What kind of Arabic and why? Language in Egyptian blogs

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Abstract
This article strives to set in motion comprehensive research on the ways in which Arabic is evolving in Arabic blogs and computer mediated communication (CMC). By combining media studies, sociolinguistics and literature it examines code choice, content and mode of representation in five top ranked Egyptian blogs. We distinguish between MSA, ECA and mixed varieties and establish that all three codes may be employed. We argue that bloggers make deliberate choices regarding code, and that code-switching in CMC may function as frames for familiarizing or officialdom. We conclude that bloggers with an activist agenda tend to use ECA and a mixed variety, and educational blogs tend to use MSA and a mixed variety. Both activist and educational bloggers may employ a Bakhtinian carnivalesque mode of representation.

Keywords: Arabic blogs, code choice, the carnivalesque

Introduction
This article is part of a larger project situated in the field of media studies in which the top ten most well-linked and visited Arabic and English language blogs in Lebanon, Egypt and Kuwait are studied during the pre-revolutionary period of April 2009 - April 2010. One of the questions investigated in this research is the ways in which blogs challenge the linguistic norms of written Arabic discourse. By combining lessons learned from studying the Arabic blogosphere in media studies with sociolinguistic and literary theory, the present article aims to shed light on how five top ranked Arabic language bloggers from Egypt choose to express themselves in their posts. To this end we set out from the vantage point that blogs constitute a domain for expression in a variety of codes, albeit being communicated in writing, electronically. We ask which factors prompt the choice of linguistic code by Egyptian bloggers and how they express themselves in their

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1 E-mail address: gail.ramsay@lingfil.uu.se
2 Riegert and Ramsay 2009.
3 These codes have been defined as follows: (1) MSA (Modern Standard Arabic), corresponding to Charles Ferguson’s (1959) High variety (H); (2) ECA (Egyptian Colloquial Arabic), corresponding to Charles A. Ferguson’s (1959) Low variety (L) and (3) Mixed varieties: (a) basically ECA, (b) basically MSA, (c) MSA with insertions from ECA, (d) ECA with insertions from MSA and (e) a mixture of MSA and ECA (Bassiouney 2006: 27). In 2009 Bassiouny applied her classification in gendered Saudi, Lebanese, Egyptian and Syrian contexts (Bassiouny 2009: 162-185). Cf. Mejdell 2008: 121.
posts. Ultimately, this article strives to set in motion in-depth as well as broad and comprehensive research on the ways in which Arabic is evolving in blogs and CMC (computer mediated communication). Furthermore, establishing valid theories and efficient methods for studying the Arabic blogosphere with respect to linguistic code is a substantial task yet to be carried out. Considering that the question of language variety in the Arabic speaking world has far reaching implications ranging from politics and religion to gender and class, coming to terms with this problematic is all the more urgent.

Blogging is often an expression of a personal vision, thoughts, opinions and local interests and calls to mind a more relaxed presentation than that which we would expect in a piece of Arabic writing which traditionally requires Modern Standard Arabic (MSA).\(^4\) I have elsewhere demonstrated that electronic communication over the internet may combine features from oral expression with those of writing and has blurred the borderline between speech and writing in Arabic.\(^5\) Therefore, not surprisingly, many Arab bloggers tend to write in their spoken varieties of Arabic, their dialect, or mix dialect with MSA.\(^6\) As observed by Gunvor Mejdell: “The younger generation employs the vernacular (and other languages) in blogs and other web productions.”\(^7\) It should also be pointed out that Mejdell positions MSA as the dominant variety for writing Arabic and that “vernacular trends are at least not yet in a position to dethrone the beautiful language” (of MSA).\(^8\)

While acknowledging that there exist at least “three different varieties of Arabic in each Arab country”, as expressed by Reem Bassiouney, we will in this article distinguish broadly between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Egyptian dialect/Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA) as distinct code levels.\(^9\) In addition, we will speak of mixed variety without further distinguishing between the mixed varieties as specified by Bassiouney.\(^10\)

In the vein of Bassiouney’s findings I argue that Egyptian bloggers make strategic and deliberate choices regarding whether to express themselves in ECA or in MSA, the last mentioned usually with insertions of dialect (mixed variety).\(^11\)

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\(^4\) Douai 2009: 133-149.
\(^6\) Riegert and Ramsay 2012.
\(^7\) Mejdell 2008: 121.
\(^8\) Mejdell 2008: 122.
\(^9\) Reference is here made to Bassiouney’s wording that the unspecified term “Arabic” may mean Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) which is normally used in newspapers and literature, the language of the Koran which is often referred to as Classical Arabic or one of the spoken varieties, the dialects which are the mother tongues of the inhabitants of the Arab countries (Bassiouney 2009: 1). Cf. Bassiouney 2006: 24.
\(^10\) Bassouney 2006: 27.
\(^11\) Cf. Bassiouney 2006: 234: “I argue that the speaker is the one who chooses the code to use … I… place the emphasis on the speaker.”
Bassiouney also found that code-switching in literature does not reflect reality but rather, re-define and reconstructs the identity of the protagonist as well as of the author. This observation is significant for our discussion on the Egyptian bloggers with respect to how they view themselves and frame their narrative. The ways in which bloggers challenge what is thought to be acceptable public representation will be discussed against the backdrop of Mikail Bakthin’s concept of the carnivalesque.

As far as Egyptian bloggers are concerned they have been accustomed to encountering the spoken variety in print literature since the middle of the last century, something which may have a bearing on the apparent ease with which ECA is an acceptable code in a majority of the blogs. This situation has a bearing on Hoda Elsadda’s findings. She studied social transformation and political mobilization among women bloggers in Egypt and described how three popular blogs by Egyptian women were picked up by the publishing house Dar al-Shorouq (Dār ash-Shurūq) in Cairo and republished and distributed as novels. This resulted in a cross-over from the electronic to the print medium while retaining the literary representation and linguistic code in which the original, computer-mediated blogposts were rendered.

Bassiouney’s and Mejdell’s findings on code-switching (CS) and mixing of varieties in speech and Jannis Androutsopoulos’ observations on CS online in CMC and computer-mediated discourse (CMD), will also be considered here. This means it is the speaker who selects the code rather than being the question of the situation calling for which variety to use. Drawing on this observation, Bassiouney found that media negotiates the relationship between MSA and ECA and creates “sites for the negotiation of identities” by bringing public content into the privacy of the home and taking private content to the public view to both local and global audiences. She concluded that “code-switching is used by both men and women as a linguistic device to leave the utmost effect possible on the audience.” The code of the private sphere is a spoken variety. The blog, however, is a medium which makes the private public (if the blogger so chooses).

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12 Bassiouney has observed that “… the use of vernacular in literature is more than just a construction of an identity of a protagonist, it also reflects the attitude, political affiliations, and ideologies of an author.” (Bassiouney 2010: 104, 107-108).
15 Elsadda 2010: 312-315, 328.
18 Bassiouney 2009: 171.

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and the question which arises is what impact this situation may have with respect to code in CMD in blogs.20

Mejdell treats factors challenging John Eisele’s four “cultural tropes” of unity, purity, continuity and competition which call for the use of MSA referring to “[A] new source of corruption: lughat ash-shabāb”. This “source of corruption” entails “the uses of shortened mixed codes on SMS texts and chat, as well as a new jargon spreading among urban youth… a new language in their conversations on the net and the mobile…”21 Mejdell’s findings on code-switching and mixing of varieties largely coincide with those of Bassiouney and include the following observation which has a bearing on our analyses of CMD in blogs:

...even highly educated Egyptian academics with a high level of linguistic competence, when talking to an audience on cultural and social matters, prefer strategies of code-switching and mixing of varieties, to regular standard Arabic…22

Androutsopoulos conducted research on CS in CMC in various modes of production including blogs, E-mail, forums, chats and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) (synchronous) and languages such as German/Greek, Turkish/German and standard German/dialect. He suggests that CS is conceived as a contextualization cue, a resource used by the participants in a CMC to frame their interpretations of what is being said.23 Androutsopoulos’ findings on CS support the observations of Bassiouney and Mejdell that the bloggers may be prompted to use specific codes in their blogs to enhance and adapt their message to the intended audience in order to attract its attention. Relevant to the blogosphere is also that the lack of visual signals such as those of a speech situation, i.e. “ordinary contextualization cues” such as prosody, gaze and posture may be delegated to other signals one of them being CS.24

To be sure, blogs are aimed at a reading/viewing audience and are therefore reminiscent of a more traditional written CS than CS in synchronous CMC such as IRC, chatrooms and Instant Messaging. In this article we take the inclusive stance developed by Androutsopoulos that blogs may be considered as sites for bilingual, “non-conversational discourse”. To be precise, internet communication, among which are blogs, are situated in a vaguely delimited sphere between the spoken word, such as telephone conversations and the written, “non-

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20 This question awaits further investigation. One of the questions posed in the interviews conducted with the bloggers was: “The Social media have prompted debates about where the boundaries between the public and the private are drawn. What are your thoughts as a blogger, on these blurred boundaries?”
21 Mejdell 2008: 121.
22 Mejdell 2008: 115.
24 Androutsopoulos 2011: 3.
conversational discourse” such as letter-writing and diaries. Hence, the blogposts which will be discussed in this article have been typed with a keyboard, edited and published by a single author, the blogger. They have been diffused electronically on the internet, and they are intended for broad but specific audiences.

In June 2009, when Bruce Etling et al. identified some 35,000 blogs in the “Arabic blogosphere” they found that “several thousand” mix Arabic, English and French. Whether this is due to easier availability of computer technology in English, hopes for greater visibility (especially with NGOs and human rights organizations), or bloggers’ occupations or socio-economic status, requires further investigation. Speaking primarily of the choice between Arabic and English or French, Aziz Douai goes as far as to propose that the linguistic styles of expression in Arabic blogs constitute an “intractable source of friction”. His observation that the bloggers’ choice of language is connected to the “issue of the primary audience they wish to target,” corresponds to Bassiouney’s line of reasoning regarding code-switching in speech which emphasizes the conscious act of the speaker who may accommodate the code to the audience. With this said, it may be noted that a recent trend among the Egyptian and Kuwaiti bloggers which have been analyzed in the larger project on which this article is based, is

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26 Androutsopoulos 2011: 4. Lenze has elaborated on this situation: “Without an editor or copy-editor, every writer decides individually which variety of language to use and how important it is to stick to conventions of grammar, spelling and diction… even reposted stories are left uncorrected in spelling and grammar … that creates an impression of immediateness and urgency (2012: 59).”
27 Etling et al. based their social network and link analysis on the 6,451 “most connected” blogs and made note of the fact that 16.7% in the cluster they call the English ‘bridge’ were Arabic-speakers living outside the Arab world. Notably, the majority living inside the region still used English as their main language (2009: 3, 20). Amna Al-Arfaj studied two women bloggers in the Persian Gulf and found that the preferred mode of linguistic expression was “a combination of languages - English (British), transliterated Khaleeji Arabic, and Modern Standard Arabic (Al-Arfaj 2010: 100).” With “transliterated Arabic” Al-Arfaj refers to a popular variety in CMD which is Arabic with Latin letters combined with numbers to make up for the Arabic phonemes for which there are no Latin letter equivalents. This variety, “Arabish”, is especially designed for computer use and facilitates writing transliterated Arabic. See Palfreyman and al-Khalil 2003. For the popularised Latin script used for Arabic in electronic text messaging and CMC see entry “Arabic Chat Alphabet” in Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_chat_alphabet and for “Arabish” see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabish. Last retrieved January, 2013.
28 Riegert and Ramsay 2012: 2. Focusing on a problem she formulates as “The minimal use of the Arabic language by Egyptian Internet users” and the “problem of lack of Arabic content on the Internet”, Rasha A. Abdullah points out a number of factors inhibiting the creation of Arabic content online, one of which is that “…students may become familiar with the Latin-character keyboard as they do their programming assignments… (Abdullah 2009: 132, 134-135).” Douai makes reference to this same situation: “…the use of English is not very surprising since the Internet has been predominantly English language tilted (2009: 147).” Cf. Warschauer et al. 2002: 8-10. Warschauer et al., who studied language choice online among Egyptian professionals aged 24-36 summarized the reasons for the use of English under four principal points: (1) Dominance of English in professional milieux, (2) lack of Arabic software standards, (3) computer and internet use learned in English environments and (4) early adopters of online habits were fluent in English.
29 Douai 2009: 147. “… the use of English is not very surprising since the Internet has been predominantly English language tilted. Cf. Bassiouney 2006: 13, 234.
that bloggers who were previously blogging in English have switched to blogging in Arabic.³⁰

The Egyptian top bloggers discussed here use Arabic script whatever code they express themselves in. As far as the print media and daily newspapers are concerned, Julia Ashtiany proposes that we speak of a “journalese” variety of MSA as proper for Arabic massmedia, a style which largely adheres to MSA grammatically but which stylistically and lexically is adapted to factors such as national, political realities and global influence.³¹ This is a reflection of Karin Ryding’s observation that MSA is useful for journalistic expression since it has a flexible word order, is open to loan translations from western languages and creating compound words and complex concepts with the *ṭāfa*.³² This may have some bearing on the choice of code for three of the Arabic language bloggers included in this study, all of whom have relationships to news organizations: ʿAbd al-Munʿim Maḥmūd was one of the prominent young Muslim Brotherhood bloggers during our period of study and left the organization when he was hired by Al-Jazeera as a producer in January 2011. World renowned blogger Wael Abbas (*Wāʾil ʿAbbās*) has freelanced for Western newspapers and worked for the German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa) and Nawara Negm (*Nawwāra Najm*) has worked as a translator for Egyptian state television and writes a column for the daily al-Dustour (*ad-Dustūr*).

Blogs may be designed and personalized in a vast number of ways the limits being set by the given layout structures in the blog platform used by the blogger and the blogger’s fantasy. As a consequence, the discussions and analyses of the blogposts in this article have not been streamlined according to a single, specific pattern. Rather, the discussions have been shaped by the format of the blog, the blogger’s way of presenting posts, the content and in some cases, the comments section has been considered for further illustration. We are also guided by remarks made by the bloggers in interviews with them. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured and contained a set of 25 open questions to which the bloggers could respond, elaborate on and give their own background and analyses. In this article, the answers given to the interview question, “What language do you prefer to use in your blog? Why?” is of particular interest. In short, the setting of the

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³⁰ Egyptian blogger Mahmoud Salem (Sandmonkey) blogged in English in his blog “Rantings of Sandmonkey” (sandmonkey.org) as did Kuwaiti blogger Reem Alishammari (Chillout Kuwait) in her blog “Q80-ChillGirl” (chilloutkuwait.blogspot.com) at the time of collecting the blogs. Both have switched to blogging in Arabic.
³¹ Ashitiany 1993: esp. 54-61.
³² Ashitiany 1993: 3; Ryding 2005: 5-9. Bassiouney refers to Ryding and elaborates saying that “the journalistic style of MSA has more flexible word order, coinage of neologisms and loan translations from western languages” (Bassiouney 2009: 12).
blog and preferences of the blogger regarding presentation of the posts have guided the structure of our analysis. It may also be noted that all personal statements and remarks given by the bloggers and presented in this article refer to these interviews if not stated otherwise.33

As little editing as possible has been carried out in the Arabic language quotations from the blogposts presented in this article. I have limited myself to comments on code and only inserted *sic* followed by a corrective between brackets after spelling errors when required for clarity. In translations to English of Arabic quotations my aim has been to convey the Arabic as straightforwardly and clearly as possible while setting aside literary elegance.

As far as transcription is concerned, I have largely followed the conventions used for transliterating Arabic into English in literary studies and omitted the glottal stop of *hamzat al-qaṭṭ* in the beginning of a phrase or when located in the beginning of a single, lexical item. Based on the discussions on theory above, I have primarily followed three guidelines when describing the linguistic style and code choice in blog posts: (1) The pronounced choice of the bloggers (as given in the interview); (2) The context (the Egyptian blogosphere); (3) The blogosphere as constituting a domain in which MSA, ECA and Mixed varieties are acceptable and; (4) Lexical items, grammar and phrase structures denoting MSA or ECA.

The selection of posts from which examples have been drawn is represented by every 10th post during April 2009 – April 2010.34 Beginning with the earliest post in the selection they have been examined for illustrative examples rather than systematically coded. The blogs were from major blog aggregators such as the albawaba portal (albawaba.com) and The Egyptian Blogs Aggregator (omraneya.net) as well as blog rolls of active blogs in these aggregators. An initial collection of personal, non-commercial blogs resulted in a list of 293 blogs. These were subjected to a Link Impact Search with LexiURL searcher in order to establish which blogs attracted the highest number of domains linking to them.35 The most well-linked blogs were compared with Alexa.com ranking for number of page-views. By comparing the 30 most visited blogs with the 30 most linked-to, a list of top ten blogs, five of which were in English and five of which were in Arabic, was established. In this article we will consider posts from the five highest ranked Arabic language blogs during the afore-mentioned period.

33 For full names of these bloggers, title of blog, its web-site, number of in-linking domains and place and date of interview, see Appendix at the end of this article.
34 The blogs were identified during 2010 by Egyptian renowned social media activist, blogger, micro-blogger and medical doctor Mina Zekri, to whom we express our gratitude and appreciation for his professional assistance. Zekri has also conducted the searches for blogs and their popularity ranking for the larger project on which it is based.
35 Thelwall 2009.
The bloggers
The bloggers whose texts are studied here are still active in various social media platforms. They have, however, either started new blogs, switched to micro-blogging, created their own web-based sites for news or literary creativity or communicate with their networks through a combination of social media portals such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Linkedin, Flickr and Pinterest.

All five present various types of criticism of Egyptian society from perspectives colored by their ideology, background, social environment and personalized layout techniques. Wael Abbas is an activist of long standing and blogs for human rights, freedom of speech and processes of democratization in his blog al-Wa’y al-Miṣrī, on the website misrdigital.blogspot.com.

Nawara Negm is a pan-Arab nationalist activist with criticism directed towards the Mubarak regime, its Western supporters and Israel, and her blog, Jabhat at-tahyīs ash-sha’biyya, is located on tahyyes.blogspot.com.

Taking on the role of an entertainer and educator in his blog, Late Night Stories – Ḥakāwī Ākhar al-Layl, on the website shokeir.blogspot.com, Ahmed Shokeir (Ahmad Shuqayr) calls himself liberal and criticizes the corruption of governmental organization and bureaucracy.

In his blog Anā Ikhwān, on ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com, former Muslim brother Abdel Moneim Mahmoud (ʿAbd al-Munʿim Maḥmūd) aims to familiarize the readership with the Muslim Brothers. He strives to educate the reader about the ideas, standpoints and actions of the Brothers while indirectly criticizing the Mubarak regime and State Security apparatus for mistreating Brotherhood members.

As for Ashraf al-Anany (Ashraf al-ʿAnānī), he is a Bedouin from Sinai whose express aim is to educate the readers about the Bedouin and their circumstances in this region, the maltreatment and injustice they have experienced under the hands of the Egyptian government and make known their plight to the readership. His blog, Sīnāʿ ḥaythu anā (Sinai is where I am), has been made inaccessible on the internet.36

Of these five top ranked Egyptian Arabic language bloggers during April 2009 – April 2010, Wael Abbas and Nawara Negm were occasionally posting video clips, images or texts in their blogs up to the end of 2012. In the following, we will refer to the bloggers according to how they are best known on social media platforms and the way in which their names often are rendered on the internet.

36 In an e-mail dated July 17th 2012 Ashraf al-Anany informed the present author that he had closed his blog after the Revolution of January 25th 2011 in order to devote himself to writing and publishing poetry.

Wael Abbas in *al-Waʿy al-Miṣrī* on misrdigital.blogspot.com

A blogger since 2004, Wael Abbas is one of the pivotal Egyptian bloggers and media activists who led the way towards the method of cooperation between mainstream media and activist bloggers in the buildup towards the Revolution of 25 January 2011, also referred to as the Lotus Revolution.37 His posts are known to include video clips and images such as photos, posters and cartoons while texts may function as captions or a request to comment on the imagery.

With a university degree in English language and literature, having worked as the Middle East correspondent for Deutsche Presse-Agentur and having written a column for the Egyptian opposition paper *al-Dustour*, as well as op-ads for electronic as well as print papers, Wael Abbas commands MSA with ease. Nonetheless, he makes a point of using ECA in his posts.

When asked, “Do you write in Egyptian Arabic?” Wael Abbas responds, “Yeah, yeah.” He explains that his readership is “from all over the Arab world. They are either Egyptians working and living there or they are Arabs… just reading the blog.” Above all, his blog is directed towards his fellow Egyptians: “… my target audience is Egyptians, young Egyptians, university students, school students. These are people I’m seeking to interact with.” As for citizens of other Arab countries, “…the rest of the Arab world, they can read Egyptian Arabic, so it’s not a problem for them.”

Wael Abbas sees his use of the Egyptian spoken variety in his posts as an act of resistance in as much as that “Classical Arabic” is “the language of the elite, the intelligence… It’s the language of the Koran…” To Wael Abbas, the situation of diglossia has a negative impact on the process of democratization, since only the educated elite commands the “high” variety of the language:

…that’s one of the justifications that I’m using … Egyptian Arabic, because I always attack the people who use Classical Arabic, especially when they use very sophisticated language with expressions that are rarely understood in the street. So, the common people don’t understand…

Drawing a parallel between Arabic literary expression and blogs, similarly to Arab authors who may employ MSA or a dialect as a “political statement” or to create a certain atmosphere or feeling in the reader, Wael Abbas intentionally lets

ECA color his text. He also is known to use indecent words and expressions of indecorousness which may reflect a lack of respect for linguistic norms affiliated with print texts. This strategy emerges as “a symbolically meaningful mode of representation with a long tradition in literary and folk culture – what Mikhail Bakhtin described as the carnivalesque”. It includes the “low” language of the marketplace with its billingsgate and vulgarities.

Wael Abbas blogs for political modernity including democracy, secular society and human rights and is known as an activist who is critical of conservative trends of Islamization. He uses ECA and a mixed variety in order to fulfill his aim which is to be read by a broad spectrum of the Arab readership in his country and outside. This being the case, he carries his argument for choice of code further while proposing that the “Islamists are successful because they are speaking the language of the masses. They are speaking this language in the mosque and people can understand them easily…” In other words, Wael Abbas, in his capacity as an Egyptian blogger, challenges the boundaries defining diglossia in the Arab world as specified by Ferguson in 1959, striking from two sides. He, himself, uses ECA or a mixed variety in his posts because he wants to reach the broadest audience possible. But he also reproaches the same “elite” of which he is critical and who command the “language of the Koran” of doing the same, orally, in “the mosque.”

Consider the following excerpts from Wael Abbas’ post on August 20th 2009. The title of the post is at-Tuhma biyidawwin meaning “The accusation is he blogs” in ECA, with biyidawwin reflecting the aspectual/mood marker b affiliated with a number of Arabic dialects of which Egyptian dialect is one. Beneath the heading is a photo of a laptop followed by a text in which Wael Abbas explains that his laptop has been confiscated by State Security:

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38 Bassiony 2010: 111. In her analysis of Bahāʾ Tāhir’s al-Hubb fi al-manfū (Love in Exile) Bassiony demonstrated that the author uses MSA as a detachment device “to reflect the feelings of exile and nostalgia that dominate the novel”.

39 Thompson 2009: 214. Cf. Morris 1994: 203-204 and Riegert and Ramsay 2012: 8. An illuminating example is a tweet from January 15th 2013 in which Wael Abbas scolded one of the activists for behaving foolishly: “My dear young activist, as long as you don’t know what to do, you ass, don’t do anything stupid like you!!!” In a followup tweet he continued: “…it’s enough shit already.” Cf. the popular Lebanese blogger Hummus Nation who is known for his carnivalesque style and who has named the section in his blog in which he proposes to treat politics “Siyāsa waʾakl kharā (sic ﻫﺮﻯ) (Politics and eating shit). http://www.hummusnation.net. Last retrieved in January 2013.

40 When asked how he goes about writing in ECA taking into account that there is no single standard for this variety he responded: “I’m making my own standards.” Cf. Bassiony 2010: 107-108.

41 Situations in which the “High” language of MSA (H) is regarded as appropriate, include written texts, news broadcasts, sermons in a mosque, speech in parliament and political speech. (Ferguson 1959: 329).

I’d just recently bought it [it was] new, not more than a number of months ago.

His new laptop, only a few months old, he continues, is now

crouching in some corner in one of the State Security investigation centers after the minions, thieves and swindlers of the Customs Authority sequestered and stole it on the authority of the State Security bastards, claiming that they were going to display it in the Technical Section as the first of its kind in Egypt… despite this the Technical Section flatly denies that they have received my computer from the Customs Authority…

After this explanatory caption for the photo of his laptop, the rest of this post is a poem about the “Dark-skinned lad who was arrested on the accusation ‘He blogs’” by Mayāda Midḥat, herself a longstanding blogger in her blog Muwāṭīna Miṣriyya (An Egyptian Citizen). 43

The introductory line which has been translated as “I’d just recently bought it (it was) new, not more than a number of months ago” gives us an idea of Wael Abbas’ code. We make note of the lexical items of lissa (here interpreted as “just recently”) and common in several dialects, mā baʿālīsh (here interpreted as “not more”), an expression usually affiliated with the Egyptian dialect and kām (here interpreted as “a number of”) which in MSA would be rendered kam. This introductory phrase is in its entirety a personal reflection on the situation at hand – one of numerous similar narratives to which Wael Abbas’ readers have become acquainted throughout the years. Throughout his blog the narratives of his posts are posited on the two basic foundation stones of familiarization and officialdom, the first attracting the reader’s sympathy and the second prompting his or her indignation.

In the following passage we make note of the lexical items “my laptop” – lāb tūbī and “minions” – dalādīl which are not usually affiliated with MSA. Clearly, this longish passage with Wael Abbas’ standards is not heavily strewn

with typical ECA items. This is also in keeping with the framing of the narrative since Wael Abbas is “giving a report” of the misconduct, not to say abuse acted out by a state authority, and a more official tone is therefore in place. This strategy is similar to that of the Lebanese blogger Hummus Nation who uses MSA “and the authority that comes with it to mock and criticize Lebanese officialdom and society.”44 This concise “report” of state misconduct gives rise to the reader’s indignation. It also comes across as ironic in a phrase such as “…claiming that they were going to display it in the Technical Section as the first of its kind in Egypt”. We may take this to hint at the backwardness of the “Technical Section” of Egypt’s Customs Authority who either has not heretofore seen a laptop such as this one, or who believes that the Egyptians have not seen a laptop like this before.

A few introductory stanzas from the poem by Mayāda Midḥat read:

They detained the dark-skinned lad.
The accusation was ‘he blogs.’
He said, yeah, its keyboard is stubborn
and the screen supplies provisions –
ideas from foreign lands,
and beauty of foreign lands
which charges our people.

The final stanzas read:

What are you accused of, my son?
I am accused of blogging.
And who is she, too, my sister?
They took her while she was blogging!
What a pit of hellish injustice.
But keep on – blog!

44 Riegert and Ramsay 2012: 12.
Arabic poetry of today may either be expressed in MSA or be created and delivered in a spoken variety.\textsuperscript{45} Notably, the leftist Egyptian poet Ahmed Fouad Negm (Ahmad Fu’ād Najm), who is the father of one of the bloggers, included in the selection which we are studying, Nawara Negm, is one of the famous dialect poets of today. This is not, however, the place to delve into a literary analysis of the poem “The accusation is he blogs” by Mayāda Midhāt. It may suffice here to point out that her poem is communicated in Wael Abbas’ blog in ECA, it expresses the urgency of the situation in the blogger’s society with regard to the lack of freedom of speech, a situation that is especially grave for bloggers since they may be arrested “while blogging”. Despite the “hellish injustice” reigning in society, the importance of activism is underlined and bloggers are challenged to keep on blogging.

Wael Abbas’ blog also confirms the suitability of a “journales"e variety of MSA for Arabic mass media, a style which largely adheres to MSA grammatically and to which we have made reference above. This is also a variety affiliated with officialdom. On 22 January 2010, Wael Abbas’ post constitutes a lengthy statement aimed at making public the rough treatment that a number of bloggers and social media activists, including himself, received at the hands of the State Security apparatus on January 15\textsuperscript{th} and 16\textsuperscript{th} 2010. This group of 29 human rights activists had travelled to Nag Hammadi. Their intention was to show their support for and extend their condolences to the Coptic community there which had lost six members, when they had been targeted from the back-seat windows of cars on January 7\textsuperscript{th} 2010.\textsuperscript{46} This post is headed by a photo from inside a prisoner transport vehicle with barred gaps for windows and the caption Bayān al-‘ā’idūn (sic) min Nag ʿḤammādī, meaning “Statement by those returning from Nag Hammadi.” A short introduction in MSA explains the purpose of the post:

In the name of all of the male and female activists and bloggers who were abducted and arrested in Nag Hammadi in the morning of Friday, January 15\textsuperscript{th} 2010, we publish this statement in order to clarify the facts.

This post is delivered in a form resembling an official statement and therefore, according to the index of suitability established by Ferguson and confirmed by

\textsuperscript{45} Cf. the increasingly popular colloquial Nabāṭī poetry prevalent in the Gulf states which is an example of a revival of a traditional cultural expression of the region.

others, the suitable code would be MSA.\textsuperscript{47} That Arab news media usually requires MSA, may have inspired the blogger to hyper-correct the active participle in the caption – \textit{al-‘āʾidūn} – “those returning”. Being in the construct state here this item should have been rendered \textit{al-‘āʾidīn} – in the oblique (genitive) case. This type of error may also be referred to the fact that the blogger functions as both author and editor, implying that spelling and grammatical mistakes easily make their way into a blog post.

Abdel Moneim Mahmoud in \textit{Anā Ikhwān} on ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com

There are two conceptual pivots upon which the linguistic style of Abdel Moneim Mahmoud’s blog texts turn, the first being that of his goal to “express what the Muslim Brotherhood is about,” and the second, to do so in a manner of solidarity with the progressive, younger generation of the Brethren.\textsuperscript{48} His blog is \textit{Anā Ikhwān}, which can be interpreted as “I am a Brotherhood (member)”. He introduces himself as

\begin{quote}
An Egyptian journalist, graduate of the school of the Muslim Brothers who loves Egypt dearly, and who hates corruption and despotism.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

This text, constituting the blogger’s brief introduction of himself, is positioned in the profile frame “About me” offered by Google’s platform for blogs. It is therefore meant to be a more personal piece of communication than the reports of the “official business” of the Brethren. Similarly to the familiarizing text snippets by Wael Abbas, this information is positioned within the blurred boundaries of the written print media calling for MSA on the one hand, and that of the personal, introductory chitchat in a blog in which the blogger may choose a spoken variety on the other.

\textsuperscript{47} “Discourse which openly challenges the ‘dominant regime of authority’ and promotes the status of ‘Āmmiyya (the spoken variety, present author’s remark), is still rarely found in the media” (Mejdell 2008: 116). Cf. Bassiouney 2009: 13 and Ashtiany who says “The basic vocabulary and syntax of Media Arabic are the same as those of Modern Standard Arabic” (1993: 3).

\textsuperscript{48} To the question “When did you start your blog and why?” and “How would you describe your own blog?” this blogger responded: “2006, I was in prison. I began the blog after I was released from prison to express what the Muslim Brotherhood was about. I was imprisoned because of people in a Muslim Brotherhood meeting that were arrested. After this I began my blog to express the opinion of the Muslim Brothers. It’s only to express my personal views.”

On the whole, Abdel Moneim Mahmoud’s posts channel questions of concern for the Muslim Brothers and function as a sort of news bulletin about the activities of the organization and their leadership. On April 4th 2011, he posted a picture of a lock and bolt with the caption “On the Parting of Anā Ikhwān”. In this post he explained his reasons for having started the blog initially. He related that he had started his blog in order to present an alternative picture of the Muslim Brothers, and he had terminated it because he was satisfied that it, by now, had delivered a rather more complete picture of the Brotherhood. He has since then established a new blog, called Afkārī (My thoughts) on afkarmonem.blogspot.com.

The posts are intended as official, explanatory information about the religiously colored and conservative political organization of the Muslim Brethren. They are directed to Arabs in different parts of the Arab world and while interviewed, the blogger explains that he only writes in MSA and that his readership is found in countries across the Arab world from Morocco to Saudi Arabia. His posts offer essays and articles about the work and intentions of the Brethren framed in a sense of personal gratitude and respect on the part of the blogger. MSA is the language of officialdom, Islam and unity and connects the Muslims with a glorious past. It is, in other words, an appropriate variety for a blog such as Anā Ikhwān.

Nevertheless, the reader of this blog will find expressions such as the blogger’s presentation of himself, referred to above, as a person who “loves Egypt dearly” and which is rendered dāyeb fī Maṣr, which we take to be a dialectal variant of the phrase “dhāʾīb fī Miṣr” in MSA. We interpret this expression as “melting with love for Egypt”, in other words, to “love Egypt dearly”. In the same introductory profile the reader will find the expression wa-biyikrah al-fasād, meaning “and he hates corruption”, which is expressed with the aspectual/mood marker b denoting dialect. Furthermore, as Mejdell has demonstrated, even educated Egyptian academics with a good grasp of MSA may prefer a strategy of code-switching and mixing of varieties, since a less formal linguistic mode would render them as “modern, cultivated and liberal-minded”. This, it is thought, facilitates the communication with the intended audience.50 It also falls in line with Wael Abbas’ observation in our interview with him that the “Islamists are using the simple language, the slang.” In other words, despite the fact that we would regard MSA as a suitable variety for a blog offering information on behalf of the Muslim Brothers, the blogger may CS and mix MSA and ECA for a variety

50 Mejdell 2008: 121.
of reasons such as familiarization, facilitation and creating a sense of solidarity with the author.51

With this said, it should be emphasized that the posts in this blog to a large degree constitute articles which have been published in mainstream media newspapers such as *al-Dustour*, and they are therefore expressed in MSA. The reversed order is also true, the blogger explains that he may put down his thoughts in his blog and later rewrite the post as an article. Whatever the case in this respect, the posts mostly constitute reports about procedures within the Muslim Brotherhood, interviews with prominent Brotherhood members or other political personalities and articles published in mainstream media. That his posts mostly reflect the style of a well-educated person being able to express himself in MSA, is illustrated in the following examples.

The initial post in the selected corpus for this blogger is dated May 16th 2009. In its critical stance towards Egyptian State Security and the Mubarak administration, it coincides with the content in posts by his fellow bloggers such as previously discussed Wael Abbas. This post constitutes a lengthy text presented under the heading: “Accusations towards representatives and members of the Guidance Office of the Brothers…”.52 The reader learns that

The security apparatus is addicted to fabricating new accusations in order to hamper the activities of the Brothers and to distort its image, especially abroad.

On July 19th 2009, the blogger lets the daughter of a prominent Muslim Brotherhood personality of the inner circle Dr ʿAbd al-Munʿim Abū l-Futūḥ, express her concern that there exists a plan to assassinate her father by prohibiting the physicians from monitoring his condition.53 This is reported in a dry, matter-of-fact, “journalese” style in the heading:

Daughter of Abū l-Futūḥ: There is a plan to assassinate my father by prohibiting the physicians from monitoring his condition.

The first paragraph of this news item posted in the blog reads as follows:

The daughter of Dr `Abd al-Mun`im Abū l-Futūḥ, General Secretary of the Arab Doctors Union, warned of the existence of a plan to assassinate him at the French Kasr El Aini hospital by imposing a heavy guard on him and the strict intransigence of the security forces imposed on Abū l-Futūḥ at the hospital.

Muslim Brotherhood leaders involved in internal strife are discussed in the post of 27 September 2009 under the following heading:

Leaders in the second circle of the Brethren warn Akef from breaking away from the group, should the conservative movement try to prevent El-Erian from reaching the Guidance Office.54

In a print media style which we recognize from daily newspapers, the post goes on to relate how the General Guide (often translated as “chairman”) and former head of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammed Akef (Muhammad Mahdī ʿĀkif) is warned not to break away from the Brothers, should the conservative branch stop him from appointing the prominent Brotherhood representative Essam El-Erian (ʿIṣām al-ʿIryān) to membership in the Guidance Office in place of former head of the Brotherhood, Muḥammad Hilāl. The names and moves of a number of prominent Brotherhood members are discussed, and the post exposes the rift in the Muslim Brotherhood between reformists represented by Akef on the one hand and the conservatives on the other. It also makes mention of the fact that the

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Muslim Brothers youth group supported the appointment of Erian on their Facebook site.\footnote{Akef’s official term ended on 14 January 2010 and at present, Muhammad Badie (Muḥammad Badīʿ) is the eighth General Guide of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Consult Khalil al-Anani in \textit{Al-Ahram Weekly Online}, 28 January - 3 February 2010, Issue No. 983, \texttt{http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/983/op32.htm}. Last retrieved in February 2012.}

Reliable sources inside the Muslim Brotherhood have related that a number of leaders in the second and third circles inside the group have decided to speak to the General Guide, Mahdi Akef, and the Guidance Office to upgrade Essam El-Erian to membership in the Office in order to succeed Muḥammad Hilāl, and this according to how Mohamed Morsi was upgraded to membership in the Office in 2004...\footnote{http://ana-ikhwan.blogspot.se/2010_02_01 archive.html. Last retrieved in January 2013.}

A final example from this blog is from February 21\textsuperscript{st} 2010, in which the blogger, Abdel Moneim Mahmoud, posts a photo of Muhammad al-Baradei under the heading:

\begin{quote}
Al-Baradei to \textit{al-Dustour} in the first talk with him in Cairo: I will never accept any official position far away from appointment for the presidency
\end{quote}

The core of this post can be summarized as an accusation directed towards the Mubarak administration. The message is that it will never permit any party to compete with it politically. To this end it uses its security apparatus to attack the largest, independent and united body in Egypt which is the Muslim Brothers.

The photo depicts the former Director General of IAEA relaxing in a sunlounger in the well-trimmed garden of his home in a gated community in Cairo with a caption inserted in the photo saying: “Exclusive photo by \textit{al-Dustour} from the home of al-Baradei”. The gist of al-Baradei’s message as reported in the post is that “the Egyptian people are longing for change and for a better future”. He makes a point of the fact that the crowds were waiting to receive him at the airport\footnote{http://ana-ikhwan.blogspot.se/2010_02_01_archive.html. Last retrieved in January 2013.}
on his return to Egypt, and that this must be taken as “a message to the ruling administration that the people need change.” The blogger emphasizes that:

Baradei requested of the people to move in order to amend the constitution.

وطالب البرادعي الشعب بالتحرك لتعديل الدستور

No doubt, a symbolic message on the struggle for freedom with roots in the famous poem *Irādat al-ḥayāh* (Will to life) is brought to mind to most Arab readers in this post.⁵⁸ Al-Baradei is quoted as having pronounced the following phrases alluding this poem by one of the loadstars of modern Arabic poetry, the Tunisian romantic nationalist poet Abul Qasim ash-Shabbi (*Abū al-Qāsim ash-Shābbī*) (1909-1934) in this post:

The people, if they want change they must move… for example, if different groups of people collect signatures for this purpose… the government must grant them their wish.

الشعب إذا أراد التغيير يجب أن يتحرك، فمثلًا طوانف الشعب المختلفة لو قامت بتجميع توقيعات من أجل هذا الهدف … عندما لا يد للحكومة أن تستجيب.

These lines bring to mind the famous stanza by ash-Shabbi which also constitutes the opening lines of the Tunisian national anthem:

If the people, one day, want life, destiny must meet their wish.⁵⁹

إذا الشعبُ يَوْمًا أَرَادَ الْحَيَاﺓَ فَلَا بَدٌّ أَنْ يَسْتَجِبَ الْقَداَرُ

In his final post, before closing his blog, this blogger declared that he had met nothing but good at the hands of the Brotherhood:

in which I had not found anything but all the best in as much as that the Brotherhood gave me more than they took from me. And the best of them, who loved their fatherland and their religion and worked with all sincerity for the revival of the nation, raised me…⁶⁰

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⁵⁸ This is interpreted as an instance of intertextuality along the lines of Gérard Genette and Jonathan Culler in Genette 1997: 5-10, 51-52 381; Culler 1981: 103, 115.
⁵⁹ The American-Egyptian correspondent Ashraf Khalil refers to these same lines by ash-Shabbi: “Who will be the first to learn the lessons from Tunisia, the rulers or the ruled? As the Tunisian poet Abul Qasem Al-Shabi once wrote, ‘If the people decide to live, destiny must obey’. Khalil 2012: 123-124.”
Clearly, the appropriate code in a blog such as *Anā Ikhwān* emerges as MSA, or Ashtiani’s “journalese”, in the shape in which this variety would normally appear in traditional print-press.61 Abdel Moneim Mahmoud’s posts may be positioned in both online and offline media and are not fore-mostly intended as accounts of personal affairs. The blogger’s sympathy with the Muslim Brethren is not primarily reflected through subjective standpoints but in the fact that he, personally, has taken upon himself to “explain and clarify” the aims of the organization in which he has met nothing but “all the best”. The studious inclusion of a quote paraphrasing a piece of high literature in the form of the well-known opening lines of the Tunisian national anthem, filled with romantic, Arab nationalist associations underpins the formality and literariness of the text, something which usually calls for MSA.

Ashraf al-Anany in *Sīnāʾ ḥaythu Anā – Sinai is where I am*

*Sina is a piece of heaven left to itself, far away. The poet Ashraf al-‘Anānī’s blog*

سيانا قطعة السماء المتروكة على حالاها بعيدا. مدونة الشاعر أشرف العناني

One of the top ten Egyptian bloggers during our time period is a Bedouin from Sinai, Ashraf al-Anany (*Ashraf al-‘Anānī*), whose blog has the full title *Sinai is where I am* followed by the subtitle *Sinai is a piece of heaven left to itself, far away* (*The poet Ashraf al-‘Anānī’s blog*). In July 2012 this blogger explained that “After the Revolution accomplished its tasks, or this is what I thought, I decided to stop writing in the blog to devote myself full-time to writing poetry.”62 Born in October 1964, he presents himself as “the poet Ashraf al-Anany” and describes Sinai metaphorically as “a piece of heaven left to itself, far away”. He has explained that the main purpose of his blog is to educate his readers about the character of the Sinai population and to create a bridge between Sinai society and other Egyptians. He believes that people have had a chance to acquaint

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61 Ashtiani 1993: 54-61.
62 E-mail correspondence from Ashraf al-Anany, July 27th 2012. Ashraf al-Anany’s blog *Sīnāʾ ḥaythu Anā* and none of his blogposts in it can be accessed on the internet. The present author collected the material during 2010 while he was still blogging in this blog.
themselves with the Sinaites with the help of the internet, and that he personally has played a role in this process.

From the poor living circumstances and failing administration of the towns in Sinai to criticism of the Mubarak regime, a wide range of topics fill this blog. Ashraf al-Anany’s texts are part of a more transnational trajectory than that of his fellow bloggers, in as much as that he not only speaks about the Sinaites but brings to light aspects of Bedouin, tribal organization and customs broadly while criticizing expressions of globalization. In the process of doing so, he reveals a set of personal interests which may be summarized as (1) Egyptian neglect and misrule of the Bedouin in Sinai leading to their humiliation and degradation; (2) critique of globalized consumer society and; (3) regaining dignity (karāma) for Egypt and the Sinaites.

This blogger prefers to use MSA and “also some Bedouin terms”. He explains that he writes “for Egypt and for Arab leaders to understand the people of Sinai.” Although there are stylistic differences of expression affiliated with personal choice and individual preferences, Ashraf al-Anany, Abdel Moneim Mahmoud and, to some extent, Ahmed al-Shokeir have in common that they define their blogging identities as educators and social critics. This is why they choose to let their cyber personas speak with the voice of the educated at the same time being intent on reaching the broad but, nevertheless, literate strata of society. It may be of interest to note that a comment by one of the readers of Ashraf al-Anany’s post, May 9th 2009, who writes under the pen-name Rāʿī an-Nāqa, meaning “Sheperd of the She-Camel”, delivers a number of verses from the Quran. These verses are rendered with all diacritical marks in place which corresponds to the (high) style, usually termed Classical Arabic (CA), required when quoting from the Quran:

What is the life of this world but play and amusement? But best is the Home in the Hereafter, for those who are righteous. Will you not then understand? (The Cattle: 32).

This means that the linguistic style which this blogger applies in his posts, may well attract readers who not only command MSA but who also find prestige and satisfaction while expressing themselves in the high variety of CA. This blogger’s

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63 The entire comment by Rāʿī an-Nāqa (Sheperd of the She-Camel) constitutes Quranic verses from the following suras: The Cattle, Yūnus, The Believer and The Prophet.
command of a high, literary MSA is corroborated by his selected title in his Facebook page in which he introduces himself as “The Poet Ashraf al-Anany” (ash-Shāʿir Ashraf al-ʿAnānī). This indicates that his linguistic skills measure up to the demands of composing poetry – a literary genre usually demanding high skills in MSA. The following excerpts from posts shed light on this blogger’s choice of code and mode of representation, including some of his poetic techniques of metaphor and symbolism.

On April 21st 2009, Ashraf posts a text with the title “Bless me: I have won 4 million six hundred thousand Euros”. This post exemplifies one aspect of the blogger’s critical view of globalized society. He is aware that the internet has assisted him with publishing information about the Bedouin in Sinai, but like other internet users he has also experienced some of the drawbacks which the inattentive internet user may be exposed to. He contacts the party issuing this lot which states that he is the winner of four Million, Six Hundred Thousand Euros and uncovers the fraud. This post is introduced as follows:

Certainly, all of us have gotten accustomed to these messages, with which I became familiar at an early stage, from the beginning of my relationship with the internet. But I decided to take on the adventure and go along with them in order to learn exactly how they appropriate people’s money through trickery…

The blogger does not like such those aspects of modernity which he regards as decadence and inferior morals, even as dangerous for humanity, all of which comes to view in his post from May 9th 2009. The title of this post is “The Art of Desire” (Handasat ar-raghba), the essence of his critique in it is the cynicism of commercialization, when “human pain is turned into a piece of news only”. Globalization is the backdrop to the ills of society and the opening lines read as follows:

Life moves on with the force of a stone rolling down into the depths from the top of the mountain … It is as if life grows old, as if it loses its virginity…

The blogger goes on to argue in favor of conservative ideals and is critical of globalization and democracy:

Many find that life has become nicer on the pretext of democracy, human rights and freedom *etc*. But with a small amount of sense, we find that all of this is an illusion and you will find those who speak to you about the dictatorship of the majority, the power of group pressure and the miserable life in the most democratic countries – even racism – it is not possible to deny that it exists there.

The post says that many people are of the opinion that life has gotten more beautiful democracy, human right and freedom. But with little effort one realizes that all of this is an illusion. Moreover, you will find those speaking of the dictatorship of the majority, power of pressure groups and life’s misery in the democratic countries.

Essential pieces of criticism are directed towards a tendency in global news media to capitalize on “human pain” when sufferings of individuals turn into “a mere piece of news”:

Globalization, here, might become a curtain or backdrop for a scene, but in the forefront the elements appear harsher when human pain turns into a mere piece of news, when the news and satellite sites feed on the horrors of the human spirit for the sake of entertaining the dear viewer...

67 We refer to this grammatical error as a typo.
The message of the post is enhanced by footage in the form of a photo collage of women, two of whom seemingly have been brutally murdered, disjoined and abused, and an image of what appears as a swirling dervish in a woman’s dress the caption of which reads:

Madonna: Distortions of desire, or its deviation, or art. All of these ways lead to such horrors.

In old times, the blogger explains, people would go against things they called moral taboos. Presently, the blogger warns, a “catastrophe” will sweep humanity “towards a harsher destiny.” Closing this post he says:

I do not know, but of one thing I am certain, there is a real catastrophe at hand. And that we will be swept, with great force, towards a harsher destiny the moment the spirit of humanism and its ability to make distinctions is lost, something which makes us sense these horrors as mere surmises.

These examples may suffice to illustrate the content, choice of code and literariness of the Egyptian poet and blogger Ashraf al-Anany. Contrary to his fellow blogger, Ahmed Shokeir, this blogger is not into a carnivalesque mode of representation. His texts are saturated with poetic features such as symbolism and metaphor, all of which complicates the translation (indeed, the interpretation) of some of his posts. The movement of “life” is metaphorically described as “a stone rolling down into the depths from the top of the mountain” and global society with its big-city lifestyle and commercialism makes life “grow old”, as if losing “its virginity”. The female pop icon of Madonna seems to symbolize decadence and distortions of modernity and its expressions of culture. To sum up, Ashraf al-Anany’s aim to educate, the somber content of his blog and literary style suit his choice of code which emerges as MSA.
Nawara Negm in *Jabhat at-tahyīs ash-shaʿbiyya* on tahyyes.blogspot.com

One of the most popular Egyptian bloggers during our time period is Nawara Negm, born in 1973. The name of her blog is *Jabhat at-tahyīs ash-shaʿbiyya* (Popular front for raving).\(^6^8\) This blogger is the daughter of the renowned Egyptian colloquial poet Aḥmad Fuʿād Nigm/Negm (1929- ) to whom we have made reference in connection with Wael Abbas’ poem by Mayāda Midḥat introduced above.\(^6^9\)

Nawara Negm began her blog in 2006 as newly divorced and with a sense of responsibility to speak up on behalf of torture victims in her country, as explained in response to the question “When did you start your blog and why?” Her blog is saturated with criticism of the Mubarak regime and administration and of all kinds of ills that she sees in her society. Although she projects positive light on Islamic movements ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to Palestinian Hamas and Lebanese Hizbollah, she does not refrain from criticizing such parties when she finds reason to do so. Special areas of interest include condemnation of Israel, the USA, the Mubarak regime and the Egyptian State Security apparatus, support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizbollah and liberation of political activists in Egypt and elsewhere. A central theme throughout this blog is that of Egyptian and Arab humiliation with respect to (1) Israel’s upper hand in the region, (2) on the global arena in the face of US and European superiority and (3) individually for every Egyptian struggling to meet daily needs.

Nawara Negm underlines that her blog texts are delivered as closely as possible to ECA. She says that she uses her blog to express herself freely, and that she posts “maybe five or ten posts” daily. She explains: “I write exactly like I speak. As if I am sitting with my friends and I express myself and it’s like the stream of consciousness…” Hence, Nawara Negm conscientiously makes a point of *not* writing in MSA although in her capacity as a columnist in the daily newspaper *al-Dustour*, she commands this variety.

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\(^6^8\) How to render a satisfactory translation of the Egyptian expression “tahyīs” remains to be solved. Interpretations range from “goofing” to “delirious talk” and “raving”. Nawara has explained the meaning of this expression as follows: “Tahyīs is a very colloquial word. It’s Egyptian, it means, you know, somebody who is raving or maybe didn’t get some enough sleeping…” (Interview, 28 March 2011, Cairo).

\(^6^9\) Aḥmad Fuʿād Negm’s resistance poetry has resulted in his imprisonment on several occasions. In a special program on Al-Jazeera English (AJE), this poet was introduced as follows: “[T] he outspoken, irreverent and controversial Uncle Ahmed, as poet Ahmed Fouad Negm is known in Egypt, discovered poetry in prison in the 1950s and has been writing ever since. When the Egyptian revolution erupted in 2011, it was the words of Negm’s famous poems, like *The Brave Man is Brave*, that were chanted in Tahrir Square.” http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/poetsofprotest/2012/08/20128279254886950.html. Last retrieved in September 2012.
She describes her blog as “political”, as “an outlet” and a way for her to “speak” her “mind” about “torture and laborers.” She points out that she does not wish to direct her readers but rather wants “brainstorming.” “I prefer to express my views and I accept it when they discuss it with me,” she explains. Her posts are rendered in a style which, as she herself acknowledges, resembles that which with literary terminology would be referred to as stream-of-consciousness. The reader of Nawara Negm’s posts is given the impression that her thoughts are presented as an uninterrupted flow as they pass through her mind. However, we are also aware that the she is not only intent on precisely duplicating the mass of thoughts which pass through her mind at the moment of blogging. Rather, she has political aims with her blog and she has consciously selected a specific linguistic mode with a chatty style of expression in order to guide her readers and make them feel comfortable.

In order to grasp the content of many of the posts of this blogger, the reader needs to be part of a specific narrative which has been operating over time. Often her group of followers may post 50 comments or more on one single post. This leads to convoluted discussions on details which in turn may be treated in ensuing posts by the blogger. Moreover, her technique of stream-of-consciousness coupled with her use of ECA adds to the difficulties for newcomers to her blog.

The first post in our selection from Nawara Negm is from April 13th 2009 and begins with a video from YouTube which no longer is available, sent to her by one of her followers, “Ṭafāṭīfū” (a nickname for Muṣṭafā).70

Gaw says that Sāmī was injured in his back in the war… No! Come on! May they get a replacement from our Lord for their man. For a long time he has asked of our Lord that he should die, or at least he admitted that he was the one who burned Rome and that Nero is innocent. No no no no no. Nobody should tell me that he isn’t used to Israeli torture. Nooooooceanss.

جو بيقول ان سامي مصاب في صدره في الحرب... لا خلاص بقى يستعوضوا ربا في الراح يتأههم، زمانه بيدعى ربا انه يموت، او غالبا اعترب انه هو اللي حرق روما وان نيرون بريه... لاللالالالا ماحدث يقول لي ما هو متعود على التعذيب الاسرائيلي

70 “This video is no longer available because the YouTube account associated with this video has been terminated due to multiple third-party notifications of copyright infringement from claimants, including Master Piece Group”, as expressed 9 May, 2012 on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imhQ3bnIxTw&feature=player_embedded
This post, illuminating the style of the blogger, continues for another 18 lines and has 49 comments. In addition, there are three updates on this same date with 32, 16 and 48 comments respectively. The question of the identity of “Gaw” mentioned in the post has not been solved here and is also raised by one of the commentators of this post: muslimHuman. As for the question of the identity of “Sāmī”, this may be a reference to Lebanese mujāhid Muhammad Yusuf Mansūr, known under his nom de guerre Sami Shehab (Sāmī Shihāb) the leader of a 49-member Hizbollah cell in Egypt who escaped from Egyptian prison in the beginning of February 2011, during the uprising in Egypt.

On April 13th 2009, Nawara Negm posts a derogatory commentary on the Egyptian government because of its inability to solve the rocketing population growth. Although being severely critical her tone also carries a tone of carnivalesque sarcasm and irony:

Is there anyone in the world who is impressed by a campaign carried out by the Egyptian government? Every time they have a campaign for contraceptives the ladies give birth to nine from one single stomach.

A central concern of this blogger is that of the lack of high moral standards, the humiliating state of Egyptian society when it comes to living standards and the sense of Egypt as being inferior to the Western nations on the global arena. Consider the following lines from a lengthy post from July 21st 2009:

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72 Shihab was sentenced to 15 years prison in April 2010, and Hizbollah leader Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah has confirmed Shihab’s membership in a Hizbollah cell that was engaged in smuggling weapons through Egypt to the Gaza Strip. Shihab was the leader of the 49-member cell that was charged with plotting attacks against Egyptian tourist sites in 2009. http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2010/04/20104291344764134.html. Last retrieved in May 2012.

73 This problem has been treated by Egyptian authors and literary critics alike since the 1940s. One of the central problems looming over Egyptian society and treated by the late Egyptian author Yūsuf as-Sībā’ī in his novel Arḍ an-Nifāq – Land of Hypocrisy (1949), three years prior to the Free Officers’ revolution of 1952, is the population growth of the country. Sabry Hafez makes note of this same problem with respect to literary texts from the 1990s. He explains that the writers, during their “formative years”, had witnessed a “constant increase in Egypt’s population – between 1980 and 2000 the population increased by 23 million – without an equivalent increase in state investment in education or housing (Hafez 2011: 112).”
Any country in the world, the economy of which depends on bagsheesh (gratuities and tips, the present author’s comment) and middlemen (samasra) won’t have any people left with morals because neither begging nor trickery produce respectable people… We were covered in the seventies because some Egyptians were able to travel to the Gulf and pump money into the country… And from where will the country get bread now? From people coming from abroad spending their money here and we’ll stretch out our hand and take tips… That’s not work, that’s depravity, degeneration and bad manners and everything depends on bagsheesh and middlemen… Go ahead and pray and grow your beard and fast on Tuesdays and Thursdays and go on the pilgrimage for money you have begged every year. Whatever you do, you’re not living a respectable life and you won’t be respectable.

On June 3rd 2010, she writes about the upcoming visit of President Barack Obama to Egypt and his speech to be given at Cairo University on 4 June. The question posed in this post is why those invited attend this event, and she ironically asks if they intend to protest against the visit during the ceremony.

The essential question is, those who’re going to attend, why are they going to attend? I mean, to speak to the Islamic world from Egypt while she is in this state – may our Lord heal her and make her well – is the greatest support for the present regime, to which those invited will say they are opposed – right? OK. The one who attends, does he attend in order to say, for example, raise his hand and ask Obama, Sir: Why did you come here and support this brutal regime?

السؤال الجوهرى الي حيحضر حيحضر لي؟ اقصد يعني مخاطبة العالم الإسلامي من مصر وهي في الحالة دي، رينا يشفها ويعافيها، أكبر دعم للنظام القائم الي المدعوين بيقولوا انهم معارضين له، صح؟ طيب الي ح
What kind of Arabic and why? Language in Egyptian blogs

All of the above examples from Nawara Negm’s post confirm that (1) She endeavors to communicate in ECA; (2) her chatty style resembles the modernist literary style of stream-of-consciousness; and (3) her content is critical, presented with carnivalesque irony and sarcasm. A number of sentences from the excerpts above highlight these observations.

Post April 13th 2009
Gaw says that Sami was injured in his back in the war…

Post June 3rd 2010
…those who’re going to attend, why are they going to attend?

Post July 21st 2009
Any country in the world, the economy of which depends on bagsheesh and middlemen (samasra) won’t have any people left with morals because neither begging nor trickery produce respectable people…

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All of Nawara Negm’s posts give the reader a sense of informal “kitchen-table talk” whether it is the question of criticism of Israel, the Egyptian government, the USA or the blogger’s fellow citizens’ lack of self-respect and dignity. Her tone is personal and the content is seemingly unstructured as if letting the keyboard keep abreast with the flow of thoughts going through her mind. All taken together, the pressing topics making up the content of her posts combined with the familiarizing choice of code (ECA) disarms the reader and creates an atmosphere of urgency and intimacy. This strategy combined with a profound antiestablishment attitude and mocking of self-righteous individuals and government cronies calls to mind the ironic and sarcastic expression of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Moreover, it appeals to a large number of readers who readily participate in the communication by commenting on her posts. The above lines and, in fact, all of Nawara Negm’s posts, confirm her own claim to make a point of writing in ECA, to let her text flow between her own ideas, comments on her reader’s observations and convoluted threads that delve ever deeper into the minute details of a specific question of interest.

Ahmed Shokeir in Ḥakāwī ākhar al-layl – Late Night Stories on shokeir. blogspot.com

Ahmed Shokeir (Ahmad Shuqayr) is the first of our top-five Arabic language Egyptian bloggers who abandoned blogging in his blog Late Night Stories – Ḥakāwī ākhar al-layl for micro-blogging on Twitter.74

Residing in Saudi Arabia throughout the time of blogging in Late Night Stories (five years in June 2011) Ahmed Shokeir has chosen to blog in Arabic,

74 In a special issue on the 25 January 2011 Revolution (Thawrat 25 yanāyir) in Egypt issued by Al-Ahram ICT Magazine and titled Loghat Al Asr this blogger is mentioned as one of the group of ten micro-bloggers producing the highest number of tweets per day January 10th –February 10th 2011. This group, constituting both individuals and news sites, delivered between 100-200 micro-posts per day on Twitter. One of them is Ahmed Shokeir (in the aforementioned survey called Muhammad Shuqayr) about whom the report states: “The citizen ‘Muhammad Shuqayr’ was in the vanguard of the Twitter stars, individuals who were active on behalf of the Revolution inasmuch as that he alone dispatched 187 messages to his followers whose number was 3,111 individuals, i.e. 6 messages a day on average... (Loghat Al Asr 124, April 2011: 21).” Another of these social media activists mentioned in this report is Mina Zekri, to whom has been referred above.
more particularly in a relaxed MSA, because he is addressing his message of social reform to Egyptians inside and outside of Egypt as well as Arabs generally. The most practical way to succeed with this aim, he concluded, was to blog in a mixture of “classical” Arabic (MSA) and ECA, as explained in our interview. He takes great care when choosing lexical items and phrases and believes that this may be one of the secrets behind the fact that so many readers are attracted to his blog.

Taking into account this blogger’s vast online communications as a blogger and a twitterian (extensive Twitter user) he may well be considered an online activist. In comparison with Wael Abbas and Nawara Negm, whose online activities go hand in hand with offline activism and mainstream-media interventions, Ahmed Shokeir resides in Saudi Arabia and criticizes ills of his (Egyptian) society in an entertaining, didactic fashion. His blog is also a window to the international arena, something which is emphasized by his popular slide show of the past year in pictures (2006-2011). This slide show, appearing at the beginning of the year, reviews globally renowned events of the past year ranging from the demise of Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz in 2006 to the assassination of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto in 2007, the demise of recording artist Michael Jackson in 2009 and Yemenite journalist Tawakkol Karman receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. We therefore, propose to categorize him as an entertainer with a didactic aim. This corresponds well with his self-image as a story-teller. Elaborating on the content of his blog in the subheading, he explains that “[D]uring the day stories are born, at the beginning of the night we tell them and by the end of the night we listen to the sweetest stories,”75 from which we may deduce that he wishes to attract his readers with entertaining as well as educational accounts.

Ahmed Shokeir’s code is MSA “in a simple way”, as he explains and clarifies further; “and maybe this is one of the secrets that people somehow like my writings.” Another key to his popularity, he proposes, may be that he occasionally inserts ECA with the express view to draw readers to his blog. This strategy, he maintains, encourages people to visit and read his blog. Ahmed Shokeir also carefully considers the mode in which his content is presented. He is satisfied that he is able to express what he has on his mind by rendering his message with diplomacy, avoiding insults and severe criticism that may cause irritation. In this way, he explains, “We are breaking taboos and criticizing

75 http://shokeir.blogspot.se/... في النهار تولد الحكايات... وفي أول الليل نحكيها... وفي آخر الليل أسمع أحلام الحكايات Last retrieved in December 2012.
Mubarak and everything… If you write with respect, you will usually get back in good language.”

The first post in our selection from Ahmed Shokeir’s blog is from May 19th 2009. The title is ʿHaʃīd ar-raʾīs, “The president’s grandson” and it is about the funeral of former president Mubarak’s grandson, Muḥammad Mubarak, son of Mubarak’s eldest son ‘Alā’. The opening phrases are worded as follows:

Reactions to the death of the president’s grandson made me recall a post which I have written previously with the title “When the president dies”. I closed by saying that we are an emotional people.

The gist of this post is that the arrangements for this funeral are not in proportion with the standing of the grandson of the president. The blogger explains

We share the president’s sorrow, [it is] a duty. But for the central state media apparatus to stand still for three days of mourning, this is not normal.

Here, we note that Ahmed Shokeir is true to his statement that he mostly writes in MSA (“in a simple way”) and that his style seems to come closely to a mixed variety of MSA with insertions from ECA. This is exemplified in the wording of the initial portion of the phrase in which it is proposed that “We share the president’s sorrow, a duty…”, where “a duty” expressed with the single item wājib (wāgib in ECA), an ellipsis of dā wāgib which is typical for ECA. In MSA this would be expressed as hādhā wājib or with stronger emphasis in a higher style inna-hu wājib meaning “this is a duty”. That it is “basically” MSA, becomes clear in the last part of the section: “this is not normal” – hādhā laysa ʿādī, which in MSA would be rendered hādhā laysa ʿādiyan with the accusative case marker visible in writing, an error that easily may be referred to as a typo.

Moreover, this post is illustrated with a picture depicting the funeral procession. The child’s father, Mubarak’s eldest son, ‘Alā’, is at the vanguard carrying the casket on the right hand side. While the text constitutes a critique of

the official arrangements surrounding the deceased grandchild, the footage serves to enhance this critique, some of which is expressed as follows:

Why have a military funeral procession with the body of the deceased wrapped in the Egyptian flag? The official TV-channels as well as some private channels announce three days of mourning for the death of the president’s grandchild… This is too much. We aren’t living in a monarchy and the president’s grandson was an ordinary person, like any other citizen of this country.

One June 20th 2009, Ahmed Shokeir posts a text under the title “Porno elections and masturbation”. This post constitutes a vitriolic criticism of the procedures surrounding parliamentary elections in Egypt. While people in other Arab countries like Lebanon and Morocco are able to vote properly, the blogger explains, “We follow elections and watch them like young men who are unable to get married watch porn movies”. Even in Iran the situation is better, the reader learns:

In every other country in the world, people are invited to participate in the elections while our people are climbing up wooden staircases to reach the first floor at a height of several meters, so they may throw themselves through a small window, in order to cast their vote.

In Egypt, though, the reader learns, voting procedures are thwarted by hooligans, by purchasing votes with twenty-pound notes cut in half and bribing the election committee with a bag of rice or a can of juice. Voting in Egypt also takes place in the names of individuals who have stood up from their graves to cast their vote and thereafter return to their shrouds in such a democratic fashion that even “the most powerful of democracies are unable to equal”. This ironic and sarcastic tone is kept intact to the end of this post. Evidence is legion as to the fraud and
cheating in Egyptian elections, the blogger informs. Nevertheless, the blogger complains, nobody has made a move to get out in a joint protest:

It is enough to read the blogs which have followed the elections and established fraud with material evidence in photos and videos and yet, all this has not made anyone move so that we go down and protest together. Why?

The reason for this we learn is that, “Because we still content ourselves with masturbation as a habit we always approve of practicing in secret.” The core of the problem is that people want democracy but when the elections come they play along with the system. “May God preserve us and our Egypt from every naughty act. We just want to get married,” the blogger concludes. The excerpt reads as follows in the post:

Similarly to other excerpts from this blog which we have discussed here, this post illustrates the relaxed MSA with insertions of ECA with which this blogger has chosen to express himself in his blog. As was the case in the post from May 19th 2009 which included the ECA item of “wāgib”, this post includes the ECA particle “baʾah” while the lion’s share is in MSA.

By contrast with Wael Abbas, Ahmed Shokeir is careful not to use swear words and does not intend to be offensive. But this does not prevent him from employing a carnivalesque mode of representation and of challenging norms and boundaries, a point in case being the post from June 2009 discussed above. In this post his style resembles that of the Lebanese blogger, Hummus Nation. While Hummus Nation’s likening politics with “eating shit” certainly may be referred to the catalogue of indecent expressions in any Arab society, Ahmed Shokeir’s ratings about the Egyptian election procedures and voting system as “porno elections and masturbation” may probably best be referred to the catalogue of indecorousness and socially offensive.\footnote{Cf. Thompson 2009: 223-231. An example of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque along these lines is given in an}
Concluding discussions and questions
All of the bloggers discussed in this article command MSA, yet their blogs present a variety of codes ranging from ECA throughout the narrative to a literary and lexically conservative MSA with commentators responding to posts with verses from the Quran. These bloggers confirm the findings of Bassiouney, in as much as that in their capacity as authors they select their code of representation and adjust it to the aim of the blog and the desired audience. It also confirms Mejdell’s observation that a variety of languages and codes may be employed in CMC among which are blogs.

Androultoudopoulous’ suggestion that CS functions as a contextualization cue to frame interpretations in CMC has found lesser support in this study. Two instances of CS were found: (1) ECA and/or a mixed variety for familiarization in personal profiles and introductory phrases and (2) MSA and/or a mixed variety for officialdom including reports, and print-press items. In this sense, CS was used by Wael Abbas to frame the narrative and impress the reader with specific sentiments such as familiarity or indignation. We also suggest that Abdel Moneim Mahmoud switched from MSA to a mixed variety in his personal profile for the same reason as Wael Abbas, to familiarize the reader with the blogger. His posts, consisting of reports which correspond to print-press articles, were in MSA.

Three bloggers, Wael Abbas, Ahmed Shokeir and Nawara Negm called to mind a Bakhtinian carnivalesque style of representation. While Wael Abbas refers to State Security as “bastards”, Ahmed Shokeir accuses his fellow Egyptians of satisfying themselves with “masturbation” while criticizing them for not taking action against election fraud. Also, Nawara Negm illustrated her resistance towards the regime and the prevalent corruption with a carnivalesque form of social and cultural critique with ironic and sarcastic commentary on religious hypocrisy and the incapacity of the government.

Themes affiliated with Ashraf al-Anany’s pronounced aim to make the circumstances of the Bedouin of Sinai known to his readers were not salient in the selection of posts discussed in this article. Nevertheless, his role as an educator emerged as he gave reports on hazards which may befall the inattentive internet user, some of the ills of globalization with its big-city lifestyle and negative aspects of modernity including what he names the “dictatorship of the majority.” Besides shouldering the role of an educator, this blogger foremostly perceives himself as a poet (remember his subtitle The poet Ashraf al-ʿAnānī’s blog). In his

analysis of the South Park episode “Giant Douche and Turd Sandwich” in which one of the series’ characters elects a turd sandwich for a new South Park Elementary School mascot, a week before the 2004 presidential election in the USA.

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capacity as a Bedouin and poet, with the immense historical and cultural implications vested in such a heritage and combined with his view to educate and inform, this blogger’s choice of code, MSA, comes as no surprise. Ashraf al-Anany does not employ a carnivalesque mode of representation.

To sum up we suggest the following presentation of the bloggers, their frames (design), choice of code and mode of representation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blogger</th>
<th>Blog</th>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Code/s</th>
<th>Narrative mode</th>
<th>CS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wael Abbas</td>
<td><em>al-Wāy al-Miṣrī</em></td>
<td>Activist</td>
<td>ECA and mixed variety</td>
<td>Carnivalesque</td>
<td>CS for familiarizing and officialdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdel Moneim Mahmoud</td>
<td><em>Anā Ikhwān</em></td>
<td>Educator</td>
<td>MSA and mixed variety</td>
<td>News media reporting</td>
<td>CS for familiarizing and news media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashraf al-Anany</td>
<td><em>Sīnā ḥaythu Anā</em></td>
<td>Educator</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Literary, poetic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nawara Negm</td>
<td><em>Jabhat at-tahyīs ash-sha biyya</em></td>
<td>Activist</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>Stream-of-consciousness, carnivalesque</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmed Shokeir</td>
<td><em>Late Night Stories Ḥakāwī ākhar al-layl</em></td>
<td>Educator/Entertainer</td>
<td>MSA/mixed variety</td>
<td>Literary, “story-telling”, carnivalesque</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From this chart it becomes clear that activist bloggers (online as well as offline) tend towards ECA and the carnivalesque while CS has been spotted with one activist and one educational blogger. Educational bloggers tend towards MSA and may also employ a carnivalesque mode of representation. Both activist and educational blogs use a mixed variety. It seems that the higher the literary aspiration of the blogger, especially in combination with a view to educate, the higher the probability of MSA as the preferred code.

In conclusion, choice of language variety and linguistic styles in blogs, electronic communication and throughout cyberspace remains a vast and independent field in Arabic studies which has yet to be explored. Theories need to be further developed, instruments of classification and methods for analysis are preliminary, and refinement and adjustment are called for in studies to come. Numerous questions arise in the wake of this initial endeavor, such as whether the individual and personal freedom of choice regarding code may spill over into other genres, online as well as offline, such as traditional news readings, official reports, political statements and religious rulings. With an ever increasing electronic communication over internet, social media platforms and cell- and
smartphones, questions which require further examination may be uttered as follows: What may a situation like this imply for the future of MSA? Where will it remain intact? Who will use this variety and for which purposes? Will MSA evolve large scale while adjusting itself to the demands of the ever increasing numbers of internet users who may or may not enjoy the education required to express themselves in fully-fledged MSA? These are questions which have not been addressed in this article and therefore remain to be explored.

Appendix

Egyptian Arabic Language bloggers, title of blog, web-site, number of in-linking domains and date of interview

(2) Abdel Moneim Mahmoud (ʿAbd al-Munʿim Maḥmūd), Anā Ḥaythu Anā, ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com, (272 links). Interviewed in Cairo, Cilantro, March 27th 2011.

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**Other sources**