Chapter 3

The Emergence of Politicized Collective Identity in Online News Commentaries as a Form of Social Capital

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how online news commentaries as a platform for social interaction can be considered a form of social capital that later led to the Arab Spring Revolutions. In the study, social capital is conceptualized as consisting of two linguistically measurable variables: a) the emergence of the posters' politicized collective identity (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Simon, 2004) that emerges in the data through the foregrounding of certain shared aspects of the posters' identity, mainly their Arab nationality; and b) the collaborative performance of face attacks and solidarity acts in the posting content. The data used are responses written to an article posted on the Al Jazeera Website describing the aftermath of the tragic suicide of the Tunisian Bouazizi. Drawing on contemporary theories of sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and social identity, the study provides empirical evidence that such online communication should be considered a social and political capital that can foster social and political activism.

INTRODUCTION

Online interaction on Al-Jazeera Website played a prominent role before, during and after the Tunisian Revolution. Since Arab governments exercise control over all forms of traditional media, (e.g. Al-Jazeera TV. Channel was banned in Tunisia at the time the commentaries were posted), the Website gives Arabs access to updated news about the political events as they occur and a chance to post their views and commentaries on the news stories and articles published. The engagement in an online interaction that fosters the collective identity of Arab participants (Simon & Klandermans, 2001) and the "relative" freedom of expression experienced in those responses particularly in making attacks against Arab governments and/or showing solidarity to other Arabs later led to a number of revolutions in the Arab World (AW) in what is known as the Arab Spring. Howard and Hussain (2013) state:

Social protests in the Arab World have spread across North Africa and the Middle East, largely because digital media allowed communities to realize that they shared grievances and because they nurtured transportable strategies for mobilizing against dictators. (p. 3)

Such online social interaction through the Al-Jazeera Website can be seen as a source of social and political capital since it offers empirical examples of how the posters' collective display of their identity and the face attacks (insults, curses, blame and accusations, henceforth, FAs)[1] and/or acts of solidarity (SAs) they perform can tie in with the emergence of what is called a politicized collective identity (PCI) that later led to social and political activism. The main aim of the present study is to explore how the emergence of the PCI in this online setting represents the enactment of social capital and gives empirical evidence of how this form of social capital materializes in the language used among the interactants. It is believed that such an analysis can contribute to the existing body of knowledge in social capital, social identity theories and sociolinguistics as it will contribute to a better understanding of the sociolinguistic aspects of social capital and its role in social and political activism.

In what follows, I will give a brief summary of an article posted on Al Jazeera Website on which the posters comment and a brief description of the computer-mediated data used in the analysis. Then, the method of analysis will be described and the research questions stated. Section II will briefly review the sociolinguistic aspects of social capital through making links between the emergence of the posters' PCI and its linguistic manifestations through the identity signals picked and the speech acts[2] performed. Section III will present the analysis where samples of identity markers along with tokens of FAs and SAs are analyzed. The analysis will then be followed by a discussion of online interaction as a form of social capital and conclusions will be drawn.

A Brief Note on the Article and the Data Used

The online article that is the focus of this study, "Tunisia Attacks Al-Jazeera and the Protests Expand all over the Country" was written after the suicide of the Tunisian Bouazizi, which was the initial spark that led to the Tunisian Revolution[3]. Bouazizi was an unemployed university graduate who was working as a street vendor. He set himself on fire in December 2010, in protest of the confiscation of his wares and the harassment and humiliation that he suffered at the hands of a municipal official and her aides. In the article, the Tunisian parliament and other political parties attack the Al- Jazeera channel for broadcasting YouTube videos of demonstrations and riots in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid- Bouazizi's hometown- where crowds were protesting against unemployment, economic conditions and political corruption. The political parties and opposition

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