Online Chatting in Beirut: Sites of Occasioned Identity-Construction

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The Middle East, Lebanon, Beirut.[1] Fanatics walking the streets holding Kalashnikovs, waving their fists, shouting. Abductions. Car-bombs. This line of association would be a fairly legitimate one for many Westerners following the news starting somewhere in the last thirty years. Although the Lebanese civil war has been over for fifteen years, these associations and the images they conjure up seem to retain a general legitimacy for people not directly engaged with this country or interested in it (see Jalbert, 1984). The recent violent assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (Dahdah, 2005) seems to reassure a general image of savageness and lawlessness in the region and of the people living there. No need to change these general ideas or allow for some degree of nuance since they are apparently still very up to date. They come in handy as a *permanent* backdrop for everyday conversations and for the "news" about the region. The images are essentialist; non-changing and preferably non-changeable in nature (see Said, 1978).

But how essential are these images to a given Lebanese identity? In my research, I set out to explore different everyday activities of youth between the ages 15 and 25 in Internet-cafés in Beirut. These activities include chatting, playing network games and web-surfing. In discussing them, it will become clear that essentialist images

have no explanatory potential whatsoever when it comes to accounting for motivations and actions in a range of instances. The aim here is not to disprove or undermine a set of stereotypes by proving "the" contrary. I cannot and do not want to show who "the" youth of Beirut "actually" are for this would be to reduce a group of people to a set of general principles that can never do justice to the complexity of everyday experienced reality. My conclusion will not state that Lebanese people are for instance very hospitable (a label known to be given to people from the Middle East). A statement such as "Arabs are very hospitable" is by itself in effect meaningless because firstly, it does not display an evident measure according to which the extent of hospitality can be established. Secondly, it does not show through which activities and meanings attributed to these activities, the actors involved come to reflect on an accomplished activity as being an act of hospitality from one party to another. Similarly, youth under study cannot be labelled as being this or that group with identities having these or those characteristics. Any rash attempt at a categorization of these youth is tantamount to stereo-typification and moreover, willingly or not, liable to subject itself to alignments (be they local, regional or international) that oversimplify and impose a reality for the sake of vested political interests.

Language is supposed to give expression to thought, to liberate ideas, to give us freedom. But sub-editors and news agencies were – and in many cases, still are – using these words as a lazy and meaningless substitute. The language of clichés did not help us

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free our minds. The words imprisoned us. (Fisk, 2002:430)

The data analyzed throughout the article are at times offensive, politically laden and display an extent of self-typification, making them prone to abuse in the ways indicated above. In my data collection, I especially had access to "chatters" from Christian backgrounds. In my other research the data was drawn from all over Beirut (and so from people from different religious backgrounds) but yielded similar findings (Abdallah, 2004). This article is therefore not meant to praise or criticize certain sectarian communities of Lebanon. Rather, the aim is to present particular groups of youth engaged in particular "virtual" activities. I will argue in the analysis that the nature of their engagement in activities is evidence for refuting the idea that a fixed, essential identity of a core self can account for the different and at times (seemingly or not) contradictory activities and utterances of the people in question. It suggests that identity, rather than being a core resource for choosing and engaging in certain activities, is constituted only *through* occasioned activities. As Moerman (1988) puts it in his research of Thai communities (namely the Lue people) in the Far East, scholars are at times more eager to subscribe to conventional ethnic labels and categories than the people under study:

> Since multiple identifications are always present, the 'truth' or 'objective correctness' of an identification is never sufficient to explain its use. (…) The question is not, 'Who are the Lue?' (…) but rather when and how and why the identification 'Lue' is preferred. Truth or falsity is a criterion which should be applied to our analysis; it has no relevance to native category usage. (1988: 61-62)

In Widdicombe's words

> [I]dentity is available for use: something that people do which is embedded in some other social activity, and not something people 'are'. (…) Thus, instead of asking what identities do people have, conversation analysts focus on *whether*, *when* and *how* identities are used. In other words, their concern is with the occasioned relevance of identities here and now, and how they are consequential for this particular interaction and the local projects of speakers. (Widdicombe, 1998: 191, 195)

This paper will show that identities of youth chatting in Beirut are performative, ongoing accomplishments; dependent among other things on modes of communication, contextual constraints, language construction, technical resources and on youth's situated agendas.

Finding One's Way in Beirut

In a broad sense, Beirut is divided between the predominantly Muslim West (Sunnites living mainly in the North-West and the Shiites in the South-West) and the predominantly Christian East. The dividing line, which acquired the name "The Green Line" during the civil war (1975-1990), comes down from the south along the Damascus highway past the National Museum and from there leads up to Martyr's Square (which has recently been renamed "Freedom Square" due to political developments following Hariri's assassination on February 14th 2005 (see Ghazal, 2005). The term Green Line supposedly stems from the fact that all sorts of greenery grew wild and free along this line because no one bothered to maintain this strip (Fisk, 2002). The line served as a fault line between different militias at war with each other. One could not cross it without fear for one's life, as snipers on both sides shot at virtually anything that moved. Today, one can move from one part of the city to the other without any trouble. The barriers and the snipers are gone but the line still exists in the minds of many Beirutis. According to Khalaf (1993) the Lebanese civil war has intensified the significance of territorially

delineated confessional identities. Yahya places this trend in a longer history:

> The segregation of the population on sectarian basis reinforced communal and neighbourhood solidarities. Most of these manifestations were apparent before the war. However, as hostilities commenced, their scope and magnitude increased as people improvised various forms of survival. (Yahya, 1993: 129)

This sectarian segregation divided Beirut into a number of zones that constitute "separate, exclusive and self-sufficient spaces. Hence, now the Christians of East Beirut need not frequent West Beirut for its cultural and popular entertainment" (Khalaf, 1993:32). Likewise, Muslims and other residents of West Beirut need not visit resorts and other attractions of the Christian suburbs.

These communal solidarities have the dual effect of cushioning "individuals and groups against anomie and the alienation of public life" while "they also heighten the density of communal hostility and enmity" (Khalaf 1998: 150). This dynamic finds its way into youth's online interaction in the Internet-cafés and takes up an important part of this paper.

East-Beirut

In one Internet-café in Sid el-Bouchrieh, a Christian suburb in East-Beirut, I spent three nights a week (roughly between 8 P.M. and 11 P.M.) doing participant observation over a period of four weeks in February and March 2004. Over this period, I spent 22.5 hours over eleven evenings in the café. In this time, I observed 65 customers (59 males and 6 females) making use of different services of the café. In addition to Sid el-Bouchrieh, I conducted over 70 observations in 30 other cafés in different neighbourhoods across Beirut.

In the North-East of Beirut I frequented Internet-cafés in neighbourhoods like Borj Hammoud and the Dawrah area where most inhabitants are from Christian, lower-income backgrounds.

West-Beirut

Here I obtained data in the following neighbourhoods. Hamra is a fairly wealthy neighbourhood in the North-West of Beirut, despite a majority of Sunni-Muslim inhabitants, it is probably the most religiously mixed neighbourhood of the city and the home of the (for most Lebanese families unaffordable) American University of Beirut (AUB) and the Lebanese American University (LAU), who are important influences in the shape and character of the neighbourhood: student and professor housing, businesses catering to the students' wants and needs, etc.

Bordering Hamra to the South-East are Sanayeh and Zarif, residential areas with mainly Sunni Muslim inhabitants with mostly middle and some lower family income level. The south of Beirut is now known as the Dahieh or Shiite suburbs, which used to contain predominantly Christian areas before the war. A large part of these suburbs consist of slums and housing with minimum or less than minimum basic facilities. Neighbourhoods that I have visited in Dahieh are Borj El-Barajneh, Haret Hreik, Maamoura and Mreijeh.

Most of my observations were between 5 P.M. and 11 P.M in the spring of 2004. In these observations I saw over 600 customers making use of different services of the cafés. My observations entailed going to cafés, checking my e-mail, and typing material for my research, while keeping my eyes and ears open, and taking notes of my observations. In addition, I talked to

employees, to customers and took notes of these conversations. I wrote down my interpretations of the findings immediately or shortly after (the same evening or the next day). As the number of my observations increased, I developed more general interpretations of the activities. The intensity of observations in the cafés and availability of online data gave me the opportunity to immerse myself in processes of occasioned identity-construction, as I trust this paper will show.

Recurrent Themes Displaying a Mindset

The present paper is actually a description of practices of youth made possible by the analytical findings of two articles by Dupret (2003) and Zimmerman (1998). Adapting Dupret's approach of the Egyptian courtroom setting to the setting of Internet-cafés in Beirut, I will focus on three issues: (1) the methods by which youth produce and recognize online and real time actions; (2) the methods by which chat-settings and café situations are socially organized; (3) the methods by which youth achieve identities through social interaction. In this way, I hope to shed some light on chatters' "practical actions as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life" (Garfinkel 1967: 11).

Concerning youth's online activities, there are three topical orientations that prevail in their communication: contact with the opposite sex, contact with people in other countries and hostile religious-political encounters. In each of these instances, youth have different *situated agendas* (Zimmerman, 1998) according to which they align their *situated identities*. From this *alignment* proceeds a projection of the distribution of knowledge and of which *extra-situational resources* should be invoked. These three orientations of

communication "set the stage" so to speak for youth's online interaction. Key issues are the unattainability of money and girls, the better life abroad and religious-political tensions between geographically dispersed groups. They are recurrent themes, points of departure, "constantly mobilized backgrounds" from which the participants accomplish specific identities (Dupret, 2003: 21). In what follows, we will see how these analytical constructs operate in actual communication.

The following is part of a conversation that I witnessed including four youth between 20 and 26 years old on a street corner in front of an Internet-café in the neighbourhood Borj Hammoud (12 April, 2004).

Extract 1

1. Zaven: My uncle is coming over from America soon. He's going to buy a chalet at the beach just passed
2. Jounieh. That means we're going to have beach-parties every week.
3. Shady: Great.
4. Paul: Efess!!
5. Shady: This is gonna be great. Finally something else than hanging around here.
6. Paul: We're gonna have some fun this summer.
7. Shady: We need to get some girls to come with us though
8. Rani: Yeah, don't worry. They'll come
9. Paul: They'll come? And who are you? Don Juan?
10. (Laughter from all)
11. Paul: You'll get them to come with you in your Peugeot?
12. Shady: Look at that one (pointing at a car driving by)
13. Zaven: You'll get them to come in that one!
14. Paul: Give me a Ferrari
15. Shady: I don't need a Ferrari. I'll settle for that one anytime.
16. Rani: Yeah, but what are you going to do when you need to have parts changed? You don't have the
17. money!
18. Shady: Ahh, change parts … whatever
19. Paul: Here in Lebanon, how do you wanna make money to buy *any* car?!

20. Rani: Lebanon sucks
21. Zaven: The government won't even let you have a *bicycle*. Don't even talk about cars.
22. Shady: Bunch of thieves all of them.
23. Paul: I've been wearing these shoes for two years now, I can't even buy new ones.
24. Rani: Europe is much better. There the government takes care of people.
25. Paul: You can make money without worries.
26. Rani: Even outside there's trouble. No place is perfect.
27. Paul: Hah! Better than here.
28. Zaven: Why are *you* here anyway? You're from where?
29. Sebastian: Holland
30. Zaven: Holland. So why are you here man? You're from Holland. You can make good money there
31. right?
32. Sebastian: Yes.
33. Zaven: Why would you come here?
34. Sebastian: Wanna get to know the country, the language.
35. Shady: Ah! This country. You don't need to know this place. You're better off without it. Believe me.
36. Zaven: If I could get out of here, I'd never come back. Not even for a visit.
37. Rani: You wanna get your ID-card right?
38. Sebastian: Yes
39. Shady: I'd give mine away for free. They don't have to pay me! Lebanese citizenship.
40. Paul: How many brothers and sisters do you have?
41. Sebastian: Three
42. Paul: So you need four. Guys, hand over four ID-cards to help this guy out.
43. (Laughter from all of them)
44. Rani: But you know, whatever country I visit, no matter how nice it is, when I'm on the plane back to
45. Lebanon, I get very excited. And when the plane lands, you can't imagine how happy I am to be back in
46. Lebanon.
47. Paul: But you have four stores that run well. Your father lives in America, your sister in Dubai. You
48. have money rolling in.
49. Rani: Yes I have money
50. Paul: So you're fine. You have no reason to leave Lebanon. If I had what you had, I wouldn't
51. go anywhere.

Although this is not a chat-conversation over the Internet, it is indicative of the kind of topics and the manner of speaking to which the youth are oriented. Two of the three topics introduced earlier are discussed here: the unattainability of girls and money and the better life abroad (the hostile religious-political encounters will be discussed later). The chalet brings some relief into a monotonous life (lines 5/6). Lebanon stands for nothing but constraint (lines 19-25). America, in the form of an uncle, brings relief. Immediately another dilemma comes into play - how will they get girls to come with them to the chalet (line 7)? The fact that Shady brings it up reveals that it is an issue that is not dealt with easily. Rani gives a quick answer to prevent the great prospect of the chalet-weekends from being spoiled (line 8). Paul is then also quick to bring them back to reality: how will they *impress* girls enough to come with them (lines 9/11)? His rhetoric reveals that it will not be their miraculous charm (line 9) and the laughter of the others confirms this (line 10), so it must be some material way. But it seems that also here they are lacking, as Paul jokes about a vehicle that will not impress anyone (line 11) and what will surely impress is beyond their reach (lines 12/13). This time it is Rani who brings them back to the reality of material want (lines 16/17). Paul gives the country and its government the blame for this situation (lines19/21). Shady agrees and adds malicious intent of the ruling authorities (line 22). Paul adds that even without a car, he is not able to maintain his current situation, e.g. providing a pair of shoes (line 23). Lines 24 to 43 are in fact a comparison between Lebanon and (Western) Europe, or "the better life abroad". With one rebuttal (line 26), they agree that life in Europe is better than in Lebanon. Lebanon is not even worth a visit (lines 35/36). Rani does express some love for the country (lines 44-46). Paul explains Rani's love by his material comfort (line 47/48) and asserts that that is all one needs to live happily in Lebanon. So in the end, Lebanon *can* be a

place to visit or even live in but the youth's current view on their financial and material situation does not lead them to consider that option as a viable one.

A couple of dynamics need special attention here. First there seems to be a recurrent sequential structure to the way the different participants interact and position themselves: (a) someone presents a topic of conversation (usually an appealing and at the same time unattainable situation); (b) the others receive and confirm the idea (they enjoy the idea for a bit, or make jokes about it); (c) someone else objects to the idea (presents the unattainable-ness of the idea). Here are the most obvious examples:
- (a) Beach parties every week (line 2); (b) Great (line3); (c) We need to get girls (line 7)
- (a) They [girls]'ll come (line 8); (b) And who are you? Don Juan? (line 9); (c) In your Peugeot? (line 11)
- (a) You'll get them to come in that one (line 13); (b) Give me a Ferrari (line 14); (c) What about havin parts changed? (line 16)
- (a) Europe is much better (line 24); (b) You can make money without worries (line 25); (c) Even outside there's trouble (line 26).

We see here a constant "changing of the guard" in the roles of introducer of topic (usual an idealistic unattainable situation) and bringer of (realistic or pessimistic) perspective. In between there are confirmers filling the gaps.

One of the most interesting sequences starts at line 19. Paul makes a remark about the material constraint in Lebanon. This sets in motion an almost automatic flow of negative remarks about Lebanon (line 20-22). It is comparable to the introduction of the prospect of the chalet. It was clear that they had talked about it before, as everyone immediately confirmed, visited and revisited the idea of having beach parties every week.

In the same way "Lebanon sucks" (or a remark to the same effect) is not just a remark of content; it is a "mode" of speaking. It realigns the situated identities of the participants. The operative context shifts from "standing on a street corner out of boredom and routine" (line 5) to "not having anything *but* this street corner because of the state and the government" (line 19-23). After all, without money for a car, a bicycle or even shoes, there is not much more to do than stand on a corner. The way Rani, Zaven and Shady joined into the complaint against the state has a ritualistic quality to it. I am not denying that they mean what they say. My point is that the content is performed in a standard procedure. This becomes all the more evident when Rani breaches the procedure (line 26) and Paul calls him back into place (line 27). Rani's input was not relevant for the procedure at hand. The discursive function of line 19 is not just to make a point but to trigger among the others, or to "make programmatically relevant" (Coulter 1979: 56) a flow of confirmation which sets an agenda of apprehending the Lebanese state as the culprit of their immediately experienced constraints.

Extract 2

1. Paul: asl?[2]
2. John: 23 male, toronto
3. John: asl?
4. Paul: 26male, Lebanon
5. Paul: toronto in canada right?
6. John: ya
7. John: hey u from lebanon? I'm Lebanese as well, but I was born here
8. Paul: really
9. Paul: where ur parents from?
10. John: don't remember. Beirut I think
11. Paul: u never came for visit Lebanon?
12. John: no

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[2] By asking for ASL (Age, Sex, Location), chatters try to create some foothold in the virtual world of the Internet. Age, sex and location are apparently the most relevant factors, more than for instance name, occupation or religion.

13. Paul: never?
14. John: no, i wanna o visit sometime
15. Paul: stay in canada, better for u
16. Paul: lebanon is shit
17. John: y?
18. Paul: y?
19. Paul: nobody help u
20. Paul: no money
21. John: u don't have work?
22. Paul: yes work but no money
23. John: u have social security?
24. Paul: what that
25. John: hahhaha!
26. Paul: we have nothing. No security, no insurance
27. Paul: we have only hezballah
28. John: that doesn't sound nice. i wouldn't wanna live in lebanon
29. Paul: yes canada better. i want go to there
30. John: ya u should com in ur vacation
31. Paul: yes I like taht
32. Paul: but problem
33. Paul: no visa
34. John: what?
35. John: oh

Here we see Paul affirming his pessimistic view of living in Lebanon (line 16). Note that this view is presented in reaction to his chat-partner being a Lebanese from Canada who has never been to Lebanon. It is thus vis-à-vis his chat-partner that Paul characterizes his country and also himself: no money, no security, and no prospects. These are all things in which Canada contrasts with Lebanon. This conversation is an evident instance of Paul clinging to one of his hinge-topics. In reaction to John mentioning he has never been to Lebanon, Paul could have told him about the wonderful mountainous landscape, the sunny weather and beaches or the delicious food. But these are all irrelevant when one is focused on the "better life abroad." John's lack of knowledge of Paul's social and economic circumstances is displayed in his question about social security and his suggestion to Paul about taking a vacation to Canada. Paul does not have any vacations from his work longer than two consecutive days (four days if holidays precede or follow a weekend) and being allowed into Canada

is even less possible. This gives Paul the opportunity to expand on his typification of Lebanon as a place not worth living in (lines 26/27).

Describing the Setting of the Internet-café

To give an impression of the kind of setting in which the interaction takes place, I will here give an introductory description of the spaces and activities of one of the internet-cafés that I have attended. The café has three levels, consisting of rectangular shaped rooms (about four by 12 meters). On ground level there are two rows of five computers lined up against the walls. Here (male) youths between 15 and 24 years old play network games, such as *Counter Strike*; a "shoot 'em up-game" played by two teams of five players each. So the two teams sit with their backs to each other along the rows of computers. They are not allowed to turn around and look at their opponents' screens; that would give away their positions in the game. Youth usually set the time limit of the game at 45 minutes in which each team is out to kill as many members of the other team as possible and has the guns, knives and grenades to do so. Despite the blood that gushes out when a player gets shot, he or she can come back to life in the following round (which is usually not more than a few minutes). The game is about scoring points and the team with the most points when the time is up is the winner. What is striking about this kind of game (there are several games of this kind), is the emotional and physical involvement of participants. Youth shout, cheer, curse, laugh, jump up out of their chairs and can play the game for several consecutive hours. Many visitors of internet-cafés do not have money for a computer at home, and certainly not for an internet-connection. With prices in most internet-cafés ranging from 1,500 to 3,000

Lebanese Pounds[3] per hour, they are an attractive option for relatively cheap access to ICT (Information and Communication Technology).

While taking a break from this onslaught every now and then, someone walks up to the fridge to have a soft-drink or a snack at a reasonable price. This floor further contains the owner's desk with the central computer where all payments are made, a television set, computer hardware and software and music for sale. In the back of the room there is a door to the bathroom and a staircase. The basement is still under construction and will give room to another ten computers and an office for film-editing and publishing. On the first floor the shouting is a lot less as not quite so many people get shot on the screens. The ground level is for games and this level is reserved for Internet-use. Eight computers are available here, in two rows of four lined up along the walls in the length of the room. Male and female youth between 15 and 24 years of age are surfing the Internet, chatting, checking their e-mail accounts, doing homework assignments, acquainting themselves with the outside world and foreign ideas, and having fun doing it.

"*Nabqa wa nastamirr*" and Hezbollah: Producing and Recognizing Actions

Paul (the same Paul as in the street corner conversation and the chat sequence with John discussed earlier) is one of the youth hanging out in this café. Paul is a young Lebanese Maronite, 25 years of age, born and raised in East-Beirut, in a neighbourhood near Dawrah. He lives in a three-room apartment on the seventh floor with his sixteen year old sister, his twelve-year-old brother, and his mother, who is in her late forties. He has another twenty-year-

old sister, who is married and has a six-month-old baby boy. She is married to a professional soldier in the Lebanese army who works three and a half days a week. When he works, she spends most of her time at her family's house. Paul's father passed away because of a heart failure at 48 years of age. Paul was sixteen years old at the time and had to leave school and find work to provide for his family; he never got to finish high school or get a diploma. He now works at a printing press nine to twelve hours a day, alternating day- and nightshifts every week. He earns about two hundred dollars a month, depending on how many hours he has worked. His boss can call him at any time saying that there is not enough work and that he should not come in for the day. A day off means a day without pay and these kinds of days can add up to a week a month, seriously affecting Paul's income. Even with a "full month's pay" it is not easy for him and his family to make ends meet.

He goes to the Internet-café everyday and stays two to four hours a day. He says he goes there because he has nothing better to do, but there is more to it than that. When he comes, other customers warmly greet him. His friends are excited to see him and he is valued for his playing skills in network games. At first glance, the Internet-café is an affordable way of spending his free time. But over time it has become a place where he is recognized and appreciated. It is also a place where he is known as *Napka*, his pseudonym in Counter Strike and his login name for his Hotmail account. He explains:

> Paul: It's an abbreviation for a slogan of the Lebanese Forces during the Lebanese civil war: *nabqa wa nastamirr*[4]. [It means 'we will remain and

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[3] Approximately 1,500 Lebanese Pounds is equivalent to one U.S. Dollar.

[4] 'We will remain' (نبقى in Arabic script) is usually transcribed as *nabqa* with a 'q' instead of a 'k' because a 'k' would make it sound more like 'we cry.' However, *Napka* is the way Paul chose to spell his nickname.

endure' - SA] They brought big ships to take away all the Christians so they could live safely in other countries. But the Lebanese Forces told them to send away the ships. *Nabqa wa nastamirr*. This is our country and we will fight for it.

At another point he says:

Paul: I hate Arabs, they're fanatics. They want to make Lebanon an Arabic republic, like Syria and Egypt. Right now it's called the Lebanese Republic, and that's how it should stay. They want to make Lebanon a Muslim state, but it's a Christian state, the only one in the Middle East. I hate Syria as well. What are they still doing here? They've been here for thirty years now! They come here for free and make money to take back to Syria. They also take taxes off everything, that's why a lot of things are so expensive. If a Syrian soldier dies in Lebanon, the Lebanese state has to pay thousands of dollars to Syria, because the Syrians are 'protecting us.' Phuh.

So his login name is a statement: Lebanon is not a Muslim or Arab state but a Christian one and it will *remain* that way. *Napka* is a well-known nickname for Paul among his friends in the Internet-café. Several months later it got more interesting. In this Internet-café in Borj Hammoud where only visitors from Christian backgrounds frequent, Paul decided to take on the name "Hezbollah" in a network game. Every time he would beat someone in the game, they would get a message on their screen saying, "You have been killed by Hezbollah."

Extract 3

Shady: What? Hezbollah? What's that? Who is Hezbollah?
Paul: Heheheh…
Rani: It's Paul he named himself Hezbollah! Crazy!
Shady: Jerk! Calls himself Hezbollah!
Rani: Hezbollah killed you! Hahahha!!
Paul: Hahhaha!!

I asked Paul if his friends actually got angry. They did not: "No, everyone there is Christian. Everyone knows that no one would be serious about something like that." From that time on, his friends in the Internet-café have been calling him "Hezbollah".

This puts him in the unique position of having the nicknames *Napka* and *Hezbollah*; two forces who in Lebanon are each others' historical adversaries and are politically still at odds with each other.

We could of course here make a distinction between serious or sincere identity assertion and the ironic joking use of it, *Napka* being the serious one and *Hezbollah* the joke. But that would not do total justice to youth's accounting for these identity labels, especially looking at the following section from a chatting sequence on a Jewish chat site (April 10th, 2004, 23:30-03:00 am). Where pseudonyms correspond with previous data display, they are in fact the same people.

Extract 4

1. Danny: no
2. Stephen: then what else?
3. Rani: fuck Israel
4. Rani: fuck Sharon
5. Robert: none of your business!! haha!!
6. Paul: u fucking juich
7. Rani: Eireh be Israel
8. Danny: hey thanks man. Fuck you too
9. Efess: we kick yo ass in de sauth Libanon
10. Paul: kess ekhet all ze Juich
11. Rani: 7ezeb allah kik you OUT
12. Stephen: don't waste your time on people who can't even spell English properly
13. Rani: u kill jesus now we com kill you
14. Efess: nefta7 jihad!!

I will take the online chat-site as the operative context of interaction.[5] The beginning of the excerpt starts in the middle of a conversation between three people, namely Danny, Stephen and Robert (lines 1/2/5). In this situation, many actions and reactions take place. What an analytic action is, when it starts and when it ends, is a subjective issue. Whether we can achieve an objective measure of what separates one action from the next, is irrelevant here. The important question is what the participants recognize as distinct actions that take place in the interaction sequence.

First, Group 1 enters the chat site. This can be read as an action in itself. It is the very important step of entering the interaction with the other. *They* take the initiative; *they* set out to change the character of a particular interactional setting. Group 1 perceives it as such: a joint action, stopping what they were doing before (e.g. playing games, chatting on another site, etc.) and entering the Jewish chat site. Group 2 acknowledges it that way: new participants, creating a new interactional situation that needs new communicative responses.

After that, each utterance can be seen as a distinct action. On the Jewish chat site, Danny, Stephen and Robert were having a casual conversation, which is partly displayed (lines1/2/5). Rani's first action in the sequence is his disregard for that conversation (lines 3/4). It seems like participants of Groups 1 and 2 are ignoring each other in lines 1 – 5 but the phrases are entered into the window by different participants almost simultaneously, and the number of participants, the speed of their typing and of the Internet connection often

have the result that the reactions to previous input in the window do not immediately follow that input (see also Group 3 lines 1 – 8). With Group 2, the first reaction to Group 1's input comes in line 8.

There is a clear difference in language use between Group 1 and 2. Group 2 uses proper English spelling while Group 2's English is broken: incorrect tenses (lines 9/11/13), incorrect spelling (insofar as it can be called incorrect because deviating spelling is also used by chatters proficient in the English language for reasons of speed and convenience, lines 9/11), and mixed with Arabic and chat-codes (lines 6/7/11/14). Before moving on I will clarify some of the use of Arabic language in Latin script. First, chatters use some numbers for sounds that the Latin alphabet does not have: 2 = *hamza* (ء), 3 = '*ayn* (ع), 7 = emphatic *ha* (ح), kh = *kha* (خ), gh or g = *ghayn* (غ). Other than that, the rules are not very rigid. The script is not meant to be scientifically correct or precisely represent Arabic phonetics. It is just meant to be functional, so native speakers understand each other and therefore, fairly pragmatic. The *shadda* (doubling of consonants) is not consistently employed, for example: "you want" can be written either as *baddak* or *badak*. Emphatic sounds are usually not differentiated from non-emphatic sounds, for instance: the emphatic *sâd* (ص) and the non-emphatic *sîn* (س) can both be expressed with an "s", so *sayf* could be either "sword" or "summer." The vocalization (but also the general transcription of the words) depends on the educational background of the chatter. French educated use more French phonetics (*chou ismek* = what's your name) and English educated use more English phonetics (*shoo baddek* = what do you want). This code is also used in text-messages of cellular phones. An example of Arabic in Latin font is *7ezeb* (line 11), meaning (political) party. In the excerpt

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[5] Starting from here I will give groups of chatters different numbers: the Christian chatters who I was with will be Group 1 and the Jewish and Muslim groups they encounter in the displayed sequences will be Group 2 and 3 respectively.

from the Jewish Chat site it is clear that members of Group 1 are French educated, looking at their spelling of Jewish in lines 6 and 10 (*juich*), which looks a like the French *juif*. The "ch" used in this word is also a French sound which in English would be spelled "sh". In line 10 the word *ze* looks like a French pronunciation of the English *the* but could also be seen as the product of the Lebanese dialect in which different *th*-sounds of Standard Arabic (ث ذ ظ) are often turned into a "*z*" or an "*s*". The Arabic transcription displays a clear Lebanese dialect in words like *ekhet* (sister, line 10) and *7ezeb* (party, line 11) which in Standard Arabic would sooner be transcribed as '*ukht* and *hezb*. Examples of the chat-code are "u" used for "you" (line 6) the number "4" used instead of the word "for."

The level of actually interacting in the sense of assuming subsequent discourse identities of speaker and listener are minimally developed, as Group 1 is more talking "at" Group 2 than talking *to* them. All their input consists of catch phrases or one-liners that have nothing to do with Group 2's input (lines 1/2/5/8/12). By talking "at" them I mean that Group 1 simply deposits comments at Group 2's feet with which they have to deal. The comments do not ask for a reaction in the form of an answer or a rebuttal. They are statements that construct and pose a reality that Group 2 has no choice but to accept. A rebuttal might be logically possible but Group 1 has no room in or between its assertions for any form of reaction from Group 2. On the chat-site as well as in the café, members of Group 1 were reacting to *each other's* content rather than that of Group 2. Throughout the chat-sequence they display the same disregard for the input of Group 2 as when they first entered the chat-site. Hence the communication of Group 1 can be described as reacting *to* each other and directed *at* Group 2. Group 1's input does not consist of

actions of seeking contact or even conflict. Their action seems to be intended as disturbing the chat room, creating "noise" that makes it harder for others to communicate with content that is intended to aggravate the others. Stephen (line 12) treats it as exactly that: noise that is irritating but does not need specific attention.

Now I turn to the content. The youth (Rani, Paul and Efess) jointly logged on to a Yahoo! chat-room called "Jewish Chat." They cursed at Jews (line 6), Israel (line 3) and Prime Minister Sharon (line 4). Interestingly enough, they praised Hezbollah for their actions against Israel in the South of Lebanon (lines 9/11), while they usually take Hezbollah as one of their main points of ridicule and aggravation (see also the following chat sequence). This makes Efess's statement in line 14 ("We'll start a jihad", which is an Islamic term for Holy War against unbelievers) all the more interesting as a display of self-identification with Hezbollah and Islamic ideology. The victims of the attack (Danny, Robert and Stephen) in the chat-room did not seem impressed enough with the level of English of the Lebanese youth to take them serious (line 12).

Members of Group 2 are confronted with an incompliance to "the natural facts of life in society" (Garfinkel, 1967: 54), namely an uncalled for breach of general values of politeness and decency, or at least asking for the ASL before starting the chat-conversation. We expect that such breaches "call forth immediate attempts to restore a right state of affairs" (Garfinkel, 1967: 42) and the members of Group 2 do so in quite similar fashion. In line 8, Danny responds to Group 1's insults with a "casual" insult. The message basically says "the says to you" with an attitude of disdain conveying that Group is not worthy of much attention. Stephen explicitly states this in line 12:

reacting to Group 1 is a waste of time. Danny and Stephen have restored the incongruity by sanctioning Group 1's failure to comply with "the expectancies of everyday life as a morality" (Garfinkel, 1967:53).

I asked Paul why they were attacking Jews like that. He answered: "Because they crucified Christ," which Rani also mentions in line 13. At another point Paul said:

> Paul: I hate Arabs. I wish America would come to the Middle East and kill all Arabs. Drop a nuclear bomb on them! Why in the Middle East, they don't have respect for people, respect for democracy? Why isn't it like America and Europe, without dictatorships and terrorists? Because of them, I can't go anywhere. At the American embassy they just look at my nationality and put a stamp "refused". "You're Lebanese, Arab. You're a terrorist. You killed five hundred American soldiers in 1982". You know what I was doing in 1982? I was drinking from a baby bottle! (kenet 3am bechrab bibrone!) What do I have to do with this?! (…) It's not wrong what Israel is doing. They're all crazy Arabs blowing themselves up, killing innocent children. Sometimes they [Israel] go too far. I can't blame them. They want peace but the Arabs are such fanatics … (May 10th 2004)

Paul told me this at his home. Thus another place and time bring out other identity ascriptions and avowals. The different instances of interactions show that in some cases Hezbollah is "they" as opposed to "we" Christians; the statement "we will remain and endure" is an assertion *against* them. In the previous sequence however, the message seems to be: "Hezbollah will remain and endure". This is not simply a change of opinion or of allegiances over time, as Paul's nickname "Napka" is still in use. The following section from a chatting sequence on a Muslim chat site, only one week before the visit to the Jewish chat site (April 4th, 2004, 01:00-03:00 am), confirms this.

Extract 5

1. Ahmad: no, not in the Koran but in the hadith it's clear what Muhammad sala Allah 3alayhi wa sallam taught us.
2. Nabil: yes but that's not what I mean
3. Efess: Hey wat u takking about? Mohamad?
4. Paul: wa nnebi!! hahaha!
5. Paul: i tell u about nebi. i fuck him yesterday
6. Efess: i fuck his sister
7. Nabil: it can say so in the hadith but dtill many people don't listen
8. Nabil: i'm talking about the ummah and how they live
9. Shady: s mohamed is a gey!!
10. Rani: islam is all gays
11. Paul: u think u com to kek out the Chretians we come to kik u out. All te muslesm we kill them
12. Paul: wekik u out ofLibanon!
13. Efess: drobon kelon
14. Nabil: who r these guys
15. Rashad: he, get out of here if u can't talk like a human being
16. Amine: think they came from th sewer
17. Shady: (big cross)
18. Paul: ferst we kik u from irak, then bush come to kik you from the Libanon
19. Paul: in the sea!!
20. Efess: kik your ASS
21. Nabil: hey what's this? Gog et a life somewhere what do you want?

22. Shady: **god bless mel gebson!@!**

23. Ahmad: ah, ignore them ya Nabil

24. Efess: yo fecking muslim s

25. Nabil: hey your day will come. U think u can get away with this?

26. Rashad: Allah will come to judge you all n what where will you go then

27. Ahmad: let's get off here – we can talk somewhere else man

28. Amine: our time when will come. When Allah will judge you, we will kill you christian pigs

29. Shady: (big cross)

30. Shady: (big cross)

31. Efess: kik your ASS HAHAHA!!

32. Rani: islam is al for stupid pepl

Starting with language use, Group 3 uses quite proper English with some exceptions in lines 14 (*r* instead of *are*) and 15 (*u* instead of *you*). Line 1 is also an exception where Ahmad transcribes the Arabic prayer over the prophet of Islam in Latin font. Lines 7 and 16 contain typing mistakes (*dtill* instead of *still* and *th* instead of *the*). Group 1's input displays a spelling according to a specific phonetics (which as I have mentioned before, most likely stems from a French educated background) that finds its way into both the Arabic and English that they produce: *takking* for *talking* (line 3), *gey* for *gay* (line 9), *Chretians* for *Christians* (line 11) and the Arabic *wa nnebi* in line 4 (*by the* prophet) and *drobon kelon* in line 13 (*hit/strike all of them*). Furthermore, Group 1 clearly has little mastery of tenses in English, as they do not use much else than the simple present in their verbs, also when other tenses are expected (lines 5/6/18). Typing mistakes are not easily determined for Group 1 because the misspelling of the words may well be intentional due to lack of

knowledge of the English language. However, it would seem that the "s" in line 9 is misplaced, *muslesm* in line 11 was meant to be *muslems* and the '@' between the exclamation marks in line 22 is a typo. The spelling of *fucking* (*fecking*) in line 24 could be a typo but could also be a spelling mistake or phonetic spelling. The same goes for *takking* in line 3 and *pepl* in line 32.

Because different chatters write their messages simultaneously, it again looks like Nabil in line 7 and 8 ignored Efess' and Paul's statements in lines 3-6 (see also sequence with Group 2). But his first reaction comes later in line 14.

As noted, this took place only a week before the attack on the Jewish chat site. The youth were playing games, openly visiting pornographic web-sites, enjoying the images together and drinking from a vodka bottle. Four of them logged on to a Yahoo! chat-room called "Muslim Chat." There, Ahmad and Nabil were chatting about Islamic doctrine and later in the sequence we see more chatters present (lines 15/16). Group 1 engaged in the chat conversation by insulting the Prophet Muhammad. The insults were of sexual and homosexual nature (lines 5/6/9). In line 3 it looks like Efess might have actually looked at what other chatters were talking about (which was not the case in the previous sequence) because he asks a question about their content. It is more likely, however, that it was meant rhetorically as an introduction to his insult in line 6. After these insults, they continue about how they would one day violently get rid of Muslims from Lebanon (lines 11/12/18). Remarkable in line 18 is Paul's identification with the United States Army when he says "*we kik u from irak*" and counting on Bush in his struggle against Muslims. This is the same Paul that in previous sequences called himself

"Hezbollah", declared a terrorist organization by the CIA.

Shady's input in line 22 ("god bless mel gebson") is most likely a reference to Mel Gibson's production of the movie "the Passion of the Christ" (which came out not long before this interaction took place). His other input in the sequence consists of an insult against the Prophet Muhammad in (line 9) and big crosses in lines 17/29/30 so line 22 can be seen as an assertion of Christianity and Jesus by opposing them to Muhammad. This acquires a political load combined with Paul's input in lines 11, 18 and 19.

The big cross-symbols (which can be made with the Alt-button in combination with a numeral code, lines 17/29/30) and the huge fonts have the effect of disturbing the communication of those engaged in the chat-room, as it makes the page scroll faster (lines 3/9/22). As may be expected of Group 3, its members reacted with bewilderment (lines 14-16), comparing members of Group 1 to animals living in the sewers. Group 3 manages to "resolve the incongruity" (Garfinkel, 1967: 63) of Group 1's strange actions but as a result of the persistent nature of their actions bewilderment eventually transforms into anger, threatening the "Christians attackers" that Allah would have His vengeance for their insults (lines 25/26). When this does not work, the only other solution is to withdraw from this breach of compliance (line 27), hence confirming the need, the uncontrollable urge, to sanction actions and "restore the situation to normal appearances" (Garfinkel, 1967: 47).

The youth in the Internet-café (Group 1) seemed to enjoy the chat-partners' reactions (Group 3) and laughed loudly at what they had to say.
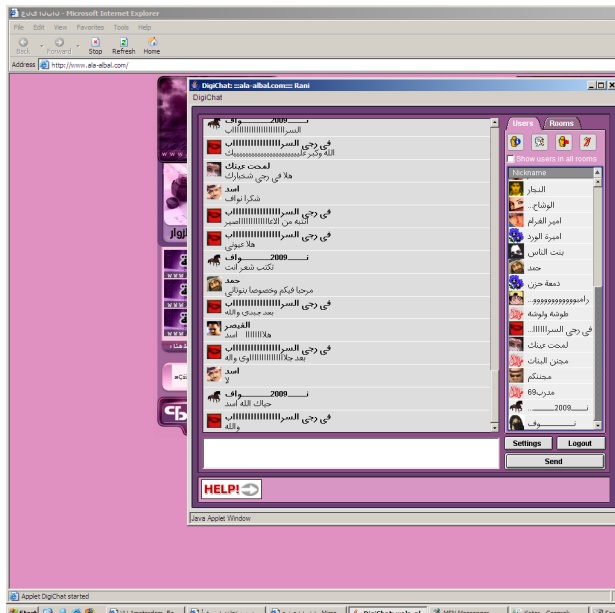
From an interactional point of view, Group 1 pays more attention to how Group 3 reacts, but this does not come out in the actual input in the sequence. Toward the last lines, Group 3 takes the input of Group 1 more seriously and reacts to the content (lines 25/26/28), but Group 1 does not respond to this, so once again we can say that their actions are directed *at* Group 3 and not *to* them.

The active contribution of the participants in the Internet-café in Borj Hammoud are their entrance into the chats-site, having no regard for the existing interaction sequence on the site, disrupting that sequential order and trying to establish a new sequential order. I will elaborate on this in the sections that follow.

Methods of Social Organization of the Chat-sites

There are different ways of chatting, varying between different levels of private and public communication. First, there is chatting with friends, or at least people whom the user has included on their contact list (the most famous example of this is MSN-Messenger). One opens a chat-site on the Internet and logs on with an e-mail address or a login name, combined with a password. Several windows will appear on the screen, one of them revealing who of their "chat friends" is currently logged on. People who are online and have that person on their contact-list will get a message on their screen telling them that he or she has just logged on. Another window functions as a sender and receiver of text between chatters, thus the whole "conversation" can be read from this window. This form of communication is interactive and the texts take less than a few seconds to pop up on the screen of the receiver after one has sent a text. This makes the interaction quite fluent depending on the quality of the Internet-connection and the speed of the typist.

option for say, two people to "go out of the room" and chat privately.

The first and last forms of chatting noted above are the most popular among youth in Internet-cafés. In October 2003, MSN (the biggest chat-room provider) stopped its free public chat-room services and switched to paid subscription. This created a disruption for frequent chat-room users of Internet-cafés because they were used to logging in on chat-rooms with their Hotmail-accounts. As stated, however, there are many free chat-room providers and youth quickly found their way to them after MSN's policy change.[6] Besides, MSN did not change its Messenger service, which still allows people to chat with friends on their personal contact-list, free of charge.

Youth chat mainly in colloquial Lebanese Arabic and mix this with French or English (depending on their educational background). They write this language in Latin script and use numerals or combinations of Latin characters for sounds that do not exist in the Latin alphabet (see section 4 for details). This code has most likely developed because chatting in Arabic font did not develop immediately with the advent of online chat-communication and native Arabic speakers wanted to communicate in Arabic. Today, Arabic script is made available by several chat-providers, but it has not received as much popularity as the Latin transcribed chat-code discussed here. This Latin transcribed chat-code is no longer a pragmatic substitute for Arabic font. It has become a style of communication in itself. A practical convenience is that this style makes it easy to switch between languages, use foreign

Left-part of the box: in the lower-compartment the chatters type their input. They press 'Enter' and their input appears 'online' in the upper-compartment of the box and becomes visible to other chat-partners. Right-part of the box: The contact-list of the chatter indicating who is currently online and who is not.

Second, there are chat-forums on specific topics (for instance, on current international developments). These are provided for instance by news networks or other organizations that have an interest in public opinion. One opens the site that hosts the forum and logs on to the forum by clicking on the icon that opens the web-based chat-application. Depending on the host, one can get into the forum directly, or will need a login name and a password. Anyone who wishes to discuss or express an opinion about the given topic can do so with total anonymity. This makes chat forums interesting sites of debate because people do not fear any consequences from articulating any point of view. Third, there are chat-rooms divided by topic or interest. These are widely disseminated. Some of the most popular are Yahoo! and Hotmail and they function in a similar way to the chat forums. In addition, chat-rooms often provide the

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[6] Some of the popular chat-websites among Lebanese youth are: www.arank.com, www.mirc.com and www.arab10.com.

words, or computer language (which is mostly English).

The conversation usually starts out by asking each other for their ASL (Age, Sex and Location). If a male youth, for instance, at that point finds out that he is chatting with another male, the conversation usually ends immediately, either by saying "sorry, bye" or just leaving the chat-window without prior notice. The other male usually does not mind this because he is also most likely looking for a female with whom he can chat. Chat-conversations often have light topics, everyday things ("What is the weather like in your country?" "What do you do for a living?" "What kind of music do you like?"), but they can also be very serious. For example, I observed a Lebanese male (25 years old) chatting with a female from the United States. She told him that she was often depressed and felt that she had no reason to live. The Lebanese youth tried in his broken English to cheer her up and sometimes asked me to help him with his English. It turned out that her parents were fighting a lot and she felt that she was to blame. He managed to encourage her by showing her that when parents fight, the children are usually not the cause and it is certainly not the children's fault. They simply have issues to resolve, and she should not take the blame for them. She thanked him for the advice and they are still in contact with each other through MSN-Messenger.

On the Net, everyone is faceless and anonymous, and there is no guarantee that if someone sends a picture or gives other information, that it is in fact information about the chatter in question. In this uncertainty, ASL is a code that chatters adhere to or at least use as something to ease their suspicion in their virtual social contacts. From my observations and engagement with respondents, who

participate in chat-rooms, I conclude that most of the time, chatters are honest in revealing their ASL, although they might play around with other details.

Extract 6

1. Paul: asl?
2. John: 23 male, toronto
3. John: asl?
4. Paul: 26male, Lebanon
5. Paul: toronto in canada right?
6. John: ya

It suggests that, because youth have an interest in getting honest information from their chat-partners, they are inclined to give honest information as well. There are, however, exceptions, those who abuse or make fun of the ASL-code. The following is an example of two friends joking with each other:

Extract 7

Chat sequence	Interpretation
1. paul: :)	(smiley face)
2. Rani: kifak ya man!	How are you man!
3. paul: ahlan kifak ya men	Hi, how ar you man
4. paul: waynak	Where are you
5. paul: asl plz	ASL please
6. Rani: kel chi tamam! 18 sana, bint min Australia	Everything is fine! 18 years, female, from Australia [answer to ASL]
7. paul: coolllllllllllllllllllll	cool
8. paul has selected the "Falling Hearts" IMVironment.	[paul made digital hearts fall on the chat window]
9. Rani: any way, 3am tinbusit?	Anyway, are you enjoying yourself?
10. paul: akid	For sure
11. Rani: chou hol falling hearts 2usas?!	What's the story with those falling hearts?!
12. paul: btetjawazinehhhhhhhhhhhh	Will you marry meeeeee [addressing a female]

What is most interesting in this code is how participants project identities on their chat-

partners and build their own for the practical purposes of the conversation at hand.

Methods for Achieving Identities in Social Interaction

As partly mentioned before, an important accomplishment of the interaction is the attributing and assuming of situated identities. When the youth enter the Muslim chat-site they have no guarantee that the participants will be (Lebanese) Muslims or that they hold the political ideas that they are assumed to have. The same goes for entering the Jewish chat-site. But the youths *need* the other participants to be certain kind of people (a certain *audience*) in order to perform a certain identity and pursue a certain agenda. So identities are construed and configured according to pursued agendas.

Pre-alignment and alignment

Before Group 1 enters the Muslim or Jewish chat sites, we can assume that the participants have fairly standard discourse identities (current speaker, listener, story teller, story recipient, questioner, answerer, repair initiator and so on – Zimmerman 1998:90), as can be seen among members of Group 2:

Extract 8

1.   Danny: no
2.   Stephen: then what else?
…
3.   Robert: none of your business!! haha!!

Situated identities for Group 3 can range from "A Muslim interested in meeting other Muslims/debate about Islam and religious topics" to "a participant interested in Islam," etc., concluded from their input, repeated below:

Extract 9

1.   Ahmad: no, not in the Koran but in the hadith it's clear what Muhammad sala Allah 3alayhi wa sallam taught us.
2.   Nabil: yes but that's not what I mean
3.   …..
4.   Nabil: it can say so in the hadith but dtill many people don't listen
5.   Nabil: i'm talking about the ummah and how they live

We can also assume that before Group 1 enters the chat site they have *pre-aligned* themselves. They are premeditated to disrupt whatever sequential order is taking place on the site and intend to cause a new agenda and alignment of identities among all participants. Before they join, situated identities among participants of Group 2 and 3 can differ in alignment but afterward we can see that the alignment can unanimously be labelled as defenders of previous sequential order.

Extract 10

Group 2

8.   Danny: hey thanks man. Fuck you too
…
12.   Stephen: don't waste your time on people who can't even spell English properly

Group 3:

1.   Nabil: hey what's this? Gog et a life somewhere what do you want?
…
2.   Ahmad: ah, ignore them ya Nabil
...
3.   Nabil: hey your day will come. U think u can get away with this?
4.   Rashad: Allah will come to judge you all n what where will you go then
5.   Ahmad: let's get off here – we can talk somewhere else man
6.   Amine: our time when will come. When Allah will judge you, we will kill you christian pigs

How does Group 1 achieve this realignment of identities?

Shaping identity through the context of its mobilization

Chat rooms are windows on the screen in which every participant can insert their textual input. Most rooms are categorized by topic or theme of content, which in a broad sense presupposes in what "mode" participants enter the room (but of course not rigidly determines it). The organization of communicative input structures the shape of the interaction. Depending on the number of participants, how fast they type, the language they use, the size and the face of font and the speed with which they understands inputs is a response to what interaction is taking place. In this way, participants do not just respond to content but also to how the content is presented to them. Which language is used? What style of language (i.e. chat-codes and abbreviations, mixtures with Arabic, or clearly deficient English)? Here is an illustration of this mixture of languages:

Extract 11

Rani: ktir basatet i7ki ma3ak il yom
paul: yeah me too so be online ok
paul: promise me
Rani: ok
paul: chou ok ma fi ok bel larouse
paul: say i promise u brother
paul: [smiley]
Rani: i promise u brother!!

A second framework of identity shaping consists of the participants' topical "hinges". They have a set of recurrent themes that colour most of their conversations; that position them in what to speak about and how to speak. These themes also provide for them a guideline what audience they need in front of which to perform an identity that will "play out" the right theme. Thus, they transform their identities and those of their audience in order to accomplish a situated activity according to set agendas (Zimmerman, 1998). We understand this better if we acknowledge that these referential instances are

> "thoroughly contexted moments in which roles, values, institutions, passions, and strategies are embodied. They are the products of social interaction, and therefore negotiated, contingent, and sometimes momentous. We cannot understand the substantive, pragmatic, human and meaningful nature of any such occasion without attending to its situated particularity" (Moerman 1988:41).

On a Muslim chat site the audience is transformed into a Lebanese or Middle Eastern Islamic threat to (Lebanese) Christianity, so that theirs can be an identity of the protectors of Lebanon and their communities.

On a Jewish chat site they need the others to be militant Israelis, threatening the stability of Lebanon and descending from the executors of Jesus Christ (this is already an interpretation because Rani actually makes the other chatters out to be the killers themselves – extract 4, line 13, Group 2). The interesting point here is that the emphasis of Group 1 is not on their Christian identity (although it is present) but they assume an almost Muslim identity: Hezbollah kicked you out (extract 4, line 11); *we*'ll start a jihad (extract 4, line 14). This is a clear instance of mobilizing an identity for the purpose of accomplishing a situated activity.

Chatting with a Canadian from Lebanese origin, Paul needs John to be an inheritor of "the better life abroad" according to which he can perform his identity of lacking in every aspect that counts.

On a street corner in Beirut, four youth needed me to be a representative of the better life abroad, so that they could perform the contrast of their lives with all unattainable virtues of life.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have seen chat participants in different situations, chatting with different people and construing their identities differently in each situation. The main building blocks of their identity-construction are assigning their chat-partners specific identities and invoking specific extra-situational events and facts that they deem relevant for asserting a specific here-and-now-relevant identity. These identities can be or seem contradicting: from ridiculing Hezbollah on one occasion to praising them, or even *being* them, on the next. From hating Israel to sympathizing with it. From being Don Juan with a chalet at the beach to having nothing but a street corner and a single pair of shoes.

The variety of … that one person can display in a range of instances, reveals the indexical nature of identity often thought to be highly stable or fixed. The chatters studied here are not confused or overly pragmatic opportunists, lacking straightforward morals - at least not more than you or I.

Writing on identity among other things, Moerman (1988) says it is produced and problematic.

> "They [reference occasions, recognition, knowing, personality, etc.] are problematic in that they are contingent, consequential, defeasible, etc. for the members, speakers, actors themselves; problematic because negotiated by the actual situated agents of society, language, and culture. Formulations of "recognition" or "person" or "knowing" as entities that exist outside of and determine what happens can never account for what happens." (1988:46)

Macrostructures do not determine what happens between individuals; rather they are actively invoked to actualize occasions and their institutional provenance. Thus, for instance, the pursued agenda and chosen situated identities draw up a "continuously evolving framework within which their

actions, vocal or otherwise, assume a particular meaning, import and interactional consequentiality" (Zimmerman, 1998:88). However, because these instances are situated, indexical, elevating them to a higher level of generalization would be unjust.

Identity is constructed and reconstructed in each instance for practical purposes and temporary relevancies at hand. To ignore this is to harm the everyday experienced realities and to fail to acknowledge the complexities and ingenuity of interaction. If identity is to be studied, it must be done in an elaborate range of instances without the scholar preferring one over the other as more meaningful for purposes of over-generalization and (stereo)typification. Identity does not let itself be caught by scholarly models. We must rather find it where how and when it presents itself: in context.

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