Phone Ring Tones in Jordan: A Sociolinguistic Analysis

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Abstract

The study lends itself to investigating ring-tone choice by a sample of sixty Jordanian university students in the Department of English at the Hashemite University. Various types of texts as ring tones in the form of songs and poetry, whether folkloric, national, religious or romantic can be very informative means of understanding the cultural and social values of a given society. The study has revealed that the socio-cultural influence clearly manifests itself in the ring-tone choice in addition to the diversity of students’ belonging. In other words, nationhood, tribally-based belonging, religious, romantic, economic, political, and ethnic orientations are explicitly reflected in the choice of ring tones. The openness and cultural contact between the East and West is also found clear as some students have opted for non-Arabic songs and music, not only to indicate a romantic identity, but also for learning new English vocabulary and structures. Such genres can bear history, religious beliefs, traditions, genealogy, etc. Exchange of such linguistic genres over mobile handsets can ignite a wide array of passions as they reflect and stimulate a collective sense of a specific identity in which a particular community constructs the meaning of their lives, gives it expression and highlights their distinctiveness.

Introduction

The population of Jordan is almost entirely Arabs descending from the various tribes that have migrated to the area over the years from all directions and mounts to about six and a half millions according to 2009 estimate. A large percentage of Jordan’s population is of Palestinian origin, having been forced from their homeland during the 1948 and 1967 wars with Israel. Jordan was the only Arab state to grant all Palestinians the right to Jordanian citizenship and many have exercised that option, playing an important part in the political and economic life of the country. Although massive influxes of refugees have strained the Jordanian society and economy, Palestinian Jordanians have contributed greatly to the health and prosperity of the country. One of the best known of Jordan’s population groups is the Bedouin who continue to have an influence on Arab and Jordanian culture. It can be said that many of the characteristics of the Jordanian and Arab society are found in their strongest form in Bedouin culture. For instance, the Bedouin are most famous for their hospitality, and it is part of their creed, rooted in the harshness of desert life, that no traveler is turned away. The tribal structure of Arab society is also most visible among the Bedouin, where the clan is at the centre of social life. The Circassians, Chechens and Armenians are the only minorities in the country.
Jordan is mainly an urban country; yet, the nomads and semi-nomads make no more than five percent of the population.

In Jordan, as is the case worldwide, the mobile phone has turned to a social tool from that of a technological one as it really becomes an essential component of adolescents’ daily activities as the most widely liked or appreciated form of communication. Being a social device, mobile phones can be used in positive ways to organize and maintain the users’ social networks, and thus do have impacts on family relations in addition to its new function or role of shaping the youth mutual dealings and connections. Although the present paper addresses itself to phone-ring preference and explaining its possible allusions and indications as mainly related to the Jordanian societal structure, a brief account of the mobile phone impact on the lives of adolescents from a functional and relational perspective is inescapable in this context. Of course, its impact on young people’s peer groups has been reported to be highly extensive since adolescence is a time of change and increasing influence of the peer group, as Ling (2003) stated, and thus communication amongst peer group members is central to the identity of the individual. Besides, this impact of the mobile phone on peer relationships is viewed by Williams & Williams (2005) to have transformed the peer group into a truly networked society.

As technologies go, mobile phones are flexible and provide coverage to homes and workplaces since people carry them as they move from place to place and between different social situations. These moving handsets shift time and place and further complicate contexts and roles since they enable and strengthen social and economic relations at a distance. Thus, mobile phones can be used for both productive and personal purposes throughout the users’ daily routines. Like electronic business, mobile phones could be looked at as a means of “virtualizing” not only products, services or knowledge, to use Cho’s (2008) words, but also social networks among the members of a social system. The ring tones can be utilized as an entry into the young peoples’ day-to-day lives and can further serve to represent to outsiders this sector of people in places like Jordan, which on its turn aids specialists in related fields like linguistics, sociology, psychology, etc. to work on the linguistic, national, ethnic and religious frames, which are crucial contexts today for most people.

**Ring Tones and Identity**

Like in the worlds displayed by mass media, identity, religious belonging, romanticism affiliation and all other modes of loyalties can strongly figure in the content worlds of cellular ring tones favored by different sectors of a given society. This, of course meets with the view adopted by cultural studies today that there are different kinds of cosmopolitanism playing the role of breaking down barriers between these groups of
people and their peers as they display the same loyalty in various parts of the globe. Yet, although the modern world of today is characterized by multiple loyalties because of the imperatives of globalization and the free flow of massive information, some barriers stay self-imposing among different groups in one society picturing them as distinct sub-communities in terms of loyalty, identity, attitude, belief and all other social, cultural and economic criteria. Ring tones, as is the case here in Jordan, take different modes depending on what is favored by those young men and women carrying the handset. These include religious prayers or verses from the holy book of the Qur’an, national and folkloric songs, poetry in the vernacular and romantic tones. Religious tones in the form of prayers or Qur’anic verses recited by well-known readers serve the communicative function of signalling a religious identity; that is, belonging to a particular community or group within the larger society.

Although the Jordanian society is mainly a Muslim one, the Islamist attitude or the identity of Islamism is not reflected in the ring tones of all people including university students. Taking into consideration the minority groups of Circassians, Chechens and Armenians on the one hand, and non-Muslim Arabs on the other, the semi-hegemonic structure of the Jordanian society can be claimed. This characteristic of hegemony can be interpreted or analyzed in two ways. The Jordanian community is mainly tribe-structured, though now has almost all of the characteristics of a modern state, whose members share attributes and common cultural habits and traditions which may not exist in the culture of or be exercised by the minority groups of Circassians, Chechens and Armenians, especially in their homes. Yet, as is the case worldwide, they have to comply with the norms of the dominating Arabic and tribal culture outside in the street, work place, and all social and cultural events. They even speak the distinctive variety of Jordanian colloquial Arabic alongside with the written standard one, whereas they speak their own languages in homes and with members from the same ethnic group. Secondly, when it comes to Armenians, who are neither Arabs nor Muslims, and the non-Muslim Arabs, the dominant social group is the Islamist and thus the ideas of Islamism come to be seen as the norm in their outside activities, though for Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs there is much in common.

Of course, ring tones suggesting values of Islamism will not be heard from handsets held by Christians, but because of belonging to the Jordanian Arabic culture, their awareness and sense of Arabic nationhood is very likely to be reflected in ring tones. Quite many of them show a notable enthusiasm toward their Arabic national identity and more specifically toward their “Jordanianism”. This can be obviously noticed in the national and folkloric songs they opt for as ring tones. It is worth mentioning that quite many aspects of the Jordanian culture are projected in oral poetry, ‘Nabaṭī’, in addition to the various types of songs sung in Jordanian colloquial Arabic, as stated by Al-Azzam & Al-
Quran (2009). Since ‘Nabaṭī’ poetry and folkloric songs are deeply rooted in the Jordanian culture and history, the identity of religion does not constitute a barrier between Muslim and Christian members belonging to the group that finds and voices out its pride in being Jordanian, to form another identity on a national ground, which meets with the concept of identity that lives through difference and hybridism. Over time, consequently, and with the development of the sense of a particular type of identity, this diversity based on other variables may be eliminated by a unifying language variety.

As stated earlier, oral poetry and folkloric songs are integral components of the Jordanian culture and past before the spread of literacy. Therefore, a sizable body of this folkloric literature remains mainly oral, lending itself best to memorization and further transmission of the local culture. Thus, the group opting for national folkloric songs as the favored ring tones is carrying out the function of cultural diffusion in an artistic mode of representation.

**Nationhood and Linguistic Genres**

The political ideology of nationalism holds that each state should have its nation and each nation should have its state. The two are seen as a cultural construct of collective belonging realized, legalized and become accepted through institutional and discursive practices. Nationalism is further perceived as a project putting the state as a political unit in congruence with the nation as a cultural one. The concept of nation is not viewed to be simply the product of macro-structural forces since it can also be the parctical achievement of ordinary people in their everday and routine activities. In this regard, Hobsbawm (1991:10) believes that nationalism cannot be understood unless it is analyzed from below, i.e. in terms of the hopes, needs, assumptions and interests of ordinary people, in addition to its being constructed from above. Adopting Hobsbawm’s view (ibid) and looking into Jordanian young peoples’ choices of ring tones, the present paper lends itself partly to the actual practices through which these ordinary people engage in and enact nationhood and nationalism in some contexts of their everyday lives; that is, following the above-mentioned approach of examining nationalism from below.

The linguistic generes referred to here represent the content of the opted-for ring tones, i.e., whether the ring tone is a national or folkloric song, folkloric poem recited in the Jordanian local dialect, a religious text, or a romantic text or tone, etc. Taking the first two genres, national and folkloric songs and poetry, these could be looked at as ways in which nationhood or nationalism frames the choices people make. They shed light on some specific or individual ways of choosing a nation and how the concept of nationhood is implied in decisions like these made by ordinary people as active participants in the
quotidian production and reproduction of nationhood or nationalism. The content of such ring tone texts embodying the peoples’ feelings, attitudes and conceptualization of nationalism is emptied out in a national language or vernacular wherein certain language choices are highlighted. For this reason in sociolinguistics, the promotion of a national variety is viewed as a deliberate endeavor, among other material and symbolic ones, towards making a nation. To the speakers of an ethnic community, a national language is a means that best expresses their distinctive culture, and for this reason they view it a symbol of their identity.

When discussing ring tones in the form of a religious text, the concept of religion and the relationship between religion and identity have to be addressed. The question of whether identity is shaped internally or externally is a challenging and thought-provoking one since it might not be easy to determine whether the main factors in identity formation can be other peoples’ perceptions, relationships, internal debate or ethnicity. In reference to religious identity, Holland et al. (2001:3) states that “People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities”. In the light of this definition, choosing a religious text as a ring tone is one way of relating to religion and how they choose to belong to a religious community. It can be a manifestation of how strongly they feel about their faith and how they opt to display their beliefs in mundane lives. In the context of this study, moreover, adopting a religious ring tone by non-Arab but Muslim Jordanians can help in making statements about who they understand themselves to be, who accordingly try to integrate with the larger Muslim society they live in. Some religious songs that are recited on auspicious days like feasts, weddings, religious occasions and other ceremonies are chosen by this group and are performed in the common speech of the indigenous people. This could be interpreted as a cultural inclusion and a religious identity synthesis within the larger society of multiple loyalties.

As for the romantic identity as reflected in romantic ring tones, one of the fundamental developmental tasks of youngsters is constructing a sense of identity as they pass through a stage of filtering and refining their value-systems as well as establishing future goals. Like relations with family members and friends, romantic ones can assist the progress of attaining a greater understanding of who they are and what they regard highly. Exchange of romantic texts in various modes can serve to provide a training foundation for the young to build and improve communicative skills. It also helps them to develop empathy and acquire the ways of maintaining cherished relationships. Entering the world of romanticism and gaining a romantic identity, the young feel more independent and autonomous from parents and find a romantic relationship as a source of emotional support, as stated by Furman (2002). Yet, being in a romantic world, the young are likely
to encounter emotional vicissitudes as a result of being together and breaking up. These, nevertheless, can be of much help in developing emotional resilience to deal with other future difficult situations, as Barber & Eccles (2003) put it. Thus, opting for romantic texts as ring tones by a sizeable number of youngsters suggests that romantic identities and relationships are at the heart of their lives and do have a significant input in shaping their long-term growth.

To sum up, different texts as ring tones in the form of songs and poetry, whether folkloric, national, religious or romantic can be very informative means of understanding the cultural and social values of a given society. Such genres can bear history, religious beliefs, traditions, geneology, etc. Exchange of such linguistic genres over mobile handsets can ignite a wide array of passions as they reflect and stimulate a collective sense of a particular identity like that of nationhood, religious affiliation and other cultural leagues in which a particular group constructs the meaning of their lives and gives it expression, affirms their cultural identity and highlights their distinctiveness.

**Methodology**

As the subjects of the study represent a large sector of the Jordanian community, it was found suitable to have them as a representing sample of the Jordanian social structure. The subjects of the study are sixty second-year students who are enrolled in Translation-Two (Translation of General Texts from Arabic into English), in the second semester of the Academic Year 2008/2009. The students were requested to write down their mobile ring tones and the reasons behind their choice. The responses are analyzed and discussed to figure out the relationship between the installed ring tones and the Jordanian community inclinations.

Choosing students of this stage is deemed suitable because they can be a representative sample, not only of their families and family backgrounds, but also of their religious, political, economic, national, cultural, and even tribal and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, the students are mature enough and can express their views and feelings publicly and freely paying little or almost no attention to social, cultural, religious, or family restrictions. In other words, they are independent and have their own way of thinking, which enriches the neutrality and objectivity of the results yielded by the study.

**Discussion**

Ring tones, the sounds that mobile phones make when a call is made, reflect the social structure of a certain community. The current study is based on a sample of Jordanian students who are enrolled in the Department of English, at the Hashemite University. As
the study will show, ring tones represent different backgrounds and belongings that might be deeply rooted socially, intellectually, religiously, politically and personally. What makes this fact clearer is that the students represent a noteworthy diversity of the population in Jordan, and they themselves reflect not only the social groups they are involved in, but also the family, which is the smallest cell of the community. For purely organization purposes, the discussion is divided into main sections that are selected on the ground of the students’ comments on the reasons behind downloading and selecting their ring tones. Motives of nationhood and belonging to land, romance, religion, education, and personality are analyzed to stand on the real representation of the ring tones.

Nationalism and Belonging

According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English, nationalism can be defined as the strong devotion to one’s own nation, and the patriotic feelings, efforts and principles that one holds towards his political state. Not quite different from nationalism, belonging can be defined as the sense of being an integrated part of one’s community, which strongly influences his feelings to be mainly in the favor of the land he is dwelling on. Being in the middle of a relatively troubled and a war-like region, Jordanians try to express their nationhood and belonging in different ways. Thus, choosing national songs by some subjects is a true reflection of the intimate relationship between the man and the land. As stated earlier, national and folkloric songs and poetry could be looked at as ways in which nationhood or nationalism frames the choices people make. They shed light on some specific or individual ways of choosing a nation and how the concept of nationhood is implied in decisions like these made by ordinary people as active participants in the everyday behavior of producing and re-producing nationhood or nationalism.

From the responses received, it was found out that some subjects have maintained that the choice of the ring tone as a national song comes as a result of belonging to Jordan as a land, and the Hashemites as a ruling family. This unseen current of nationhood is expressed in their cellular ring tones, a fact that has motivated them to show out this openly and publicly. Examining the names of the respondents closely, it was found out that most of the subjects are of a Jordanian origin and they hold Jordanian tribal family names; i.e., not of a Palestinian origin holding a Jordanian nationality, for example, who prefer to use Palestinian national songs, instead. What might have also urged such subjects to settle on these ring tones is the reaction that they may have taken against the ring tones used by this half-Jordanian community, i.e. Jordanians of a Palestinian origin.

Patriotic feeling can be most noticed among the young generation of a certain community. This fact is best illustrated by the second or the third-year-students at the
Hashemite University, where the study is conducted. According to some subjects, having a national song as a ring tone is very appropriate as it reminds them of their country even when classes are run. The intermittent belonging of students to their beloved country has even chased them to the classrooms where being called in the class is embarrassing to the cellular holder. A noteworthy point that can be added here is that Jordanians have many national events that keep the Jordanians in touch with the patriotic feelings such as the Independence Day, the Army Day, and the Throne Day. National songs strongly express the feelings of the Jordanians who impatiently wait these days’ anniversary. Students’ patriotism is thus influential in setting national songs as ring tones as such songs are observed everywhere, even when students are coaching to the university.

**Nokia Tone**

It can be safely said that Nokia is the most well-known supplier of mobile phones and fixed networks and other customer’s related services. This widespread of the company has made it known to all mobile phone users. As a company, Nokia is engaged in the manufacturing of mobile devices and in converging Internet and communications industries, and is thus the world’s largest manufacturer of mobile telephones and communication devices enjoying a large market share. Being highly reputable for this communication technology, many students have chosen its tone as theirs.

Some students have chosen the Nokia ring tone for many reasons. They maintain that the tone is quiet and other rings may cause noise especially in classes. Thus, the class atmosphere has urged those students to select the tone for fear of causing some distraction in the classroom. In addition, as they say, the tone is easily recognized and can attract the phone bearer’s attention when a call is received. The tone is also economically motivated as some other tones are relatively unaffordable for the university student sector. Some subjects have also chosen the tone not only as it is suitable on the campus but as it can be appropriate in all occasions and places, and does not cause any embarrassment for the holder. This idea springs from the fact that the Jordanian community is generally conservative and sensitive and any violation of the social values because of songs and some music can be considered as shameful and irritating. Some subjects have even linked between their own simplicity and the tone itself by stating that they have a simple life and belong to simple families, which consequently requires having a simple phone set and a simple ring tone as the ‘Nokia’. The widespread of the tone has also made it standard and socially acceptable by all ages. Thus, the social and economic standards of some students have imposed themselves on the users of the ring tone. In traditional communities like the Jordanian one, parents have authority, control and power over their children. This authority extends to ring-tone choice, a fact that has motivated some subjects to choose the tone of ‘Nokia’ to please their fathers who themselves have opted for it, according to some subjects. Other subjects have maintained
that ‘Nokia’ tone is an ordinary one, and can be recognized easily by all people regardless of age and level of education, though as they state, the ring tone is not what matters but the message itself is what does most.

**Romantic Song Tones**

Romance and love affairs are very likely to fall within the main interests of young people, especially when they are involved with the other sex in institutions like a university. This romantic feeling has been expressed through students’ belongings or properties such as mobile phone ring tones. Some subjects of the sample have used romantic songs and music as ring tones. Living in this school community has influenced those subjects to load such tones in order to express their unseen feeling of love; in other words, the students are able to express their romantic feeling via their phone sets, either because they cannot express their love openly and in public due to social restrictions, or they have found that the mobile phone can indirectly perform the same purpose.

To exemplify, Fairouz’s songs have occupied a high position in Jordanian mornings, and have urged some students to choose her song as their handset ring tones. For example, ‘sa narja’u yawman’, ‘we will be back one day’ has been chosen due to the romanticism it gains among the students. As the Lebanese female singer is highly appreciated in Jordan and her songs receive enough attention from a large sector of the community, where students constitute a considerable percentage, the choice of her songs as ring tones is not strange. The other song of Fairouz, ‘mais al-rim’, ‘the white dear proud swinging gait’ is also installed by some students for romantic implications it has. According to some students, Fairouz plays a major role in motivating and charging students with enough readiness to prepare for classes. Some students have even considered the traditional aspects of her songs as romantically influential, that can attract the other sex’s attention. Some loaded ring tones are also for female singer. For example, the song ‘qasr as-showq’, ‘the castle of love’ for the male singer Marwan Khouri, and a song for Fadl Shakir are also chosen as ring tones by some students. The choice is not only based on the lovely words of the songs, but also on the personality of the singer who has gained enough love from some cellular bearers, notably by the opposite sex.

**Romantic Musical Tones**

Music can be defined as the art of putting sounds together in an attractive manner in order to produce a cohesive composition with a coordinated rhythm. Music can be loud or low by nature, and can have enough attention according to the amusing ear of the listener. Some music has romantic implications, which has encouraged some subjects of the study to download them as a ring tone. To exemplify, the ‘Nostalgia’, which accompanies the song of Yanni has been chosen as a ring tone by some subjects. The reasons behind the
choice are the musical romanticism, and the loud sound of the music. It is generally true to say that young people, like the university students, tend to use loud music which can cope with their age as it gives them energy and power. Still, some subjects have chosen soft music ring tones as they suit their personality and their social background.

Being the food of spirit, some ring tones have gained popularity in Jordan due to their film relatedness. In the past couple of years, Turkish romantic movies have become well-admired and the music accompanying these movies reminds students of the romantic events. According to some subjects, the Turkish music of some romantic films makes them relaxed and stress-free. Some subjects maintain that the romantic feelings incurred by these films’ music reflect their character as mobile phone bearers. As this group of subjects is fond of song-free music, the romantic music has been installed as the standard ring tone; thus, they have prioritized the music over the song with which the musical rhythm is performed. The guitar music which is loaded by some students is another example of students’ willingness to focus on the music and not the songs. In other words, the subjects are musically and not verbally oriented.

**Vibration and Silent Ring Tone**

Unlike some ring tones which can create noisy and irritating atmosphere, silent ring tones and vibration are set by a considerable number of students. The atmosphere of the university sessions, where students sit for classes, has forced itself on the choice of these ring tones. As students are asked to switch off their phones in the class for fear of distracting the class attention, some subjects have resolved an expected problem by choosing silent and vibrating ring tones. Class sessions have thus dictated that students should follow the university regulations which prohibit high ring tones in classes.

Investigating the responses of students, it was found out that some subjects have set the ‘silent’, as a ring tone. They maintain that ring tones are embarrassing during classes not only for the phone bearer but also for the instructor who might penalize a phone-rung student for the unanimously unaccepted behavior. For some subjects, ring tones are not very necessary, and the silent ring tone is planned for and is not on their agendas.

**Religious Ring Tones**

Jordan is a Muslim country though there are some other religious minorities such as Christianity. Some ring tones observed in the study have shown that some students have chosen Qur'anic verses, Prophetic traditions, and Islamic songs in a form of supplication. What might have urged and encouraged some non-Arab Muslims such as Chechens and Circassians to use Islamic religious ring tones is the feeling that they are minorities in the
Jordanian community; this serves to stimulate in Arab Jordanians a sense of solidarity since these minor communities are Muslims in the first place. As stated earlier in the article, religious tones in the form of prayers or Qur’anic verses recited by well-known readers serve the communicative function of signaling a religious identity; that is, belonging to a particular community or group within the larger society.

As students who need all types of help, even the spiritual one, they have set religious ring tones. For example, one of the subjects has maintained that contact with Allah is always necessary, let alone when one wants to succeed in his study; it is the religious belief of reliance on Allah that has motivated such subjects to opt for divine ring tones. Reflection of one’s belief can also be behind some samples’ choice of religious ring tones, as stated by few subjects. What is clear enough is that some students do not feel embarrassed to say publicly that religious identity is illustrated in the phone ring tones, especially in the terrible moments that Muslim nation is passing through, which is another form of relief for the Muslim terrible conditions. Shunning from setting musical tones or songs is due to the fact that such tones are religiously prohibited, and are thus not suitable for college students who resort their success to reliance on Allah, as the first supporter.

**Conclusion**

This study has investigated the tendencies behind the choice of certain ring tones in the Jordanian community, through sampling sixty students at the Department of English, at the Hashemite University, Jordan. The study has shown that the socio-cultural influence is very apparent in the choice of the ring tones, and the diversity of students’ belonging. In other words, nationhood, tribally-based belonging, religious, economic, political, and ethnic orientations were found too explicit in the choice of ring tones. The openness and the cultural contact between the East and West is also found clear as some students have chosen non-Arabic songs and music, not only for the romanticism that they may hold, but for learning new English vocabularies and structures. In addition, as the Turkish movies are very influential on the adult sector of the Jordanian people, especially after the presentation of some romantic ones, some students have installed some Turkish movies’ music to be reminders of the Turkish romantic movies.
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