'You don't have enough letters to make this noise': Arabic speakers' creative engagements with the Roman script

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on data collected primarily among young Egyptians, in this paper I discuss script-fusing – a literacy and semiotic practice of combining letters from two scripts, in this case Arabic and Roman, within a single word. I focus on its employment in digital environments, particularly Twitter, where some Arabic speakers adopt it to stylize their screen names. As a springboard for an analysis of the metalinguistic commentary on this practice, provided by several Twitter users and one Egyptian graphic designer, I offer a historicized interpretive framework for thinking through its creative potential and social semiotics by discussing it against the backdrop of *Franco*, an alternative way of writing Arabic using the Roman script supplemented by digits. Franco practices emerged as a response to technological constraints in the early days of the internet when Arabic script was not supported. This is no longer the case, but Franco has nevertheless not disappeared: not only is it still occasionally used for digital writing, it has also become a literacy resource used in a variety of offline domains. I argue that, instead of becoming redundant for writing Arabic, the Roman script is being further appropriated, resemiotized and aestheticized through acts of fusion with the Arabic script. Its cultural biography in Egypt (and arguably the Arab world) thus shows itself as a trajectory from a practically oriented, often contested, creative working around the technologically-induced lack of script choice, to an aesthetically, and at times ideologically, motivated engagement with the current profusion of linguistic and semiotic resources that are creatively blended together in acts of indexing and, indeed, iconicizing modern Egyptian and Arab cosmopolitanisms.

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1. I am Tahrir

The Egyptian uprising of 2011 started on January 25 and ended Hosni Mubarak's thirty-year-long rule in only eighteen days. When his resignation was announced on February 11, the streets of Cairo and other Egyptian cities erupted in joyous celebrations. I believe no one who celebrated that night could have imagined that six years later the country would be ruled by a dictator comparable to, if not worse than Mubarak.[1] But in those early days, social networks bubbled over with excitement. My Facebook news feed was transformed into a flow of optimistic updates announcing new cultural and artistic initiatives inspired by what at the time looked like the triumph of people power. One such update was a link shared by a friend some ten days after Mubarak's ousting: a Facebook page of a newly founded initiative whose aim was to collect 'art produced during or

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Fig. 1. I AM TAحRIR (©Marwan Imam).

inspired by the January 25 revolution – and not just in digital format'.[2] Their name, in English, was 'I Am Tahrir: The Art of Revolution'. And their logo was striking. Instead of <H>, a stylized, larger than life Arabic letter <ح> was interlaced through 'Tahrir'. Taking over the entire logo yet leaving everything readable, it made Arabic speak, if not chant, through English (Fig. 1).

A common stereotype among non-linguists who do not speak it, is that Arabic is a 'guttural', 'throaty', language. Even though one can easily come up with many counter-examples of meaningful sentences that do not sound 'guttural' at all, it is true that six speech sounds of the rich consonantal inventory of Arabic have their places of articulation in the post-velar areas of the oral cavity. One of them is the voiceless pharyngeal fricative /ħ/, in writing represented by <ح>. If we are to substitute the English sentence of the logo with the corresponding, or more precisely, underlying Arabic sentence, /ana-t-taħrīr/, it becomes audible that the choice of the designer, Marwan Imam, was not at all random. He chose the Arabic letter that represents the sound which is, to use a lay term, one of those 'typically Arabic' sounds—the one to whom <h> doesn't do justice. The <ح> in the logo thus becomes an iconic representation of Arabic (Sebba, 2015), both aurally and visually.

Having been the locus of the mass protests and the focus of intensive media coverage, Cairo's central square, Tahrir (Liberation) Square, had by that time been metonymically constructed as the symbolic 'heart of the Egyptian Revolution'. It became known to many people around the world, even to those who do not speak Arabic and had probably never heard of it before the uprising. Therefore, even without <h>, many a non-speaker of Arabic who knows some English may be able to read the sentence in the logo. This recoverability of <h> is due to the fact that its absolute position was maintained when it was substituted by another glyph (Ryan, 2015): in this case, the one designed to represent a letter from an entirely different script. The logo, however, contains several other elements that multimodally activate subtle cultural references which are lost upon those unfamiliar with Arabic and its sociocultural contexts.

The small '25' underneath <A>, rendered in Eastern Arabic numerals (٢٥), commonly used in Egypt and throughout the Mashreq, indexes the Revolution which started on January 25. Other visible marks point to the sentence 'I am Tahrir' as if it were written in Arabic script – أنا التحرير.[3] Two pairs of dots (one arranged vertically against <I> and above <T>, the other placed under the second <I>) mirror the dots of the corresponding Arabic letters (<ت> /t/ and <ي> /ī/). Interspersed around the Roman letters are some optional orthographic marks that are not commonly found in printed Arabic texts. Only short consonants and long vowels are written in Arabic, and these optional 'points' are occasionally used for marking the short vowels (ـَ fatḥa /a/, ـُ ḍamma /u/, ـِ kasra /i/), the consonant length (ـّ shadda), and the ø-vowel after a consonant (ـْ sukūn). Graphic designers may sometimes employ these points purely decoratively, combining them occasionally with other traditional calligraphic ornaments. Such practice triggers associations with fully pointed texts, like those of the Holy Quran, or old, often illuminated, manuscripts. In this case, however, their decorativeness notwithstanding, these points do reflect the orthographic function they would have in the Arabic sentence if the vowels and long consonants in it were marked —أنا التَّحريرْ. The Arabic name for these signs is harakât (حركات /ħarakāt/) which literally translates into 'movements, motions'. In old manuscripts, especially Quranic manuscripts, these marks are sometimes executed in red ink above and below the main black text. This ancient practice of highlighting some textual elements with the use of coloured inks goes back to pre-Islamic times (Gacek, 2009: 76). Metaphorically speaking, when written in red, the vowel signs become the blood of the text, pumping the life of language through a skeleton of consonants. What is red in this logo is I AM, which creates the effect of the red-white-

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[2] Still available at the time of writing, the page has been inactive for more than five years [https://www.facebook.com/I-Am-Tahrir-The-Art-of-Revolution-180800778629908/].

[3] The Arabic script (used for writing Arabic, as well as several other languages throughout Asia and Africa) is cursive: the letters within a single word are always connected to each other, both in hand-writing and in print. It is written and read from right to left. There are twenty-eight letters (this being the inventory used for writing the Arabic language discussed here), six of which are only connected to the preceding letter, but not the following one. Some letters share the same basic shape and are distinguished from each other by (the number and position of) dots. The basic shape of an isolated/unconnected letter changes depending on the letter's (initial, medial, or final) position within a word (Holes, 2004: 391–396). Here are the 28 Arabic letters in their isolated forms:

ز	ر	ذ	د	خ	ح	ج	ث	ت	ب	ا
ك	ق	ف	غ	ع	ظ	ط	ض	ص	ش	س
					ي	و	ه	ن	م	ل