to overcome shyness and hesitancy. The president then began a PowerPoint presentation

overview of JCI, including both an explanation of the international structure of JCI and the activities and governance of JCI locally in Syria. His presentation switched between English and Arabic, with most of the written content of the presentation in English and most of the verbal presentation in spoken Arabic.

Attendees at the orientation received two photocopied handouts as soon as they entered the meeting room. The first sheet was entitled “Orientation Session” and contained a guide to “JCI most common abbreviations.” Both the abbreviations and their corresponding terms were all listed in English. In addition, there was a box at the bottom of the sheet that contained positions, names and emails of the JCI officers. The second sheet began with the headline “الجلسة التعريفية,” or “Introductory Session” and then provided a list of key JCI English terminology with their Arabic translations. The sheet contained the subtitle “ترجمة الاختصارات و المفردات المستخدمة في الغرفة” [“Translation of the Abbreviations and Vocabulary Used in the Chamber”]. It listed the titles of JCI officers, the names of JCI’s most prominent programs and other bureaucratic JCI terms. This sheet would have been quite critical for a monolingual Arabic speaker joining JCI given that members and officers used these English terms without translation frequently. However, the linguistic framing of the meeting – through the PowerPoint presentation, the speeches and the photocopies – communicated that Arabic knowledge alone was not sufficient for thriving in JCI and its social universe. The JCI leadership may have been willing to translate its key terms into Arabic or summarize an English text into Syrian Arabic to welcome prospective members, but the persistent use of English and its treatment as the default language alerted prospective members that a willingness to at least incorporate new English terms was necessary to thrive in JCI. In order for JCI to

retain its cachet as a global organization with global values and global connections, its members needed to engage with its global language.

***“Developing Myself:” Self-improvement in the new Syria***

While deictic usage situates this Syrian social group locally in geographic, temporal and social contexts, deictics’ grammatical cousin, a category called shifters, connects the new neoliberal elite to transnational discourses of what types of education, training and attributes are required for an individual to prosper in a neoliberal economic situation. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, shifters appear to have universal dictionary definitions, but they also have contextual references and local indexicality. Bonnie Urciuoli has written extensively of how the terms that underpin neoliberal discourse reference transnational ideologies at the same time that they index the local contexts of their usage. Following Bourdieu, who famously called neoliberalism “free trade faith,” Urciuoli writes that neoliberal discourse encourages individuals to “become his or her own product.” (Urciuoli 2010, 162) Central to this process is the procurement and appropriate deployment of skills, a term which can be paired with an array of other nouns and which “does not consistently denote a particular practice” (164). In Syria, skills and other SDS terms help to construct a common vocabulary of words that build a local community while simultaneously linking it to transnational ideologies through the usage of such terms. The process of becoming one’s own product in Syria typically involves both discursive practices and concrete “bundles of activities.” At the discursive level, much of the focus on skills and self-marketing that Urciuoli describes in American liberal arts education falls under the rubric of what Syrians call “developing” themselves.



Always using the English word, whether in an all English, Arabic or mixed conversation, the word, like all SDSs, invoked “layers of indexicality” (Silverstein 2003a, 1976) that pointed to multiple contexts.

The first time I conducted an interview and heard someone discuss “developing” him or herself, I stopped short. The term seemed so much like new age jargon and deeply out of place in Syria. By the time I had completed my interviews, I came to expect members of the new elite openly discuss their strategies for self-actualization. In fact, the trope was so pervasive and well-received that I began to realize that it was more than a quirky side effect of the uneven and often dated manner that trends from other parts of the world drifted into the Middle East. Rather, it was a central narrative through which the new elite conceived of their standing in society and through which they described how they came to participate and believe in the activities and principles central to identification with the new elite. In short, developing oneself meant acquiring the knowledge, skills and linguistic practices that permitted friction less entry into entrepreneurial organizations, private businesses and prominent social circles. Often membership in the entrepreneurial organizations is seen as a pathway to self-development.

So you become a member of JCI in order to give to your community to be an active citizen, responsible for what’s happening in your society, as well as you can benefit from whatever JCI is giving. First being a member is developing your professional skills, you’re public speaking skills and being professional. We really operate in a professional way, in an organized way.

In this quote, from my interview with the local Damascus JCI president Ahmed, the themes of development and skills come together, joined by another shifter term that surfaced frequently: professional. Like skills and development, there was no one

referential meaning for professional, even with the local Syrian context. Instead, it indexed a wide range of behaviors, ideologies and social relationships. It could point to something as simple as punctuality or it could point to more complex ideas about organizational psychology, personal comportment and even slick graphic design.

The neoliberal discourse is embroiled with the promotion of institutions, particularly JCI and other non-government organizations, including volunteer efforts analyzed in the following section. The JCI President above described JCI as an incubator of the skills and development that a Syrian needs to acquire to be recognized as “professional” in the local context. JCI’s leadership considers English acquisition a fundamental component of “development,” and indeed these shifters are always spoken in English, even in the midst of an all-Arabic sentence or conversation. The following explanation from my interview with the daughter of a prominent businessman and active JCI member illustrates how the terms “develop” and “skills” take on local resonance.

The main role of JCI is to develop the person and the community and we can say the country in a way. Whether it’s in JCI or another organization. If I meet you in JCI, and I see all the skills you have and I don’t have it, I will try to work on myself. I don’t know if you noticed, but a lot of volunteers, they didn’t speak English or knew only a few words. Now they are able to write emails in English and to speak.

When she says “skills,” she does not necessarily mean expertise geared toward any particular workplace, such as typing or financial modeling or welding. Here, “skills” indexes personal attributes and habits that elites display and endorse. These include elite interactional styles, patterns of consumption, kinds of employment, educational background and social networks. This shifter, like pronouns and other deictics, works to construct boundaries around this new social group and to define the qualities of membership in it.

Key English slogans, often drawn from the cannon of business-advice and business self-help books, recurred in conversations, written materials and on online profiles and status updates. Some of those slogans were directly affiliated with a specific organization – like SYEA’s “Own Tomorrow!” or JCI’s “Be Better!” which were always rendered with exclamation points. Still others had no particular connection in the Syrian context but rather were thrown into conversations or events on an ad-hoc basis. “Show your spirit” or its frequent variant “show your JCI spirit” surfaced often at JCI events, when organizers were attempting to get the crowd excited or create an enthusiastic atmosphere. Other common phrases were longer and more awkward to shout out at an event to garner cheers, and these tended to be repeated in smaller-scale venues or conversations. One in particular, “failing to plan is planning to fail,” was a neoliberal elite favorite, with individuals not only reminding each other of the saying’s veracity at meetings and trainings but also placing the phrase on their Facebook pages or Gmail status updates.

The ability to command English or the desire to learn to do so is one of the most prominent meanings to which the term development points. Neoliberal elites view English as an index of one’s potential for success in a neoliberal situation and as the pathway to development, skills, entrepreneurship and other discursive shifters that locate individuals in the context of local neoliberal “faith.” In the following quote, Jawad, a young man from a modest socio-economic background whose years of effort and hard work earned him entrance in neoliberal elite circles, describes how he leveraged dogged efforts to learn English to immerse himself in the events associated with neoliberal elites.

Really I have to improve myself in English. Everyday I bring a movie and I put English subtitles. I don’t use Arabic at all, and I watch this movie concentrating

on the words. I like to improve myself so I heard that they are doing a lecture series at Carlton about two years ago. So I made a confirmation, and I attend this lecture.

Jawad viewed English proficiency as a prerequisite for attending JCI events like the business lecture series. He also links learning English to “improving” himself, another shifter that roughly parallels the indexical nuances of development. While Jawad situates English acquisition as a precondition for immersing himself in a neoliberal context, other Syrians depicted English usage itself as an index to a neoliberal orientation. In a two-hour coffee shop interview with me, over French fries and a water pipe, human resources manager Hadil explained how English-speaking businesspeople found common ground.

People good in English, the community is reshaping. You are developing yourself, your income is higher, your interest in development is getting higher. It's not if someone doesn't talk English, they're not sociable. People who use English have access of way to develop themselves that other who talk English have.

This depiction of English as a means of access parallels the way that shifters both index local contexts and connect to instantiations of that word in other contexts. The usage of English allows local Syrian speakers to plug into transnational discourses and information at the same time that it establishes the speakers' elevated position on the local hierarchy of social prestige.

### ***New Values and Old Politics***

At times, the neoliberal elite's affiliation with neoliberal discourse marked by SDSs creates a striking clash between the ideology they express and the facts of Syria's social and political reality. Combined with the strength of collective group-marking deictic usage, the shifters embroil the social group in a discourse that sometimes seems to

directly challenge Syria's political status quo. JCI, both internationally and locally in Syria, espouses a set of values and principles that are defined by the international JCI governing body and must be accepted by national and local outlets in order to establish a chapter. Strikingly, these values include tenets that are remarkably contradictory with the Syrian regime's official policies. Although the Syrian regime is notoriously unwilling to publicize its exact policies and philosophies, the ruling Baath party and the Asad family does not promote nor legislate in favor of the ideals that JCI members and local branches are expected to adopt and uphold. The statement of JCI values is the following:

We believe:

- That faith in God gives meaning and purpose to human life;
- That the brotherhood of man transcends the sovereignty of nations;
- That economic justice can best be won by free men through free enterprise;
- That government should be of laws rather than of men;
- That earth's great treasure lies in human personality;
- And that service to humanity is the best work of life.

In particular, the second, third and fourth values stand in direct contrast with Syrian reality and policy. The regime's rhetoric is highly nationalist, Arab nationalist, anti-Israeli, anti-American and trumpets its sovereign rights, particularly over the contested Golan Heights. The ruling Baath party's constitution specifies that Syria's economy must have a socialist dimension; recently the Asad regime has moved towards capitalism by establishing what it calls a "social market economy." Despite such changes, Syria is hardly a bastion of free enterprise or of free men. Most contradictory is the fourth value

that “government should be of laws rather than of men.” The Asad governments, under father Hafez and son Bashar, actively cultivated cults of personality to ensure their stronghold over the country (see Wedeen 1999, 1998). Their images and slogans trumpeting their wisdom and governance blanket every street corner, taxi cab and storefront. At the same time, Syria has been under so-called emergency law since 1963, a maneuver which allows the regime to forgo due process, detain individuals without cause and suppress political opposition without citing a single statute or legal justification.

Despite such obvious discrepancies, JCI has been able to thrive because of, and not in spite of, ideals that directly challenge the status quo in Syria. Many members told me that they were attracted to JCI and found their participation particularly rewarding because of how “professionally” the organization conducted itself. In this usage, the SDS “professional” points to the orderly transitions of power that occurred during annual democratic elections for all JCI leadership posts. In particular, they most frequently cited JCI’s “one year to lead” rule which stipulated that leadership posts be held for only one year. This rule, they said, kept any one person from being entrenched in leadership and gave members the opportunity to select a new direction during annual elections.

As an anthropologist working in a country that is hostile to foreign researchers and to any analysis of its contemporary configuration, I struggled to elucidate the unspoken but obvious connection between the ideal situation provided by JCI and the actual governmental structure. At times, I attended lectures or listened to conversations about business culture or human resources that seemed to me to be metaphors for Syria’s political problems and potential solutions. Yet, not once did anyone ever draw an explicit connection between critique of nepotism, corruption and autocracy in business settings

and the parallel problems that plague the country at the political level. As I discuss in Chapter 1, openly debating politics is simply not part of the repertoire of the new elite – whether for aesthetic reasons, privacy concerns or fear of retribution from a notoriously vengeful regime that brooks no opposition. I could not risk breaking the trust I had established among JCI members and other young Syrians by directly asking them about Syrian politics.

Although my precarious position prevented me from directly inquiring about how young elite Syrians viewed the changes they pursued in business and civil society versus any potential change on a political level, I attended several JCI events where it seemed to me impossible that attendees were not drawing connections to Syrian politics, at least internally and silently. In October 2008, I attended a JCI-sponsored lecture on human resources. Once virtually unknown in Syria, human resources has recently become a trendy topic and career choice as new corporations offer opportunities for professionalism and skill-building. The lecturer based his speech on the premise that the business climate in Syria has vast problems, and that the audience was as eager to find solutions as he was to suggest them. The speech focused on the transition many regional businesses were making from privately-held, family-run operations to publicly-traded corporations accountable to shareholders. To accomplish this successfully, the speaker claimed the businesses needed to introduce accountability, investment in skill-building and eliminate nepotism in filling leadership posts. In both the speaker's monologue and the extensive question and answer session that followed, the themes echoed complaints and concerns that could easily be made against the political situation in Syria. The parallels to the Syrian political situation are obvious: the current president was handed his

position by his father, the former president. At times, President Asad was thought to struggle to professionalize the nepotistic and insular highest levels of government officials who were loyalists of his father (see Leverett 2005). Older, entrenched officials educated in the USSR and viewed as out of touch with global trends clash with up-and-coming technocrats with PhDs from the US and the UK and market-oriented philosophies.

Several questions asked the speaker to address the difficult transition many businesses in Syria were currently making from family-run to corporate entities. The speaker also discussed the challenges faced by newly hired human resources managers whose bosses might want to follow the new trend but might balk at investing money in building employees' skills or spending money to increase their productivity. The concern that older, monolingual, undereducated and entrenched managers might resist their younger, ambitious, internationally-savvy counterpart's attempts to modernize the business, institute transparency and increase productivity also surfaced frequently. Certainly, these are all issues that young Syrians, typified by the lecture's attendees, genuinely face in their daily professional lives. Just as certainly, their intense interest in the lecture was not simply a calculated foil for discussing Syria's politics disguised as a business metaphor. Yet, the parallel challenges faced by Syrians in both business and governance cannot be ignored or dismissed. The fact that young elites are actively and publicly advocating against nepotism, corruption and the lack of professionalism will most likely have a profound impact on how they view their government, even if at the moment they restrict their critiques of the status quo to business practices. What is unknown is what could result from such an expansion of their frustrations into the



political realm and for how long the regime will tolerate and even encourage an organization whose core values contradict its fundamental strategies of governance.

### ***Shopping, Leisure & Social Boundaries***

The rise in conspicuous consumption and a new-found local enthusiasm for it correlates with the same linguistic and social practices that have given rise to other associations of the neoliberal elite. As the entrepreneurial organizations provide opportunities for individuals to acquire the vocabulary, “skill” set and social contacts necessary for successful participation in the neoliberal elite, the newly opened venues of consumption and leisure form additional settings in which elites engage in corresponding sets of linguistic and social practice that further establish the group’s cohesion and boundaries. The “strong discourse” of neoliberalism embraced as a secular “faith” by young Syrians (Bourdieu 1998) encourages free trade and open markets, and visibly (and audibly) participating in those consumer markets in Syria comprises an important component of neoliberal elite practices. Chapter 5 will examine in more detail the role English usage – or lack thereof – plays in establishing value in such markets. This section will outline the social and linguistic practices associated with local consumption of global goods and services and how those practices overlap with the linguistic practices of the entrepreneurship associations.

Syria has always had wealthy people who spent large sums of money on things they wanted. However, what is new is a political and cultural climate that not only tolerates vast individual consumption but also encourages and rewards displaying one’s status via material goods. Under the regime of the father Hafez Al-Asad, the ruling

Baath party and the prevailing culture, imparted top-down with the government's heavy hand, skewed toward a more ascetic and strictly socialist veneer. Those who possessed great wealth, almost always attained through some kind of collaboration with or tolerance from the regime, purchased lavish homes abroad and indulged in shopping sprees in Beirut's expensive boutiques. At home, they lived in relatively modest apartment houses and purchased local goods, as foreign imports were largely banned.

The government easing of restrictions on the import and sale of foreign goods during the last decade and cancellation of laws banning all kinds of private enterprise certainly increased the opportunities for conspicuous consumption, and they signaled with equal potency that a new official tolerance for wealth had arrived in the country. Now, the Syrian government wants to promote an image of itself as cosmopolitan and business savvy abroad instead of stressing its socialist bona fides. Hence, we see its visible support of organizations like JCI and SYEA and its consistent use of the English-bred and incredibly cosmopolitan first lady as the most prominent face of the country, after the president. Some analysts believe that the impetus to allow more foreign goods into the country came after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in neighboring Lebanon in 2005. Prior to that, wealthy Syrians traveled frequently to Beirut to shop, dine and enjoy the liberal nightlife. After the assassination and consequent expulsion of the Syrian army from Lebanese territory, Syrians no longer felt welcome there. To avoid a restless and discontent elite class, it is theorized, the government enacted laws that would enable the elite to bring what they sought in Beirut to Damascus. One Syrian journalist who works as a fixer for foreign correspondents explained that

after Hariri, Lebanese cut the border. They (the bourgeois) used to go to Beirut. It pushed Syrians to Beirut-ization of Damascus. We have labels, private banks,

insurance which all need English. English became for class, for work, for living. Satellite TV is in English. Comes with identity to be cosmopolitan.

On the streets of Damascus, in the wealthiest neighborhoods, this means that a symbolic economy of name brand clothing, automobiles and even lattes has emerged. Expensive coffee shops, charging up to \$5 US for a cappuccino all feature large windows that render patrons highly visible to passers-by. Sitting in such a pointedly visible location requires the “right” wardrobe, usually consisting of pieces culled from outlets of foreign chains<sup>15</sup> that line the main shopping streets. As one leisurely sips coffee and picks at salad that might cost almost \$10 US, young men circle the streets slowly in imported cars with booming sound systems. BMWs (which Syrians call BMs) and Mercedes rest at the top of the hierarchy while Audis and Lexus also convey sufficient wealth and status. Such outings are designed to perform elite consumption, as “the taste for cappuccino has become a potent global sign, signifying gentrified tastes in highly diverse local taxonomies of cultural distinction” (deKoning 2006, 225) in Damascus and elsewhere in the Middle East. Most customers of such exclusive shops or restaurants know or know of each other. Acknowledging acquaintances or friends required a complicated calculus that would determine if the others were ignored, recognized with a terse smile and head nod or greeted with enthusiastic cheek-kissing and the appropriate phrases: “شو اخبارك؟ كيفك؟” [How are you? How’s it going?]. Most important, however, was being present in such places, dressed in the right way, to signal that one both could consume such luxuries and that one knew how to enact such consumption properly.

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<sup>15</sup> These chains include the Spanish brand *Mango*, the French brand *Promod* and the Italian brand *Stefanel*. Due to the continuing American sanctions against importing consumer goods into Syria, no American chains exist. Although some shops do offer illegally smuggled American labels like *Gap* or *Levi’s*, American brands are not widely available. Small boutiques sell designer European goods at exorbitant prices, including handbags that retail for more than the average annual Syrian GDP.

Conspicuous consumption and the venues in which Syrians can perform it also developed because of the rise of private enterprise and the higher salaries made possible by the increased presence of foreign business and lucrative businesses like private insurance and banking, at least according to the executive manager of Syria's most visible and prestigious restaurant chain. As the second in command<sup>16</sup> at a successful business that operates some of the premier venues in which Syria's new elite socialize, he observed as the demand for Western-style cafes and restaurants began in the late 1990s<sup>17</sup> and became a central component of the new elite's publicly conducted social lives in the 2000s. He explicitly linked the success of his chain to what he called the "15,000 lira salary." 15,000 lira, or approximately \$300 US, refers to the salary that most young employees at private companies receive on a monthly basis. Although relatively limited by international standards, this is considerably more than public sector employees receive, and it conferred on its recipients, young people primarily from upper middle class backgrounds who lived with their families and had few expenses, the ability to spend money on new luxuries like pricey coffee drinks, dinners out and imported clothing. In addition, the lives of the private sector employees were different, creating additional demand for restaurant culture. Private sector employees worked longer hours and often in locations farther from their homes. They wanted to eat light lunches near their office, and the new cafes provided them the convenience and visible prestige that they desired. After work, the manager theorized that they wanted to linger with friends,

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<sup>16</sup> He reports to the owner of the chain, the son of a very well-known former government official under President Hafez al-Asad.

<sup>17</sup> Prior to this time period, cafes were mostly the domain of men who would drink tea, smoke water pipes called *arguileh* and socialize. Wealthy women often frequented lunch spots in the elite hotels.

observe who was also socializing in similar places and display their ability to finance such visibility.

According to the chain's manager, they wanted to do this in specifically Western-style cafes and restaurants. He described his Syrian customers as constantly looking for the chain's newest restaurant innovation, drawn from dining outlets in Western countries that chain's management visits for inspiration. His chain's restaurants' various themes reflect the demand for non-Arabic food choices and décor concepts: one offers a vaguely Tex-Mex menu, another is a steak restaurant renowned for its large salad bar, a third mimics a Parisian-style café and another is an Italian trattoria. That these new places favor Western styles and non-Arabic food reinforces that conspicuous consumption for the new elite is necessarily global and foreign, even if that is in aesthetics only and not origin. They are also the places in which displays of elite interactional styles and stances transpire, and their own linguistic barriers reinforce the centrality of English usage in establishing their validity as elite spaces.

Throughout my interview with the manager, a monolingual Arabic speaker, he interspersed his Arabic speech with English terms like "grill," "salad bar" and "café." Like its manager, his restaurant chain relied heavily on English terms, American dining concepts and menus of generic continental cuisine. The manager's linguistic repertoire, despite his inability to form sentences in English, reflected how sprinkling English terms or international concepts into a conversation, menu or venue could imbue it with global sophistication for the local Syrian audience. This chain's restaurants set their prices to match, charging around \$5 US for a sandwich and French fries or up to \$10US for a simple plate of pasta, which is quite expensive when we remember that the average

Syrian earns \$13 US per day. English-dominant menus and the employees' usage of English terms in greetings and ordering justify the high prices by setting the ambience as exclusive and international. Most significantly for the burgeoning new elite, these were public linguistic and social performances. Western-style venues provided the appropriate stage on which new elites could display their global sophistication, global linguistic skills and even global dining preferences. The fact that these restaurants were always located on well-trafficked corners and thoroughfares with floor-to-ceiling windows meant that such virtuoso performances were visible not only to those inside and included in the new elite but also to those outside looking in.

Indeed, JCI and SYEA members populated such venues. Before and after the almost nightly JCI meetings, a *Costa*<sup>18</sup> branch nearby the office in Abu Rummaneh would fill with members who would catch up with friend in small groups or hold sub-committee meetings there. Other times during the day, JCI and SYEA members or other identifiable members of the neoliberal elite could be found there. One of my closest Syrians friends, not a member of an entrepreneurial organization but affiliated with many of them through schooling, familial relations, employment and neighborhood, often insisted we meet there for afternoon coffee. At any given time, she could typically identify – and provide gossip – about approximately 80 percent of the clientele. Having coffee there required extensive rounds of greetings as people circulated around the tables chatting with or simply acknowledging friends and acquaintances. The conversations overheard use mixed Arabic and English in keeping with elite interactional style (described in Chapter 4) and reference elite transnational trends. One afternoon, a young

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<sup>18</sup> *Costa* is a British coffee chain that has three branches in Damascus. It offers an array of espresso drinks and snacks at European prices.

man chatting on one of the first *iPhones* in Syria ended the call by saying, “يلا [let’s go] at 4:15 I have to leave to go to the gym.” As a site in which members and practices of the new neoliberal elite are visible and audible, *Costa* and other places like it provide gathering spots for group members and reinforce the elite bona fides of its regular Syrian customers.<sup>19</sup>

Like the entrepreneurship activities discussed earlier, the linguistic practices in these settings include strategically deployable shifters (SDSs). Such terms work at multiple levels – taking on a specific meaning from the local context of their usage and carrying referential meaning from its usage in many different locations. These shifters rely on mixed English and Arabic written materials and conversations to create layers of indexicality, ranging from the establishment of a cohesive local elite group to the connection of that group with other people buying and consuming the same objects in other locations worldwide. In that sense, consumer goods themselves act similarly to SDSs in that they share qualities with other versions of themselves worldwide yet they take on a particular social meaning in Syria. Take for instance, the clothing available at Damascus’ branch of the Spanish fashion chain *Mango*. In Europe and North America, *Mango* has the reputation of producing trendy, reasonably priced clothes available to the mass market. In Syria, *Mango*’s prices are often higher than they would be in Europe, and they are prohibitively expensive to the majority of Syrians. Thus, a *Mango* blouse on a young woman in Madrid might signal that she is stylish but of average financial means. In Damascus, that same blouse, while maintaining the same index of European stylishness, would immediately establish the wearer as wealthy and elite.

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<sup>19</sup> This *Costa* branch was also quite popular among Damascus’ expatriate population, many of whom worked at the embassies nearby.

The linguistic practices used on price tags further index the elite Syrian shopper's orientation to transnational goods, ideologies and practices. Consider the tags I found on a pair of jeans that I purchased at the Italian clothing chain *Stefanel*. The two black tags feature three languages: Italian, English and Arabic. On one tag, an explanation of how the jeans were made by hand appears in English and Italian. On the other tag, a sticker is affixed containing the bar code, sizing and price information. It also contains, in Arabic only, the information that the jeans are an import produced in China and the Syrians customs authorization number. The price, 1950 Syrian lira or about \$40US (although I bought them on sale), is rendered in both English and Arabic. The sizing information does not appear in Arabic; rather it is in English and contains the Italian, European and American size equivalents. While the logic of the price tag's producer is impossible to ascertain, the tag's mix of languages and transnational information helps to situate the buyer in a global chain of consumption. This renders the jeans, and thus their buyer, cosmopolitan and sophisticated in a local hierarchy that elevates European and American goods and practices over their Arab and Syrian counterparts.

The newly established structure of conspicuous consumption also provides a stage on which elites can consume while non-elites might watch without the ability to participate themselves. I am referring to the incredible popularity of several recently-constructed Western-style shopping malls in Damascus, with several more under construction. The glass and metal structures mirror the typical content of any suburban American mall: level after level of clothing, shoe, electronics and gift stores circle around an expansive courtyard. Glossy window displays feature long-limbed mannequins sheathed in Western clothing. The basement level houses a food court, a large Western-



style supermarket stocking imported goods and a children's play area with an arcade. Like other high-priced shopping, dining and entertainment areas in Damascus, these malls attract wealthy Syrians who spend hours trying on clothing, sipping coffee and entertaining their children, typically with the help of small entourage of non-Syrian nannies (see Chapter 5 for further discussion of domestic labor). The mall "carries with it a fascination for those who embrace the new consumerist culture" and those who "can only participate through 'voyeurism' and window-shopping" (Abaza 2006, 215).

What differs in the mall setting, however, is that the malls do attract non-elite Syrians who often arrive in large groups to gawk at the elaborate decorations, stroll around the expansive walkways and perhaps indulge in a fast-food meal in the food court. Despite their presence in the malls, these Syrians engage with them completely differently from elite Syrians. They arrive at the mall in a kind of domestic tourism, to witness another style of commerce and consumption unimaginable in the lower-income urban neighborhoods or rural villages where they reside. Amidst the goods they cannot afford, they have the opportunity to see the "new" Syria in which other Syrians spend as much on a cappuccino and t-shirt as they earn in a month. Spending a Friday afternoon around the mall, as I often did with close friends, provides a clear insight into the bifurcated class structure. Non-elites seemingly feel welcome in the mall, which they treat as a public space, but not in the individual stores. As I describe in Chapter 5 of the dissertation, the signage, pricing and linguistic norms of the expensive shops construct an effective barrier for excluding consumers without the cash and savoir-faire to participate appropriately. Yet in the malls, unlike in other venues of elite consumption, such interaction is on display for any passer-by, rendering the newly amplified patterns of elite

consumption visible yet inaccessible for the majority of Syrians. Like the deictic pronouns that divide Syrians into those who are alike and those who are different, the differentiated relationship to new consumption represents another new social fault line. The majority of Syrian society can only witness JCI events or the scene at an upscale coffee shop or dress-shopping at the expensive mall. They remain in the category of “them.”

This chapter follows the instantiation of a formative grammatical category – shifters – through the most important venues of neoliberal elite activities: entrepreneurship organizations and exclusive, expensive sites of leisure and consumption. In the range of locations, situations and social interaction that this encompasses, neoliberal elites use words that change (i.e. shift) referential meaning depending on the context of their utterance. Some words, deictics, are wholly dependent on context for their reference. Others combine fixed referential values with context-specific meaning. Both categories are crucial for establishing neoliberal elite boundaries and membership and for defining the shared qualities of that membership. Shifters are powerful because they can simultaneously establish local prestige and fix global connections. As this chapter demonstrates, the neoliberal elite’s linguistic repertoire’s combination of deictics and SDSs works to erect powerful boundaries and sorting mechanisms for this new elite social group, based on its global sophistication and connectivity. In particular, the SDSs of a transnational neoliberal discourse have extra potency in the local Syrian context as these terms reflect the interests and activities of the group. In themes that weave

throughout the entire dissertation, shifters are a linguistic resource around which the neoliberal elites locate their group affinity, unity and perspective.

#### **Chapter 4: “Depends on the Type of Person”: Neoliberal Elite Style and Stance**

Here in Syria I have two types of friends. Some of my friends when I speak in English words beside them they say why you are speaking English, you are an aristocratic man? Or you are a let's say classy man? A luxury man? You are show off? Some of my friends said that, *حالو شيف* [show off].

And I have another type of friends I have to use English with them because they are in a certain level of education and they are speaking some English in their language. So I use also English in my speak. I think that depends on the type of person you are speaking with.

Jawad, JCI committee chair and tech company manager

As Jawad, a charismatic and deeply ambitious Syrian man from a modest background, illustrated in his conversation with me, negotiating linguistically-constructed social boundaries in Syria can be an arduous and complex task. An individual speaker must balance his interlocutor's expectations, position himself in the conversation and take stock of the conversation's history and context, all while deciding the specifics of his own linguistic output. While the previous chapter examined how strategic linguistic practices constructed and maintained boundaries around a new social group benefiting from new opportunities made possible by economic liberalization, this chapter focuses on how individual speakers navigate these boundaries. It highlights the two primary linguistic strategies employed by Syrians: style and stance.

Both of these linguistic strategies involve calibrating and deploying the appropriate amount of English usage in conversations and interactions. Jawad's explanation of the the different linguistic practices he uses for different friends reflects how critical English usage is in both of these techniques. A public university graduate

from a non-elite background, Jawad realizes that his public linguistic displays impact his alignment toward or away from the new elite. For the new neoliberal elite, English usage is both the pathway to and proof of the kind of self-development that neoliberal ideology demands. The road to acquiring and displaying such proof, however, is far from easy for speakers. Their linguistic practices are subject to the perils of critical commentary, rejection and censure. A speaker's ability to hew appropriately to the linguistic norms of the new neoliberal elite can determine their inclusion or exclusion from the group and its activities.

This chapter begins by outlining the general parameters of elite interactional style in Syria. It starts with the specifics of how Syrians incorporate English into Arabic conversations and sentences, moving to non-verbal style and the phonological variations that constitute accent. It then considers how Syrians develop and execute their linguistic style and stance, which can be leveraged in business, social and civic settings for enhanced standing and opportunities. The chapter then looks at the tremendous social power wielded by those who can master and deploy a stance that effectively and appropriately incorporates utterances that include English. This stance provides interactional coherency to the emerging social group of new elites and underlies all of the new elites' activities, affinities and attributes.

### *The Syrian Style*

Sitting in a picturesque courtyard café in Damascus' Old City, sipping Turkish coffee and inhaling the light apple scent of water pipe smoke, one can absorb the lyrical conversation of Syrian Arabic that fills the room. The self-touted stronghold of Arabic

speaking and Arab tradition, Damascus echoes with the melodic cadence of its local Arabic dialect. Yet, listening more carefully to the enveloping conversations, one might experience some linguistic dissonance. Did the couple at the next table really request the check using the English word “receipt”? Are the two elegantly dressed young men discussing their “options” in “business”? Did one of the teenagers speaking loudly into an expensive cell phone tell her unseen friend “I have to go the gym” in English?

Such inclusions of English into the famed Arabic of Damascus are an increasingly common and socially salient feature of Damascus’ linguistic landscape. The entrance of English – and other European languages to a lesser extent – into the linguistic repertoire of Syria’s new elite means that utterances like the ones described are not just common but almost mandatory in certain contexts associated with the neoliberal elite. There are an infinite number of goals one might accomplish through this mixing of Arabic and English. A speaker might be working at the conversational level: changing languages to change the topic or attempting to establish dominance over her conversational partner. Or, the speaker, by virtue of educational background or exposure, might be able to access a concept in one language more quickly than in another. The concept referenced may not even have an available linguistic equivalent in one of the languages, as often happens in Arabic with terms describing neoliberalism or globalization (see Abed 2007, Hasan 2010). The data presented in this chapter focuses on instances in which speakers utilize English lexical items in contexts associated with the neoliberal elite and its activities. In these settings, I focus on how deploying English indexes an orientation away from a presumed monolingual Syrian backdrop and an alignment with the neoliberal elite.

As Sue Gal illuminates in her seminal work on Central European code-switching that has been enhanced by subsequent studies (Gal 1998, 1987; Meek 2007, Myers-Scotton 1998; Woolard 1998b) in multilingual settings each language can index a set of social meanings at local, regional and global levels. Furthermore, the indexical qualities of each language combine local and global considerations that are known to both those who deploy and receive such social messages via the speaker's linguistic repertoire. Individual speakers can and do take advantage of such rich linguistic resources to accomplish an infinite number of linguistic and social tasks. Speakers can avail themselves of local, regional or global linguistic ideologies in face-to-face interaction. Such large-scale beliefs manifest in localized conversations and "can, directly, or indirectly, refer to the more or less agreed-upon differences in power and status between two or more languages which are at our disposal for a particular piece of communication" (Jorgenson 1998, 237). Sociolinguists often refer to a "division of labor" in which certain languages are generally expected to dominate certain domains and "code-switches can be explained by factors beyond the particular conversation, which are globally determined, although only indirectly by societal power differences" (247). A speaker's style in Syria's neoliberal context can take advantage of these linguistic ideologies to mix Arabic and English with consideration of the speaker's social position, the audience's social position and the history of utterances between them.

While the intersection of linguistic style and social status has preoccupied sociolinguists (Labov 1966), conceptions of style often involve establishing an urban dialectology based on pre-supposed class designations (Irvine 1985). More recently, linguistic anthropologists advanced a more dynamic view of style focused on

“implementation, at any given time, of a combination of features from the many varieties, registers, and performance genres at that speaker's disposal” (Mendoza-Denton 1999). Such implementation is always at once responsive to the context of its instantiation and indexical of it. The indexical orders of style are multi-layered and subject to constant reassignment (Eckert 2008, 2001). In the Syrian context, it is helpful to think of style as the results of choice among available linguistic options. An individual’s style at any given moment and in any given context is further sharpened by what the linguistic choices are not. A speaker has many options for proceeding linguistically – particularly in a multi-lingual setting like JCI – and she can situate herself in a conversational context through a set of choices that distinguishes her speech from that of others. For example, a clue to what linguistic and social work is being done through the usage of an English word when the Arabic term is easily accessible and semantically identical lies in the concept of distinctiveness. By saying “idea” instead of the Arabic equivalent “*fikra*/فكرة” a speaker is not invoking a difference in meaning or reference but rather is establishing his or her linguistic style as apart from others in proximity. In this case, the point is to set the speaker apart from an assumed Arabic monolingual background. Thus, by repeatedly using an English term when an Arabic one might be readily available, a speaker effectively demonstrates her familiarity with English and aligns her linguistic style with that of a particular social group, in this case Syria’s new neoliberal elite. This move resonates socially as well; as such linguistic labor simultaneously can point to group boundaries (Irvine 2001) and establish the individual speaker as socially distinct (Coupland 2001).



This might explain a phenomenon that I observed and struggled to analyze initially. Many of the JCI members or other neoliberal elites I encountered inserted English terms and phrases habitually into mostly Arabic interactions. They were so adept at inserting English words and phrases, including obscure vocabulary or highly idiomatic phrases, that I assumed they were all fluent English speakers. Yet when I sat down with several of them for a one-on-one conversation, which they insisted on conducting in English, I discovered that they struggled to form complete sentences in English, conjugate verbs correctly or comprehend my questions. They were often the most frequent and insistent users of English lexical items or phrases in public linguistic practices. Yet thinking of English insertions as a method of establishing a stance of distinction against an assumed monolingual Arabic background indicates that using English is less about the pragmatics of speech and more about establishing difference within a local context. Given that they interacted with other frequent English users and that they produced these utterances in contexts where English insertions were constant, they could align themselves with the social group by demonstrating the same linguistic practices.

### *The grammar of style*

Like other forms of linguistic merging, English-Arabic mixing in Syria unfolds according to set patterns (see Auer 1998, Maschler 1998). Some analysts have even proposed that in a “particular case of language alternation constitutes a code-switch” and “can be said to constitute part of a new, mixed code” (Maschler 1998, 125). In addition, there are norms of appropriateness that must be absorbed by those wishing to incorporate

English into their linguistic repertoire in a socially sanctioned and well-received manner. In sentences that incorporated English and Arabic elements, pronouns, verbs and prepositions almost always appeared in Arabic. Significant nouns, idiomatic expressions and SDS terms were the most likely to be in English. This had the effect, to the listener, of highlighting the English terms or phrases being used and drawing attention to the semantic content of the English words. This was reinforced by the influence and circulation of catch-phrases frequently used by new elites, particularly in entrepreneurial organizations. When they collectively intoned “be better!” or “show your spirit!” their idiomatic English became more influential and appealing through its contrast with a mostly Arabic background. Yet English inclusions did not need to be so enthusiastic and pithy to highlight the speaker’s global sophistication and familiarity with the popular global trends sweeping through Syria, like business development, human resources and entrepreneurship.

The following examples illustrate the kinds of English inclusion that I overheard in natural conversations around me on a daily basis. These utterances are drawn from conversations in coffee shops in upscale areas, from a lecture on the future of the Syrian economy and from meetings of entrepreneurship organizations.

“options يعطيني . . . في كان the receipt.” [There are options . . . he gives me the receipt.]

documentary.” [We’re making the documentary]

”محافظة البيئة جزء من السياحة بجوز في

recycling system.” [Preservation of the environment is part of tourism, maybe through a recycling system.]

“plan B? stand-by. اثنين في plan B? في يكون ما” [Isn't there a plan B? There are two stand-bys.]

“national, treasury عند بشير ال project ال اذا” [If the project becomes national, the treasury no longer belongs to Bashir.]

One can easily ascertain the consistency with which English words communicate the critical semantic meaning of the utterance while Arabic provides verbs, pronouns and grammatical sentence structure. I argue that English lexical insertions aim to highlight a speaker's global sophistication and local social position in ways that the use of English verbs or grammar could not. The belief in English as the pathway to and proof of neoliberal self-development is a shared ideology of JCI members and others in their social group. In particular, SDS English lexical items generated by organizations like JCI, which includes many of the above examples, constitute the shared discourse of group members (see Chapter 3). It requires integration into group activities and ideologies to be acquainted with the concepts behind the English terms included and to master their context-specific usage. For instance, the term “Plan B” is unlikely to be included in the formal English textbooks given to Syrian public school students; the speaker would need to have interacted with native speakers or have extensive exposure to English media to acquire that phrase. Its presence, thus, is indexical of a speaker's engagement with the neoliberal elite's discursive preferences, and not specifically of the speaker's English abilities. A cursory overview of English words that frequently surfaced in Arabic conversations strengthens this point: board members, meeting minutes, ceremony, branding, global financial crisis, soft skills, maximum exposure, training, active citizenship, sponsorship, networking. Many of the English words that

appear again and again are the SDSs analyzed in Chapter 3 that have multiple indexical layers: their semantic content references ideologies of “free market faith” while uttering them in English points to the individual speaker’s position in a local social group.

When I directly asked my Syrian acquaintances about their language usage, they did not attribute their reliance on English lexical items to their need or desire to exhibit global sophistication and international exposure. They were far more likely to view it as haphazard or as something that unfolded by chance at the moment. As one young, French School-educated Syrian woman who commanded three languages with ease explained her linguistic habits in her social life, “actually sometimes we open a conversation in English. It depends on the person you’re talking to. With my friends, I start with good morning and end with معك بحكي بلا [ok I’ll speak to you] so it depends.” Still others reported that they had difficulty recalling certain words in certain languages and so quickly used the word that occurred to them first. I do not intend to negate their claims but rather to suggest that their linguistic output, taken as an aggregate, is consistent in terms of the role that English plays in shaping semantic and social meaning.

English words are always subject to Arabic grammatical rules and constraints. English nouns are frequently paired with the Arabic definite article (/il/ or ال). This is not always the case, however, as the examples above provide an instance in which it was used (for documentary) and one in which it was not (the receipt). It was also a common occurrence for English nouns to be made plural using the regular plural ending for Arabic nouns (/at/ or ات). Most Arabic words actually become “broken” in the plural form, meaning that vowels are inserted in the stem of the word to create the plural form. However, the generic suffix ات also can indicate plurality for “regular” nouns, and it is

this ending that is attached to English lexical items. This creates Arabized English plurals like task-at, poster-at and event-at. This was not a universal, however, particularly when the English plural was pared with the Arabic definite article. In those cases, the person used the English plural, as in il-resources or il-projects.

One of the more striking features of the rules of this linguistic mixing involves nouns and gender. In Arabic, all nouns have a gender; there is no neutral. The gender of a noun impacts how verbs are conjugated, and adjectives must agree in gender, through the use of a specific Arabic letter (/ -a/ or ة) added at the end to indicate femininity. When English nouns are used in Arabic sentences, they retain the gender of the corresponding term in Arabic and in all verb conjugations and adjective agreement. The following examples illustrate how English nouns retain the gender of the Arabic word for which the English word is substituted.

“حلوة experience فعلاً هي.” [It is truly a great experience]

“راحت بس idea عندي كان.” [I had an idea but it went away]

In Arabic the words for both experience (تجربة /*tajriba*) and idea (فكرة /*fikra*) are feminine, and these two statements, from different speakers in completely different conversations, demonstrate how other elements of the sentence behave as if the English replacement is gendered as feminine. In the first sentence, the feminine pronoun for it is used, and the adjective for great is rendered in the feminine. In the second sentence, the verb conjugation for went away is the third person feminine. This corresponds with the general trend that English lexical items in Arabic sentences maintain – rather than disrupt – Arabic grammar and syntax (see Chapter 2).

Not only do they take on the grammatical properties of Arabic words in regard to plurals and gender, English words often became “Arabized” or reordered phonetically to mimic the phonetic structure of Arabic verb forms. In an interview in which I had asked her about how she and her friends mixed between Arabic and other foreign languages, particularly English, Bushra described how commonly used words from English “became” Arabic words used amongst her friends.

Why did we do it as “*say-ive*”? Because we start using it in our language. *Sayivet* the files? Like *depress-et* from depressed. I’m depressed. Are you depressed? From depressed, *depress-et*. Yes. For example, if you go fill the car with some gas. *Fuwelta*? Fuel. Yeah, you see? We use these a lot.

Like English lexical items that retain their original form, such “Arabizations” point to the speakers ability to carry international terms, activities or concepts into an Arabic-speaking context. Although the words take on an Arabic phonetic structure, one must know the meaning of the original English word in order to comprehend the altered Arabic form it. Thus playing with the word and *arabizing* it does not render it more comprehensible to monolingual speakers, but it does highlight the speaker’s mastery in both linguistic styles.

### ***Non-Verbal Style***

Another area in which the interactional style displayed by members of the neoliberal elite relies on differentiation from the interactional style of the majority of Syrian society is in non-verbal communication, particularly in greetings like handshakes, hugs and kisses. Anthropologists and linguists have long recognized that non-verbal communication requires the same cultural competence as linguistic forms (see Wharton 2009, Leach 1972). In Syria, that means that apart from very pious Muslims who do not

find it acceptable to touch or kiss anyone of the opposite gender under any circumstance, the default non-verbal greeting for acquaintances and friends is the double-cheek kiss, first right cheek to right cheek and then left. This remains the default greeting for new elites in any greeting involving one or more women. However, I noticed over my almost two years that when the greeting involved two men, they increasingly avoided the double kiss, substituting it with an awkward maneuver that combined a handshake, half-hug and deliberately masculine back pat.

This departure from the double cheek-kissing norm first struck me quite late on a Thursday night at very loud nightclub. I sat on plush banquette, sandwiched between my two best Syrian girlfriends who were scanning the crowd intently for potential boyfriends. In the hopes of increasing their odds, they had invited a mix of expat and Syrian men to join us at the table. One such friend, a well-known member of the new elite, worked at a media company and told us several of his friends would join us soon. They did, and they eschewed the traditional greeting that I mentioned in favor of the protracted, awkward physical stance I described earlier. Another co-worker arrived, and I believe I saw them do a fist-bump out of the corner of my eye. When they circulated over to greet the line of women ensconced on the banquette with me, they alternated between hand-shakes with me, who they did not know, and double cheek kisses with my friends, who they did know.

There were other stylistic choices about these new elites that differed from non-elite Syrians and, blended with non-verbal communication styles, they established the context as one associated with the new elite and indexed each individual's awareness, at least, of global sensibilities. The first co-worker dressed himself with such attention to

American street trends that he seemed almost like a parody of a hip-hop star.<sup>20</sup> He wore baggy cargo jeans that hovered below his hips, an oversized New York Yankees t-shirt, white low-top sneakers and his curly hair shaped into an Afro. He showed us his new iPhone, at that time unavailable in Syria, procured for him by a Syrian friend with an American passport. I asked him what he did for work, and he replied that he worked as a graphic designer but that really he was a “basketballer.” I was not sure what that meant exactly, but I did know that by referencing American trends and linguistic norms, he was establishing himself as a certain kind of Syrian: elite, cosmopolitan, English-speaking and globally connected.

### *Accents*

One particular area of the speaker’s linguistic style and repertoire in foreign languages that always elicited extensive commentary and a great deal of interest was the accent, a term used by Syrians to describe phonological competency in European languages. What constituted a “good” accent was never clear or easily elicited from people. However, possessing what was deemed a strong or closer to native accent conferred an aura of private school education, extensive experience abroad and even intelligence on the bearer of such an accent. In addition, accent was one aspect of a speaker’s linguistic ability that was closely observed and commented upon by others. Zhang (2008, 2006, 2005) has demonstrated how phonological variation, combined with English lexical insertions into Mandarin, demarcates Chinese employees of foreign businesses in Beijing as a discrete social group. The distinctiveness of their interactional

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<sup>20</sup> I think Sarah Hillewaert for reminding me that hip-hop has become a globalized culture (see also Ibrahim, Alim and Pennycook 2009), but this style and cultural reference are completely new in the Syrian context.



style differentiates them from public sector employees, an important social boundary in China's globalizing and liberalizing economy. This parallels the linguistic situation in Syria, where English lexical insertions index group affiliation, with the help of certain phonological characteristics in the speech of members of the new elite.

This may be because of a persistent ideology in Syria that claimed that it is more difficult to fake or learn an authentic accent in a foreign language than it is to master grammar, vocabulary or semantics. For the most part, a good accent was assumed to be the product of early and consistent exposure to the language, whether through growing up abroad or a private school where the language of instruction was not Arabic. Any deviation from that was considered mysterious and unaccountably advantageous. Hadil, a human resources manager with effortlessly fluent English skills explained her linguistic talents this way:

I always in the best schools, in private schools that were paying a lot of attention to languages. I love languages and accents. In HR, I have to make sure people speak French. I don't know it, but I'm good with accents. It's a gift. I've never been to the UK or US but I can talk with a British accent.

She searches for an explanation that can account for her excellent accent in spite of limited time spent abroad. Others attributed accents to prolonged exposure to a native English speaker in Syria, an inverse that still upholds the theory that better accents come from something foreign. Farah, the eldest of four daughters of high-level army official, once informed me that all her sisters spoke English much better than either of her parents. She acknowledged her own fluency in English, which she mainly attributed to her degree from an American university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). However, she reported that her younger sister had the strongest English of all of them, the source of which they believed to be their Filipino nanny. "The youngest one, her accent is perfect. When she

speaks English, you can't believe. She's really amazing. That's the effect of a Philipinian girl. We were lucky, her English was good." While Syrians attributed their extensive vocabulary or familiarity with American slang to books or movies, accents required interaction with fluent speakers, preferably abroad.

When I pushed my friends or interviewees about accents good and bad, one of the most important factors was the pronunciation of the letter /p/. There is no equivalent to that phoneme in Arabic, so speakers with "lesser" accents substituted the phoneme /b/, which does exist in Arabic, for words with a /p/, such as please (which would become *blease*), paper (*babber*) or police (*bolice*). There was a belief that mastering and correctly deploying the phoneme /p/ related both to how one came to learn English and how well one really commanded the language. English speakers who had encountered English earlier in life and had prolonged interactions in the language were thought to have an easier time. Syrians who studied English as adults or Syrians whose only interactions in English unfolded in Syria were considered less likely to master the phoneme /p/. In addition, Syrians who were otherwise very competent in English, with a strong command of idioms and even American slang, were derided as weaker speakers if they did not master the phoneme. I recall sitting with a close friend, relaying the details of a meeting I had taken part in earlier in the day. One of the participants, an acquaintance of my friend, impressed me with her use of some highly specialized English terminology and idiomatic phrases. I remarked to my friend that I found this participant's English skills remarkable. Surprised, my friend raised an eyebrow in dismissal of my statement. She doesn't speak English well, she scoffed, she doesn't even know how to say /p/.

Just like other linguistic attributes, accents were subject to concerns about snobbery, showing off, legitimacy and prestige. They were also a linguistic location in which speakers could claim the authenticity of their English abilities while minimizing the linguistic skills of others by painting them as mere attempts to flaunt their status. Those with international connections, whether for education or business, argued that they focused on the communicative competence of their accents in an international context, carrying not an iota about the Syrian repercussions of having a marked British inflection. I visited Walid in his well-appointed offices, where he acts as the vice-president of an international holding company, of which his wealthy father was one of the founders. As he explained his responsibilities at the company, I asked him what role English had played in building his career. The graduate of a university in London, he answered by focusing on the social significance of accents.

People are fascinated about accents in Syria. When it comes to me, I've lost my British accent for sure. I really don't care about it. When I speak to Oriental people from Thailand or Japan, I really try to soften my accent. It's not about impressing them, it's about communicating. That's something again that Syrian people misconceive. It's about communication not about impressing people for me. If I speak to someone with really basic skills, I want the deal to be conducted rather than writing the literature.

Especially when they know that I'm educated in Britain for 5 years, they come to me and try to impress me with some accents. And for me, I'm so proud of – not proud – just relaxed, I don't want to make things complicated.

Walid's well-established position in a social circle consisting of the most prominent names in Syrian business and his family's own profitable business dealings allow him the luxury of not needing to impress people. His position in business and society is so assured that he can assume a stance of casual nonchalance about his linguistic performance; his education in England ensures that his accent will still impress fellow

Syrians whether he attempts to maintain it or not. For others who join the new elite but do not come from families in the highest levels of society, the accent is an additional linguistic avenue through which they can raise their social profile, land more lucrative employment and earn more prominent volunteer positions. Yet they must skillfully navigate between deploying a clear accent in English without appearing to needlessly flaunt superior linguistic skills. Raya comes from an educated family that is financially comfortable and respected but not wealthy and prominent. An active member of the new elite, she held several leadership positions in JCI, a well-paying corporate job and frequently inserted English into her conversations. She studied in the lesser prestige private Catholic schools and then attended Damascus University. Her assessment of the importance of accents reflects the potential risks and gains of wielding them.

Especially for people who studied in USA or London so their accent it's just much better than anyone who is studying here. We feel that this is the problem in using English. And you are trying to show off that your accent is better that means that your English is better and you are better than me. That person knows English but not that better way.

The advantage is that if a company is seeking a person who is qualified people and don't mind giving a high salary, it will be an advantage for them [people who studied abroad] more than for us.

Raya's description highlights the authenticity – without fear of being labeled as an imposter – wielded by accents gained through education abroad. Bearers of such accents could easily reap the rewards in terms of jobs and social prestige. Those who earned strong accents through hard work in Syria or who possessed lesser accents faced a less certain social reaction and strength in securing highly paid positions.

### *Stance and power*

The individual and conversational negotiation between competing contexts and ideologies requires speakers (and analysts) to consider multiple simultaneous valences and options during interaction. Recently, many scholars have begun to speak of that individual positioning as stance, a three-part calculation in which utterances are interpreted through who said them, to whom they were said and what utterances they follow (Dubois 2007; Jaffe 2009a, 2009b). Speakers thus engage in an “interpretive process, which we track by closer observation of their own interpretive actions in stance-rich environments” (Dubois 2007, 151). In situations where stance-taking can involve two or more languages, mixing several languages

may have multiple meanings related to (a) social meanings conventionally attached to expressive activity or individual codes in a bilingual repertoire, (b) social meanings conventionally attached to switching between codes, and (c) individual knowledge, awareness, and intent related to both of the aforementioned items” (Jaffe 2007, 55).

An individual’s stance incorporates all three of these concerns and situates the speaker within the various “linguistic items that index stances – and hence build styles and identities – in local interactional contexts” (Bucholtz 2009, 149). Stance incorporates interactional style and differentiation in the calculations made by speakers. The interpretative process of stance requires an assessment of others’ interactional styles, of the history of interactional styles and of the potential reception of the speakers’ interactional style.

This is certainly true among Syrian’s new neoliberal elite where, in simplified terms, English is the international, global language while the Syrian dialect of spoken Arabic is the local language of lesser prestige on the world stage. Stances associated with

the neoliberal elite employ Arabic as the primary language to situate both the speaker and listener in the local Syrian context. Often, my informants told me that they spoke Arabic “because we’re in Syria. It’s our language.” The insertion of English lexical items references a vast recent history of the values and discursive markers of Syrian neoliberal ideology: the speaker’s international orientation, global cosmopolitanism, elite social status, business success or a private school education. Yet when the contexts shift, so do the particular manifestations of linguistic ideologies into a particular conversational setting. I found that in order for the speaker’s inclusion of English to communicate any or all of those messages to a Syrian interlocutor and to establish their relative prestige in a Syrian context, a significant portion of their linguistic output had to be in Arabic. Otherwise, the use of English indexed a conversation with a foreigner or another interaction that had little significance in a Syrian social context. An Arabic frame thus might enhance the impact of English insertions within the local context.

Given this dissonance between how Syrians at different places on the social spectrum conceive of and defend or deplore English insertions, its usage and presence can produce conflicts and debates over how much English is appropriate, when it is necessary and which linguistic practices are better for Syrian society. This is the calculus of stance: assessing and deploying interactional style options while considering context, interlocutors and shared ideologies. It is not surprising that the appropriateness of English was often a topic of heated debate and the subject of attempts to police its usage, frequency and varieties. Up for debate is the amount that is acceptable, the kind that can be done and the audience in front of whom it can take place. Syrians are critical consumers of others’ linguistic practices. My ethnographic notes and interviews are

filled with instances in which prominent members of the neoliberal elite assessed the linguistic practices of others, reflecting on exactly the coordinates that comprise stance: the context of utterances, the position of interlocutors and the understanding of linguistic norms. The ability of speakers, particularly those whose social profile lands them on the margins of the neoliberal elite, to successfully navigate conversational settings can mean the difference between acceptance into social groups and scorn or rejection. This played out with particular force at JCI meetings where the group's international affiliations necessitated English usage at the same time that the group's desire to diversify outside of the upper classes brought in members who not only did not comprehend English and who found the practice of switching alienating and exclusionary.

This combination produced a peculiar ritual of policing that was enacted at the beginning of many meetings. The committee chairperson, usually someone from the upper reaches of Syrian society or someone from a more modest background whose constant skillful switching ingratiated him or her with the elites, admonished the other members to not use English, explaining that not everyone understood English. The speaking only in Arabic would last anywhere from two to seven minutes, until someone inserted an English lexical item into an Arabic phrase. At that point, English reentered most participant's utterances and quickly the conversation would become unintelligible to someone without a steady command of English vocabulary and some key phrases. The chairperson would inevitably begin inserting English once again and fail to reprimand those who violated the rule. The following example is illustrative of a typical failed attempt to police English inclusions.

The chairwoman Lana was a vivacious woman in her late 30s who had spoken to me privately about how important it was to curb English usage at meetings so as to create a welcoming atmosphere at JCI for Syrians who had not been privileged to have the private school educations and international exposure that would result in English fluency. In an informal interview over lattes, she explained her supposed commitment to Arabic-only meetings this way:

When I insist in the meetings to speak Arabic its because I don't want people from other groups, from lower classes to go away. I want them with us. I want JCI to be larger and to have others from different groups. English can be an access.

The way such commitments unfolded in reality, however, looked a little bit different. At the beginning of the meeting, Lana opened by saying:

“اربع على نشغل areas . . . uh uh (she stammers and hesitates for a few seconds) مشروع عندنا في نطاقات children's fair.” [We work in four areas . . . uh uh areas (this time in Arabic), we have the children's fair project.]

Then after listing the other projects in a mix of English and Arabic, she leaned forward and said forcefully and pointedly, in Arabic, “as much as we can we are going to try to speak Arabic because there people among us who don't speak English well.”<sup>21</sup> After this definitive statement of the rules of the meeting, the committee chair and most of the other members proceeded to insert English lexical items rapidly and frequently. Among the terms inserted within the first few minutes after that warning: documented, international, business plan, tool kit, projects, updates, sponsorship guide.

Later in the meeting, the committee chair used the word concept in English. Suddenly she stopped and looked around the room. “Concept, شو concept?” [What is concept?] After a moment, a member yelled out مفهوم/*mafhūm*, the Arabic cognate,

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<sup>21</sup> She said in Arabic:

قد ما بقدر نحاول منحكي عربي لان في ناس مننا ما بيحكي انجليزي منيح.



laughingly. Lana laughed along, joking in English that she could no longer remember how to speak Arabic. The meeting concluded shortly after that.

The interaction that unfolded during this meeting exemplifies the calculations of stance that participants in a conversation make. Lana's stance was informed by several social facts about her and her position in the conversation. First, she sat in a place of authority, both in the room as chairperson of the committee and in other contexts as the daughter of a prominent, well-connected family. Second, she took stock of the attendees and noted the attendance of several new members. Third, she made calculated assumptions about their linguistic abilities and used her position of contextual authority to decree English off-limits. After some time, she either forgot her calculated stance against English or consciously changed her stance, deciding that English was appropriate.

The response to her re-insertion of English into the conversation and her "inability" to recall the Arabic term for concept was the result of calculations of stance on the part of the meeting's attendees. Given the layers of authority she wielded, it was unlikely that anyone in the room would challenge her violation of her own rules.<sup>22</sup> When she failed to produce the Arabic word, her interlocutors consider that within the context of JCI, English is prestigious and central to the group's conception of success. Their calculations resulted in the widespread laughter in the room and the effort of one attendee to laughingly produce the Arabic word for her.

Another example of interactional style deployed through stance calculations took place at a JCI-sponsored business lecture at a large downtown hotel. An older gentleman who had been prominent in the Syrian business community for years presented a talk

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<sup>22</sup> There are several JCI members, all of them founders of the organization and at the time holding higher offices, whom I believe would have challenged her. However, none of them were present during this meeting.

about entrepreneurship. The talk was intended to motivate young people starting out in business and to introduce business practices to Syrians who might not otherwise have been exposed to concepts like human resources, skills development and business plans. Yet the egalitarian intent of the lecture may have been diluted by the fact that the speaker, like Lana, proved unable or unwilling to translate many of the phrases he used into Arabic. And like Lana, the English phrases he inserted were not from a basic level of vocabulary: refresher course, infrastructure, incentive travel and service industry. Despite the rampant inclusion of English lexical items, the speaker concluded with this expression of contrition: “إكتير English terminology احكي عم أن بأعتذر” [I apologize for speaking/using English terminology so much] It does not require an anthropologist to point out the irony of apologizing for excessive English usage by using English. Suffice it to say, that like other efforts to curb insertion of English into Arabic contexts and conversations, this one failed because policing efforts were more a performance (see Goffman 1959) of modesty and a stance calculation than a genuine effort to create more inclusive linguistic practices.

A stance calculation that incorporates Arabic and English is not just for serious meetings and overt power plays. Often, Syrians around me played with English and Arabic as part of humor and social banter. One evening, a large group of about thirty people gathered at a pub, which usually offers jazz performances on the weekends, in a downtown hotel. This night, a Tuesday the club was offering karaoke night, and we spent several hours belting out current Arabic pop songs, American slow-rock hits from the 1970s and 80s, a healthy amount of Abba and even a few classic Egyptian ballads. Some ordered alcoholic drinks; others opted for juice and salads. The overall atmosphere

was relaxed, and as the evening wore on, everyone became enthusiastic singers. Men and women mingled casually, both sang and both walked around. People tackled songs with equal enthusiasm.

The Arabic songs, mostly Egyptian ballads from 20 years ago, received the most enthusiastic reaction and the microphone was passed around from person to person. Much of the humor of the evening came from those who were adlibbing the lyrics to the songs, both in Arabic and in English. They would play with the Arabic words, inserting similar, goofy words that rhymed with the lyrics. The most laughter, however, came when a couple of males in the group began singing classic 80s American love songs – think “On the Wings of Love” and a heavy rotation of Celine Dion’s greatest hits – and then adding in Arabic commentary or singing the same phrase translated into Arabic during a lull in the singing. For instance, one song said something like, “I can’t stop thinking about you.” The karaoke singer sang the line in English quite melodramatically and got a laugh from everyone else. Then he said, “ما بأقدر” [I can’t] in an equally melodramatic fashion. The rest of us roared with laughter and applauded vigorously. The singers, usually reserved men who coolly smoked cigarettes and waited for people to approach them before engaging in conversation, removed Arabic-English mixing from an interactional setting and placed into a performance setting. This public display of their virtuosic linguistic style, beyond establishing them as witty and smooth, also reminded their audience of their superior skills in English. From their ability to master the English slang of popular songs to the ease with which they substituted English and Arabic, their skill in manipulating the two languages together to produce universal laughter cemented their social status as particularly worldly, sophisticated and adept.

### *English Usage and Denial*

Many stance calculations among members of the neoliberal elite resulted in the denial of English usage on the part of individual speakers. Despite the pervasive insertion of English into Arabic conversations, many members of the new elite systematically denied, minimized or explained away English usage. I argue that this is a deliberate – if not entirely conscious – strategy to maintain linguistic and social boundaries while striking an egalitarian stance. It buffered the most egregious inserters of English – whose linguistic output was thus incomprehensible to a majority of Syrians – from claims of elitism. Also, it is important to consider their denial in the context of Syria’s recent history as a proudly Arab nationalist stronghold. It also produced a perplexing conundrum from members of the new elite who were less entrenched in elite styles and who often straddled between higher and lower status social circles. They were acutely aware of their own English-based linguistic practices among their elite peers yet achieving entrance into the new elite required participating in the denial or minimizing of English usage.

Denial of English usage did not mean that upper elites completely erased their inclusion of English lexical items. Their stance adjusted depending on other speakers and the context. Often, a set series of different “excuses” for the English terminology that frequently surfaced in their linguistic styles. Sometimes, this did take the form of out and out denial of any English inclusion. Mostly, however, they would explain that a comparable expression – usually a business term – simply did not exist in Arabic. Or, with equal frequency, they would attribute any use of English as necessitated by their

international business connections or affiliations with international organizations. This particular strategy of minimizing was particularly prevalent among upper elites who were mostly likely to have direct business dealings with international clients. This gives their denial of veneer of plausibility even if much of their English usage occurred in an all-Syrian environment. As my informants declined in wealth and social prestige, they were much more likely to have thought long and hard about whom they included and excluded by such linguistic practices, how they benefited from switching regularly and who they alienated.

One stance of denial involved claiming that any English insertion was unintentional and inevitable. Most upper class informants seemed almost defensive when asked about their frequent insertion of English lexical items and countered that the only reason they use English terms in an Arabic conversation is because the Arabic terms – if they existed at all – were not well-known or used. The insistence that English is the language of business, both in Syria and abroad, meant that using English was not a personal choice that reflected the social or linguistic ideology of the speaker. One of JCI's founders, whose family owns a prominent tourism company, explained: "English is the business language. I am involved in many things. We import stuff from abroad so all our communication is in English. We work in travel and tourism so again all our correspondence is in English." In addition, many Syrians explained to me in interviews about the role English plays in their private and professional lives that

Farah, whose last name is well-known to every Syrian, whose father is close to the regime and who attended an expensive American university abroad, explained her habitual English usage necessary when dealing with topics related to business. She did

not aim to use English but said that the business term comes to her mind in English first and she must “think about it before saying it in Arabic.” Many more informants blamed Arabic’s weakness in the realm of business for their reluctance to use terms in Arabic. Others reported that due to educations entirely in foreign languages and never in Arabic – the surest sign of an elite background given that only the most expensive schools in Damascus (DCS and the French School) offered this – they had difficulty accessing Arabic vocabulary. This explanation of continued English usage was only accessible to the small handful of people who attended, and more importantly were known to have attended, these two schools. One woman in her late 20s, Reem, who attended the French school and later graduated from AUB, joined me for coffee late one afternoon and, at my request, narrated the role the English played in her personal and professional life. In both contexts, she mentioned, unprompted by me, how her attempts to construct all-Arabic sentences typically fail and result in English or French insertions.

When I was very young in school, we used to speak a lot in French. With mom we speak in Arabic. If I want to talk to my dad, I speak in French. Even with my friends and my cousins we used to speak in French. Even at home, I start in Arabic and end in English. Because words come easier for me in English.

In terms of social life? They mostly speak English well. My friends from school they also speak French so when we hang out we end up speaking 3 languages. If a word comes easier in English, we say it in English, if it comes easier in French, we say it in French. We use a lot of English, yes. In Arabic, all the conversation in Arabic? It’s difficult for me.

This naturalization of English usage, as devoid of social meaning and as simply a function of utility, does not necessarily mean that Reem was being disingenuous. It is easy to imagine, and indeed sympathize, that if one had never attended school conducted in Arabic, it might indeed be quite challenging to access the pertinent Arabic vocabulary quickly. What is more significant about such explanations is that they ignore the social

implications for such linguistic repertoires within Syria. Those clearly recognized as elite, whether by virtue of their family name, educational history, wealth or time spent abroad, simply refused to acknowledge the attendant social meanings of their English usage.

Conversely, informants who came from more modest backgrounds, who attended government schools and who had not lived outside the country, for education, entertainment or work, built their stance with an acknowledgement of the risks and ramifications of integrating English into their Arabic. Rather than deny their use of English words and phrases, they described a stance that was transparent about the calculations of what they gained and lost by making what they saw as a conscious decision to integrate English into their spoken Arabic. They also described the multiple stances that they took various kinds of interaction, depending on their interlocutor, mainly. On one hand, their use of English indexed education and sophistication and a willingness and desire to play by the rules of elite Syrian society. On the other hand, they knew that it alienated their friends from more modest backgrounds and prompted accusations of snobbery and social-climbing. Yet most who were eager to enter into new social realms expressed their choice as necessary for self-improvement and social advance. Returning to the typography laid out by Jawad in the introduction to this chapter, his awareness of the social mobility afforded by increasing and decreasing English usage appropriately according to the social context is the primary factor in determining his interactional style.

I think they say [showing off] the problem with them is that most of them they couldn't learn English, they found it a very hard language. They didn't continue with their learning. Most of them, I say this dearly, they don't like to develop themselves. But I think that most of my friends now are aware about they have

to. So I think this percentage of persons who don't like to learn English is decreasing.

We have to deal with these two types of persons in our lives. My best friend she's a girl I spent most of my time with her. She don't like speaking English at all. She understands the basic words something like this. When I speak in English, she says why you don't speak English, speak Arabic, keep speaking Arabic. When I brought her to JCI so she couldn't continue in JCI cause they are speaking "ELS, commission director" and she didn't understand. She refused to learn . . . it's an idea.

Jawad's social relationships means that he transverses two linguistic worlds: one in which mixing between English and Arabic is de rigeur and proof of the sort of self-development so cherished among the neoliberal elite and another in which the same linguistic choices invite censure. His explicit cost-benefit analysis of his linguistic choices differs from his how his peers from more elite backgrounds express their own linguistic strategies.

There are also some upper elites who do engage in similar stance calculations, aiming to reduce exclusivity through less English usage. One prominent JCI committee chairperson, something of a Damascene socialite, did express privately to me in our interview and publicly during several JCI meetings that she chaired her concern over the potential alienation of new, non-English speaking JCI members. Like Jawad, she recognized that less elite Syrians might utilize English usage consciously as a means to advance themselves professionally and socially. In our interview, I asked her directly for her assessment of the English usage in JCI. She answered:

We had many cases where people were in JCI and they left because they couldn't follow [in English] and they were ashamed to ask. Some of them were encouraged to say no, speak Arabic, we do not understand English. But some of them no. Especially when you are among the classy people, rich people like [she names specific members]. They are rich and powerful.

Not everyone is rich in Syria, not everyone is belonging to a big family, a reputable family. People need something to make them stronger, and they think they need foreign language to make them stronger. In fact, it works with them.



Yet despite her awareness that repeated English usage could and did alienate other Syrians and that English usage played a role in social stratification, she never successfully curbed her habit of English usage. She, after all, was the same committee chair who insisted on all-Arabic policy in her meetings and then proceeded to use English terminology extensively.

During a lengthy conversation over tea and *arguileh* with Hadil, a human resources manager and trainer with a multi-national firm, she enumerated the many professional benefits she had accrued because of her fluent English. In chapter 3, she noted that in social situations, “most of time it’s a mix . . . People good in English, the community is reshaping. You are developing yourself, your income is higher, your interest in development is getting higher.” Raghda’s depiction highlights her own and her peers’ pattern of English usage, despite my efforts to engage her in a discussion of specific conversations in which she was a participant, and I was observing.

Jawad’s articulated awareness of his malleable linguistic habits stands in striking contrast to upper elites whose stance was consistent across interactions and never involved admitting to consistent English usage when speaking with other Syrians. Although they were often the most frequent and widespread users of English in otherwise Arabic-speaking contexts, they offered several rationales for minimizing or explaining away their daily reliance on English – particularly lexical items. The motivation to deny or minimize their English usage mitigates any charges of pretension. For the Syrians regarded as sitting at the apex of Syrian society, incorporating English into Arabic conversations is to be downplayed and minimized, lest they be seen as snobby or as alienating. When they do acknowledge the prominent role that English communication

plays in their social lives, business activities and institutional affiliations, they situate it in a global context, never the local Syrian one. Ahmed, the current JCI president, draws upon the social prestige he accrues as a wealthy McGill graduate and possessor of a prestigious last name, explained his organization's reliance on English by denying that widespread English usage had any connection to local social norms.

In terms of language use, a noticeable difference is that the level of English will vary with the background of the individual member which is only natural. However it is difficult for someone to be in JCI without some level of English simply because we are an international organization.

Being able to communicate in English . . . is necessary to really gain the full experience and experience everything JCI has to offer you. Ok you can translate into Arabic and do the networking in Arabic, but you really will only have the local or national things about JCI. In order to get that international experience, you need to have an English background to travel abroad and communicate with other people.

As mentioned earlier, citing the imperatives of international communication is a common trope of denying English usage. That is not to imply that Ahmed's explanation does not have a convincing logic to it. JCI is part of an international parent organization, and many of the group's activities involving liaising with JCI chapters in non-Arabic speaking countries. However, what Ahmed and other upper elites do is transfer this explanation for English usage onto a range of other social situations in which they do frequently insert English words and phrases when it is absolutely *not* necessary for comprehensible communication. They also use them in situations where moments of socialization of those new to the neoliberal elite occur. Ahmed, as the local JCI president, interacted with new JCI members in his official capacity quite frequently. During these times, he relied on English when using official JCI terms but also when English usage was completely optional. Of course, Ahmed had the added advantage of

having lived for over a decade in Canada and the United States. Although he never cited that to me personally, it was a well-known fact about him and gave his English usage the veneer of authenticity that is so important to achieving social prestige without facing accusations of showing off.

Another McGill graduate, the son of a prominent business man and a wealthy entrepreneur in his own right, Shadi framed his own linguistic habits as dictated solely by the demands of his international education, familial relations and business ties. Like Ahmed and other upper elites, he erases his English insertions into Arabic conversations and depicts his linguistic habits as monolingual conversations in which his stance calculation shifts depending only on his interlocutor.

I speak a mix of French and Arabic at home because my maternal grandmother is French. But mainly Arabic. I guess it's a mix of languages with my friends. It depends on the person you're talking to. I can adjust to the other person. If they are American or something, I can speak to them in English.

Like Ahmed, Shadi frames his language selection in different terms than Jawad did. For Jawad, the incorporation of English terms and phrases into his conversational repertoire was a conscious stance strategy whose intended audience as he describes it is other Syrians who he – and most people around around him – perceives as having more prestige and sophistication. At the apex of Syrian social hierarchies, an explicit admittance of willful switching would only expose the individual to accusations of pretentious, in a society still deeply ambivalent about its burgeoning culture of conspicuous consumption and international orientations.

### ***“Showing Off” and Authentic Linguistic Usage***

Much stance taking in Syria involves calculations over individual speaker’s “authenticity” in speaking English or using English lexical items in certain contexts. Despite the social power that successful stance calculations can convey on a skilled linguistic user, all displays of English usage are not equal. There is always a debate over whose use of English is authentic – that is to say the bi-product of a childhood spent abroad or an elite education – and whose is viewed as a vulgar attempt at showing off. While those from more modest backgrounds recognized the peril they risked in using English insertions as a method for communicating with those from elite backgrounds, they considered their new linguistic habits necessary to move ahead in business and society. Syrians from more prominent backgrounds, however, often buffered themselves against claims of snobbery stemming from their use of foreign languages by focusing on the necessity and authenticity of their foreign language usage, which they contrasted with an amorphous social group that used English only for purposes of social advancement.

A pleasant conversation over lunch at the newly opened German café reminded me how often elite stance-taking meant discrediting the English usage of other Syrians as a contrast to the speaker’s own perceived “right” to mix Arabic and English. I was speaking with Bushra, a charming, soft-spoken 20-something with a prestigious last name and a great deal of family wealth. Bushra grew up in Nigeria, attended university in Lebanon and lived in Syria for the first time in her early 20s. Effortlessly fluent in English and French – from her education in international schools in Nigeria – Bushra reported that she initially struggled to adjust to both social and linguistic norms of Syria when she moved with her family.

I had a hard time when I came here, there were certain things I couldn't say in Arabic. Words that I never used in Arabic. I'd ask my mom, or my colleagues, how do you say this in Arabic. I feel more comfortable in English because nobody in Nigeria speaks Arabic. It's just in the house.

When I moved to Syria, it was very, very tough because I couldn't find people like me who lived the same lifestyle and were abroad even our way of thinking is different.

Bushra linked her struggles to her childhood spent abroad, which she believed was the sole reason she developed linguistic and social patterns that differ greatly from the majority of Syrian society. Although at times during our conversations she seemed aware of socio-economic status differences regarding language learning, mentioning that she spoke only Arabic with "the poorer people, the less fortunate people that I sometimes deal with," she resisted the notion that social prestige might play a strong role in producing different systems of linguistic and social value. She also differentiated between those who were truly English speakers and those who faked it to earn quick and easy social prestige, the same way they might purchase an expensive car with which to show off.

When I first came here, I saw the people who show off, and they're not people who speak English. They're not people who were raised abroad. They were people who had more advantages here in the country and who can afford to have a BMW and they do it to show off. For sure. Definitely. People who spoke English and were raised abroad, they buy it because they enjoy it, because they can afford it and because they want to enjoy life. Who doesn't want to enjoy life and have the latest? But some people take it to extremes. People who show off are people who don't speak English, Syrians who've lived here their whole lives and want attention. But I don't think it's related to people who speak English who do that.

I don't want to talk about people who speak English and how they think, but they are more liberal and down-to-earth. They're more relaxed and convinced of who they are, comfortable with who they are. It doesn't really matter to them that I have this and want to show it off. It's part of their life. I'm not one to buy a Gucci bag or anything.

As part of Bushra's stance, she calculated that a certain social group of Syrians was entitled to purchase expensive goods, speak foreign languages freely and "enjoy life" without fear of social censure or displaying poor taste. However, another class of Syrians, something equivalent to the nouveau riche, did not possess the necessary bonafides of time spent abroad, generations of family money and private school education to "enjoy life" without being accused of ostentatious displays of showing off.

Bushra's explanation incorporated conspicuous consumption into her explanation of who can legitimately use certain linguistic and consumption styles, and she was not unique among upper elites in differentiating between who could use English authentically and others whose use is inevitably viewed as a ploy to social climb. Even if this was viewed sympathetically, it was still differentiated from upper elites. A young man named Haytham, who attended an Ivy League university was the product of Aleppo's international schools, which his parents also attended. He felt firmly entrenched in the foreign-language speaking upper elite of Aleppo yet recognized that Syrians from less overtly prestigious backgrounds might feel compelled to prove themselves linguistically.

In Aleppo, people who have gone to foreign schools. There's just a handful. Everyone knows everyone. The fact that you've gone to an international school is known even before you . . . [pauses] you really don't need to say anything for people to know it. It's sort of taken as a given that you're going to be speaking a foreign language. Now if you haven't gone to one of these schools and you want to prove to people, yeah I can speak English, then you sort of . . . [trailing off]

While Damascus is certainly larger than Aleppo, with a greater number of educational options, the idea that private school students do not need to work to prove their linguistic or social advantages certainly applies. The stakes are much higher for those from less privileged backgrounds who must walk the fine line between displaying the English skills

that are necessary to move ahead without appearing nakedly ambitious or pretentious while doing so.

There are effective stances for balancing between these two needs and those who can implement it successfully often do find themselves immersed in a more elite social milieu. The key to establishing the authenticity of one's English usage was to take a stance that connects the English to an economic imperative, like employment, training or education. I interviewed Jamil at Costa Café, where I sipped a latte, and he chain smoked French cigarettes. Jamil, in his early 30s, was active in JCI, had worked for years at a cell phone company and had something of a reputation as a ladies' man. He spent half his childhood in Saudi Arabia but returned to government schooling, including university, in Syria. He is the distant relative of a well-known family that earned fame during the Syrian struggle for independence against France between the two world wars. His assessment of his own balance between English and Arabic typifies the kind positioning one must establish in order to avoid charges of arrogance.

I do switch between Arabic and English a lot these days especially in the last 3 years. People start to learn English. It's not about that I know English. It's about demands of the business, demands of the work. One example is JCI. But I have other places where I go and switch. There are some events within my family, it's not suitable to talk in English because some of my relatives might not think it's a polite attitude toward them.

Jamil even mentioned how strongly he felt about displays of English for the sake of prestige or showing off. He described how he would thwart such linguistic performances by pretending not to speak English and by responding only in Arabic.

When I go to a place where people start to speak English or French just as a show off, I start to speak Arabic. I act as if I don't understand them where I do understand of course. When I feel are talking in different languages for showing off, I start speaking only Arabic. When it's a different atmosphere, of course I need to use another language. Especially when it's business. Most of my time, I

spend with business deals and activities. It's more useful to specify what I need to communicate in English over Arabic.

Jamil effectively situates himself as against the use of foreign language to establish inauthentic prestige and as legitimately entitled to use English without censure. He simultaneously reprimands those who show off by publicly sabotaging their attempts to incorporate foreign languages and reinforces the assertion that as someone involved in business, he simply must use English to close deals. Like citing time spent abroad or a lack of Arabic knowledge due to one's education, recourse to the demands of business is yet another tool in the stance-taking of elite interactional style that allows the new elite to simultaneously build status through English usage and deny that they are doing just that.

As individual speakers encounter and navigate the formation of Syria's new social group, the neoliberal elite, they must determine how to react to the social and linguistic practices favored by the group. First, they can use their linguistic style to align their linguistic practices with those favored by the elite. Linguistic style is generally recognizable through differentiation or, in other words, what that linguistic style is opposed to in a specific context. In Syria, this means that a neoliberal elite linguistic style relies on consistent English inclusions into Arabic sentences. There is also an emphasis on English SDS terms, corresponding non-verbal styles and phonetically accurate English accents. Despite the ubiquity of this style among the neoliberal elite, there is confusion and debate over when and how to deploy it conversationally. Individuals must thus engage in stance calculations in which they assess a conversational context based on their interlocutors and the history of interaction between them. If stance calculations are successful – and allow the speaker to display English-based linguistic



practices without accusations of snobbery and showing off – the speaker can accrue a wide variety of social benefits. As the next chapter will demonstrate, those benefits can also extend beyond the social realm and into the realm of profit, finances and tangible gain. That successful integration into the neoliberal elite and its sociolinguistic practices can be transferred to material profit puts into sharper relief the stakes of this group's boundaries and exclusivity.

## **Chapter 5: “Class A Talks English”: Linguistic Practices in Syria’s Marketplaces**

My meeting and proposed interview with Yasir, the owner of an upscale event-planning company, began awkwardly to the say the least. I had seen a small, discreet advertisement for his company, *White Weddings*, in a corner of Abu Rummaneh and its fluent English usage – a sign reading “*White Weddings: Wedding & Events Organizing*” – and its crisp, flowery graphic design made me envision the owner as an elegant, wealthy Syrian woman who gracefully alternated between English and Arabic – exactly the kind of social standing and linguistic usage I sought for my research. So when I dialed the number listed on the sign, I did not even bother to start with Arabic as I usually did. Imagine my surprise when a gruff-sounding young man answered back in Arabic.

Yasir too was a little taken aback when I explained that I was an American interested in how Syrians used English and Arabic in their lives and businesses. He said briefly in English, “yes we do use English here,” in a perplexed tone but agreed to let me visit him the following morning. When I arrived at his sparsely furnished office in small office building filled mostly with lawyers, he immediately informed me that his English was weak and that he probably did not know much about my interests but could show me everything about the latest trends in Syrian weddings. I agreed and explained in more detail that I cared most about how English was used to separate social groups from each other. When he realized that it was, in essence, an explanation of social hierarchies that I was after, it became clear that my research topic mirrored his business strategy. He enthusiastically jumped into an explanation of Syrian class hierarchy:

Yasir: فيها سورية [Syria has in it] class a, class b, class c people, الشعب [the masses]. Our company or our new project needs or wants Class A clients. Everyone in class A like advertising in English. When he or she read Arabic, she or he take a bad انطباع [impression] . . .

Me: Impression.

Yasir: Impression for this company.

This neatly summarized explanation of the convergence of social norms that privilege elite English usage and a new category of businesses using English to tap into that wealthy market dovetailed into Yasir's comprehensive explanation of how commerce worked at every level of Syrian society.

Yasir: Here Class A most of them talk English. يعني [it means] maybe um a little my brother like me, most of my friends better than me.

Me: Do most people speak English when they call you?

Yasir: No, no Arabic [laughing]. But the advertising should be in English. When you do advertising for Class A they live in Abu Rummaneh, Malki, Kfar Suseh, Mezze, maybe in Yafour.<sup>23</sup> When you go another places, like مخيم [refugee camp], you know مخيم? It's a public<sup>24</sup> place so you can write in عربي [Arabic] because most of them anywhere, any public where, out of Damascus, like to see advertising in Arabic. Because a little of them speak English.

Everyone here in the office when we meet, me and my brother, with the bride and groom, speak Arabic everyone. There is shortcuts, a lot of shortcuts, should be in English. For example, we can say صوت [voice] we say DJ. DJ means صوت [voice]. DJ works in weddings, شربة مهمة [something important], DJ, lighting, decoration for wedding, photography, camera.

Yasir is not the first social scientist, amateur or otherwise, to sagely observe that the markets for commodities and for linguistic styles (and their connected social meanings) are often governed by a similar logic and linked by overlapping ideologies. Just like a sleek graphic or a catchy slogan, the well-placed inclusion of English in the Damascus marketplace can promote a business and cement its affiliation with the neoliberal elite.

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<sup>23</sup> These are some of the most affluent neighborhoods in Damascus and its surrounding suburbs. See Chapter 2 for more background.

<sup>24</sup> He used the word public in English, most likely translating from the Arabic شعبي which means popular in the sense of common or lower-class. Here, he is using the word to indicate poorer regions of the city.

As Yasir noted, that makes the link between commerce and language explicit and direct. In contemporary Syria, key English lexical items are increasingly playing a powerful and segmenting role in the worlds of commerce and consumption just as they are used to establish social hierarchies and boundaries.

In the decade since Bashar al-Asad assumed power and began pushing Syria's economy slowly but inexorably toward a "social market economy," the Syrian marketplace has been flooded with a wide array of newly available foreign consumer products and information technologies from abroad. From inexpensive plastic Chinese cooking tools to iPods and Windows software to designer Italian outfits, Syrians can now find what they desire right in their own country.<sup>25</sup> With the creation of new kinds of consumer marketplaces, Syrians have also shaped and participated in new linguistic marketplaces. Just as their enthusiasm for foreign products and services usurps their affection for locally made Syrian goods, the possession and successful deployment of certain elite styles of English and Arabic that index global affiliations can earn them prestige, professional advancement and financial success. Syrians often discuss acquiring and deploying English in ways that assume that economic and linguistic marketplaces overlap and that the benefits of one can create gains in the other.

The term "linguistic marketplace" originates from Pierre Bourdieu's influential body of work on how the kinds of linguistic styles and repertoires people deploy can carry significance, influence and power in other realms of social and cultural life (1991). Bourdieu describes how top-down institutions declared certain linguistic varieties as official languages which then became the most prestigious linguistic forms. Those who

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<sup>25</sup> Prior to 2005, when the assassination of Rafik Hariri and Syria's presumed responsibility for it made Syrians reluctant to travel to Beirut, wealthy Syrians frequently took weekend shopping trips to Beirut.

commanded such varieties with mastery earn a “profit of distinction” which can be “spent” in other domains. He identified the educational system as the primary mechanism through which prestige varieties are inculcated and through which speakers learn to identify themselves as elite or not. Although he acknowledged that speakers had some ability to manipulate the market, his model relied on the theory that ultimately official institutions set the parameters of marketplaces, linguistic or otherwise. Other scholars of the political economy of linguistic styles have further refined Bourdieu’s theories by demonstrating that elites styles are a shifting notion, comprehensible only in their immediate context, historicity and relationship with other social categories (see Irvine 1989; Woolard 1985).

In the Arabic-speaking world, Niloofar Haeri (2003, 1997, 1996) applies Bourdieu’s marketplace formulation to middle class Egyptians who navigate between the spoken Egyptian variety of Arabic, familiar to them from their home lives and social interactions, and Modern Standard Arabic, the formal, written language of education and literature. She refutes Bourdieu’s conflation of official languages, i.e. the language of the state, with elite linguistic forms, or the linguistic variety laden with prestige and favored by the upper classes (Haeri 1997). Haeri describes how the Egyptian economy’s demand for foreign language speakers means that elite Egyptians are educated in English or French while the Egyptian government conducts public education and official business in Arabic. Contrary to what Bourdieu’s theories might predict, elites are not the ones who display mastery of the official language. Bourdieu’s insistence on the unity of linguistic markets, she argues, is a historical truth of the development of Western Europe, particularly modern France, not a universal inevitability.

Despite its obvious limitations, Bourdieu's move to link labor markets and economic activities with a hierarchy of linguistic variety resonates in contemporary Syria. I argue in this chapter that new economic possibilities and global connections are inextricably linked to the rise in prominence of new linguistic practices, in a complicated relationship that is neither unidirectional nor deterministic. I highlight the realms of marketing and consumption, education, hiring practices and even marriage where such a relationship is particularly apparent and relevant. The neoliberal elite's linguistic styles, described in the previous chapter, can then be leveraged in other "markets," whether they are for employment, the consumption of goods, the cementing of social connections or acquisition of cultural prestige. At the same time, Syrians with social or economic advantages invest great energy into leveraging those "profits" into the most prestigious linguistic varieties for themselves and their children. This chapter addresses these issues first by analyzing the prominence of certain English styles in local marketing. Next, it explores how expensive educational institutions that teach in foreign languages and have international connections have become a potent form of social prestige. The question remains, however, of whether the increasing synergy of linguistic and economic markets in Syria means that social hierarchies affiliations are more malleable and shifting or whether this is merely an opportunity for old elites to reclaim dominance through new maneuvers. An exploration of the role that elite interactional styles play in hiring practices will illuminate how new linguistic possibilities may serve to shift class boundaries. Finally, this chapter examines the complicated calculations involving social status, employment, gender ideology and linguistic practice that elite young women make when selecting marriage partners.

### *Marketing, Buying & Selling in English*

Returning to Yasir and his matter-of-fact explanation of why using English was simply a demand of the market, I realize that I had failed to understand how crucial sophisticated English usage is to successful marketing and how Syrians need not command the language flawlessly nor have spent time abroad to harness its power to make them money or to imbue businesses with the aura of sophistication necessary to make them successful among Damascus' elite.

*White Weddings'* promotional catalogue illustrates how its owner's Arabic-English linguistic ideologies unfold in the written context. As the language of prestigious commerce and "Class A" customers, English is used in names, logos and advertising slogans. However, in deference to the fact that even some members of Class A may not always command the language as capably as they command shopping English – a lexicon that includes English words for clothing sizes, specific items and prices – the introductory pages to the booklet are in Arabic, with the company's name and its cooperating partners written in English in an otherwise all Arabic text. Additionally, a few key phrases that Yasir identified as particularly significant to Class A customers – and thus necessarily spoken and written in English – all appear in English in the midst of an Arabic text. However, in the case of the "shortcuts," the Arabic translation is written directly next to them. As an example the insertion of the English "Wedding List" sits next to its Arabic translation.<sup>26</sup> The indexical value of these key English terms derives from their ability to index wealth and cosmopolitanism, not from their semantic content.

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<sup>26</sup> The translation reads

قائمة هدايا العروسين.

With the exponential rise in expensive retail and dining outlets in Syria – usually franchises or multi-national conglomerates – comes a parallel increase in the use of English to market, price and sell such goods and services. Technically, these stores, cafes and offices do not monitor who comes through their doors and are part of an accessible public domain in Damascus. However, as their use of English advertising, menus, price tags and logos coincides with prohibitively high prices for the majority of Syrians, the combination of using a foreign language and expense effectively communicates which kinds of Syrians might be welcome as consumers in such venues and which may not.<sup>27</sup> Just as the use of deixis and SDSs constructed social boundaries in entrepreneurship organizations, English terms in signage also erect invisible borders around seemingly public venues. Public displays of English work both indexically and referentially in signage; they index global sophistication and local elite status and reference the business belonging to the sign (Frekko 2009).

Of course, English signage also is used in neighborhoods and venues with lower price points and a less elite clientele. This is particularly true of clothing and accessory store names, which were often in English even in non-elite shopping areas. However, the naming choices for these stores tend to be less fluent than those in elite areas. For example, a large shoe store is named “Why Not?” and a men’s clothing store had a sign reading, “No Excess.” A clothing store featuring party dresses for Islamic, conservative women to wear under their long, modest coats is called “Ice Cream.” Orthography in

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<sup>27</sup> The exception to this is *Cham City Center*, Damascus’ first Western-style mall. Although most of the stores’ wares are far too expensive for the average Syrian, the mall became a tourist destination for rural and less wealthy Syrians who would spend Friday evenings walking around the passageways, taking in the window displays and sitting in the food court. They did not, however, enter the shops whose English signs and obviously expensive merchandise, performed the same exclusionary function as similar phenomenon did in other parts of the city. See Chapter 3 for a more detailed explanation.



these stores tends to be less accurate as the prestige of the area and the price point of the goods decreases. One store selling women's clothing spells Avenues as "Avnues." Still others utilizes global names but often select ones with little connection to the store's goods, such as the men's shoe store named after the Irish band "U2." These contrast with more elite linguistic signage and naming, where the English name correlates with the store's wares. These include the cosmetic store "Faces," a gift shop named "Momento" and the shoe store "Red Shoe."

In the Syrian marketplace, like in elite interactional styles, Arabic most often communicates the bulk of pertinent information and does the labor of communication. English, represented through key lexical items, indexes sophistication and wealth, or membership in Class A as Yasir so pithily described it. For the Syrians who can afford Yasir's pricy services and who believe that wedding planning is a service worth its cost, Yasir's insertion of English in his signage and marketing materials communicates that his business subscribes to the same linguistic and social ideologies as they do. It assures them that their purchase of his services will situate them as elite and communicate that message to other Syrians who are also steeped in a system where strategically deploying English conveys similar messages. The repeated usage of certain key English terms also contributes to codifying an elite vocabulary of consumption which reinforces boundaries of the new elite class. Those who can afford Yasir's services are exposed and re-exposed to a term like "wedding list" which they can then use in other settings to signal that they have both the finances and *savoir-faire* to have encountered a "wedding list."

Yasir's ardent commitment to using English in his business and his ability to articulate its social ramifications may set him apart in the Syrian business world, but his

use of English in high-end marketing does not. In the most fashionable retail spaces in Damascus, outlets selling jeans for \$300 US and sweaters for much more, the window displays and signs almost never used Arabic. English dominated window display with the assumption that anyone who could afford the astronomical prices at these stores would either command English fluently or approvingly accept the presence of English as indexing the store's prestige. In a slight variation of the American saying "if you have to ask, you can't afford it," the Syrian version would read something like, "if you have to translate it, you can't afford it." The dovetailing of unaffordable pricing and English usage in commerce contribute to the construction of invisible and intangible – yet effective and recognizable – boundaries that establish which Syrians can become elite consumers and customers and which cannot.

One window display from the early fall of 2008 caught my eye in particular. The store, *AI Zone*, is the trendier, more youth-oriented sister store of the designer Lebanese department store *Aishti*. The store is located in the *Boulevards*, a strip mall attached to the Four Seasons hotel that was opened to house Damascus' small but robust luxury shopping scene. It houses a branch of the English coffee chain *Costa*, several Lebanese shoe stores selling Italian labels for hundreds of dollars and a jewelry store with enormous diamonds sparkling in its windows. *AI Zone*'s inventory features hundreds of designer denim options, which retail for anywhere from \$200 US to \$400 US. In the fall of 2008, the store featured its jean selection in its window, with an eye-catching electric blue plastic sculpture spelling out "JEANS." Above that, hung a blown-up image of a jean's care label. Most of these jeans were designed and produced in the US, meaning that their presence in Syria was technically illegal from an American perspective, since

American sanctions passed in 2005 banned the import of American consumer goods into Syria. Yet that fact did not stop the chain from proclaiming the jeans' American origins, in the form of a "Made in the USA" at the care label's bottom. Arabic appears nowhere in the window display which implicitly links its high-priced wares with English familiarity, American clothing sensibilities and local sophistication. It differs slightly from other marketing and advertising techniques in which the bulk of crucial information was communicated in Arabic while English lexical items or brand names signaled elite status to customers. The complete omission of Arabic in this case reinforces the foreign (in a positive sense) origin of the jeans and the placement of *AI Zone* at the apex of elite and expensive stores in Damascus.

Despite a frequent emphasis on the foreign origins of expensive goods, it is a locally-owned Syrian company that produced the slickest graphics and adhered most strictly to using almost exclusively English in its signage, menus and promotional materials. *In House Coffee* is the Syrian-owned answer to Starbucks whose customers can expect free Wi-Fi, trendy, modern decor and to pay approximately \$4 US for a latte. The company's many chains across Damascus – situated in the most affluent shopping districts – regularly feature bright, modern advertisements papered over their windows. In December of 2008, the eye-catching advertisement appeared at *In House* chains. It told customers and passer-by that "In House Coffee, Just a Perfect 09, Wishes You a Happy Holidays." Along with sleek lines depicting attractive, hip young urbanites socializing in spaces decorated more like Manhattan studios than Damascene homes, this advertisement prominently featured clever sayings in English only, with no Arabic translation offered. It even appears as if one of the figures is guzzling a bottle of wine.

Although the words “100% Alcohol Free” written on the bottle help the chain avoid any controversy with Syria’s observant Muslim community, there is a disconnect between a typical Syrian lifestyle and *In House*’s image is striking. In fact, there was one instance when Arabic did appear prominently in one of *In House*’s sleek window signs. In January 2009, the Israeli bombing of Gaza triggered outrage in Damascus, and *In House* produced a poster that incorporated Arabic words to express solidarity with Gazan suffering. Chapter 6 will contain a more detailed analysis of this sign.

Most Damascene advertising signage in elite central areas, and catering to an elite, moneyed clientele, featured English and possibly some Arabic in their signs. One sign belonging to a French bakery chain that had recently opened a sandwich shop and patisserie in the heart of the most upscale dining area incorporated some French into its signage announcing a new lunch special. It did not, however, include any Arabic. The sign advertised a deal where customers can select one drink, one main dish and one dessert for a fixed price of 300 Syrian lira or \$6 US (an additional 50 lira for an espresso). The options were listed in English, as is the heading “Meal Menu” and its pricing. The offerings included “soft drinks, orange juice, roast beef sandwich and exotic fruits tart.” At the top of the poster, the chain’s *Brioche Dorée* logo sits atop a tag line, reading “Café, restaurant, patisserie: le plaisir des sens.” This inclusion of the French, which translates as “the pleasure of the senses” was meant to highlight the chain’s French atmosphere and evoke a Parisian aura, along with the faded pictures of the Arc de Triomphe and the Champs-Élysées in the poster’s background. It was linguistically significant because it highlighted how English became the default language for advertising to elite Syrians, rather than an accent language. While the semantic work of

communicating prices and options was undertaken by English, French indexed the sophistication of a Parisian café. English communicated the necessary information and pricing, French set an atmosphere. Arabic, in its conspicuous absence, told potential customers who only commanded Arabic that they were not the kind of customer with whom *Brioche Dorée* sought to communicate.

Similarly, even restaurants or cafes that use Arabic on their menus or signage can privilege English in more subtle ways that I argue further alienate and discourage monolingual Arabic speakers. Returning to the *In House* coffee, the chain produced a take-away menu that was ostensibly bilingual, one side listing the menu in English and the other side in Arabic. Although there was a one-to-one correlation between menu items listed in English and Arabic, choices about translation and transliteration rendered the English side of the menu more compelling and comprehensible. Furthermore, given the chain's decision to merely transliterate<sup>28</sup> – rather than translate – parts of the menu into Arabic, parts of the menu were as inaccessible as the English side. The exclusionary aspects of deploying English were not abated merely by the presence of Arabic writing. Like elite interactional styles in which conversations were primarily Arabic but the inclusion of English lexical items left them incomprehensible to a monolingual Arabic speaker, the Arabic side of the menu represented only a surface acknowledgement of the chain's Syrian location and not an effort to cultivate monolingual Arabic speakers as customers.

The slick menu was shaped like a cup of take-away coffee, and the chain's name *In House* Coffee appeared at the top, along with its logo. Underneath, the English words

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<sup>28</sup> Transliteration means that English words are written phonetically in Arabic script. Thus even if someone can sound out the words as written, their meaning is opaque unless the person knows the English words.

“take-out menu” were followed by the company’s ubiquitous slogan “just a perfect day!” There was no Arabic translation of this page so a monolingual Arabic reader had to rely on context clues to determine what is on the menu. Meanwhile, the company’s branding was inaccessible because it never appeared in Arabic. Inside, the menu inconsistently alternated between translating the English items into Arabic and merely rewriting the English words in Arabic script. A section called “Splash Smoothies” exemplified how parts of the menu written in Arabic script still obscured information from those who did not command English. The items listed under this heading in English, “Mango Special, Banana Mama, Strawberry Daiquiri and Inhouse Special” are transliterated, rather than translated, on the Arabic side of the menu. Despite the fact that words like banana, strawberry and special have Arabic translations,<sup>29</sup> some of which even appeared in other sections of the menu,<sup>30</sup> the Arabic side of the menu listed them only in their transliterated form.

In addition to the semantic distance established by transliteration, the menu failed to include parts of the English menu in its Arabic version although the reverse did not occur. For instance, the first inside page of the English menu proclaimed the beginning of the drinks section. Underneath, in smaller type, there was a legend that explained the coded graphics that appear by some of the items. One of these was “Guiltless Eating! The healthy choices.” The Arabic translation translated to something much less catchy and less exuberant: “healthy choices.”<sup>31</sup> The section for milk shakes in English was

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<sup>29</sup> These translations are موز (banana), فريز (strawberry) and خاص (special).

<sup>30</sup> For example, the translations for banana milkshake and strawberry milkshake use the Arabic translations (فريز and موز).

<sup>31</sup> الإختيار الصحي

“Shake it up!” while the Arabic equivalent was the word “milkshake”<sup>32</sup> transliterated into Arabic. While these omissions and discrepancies seem rather minor, the menu’s Arabic version was both inaccessible to many Arabic readers and also far less attractive and less saturated with the chain’s branding than the English version. It is doubtful that the chain deliberately attempted to subterfuge monolingual Arabic readers. Rather, I believe that these linguistic issues demonstrate that the chain was far less invested in cultivating customers who do not have knowledge of English, and that it assumed that its desired customer base could and would rely on the English version first and foremost.

### *Schooling & Language Acquisition*

In her refutation of Bourdieu’s notion of a fully integrated linguistic market, Niloofar Haeri notes that one cannot speak of integration in a country where two separate education paths to the economy have emerged: private education in foreign languages and public education that insists on schooling students in the less economically viable Modern Standard Arabic (1996). The historical trajectory of Egypt’s economy, she argues, created these dual trajectories with one servicing the private economy and the other creating bureaucrats for Egypt’s vast state apparatus (this is corroborated by Mehrez 2008; Singerman and Ammar 2006). Although I would caution that Haeri overstates the influence of languages of instruction, in the process neglecting the importance of other sources of linguistic prestige in creating linguistic hierarchies, her emphasis on education as an important site in linguistic marketplaces parallels the Syria situation as well. Unlike Egypt, which has a much longer history of economic integration with global economies, Syria’s economic demands are quite recent. However, its recent

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<sup>32</sup> ميلك شيك

economic opening, and accompanying social changes, has created a similar thirst for English that has also reverberated in educational settings. Increasingly educational choices and strategies follow the same ideology that has shaped other social arenas. Individuals must cultivate economically viable “skills” and “development” that prepares them for a competitive free market. Locally, that translates to a high demand for educational institutions that offer high-level English instruction and institutionalized global connections.

Unlike in Haeri’s scenarios and those of many other anthropologists who situate their ethnographies in formal educational institutions (see Eckert 2001, 2000; Heller 1988; Jaffe 2007; Meek 2007), where they highlight schools as the sites of production and dissemination of linguistic ideologies, the Syrian example follows a different trajectory. The linguistic ideologies promulgated by the newly opened private schools exist in several marketplaces, in business settings, in social interactions and a multitude of other venues. However, these schools did not create a preference for foreign languages and a relegation of Arabic to lower-status; rather they were established to service a group of Syrians who already believed those things about language and who lived out those ideas in most other areas of their lives. First, this is because the proliferation of English-medium private occurred at the same time as the founding of JCI, SYEA, private businesses and commerce. Second, the educational situation in Syria is too fractured, diverse and in flux over the last decade to result in anything close to a “unified” marketplace or system of value.

The young business people, JCI members and ambitious marketing professionals are too old to have graduated from the new private schools, but they will enroll their



children – and the few with children have already begun to – because of linguistic and societal ideologies they already hold. Furthermore, new elites place equal emphasis on acquiring English education for their children outside of formalized education, such as hiring English-speaking domestic labor at an elevated cost. Thus, it is appropriate to discuss multi-lingual educational choices for elites in the context of the demands of the market since it functions much like a product that Syrians purchase to enhance their elite bona fides, consolidate their economic advantages and cement their position in elite social circles. It also indicates that the integrated linguistic market can be even more fractured and multi-sited than previously theorized.

Educational choices and affiliations carry social meaning in Syria that communicate prestige, wealth and a variety of other messages up and down Syrian social hierarchies. Even now, the overwhelming majority of Syrians attend free, government-run schools, if they attend school at all. Truancy and child labor remain significant issues in rural areas and impoverished urban districts (Kabbani and Kamel 2007). Despite the excitement over the burgeoning private education sector, it is important to remember that most Syrians attend government schools with significant overcrowding, a lack of teaching resources and under-trained teachers.

When members of the new neoliberal elite were growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, educational options in Syria were limited so the possibilities for educational choices and affiliations to mark elite status were correspondingly small. Prior to Bashar al-Asad assuming the presidency and the subsequent economic liberalization, primary and secondary educational options were the ubiquitous government schools, religious schools – including Islamic schools and Catholic schools popular among Christians and

Muslims – and two very expensive, very restrictive private schools: Damascus Community School (DCS), more often known as the American School, and the French School.<sup>33</sup> Higher education was limited exclusively to the government-run and highly censored Damascus University and other branches of the government university in other cities across Syria.<sup>34</sup> Syrians who desired a private post-secondary education traveled abroad, often to the United States, Europe or Canada and most often to nearby Beirut to attend the prestigious American-accredited schools American University of Beirut (AUB) or Lebanese American University (LAU). In addition, many members of the neoliberal elite grew up abroad for parts of their childhood so they enrolled in a range of schools in many countries.

Currently, the educational landscape in Syria is in a moment of great transition. Elementary, second and post-secondary private educational institutions are now allowed to function with relative autonomy. According to the website of the Ministry of Higher Education:

Legislative decree number 36 dated 2001 allowed private universities to be established, or cooperative establishments between the government and a university. . . So far, 20 universities have been given licenses, 14 of which have actually opened their doors, and six to open soon. The foundations of educational certification was also established, in addition to the guidelines by which a private university can be granted certification under decision 31 of 2007, whereby a university can have an independent academic and management structure representing the owner, and headed by the president of the university (“Ministry of Higher Education” 2011).

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<sup>33</sup> Theoretically, DCS and the French School’s instruction in foreign languages were tolerated because they educated the children of foreign diplomats and expatriates. In reality, the majority of the students were Syrian, drawn from the upper echelons of the moneyed elite.

<sup>34</sup> Although Damascus University is the largest government-run university and many students travel from other parts of the country relocate to study there, it does not offer every discipline in the university system. Dentistry, for example, is only available in the second-largest city of Aleppo, meaning that Damascenes may be distributed across the country for parts of their education.

The exact numbers of elementary and secondary private education options are less clear. One estimate claims that ten percent of Syrian students are enrolled in private institutions (Landis 2003), with the vast majority of those in religious or parochial schools, not in the English-medium schools preferred by the neoliberal elite. While that represents a substantial percentage of the youth population, the shifting of elites from parochial and government schools to non-religious, foreign-affiliated private schools has occurred only in the last decade.

Already students at these exclusive private schools have coalesced as a visible social group among their peers. The cousin of a close friend, a student at the Pakistani School, told me that high school students from the most prestigious schools often gathered after classes at one of a few cafes in Abu Rummaneh. She reported that they considered themselves to be one large clique and that they all knew and gossiped about one another. Having seen and heard them myself at cafes, I was aware that these teenagers were perhaps even more ardent and frequent mixers of English and Arabic than their even older counterparts. I asked whether she felt they used English or Arabic more frequently in their interactions. She replied unequivocally that English dominated conversations and listed unprompted a variety of explanations for this: that they consumed so much English-language media, that it carried over from using English at school and finally that it allowed them freedom to flirt or banter more explicitly without censure from older Syrians who likely could not follow their fast-paced and highly idiomatic English conversational style.

The range of elementary and secondary educational options was limited for neoliberal elites in their 20s and 30s so instead foreign university affiliations often

created a sense of social connection. At a dinner in the Old City of Damascus one evening I sat across from Mohammed who is the country director for an environmental micro-finance NGO in Syria. Originally from Aleppo, he mentioned that he had completed his undergraduate studies at AUB. I replied that I too had lived in Beirut and had found AUB's campus to be lovely. Mohammed brightened instantly and began enthusing about Beirut and AUB's student life. He had loved his college years, he told me, and felt nostalgic for them. Then he talked about what he termed "AUB spirit," a term that echoed JCI's frequent "spirit" exhortations. He described attending business meetings during which several attendees discovered they were all AUB graduates. Instantly, he said, they felt a bond between them and engaged in reminiscing about the good old days. Although he did not elaborate, it is not hard to imagine that the bond of nostalgia could also help him to integrate socially with or profit financially from other members of the neoliberal elite who attended AUB or other American universities.

A blurb in the AUB alumni newsletter *Main Gate* provides further evidence that Syrian alumni of AUB are both drawn from the upper echelons of Syrian society and are active participants of the new elite. The short article describes an alumni gathering and fundraising evening held in 2002, at the Club d'Orient in Damascus. At the time, Club d'Orient was the most exclusive location for events like banquets and weddings. The names of the alumni mentioned represent the small handful of the wealthiest families in Syria. More strikingly, one of the speakers was a founder of JCI and the other a founder (and still a board member) of SYEA. The event demonstrates that the prestige of attending a private, English-medium university continues after one graduates. It also provides evidence that alumni of elite private schools very often overlap with the most

prominent and active members of the new elite and activities associated with the new elite.

Guests entered a lively AUB scene where a video on the University was being shown, drinks were being offered, and a band from the High Institute of Music was playing music in the lobby. During the program Syrian branch members *AUB alumna* and *AUB alumnus* introduced the speakers. *AUB alumnus* welcomed the guests and noted that this was the second fundraising activity in two years for scholarship support for the endowed fund for Syrian students enrolled at AUB. The second speaker, *AUB alumnus*, confirmed the loyalty of our graduates towards their alma mater while Dr. *AUB alumnus* spoke warmly about his memories of AUB and its role in servicing the region (“Alumni Activities Worldwide” 2003).

The prestige and respect accorded to AUB graduates – equally pronounced for graduates of schools in the US or UK – contrasted sharply with the frustration over the educational backgrounds of the previous generation of regime-linked elites, many of whom were Baath party or government officials. These elites, educated in Eastern Europe under the Soviet bloc, epitomized the incompetence and lack of modernity the JCI set works against. According to Kjetil Selvik, many entrepreneurs felt that many government officials “studied in Eastern Europe regardless of their capabilities” and this is why “they are actually against economic reform because they will lose their privileges” (Selvik 2009, 54). In this instance, the wrong kind of foreign education could stigmatize the bearer of such a degree as ill-equipped for a neoliberal Syria just as the right diploma could indicate the opposite.

The British Council – which houses a non-degree English institute – occupies a peculiar spot in the hierarchy of neoliberal elite educational options. My contacts from the most elite families attended DCS or the French School, and a few spent their high school years abroad at boarding schools. However, the majority of Syrians from upper class or upper middle class backgrounds attended government schools in the best

neighborhoods or Catholic schools run by nuns. To supplement the generally lackluster quality of foreign language education in those schools, most of these Syrians enrolled in private language institutes. The most prestigious, expensive and arguably effective of these is the British Council. Students pay \$200 US for almost two months of instruction three days a week, in classes with up to 25 students. Housed in a spacious former home in the center of Shaalan, Damascus most bustling and upscale market area, the British Council serves as another educational institution in which young elites who can afford its pricy services meet each other, mingle and perfect their elite interactional styles. A majority of the Syrians whom I interviewed mentioned that they had taken at least a few classes at the British Council and repeatedly observed that they had forged a friendship with someone else who I had interviewed through a British Council course.

It is important to note that there were language institutes in every neighborhood in Damascus, with a plethora of choices for studying including a language center at the American Embassy. The British Council's brand – buoyed by its price tag and the numbers of elite students who enrolled – became associated with social prestige that inspired its alumni to proudly attribute their language skills to the institution. Yet, the Council's elite status was somewhat diminished by the fact that upper elites did not enroll, having already secured their language skills in private schools or study abroad. The Council acted as an important marker among the upper middle class. It separated Syrians who learned English through the free, government-provided channels such as Damascus University and Syrians who could afford to supplement that education – widely considered poor – with better English instruction. In fact, the JCI members who did not attend prestigious private schools or travel abroad for university mostly spent

several years enrolled at the British Council. While it does not carry the prestige of DCS or of AUB, it did provide its students, or clients, with the fluent and idiomatic English to allow them to mingle with the upper elite. One female member told me:

I graduated from Damascus University, English literature department. I think you met a lot of people who have a BA in English literature and it's necessarily that they can use it smoothly and with relaxing. That's why I joined British Council in Damascus when I was a second-year student. I started learning English and other skills in English. That's how I improved my language skills.

Another male JCI member, from well-known extended family:

I went to the English literature department at Damascus University where also they don't teach English well. Ask me why or how. They have the material in English, books, drama, prose, grammar maybe but they do not teach the listening and pronunciation well. Of course I have to depend on myself, develop my skills. I went to the British Council.

Their comments indicate that additional, expensive English training was required to allow them to mingle in their social circles and to hold the well-paid jobs at private companies that they each had. They also depicted enrollment in the British Council courses as part of their larger neoliberal project to "develop" and build their "skills." Additionally, it highlights the near impossibility for Syrians without the funds to supplement public education to master the fluency, accent and "smooth" quality of English that the new elite values.

Informal education in English, outside of schools whether public schools, private schools or language institutes, also requires investment and attention. The most common form of this was the hiring of domestic labor that spoke English. Domestic labor brought from other parts of the developing world was relatively inexpensive in Syria, and most Syrians even of relatively modest means employed at least one live-in maid. They located domestic labor using local firms that arrange for their temporary immigration into

Syria and then placed them in homes for a period of a few years.<sup>35</sup> The labor was drawn from a range of countries, most commonly Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines, where English education in urban areas is very strong. There was a hierarchy in domestic labor, with women from Africa considered the least valuable and receiving the lowest pay and women from the Philippines commanding the highest rates. There was an additional premium for women who spoke English, all of whom also come from the Philippines. Many Syrians attributed their own English competency or that of their family member's to interactions with an English-speaking maid. When describing her envy of her sister's flawless English, a Syrian acquaintance told me: "when she speaks English, you can't believe. She's really amazing. That's the effect of a Philipppinian girl. We were lucky, her English was good."

In the fall of 2008, I attended a young child's second birthday party. One of her mother's close friends, herself the mother of two young toddlers, brought her two children and her two maids. Her children, energetic and outgoing, spoke cheerfully in a mix of English and Arabic and contentedly watched an animated movie in English. I remarked to their mother how impressive I found her children's language skills, and she pointedly happily to the two Filipino women who trailed her children's every move. They spoke fluent English, she noted, and communicated with her children exclusively in English. I responded that employing English speakers seemed like a sound strategy for raising her children, and she nodded enthusiastically. She and the other women told me

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<sup>35</sup> Although some domestic laborers did become valued members of Syrian households, for many of these women, their experiences as domestic labor were often miserable and violent. The women surrendered their passports to the agency at the airport, had little or no access to cash and lacked basic personal freedoms. They received their wages only at the end of their multi-year contract. In addition, agency employees and members of the employing households frequently verbally and physically abused the women. I once witnessed an agency manger punch a domestic laborer in the face for attempting to run away from her employer's house.



how it is significantly more expensive to require domestic labor that speaks English, but that it was their most important qualification when selecting domestic workers. Several other women who had non English-speaking maids from Indonesia sighed resignedly and reported that they were seeking English-speaking Filipino women. They were placed on a waitlist because the demand for English-speaking domestic labor was so high that agencies could not keep pace.

English-speaking domestic labor is a significant dimension to how elite Syrians conceptualize and invest in English-language education for their children. While an English-speaking Filipino maid cannot instruct a child in the elite interactional styles they learn while attending school with other children of the elite, the unmet demand for English-speaking domestic labor attests to how much elite Syrians consider it a significant part of their children's linguistic upbringing. It is viewed as an important pathway to a crucial part of elite interactional styles and linguistic reputations. Furthermore, the lengths and expense that elite Syrians go to in order to obtain such domestic labor reinforces that Syrians regard language skills, cost and economic advancement as an equation to be balanced. It also suggests that institutions do not maintain a hegemonic grasp on distributing elite linguistic resources, and that individuals invest in their linguistic repertoires in inconsistent ways that may not be available to all elites.

### ***Hiring Practices***

In the realm of language skills and hiring practices, Syria has experienced equally profound change and inconsistency, many centered on an increased demand for English-

speaking applicants. In less than a decade, Syria transformed from a country in which pan-Arabism and monolingual Arabic speakers lingered long after they fell out of vogue elsewhere to a society in which the obtainment of English skills dominated the educational system, employment practices and social interactions. Every human resources professional, company owner and job-seeker whom I interviewed told me that high-level English was the most important qualification for obtaining a prestigious job and even some not so prestigious ones. They also invoked neoliberal principles and SDS terms to explain why English was the most important personal “skill” in contemporary Syria. One human resources manager explained the situation this way:

Executive assistants have to have good business English. Managers only have to read bank reports in English. Expert managers have to have excellent English, even a third language depending on their region. Right now my manager doesn't have English – it's tough. Being good in English will open access. Being good in English will help you get a lot of resources you can build on. I prefer always on my team people who are good in English.

Commanding fluent, confident English can land ambitious middle-class youths higher salaries and more opportunities to climb new corporate ladders. The manager invoked that oft-repeated elite assertion that English is proof of and access to personal development (“open access” and “build on”). Although all English skills were helpful in securing employment, her explanation suggested that fluency the discourse of neoliberal elites was the most effective for achieving private employment in new sectors like human resources.

In linguistic anthropology, interest in the intersection between social prestige and the job market most often focuses on the interactions of the job interview. Seminal studies examine how the linguistic resources which members of disenfranchised groups possess are not adequate to gain the trust of the interviewer and subsequently,

employment (see Fiksdal 1986; Gumperz and Cook 2002; Gumperz 1992; Kerekes 2006; Ross 1998). This may certainly be a critical issue in hiring practices, but my own observations in Syria demonstrated that focusing only on the moment of the interview overlooked the “real” story of how applicants landed jobs. I found that the critical intersection of linguistic practices and hiring occurred well before any interview. I want to depart from linguistic anthropological approaches that focus on the linguistic mechanics of employment interviews that function as gate-keeping. They are not applicable to Syria because a) they deal primarily with Western settings and are interested in ethnic/racial linguistic differences that aren’t particularly applicable in Syria and b) they ignore the lead-up to the interview that I argue impacts the outcome of job applications more than the actual interview, which in many instances in Syria is largely symbolic and derived from an interest in mimicking Western hiring customs.

Like the old adage, “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know,” in Syria today elite group boundaries and socio-economic mobility often are not negotiated in the overt locations of job interviews but in the back-channels of personal connections, casual conversations and social introductions. By the time a young job-seeker has arrived for a formal interview, their fate is already sealed for the most part. The borders around the inter-connected neoliberal elite are erected in only a limited number of venues, and if an applicant arrived at the interview without knowing anyone first or without a personal connection, it is unlikely she would land the job no matter how virtuosic her linguistic performance. So any opportunity to traverse social hierarchies requires an upwardly mobile young person to network among the elite – a task that requires casual, fluent

English even more than a job interview might. English is obligatory, but it is obligatory to cement the social relationships and casual connections that lead to job opportunities.

This first example illustrates how one woman from a non-elite family background leveraged her successful integration into neoliberal elite linguistic practices to land more prestigious and lucrative employment. Sawsan's story began in Saudi Arabia where she was born and spent the first 12 years of her life. Her family moved there so her now deceased father could take a job in middle management. She attended Saudi Arabia's government schools and lamented the poor quality of the educational system there. English, particularly, she reported was taught as merely a series of grammatical rules. Encouraged by her father who traveled for his work, she began intensifying her study of English independently. When she returned to Syria in middle school, she entered the Syrian government schools. After graduating from a government high school, she enrolled in the English literature program at Damascus University but left without graduating to begin working, a common occurrence in a country where the actual diploma in hand is not that important on the job market. Sawsan was alone in her family in her affinity for English and ability to use it fluently and strategically. She reported that neither her brother nor her sister share her enthusiasm for watching American TV shows and movies in English nor for surfing English language sites online. Her mother, she told me, "is a stay-at-home wife. She doesn't need it, she doesn't have that contact with English."

Sawsan's opportunity to leverage her English skills and familiarity with English-language media came when she worked with a young woman involved in JCI. With her coworker's encouragement, Sawsan joined the group and told me she felt like she had

finally found a place where she belonged. Her desire to use her fluent English and her almost encyclopedic knowledge of American popular culture made her something of an anomaly in her family and in her conservative neighborhood on the edge of Damascus – far from the posh neighborhoods of most JCI members. At JCI, not only had Sawsan found an outlet for her interests and ambitions but here in this venue, her frequent usage of English and American culture references actually further ingratiated her into the group and made her an integral player in JCI activities. She cemented friendships with members who came from families with far more prominent names, had deeper pockets, attended prestigious schools and lived in fancy neighborhoods.

However, Sawsan’s new chumminess with the children of the most elite Syrians did not really materialize into anything tangible in her own life – at first. She continued to be under-employed as a glorified secretary at a series of mid-sized companies. She would create and maintain sophisticated websites for them and handle English correspondence for high-level managers all for a very small salary. That is, until she discovered a posting to become the webmaster for one of Syria’s two English language magazines. The magazine, owned by scion of an influential and extremely wealthy Syrian family, employed a mix of foreigners and Syrians from prominent families with well-known last names, including Bushra from Chapter 4. The position offered a much higher salary than Sawsan had ever earned and a level of prestige unheard of for someone of her background. Ordinarily, this sort of position would go to another child of elite Damascus, but JCI had provided Sawsan with the necessary back-channel to secure the job. It turned out that the magazine’s owner, Shadi, was also one of the founders of JCI Syria. All the JCI members with whom Sawsan had cultivated multi-lingual friendships

were intimates of the owner. One evening at the conclusion of a JCI meeting, Sawsan pulled me aside and excitedly confided in me about what was happening. She didn't yet have the job officially, but no fewer than 6 JCI members called the publisher to encourage him to give her the position. The next day, Sawsan had secured the position which she held for several years.

In the next example, a young man who attended DCS, or the American school, his lifetime friendships with his classmates and fellow elites into a series of high-level, well-paid positions. As the editor of the other English language magazine, he obviously could not execute his work without the highest level English skills. However, it was ultimately his parents' ability to foot the \$20,000 US plus tuition bill and his lifelong social relationships with other elites that provided him with the access and knowledge to secure his position. Omar is the son of well-to-do, well-educated parents, and he grew up in one of the most prestigious neighborhoods in Damascus. As a Syrian DCS student, his parents could afford to pay approximately \$20,000 per year per student which is an astounding four times larger than the per capita GDP. In this milieu, students meet the other children of Syria's most elite and form life-long friendships which often later translate into joint business ventures, marriages and strong networks.

Omar was no exception. After graduation from DCS, he enrolled at the American University of Beirut (AUB). Upon completing his studies there, he moved to the UK where he studied for a PhD in political science. He then returned to Lebanon to work in academia and also became a reporter for an English-language Lebanese daily newspaper. In both places, he roomed with the son of one of Syria's wealthiest businessmen who was studying at the same universities. Omar' friend's father is one of a handful of

businessman who commands a diverse range of companies from construction to pharmaceuticals to hospitality. Omar noted that although he has a privileged background by Syrian standards, his family's wealth and prominence in no way equaled that of his friend. Yet his family's wealth was sufficient to enter into elite circles from a very young age and although Omar's family may not have been among the ten wealthiest families in the country, they were not too far behind either. As Omar described his own family: "my entire family is part of the upper new elite, my sisters, my mother, my father. Nowadays they [the elite] are mixed. Now these Alawites do partnerships with Damascenes. It's a big loop, a big network . . . social stratification remains very difficult."

Omar spoke English confidently and easily, with a clear British accent. "Speaking flawless English in all modesty" is how he described it. He was openly critical of the low level of English proficiency among students and young people in Syria which he blamed on the Baathist "destruction" of the educational system. He was equally critical, however, of his fellow English users who patronized the expensive Western coffee chains and clothing stores. He projected a certain cosmopolitanism and disdain for fellow members of elite circles. "As far as I'm concerned *Costa* is a place to grab a coffee between connection flights at airports in Europe. It's not a place to go and sit," he intoned. This was a not-so-subtle dig at the less traveled aspirants into the neoliberal elite for whom the pricy British coffee chain functioned as an epicenter of their social world. His criticism of these elites was a way of asserting his global familiarity with *Costa* outside of Syria, which he contrasts with Syrians who only know the chain in a local context (see Chapter 4 for an explanation of elite authenticity and language

usage). Sawsan, in fact, told me how much she loved having *Costa* in Damascus and how it was the ideal place to do work or gather with friends.

Years after they graduated together, Omar's roommate Mazen, the son of the prominent businessman, was expanding his own business portfolio and wanted to add a magazine to it. He specifically wanted to do something in English where the market was wide open and the demand burgeoning. He contacted his friend who described the history of their friendship this way: he's "my former housemate at AUB and classmate at the faculty of political science, and then we were roommates and classmates in the UK and then we returned to Syria and we did the Young Entrepreneur's Association<sup>36</sup> so we go a long way back." Omar was hired as editor-in-chief. The concept of the magazine evolved from a business weekly to the monthly mix of political and social features that it is today. Omar's wealthy friend certainly considered Omar's academic credentials, global acumen and idiomatic English when asking him to serve as editor-in-chief of his English magazine. He simply could not perform the job without certain quantifiable language skills. Yet there was no competition for the slot, no search for other candidates, no advertisements soliciting applicants. Omar's immersion into elite Syria from a young age and his life-long friendship with the most prominent Syrians became a prestigious and potentially lucrative job.

While Syria has hardly become a meritocracy, and old elites have done well in the new English-dominant economic opportunities, I would argue that Sawsan's story and others like her point to a new amount of give in an otherwise calcified social system. Certainly, elites like Omar – with their English-language educations, high-level personal connections and significant financial resources – have a head start in the race to dominate

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<sup>36</sup> This is a reference to SYEA. His publisher friend is one of its founders.



the market of English language employment. But their less advantaged competitors can and do mount a substantial challenge to their hegemony of jobs in an increasingly English-centric Syria. While the same prominent family names do continue to appear and reappear, and the best way to get ahead is still to have a wealthy, well-connected father, non-elite youths who master English and are willing to adopt new linguistic practices to assimilate into organizations like JCI do have new avenues for finding employment and new ways to cement potentially beneficial social connections. The social ideology that emphasizes an individual's level of development and achievement of skills also extends into the workforce and the rites of entrance into it.

### ***Marriage and Divorce Markets***

As the economic options for both young men and women have increased in recent years, so too has the potential for marriage to help young people, particularly members of the neoliberal elite, maximize their independence and increase their financial and social status. A Brookings Institute Report on youth in Syria suggests that marriage has become intertwined with socio-economic advancement, writing that “family status, as reflected by earnings and reputation (communicated through social networks), play a role in marriage in Syria. Marriage, in a sense, may be a medium for both sustaining economic and social status and transitioning to a higher level.” Yet how that combination of status, advancement and marriage plays out differs widely within Syrian society, between urban and rural, wealthy and poor, religious and secular and individual personalities (see Rabo 2008). Despite the diversity of styles and goals, arranged marriages between family members or close acquaintances represent the Syrian majority, in almost all sectors of

society. Consanguineous marriage is still widely practiced in contemporary Syria, with one study placing the frequency at 30.3% in urban areas (Saadat and Othman 2009). Many members of the neoliberal elite had parents who were first or second cousins. Against this background of arranged and consanguineous marriages, I noticed that a small number of women<sup>37</sup> from the neoliberal elite began to apply the ideologies they used in JCI, business life and education to their marital decisions. They actively searched for marriage – or divorce – situations that would allow them to “develop,” pursue “business activities” and utilize their “skills.” They also expressed the belief that such arrangements based on neoliberal principles would result in happy, companionate marriages.

The first example that illustrates the confluence of neoliberal ideologies with marriage choices is the story of Farah’s marriage. I first met Farah in her capacity as a JCI board member. Unlike most JCI women who dressed in Western fashions and mingled socially with men, Farah stood out for her conservative and religious social comportment. She was *muhajibeh* (she wore the Islamic veil) and eschewed JCI events like karaoke night that were held at nightlife establishments. She was confident and outgoing and, as chairwoman of the business committee, not afraid to publicly scold members for failing to produce work to her standards or to shush male members chatting over her. She spoke English fluently and peppered her speech with many of the idioms and key SDS terms used in JCI and other similar venues.

Farah had grown up in Malki, the daughter of a high-ranking and well-connected official in the army with a very prominent family name. Her Sunni Muslim family,

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<sup>37</sup> I want to be clear that this was a very small number of women, perhaps no more than five. However, I increasingly heard talk of marriage and divorce decisions framed in neoliberal discursive SDS terms. Further research will be needed to determine if this becomes a widespread trend.

educated and elite, was also religiously and socially conservative. She studied at the best local schools and then enrolled at the American University of Sharjah for her bachelor's degree. Like American University of Beirut (AUB), AUS offers an American curriculum and an American price tag. Unlike AUB's liberal American-style college atmosphere, AUS's location in the conservative emirate of Sharjah means that men and women are strictly segregated, women's dormitories have strict curfews and Islamic norms prevailed, making it an ideal school for conservative elites who want to protect their daughters' virtue without sacrificing the quality of education.

I quickly learned that Farah was engaged to another JCI leader, Fouad. Initially, I privately felt surprised that Fouad and Farah had found compatibility together. Fouad, while sweet and well-respected among the JCI membership, had none of Farah's cosmopolitanism, easy confidence or fluency in English. He stumbled to speak in complete English sentences, had traveled little, and his slightly sloppy appearance contrasted with Farah's neat and conservatively stylish outfits. I strained to understand what had attracted Farah to him until I interviewed them after their marriage and discovered Farah's complicated motivations for selecting Fouad as her husband.

One crisp Friday evening, I made my way to their cozy apartment in Mashru' Dumar, the upper middle class suburb of Damascus. They greeted me at the door giggling and offering juice and cookies. I was the first guest they had hosted as a married couple, and their excitement and obvious affection for each other was palpable. As we sat down together to discuss their involvement in JCI and other new business activities, the story of what brought them together also unfolded. Fouad, despite what he may have lacked in sophistication and poise, possessed something far rarer and, according to Farah,

more difficult to acquire: the willingness for his wife to pursue her time-consuming career and JCI leadership roles after their marriage.

Upon graduating, Farah returned to Damascus and found a position in the finance department of a new cell phone company. These positions are very highly sought-after and mainly male-dominated. She began to build a business career, became involved in volunteer campaigns and charitable organizations in Damascus and assumed leadership positions within JCI. All of these activities made her something of an anomaly: a religiously conservative woman with a high-powered career she did not want to abandon. For most Syrian women – conservative or not, elite or not – marriage and children meant the end of their careers as husbands and social pressure demanded they turn their attention to domestic matters. Farah wanted to avoid this.

Fouad was raised in Mashru‘ Dumar. He attended local government schools, followed by completing his university education in civil engineering at the government-run (and free) Damascus University. He worked in graphic design positions before starting his own small design firm. In addition, his home neighborhood, educational choices and lack of extensive experience abroad indicated that his family background and upbringing were less elite than Farah’s. But they did share one important thing, according to Farah: “I come from a conservative family, not that opening to mixing with men and women. And HE is coming from a conservative family.”

During the interview, the bubbly newlyweds enthused over each other’s accomplishments and attributes. Farah, however, dominated the comments and provided most of the information. We conducted the interview in English which Farah spoke fluently and easily while Fouad struggled to express himself. I offered to switch the

interview to Arabic but not surprisingly given that all the JCI members had insisted on English as a sign of their fluency, Fouad demurred and seemed content to allow Farah to speak for them as he added in an occasional comment. He seemed to delight in his wife's confidence and expressiveness. Farah, for her part, offered up this commentary as an explanation of what makes a desirable partner:

Going to work made me meet many men and seeing the different kinds. The good ones, the bad ones. [Fouad interjects and says "the best one." With which Farah enthusiastically concurs: "Exactly!"] It made me think about what is really the type of thing I should be going for. These things my family didn't teach me . . . going into JCI I didn't plan it.

The difference here from work, at JCI I meet the men who have a similar mentality to me. They believe in positive change. Now I can find the person who can share me the same mentality, help me raise my kids the same.

As she narrated her own path to marriage, Farah felt that her immersion into traditionally male-dominated economic activities provided her with insight that she also applied to her marriage decisions. JCI, she explained, gave her the opportunity to meet an appropriate marriage partner. The attributes that attracted her to Fouad were the same ones that unite the neoliberal elite: a fluency in the discourse of neoliberalism (such as a belief in "positive change") and a shared neoliberal ideological orientation ("same mentality").

On a Syrian marriage market, Farah would have been sought after by elite men and their families; she is conservative and religious, yet highly educated and able to teach her children fluent English. However, her desire to continue working into her marriage made her less marketable. Farah believed that marriage prospects who would have matched her in education level and cosmopolitanism, in addition to religious conservatism – and who could afford to support their wife and children in a cushy lifestyle – most likely would not have accepted her commitment to her career. So for

Farah, a savvy and strategic marital decision coupled with deep affection for her doting husband, to choose a husband with lesser education, wealth and social status, might have helped her to avoid the lack of career, autonomy and daily freedom that she felt were inherent in many contemporary Syrian marriages.

I tell my female friends, it's better to be single rather than to be controlled. You have to be careful because oriental men like control, [they] like to erase your personality . . . not to share with you their life. This mentality in marriage thing it's not changing.

Her marriage is now only a year old; whether her strategy results in long-term success or fails to sustain its independent ethos in the coming years remains to be seen.<sup>38</sup> However, Farah's merging of career concerns, awareness of social status and genuine affection into her marital decisions represents a new and significant set of options available to certain young Syrian women seeking to balance their genuine desire to marry and start families with their equally strong wish to maintain their professional activities.

Just as marriage can yield unlikely outcomes of independence and career advancement for Syrian women so too can divorce provide the space for elite young Syrian women to continue their participation in the activities of the neoliberal elite. An attractive and well-dressed woman in her late 30s, Lana seemed to be everywhere at once: chairing a JCI committee, organizing a lecture series and running a successful consulting business in the pharmaceutical. She often joked about being single and needing to find a boyfriend, a rarity in Syrian culture where such matters are often too sensitive for jokes. Given the demands of owning her own business, I assumed that she had eschewed marriage for the sake of having a career. In reality, she had pursued a

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<sup>38</sup> After I left Syria, I learned that Fouad and Farah had one daughter. Farah recently launched her own business, a boutique consulting firm focusing on financial advising.

difficult divorce to regain her autonomy, build a career and education and to raise her daughter independently.

Lana comes from a prominent and well-known family. Several of her uncles were ministers – one even led national security – under Hafez Al-Asad. Her own father was an ambassador for the Syrian government, and she spent large parts of her childhood abroad. In Damascus, she lived in the best neighborhood, attended the most prestigious schools and is generally considered to be something of a socialite. Lana's family, an integral part of the Baathist socialist regime, promoted a secular, nationalist orientation even as she was exposed to a cosmopolitan, international lifestyle by virtue of their high-level positions. However, as notables from an Eastern Syrian city, they retained some of what she called their traditional values, particularly concerning gender and marriage. Lana was encouraged to marry an older man while still in her teens, a marriage she did not enjoy and that resulted in one daughter. She describes the dissolution of her marriage:

When I was 19, everything was fine. When I graduate, my personality grew up very fast and I became very mature in a very short time. I was exposed to the real society. You are husband but you don't have the right to do such and such and such . . . My family considered it as a crime, you shouldn't change. I studied, I worked, I researched. I'm not the girl who lives in the closed box. He refused to change, he wanted the little Barbie.

After six unhappy years she obtained a divorce and kept custody of her daughter, now a teenager. Throughout her experience, she maintained that she always had as her goal to live her life and make decisions independently.

In my family, I'm the crazy one. I always do what I want. I get married when I was very young. I got divorced. I got my daughter that I want. I raised her the way I want, and I make my future as I much as I could. I mean, I'm Syrian we can't achieve whatever I want. There's limits. Within these limits, I do whatever I want.

After her divorce, Lana and her daughter moved back in with her parents. Single women, whether never married or divorced, simply do not live alone in Syria – one of the limits Lana mentions. Although she described power struggles with her father over her daughter's upbringing and her own behavior, she believed that this choice still permitted her much greater freedom than a marriage. In fact, she was able to leave her daughter in her parents' care while she traveled abroad to receive a masters in Saudi Arabia and later a PhD in England. She felt that no Syrian husband would have permitted her to travel abroad for extended periods, even to complete her education.

Today, Lana owns a successful business, is sought-after as a consultant, holds a prestigious JCI leadership position and is well-known in Damascus social circles. I think it unlikely that Lana sought out her marriage and subsequent divorce as a conscious strategy for achieving career success and financial autonomy, particularly given how she described her naiveté at the time of her marriage. However, according to her narration of her life, as she lived through her marriage she became aware that ending the marriage could help her achieve her goal of independence more than marriage could. Despite the inherent social stigma and other risks still associated with divorce, it began to emerge to her as a better strategy than remaining in a marriage to a man she described as a much older, very controlling and unaffectionate husband. While the inevitable return to her parents' home meant submitting to their rules and supervision, it also provided her with the support network to raise a daughter and have a career – and a relatively sheltered social position from which she could actively participate in society while protected from the stigma of being a single woman. Since she was already divorced and a mother (thus sexually no longer in need of protection and policing), her family relaxed their



monitoring of her somewhat, a trend common of divorced women who lived with their families after their marriages ended.

I can hardly argue that these examples represent a profound shift in Syrian marriage practices, let alone across the wider region. Farah and Lana are highly educated urban elites who have resources and advantages unavailable to the vast majority of Middle Eastern women. However, I do think that their stories point to the fact that ideologies that govern neoliberal orientation, linguistic practice and business culture may also impact family life and marriage. The discourse in which Farah and Lana participated at JCI meetings or business events was not simply a tool for economic and social advancement. They believe personally and deeply in those ideals, and apply them even to the most personal aspects of their lives. This section focused on how women negotiated marital choices, but I want to highlight Fouad's equally fervent support of Farah's commitment to her own development and participation. He also seemed to embrace those neoliberal values, not just as theory but as practice in his own life. In fact, a small interaction with Farah and Fouad illustrates how significantly their shared ideology affected their family planning. At a JCI event after I had interviewed them, they approached me to tell me there was something they had forgotten to mention in the interview that they thought might be important for my research. When they had children, they told me, Farah would speak to them in English, Fouad would speak to them in Arabic, and they would hire a French-speaking nanny. That way, their tri-lingual children would be ready for life in the new neoliberal Syria.

From upscale coffee houses to educational choices, employment options and the business of securing and marrying a spouse, Syria's many seemingly disparate marketplaces actually enjoy a remarkable consistency of governing ideology. That is, the same emphasis on neoliberal ideology expressed through its prominent discursive terms that underpins the neoliberal elite as a discrete social group also applies to the benefits neoliberal elites accrue in multiple settings. Upscale businesses, private school students, job candidates and prospective marriage partners can all trade on their knowledge of neoliberal elite linguistic practices and social ideology to generate tangible financial profit. This means that the linguistic basis of group boundary formation and individuals' navigation of it, as explored in previous chapters, is not simply a matter of prestige and social status in the abstract. There are direct material consequences to the neoliberal elite's formation and high status within Syrian. As the following chapter turns to the neoliberal elite's methods of exclusion, this chapter's emphasis on material gain emphasizes that more is at stake than social status. The ability to enter into the neoliberal elite can allow Syrians to benefit but the fact of exclusion from it could result in sharper divisions of wealth, deeper kinds of stratification and the increased alienation of non-elites.

## Chapter 6: Teaching them to Fish: Volunteerism and New Syrian Social Stratification

Every month, the Syrian society magazine *Class* publishes a column entitled “Class Volunteers.” The Arabic-language social diary fills most of its pages with pictorials of high society weddings and revelers at expensive nightclubs so a page dedicated to the quiet endeavor of volunteer work contrasts with the magazine’s typical fare. Although most of the magazine’s copy is in Arabic, the headline for the section is in English. Underneath, the name and a snapshot of the featured volunteer sit on top of a long list of professional and volunteer-related accomplishments. In January 2009, the featured volunteer was a Ruba, well-know member of the new elite<sup>39</sup> whose accomplishments included helping to found JCI and establish the children’s cancer charity, *Basma*, which will be discussed in more detail in this chapter. The bottom of the page featured this explanation:

This special page is to illuminate individuals who give part of their time and their lives to the service of others who need this help, thus we aim to make the culture of volunteerism a general culture for every individual in Syria.<sup>40</sup>

The culture of volunteerism is a central ideological tenet of the neoliberal elite, and iterations of this SDS word and its corresponding principle surface everywhere that other central features of the neoliberal elite do. Whether that takes the form of a paper placemat promoting volunteerism that blanketed upscale cafes for a month in 2008 or a

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<sup>39</sup> In every *Class* magazine that I could purchase, the featured volunteer was well-known amongst the neoliberal elite and involved in at least one of it central activities, such as JCI or SYEA.

<sup>40</sup> هذه الصفحة مخصصة للاضائة على أشخاص وهبوا جزءا من وقتهم و حياتهم لخدمة أشخاص آخرين يحتاجون هذه المساعدة، حيث نهدف منها لجعل ثقافة التطوع ثقافة عامة تخص كل فرد في سورية . . .

magazine column, advocating a culture of volunteerism has become a central part of neoliberal elite life. Its premise of intervention on behalf of “others who need this help” contains a deictic us/them divide with the “we” who volunteer on one side and the “others who need help” on the other side.

The four previous chapters have dealt with life on the *inside* of the neoliberal elite: how specific context-dependent linguistic practices form its social boundaries, how individuals maneuver in conversation to navigate those boundaries and how individuals and groups exchange linguistic practices for tangible benefits. This chapter addresses how individuals remain outside the group – in this instance, recipients of the group’s volunteering campaigns – through sustained social and linguistic practices. The exclusion from the neoliberal elite is neither personal nor targeted, but it is the result of widespread social and linguistic ideologies that govern the rules of engagement in volunteer events and campaigns. As such, volunteer activities have become a major locus in which social hierarchies are enacted, displayed, enforced and maintained.

This chapter begins with an explanation of how the concept of volunteerism links to other strategically deployable shifters (SDS) of the neoliberal ideology that underpins the formation of the new elite (see Urciuoli 2010, 2008, 2005, 2003; see also Chapter 3). It demonstrates how central the promotion and performance of volunteerism is to the neoliberal elite’s self-conception and public presentation. The chapter then examines two JCI volunteer events to analyze how the structure of volunteering and the expectations for both volunteers and recipients reinforces social divisions and hierarchies. It concludes with an analysis of the “culture of competition” that has emerged recently among the neoliberal elites in which the rules of business plan, public speaking and creativity

contests have become pathways to elite acceptance or guarantees of permanent exclusion. All of these volunteer activities bring the neoliberal elite into close interaction with Syrians outside their group – particularly those designated as being in need of assistance – and provide windows into the sharp differentiation between membership in and exclusion from this new social group.

### *Volunteerism vs. Charity*

As the neoliberal elite group has developed into a discrete Syrian social group, they continually situate their group in local, regional and global contexts through the use of deixis and other shifters (see Hanks 2005; Silverstein 2003a, 1976). These words, which are either wholly or partially context-dependent for the referential value, articulate the group's shared orientation and reflect how the group engages in a global discourse of neoliberal ideology in a Syrian-specific context. In Chapter 3, I demonstrate how the repeated usage of SDS terms of self-development and skill-building took on Syria-specific connotations. While the words I highlight in that chapter functioned mainly to create group cohesion and solidarity, in this chapter I examine the numerous instantiations of another SDS, volunteerism, which work to create social distance through its opposition with the word charity.

From the entrepreneurship organizations like JCI and SYEA to the local United Nations agencies to the Syrian First Lady's expansive Syrian Trust for Development,<sup>41</sup> the emphasis on volunteerism [التطوع] pervades Syria's limited scene of non-governmental associations. The phrase "culture of volunteerism" surfaced again and

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<sup>41</sup> The peculiar position of the First Lady's charity has been described as GONGO, or governmental non-governmental organization. Although it is officially non-governmental, the first lady's proximity or possible influence in the regime renders the Trust partially governmental.

again, whether in conversations, JCI activities or the numerous advertising materials distributed around Damascus during the course of my research. Although the political climate in Syria does not permit radical social change, intervention into social issues with no obvious political ramifications is burgeoning (Pierret and Selvik 2009). Whether designed to benefit rural families, orphans, poor college students or children with cancer, these volunteering campaigns are elaborate, sustained efforts that identify a population in need, create a long-term strategy for involvement and implement a program for intervention over an extended time period. They also, during the course of their existence, establish and infix new social categories: the giver and the recipient, the privileged and the needy, the benefactor and the beneficiary. I contend that volunteer campaigns, though often well-intentioned, reinforce social hierarchies that privilege the neoliberal elite and encourage those in the middle of the hierarchy to adopt the social/linguistic norms of the neoliberal elite and exclude those on the bottom from acquiring and displaying those norms. Other anthropologists of the Middle East (see Deeb 2006; White 2002) observe that charity participation provides volunteers integration into social groups and religious, political ideologies in Lebanon and Turkey. In Syria, volunteer work is apolitical and secular, but it also is a significant social space in which both volunteers and recipients locate social boundaries.

The indexical value of volunteerism in certain Syrian contexts arises partly from its contrast with its supposed predecessor “charity work” [العمل الخيري]. The comparison between the two concepts posits a teleological relationship in which Syrians under the archaic system in place before the last decade performed unplanned, non-strategic acts of goodness (distributing food, donating clothing or sponsoring medical treatments were

examples used to describe charity work). Often, these sorts of charitable acts involving redistribution of wealth and resources were and still are dominated by religious organizations, whether Muslim or Christian (Pierret and Selvik 2009). Currently, Syrians who are socially and linguistically engaged with international networks of NGOs, skill-building resources and educational institutions advocate long-term, large-scale, well-planned interventions into societal problems. When using the term volunteerism in conversation, Syrians most often paired it with the paraphrased proverb that instead of giving the poor a fish, it is preferable to teach them how to fish so that they may feed themselves in the future. Just as these young Syrians invested heavily in their own skill sets and enthusiastically signed up for training sessions of all kinds, they advocated providing similar opportunities for those they deemed to be in need.

The indexical values of the volunteerism/charity work binary promoted by new elites who fill the ranks of JCI and spend their free time volunteering became clear to me during a JCI “day out.” I joined approximately 50 members for a day-long retreat in the upscale Damascus suburb of Yafour. At a resort conference center, they gathered for a 10-hour day that combined skill-building workshops, lectures on JCI activities, group-building social events and public speaking competition. In a lovely bit of anthropological synergy, the topic they chose was the difference between charity work and volunteerism. The contest provided insight into why the juxtaposition of the two concepts was central to the new elite’s community of practice and self-conception. The contest asked participants to answer the question “شو الفرق بين التطوع و العمل الخيري” [what is the difference between volunteerism and charity work?] during a 10-minute presentation to the audience. The five contestants’ entries reflected how the term volunteerism

invokes a range of positive associations connected to self-development and situated the speaker in a contemporary context of economic liberalization, entrepreneurship and social progress. In contrast, speakers used charity work to index backwardness, a closed society and ignorance.

Several of the contestants opened their speeches by referencing the proverb about fishing. The speeches mostly followed a consistent format. At the beginning, they offered an anecdote that illustrated how ordinary Syrians confused volunteering with charity. One participant said that when he told people that he was a volunteer with JCI, they asked if he gave food to the poor. That met with sympathetic murmurs from the JCI audience, who often found common ground by complaining that other Syrians did not comprehend the level of professionalism and organization inherent in their volunteer activities. Such anecdotes meant to demonstrate how widely sporadic, unplanned, unsystematic donations differed from the strategic, meticulously orchestrated and long-term programs of JCI and other similar organizations. In contrast, the speakers asserted that volunteerism required assessing the comprehensive needs of Syrian society and its communities, followed by the creation of long-term programs that would address a specific set of goals in a strategic and continuous manner. By aligning themselves with those qualities of professionalism, JCI members could stress those same credentials on a personal level through their advocacy for and participation in volunteerism.

These particular indexical values of volunteerism also circulate at the regional level, as illustrated in an article in the United Arab Emirate's English-language newspaper *The National*. Entitled "With First Lady's help, Syria wakes up to benefits of volunteerism," the article highlights how Syria has seen a boom in volunteerism. The



article's author attributes this to the example set by the First Lady and her active and prominent organization, the Syria Trust for Development (note that development is another significant SDS for neoliberal elites). For proof of this, the article quotes a prominent member of the upper elite, a founder of JCI and one of the most visible neoliberal elite trendsetters.

“The first lady is absolutely key to the trend,” said Ruba Shami,<sup>42</sup> a social analyst, volunteerism expert and member of the cancer charity *Basma*. “She has been proactive in encouraging volunteering groups and as a knock-on effect the ministry of social affairs has given permission to many new organizations,” Ms. Shami said.

She also points to rising affluence: “People’s lives have become more comfortable, which makes them more predisposed to helping the less fortunate in their communities” (Birke 2010).

Ruba Shami hails from a very prominent and wealthy family. Her father owns a company that provides services to Syria’s oil and gas industry and jointly invests in ventures with the president’s first cousin, an infamous businessman who has profited greatly off his proximity to the regime. A graduate of private schools in Syria and AUB in Lebanon, Ruba married into another of Syria’s most notable families. In addition, Ruba’s charity *Basma* (which is the Arabic word for smile) provides an instructive case study for what differentiates volunteerism and charity in the contemporary Syrian philanthropic scene. The publication of this article, and the reference to *Basma*, reinforce local Syrian conceptions of volunteerism that privilege it as more advanced and more in line with global standards of professionalism and development.

*Basma* is a children’s cancer charity. It raises money and mobilizes a corps of volunteers. According to its own promotional materials, *Basma* provides “psychological and moral support to the children and their parents during the treatment period, as well as

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<sup>42</sup> I have changed her name.

the financial support. BASMA seeks also to provide medical support to the children's cancer units in Syria in order to upgrade the medical services rendered to children" ("Basma" 2010). Its mandate to support and fund children receiving cancer treatment could place it well within the realm of traditional Syrian "charity work." Many organizations, from Islamic *waqfs*<sup>43</sup> to government-run associations, offer such straightforward interventions in causes with no possible political undertones, such as paying for medical treatment, providing entertainment for orphans or feeding the poor on holidays. Such actions on the behalf of others are typically limited in scope and time, low in visibility and without any comprehensive implications for how class relations are configured currently.

However, it is *Basma's* comprehensive approach to recruiting volunteers and to creating a sustained fundraising drive that embeds it in the larger context of neoliberal ideology and discourse utilized by the new elite to demarcate its social boundaries. In February 2009, *Basma* launched its campaign entitled "يوم من العطاء للاطفال المصابين" [28 days of giving for children with cancer]. To publicize the campaign, in which prominent and prestigious businesses were persuaded to donate portions of their profit on a certain day to *Basma*, *Basma* saturated upper-class Damascus with a bright, graphic calendar that described the particular business making donations for each day. For instance, on February 12<sup>th</sup>, the pricey Italian coffee chain *Segafredo* would donate all its profits to *Basma*. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, the CD store *Eido* would donate 25 percent of any purchases to *Basma*. The businesses included in the calendar are among the venues

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<sup>43</sup> Waqfs are an Islamic institution which "consisted of an object which was endowed to specific pious purpose for eternity" (van Leeuwen 1999, 11). This required property owners to turn over their property to a trustee who would utilize the asset for a charitable purpose, often to support mosques or to distribute alms.

through in which new elites consume, socialize and display their cohesion as a distinct social group. The calendar was printed on paper placemats in upscale cafes and restaurants, published as an advertisement in society magazines and placed on billboards and posters in Damascus' upscale neighborhoods.

*Basma's* February campaign targeting Damascus' new elite – through linkage of elite consumption and a charitable cause – represented a new development in both the professionalization of charity work in Syria and in how sustained charity efforts (considered volunteerism by new Syrian elites) were inseparable from other social attributes that mark the new elite. *Basma* structured its campaign so that new elites learned of it through activities that define the new elite as a group: consumption at expensive venues, reading new kinds of publications and circulating in elite neighborhoods. This allowed them to support the campaign by continuing those same activities. The fact that they were publicly consuming on behalf of the organization reinforced their membership in the new elite by linking them to the group's *de rigueur* association with volunteerism. Furthermore, *Basma* situated itself in the Syrian discourse of volunteerism by stressing its long-term strategies and its commitment to “improving social conditions of children with cancer in Syria.” It also structured opportunities for volunteerism by recruiting and encouraging young elites to regularly visit and provide moral support for children and their families in children's cancer wards. That *Basma* structured its purpose as a stated goal – to improve social conditions – followed by concrete, long-term actions to meet that goal demonstrated how the discourse and philosophy of volunteerism as an improvement over charity work functioned within *Basma*.

The indexical associations that contribute to the oppositional volunteerism/charity work pair also help to divide purveyors of volunteerism from its recipients. There is the giver and the recipient of charity work on one hand and the volunteer and the recipient of the volunteer work on the other. The following sections will explore in more detail how the activities of volunteering, into which JCI members and other individuals in the neoliberal elite were so heavily invested, rely upon the creation and identification of social divisions. Sometimes these social categories represent new systems for locating and servicing an “other;” at other junctures they recreated old divisions based on wealth, family reputation, access to capital and other factors.

### *JCI Children’s Fair*

In 2008, I attended JCI’s fourth annual Children’s Fair and many of the planning meetings that preceded it. Run by the community committee of JCI – the sub-group responsible for JCI’s volunteer campaigns – the fair required months of advance planning and necessitated the labor of most JCI members. I first learned of the fair as a regular attendee at JCI’s meetings. Yet, although the meetings’ topics such as location, planning and the marketing scheme were straightforward enough, I struggled initially to grasp the core purpose of the event. Who were the children meant to benefit from the fair? The meetings whose ostensible purpose was to organize the fair introduced a number of competing elements and different interest groups, with competing linguistic practices, and it only became clear to me how they all fit together during the actual fair itself. The linguistic framing of the planning meetings and the event itself further exacerbated social

categories and group divisions by affiliating disparate linguistic practices with each social designation.

The first issue at stake was the joint participation of government school and private school students in the creation and execution of the fair. This surfaced during an early planning meeting during which their respective competence at participation was assessed and debated with a great deal of concern. In a hierarchy that was reflected widely in both JCI and larger society, private school students were assumed to be adept at participation in volunteer campaigns and knowledgeable about the social norms demanded in such a situation. One member cited the American School students<sup>44</sup> as particularly adept. Public school students, in contrast, prompted concern from JCI members about their capability to perform the role expected. Yet despite the difference accorded to them, neither of these groups was to be the intended recipients of whatever genre of charity the fair would dispense.

A week before the fair, a conversation unfolded in the typical mixed Arabic-English interactional style of JCI. As the topic of the fair was introduced, one member immediately interjected with her concerns about potential difficulties that might arise. She mentioned that the government school students would need extra help and expressed worry about their ability to participate properly. She then countered her concern with the assertion that the private school students were more than equipped to participate. She especially mentioned the American School students who could help guide the government school students. No explanation of what participation entailed, what the

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<sup>44</sup> Although the school's official name is the Damascus Community School (DCS), it is almost always referred to as the American School in conversation.

government school students lacked or why was given. One member later summarized the issue with the government school students this way:

ستة في public schools. شيء في يكون ما. [There are six public schools. There is nothing under control.]

She then included this as among the pressing “task-ات-تبعنا” [tasks belonging to us]. Another member then interjected her added concern about the difficulties posed by incorporating government school students into the fair. She stressed that members acting as chaperones for the various schools would be distributed unevenly, explaining that “ال public ال من أصعب private” [the public (schools) are harder than the private (schools)]. The meeting concluded with the meeting’s chairperson reminding the members to be aware of the difficulties posed by the government school children. However, this time admonishment came fully in Arabic, and the chairperson used the Arabic words حكومية [governmental] and خاصة [private] rather than substitute the English lexical items as speakers had done earlier. She declared that government school students would need extra help producing decorations and extra time to assemble said decorations properly. She also explained that, unlike the arrangement with private schools that would use their funds to purchase their supplies, JCI would purchase supplies for the government schools.

Although the perceived performance gap between government and private school students was a preoccupation of JCI members during the planning process, those students were not the fair’s primary beneficiaries. Moments after these discussions, an elegantly dressed and impeccably groomed woman, sporting an immense diamond wedding ring, entered the room. She seemed slightly older than most of the members, perhaps in her

late 30s or early 40s. Indeed, she clearly recognized many of the members, as she waved silent hellos and mouthed greetings to several people. The Community Area chairperson introduced her as a representative from the Syrian Association for Autism [الجمعية السورية للتوحد]. When she began speaking, she framed her comments as those of a concerned mother of a son with autism. She spoke about the importance of such fairs for children like her son, afflicted with autism, and the need for autistic children to feel the caring and interest of their society.<sup>45</sup> She spoke in Syrian Arabic, inserting several English lexical items. At one point, she paused as tears filled her eyes although they never fell. Her emphasis on how the fair would bring joy and comfort to autistic children added an additional dimension to the fair's participants but failed to clarify to me what its primary objective was.

As I lingered in the JCI office after that meeting, I chatted casually with several members of the fair. One member clarified that the aim of the children's fair was to "promote volunteerism among school children." It began to realize that the fair's main purpose was to educate students from both the public and private schools on the benefits of volunteerism although it was assumed that the public students would need more assistance in this process. The autistic children and other disadvantaged or special needs youth would of course also benefit from a fun and enjoyable children's fair, but their participation mainly served to provide the opportunity, venue and recipients of the "culture of volunteerism" that the fair was intended to spread and encourage. The divide between the school children setting up booths at the fair and the other children attending the fair then was less salient and meaningful than the divide between the private school

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<sup>45</sup> In Syria, special needs students do not attend mainstream schools. Instead, they are sent to government-run institutes or special venues.

students who were presumed to have prior knowledge of how one properly participates in such an event and the government school children who were expected to lack such know-how.

JCI's Arabic promotional literature further highlighted the fair's uneven expectations of participation from various groups. The idea of spreading volunteerism resurfaced and, with it, the emphasis on educating government school students in the linguistic and social practices of JCI and its members. A brochure about the fair failed to mention the impact of the fair on its attendees:

يهدف المهرجان إلى تشجيع مفهوم التطوع ونشر ثقافته في عمر مبكر وقد حازت هذه الفكرة على دعم و رعاية كبيرين من كافة القائمين و المسؤولين عن التربية و التعليم.

[The fair aims to encourage the concept of volunteerism and spread a culture of it at the earliest age. The idea won support and sponsorship from all those leaders responsible for education.]

Even events as seemingly straightforward as this fair for disadvantaged children were primarily meant to “promote the concept of volunteerism among school students by giving them the opportunity to volunteer in an atmosphere full of joy and happiness [النطاق الاجتماعي مهرجان تطوع طلاب المدارس لتنشيط ثقافة التطوع بين اليافعين]” as JCI communicated in its annual report booklet. Through these explanations, one can see that the experiences of the children attending the fair were largely absent from public promotions and descriptions of the fair, rendering them the invisible (and silent) props in this lesson on volunteerism.

Finally the weekend of the fair arrived. The fair took place over the Friday and Saturday of a warm and sunny October weekend at a sporting arena in a peripheral Damascus neighborhood. Booths spread over several basketball courts formed a tidy tent city of cheerful stations awash in colorful signs and bright decorations, offering face-



painting, baked goods and carnival games. American pop music, from Beyonce to 50 Cent, played through loudspeakers. Approximately 50 JCI members, recognizable from their gray JCI polo shirts emblazoned with JCI's English logo, supervised the event. They monitored a check-in counter, manned a booth selling JCI paraphernalia, circulated through the crowds and hovered over the booths. Throughout the day, a stream of children entered the fair. Most of the attendees came via an affiliation with a charitable group – some of which contained no specific socio-economic status connotations like the society for autism and others with direct class connotations like organizations for orphaned children or disadvantaged rural youth. JCI members partnered with the NGOs' own chaperones to guide the children through the fair and entice them with the games and activities. Their friendly smiles and enthusiastic encouragement to try the games succeeded in welcoming the initially shy attendees. By the end of the day, the grounds were filled with smiling 6-year olds with painted faces munching on chocolate chip cookies.

As welcoming as JCI members were to the children from NGOs, behind the scenes they were more concerned with the performance of the government school students. The public school booths were interspersed with the booths of the private schools, and many more JCI members hovered around their booths than they did at the private schools' booths. They would not have found space in any case as the private school booths were crowded with fashionable teenagers of both genders enthusiastically welcoming the children and as many equally affluent-seeming teachers and parents. Their decorations featured huge, artistically drawn murals of children playing, sporting equipment or intentionally cheerful imagery like yellow suns and fluffy clouds. The

government schools' booths followed similar themes but their decorations lacked the crispness of the drawing and brightness of the colors. Their workforce differed too; no parents or teachers led the group, and their student bodies were primarily female. Rather than wandering about the grounds in mixed groups chatting loudly, the government school students clustered amongst themselves and stayed in the confines of their own booths. The American school, which represents the apex of knowledge and ability in these moments of volunteerism, had the most professional decorations and games with signs printed on a computer and filled with crisp graphics, unlike those in the booths of the public schools. The International School of Choueifat, Damascus, Syria, another expensive private school, featured childlike cartoon characters playing baseball on their signage. Baseball is not available anywhere in Syria, and the images of mitts and bats likely meant little to the disadvantaged youth who had probably never even heard of the sport.

Disparate clothing choices also marked the differences between the groups of attendees and participants. The JCI members (many of whom attended private schools or completed their university studies abroad) and private school students wore the latest Western fashions: tight-fitting skinny jeans, sunglasses with designer logos and T-shirts with their school or JCI logos printed in English. The government school students also sported jeans and T-shirts, but many of the female students wore the Islamic veil, and their clothing was generally loose-fitting and covered their ankles and wrists. Their accessories were locally made and less expensive than the imported Italian brands, but the girls particularly sported colorful necklaces and bracelets in current styles. Finally, the children and parents brought by the NGOs for orphans or rural children wore

polyester dress pants and button down shirts for the men and flowing skirts and elaborately ruffled blouses for the women and girls. It was obvious that they had come dressed in their most special clothing for the occasion, and their sartorial choices did not reflect the latest European trends or but seemed dated by several decades. Their attire clashed with the enforced casualness and trendiness of the entire event and signaled their lack of familiarity with the dictates of participating in a children's fair.

The linguistic framing of the event reinforced the social messages about volunteerism that it attempted to spread. Although the fair was officially bilingual, with the school names printed in Arabic and English on the booths that JCI provided, English titles and catchphrases dominated the booths' decorations. The private and prestigious Pakistani School posted the phrase "Welcome, our guests" on its booth with no corresponding Arabic signage. As per its typical branding, JCI hung professionally printed blue plastic tarps with its English logo and slogan all over the fair grounds. Although it printed the Arabic translation of Junior Chamber International on its booth, its English logo and English materials far out-numbered the small amounts of Arabic. For an event that was at some level meant to attract disadvantaged Syrians, the heavy use of English seemed strangely opaque. Yet when one considered that JCI is promoting what it considered a new culture of volunteerism based on global standards and convened through a global organization, its insistent use of English became less perplexing even if it was no less exclusionary. The fair was about inculcating non-elites in the new ways of the new elite, and as established in previous chapters, English usage was the unifying element in all the orientations, interactions and principles of the new elite. Without its

English branding and framework, the fair and JCI's sponsorship of it would have lost its clear affiliation with the neoliberal elite.

As JCI members continually stressed to each other and to me during the course of planning and executing the children's fair, events like this one were not and are not a common occurrence in Syria. A children's fair – convened by a non-governmental, secular entity – was exotic for Syrians outside the upper classes. The bewilderment on their faces and their inability to dress or speak like those sponsoring the event revealed their lack of familiarity with the concept. The distance between what a non-elite Syrian would have expected and the extra-ordinariness of the event was reinforced by JCI members who repeated that “this was only the fourth ever such fair” and there “just isn't anything else like this in Syria.” This emphasis on the fair's newness and exceptional nature reinforced JCI's position as the arbiter of all that was current and progressive in Syria and reminded those attending or even participating that they needed to learn the corresponding new norms of behavior.

The advertising campaign that publicized the fair around Damascus – geared at alerting less privileged children that they could participate in something atypical, novel and above all beneficial – appeared fully in Arabic, an unusual departure from JCI's typically English-dominated marketing and publicity efforts. While in JCI meetings, I never once heard the event's Arabic title, the colorful poster boasted the Arabic name in clear, child-like writing: المهرجان الرابع لتطوع طلاب المدارس. It also included colorful graphics of a cartoon figure playing sports. By choosing to depart from its typical English dominant publicity and communicate in Arabic, JCI communicated an important message from the elite JCI to the less affluent and prestigious public: that this particular

event was intended for and on behalf of the less fortunate. It was inclusive, free to attend and welcoming non-elites in the language they speak fluently. Of course, this contrasted profoundly with the signage that appeared at the event itself or the linguistic interactions between JCI members amongst themselves or with the school students involved in executing the event. Although the presence of “needy” recipients was needed to have a successful fair demonstrating volunteerism, the fair was not truly about their experience – and the linguistic framing of it reflected that fact. The contrast between the fair’s public monolingual Arabic image and its widespread inclusion of English at the event itself, whether written or spoken, revealed how strongly JCI intended for the fair to socialize attendees in the norms of the new elite, a mission that required consistent English usage.

The public Facebook page dedicated to this 2008 Children’s Fair reveals how members viewed the event in triumphant terms that valorized the event and its impact. The page, entitled “ChildrenFair 2008, another success added to JCI Damascus,” provided a forum for members to add pictures of the event and to post comments – unfailingly positive and celebratory – about the children’s fair. The page’s description stated that “this is a temporary group created to celebrate the success of ChildrenFair 2008. We had good moments and bad moments, let’s forget the bad ones and share the good ones here. Dear JCI members, please add photos if you have.”

The page is significant because it reveals how hard JCI works to craft its progressive image and how important its positive self-image is to its success as a group. In addition, the photographs posted on the page reveal how much emphasis the group places on such charitable events as moments of critical bonding between members. The preparations and execution actually overshadow the fair’s impact on the children who

attended. The majority of the photographs feature members posing in groups in front of the event's signage, the materials with the JCI logo, or building the tents and booths. Of 32 photographs, only a handful of them depict children from the NGOs participating in the event and partaking of the activities offered. This reinforces the contention that, whether intentionally or not, JCI and its membership privilege how the event brings together those already established as elites over how it helps or benefits the non-elites who were the ostensible reasons for the fair in the first place. Bad moments and mistakes must be forgotten, photographs of smiling, cooperating JCI members, private and public school students must be highlighted, and positive publicity must be distributed for the event to qualify as successful. The reactions and reception of the non-elites simply do not figure into the event's lasting significance.

In between these extremes of elites and their beneficiaries the government school students navigated their own position both in the event and possibly in society at large. Like the JCI members and private school students, they were considered to be hosts of the event. They were not recipients of its charity. They were expected to engage the NGO children, to use their assumed position of relative privilege to provide them with entertainment and joy that the NGO children presumably lacked. Yet as their comportment, dress and peripheral position in the planning hierarchy indicated, they were not fully accepted members of an elite group who could freely dispense charity and behave appropriately in such venues without explicit instruction. In fact, given that the children's fair was really for "the volunteerism of school children," these middle class children were the ones for whom the event was structured and whose socialization into such activities was the most important purpose. Although everyone welcomed the NGO

children and hoped the event would provide them with a lovely day, the crucial work was to inculcate the government school children with norms of volunteerism that JCI members and private school students had already mastered. The neoliberal elites instructed the middle class on how to “help” the poorest Syrians, or those with special needs regardless of social status. In that way, the children’s fair provided an instructive lesson on who stood where in the class hierarchy and what kinds of expected behavior corresponded with each position.

### ***For All the Children of Gaza***

A similarly illuminating volunteering event occurred a few months later. This time, the precipitating events in question unfolded more spontaneously. The triggering international incident was Israel’s bombing raid on the Palestinian territory of the Gaza Strip, spanning from early December of 2008 to late January of 2009. The images of violence and destruction that flooded the Arab world are gruesome and disturbing. Bloodied corpses of children, houses rendered piles of concrete dust and decrepit hospitals teeming with the living wounded appeared on TVs, the Internet, newspapers and magazines. The intensity of the bombing did not abate, and as it continued, raw emotion and fury in the Arab world accelerated. In Damascus, the tension over the bombings and anger at the perceived injustice boiled. Television sets in stores and homes stayed tuned to the constant footage of the bombings on the pan-Arab station *Al-Jazeera*. Taxi drivers continually interrogated me about my reaction to the bombings, vainly searching for some explanation of why the international community allowed the violence to continue. Shop-keepers began placing copies of Israeli flags or Stars of David on the

pavement in front of shop entrances so that customers might step on them and thus express their disgust. One particularly angered and ambitious shopkeeper compiled a collage of inflammatory images, including Israeli flags imprinted with swastikas and signs stating “Kindly American citizens are not welcome in this store.”

By early January, audible and visible expressions of anger over the siege were present on Damascus streets, as the government or other para-governmental organizations<sup>46</sup> arranged protests on an almost daily basis. Given that there was and has never been an Israeli presence in Syria, the targets of their rage varied. A crowd of mostly young men marched on the Egyptian embassy, furious at President Hosni Mubarak’s decision to refuse Gazans entrance into Egypt. A crowd of school children and government employees, pushed out of classrooms and offices by official decree, headed for the American embassy. Mostly, the protests began and ended at central Damascus squares where the protesters held signs and chanted slogans, primarily for the benefit of the Syrian television stations that filmed it. Posters vilifying Israeli leaders and Arabic chants demanding death to Israel and America were common.

Consistent with their general distancing from non-elite styles of interaction and consumption and their insistent apolitical stance, JCI members chose not to keep up with the reactions of the majority of Syrian society and the government’s official actions. In fact, most neoliberal elites seemed remarkably disconnected from the popular forms of protest happening around them daily. At a JCI meeting on the same evening as a scheduled, government-sponsored protest at the American embassy, a member was scheduled to give a short presentation. He was curiously late for over an hour, texting another member to report that he was stuck in traffic. When he finally arrived, breathless

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<sup>46</sup> Here I refer to labor syndicates, student leagues and political parties sanctioned by the regime.



and apologetic, he described gridlock on the streets, for a reason he could not fathom. The other members seemed puzzled too, wondering what would keep someone in a standstill on the road just behind the American embassy until I finally reminded them that there was an official protest that day. Oh right, they murmured, and returned to their discussion of a business lecture series. Yet despite their disinterest in popular (and populist) activities like protesting in the streets and creating inflammatory signage, they too expressed mounting anger over the bombings of Gaza and began to discuss in their meetings what kind of response would be appropriate for their group.

JCI members were not the only elites who availed themselves of elite styles and linguistic ideologies to express their disdain at the events in the Gaza while simultaneously communicating that they shared the Syrian outrage what was taking place. In Chapter 5, I discussed how the coffee chain *In House*'s promotional materials typified how elite businesses – or those attempting to be – combined stylized advertising and marketing campaigns with strategic insertion of English words or all English advertisements to mark their elite status. The chain once again summoned its elite stylistic and linguistic resources to craft a response to the Gaza bombings that communicated its rage while maintaining its elite aesthetic.

*In House* created a large, eye-catching poster for the front windows of its stores that featured two hands reaching toward each other, with English and Arabic words in different fonts scattered artfully across the sign. The word “Freedom” in English sat next to its Arabic translation [حرية] on the main axis. Although Arabic words are placed throughout the sign, the main text is in English with no translation offered. It describes the events unfolding in Gaza without taking an explicitly political stance, instead

focusing on the civilian casualties. The Arabic words, printed in various sizes, fonts and colors, do not form a cohesive narrative but act more like graphic features. Except for freedom and its Arabic translation, none of the terms or narrative was translated, meaning that monolingual Arabic speakers would not be able to access the majority of the sign's message. Yet the presence of Arabic indexed the chain's – and thus the potential customer's – connection to the Palestinians and their suffering by virtue of their shared Arab heritage. As described earlier, Arabic is the language of history, religion and regional politics, exemplified the Arab world's shared distress over the Palestinian situation. Expressing sympathy for and anger over the Palestinians in only English would simply not offer the same emotional connection that Arabic provides. However, for all its desire to promote its support for a universally popular cause in Syria, the chain did not want to diminish its elite reputation so simultaneously, English dominated the sign to remind customers that this expression of sympathy was one that was repackaged linguistically to merge with the aesthetic and linguistic preferences of the neoliberal elite.

In keeping with such preferences, JCI organized its own public demonstration of support for the children of Gaza. At a meeting in mid-January, one of the committee chairs announced that they would hold an “action” on behalf of “أهل غزة” [the people of Gaza] that coming weekend. The event would be a fundraising drive to collect money on behalf of the Syrian Red Crescent who had ostensibly been transferring funds and goods to Gaza. It would take place on a Friday afternoon – part of the weekend in Syria – on the side of Damascus' largest and most traversed traffic circle. JCI members would carry boxes and solicit cash donations from passers-by who would pull over to donate. A DJ

would provide inspiring background music, and the day would conclude with a short performance by a children's choir.

The location, Umayyad Square, is located in the West of Damascus, and much of Damascus car traffic circulates through it in the course of traversing the city. The square sits on the edge of Malki and Abu Rummaneh, two of the most elite districts in the city. Choosing to travel on any one of the spokes of the wheel emanating out from the square can direct cars toward the most affluent residential neighborhoods of the city, the touristic Old City or the lower-middle class areas to the South followed by the poorest areas in Damascus past them. The location for this fund-raising was chosen strategically. There was a mutually understood socio-economic map to the city that members deployed when structuring their fund-raising or volunteer activities.

When I arrived at the fundraiser, I saw that they positioned their staging area so that they were most likely to catch the cars going to or coming from the most affluent areas of the city, where most JCI members reside. This would catch the Damascus residents who had the most money to give, but it would also make the JCI action visible to the part of Syrian society who mattered most to them and for whom their branding was relevant and understandable. I arrived at 11 am on that Friday, when Damascus is empty, as traffic does not start circulating until after Friday noon prayers. By the time I arrived, JCI members had already established a staging area, marked by two parked vans on the side of the traffic circle. There were two huge banners hung over the vans. One, written with spray paint on a sheet-like banner, proclaimed in Arabic تبرعوا من أجل أطفال غزة للهلال الأحمر السوري [Donate on behalf of the children of Gaza to the Syrian Red Crescent]. The sign was charmingly hand-made and unsophisticated. It contrasted sharply with the

banner hanging over the other parked car. This one, made from an industrial plastic material, featured the crisp, professionally designed JCI logo, in English, printed repeatedly on a bright blue background. The sign was obviously professionally-made and well-planned to provide JCI's branding – an SDS terms JCI members repeatedly used in English – with maximum visibility. In fact, later when we took a group picture, there were several rounds of reshuffling people to ensure that the JCI logo was visible and legible in the photo. No such interest was taken in the Arabic sign asking people to give.

As I greeted the JCI members organizing the event, I was given a sash-like scarf that features the iconic black and white check of Palestinian scarves called *kafiyeh* and the word غزة [Gaza] printed in Arabic next to what looked like the outline of a mosque. A JCI member affixed a small button that read in Arabic لأجل أطفال غزة [on behalf of the children of Gaza]. It was tiny and barely legible to anyone standing farther than six inches from the scarf, let alone to the people in the cars driving by. A member also handed me a large bright blue adhesive sticker that read in English “I’m a volunteer” with JCI and its logo printed below it. Like the larger signage hung over the cars, there was a clear division of labor between English and Arabic in these materials. It was not incidental that JCI's branding, logo and other materials using key neoliberal discursive terms (i.e. volunteer) were written exclusively in English while all information pertaining to donations, the suffering in Gaza or the Red Crescent were written in Arabic. Like *In House* coffee, whose limited use of Arabic indexed the plight of the Gazans but communicated little if any information, JCI's use of its English materials at the Gaza fund-raiser reminded most passers-by of the prestigious status of the organization, even if the majority passer-by did not command English sufficiently to comprehend what was

written. They could still register the prestige associated with English, and those who did command English – JCI’s target audience – would process both the message of prestige and the semantic meaning carried by the English words. Arabic, on the other hand, expressed the more populist and general message of supporting Palestinian children. However, the pervasive presence of English which many Syrians cannot read somewhat mitigated the universal message of the Arabic signs.

Even the apparel sported by JCI members during the fundraiser indicated the extent to which JCI was concerned with projecting its neoliberal elite status at the expense of conveying information about their event and the exact cause it supported. Members wore crisp gray polo shirts with the JCI logo professionally embroidered on the chest. Some even sported JCI bandanas with the JCI logo in English emblazoned on them. The clear boxes they carried to collect the money featured a large JCI logo on the front, with no mention of Gaza and the beneficiary of the fundraiser. The eye-catching bright blue of the JCI logo and buttons dominated the event’s visual cues.

As noon prayers ended and Syrians began their weekend, the square was suddenly crammed with cars. The strategy of positioning the fundraiser to catch the wealthiest cars seemed to succeed and a flood of BMWs, Lexus and other luxury cars pulled over to deposit money. Many of them were young adults who recognize their JCI friends and stay for a while to chat. Parents handed money to children to deposit in the containers. As a reward for donating, we distributed the bright blue JCI stickers to people, not the pins using Arabic to express support for the children of Gaza. After about four hours, the fundraiser collected several thousand dollars. In the late afternoon, a children’s choir arrived to perform as the concluding event. They were composed of about 30 private

school students of varying ages, dressed uniformly in white shirts and black bottoms. They came with an entourage of parents and siblings, all dressed in fashionable clothes and expensive-looking jewelry, clutching the latest digital and video cameras. Their families stood on the periphery of the space designated for the singers but often darted in to fix a wrinkled shirt or brush some messy hair. The choir director, a middle-aged man, immediately began ushering the children into neat rows, speaking mostly Arabic but imploring them with “please” or “thank you” in English. When he hooked up the microphone he yelled “test” in English to the teenager operating the machinery. Finally, the children were organized and prepared to his satisfaction, and he signaled to start the singing. The parents in the audience recorded the performance intently and many also mouthed the words along with their children.

A few minutes into the performance, a small group of boys ranging in age from about 13 to 6 wandered up to the area and looked in curiously. They were dressed in ill-fitting, outdated clothes and had no adult chaperone. Most likely on their way to the mini-bus station nearby, they were clearly quite poor and of very low social status. The unlikely site of identically dressed children singing in neat rows seemed to both intrigue and irritate them. They moved through the crowd until they were standing next to the other children. At this point, the choir was singing a rearranged version of a classic Arabic folk song of solidarity so these boys knew the lyrics if not the tune. They began to sing along loudly and their voices, not in sync with the choir, became louder than the choir. Instantly, two female JCI members rushed forward and attempted to usher the newcomers to a spot in the audience. The boys resisted, starting to disagree loudly and argue with them. Eventually several of the larger, more imposing JCI male members

came and shepherded them away. They lingered in the audience for a moment or two and then walked on, their voices loud enough to hear them expressing – in Arabic – their anger at their removal.

At the end of the concert, the parents and JCI members rushed to the children in the choir, praising them elaborately, hugging them and complimenting them on their great talents. The choir director received long applause. The choir children were rewarded and validated by their participation in the fund-raising effort, which stood in stark contrast to the frosty reception given to the boys who inserted themselves, uninvited, into the performance. For JCI and other elite Syrians, there was a right way and a wrong way to participate in such volunteer activities. The right way was pre-planned, well-organized, visually stylish, composed – and interspersed with English neoliberal SDS terms. For the upper class children who hewed to that mandate, there was abundant praise and acceptance. For the lower class children who did not understand these norms of volunteering, there was rejection and displacement. This may have been blind support for the children of Gaza, but it was not a *carte blanche* for the children of Damascus.

### ***Competition Culture***

Along with volunteer activities and public charitable events, the last few years in Syria have witnessed the development of what I will term a “competition culture.” Suddenly, NGOs and the entrepreneurial organizations, in addition to private schools, offered chances for young students and young adults to showcase their skills, intelligence or business savvy in the context of a formalized competition. By naming winners and

designating losers, competitions established obvious hierarchies. These competitions, however, created and reflected even wider and more embedded social hierarchies that extended beyond the terms of the competition. By pairing lengthy training and preparation phases – sometimes stretching up to six months – with drawn-out contests, these competitions divided Syrian society into judges, competitors and those who could not even enter the competition. Mirroring events like the children’s fair, the competitions instructed competitors on how to behave appropriately in new settings and in a new Syrian society. Those who adopted the mores and standards wielded by the judges received prizes and awards. They could even be invited to act as a judge in the future, cementing their transition from “student” to “teacher.” More than just opportunities to establish personal success, the very structure of these competitions acted as a mechanism of socialization into the neoliberal elite.

The competitions accomplished all of these social tasks because they offered uneven opportunities for participants to display the linguistic practices and neoliberal elite stance that would align them with elite preferences. Certain competitions, held within the entrepreneurship organizations or requiring display of their specialized lexicon, provided participants with tacit or explicit permission to engage with the SDS-based discourse of neoliberal ideology. This permission was often achieved through competition rules that encouraged or permitted the usage of English or multiple Arabic varieties. Competitions that placed strict limitations on the linguistic options of participants and enforced formal Arabic – a linguistic register almost never used by neoliberal elites – provided no chance for participants to linguistically or socially merge with neoliberal elites. Such participants were excluded from the critical linguistic



practices, detailed in Chapters 3 and 4, which individual speakers had to adopt and display appropriately.

The first competition whose rules create a pathway to elite group membership was JCI's annual Creative Young Entrepreneur Award (CYEA). JCI's Business Area invested a great deal of money and energy to promote this award, indicating the importance they placed on it. According to a flier advertising the competition, the award recognized a young adult between the ages of 18 and 40 who:

have started a new business using creativity in product development, service development and in their approach to the market. Or, as employees they have taken an existing business, and incorporated creativity to solve a problem, or change a process to create positive change in their business operations.

While CYEA had a shorter period of competition than most other awards and was less public than others (it took a mere month between the receipt of paper applications and the announcement of ten finalists and then a winner), the ultimate winner was announced at an elaborate ceremony, photographed extensively and the results published in JCI's materials and in the society magazines. Indeed its very "goal [was] to provide an opportunity for young entrepreneurs to celebrate their creativity."

Examining the back story of one of the winners and her employment history provides valuable insight into how social status impacts the competition and was renegotiated through it. I developed a casual friendship with the 2007 winner Raya and spoke with her at length about her involvement in JCI and other NGOs, her career and family and educational background. During our interview, she detailed the business achievements that won her the CYEA recognition. She came from an educated family, comfortable and professional but not extremely wealthy nor well-known: exactly the kind of background shared by many neoliberal elites. It was elevated enough to provide her

exposure to many of the people and ideas of the new elite, but modest enough that her participation in the new elite was far from guaranteed. She attended private schools run by nuns in her early childhood in Aleppo and then enrolled in public schools and Damascus University when her father transferred the family to the capital to take a new position. Her aunt, an English teacher, helped her with her homework as a child, but, among her three siblings, she reported that she was the only one with a high level of foreign language proficiency. The others, she told me, never concentrated on learning English, and “they regret not focusing on language.” Although she majored in English literature at Damascus University – in a department notorious for not producing fluent English speakers despite its ostensible objective – she also enrolled in English classes at the British Council that she felt gave her English fluency. As described in chapter 5, the British Council is prohibitively expensive for most Syrians and an important educational site for elites from more modest backgrounds who can afford the fees but who did not attend foreign-language private schools. Upper elites, whose immersion into foreign languages from a young age precluded their need for additional English instruction, did not enroll, placing the British Council, and its students, in a position of marginal elite status.

After graduating from university, she began to work at the Syrian office of a well-known international shipping company. As she worked her way through the ranks of the company, she achieved the innovation and creativity that eventually won her the CYEA.

She explained her career progressing at *Shipping Company*:

I started as a customer service agent, working just at the counter. After that, I changed to be backline which is like correspondences between *Shipping Company* centers all over the world. After that my country manager picked me up to be her secretary. Then after that, she promoted to be a personnel assistant then duty

manager in her absence. It was promotion gradually. Finally, I assumed the position of air operation manager and freight.

I created a freight department. As a *Shipping Company* express, it was only about samples, but I introduced freight in air and ocean. I represent my country in so many conferences in the Middle East and headquarters. I had to give a presentation; I was the only female because it was freight. This job especially is assigned to males not females. I was trembling. You have to present it in English. It was very successful; it was like a report about what *Shipping Company* Syria did and how things developed. It was a great experience.

Her achievements were impressive: creating an entirely new department in the notably static Syrian business environment, overcoming gender expectations and probably even discrimination and becoming a regional leader. Unlike the entrepreneurial experiences of many of the founders and leaders of JCI who came from families of great wealth and who started their own companies and organizations with the support of their family businesses, all her achievements took place under the auspices of an international corporation. By winning CYEA and thus earning JCI's highest form of validation and the implied acceptance of the elites who started the organization in Syria, she earned entrée into JCI and its corresponding social circle. In 2009, she was elected as chairperson of the Community committee and was – and still is – widely regarded as one of JCI's most visible and influential members.

The role of language usage and interactional style is central to this narrative, just as it was in the formation and execution of volunteering events. To be fair, she knew before our conversation that my interest was in English usage, specifically Arabic-English mixing so she almost certainly highlighted her language usage to interest me. Nonetheless, it demonstrated how her language skills and ability to adopt elite interactional styles – coupled with her formalized acceptance into the new elite through winning CYEA – facilitated her rise in social status. She narrated her transition from

adapting to the Arabic-English style of JCI and its members to claiming that English words were so ingrained in her vocabulary that she had to censor her usage to avoid seeming “superior or something, showing off that language is good or your accent maybe is better.” She added:

My English helped me to be volunteering in JCI. The thing that we face in JCI when they come to attend one of our meetings, they say OK I have to learn English first and then join you. I think it’s an issue because the main language we use in JCI is English, the minutes that we send, our emails, the projects names we used.

She then described her linguistic habit in social settings with the same ambivalence and even denial of widespread English usage employed by upper elites. In my observation of her, she was a prolific and constant user of English lexical items in Arabic conversations, both in JCI meetings and in social outings. Yet she said:

For example, we go out so many times, we go out as the JCI people we go out all together, we speak in Arabic actually . . . When we go out sometimes, we speak in Arabic. Of course sometimes you use words in English sometimes but it doesn’t give a rude impression.

Her linguistic history typifies the transition that those on the outer edges of the new elite often make. She described her English usage initially as a strategic tool for entering the world of JCI. After that, however, English became a regular part of her social repertoire as she found herself more integrated into the new elite.

Her professional history after her *Shipping Company* achievements further illustrates how family wealth and background determine who would and would not enter a competition like CYEA. After several years moving through the ranks at *Shipping Company*, she reported that she became restless for new opportunities in a new company. She eventually joined a conglomerate that had business interests in everything from pharmaceuticals to agriculture to event planning. She became an event manager, working

with one of the partners of the firm. That partner, Walid who discussed his English accent in Chapter 4, was around her age, and his father had helped to establish a very successful holding company. His father eventually installed Walid as a partner in the company. In addition, he was a very active founding member of SYEA. When I interviewed him, he too described impressive innovations he had made to his company, and at a very young age. Yet he never entered CYEA or a similar competition, and I imagine that he never would. His family's elite social and economic position ensured that he would never have to enter such a competition to gain prestige and indeed that he would always be among the judges, not the judged. While Raya needed the competition and other activities like it to prove her compatibility with the upper elite, her boss was born with credentials that required no proof.

Other competitions feature lengthier incubation periods that allow for a more extended socialization of contestants, by the leadership of the NGO or entrepreneurial organization. JCI and SYEA each offer several competitions in which prospective entrepreneurs submitted detailed, lengthy business plans about their proposed business or innovation in the hopes of receiving a relatively substantial amount of seed money with which they would launch their business. JCI's Best Business Plan Competition (BBPC) claimed to be the first and trend-setting business competition, explaining in its sponsorship guide that "JCI Syria had the initiative in 2007 when it launched the first business plan competition in Syria and created a big buzz in the business community regarding the importance of planning. However, several NGO's are imitating the competition (SYEA, Shell, انطلاقة, إبدأ).<sup>47</sup> Hence, the mission of BBPC project is achieved. Therefore, we need to alter the project in a way that achieves a new kind of positive

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<sup>47</sup> The announcement here refers to other Syrian NGOs who have sponsored business competitions.

change.” What is significant about their structure is that it included a lengthy incubation phase, including several workshops for contestants prior to the deadline for submission of their plan. The exact timeline and structure varied from year to year and among JCI branches, but the underlying concept was that applicants needed JCI and its members (or SYEA and its leaders) to educate them in the proper procedures and to judge their competence in adhering to these top-down edicts.

The training schedules were established and conducted locally in the individual Syrian cities. This means that competitors either personally knew or knew of the “experts” who conducted the trainings and socialized them in the importance of planning, the applicable SDS terms and the newfound opportunity to petition banks and investors for capital. Often experts were members of JCI from upper elite families who had studied business abroad, a fact that reinforced such competitions as vehicles for gaining social acceptance by established elites. After the competitors attended the various training sessions and presumably devoted extensive hours to crafting their business plan submission, the competition entered the first of several judging phases. A committee of local business people selected local winners who then participated in a playoff style tournament that resulted in one winner for the entirety of Syria.

JCI Aleppo’s “schedule of training,” for example, stretched over a month and featured several-hour long sessions in which “experts” educated participants about various aspects of the business planning process, from legal issues, to securing financing to developing a marketing strategy. Attendance at these sessions was mandatory, reinforcing my contention that the competition was most significant as a venue for socializing potential new members of JCI and its social milieu. Many JCI members told

me with excitement that most people who competed in BBPC eventually did become members of JCI and were often quite active.

In keeping with the idea that the BBPC socialized ordinary Syrians who were ignorant of business norms into competent business plan authors who could communicate with business elites effectively, the announcements advertising the competition were mostly written in Arabic. The 2010 BBPC's poster featured a bright graphic of four colored blocks with images of dollar signs and question marks imprinted on them. The words "عندك فكرة!" [you have an idea!] were printed prominently on the page with information on how to become a participant and the event's timeline. Information on the various JCI websites and public Facebook pages announced the stages of the competition, its structures and other details primarily in Arabic. However, the key terminology, translated awkwardly from its English terms of origin, rarely conveyed the same clarity of its English counterparts so the English translation was usually listed as well. In fact, a linguistic transition was as much a part of the socialization process of these competitions as it was the development of their business plans. Applicants may have begun the process enticed by all-Arabic advertisements, but very quickly, via the extensive schedule of trainings, they would have become acquainted with an English vocabulary of business and business plans. The ability to master and deploy SDS terms – such as marketing, business strategy, communications skill and indeed business plan – would be as central to their success as the strength of their idea itself.

While the competitions I described thus far served to linguistically and socially groom and initiate certain educated but non-elite youths and mid-level elites for entrance into the spheres of influence with upper elites, other competitions and their structures

clarified and gave cogence to the class of people who would receive the volunteering efforts and influences of the elite groups. JCI and SYEA both hosted several competitions, whose rules for participation explicitly banned private school students, members of either organization or high-level professionals from entering. Ostensibly, this leveled the playing field, allowing those without significant educational or professional advantages to succeed. It also had the consequence of sorting Syrian society into different levels and of determining a different outcome for those who were victorious in these contests. Unlike CYEA or BBPC winners, these winners were not expected to use such competitions as the first step in entering the new elite. The very rules of the contests in which they participated insured that they developed linguistic practices and social ideologies suitable for their lower social status, not for the passage into elite social sectors.

Another example of a competition that calcified social hierarchies by establishing clear recipients of intervention, guidance and training and clear judges of the execution of such knowledge is SYEA's *Eastern Entrepreneurs* competition.<sup>48</sup> Eastern in this case referred to rural and under-served regions of Syria which were mostly clustered in the Eastern part of the country. It established an explicit contrast between the urban, globalized cities of Syria and the poorer, presumably uninformed rural regions. It also, whether purposefully or not, invoked the global East versus West ontology in which the West represents modernity, technology and progress and the East ignorance, barbarity and isolation. Although *Eastern Entrepreneurs* was unique in identifying specific regions of Syria as needing business intervention, its format generally mirrored the structure of

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<sup>48</sup> This competition is part of a larger program called SYEA Ventures which also offers the same competition and cash prize to a business plan from any part of Syria. *Eastern Entrepreneurs* follows basically the same structure as SYEA Ventures, including an incubation period lasting 146 days.



JCI's BBPC. It began with general competition in which anyone could submit a business idea. Participants then had to participate in SYEA-organized sessions. SYEA's English website explains that "the entrepreneurs who submitted these projects go through a number of training rounds about how to write a business plan and are provided with the experience and skills to study the market, pricing mechanism for products, selection of workers, financial management, and other areas." After participants refined their business plans based on information acquired at such trainings, they then went before a jury who selected ten finalists to proceed. The website says that "a jury offered some directions and observations to develop the business plan, and each team was assigned professional advisers with business experience in order to transfer their expertise to the participants and assist them in placing the final touches on the business plan" ("SYEA" 2010).

The description emphasizes how it gave participants a "basic" level of business knowledge to aid in the cultivation and execution of business plans. Like other aspects of competition culture, Eastern Entrepreneurs did provide aspiring businesspeople with helpful support that they would not otherwise had. One million Syrian *lira* (approximately \$20,000 US) was a substantial sum and certainly assisted the winners in successfully launching their business. Yet the competition also established a clear divide between benefactor and recipient. The implication was that Syrians from certain regions and certain family, educational or social backgrounds simply did not possess adequate knowledge or resources to enter the business world in Syria without outside assistance. Those who did possess such resources or knowledge would never submit themselves to the judgment of a jury. It was a fact of Syria's tiered social and business life that those

associated with the localized East required the patronage of those associated with the globalized West (of Syria) to enact any kind of social mobility. It was a lucky coincidence of Syrian geography that their own national divide mirrored the international East/West binary, but the dynamics of each pairing were remarkably similar.

The example of the different kinds of public speaking competitions that JCI sponsored further illustrates this point. The cultivation of public speaking skills was something of an obsession among the JCI leadership. Top members often listed the improvement of public speaking skills at all levels of society as one of their primary goals for participation in JCI. Strikingly, public speaking competitions were featured at many JCI trainings, retreats and other activities that did not – to my mind at least – seem to be obvious venues for an impromptu speech competition. Speech competitions were also an important feature of the volunteering work that JCI did on behalf of public school children and other groups not considered likely candidates for eventual membership into JCI. The linguistic rules created by members when structuring these two kinds of speech competitions indicated how the different rules contributed to different social outcomes for the two groups participating.

I would like to return to the speaking competition whose topic was the difference between charity work and volunteerism that I mentioned in an earlier section. This time, I want to focus on the linguistic styles of the participants in the competition. The retreat kicked off with a meet and greet followed by a comical and elaborate presentation put on by JCI officers to introduce new members to JCI and its many English acronyms and slogans. This time, most likely in deference to the fact that the presentation was geared toward new members who presumably might not have had the opportunity to adopt elite

interactional style, another member translated the English terms into Arabic. This was a rarity. At the JCI events I attended, the most accommodation to monolingual Arabic speakers that I witnessed consisted of an acknowledgement that the organization relied heavily on English terminology which was followed by rampant English inclusions. As the day progressed and leaders made other speeches, the amount of English usage increased, and the translation disappeared.

Six individuals entered the public-speaking competition, and they had just 15 minutes to prepare a five-minute speech. During the speeches, all the competitors spoke in the mixed Arabic and English that typifies the linguistic style and stance of the new elite. This means that they framed their speeches in Syrian spoken Arabic with frequent insertions of English SDSs and paragraph-length asides in English. They did not use any formal Arabic, whether in lexical selections or grammatical choices. The closest one speaker came to formal Arabic is when he translated JCI into Arabic: *الدولية الفتية الغرفة*. Although this was not technically discreet from spoken Arabic, his inflection and decision to substitute the Arabic translation for the much more common English JCI gave that moment a more formal feeling. Aside from that, the participants maintained the linguistic preferences of Syrian elites. The judges of the competition – JCI members in leadership positions – issued their assessment in the same linguistic style. No mention was made of any inappropriateness nor was a preference for formal Arabic expressed.

I stress these points because this inter-JCI speech competition and its linguistic norms contrast with a discussion I observed at a JCI planning meeting a few weeks after that. This time, the competitors in the speech competition were government school students. Like most JCI projects, this would be a sustained effort to teach the students

public speaking skills, culminating in a competition to motivate them. One member said the goal was to “spread the importance of public speaking in life and society.” Another member remarked that JCI was a “pioneer” in that effort. During the time that I observed JCI’s activities and meetings, the group was planning its most comprehensive speech competition for government school students. The debate over how the competition should be structured and conducted unfolded over several meetings. Several issues became critical points of difference among the members: whether the students should be in high school or middle school, the level of collaboration with school personnel and the linguistic rules of the speech competitions. From the beginning, the group established that English would not be the language of the competition since the members felt the students’ level of competency would not be high enough for an English-language competition. This seemingly straightforward declaration, made without any tangible proof, immediately established that these students could not adhere to the same linguistic norms as JCI members. This contrasted with the linguistic emphasis of competitions that were held for JCI members, which stressed the use of English that could be applied to international competitions. For the government school students, that left the decision of whether to conduct the competition in formal Arabic (*fushā*/فصحى) or Syrian spoken Arabic (‘*amiyya*/عامية). At one meeting, one of JCI’s founders Tareq argued forcefully for the use of *fushā* in the competition. I was shocked because Tareq himself spoke in public frequently and never used *fushā*. He spoke, typically, in the elite blending of Arabic sentences and English lexical items, sometimes including full asides in all English sentences. In our interview together, here is how he categorized his linguistic habits:

Well to be clear on that, when I used to deliver my speeches during our gala dinner, I used to deliver in semi- *fushā*, semi-‘*amiyya*. I used to feel that I can

connect with my audience when I am speaking the same language, slang and words they use in their day to day communication.

It is not that *fushā* can't establish this connection but it is not what they are using in their daily thing. It was the end of the year gala or the award so it had a lot of passion, a lot of motivation, I need to be at the same level so that is why I used the semi- *fushā*, semi- 'amiyya technique.

Although he insisted that he mixed both the formal and colloquial forms during speeches, in my observation he rarely if ever included *fushā* elements but did incorporate English extensively into his speech in both casual conversation and public speeches. Despite this discrepancy, which was typical for upper elites who consistently downplayed their English usage, Tareq seemed aware of the different standards for different parts of Syrian society. During the interview, I asked him directly about his insistence that the student competitors use *fushā* when JCI members themselves rarely did.

When we are speaking about students, giving the competition in an institutional way as a program, it need to be done the proper way, and the proper official language of Arabic is the *fushā*. So we used to learn in our schools in *fushā*, the language it was *fushā*, our news, it is the main language.

I didn't want anyone outside JCI to accuse us as people who are trying to change or diminish the Arabic *fushā*. And people who are not really happy with JCI for whatever reason they are jealous, they are competitive. They might use this as look at these people: they are Westernized, they are part of an international organization, trying to do something but not in a proper way . . . [he hesitates] like they have a hidden agenda.

It's not the case. We can be aligned and parallel with the Ministry of Education. I was afraid about JCI, I want to protect JCI. But when I am speaking with my good friends, the Jaycees, I don't mind using 'amiyya just to establish some common ground.

Tareq's explanation points to several factors that influenced how volunteerism and charitable work contributed to a new kind of social stratification in Syria. The speaking competitions – geared toward government school students or geared toward the elite and aspiring elite of JCI – established different linguistic rules for those were or would

become different groups in society. Tareq articulated how the rules changed when one was inside JCI or other neoliberal elite communities. Those Syrians were able to circumvent the top-down rules enforced by governmental actors. The government school students, however, without access to the money, personal connections or political power that could immune them to such standards, must stay in accordance with the ruling party's preferences, linguistic and otherwise. Furthermore, Tareq indicated that while official governmental power tolerated JCI and its ilk when they ignored the regime's linguistic preferences, such tolerance did not extend to JCI's *influence* over less elite sectors of society. They had to adhere to the regime's preferences, and JCI could not expend its relative social power to sway that. Thus, the volunteering efforts that they structured served to reinforce governmental preferences for the less elite and to entrench the social and linguistic differences between elites and non-elites.

The neoliberal elite's volunteer campaigns span many societal different domains: autistic children, government school students, reactions to regional events in Gaza, business plans and the skill of public speaking. In all of these events, several facts remain consistent. First, the social and linguistic practices of the neoliberal elite prominently shape the volunteer events' structures, purposes, enactments and rules for participation. Second, these volunteer events often bring together Syrians from every place on the social hierarchy. Finally, new possibilities for social mobility into the neoliberal elite and new terms of exclusion from it play out during these events. On one hand, certain events encourage non-elites who can master the neoliberal elite's practices to mix with upper elites and become recognizable figures in the new neoliberal elite. On

the other hand, Syrians of very low social status are not given opportunities to learn or display neoliberal elite practices. Thus, the cleavage between Syrians on opposite ends of social hierarchies is doubled. There is first and foremost a large gap in finances, in education, in general social capital and in linguistic knowledge, but now there is also an equal divide in the acquisition of the specific knowledge, practices and norms required to achieve neoliberal elite status.

## **Chapter 7: “We are never political”: the Neoliberal Elite and the Syrian Regime**

As many countries across the Middle East and beyond turn to neoliberal ideals for economic reform while offering little in political concessions and increased freedom, the Syrian situation offers instructive parallels for how similarly emerging groups might engage with repressive regimes across the developing world. Thus far, this dissertation has addressed the formation of the new elites as a cohesive social group, how individuals interact with the group, how the group gains in certain social sectors and how the group deals with less privileged portions of Syrian society. This topic has implications for how anthropologists conceive of social group formation, the emergence of new and potent social hierarchies, the role of linguistic practices in forming powerful social divisions and the resources that individuals and groups bring to bear in times and circumstances of political and economic change. I have argued that group formation around a shared ideological orientation to transnational discourses categorized as neoliberal have created profound new social fissures in contemporary Syria. Although this dissertation is most interested in the “lateral relationships among individuals . . . communities and intersecting publics” (Greenhouse 3), contemporary life in Syria is dominated by its autocratic and repressive regime. Understanding the full consequences of the emergence of the new neoliberal elite requires assessing its interaction with regime authority. In concluding this research, I turn now to how this group interacts with the brutally repressive Syrian regime.



Despite the excitement over new developments and possibilities for personal achievement, a specter of violence and repression hangs over Syrian society – and the neoliberal elite is not exempt. Given this contrast between the vision and ethos of organizations such as JCI and the reality of Syrians politics, the uneasy relationship between the neoliberal elite and the regime is characterized by ambivalence. On one hand, the new neoliberal elite have benefitted tremendously from regime policies and what little reform, in the economic sector, the regime has delivered. The entrepreneurship organizations, private sector businesses, new venues of consumption and volunteer campaigns that neoliberal elites hold so dear are the direct result of top-down policy changes by the regime. Yet as I touched on in Chapter 3, the neoliberal elites genuinely believe in the principles they espouse: relaxed government regulation in all sectors, more resources for all of Syrian society and more democratic principles in leadership at all levels. I argue that this makes their relationship to official policies and instruments of power both acquiescent and subtly resistant. The regime, in whatever is discernible of its notoriously opaque actions, responds with equal ambivalence to its newly visible elite group by alternately enabling their rise and cutting down some of their most significant institutions.

### *New Elites and Old Policies*

It is important to note here that in many ways, neoliberal elites are subject to the same mechanisms of control and domination as less privileged members of Syrian society. Syria has been governed by emergency law since 1963 – a provision that allows the regime to circumvent printed laws, detain people without justification, clamp down

on expressions of speech and in general attack dissent without accountability or challenge.<sup>49</sup> Since 1971, when father Hafez seized absolute power through a coup d'état, this has meant that the Asad family controls the country's political, economic, military and even social sectors. Hafez al-Asad was notorious for his preference for repression and his willingness to turn violence against his own citizens to maintain it. Both father and son relied heavily on an inner circle of military and security leaders, most of who were drawn from the close relatives of the family or members of their minority Alawite sect. Their most effective tools include the secret police, known locally as *mukhabarat*, who intimidate, spy on and even harm citizens without any due process, a judicial system completely acquiescent to the regime and a military apparatus ready to turn on its own population.

Just as Bashar al-Asad has slowly altered the economic and business climate that his father had shaped, so too has his approach to controlling information and limiting dissent shifted over the previous decade. This is not to say that the situation has become better, freer or less repressive – even if such a judgment were possible to make, I would not want to claim it. However, both the mechanisms of control and their desired effects are different now, the result of Syria's shifting geopolitical position, increased integration into the global economy, the spread of new communication technologies and the cumulative effects of decades of more violent interventions. While the regime remains nervous about Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood who provoked the regime in Hama in 1982, it now must contend with information flowing in from the Internet, satellite television and mobile phones. Despite the new sources of information and shifting

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<sup>49</sup> The emergency law was lifted on April 20, 2011. The removal of the law was purely cosmetic as the regime continued to imprison large numbers of citizens without cause, murder its own people and use the military to attack peaceful protestors.

regime concerns, the mechanisms of repression and reliance on ideological propaganda have been consistent from father to son.

Lisa Wedeen's (1999, 1998) body of work on how the regime of Hafez al-Asad cultivated the veneer of allegiance and the cult of personality of its leader is the most detailed account of how that regime compelled and enforced compliance with the regime. She details the slogans, the nationalistic rituals and iconographic images created and distributed by the regime to enforce a strict behavioral standard of compliance with and enthusiasm for regime rule. She labels this phenomena acting "as if" to explain how the regime emphasized quantifiable yet superficial displays of allegiance even though it was well known that many Syrians did not internally believe what they externally promoted. Rather than weaken the regime, this insistence on performances of fealty forced Syrians to become preoccupied with maintaining the required veneer of loyalty. Coupled with harsh restrictions on speech and flows of information, father Hafez used this to maintain his uncontested grip on the country until his death in 2000.

Miriam Cooke's complicated and layered account of cultural critiques of the regime, *Dissident Syria* (2007), highlights the overlapping ways that the regime alternately commissions, tolerates and punishes dissent and criticism expressed through cultural mediums like literature, visual arts and performances. Cultural producers addressed broad, universal subjects like freedom, death and justice – implicit rebukes that avoid specific accusations against the government. In that way, these artists walked the same line very fine line between discontent and outright dissidence that new elites do. However, the focus of their unhappiness and their end goal differed greatly. The artists with whom Cooke worked focused on human rights and social justice while new elites

focus on economic freedom and business development. Yet they also express their complaints in general terms, without ever assigning direct blame to the regime. They tend to attribute any national failings to a generalized cultural problem. Like Cooke's artists, they comply with the regime and its mandates while offering oblique criticism and working vigorously toward change in areas that are not deeply politicized. Or, in the case of the artists Cooke presents, they could present their critiques in forms obscured by disjointed narratives, fantastical details or abstract representations. Still others risked great harm by confronting the regime head on as "they boldly questioned the power discourse and demanded accountability in order to incite others to do the same" (17). Although many have derided neoliberal elites as entitled, self-interested beneficiaries of the regime's largess, I would argue that they both align and diverge from the regime and its interests in a complicated relationship.

Currently, the regime views Islamists and Kurdish activists as the most dangerous threats to its grip over the country. According to a Human Rights Watch report (2009) on the trials at Syria's Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) during 2007 and 2008 (which overlapped with my tenure in Syria), the majority of individuals tried under the auspices of the court, which supposedly addresses threats to national security, were from these two categories. In particular, the court arrests, tortures and convicts Islamists for a range of broad, vaguely constructed crimes that serve to "criminalize their exercise of free expression" (24). Recently, the report notes that Kurdish activists been on trial with increasing frequency as Syria seeks to strengthen its diplomatic and economic ties with Turkey.<sup>50</sup> Despite the focus on containing and punishing the threats posed by Islamists

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<sup>50</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, Syria was a prominent sponsor of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). The group, based in Turkey, advocates for separation from Turkey and its militant wing is classified as terrorists by the

and Kurdish activists, the court has also begun prosecuting bloggers in increasing numbers. In the time period covered by the report, the court sentenced ten bloggers to prison. Most of them published online stories critical of the regime or ran youth forums that included postings or articles that challenged the political status quo. The security apparatus' interest in bloggers overlaps with the burgeoning organizations and activities of the new elite.

Unlike the handful of human rights activists and opposition leaders who routinely land in prison and on trial, the more cautious politicized artists and young new elites applied their voices or actions only to areas not deeply politicized nor considered a threat to the regime. They work in a different kind of abstract: criticizing the national mentality, attacking the vague "situation" or focusing on minor complaints not likely to threaten the regime. This habit of holding back or consciously limiting their criticisms will come into sharper relief later in this chapter when I outline how self-censorship plays a central role in the burgeoning English press and media industry in Syria. Yet despite their reluctance to push against the regime in any confrontational manner, the regime itself has not responded with any corresponding loosening of its own restrictions. In fact, during my residence in Damascus, the regime implemented new restrictions that impacted new elites most severely. In combination with lingering older forms of repression and surveillance, the regime's official policies do not seem geared to make the new elites' ambitions for change – no matter how inconsequential to the regime – any easier.

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United States. However, in recent years Bashar al-Asad and Turkey's moderate Islamist president Erdogan have forged closer ties. The increased pressure on Syria's restive Kurdish minority is widely viewed as an effort to curry Turkish favor in exchange for a stronger trade relationship and increased diplomatic cooperation.

### *Ambivalence of the neoliberal elite*

One of the recurrent refrains of members of the new neoliberal elite is their professed disinterest in politics writ large. The phrases “I’m not interested in politics” or “I don’t follow politics” circulated widely in the group and their utterance seemed almost mechanical. Over time, I realized that this statement truly meant that they were not willing to discuss the president and his family directly or specific government actions or policies. Yet in conversations about society, education and poverty, neoliberal elites offered many criticisms of the status quo and revealed a general dissatisfaction with the level of development in contemporary Syria.

The following are some of the direct criticisms my contacts among the new elite had about the regime, the ruling Baath party or the political status quo. I have not included any biographical information about the speakers so as not to endanger them, but their comments are typical of the neoliberal elite’s frustrations with the regime and the slow pace of reform under Bashar.

“If you talk about reforms in a Western mentality, what you have always is that reforms are slow. There needs to be a much faster pace.”

“The problem in Syria is not only about the government. It is about a system that has existed for so long. It started with the government. It started because of the socialist mentality, the Baathist mentality that has existed for 40 years. It has extended to everything in the country, to education, to business practices, even to society and social linkages and relations between people. What needs reform is not only the government, what needs reform is everything.”

“Even the government, top officials, maybe ministers or head of big organizations, they lack the English language. And that’s embarrassing. For someone to be in a certain position, they need to be at a certain level. It’s kind of image.”

“War on Iraq was turning point toward bad. All the talk of regime change pushed regime to centralize. Tighter. Hariri murder was very, very dramatic. It changed a lot of things. Only Iran didn’t accuse Syria. They opened a big gate for Syria. Here, the regime cracked down more and more. All opposition leaders are 70 years old. There’s lot of infighting.”

“The Baath systematically ruined education and part of that was speaking a second language. It’s catastrophic what happened here in terms of education.”

Although these quotes reveal that new elites were deeply dissatisfied with the status quo, new elites did not seek revolution nor did they assign full blame to the regime. They often expressed the belief that the regime had retarded the country’s progress, but that the true problem was that society had stagnated along with it. Most neoliberal elites did not blame the current President for the problems they identified; they followed a popular sentiment that he personally was a reformer trapped in an ossified system. Yet despite their confidence in the president and their general support of his regime, these complaints reveal that their neoliberal ideology often did clash with official policy.

### ***Self-Censorship***

As laws governing private media and private sectors regulations relaxed over the last decade, Syria has seen a proliferation of new magazines and newspapers. As is the case with all economic activities in Syria, only individuals with close personal connections to high-level regime figures received the permission to establish and operate such businesses. These publications ranged from several Arabic-language society magazines featuring photographs of expensive weddings and attractive young people at restaurants and nightclubs to Syria’s first private daily newspaper *Baladna*<sup>51</sup> [Our

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<sup>51</sup> *Baladna* began as an Arabic newspaper and in 2009 it added a daily English issue as well. The two newspapers do not always cover the same issues, and *Baladna* English has included some articles on controversial social issues.

Country] to two English language magazines. Through their linguistic practices, their distribution in elite venues, the Syrians they chose to feature in them and their cover prices, the publications both covered the activities of the neoliberal elite and sought elite readership. While these publications had no official governmental affiliation, they all practiced a degree of self-censorship.

The society magazines devoted their coverage entirely to subject matter unlikely to concern authorities: social events, leisure activities, celebrity gossip and shopping. The Arabic edition of the newspaper *Baladna*, a glossy broadsheet that was the first paper in Syria to offer home delivery, covers breaking news and politics but always offers a narrative that converges with that of the regime, who also uses its mouthpiece newspapers *Tishreen* and *Al-Thawra* to disseminate its viewpoint. The government also runs the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) through a website and news service. Despite the fact that the managing editor of *Baladna* told me in an interview that the newspaper never dealt with politics, its headlines often directly mirrored those on the SANA website. The editor explained to me in Arabic:

Editor: We are not a political newspaper but of course there comes news from the President or the ministries or something from in them, but we are never political [she uses the French word *politique*].

Me: Did you all think that there was a place in the market for a non-political newspaper, uh, something more cultural?

Editor: Yes. We are a newspaper something new for the public. We do the subjects that they want without entering into anything forbidden or distant from them. The opposite, it's something very close to them, the language and the subjects are close.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> هي: مانا جريدة سياسية بس تبعاً نزل اخبار تبع الرئيس تبع الوزراء شو بصير فيهن بس مانا بوليتيقي ابدأ. أنا: أنتو ظننتو أنو كان في محل بالتسويق يعني جريدة غير سياسية أو أكثر ثقافية؟ هي: أي. نحن نكون جريدة شيء جديد جريدة العالم نعمل موضوعات يلي بدهنها بدون ما بيكون فيتين على شيء ممنوع و بشيء بعيد عنهن بالعكس شيء كتير قريب اللغة و الموضوعات قريبة.



Just like individual elites who professed their distaste for politics possibly as a way to avoid confrontation with regime power, the newspaper editor depicted politics as distant from Syrian people and not of interest to them. She explicitly described avoiding “forbidden” topics. However, given that the information never challenged the regime narrative, *Baladna*’s self-censorship incorporated both silence on sensitive issues and a frequent adoption of the regime’s perspective into news articles.

The English language magazines also avoided direct political coverage, but they were most likely to verge into economic or cultural issues sensitive to the regime. When I interviewed the publisher of *Forward* magazine, Mazen, at his family’s Damascus home, our lengthy conversation covered both the intricacies of publishing a foreign language magazine and of entrepreneurship in SYEA, of which he was a founder. Like the *Baladna* editor, he insisted that the intention of his publication was to focus on society, culture and business, rather than on domestic politics. He noted that the magazine targeted American audiences in particular, citing CNN and American university libraries. However, he explained that the magazine’s desire to engage with American-Syrian political issues and relations required the editors to self-censor any issue they thought might provoke the Syrian regime.

I would say it is sensitive to the government to have a publication promote an understanding to the public with the US government. This is something the government is going to do at some point in time, but it’s I don’t think they will accept a local magazine to talk to local audiences and tell them that we should have a better relationship with the US.

Mazen regarded avoiding direct confrontation with the regime as part of the rules of doing business in Syria. Just as neoliberal elites declare their aversion to politics as a matter of course in daily conversation, so too do elite publications follow the regime’s

red line and third rail issues. Despite internal criticisms individual actors in the field of elite publications might hold, self-censorship is the prevalent way that elites deal with sensitive government issues in both their conversations and publications.

### *Asma al-Assad*

Perhaps no one embodies the neoliberal elite's relationship with the regime better than Syria's first lady Asma al-Assad. Married to Syria's current president, the young, impeccably stylish and increasingly visible Asma epitomizes what young new elites want for both themselves and their country. Even the smallest details of her well-publicized personal biography reflect the life trajectory many new elites either have or aspire to have. She is something of a patron saint for the new elites: both a paragon of all that they want for Syria and Syrians, and often a vital ally in establishing the kind of social agenda that they champion.

Asma was born in England to Syrian parents from prominent families with prestigious careers. Her father is a well-known surgeon; her mother a former diplomat. She had, by all accounts, a typical upper class English upbringing which concluded with a degree from King's College London and a nascent career in investment banking. Many reports say that she went by the anglicized name Emma during her school years. There are also oft-repeated rumors that she declined a spot at Harvard Business School to marry Bashar although that is difficult to verify. Regardless of the specifics, Asma was clearly a bright, ambitious, successful young woman when she met the reportedly gangly and

socially-stunted Bashar<sup>53</sup> at an embassy party in London. They married quickly after that – and just a year into Bashar’s term as President – and the young woman in her mid-20s suddenly became the recognizable wife of a head of state.

The most infamous story about Asma as first lady – perhaps apocryphal but proudly repeated by Syrians nonetheless – is how she spent the first months of her term as first lady traveling around the country incognito and entourage-free to experience the various regions and their social problems firsthand and without pomp and circumstance. Even if this account is exaggerated, Asma maintains a chic but casual and accessible image and demeanor. When she visits orphans, she wears jeans and a sweater and photographs circulate of her actively playing with them. In her increasing number of international public speaking engagements, she addresses the audience in a crisp British accent and confident tones. She is tall and rail-thin, elegant and yet approachable. In a country that can often feel stagnant and old-fashioned, she is remarkably modern and progressive. This has not gone unnoticed, both within Syrian and beyond. The *Huffington Post* recently celebrated her style and beauty in a reverential slideshow, the *Sunday Times* compared her to Princess Diana (“London Girl” 2008) and French *Elle* rated her the most fashionable first lady worldwide (“British Born First Lady” 2011). Recently, just before the Middle Eastern uprising reached Syria, American *Vogue* published a glowing profile of Asma, lavishing praise on her sense of style, personal comportment and civic engagement (Buck 2011).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> A Syrian acquaintance who had attended Damascus University with the president and attended several classes with him reported that the future president was so uncomfortable around female students that he would blush and fumble when young women attempted to speak with him.

<sup>54</sup> Many other publications and blogs – from the *Wall Street Journal* to *Foreign Policy* magazine to the gossip website *Gawker* – slammed *Vogue* for fawning over the wife over an Arab dictator as people in the region were dying for basic human rights.

The regime and those in Syria who want to promote a more modern and moderate image of Syria have begun to take note of her international appeal. She is very popular at all levels of Syrian society. On her Facebook fan page, young Syrians post adoring comments under pictures of her at official events. They repeat how proud they are of her and often even comment on their love of her clothing. The explanatory section on that page breathlessly describes her as “Syria's young and determined First Lady. Operating within a national context for social change, she continues to play a pivotal role in her country's economic and social development. Promoting active citizenship among Syria's population is central to the First Lady's work.” New elites in particular, who undoubtedly see something of themselves in her image, seek to affiliate themselves or their organizations and activities with her. SYEA's leaders and founders repeatedly brag that she attended the inaugural ceremony for their organization. The current local president for JCI Damascus included this praise from Asma as her “Best JCI Moments Nationally: When H.E. Asma Al Assad told us that JCI Syria members are ‘the best ambassadors whom we have never hired.’” New elites view themselves as part of the same project as the first lady: to change Syria's image on the world stage, from backwards dictatorship to a modern nation with a vibrant economy. A first lady like Asma with an increasingly prominent profile both enhances the mission to which they are deeply committed and validates the aspirations they have for their country.

The first lady's umbrella organization, the Syria Trust for Development, reflects the alignment between her vision and style and that of the neoliberal elite. The Trust, as

it is commonly called, purports to be a non-governmental organization<sup>55</sup> working to promote economic development in rural areas, increased education and promote Syria's cultural heritage. These activities resemble those of JCI and SYEA and in fact, many members either worked for the Trust's programs or volunteered in them. *Shabab*, a business and entrepreneurship training program for impoverished young people that is almost exactly identical to business education programs arranged by JCI, attracts many neoliberal elites as volunteers. More strikingly, the trust relies on the same SDS terms that underpin the interactional norms of the neoliberal elite: development, entrepreneurship, skills, productive, training and many more. In both substance and linguistic style, the first lady and her trust feel almost like an extension of the neoliberal elite.

The English magazine *Forward* goes the farthest in its uncritical praise of the First Lady by including a column on her activities in each issue. Typically accompanied by a photograph looking stylish and glowing at an official event in the country, the column summarizes one of her initiatives, usually directed at impoverished women or rural development and lists her recent international travel. I spoke with the publisher of the magazine who assured me that the dedication of so much space to a figure close to the regime was not pandering to the government nor did it signify an automatic concurrence with the regime's policies. Rather, he said:

We cover the news of the President and the First Lady. Not because they're important people but because the first lady in particular when she is dressed the way she's dressed and when she talks the way that she talks, and when she handles herself the way she does, then that defies immediately any misconceptions about Syria. Regardless of what many people told us that we are

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<sup>55</sup> Recently the term GONGO (governmental non-governmental organization) has been coined to describe the influential development organizations that are run by powerful members of a regime, but that are not officially sanctioned by the government.

covering too much of her, they wanted us to be more objective. We are objective, but when we have good photos, we are going to put them, and I tell you many of the comments we receive through the website, they focus on this from foreigners. She helps Syria a lot.

Yet despite her local association with development, women's causes and even Syria's nascent civic life, Asma al-Assad is married to a dictator who continues the repressive and brutal tactics for maintaining political and security control over the country. While she makes of point of presenting herself as apolitical and avoiding any questions of governance and security, she can and does at time defend the regime aggressively.

In an interview with Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, translated on the American blog *Syria Comment*, the interviewer asked about her husband's reputation as a dictator and sponsor of terrorism ("Syria Comment" 2008). She responded with a question of her own:

What is the explanation for the fact that on the one hand we lead the life of an ordinary couple, who go out to dinner and to the theatre with friends, and to the playground with our children, who live in an apartment in a normal city district, with our children playing in the street with our neighbours' children, while, on the other hand, the President is allegedly a tyrant, and distant from the people. The two things cannot exist side by side.

Not only does her response not answer the question, she performs her most important function with regard to her husband's image: she normalizes and softens him. By focusing on their relative ordinariness as parents and partners, she draws attention away from the less savory aspects of her husband's career – the jailing of dissidents, the strict controls on information and the nefarious secret police – and attempts to portray him as a kind-hearted father struggling to do right by his family and country. Her spirited and misleading depiction of Syria's social and political situation continues in the article when she is asked about navigating between her Muslim background, Christian education and

Syria's sectarian diversity. Her reply presents an overly idealized Syria in which ethnic and religious divisions go unnoticed by the population, a common refrain that the minority Alawite regime perpetuates to maximize its own legitimacy (although Asma hails from a Sunni Muslim family). She responds:

You must excuse me if I correct you: I do not have "good relations" with Christians, just as I cannot have "good relations" with myself, with my legs and my arms. We Syrians are a single body. Our history did not start yesterday: it is a history that is thousands of years old; St Paul and the Ummayyad mosque are part of who I am as a human being . . . Here we are one enlarged family.

Her depiction of a unified Syria dovetails with the image of Syrian society that neoliberal elites themselves wish to create and project in the international arena. She prefers to focus on development, on Syria's cultural strengths and on the recent progress being made in areas such as rural development, business culture and technology. This aligns with the aesthetic social preferences of the neoliberal elite, whose sense of group cohesion often hinges on shared linguistic patterns and an embrace of all that is new, transnational and modern in Syria. In both her persona and her activities, the first lady shares that preference with them, allowing them to believe they have a like-minded ally in the upper reaches of the regime.

### ***Mixed Signals: Closing the American School***

Nothing about the current configuration of the new neoliberal elite would be possible without top-down regime policy changes and its tacit permission. Throughout this dissertation, I have claimed that a series of economic and civic government policy changes (outlined in Chapters 1 and 2) enabled the rise of the new neoliberal elite.

Although I doubt that the regime engaged in deliberate social engineering to create a new

kind of elite, I do contend that both its explicit and tacit policy reorientation privileged Syrians who could and would respond to a selectively free-market Syria. In more informal channels, prominent regime figures appear at entrepreneurship organization events, offering the endorsement of their presence and their encouraging words. Asma al-Asad attended SYEA's founding ceremony and often speaks at major JCI conferences in Syria, in addition to publicly praising both groups. However, at times regime policy and decisions pointed to a more fraught relationship, as the government attacked or censured key neoliberal elite sites. Combined with the forthright complaints about the government and the societal status quo uttered by new elites, the following regime actions indicate that it is willing to undercut the neoliberal elite. This suggests that over time, the regime might find the neoliberal elite's growing social influence a threat and might aim to weaken it accordingly.

I first noticed something was amiss along the airport road. I was returning in the early evening from a brief trip to Europe. Landing in the airport, I quickly grabbed a taxi to return to my central Damascus apartment. As the taxi sped along the lengthy stretch of highway into the city, I spotted police cars idling on the side of the highway every quarter mile or so. Although Syria is a police state and security authorities maintain a heavy presence in the capital city, it was unusual to see so many police vehicles spaced in such regular intervals. I asked the driver if a foreign dignitary was slated to visit, but he shrugged his shoulders and claimed not to notice anything unusual. Back at my apartment, I began calling Syrian and expat friends to see if I had missed an important occurrence. Earlier that month, a bomb had exploded a building rumored to be a secret



police station, and I worried that another such incident would put Damascus into a untenable security frenzy.

The actual source of the increased police presence was actually far more damaging for an American researcher and, ultimately, for the new elites I was attempting to understand. That day, American helicopters stationed in Iraq had crossed five miles into Syrian territory and bombed a small farming village. The Americans claimed they were after a infamous militant fighting against them in Iraq; the Syrians referred to the attack as a “serious violation of its territory” (Arbil 2008). Eight people were killed, four of them children. There had long been squabbling between the Americans and Syrians over Syria’s inability or reluctance to secure its Iraqi border and stop foreign militants from passing through to fight American troops. Although the attack marked the first time American troops had entered into Syria territory, the incident itself did not provoke a very emotional response on the streets of Damascus. A few street protests did circle around the American embassy, but they seemed more ritualistic than impassioned. For most Damascus residents, the incident seemed too distant and irrelevant to attract any sustained anger. The government’s response to the incident, however, quickly became a source of tension, frustration and confusion in Damascus, particularly for elites and those aspiring to be.

Shortly after the incident took place, the Syrian government – in a rare instance of transparent decision-making – announced that it would forcibly shutter several influential American-backed institutions in Damascus. These included the American Cultural Center, a center attached to the embassy that offered popular English language classes, American movie nights and a constant barrage of information on how to apply to

American universities. Interestingly, these offerings attracted mostly upwardly mobile students of modest means, not the elites who had these services readily available to them at private schools or through family members. For them, it was the closure of Damascus Community School (DCS or more commonly known as the American school) that put the government's political agenda in direct confrontation with one of the most important centers of elite class production.

As I described in Chapter 5, Western and American style educational institutions were very important to established and aspiring new elites. Enrolling in international private schools conferred students and their families with a high level of social status and integrated them socially with other members of the elite from a very young age. DCS sat at the apex of this elite educational ecosystem. The surprising decision to shutter the school – mid-year nonetheless – unnerved an elite class who assumed that the government tacitly supported their ambitions and institutions.

The decision was surprising for other reasons. While DCS was owned and operated by the American embassy, whose sitting ambassador always served as chairman of the board, American students were by far a minority at the school, where Syrians students constituted the single largest group. The school was far better known as an incubator for elites. So it seemed an odd choice for retribution against the American government who would be much less affected by the policy than wealthy Syrians whose school-age children suddenly had to scramble to find alternate educational plans. Certainly, the Syrian government might not have been fond of the fact that its most elite were educated primarily by American teachers, via an American curriculum and inculcated with American values. Yet, up until this point, very wealthy elites seemed

exempt from the anti-American, pan-Arab sentiment promoted by the regime in its public schools, among its government employees and on the street. In this case, the regime seemed to use the American attacks as a pretext for shutting down one of the elite's most important symbols of prestige.

Elite responses to the policy were uncharacteristically critical. Of course, no one dared to directly criticize the regime as such hubris would have been met with unequivocal retribution, but this opinion piece published in the English-language *Asia Times* summarizes the general sentiment. In it, a prominent English-language commentator and professor of political science at private university, highlights the self-defeating nature of the Syrian policy. He also implicitly endorses the notion that American or Western style education in the Middle East is not about becoming foreign or even emigrating, but rather is about deploying global resources to advance and amass benefits locally.

As part of America's foreign policy in the Arab world, DCS was for many years a success, helping to promote America as a land of opportunity, freedom, and dignity to hundreds of Syrians. It marketed the American dream and its graduates went on to American universities in the US, who returned home to promote America.

The 200 Syrian students at DCS will need to find other schools to complete their schooling, and the US, which attaches a great importance to its cultural mission in the Arab world, will be badly affected by the closure. It has lost the chance to coach 200 potential ambassadors who could have defended America to the rest of the world and worked on mending Syrian-American relations (Moubayed 2008).

Although he never discloses it in the article, he was educated at DCS, a path that led him to an undergraduate degree from American University of Beirut in Lebanon and a PhD from the University of Exeter in England and finally this English-language column in the *Asia Times*. It is not clear, however, if he considers himself a "potential ambassador" or

not, but his fairly illustrious career path certainly originated at DCS.<sup>56</sup> He places the blame for the closure on the American side, but his article is a lament for a lost function of the elite: to serve as global ambassadors in a local context. It was precisely that function that many believe was the primary reason the government sought to close the school at the same time that it was allowing other private schools to flourish.

The resolution to the shuttering of DCS reinforces this suspicion. In 2010, the Syrian government, after lengthy negotiations, permitted DCS to reopen for the 2010-2011 school year. As per the official DCS website, the reopening will take place under the following conditions:

As per the May 12 meeting between the Ministry of Education and the US Embassy, and in accordance with the Damascus Community School's August 31, 2008 license, and the regulations mentioned in the Legislative Decree 55 of September 2008 and its September 2009 amendments, the Damascus Community School is permitted to enroll: foreign students, Syrian students with dual nationality (Syrian and other nationality), dependents of Syrian Diplomats, and other Syrian students that fall within the regulations of Decree 55. All Syrian students and Syrian students holding another nationality (dual nationals) are required to obtain an approval from the Ministry of Education as part of the registration process ("DCS" 2010).

This eventual resolution demonstrates that the government did not oppose DCS on the grounds that it educated foreigners or even the supposed enemy, Americans. They seemed to have closed DCS to prevent Syrian elites from being exposed to, utilizing and spreading American values and resources – exactly the kind of interaction whose loss the author mourns. The closure left elite families scrambling and frustrated. Not so privately, many groused that this was another short-sighted government policy, propagated by an old guard who did not understand the contemporary world. I cannot pretend to understand what prompted the decision to close DCS, but the policy's end

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<sup>56</sup> See the explanation of how he became the editor-in-chief of *Forward* magazine in Chapter 5.

result did cause tension with Damascus' most elite families and challenged the presumption that Bashar's regime was as committed to the success of a globalized Syrian elite as they were.

### ***Official Censorship***

The Syrian government relies heavily on censorship to control any possible expression of opinion, from monitoring cultural works like novels, plays, television and film to requiring the submission of media like magazines and newspapers to government censors prior to publication. This too originates in the 1962 declaration of a state of emergency. Despite the pervasive and total control that government censors have to limit, alter or quash any genre of expression, the mechanisms and goals of Syrian censorship are far from transparent. Those involved in cultural production or journalism with whom I spoke all reported that they were never fully aware of what they could and could not say. They also did not know when certain topics shifted from being acceptable to forbidden or vice versa. They were involved in a perpetual guessing game in which the only way to discover the nuance of censorship policy was to create something offensive and have it censored. Of course, certain particularly inflammatory issues were universally known to be forbidden. These included direct criticism of the president, direct discussion of human rights abuses, acknowledging the legitimate existence of Israel, Kurdish rights and Salafi<sup>57</sup> Islamist thinking. Given how every Syrian knew these issues to be completely unacceptable in public forums, most people simply chose not to

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<sup>57</sup> Salafi refers to a conservative and fundamentalist school of Sunni Islamic thinking. Syria is not the only government that invokes a perceived Salafi threat to justify repressive practices against Islamists (see Knysh 2007, 2004).

address them and those who did, like Michel Kilo and Haitham al-Maleh,<sup>58</sup> spent most of their adult lives in and out of prison.

Cooke's provocative and insightful treatment of the tension between official censorship, self-censoring and defiance of the regime provides unusual insight into how fiction writers and other cultural leaders walk a fine line between expressing their contempt for the status quo and avoiding a direct confrontation with the regime. In *Dissident Syria*, she quotes the writer using the pseudonym Adib Sadiq, a defiant Syrian writer who lives in exile. He writes that "manuscripts and screen scripts had to be submitted to censorship committees attached to the Ministry of Culture or Information, which stamped each approved page" (9). Furthermore, ministry representatives would spot check bookstores to ensure they were not selling banned materials. Her work also highlights an important theme of Syrian censorship: that, "above all, censorship is arbitrary. Even if writers internalized the unwritten rules and what they wrote had been officially approved, they might find themselves retroactively censored" (26). The nefarious arbitrariness of censorship extends beyond works of cultural production and into the media and English language publications currently captivating the new elite.

Indeed, at times the Syrian censorship practices produce moments of postmodern absurdity. Their desire to eliminate any potential political competition leads to censorship practices that fixate on the presence of certain inflammatory words rather than assessing overall content. The following example was relayed to me by the editor in chief of one of Syria's two glossy English language magazines. The editor, a European woman who had spent significant time in the region, described her encounter with the

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<sup>58</sup> Michel Kilo is a Christian attorney, human rights activist and critic of the Asad regimes. Haitham al-Maleh is also a lawyer and the head of the Syrian Human Rights Association (George 2003).

censors incredulously. In her first issue as editor in chief, she submitted three copies of the fully printed magazine before distribution, as was the magazine's arrangement with the censors. One of the magazine's articles addressed the question of whether or not there was any true political opposition in Syria. The article's conclusion actually bolstered the regime's claims about its dominance in Syria: the writer wrote that due to infighting and fragmentation, there was no true political opposition.

Despite this seemingly party-line message, the article was the first in a long period of time to be rejected by the censors. According to the editor, the censor explained the article's problematic nature by claiming that:

the opposition doesn't exist therefore you can't write about it. We had written much more critical things pro-opposition against the government in the past but the red lines shifted. We now wrote a piece that was saying the opposition doesn't exist because it's so fragmented and there's so much infighting. We were completely saying what they were saying but they were like you can't say it because they don't exist.

The editor's story illustrates several key points about press censorship. First, the boundaries of what the censors allowed and banned shifted continually. Since the framework of the emergency law precluded any need for censorship laws to be made public or explicated, writers and journalists had to continually navigate around a set of rules they inferred or outright guessed. Second, censorship was often more about appearance and problematic key terms rather than overall content. Political opposition was on the list of banned topics so there was simply no acceptable way to approach the subject.

What transpired next further demonstrates the chaotic nature of how censored information can and does still circulate even after a direct government intervention. Magazine and newspaper distribution in Syria is conducted through a government agency

[مؤسسة]. This serves to further consolidate government influence over journalism although private companies are allowed and in recent years have become a popular option, particularly for placing glossy society magazine in upscale cafes and shops. This magazine, however, was conducting its distribution through the government agency. According to the editor, there is no coordination between government censors and the government distribution agency.

The most ironic thing then what happened was . . . a big disaster. It was our tourism issues, and we had such beautiful photos and worked so hard. And then it was a double thing because the ownership of the magazine wasn't clear. Who dealt to the ministry wasn't clear. The issue was delivered by the [agency]. We reprinted 1000 issues and sent them to the [agency]. And they were like why are you giving these to us again? The weird thing is that when you get banned you can deliver to all your subscribers and clients, you just can't get go through the [agency].

Despite the government's interest in clamping down on free expression, its fractured and poorly functioning bureaucracy often prevents it from accomplishing absolute oppression. In this case, the agency ended up distributing the version with the banned article because they had no communication with other parts of the government. Furthermore, publications are permitted to circumvent censorship to their private subscribers; the banned articles simply cannot be placed in public venues like schools, cafes or shops.

### ***Banning Facebook***

In the last few years, Internet access and connectivity has grown exponentially in Syria. Although most Syrians did not have the means to access the Internet at home, Internet cafes proliferated all over Damascus. In less elite neighborhoods, Internet cafes consist of bulky, outdated desktop models working off a sporadically successful dial-up



connection. In wealthier neighborhoods, the cafes became more elaborate affairs, with high-speed connections, wireless routers and even waiters who would serve tea or sodas to customers. Furthermore, most private businesses provided Internet connections to their employees who increasingly relied on email and online processes to do their jobs. Upscale coffee shops and restaurants began offering free wireless connections to patrons to attract stylish wealthy young people who would linger for hours sipping endless cappuccinos while chatting and gaming on sleek laptops brought back from Dubai, Europe or the United States.

Like millions of young adults the world over, young elite and non-elite Syrians favored the social networking site Facebook. They quickly created elaborate profiles, added multitudes of “friends” and used the site organize meetings, publicize events and share news items. For several years, this appeared to be tolerated if not sanctioned by the regime as Syrians had unfettered access to the site. Organizations like JCI, SYEA, the First Lady’s Syria Trust for Development, hobby groups like amateur photographers and nature enthusiasts and private schools established pages. Young people in particular consolidated their online communication and profiling into the multi-faceted site.

As long as Syrians have had Internet connections, they have also faced Internet censorship and blocked websites. No formal acknowledgement of such blockage exists nor does the regime provide any insight into their peculiar logic of which sites they block and why. For instance, during times of political duress, Hotmail and Yahoo mail would often be blocked although free access to Gmail was always available. Many Syrians and foreigners speculated that the reason was incompetency rather than tactical maneuver: the government, whose own offices still utilized paper files or Dos-based computers with

green screens and flashing block cursors, simply had not remained current with Internet trends and did not realize that Gmail had outpaced Hotmail and Yahoo in popularity. Regardless of what animated its decision-making, by late 2007, Syria seemed to catch up with current trends in national Internet usage. On a seemingly random November day, Syrians awoke to find that they could not access Facebook, YouTube and, oddly, Amazon.com. No announcement or explanation of the presumed policy change was offered; Syrians simply could not load the pages from that day on.

As news articles covering the blockage pointed out (Boms 2008), banning Facebook was simply the latest in a lengthy practice of blocking or prohibiting sites that the regime deemed incendiary or threatening. These usually consisted of Arabic-language newspapers critical of the Asads like Lebanon's liberal *An-Nahar* or blogs with a decidedly political bent. Arabic-language sites were far more likely to be identified as problematic and then banned; English language sites containing criticism of the regime or publishing inflammatory material were easily accessible. Again, most Syrians attributed this to the government's ineptitude, theorizing that the government simply did not have enough fluent English speakers to monitor English media. Yet the decision to ban Facebook seemed more significant than earlier Internet censorship policies, not because Syrians accessed it mostly in English, but because of how openly elite Syrians used the site. This policy would limit how Syrians could interact with the Internet's most important sites.

Or would it? Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Facebook ban was how openly it was defied and how much the regime seemed to accept that defiance. Days after Facebook and other sites were blocked, I walked into one Damascus' largest and

best-known Internet cafes, located in one of the busiest corners of the upscale shopping district Shaalan. From noon until midnight, the café was packed with a mix of foreign students, young Damascenes and even housewives taking advantage of the relatively fast connection. In addition to its many customers, the café often hosted middle-aged men in stiff suits, smoking cigarettes and sipping tea: almost certainly *mukhabarat*. While occasionally they sat in front of computers, they usually chose to sit idly at the center tables, with no pretense of fitting in with the patrons. The patrons in turn, ignored them or greeted them casually and went about their business. That day, I walked in curious to see if the *mukhabarat* would be present in full force, ready to enforce the new anti-Facebook policy.

Yet despite the fact that Syrian servers blocked the website, the Internet café continued to turn a substantial profit by connecting Syrians to the favorite sites, first among them Facebook. That day, instead of being greeted by a silent nod toward an available computer, the café owner's son asked me cheerfully and loudly “بديك /baddik Facebook?” [Do you want Facebook?] I shook my head and proceeded to watch the scene around me. Every customer who entered the café received the same inquiry. For those who indicated, with no secrecy or nervousness, that they did want Facebook, the owner's son rushed to type in the address of a proxy server. The Facebook home page would appear, and the Syrian and foreigner customers would openly spend hours on the site, its iconic blue framing and typeface visible to anyone nearby.

In fact, Facebook continues to be so widely accepted in Syria and openly used that it is difficult to understand why the government would continue such an ineffective and

spottily enforced ban.<sup>59</sup> As of September 2010, 40, 289 people – most of them Syrians residing in the country – feel so comfortable using Facebook despite that ban that they became “fans” of Asma al-Asad’s public page. Another 31,189 people “like” the president himself on Facebook. While affiliating oneself with these pages is hardly controversial – both contain only glowing praise and flattering coverage of their official activities – it is notable that Facebook is simultaneously banned and utilized as an outlet for praising the very leadership that banned it. It also complicates the question of why the government would ban it in the first place. The speculation over the reason for the ban has ranged from humor to conjuncture to conspiracy theory. Initially, a rumor circulated that a YouTube video of first lady Asma al-Asad’s skirt flying up in the wind at a public event, revealing her underwear, prompted the ban. However, that video, in which the woman in question bore only a passing resemblance to the first lady, was revealed to be of the wife of a Spanish politician. Others told me quite seriously that young Syrians had been “friending” and communicating with young Israelis over Facebook, prompting the crackdown. *Haaretz*, the Israeli newspaper, reported that the government was upset that those living in the Golan Heights were allowed to list their location as “Israel” (Boms 2008). While that kind of activity could certainly draw the ire of the Syrian government, no evidence ever seriously supported that claim. Most likely, given the lack of publication of the policy and its lax enforcement, the ban was something of a security blanket for the government. Even though widely enforcing it was unnecessary and virtually impossible, having the law on the books provided the government with the opportunity to go after key individuals they deemed threatening.

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<sup>59</sup> In February 2011, Syria lifted its ban on Facebook, YouTube and other sites. The move was most likely an attempt to head off the kind of massive protests seen in Tunisia and Egypt.

There is an inherent paradox in tracing the rise of a neoliberal elite class in the context of one of the world's most repressive security states. The paradox surfaces in both the neoliberal elite's assessment of the regime and its various members and in how the regime alternately encourages and sabotages neoliberal elite institutions. At times, members of the regime – particularly the first lady and occasionally even her husband the president – present public personas that align with the preferences of the neoliberal elite. They form NGOs that promote volunteerism and skill-building, they pepper their public speech with SDS terms, and they favor the same linguistic and social comportment as the neoliberal elite. However, in a regime known for its opacity and in a state renowned for its brutality, this hardly translates to unmitigated encouragement. If and when the neoliberal elite and its institutions seem at all to challenge the strength of regime power, it seems increasingly likely that the regime will read that as a threat and act accordingly to eliminate it. At the time I researched this dissertation, the regime and neoliberal elite had reached a kind of synergy: the regime provided economic and social benefits to the elite and the elite provided Syria with a progressive, professional image at home and abroad. Should that change under difficult economic conditions, internal dissent or geopolitical pressure, their tenuous relationship may not stay so harmonious.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

*As I finished writing this dissertation and completed the final edits, the 2011 pro-democracy revolutions and the removal of previously entrenched dictators engulfed the Middle East. The formerly oppressed and stagnant region seemed to come alive with young people demanding basic rights and the possibility of an emboldened and dignified Arab World. Despite the palpable excitement, no one expected the revolutionary fervor to reach past Tunisia and Egypt into Syria. But it did. By mid-March relatively small-scale protests of a few hundred Syrians would flash onto a street and then disappear again. Eventually, protests peaked into the thousands in several provincial cities, provoking deadly confrontations with the secret police and army and seemingly hollow promises of the lifting of the emergency law and political reform from the regime. As I write this, protests continue, now moving into larger, more diverse cities, and the regime's reform promises remain unfulfilled. The death toll is also mounting as the regime inflicts collective punishment in several restive areas.*

*The members of the new neoliberal elite whom I interviewed for this dissertation use Facebook and sometimes Twitter and blogs to craft their public response to Syria's situation and the region's turmoil. As Tunisia and Egypt disposed of their dictators, they were typically sympathetic with protesters, claiming "we are all Egyptian" and congratulating those nations' citizens when their leaders stepped down. As protests increased in size and frequency in Syria, their sentiments turned from pro-revolution to ambivalent to staunchly pro-Asad. Suddenly, profile pictures of smiling babies and*

wedding portraits became sketches of Bashar al-Asad's face with slogans supporting him. Status updates railed against external elements promoting sectarianism and declared eternal support for the president.

*It is hard to ascertain anyone's true sentiments in a situation of repression and political coercion as exists in Syria. However, it is clear that socio-economic inequalities, frustrations with government policies that create widening economic gaps and nepotistic corruption have been at the heart of every uprising in the region. The complaints of Syria's protesters also have cited these issues as part of their frustration, a charge that indirectly implicates the neoliberal elite. As a group, they have flourished under the rule of a Middle Eastern dictator and benefited from the limited reforms in the economic sector that he did enact. As my research demonstrated, they have partially strengthened social divisions and inequalities, putting their reaction to the region's uprisings into sharper relief.*

Trailing a few members of the neoliberal elite around expensive clothing stores as they searched for the perfect party dress or dancing for three hours at a newly-opened nightclub often seemed like a superficial endeavor. However, behind the sometimes less-than-serious activities in which I engaged for this research, there is a remarkably significant conclusion to all of this. This dissertation is ultimately the story of a new kind of Middle Eastern elite, which means that it also the story of new kinds of social inequality, social division and even social strife in the region and beyond. Dresses are never simply frocks and nightclubs are never about merely dancing; beneath the “professionalism” of the new elite's entrepreneurship associations and the happy graphics

promoting a children's fair, there is a new fault line in Syria and the region that may prove to be one of the most enduring and insurmountable.

To have a neoliberal elite, one must first have neoliberalism. In Syria, recent economic liberalization has privileged the private sector over the public and engaged global free markets through imports and exports, information flows and transnational corporate presence with unprecedented enthusiasm (see see Abboud 2010a, 2010b, 2009; Hinnebusch 2008, 2005; Selvik 2009; Sottimano 2009). The neoliberal turn is not new in the Middle East (see Denis 2006; Rutz and Balkan 2009; Singerman and Ammar 2006); if anything, Syria is relatively late to the game. Scholars before me have observed that neoliberal reform has uneven results and inconsistently benefits different portions of local populations (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001; Greenhouse 2010; Harvey 2005; Mitchell, Timothy 1999). However, what my research demonstrates is that neoliberal reform can and does lend itself to the creation of an entirely new kind of elite group, defined in large part by its ability to adapt to, embrace and mobilize the principles of neoliberal ideology in its activities and group identification. Of course, standard kinds of elite status – wealth, education, family background to name a few – come into play, but they are not sufficient for explaining the neoliberal elite as a discrete social group. Neoliberal elites come from a relative diversity of backgrounds and levels of social status, but they all share this orientation toward neoliberal ideals.

Yet to simply infer group existence cannot adequately explain its formation, maintenance and boundaries. Linguistic anthropology focuses on linguistic practices and interactional moments as the very material of all larger scale social phenomena. In the case of Syria's neoliberal elite, English language usage is absolutely central to the



group's communicative norms and also to its neoliberal orientation. In many local situations around the world, English acts as a carrier of neoliberal ideology and as a social signifier of an individual or group's neoliberal competence (see Heller 2003; Park 2010; Pennycook 2007, 1998, 1994; Rutz and Balkan 2009; Urciuoli 2005, 2003). By turning to the instantiation of English terms in Syrian conversations and other critical linguistic practices, the dissertation demonstrates what is unique and local about the Syrian story and, simultaneously, what the situation in Syria shares with a wide set of examples across the world in which English speaking has become an integral part of local conceptions of neoliberal person-hood. Syrian neoliberal elites are acutely aware of how their linguistic practices align them internationally. When they travel to JCI conferences abroad or international business meetings, they have access to a shared discourse of neoliberal lexical items in English. They may appear to speak and think just like others plugged into the same discourse, but my research also shows that with the very same words and references, they might actually be constructing very different local meanings and social boundaries.

Specifically, this interplay between global discourse and ideology and local group formation and linguistic practices plays out in the consistent usage of context-dependent linguistic terms. This broad grammatical category called shifters incorporates items such as pronouns that are entirely context-dependent for their referential value and other lexical items that have somewhat fixed meanings but also change referential value depending on the context of their usage. Syrian neoliberal elites frequently rely on these two categories to establish the prestigious social status of neoliberal elites in a local Syrian context and to link to transnational neoliberal discourse and ideologies. By

drawing on linguistic resources that shift in usage – and thus erect boundaries around a given social situation – neoliberal elites effectively situate their group in local, national, regional and global contexts.

Individual Syrians who encounter such forceful linguistic practices must attempt to navigate these linguistically built social boundaries effectively. They often utilize two linguistic techniques, style and stance, to align their linguistic practices with neoliberal elite norms and to make appropriate calculations about when and how much to deploy such linguistic resources. For Syrians who leverage linguistic resources to successfully establish elite bona fides, there is a variety of Syrian marketplaces in which the adherence to elite linguistic norms can result in social, material and financial profit. Yet such profit is limited, and the same linguistic-based boundaries that encircle the neoliberal elite also work to keep non-elite Syrians out. This surfaces most clearly at volunteer campaigns in which neoliberal elites intervene on behalf of numerous causes associated with non-elites. Expected linguistic and social practices for elite and non-elites differ widely at such events and are often specific moments in which non-elites encounter the sharp contours of the neoliberal elite. Finally, despite their local position of social prestige, neoliberal elites must navigate their sometimes fraught and sometimes warm relationship with Syria's notoriously brutal and intolerant regime.

The findings of this dissertation expand anthropological conversations about how economic policies and ideologies impact social group formation, social inequality and linguistic practices. They are not simply top-down edicts that favor some groups and exclude others; rather certain individuals and groups interact with these policies and ideologies in an agential and dialogic manner. Linguistic practices are a central tool

through which they encounter such relationships. This dissertation also adds to a growing corpus of linguistic anthropological literature that examines local instantiations of global linguistic phenomena (see Ibrahim, Alim and Pennycook 2009; Park 2010; Pennycook 2010), understanding how individuals and groups deploy seemingly transparent linguistic resources in novel ways both locally and globally. In *Middle Eastern Studies*, this dissertation points to the emergence of a new kind of regional elite and expands the predominant assumption that elite merely stands in for urban and non-elite for rural or tribal. In reality, social stratification in the region unfolds across multiple trajectories, among which the orientation toward localized versions of neoliberal ideology is quickly becoming one of the most important. Finally, this dissertation also has implications for political science and policy studies of Syria, as it challenges old narratives that Syrian's sectarian diversity provides the primary source of social differentiation and the only lens through which Syrians understand their regime.

As pro-democracy uprisings swept the Middle East, a number of commentators and articles have pointed to neoliberalism as the source of so much unexpected discontent in the region. Egypt scholar Walter Armbrust (2011) even asked on Al-Jazeera English's website if the region witnessed "A Revolution against Neoliberalism?" Although understanding the vast and complex regional events as a reaction to one specific development cannot incorporate the many reasons for the uprisings and demonstrations, certainly the vast inequality wrought by economic liberalization drove at least some of the frustration and demands for dignity. In Syria, it now appears that uprisings that began in rural, economically marginalized regions have failed to reach major urban areas and to persuade most professionals, merchants and elites to join them. The neoliberal

elites have benefited under the political status quo and, at the time of my research, seemed to think that they were aligned in vision and style with ruling elite. At the same time, they truly believe in developing, reforming and improving their country. As the Syrian regime becomes increasingly violent and cruel in its tactics of repression, the neoliberal elite will have to balance its prestigious social and economic position with its commitment to the principles that shape it. How they choose to do this could tip the balance for or against the regime in Syria and alter the region irrevocably for many years to come.

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