

Talk and Adult Lebanese Female Friends

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Introduction

Hardly any research on language and gender in general, and women's talk in particular, has been conducted in the Arab or the Lebanese context (see Haeiri, 1997; Sadiqi, 2003; Nelson, Al-Batal, & Echols, 1996). Outside the Arab world, major studies on female friends' talk focused on conversations between children and teenagers (Goodwin, 1982; Goodwin, 1983; Goodwin, 1998; Goodwin, 2002; Hunt, 2005) or married women with children (Coates, 1996; Holmes, 1995; Tannen, 1990). This research study aims at further exploring potential competition for social power by examining levels of support and competition in the talk of adult (unmarried) Lebanese women best friends' gossip, narratives, and discussions. The study examines the levels of support in these best friends' responses to each other in conversations. It also investigates the extent to which these adult women friends recognize or admit that they disagree or compete for popularity or knowledge in their interactions with their best friends.

Booth (2005) suggests that in many parts of the Arab world, women have gained a considerable amount of social power over the centuries - especially by means of the literature they have produced, i.e. by their words. They developed a deep thirst for knowledge, became educated, occupied high and prestigious professional posts, and started to speak their mind and encourage other women to break their shackles and free themselves from gender role expectations.

Jackie Guendouzi (2001) put forward a ground-breaking work on the talk of female best friends, probably the first study that explicitly and exclusively reflected on elements which could signal competition in conversations between female best friends. She said that female best friends share a set of norms. When one of them judges any person based on these norms, she is practicing a slightly more elevated level of power than the other interlocutors. She decides what is considered acceptable and what is unacceptable with respect to intra-group beliefs and norms. She is showing courage by actually articulating this judgment and sharing it with others whom she expects to agree with her.

The present research study is rooted in what the above-mentioned works suggest. Findings suggest that the evolution¹ of which Guendouzi (2001) and Booth (2005) speak has made its way to even the most spontaneous and basic practice: conversation between female best friends. Despite the high level of support adult Lebanese female

1. The evolution that females have experienced on the level of their status in their societies is reflected in their speech. Accordingly, and as far as this research study is concerned, parallel to their elevated power status, female friends' talk has undergone a certain level of transformation in terms of attitude and purpose: from pure support (Coates, 1996; Jones, 1980) to possible challenge for knowledge, power, and popularity through speech (Booth, 2005; Guendouzi, 2001).

friends enjoy in their conversations, competition and challenge are not altogether absent, and knowledge² may be one of the reasons for this phenomenon.

Women Friend's Talk: A Brief Literature Review

Robin Lakoff (1975), Deborah Jones (1980), Deborah Tannen (1980), Janet Holmes (1995), and Jennifer Coates (1996), among others, highlighted the importance of women's talk as a tool for maintaining and strengthening their friendships, establishing rapport and solidarity, and exchanging support. In the new millennium, however, some researchers in the field of language and gender detected elements in the talk of women friends which may not be absolutely supportive (Ardington, 2006; Cameron, 2005; Campbell, 2004; Guendouzi, 2001; Guendouzi, 2004; Hess & Hagen, 2006; Hunt, 2005; Kotthoff, 2006; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006). Their studies focused on some of the conversational elements which earlier research overlooked or discussed cursorily, such as potential competition for knowledge or popularity in the conversations of adult women friends.

Marjorie Goodwin (1982, 1983, 1985, 1990, 1998, 2001, 2002) was among the first researchers to argue that even at an early age, young girls sometimes use unsupportive and even aggressive conversational strategies when the need arises. Young girls at play generally prefer to use supportive and rapport-building, friendly forms such as the collective pronouns "we" and "us" as long as the play environment is safe and conflict-free. However, in the case of conflict, competition and aggression may be manifested in the use of strong directives such as "ADMIT IT" or "SAY IT"³ (Goodwin, 2002; West, 1995) and exclusion from play (Goodwin, 2002).

Studies on the talk of older groups of female friends focused primarily on the narratives they tell in their conversations (Coates 1996; Holmes 1995). Narratives entail recollecting past events through speech (Labov, 1967; Labov, 1997). In women friends' narratives, "mirroring", i.e. telling a story which shows agreement with that of the previous speaker, was identified as one of the main strategies by which interlocutors exchange support. However, while Coates (1996) argued that women's narratives are always mirrored, Holmes (1995) concluded that women friends' responses to each other's narratives may range anywhere on a supportive-unsupportive spectrum.

Besides narratives, gossip – or the evaluation of an absent party's behavior – is another type of conversational content typically associated with the talk of women friends (Campbell, 2004; Guendouzi, 2001; Jones, 1980). Campbell (2004) and Guendouzi (2001) associate gossip with a higher power status even among groups of women friends. When a female gossips, she exhibits deep knowledge of the norms and standards of her group, and gives herself the right to pass judgment accordingly. Furthermore, Campbell states that women's gossip involves challenge and competition for knowledge and popularity. Interlocutors who are more likely to pass judgments – i.e. gossip – are believed to have an elevated level of power compared to the rest of the interlocutors in the conversation; they are considered better – and probably more courageous – experts on what types of behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable based on the system of beliefs and norms that the group of interlocutors – more or less – shares. It is noteworthy that gossip also denotes indirect aggression through attacking someone's reputation (Campbell, 2004; Guendouzi, 2001; Hess & Hagen, 2006).

2. As this research study would later suggest, women may like to exhibit the knowledge they have acquired through their education and their life experiences. They may choose to argue about issues in fields of their expertise; they may pass judgments based on what they have established as a strong system of beliefs and norms. These types of knowledge are assets that women sometimes employ in order to attain their underlying purpose from the conversation.

3. Capitalized words indicate that they have been articulated in a strong imperative tone and intonation.

Atypical to women friends' talk are discussions which are defined as eventless conversational exchanges that involve neither a recollection of events nor the evaluation of an absent party (Coates, 1996). Sally Hunt concluded from a study she conducted in 2005 on college roommates' talk that discussions are a means by which women friends compare and contrast their outlook on several issues pertaining to their lives, culture and experiences. Women friends, she said, feel free to explicitly agree or disagree with each other in their discussions, and any disagreement is frequently met by laughter and humor. Adkins (2002) suggests that disagreement involves a level of competition for knowledge in a certain field.

Summing up, it can be observed that research on language and gender has so far shown that women friends' talk is not exclusively supportive; there are elements in women friends' gossip, narratives and discussions which may introduce a certain level of competition for power, popularity or knowledge into the conversation (Cameron, 2005; Campbell, 2004; Guendouzi, 2001; Hess & Hagen, 2006; Hunt, 2005; West, 1995). These elements may not be detected in the way a woman initiates talk as much as in the way women friends respond to each other in a conversation (Holmes, 1995).

Objectives and Methodology of the Study

This study seeks to examine the types and frequencies of supportive and unsupportive reactions to gossip, narratives, and discussions in the conversations of adult Lebanese women friends. It compares the frequencies of these three types of conversational content and explores the topics that each type involves. Furthermore, it sheds light on the relationship between women's talk and their friendships. It also investigates the participants' beliefs concerning disagreement or conflict in their conversations.

The study deals with a group of females that is underrepresented in the literature, namely 25-30 year-old single Lebanese females. Thirty-five Lebanese females who belong to this age group were asked to participate in the study, twenty-eight of whom agreed to participate (seven females declined). The group is homogeneous in terms of educational background: all 28 females are holders of Bachelor's or Master's degrees from the American University of Beirut or the Lebanese American University. They all live and work – full-time or part-time in Beirut. Their hang-out zones are the same cafés, restaurants, or pubs in Beirut – mainly around Hamra or Ashrafieh areas.

After signing an Informed Consent Form whereby they officially expressed their readiness to participate in this research study, the twenty-eight participants (who are pairs and groups of best friends) tape-recorded their conversations. Studies on language and gender suggest that the most reliable results can only be concluded through the analysis of naturally occurring speech (Coates, 1996). After conversations were recorded and transcribed according to Coates (1996) key for transcription, a corpus of approximately 9 hours and 30 minutes of naturally-occurring conversations between adult women best friends was developed. The recording process started at the end of November 2008, and the last conversation was delivered mid March 2009. By the end of June 2009, transcriptions were fully ready for analysis.

The method of analysis of the corpus, similar to that in Coates (1996) and Hunt (2005), entailed a careful isolation of instances of gossip, narratives, and discussions based on

elements which constitute each of these types of conversational content respectively (see Table 1 and Table 2).

Table 1. Elements of Gossip Based on Eggins and Slade (1997) & Guendouzi (2001)

Elements of Gossip	Definition
An absent party	A person who is carrying out a behavior which is evaluated by interlocutor(s) as deviant from the norm
Substantiating behavior	The supporting information the speaker uses to prove that she is right and to elicit agreement from the other interlocutors in the conversation that the absent party's behavior is deviant
Pejorative evaluations	Other examples provided by the initial speaker or other interlocutors to further illustrate how the absent party's behavior was deviant
Probe (s)	Questions that are asked to further investigate the situation and evaluate the behavior of the absent party
Wrap-up	A final comment or judgment which briefly summarizes the situation and its evaluation

Table 2. Elements of a Narrative Based on Labov (1997)

Elements of a narrative	Definition
Abstract	An opening clause which introduces the narrative and which may help listeners predict its upcoming organization, topic, and relevance to the conversation
Orientation	Specifications of the place and time of the narrative as well as the people involved and their initial performance
Complicating action	The following behavior or event that would answer the question "so what happened?"
Coda	A follow-up on the events; a closing section which relates the narrative to the current conversation and which would answer the question "and what happened afterwards?"
Evaluation	Information on the results of the behaviors and actions in the narrative and how they are related to human life – a narrator assesses events by weighing what happened against what should happen or what should have happened (fiction is compared to fact)

Discussions are what could be categorized as neither gossip nor narrative. A conversation could start as gossip or narrative and develop into a discussion about a more global or abstract concept (Coates, 1996; Holmes, 1997). Holmes (1997) suggests that not all speech exchanges take the form of stories. Speakers may merely discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a certain object or behavior in what Holmes labels as “storyless interactions” or discussions (Holmes, 1997, p. 266). Yet, no example of discussions was mentioned in any of the leading works on female friends’ conversations. This may be considered as one of the limitations of the literature on women’s talk which rarely – or never actually – explored this type of conversation; the literature mainly focused on narratives and gossip as these are considered arenas for sharing and support.

After instances of gossip, narratives, and discussions were isolated in each conversation, a quantitative investigation of their frequencies took place. It is noteworthy at this point that in some instances, the three types of conversational content would overlap. That is, for example, sometimes in a narrative, an instance of gossip would occur, and the narrative would then evolve into a discussion. In this case, each type was counted once, i.e. one single conversation or chunk of a conversation entailed an instance of gossip, a narrative, and a discussion. Based on Holmes (1995), responses to each instance were investigated in terms of support, lack of support, or neutrality. For example, if a participant gossiped about an absent party and the listeners agreed, the answer would be considered as supportive. If the absent party was defended, the answer would be considered as unsupportive. A neutral response would occur for instance when the listener says that she is unfamiliar with the party who is the subject of gossip.

Afterwards, topics in each type of conversational content were examined. A list was prepared as to the topics and content of the participants’ gossip, narratives, and discussions. The analysis and conclusions were drawn from the frequencies and the topics in the corpus, which were compared to those in earlier studies, mostly Coates (1996), Holmes (1995), and Guendouzi (2001). These studies are the ones most relevant: Coates’s study highlights a high level of support in women friends’ talk (Coates, 1996); Holmes’s suggests the possibility of neutrality and the lack of support in women friends’ conversations (Holmes, 1995); Guendouzi’s study argues that unsupportive conversational behaviors can characterize women best friends’ talk (Guendouzi, 2001).

In addition to the above-mentioned corpus, semi-structured ethnographical interviews were carried out with ten of the participants based also on Coates (1996, pp. 17-19). The interviews basically investigated the nature of the friendships the participants in this study shared with their best friend(s), their reflections on their conversations, and their beliefs with regards to conflict and competition between best friends. These interviews aimed at showing how participants differentiated between a best friend and other types of friends or acquaintances. The researcher stopped interviewing participants when the answers to the questions started to become repetitive.

Results and Conclusions

Table 3 summarizes the findings concerning the frequency of each type of conversational content in the corpus: gossip, narratives, and discussions.

Table 3. Frequencies of Gossip, Narratives, and Discussions in the Corpus

Type of Conversational Content	Frequency	Corresponding Percentage
Gossip	62	18.51 %
Narratives	111	33.13 %
Discussions	162	48.36 %
Total	335	100%

Neutral, supportive, and unsupportive responses to gossip, narratives, and discussions were detected in the participants' conversations. Table 4 provides a statistical overview of these responses.

Table 4. Neutral, Supportive, and Unsupportive Responses to Gossip, Narratives, and Discussions in the Corpus

Type/ Total in Corpus	Response (Frequency / Approximate Percentage)		
	Neutral	Supportive	Unsupportive
Gossip / 62 (100%)	0 (0%)	48 (77.4 %)	14 (22.6 %)
Narrative / 111 (100%)	15 (13.5%)	81 (73%)	15 (13.5 %)
Discussion / 162 (100%)	50 (31 %)	75 (46.3 %)	37 (22.7 %)

Gossip was never met with neutrality in the corpus. In 77.4 percent of the overall instances of gossip, the participants' responses to each other were supportive. This support involved adding pejorative adjectives to the speaker's judgment, or providing further examples that illustrate how the absent individual's behavior was deviant. For example, a female would complain about a guy who did not call her back after a date saying that he is rude; her friend would echo negative descriptions of his behavior such as saying that he is dumb not to call her back, or jokingly saying that he has multiple personalities and that it was his other personality who didn't make the call. Participants responded to 22.6 percent of the gossip instances in the corpus in an unsupportive manner. These unsupportive reactions took the form of explicit disagreement with a speaker concerning her judgment or of direct defense of the individual who is the subject of gossip.

Narratives also represent a type of conversational content in which the level of support is high; 73 percent of the total narratives in the corpus were met by agreement with the narrator. For example, a speaker narrated the story of how her family is forcing her to meet suitors. The listener mirrored by narrating an unpleasant experience with a suitor she was forced to meet. Both speakers concluded this part of their conversation with how depressing they found the whole suitor-meeting experience. Interlocutors reacted to 13.5 percent of the narratives in the corpus in an unsupportive manner. They sometimes told narratives with conclusions that contradict the ones reached by a previous interlocutor, or explicitly disagreed with an "evaluation" element of a

speaker's narrative. For instance, a speaker narrated how uncomfortable it made her to go out with a couple she knew who were not on good terms with each other. She said that they fight in cafes and restaurants and embarrass her. The other speaker narrated many instances whereby she went out with the same couple yet she always spent a good time with them. In 13.5 percent of the narratives, interlocutor's reactions were considered neutral as they basically involved asking questions to fill in the blanks of the narrative with no clear indication of agreement or disagreement.

As the frequencies indicate, and unexpectedly, discussions represent the most frequent type of conversational content in the corpus. Thirty one percent of the discussions in the corpus involved neither supportive nor unsupportive responses; they comprised neutral conversational exchanges on general themes and topics. For example, two friends with medical backgrounds discussed types of medicines usually used for psychological disorders and their side effects. Another discussion was about diets or educational programs. Discussions also involved series of questions and answers by which participants exchanged information and updates. Discussions in the corpus also seem to be a medium in which the participants felt free to express disagreement. For instance, one of the participants would list reasons why she should stay in her job while her best friend would give her reasons why she should not do so. The ratio of discussions met with agreement to those met with disagreement in the corpus is approximately 2:1.

As can be concluded, narratives and gossip comprise the types of conversational content in which the participants in this study showed the highest levels of support for each other; participants were more compelled to agree with each other in gossip and narratives than in discussions. Gossip elicited more unsupportive reactions than did narratives. The frequencies of unsupportive reactions to gossip and discussions were approximately the same. Discussions involved the highest level of neutrality where neither supportive nor unsupportive reactions were detected.

Topics in Women Friends' Talk

This study has shown that topics in women friends' talk may range from mundane activities, such as buying tennis shoes, to very particular and technical issues, such as the difference between two psychological disorders. The participants' conversations involved general topics such as diet and saving money, embarrassing situations such as getting dumped by a romantic partner, sensitive issues such as religion and politics, and technical discussions pertaining to medicine or philosophy for instance. These women's talk extensively involved the people in their lives: romantic partners, family members, bosses, colleagues, classmates, friends, acquaintances, and less frequently even total strangers.

The interviewed participants in this study indicated that they expected their best friends to update them with their latest news. Interviewees expected that they would depart from their encounters with their best friends having discussed all the details pertaining to at least each other's personal lives (dating habits and experiences, updates on intimate partners, nostalgia for an ex-boyfriend, romantic feelings and emotions), work (work environments, relationships with colleagues and bosses), study (study plans and habits), family (news and lifestyles of family members), and

sometimes finances (expenses, saving money, loans, and credit card bills). They sought and gave opinions and advice on issues related to their everyday experiences such as work, study, fashion, weight loss, and new places to visit. They discussed personal development, weddings, employment, immigration, sex, money, health concerns, business, and philosophy. They “nagged” and “complained” about male partners, emotional dilemmas, singlehood, pressure to get married, as well as menstrual pain and stress. They reflected on their past experiences, reminisced about their shared memories and explained how they have changed over time. Interviewees also mentioned how they projected by expressing future ambitions, hopes, and dreams, and reflected on their fear of their growing responsibilities. Less frequently, women discussed politics, pets, desserts, and hair removal.

Talk and Women’s Friendships

Talk is a form of social action. It is one of the main activities during which the participants in this study practised, maintained, and nurtured their friendships. Interviewed participants indicated that they meet their best friends over coffee, a meal, or even a cigarette. They talk at the beach or at the beauty salon. They have conversations before and after they watch a movie, a play, a concert, or any cultural event. They are culturally active. They talk over music and a drink at pubs and night clubs, or during in-door gatherings. They talk on a regular basis, face to face, on the phone, or via the internet. In the interview, women friends indicated that they make an effort to maintain their friendships.

When the interviewees defined friendship, most of them did so in terms of talk itself: “friendship is a relationship where you can disclose”; “friendship is a relationship between two people in which they are both understanding and non-judgmental”; “friendship involves being supportive of others even if you think that your best friend is making a mistake. It is about giving her advice but also accepting her final decisions”; “friendship is when two people trust in each other, respect each other, care for each other, and tell each other everything”, “friendship is when two people connect to each other”; “friendship is when two people enjoy each other’s company, have a meaningful and interesting conversation, share experiences and memories, and do nice gestures to show how much they value each other”. One of the interviewees mentioned that “a best friend is someone who would not judge you even if you said ‘the taxi driver is a hottie!!!’”. The interviewees suggested that talk with their best friends is special because it is intimate. It reflects how these friends understand one another, identify with each other and share experiences. It is a chance for them to “get things off [their] chest and feel better without having to worry about the consequences”. An interviewee mentioned that a woman friend can be more understanding than others because it is likely that she has gone through a similar experience. Talk with best friends, as the interviewees reported, involves a high level of knowing what a woman wants to say without having to say it, and listening attentively to a woman elaborate on an issue which others may consider trivial. Talk is the means through which women friends exchange “genuine support even if [they] are not as right as [they] think [they] are!”⁴

4. All these quotations are authentic testimonies from the semi-structured ethnographical interviews conducted with the participants.

However, two out of the ten interviewees mentioned that they figured out from their experience that no friendship lasts forever. They justified this point by explaining that

because people have different personalities, some are unable to forgive and forget when the slightest misunderstanding or conflict takes place. These two interviewees reported that they had faced bad experiences with individuals whom they considered their best friends. These bad experiences were attributed to “serious differences” in the way the interviewees and their best friends deal with problems or react to situations.

Sharing the same values and interests comprised the main component of the interviewee’s friendships. When asked about the key components of her relationship with her best friend, one interviewee said: “I believe that a best friend is someone you have lots of resemblance with, be it in personality or in background, such as childhood or teenage memories, or perhaps a common way of thinking. It’s the resemblance with the other person that makes you feel like revealing all about yourself to your best friend because you know that you won’t shock her since she thinks the same way you do”. Three of the interviewees enjoyed the history they shared with their best friends, which created inside jokes and a special vocabulary that are exclusive to their friendships. Findings from the analysis of the corpus support this claim.

Conflict, Support, and Women Friends’ Talk

When asked if conflict ever comes up in their conversations with their best friends, interviewees’ answers varied significantly. Some indicated that conflict is a natural part of any interpersonal relation, and would just eventually surface with time because people’s personalities and moods vary and change. Others claim that they are unable to recall a single instance of conflict in their conversations with their best friends. Interviewees reported that conflicts arise because of “difference in expectations”, “hormonal fluctuations”, and “deception and betrayal”. Four interviewees mentioned that not keeping a secret is one of the conflicts which usually end friendships. Two interviewees mentioned that they would stop arguing if a conflict takes place because persisting will make the conflict more serious and jeopardize friendship. Two other interviewees described their conflicts with their best friends in a dramatic manner; one mentioned that “upon conflict, voices are raised, and there is an exchange of harsh yet truthful words. But then the conflict is resolved on the spot, even if we both stick to our opinions. We just agree that this issue is something we see differently and leave it at the point when attempts to change each other’s minds don’t work”. One interviewee mentioned that she has a complex personality and prefers to take a distance from any friend with whom she faces repetitive conflicts. Hence, most interviewees in this study admit that conflict may be a natural constituent of their relationships with their best friends, and it creates moments of tension yet does not terminate their friendship.

Analysis of the corpus⁵ indicates that disagreement, competition, and conflict may take place in participants’ talk despite the high levels of support and sharing. Interviewees also highlight that resolving conflicts with best friends is a skill that women friends learn when doing friendships. Because they know their best friends very well, women friends apply this knowledge to avoid conflict and to resolve it when it takes place. A few interviewees reported that frequent disagreement, challenge, or competition in a conversation with a particular friend may signal that this friendship may lack basic components such as trust. They said that if a woman discovers that she shares very few beliefs, values, and interests with another woman, she may decide to end the friendship or distance herself, even if the two women had known each other for a long

5. All reference to “the corpus” in this research study is concerned with the - approximately - 9 hours and 30 minutes of naturally-occurring conversations between adult Lebanese women best friends. The conversations were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed, and based on them, the conclusions of this study were made as the researcher mapped findings to the literature.

time. The majority of the interviewees indicated that they continuously, cautiously, and consciously protect and nourish their friendships with their best friends.

Comparing what the participants reported in the ethnographical interviews with findings from the analysis of the recorded conversations, indicated that conflict and disagreement did actually come up in these conversations. However, the corpus also reflected the close connections, shared histories, and high levels of support among these participants. Discussions comprised the type of conversational content most frequent in the corpus, and also represented an arena that required less support and allowed more disagreement. Levels of support in narratives and gossip were considerably higher than agreement in discussions. Agreement, support, and mirroring seem to be necessary requirements whenever narratives or gossip came up in these best friends' conversations.

Talk and the Female Gender Role

In the Lebanese culture, women between 25 and 30 years of age are expected to find a partner to whom they can eventually get married. To satisfy these expectations, females generally associate themselves with the social roles of "wife" and "mother". In this study, participants neither completely distanced themselves from these social roles nor did they exactly associate themselves with them.

In some of the conversations in the corpus, interlocutors expressed their resentment towards not being able to meet some of the female gender role expectations in their culture. Single participants expressed their need to find romantic partners. It was concluded from many of the conversations in the corpus that participants frequently complained about failed romantic relationships with men; the participants attributed this to negative qualities in the personalities of the men they usually meet and date. Given that these females are not afraid to speak their mind, they believe that this is one of the possible reasons that push men away from them. According to some of the participants, men prefer calmer, meeker, and more agreeable females. In many of the conversations, moreover, women presented themselves as victims who suffered from men's carelessness, infidelity, and instability.

The participants were evidently seeking romantic relationships that could be lasting and serious. Because of many failed attempts, participants repeatedly questioned their expectations towards their romantic partners, especially when it came to personality traits and age. Participants basically discussed, evaluated, and compared what makes a man an adequate romantic partner for each of them; fidelity, generosity, intelligence, handsomeness, financial situation, extroversion vs. introversion, and future goals were some of the commonly discussed characteristics.

Although they continuously expressed their need to find adequate romantic partners, participants did not explicitly discuss wanting to get married. The idea of marriage came up when the participants were discussing the marital relationships of other people or the pressures imposed upon them by their parents. Gender role expectations towards marriage in particular seemed to provoke participants' sense of uncertainty. Participants' perspectives varied between acceptance, rejection, and confusion. Most participants affirmed that what they were seeking were basically relationships that

may - at a later stage - evolve into marriage. Moreover, they did not try to associate themselves with typical female social roles such as “wife” and “mother”. Based on the discussions, there seems to be a strong correlation between the participants’ inability to find adequate romantic partners and their dissociation from the idea of marriage. Besides, complaining about unsuccessful romantic relationships and dissociation from the female gender role “wife” seemed to be recurrent in many of the conversations in the corpus. The fact that participants never discussed the idea of building a family or having children in the whole corpus indicates the possibility that they might have dissociated themselves from the gender roles “wife” and “mother”.

Jennifer Coates (1996) identified women friends’ talk as the environment where women feel the most comfortable to challenge expectations. Some participants in this study challenged female gender role expectations in some of the topics of their conversations. Participants discussed practices that are associated with shame and disgrace in the Lebanese culture such as cohabitation, premarital sex, and having children outside wedlock. They sometimes made several references as to how these behaviors would infuriate their mothers. Women in the corpus rarely or never actually expressed their desire to become mothers. Hence, participants enjoyed a level of freedom to challenge, negotiate, and reject norms in their conversations with their best friends.

Another means by which women in this study challenged expectations is their choice of vocabulary. Participants used profanities quite often in their conversations with their best friends as findings in the results section suggest. These conversations gave them the chance to be spontaneous and even to transgress boundaries placed by their society on their talk. This use of profanities such as *sharmuta* (i.e. whore), *kess emmo* (a swear word cursing one’s mother), *kess ekhta* (a swear word cursing one’s sister), *w air* (i.e. dick), and “fuck”, in addition to others may be the participants’ means to associate themselves with men who represent the sex with the higher social status. They did not feel the need to conform to more polite forms of language which according to the literature (in Tannen, 1990 for example) are typical of female speech.

Challenge and Competition in Women Friends’ Talk

Participants in this study liked to show their knowledge whenever they felt that they had expertise pertaining to a topic that came up in their conversations. This knowledge may be personal or technical. As findings suggest, participants exhibited their knowledge about types of medications, psychological disorders, computers, and philosophical concepts, among others. Moreover, interlocutors in the corpus frequently gave each other advice. Hence, women in this study did not hesitate to display their knowledge and expertise whenever they had the chance to do so, and especially during discussions.

Another way the participants in this study seemed to claim popularity is by knowing what to say and how to say it. Popularity as Guendouzi (2001) defines it is an elevated level of likeability over other interlocutors in a conversation based on a higher level of knowledge in a certain area. Coates (1996) indicates that women establish a deep connection because they have deep knowledge of what the speaker expects or likes to hear. Interlocutors in this study probably tried to gain a higher level of popularity

by making each other laugh for example. Glenn (1992), as well as Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (2006) highlight the role of the ability to make others laugh in elevating a speaker's status. Hence, through their conversations, best friends in this study continuously sent to one another direct or indirect messages which could be indicators of different levels of power or status. They challenged each other by expressing their opinions and showing their knowledge; they competed for popularity by making each other laugh. They questioned the levels of trust that their friendships entail. They reassured each other concerning their shared values and histories. They continuously spoke their mind and gave each other advice. They experimented with female gender role expectations in their society, questioning them, discussing how much they are willing to conform and sometimes defying them at least in their talk. Popularity was sought and established through different strategies and in different intensities depending on the company, the topic, the situation, etc. A deeper psychosocial analysis of the relationship between popularity and talk may be an interesting topic for future research investigations.

Conclusion

This research study has shed light on the talk of participants who seem to make-up a female sub-culture on their own, one that is underrepresented in the literature on women's talk and that does not necessarily resemble other subcultures of females from younger or older age groups in terms of speech. These educated females have been out and about, and have acquired rich knowledge from their education and life experiences that they seemingly do not hesitate to exhibit and negotiate.

The participants' talk typically resembled neither the speech of their older counterparts in studies by Coates (1996) and Holmes (1995) nor that of younger generations of teenage or adolescent females (see Goodwin, 1985, 1990, 1998, 2000, 2001, and 2002 and Cheshire, 1998).

The participants' speech partially resembled that of teenagers and adolescents in terms of the evidently rebellious attitude against norms and expectations. This attitude is mostly evident in the excessive use of profanities and the discussion of topics atypical to women's talk in the corpus; these conversational behaviors have been typically attributed to the talk of men rather than women (Tannen, 1990). Moreover, using linguistic forms that are associated with men's speech could be these women's means of associating themselves with the sex which enjoys a higher level of power status in society. Additionally, some practices that are frowned upon or even totally rejected in the Lebanese society such as cohabitation were discussed by some of the participants.

Findings from this research study have implications that are related to women's status in a post-feminist world where Arab women are more educated, knowledgeable, and accomplished, and where they enjoy a wider range of choices and a higher power status than before, as suggested by Booth (2005). Alternatively, Coates (1996) suggests that unlike mixed sex conversations where women feel the need to conform to gender role expectations, women friends' talk is a comfortable environment to break rules and challenge expectations while exchanging support.

The talk of the participants in this study is highly – yet not exclusively – supportive;

even among women best friends, talk can be cooperative or competitive. Gossip for instance seems to introduce a certain level of challenge or competition for popularity into a conversation. Some interlocutors felt free to control the norms by passing a judgment at an absent party. Gossip usually brought about a great deal of laughter into the conversation. When participants unleashed their creativity in their evaluations of absent parties, it may have been their means of attaining a higher level of popularity through entertaining and inducing more laughter. Such competitive functions of some conversational behaviors like gossip have been obscured in many studies on women friends' talk. Competition however rarely seems to create any tension in the conversations provided that support was more evident and more frequent in the corpus than the lack of support or neutrality. In many of the participants' conversations, humor and laughter accompanied reactions to competitive elements such as gossip and disagreement; laughter was also the response to talk about embarrassing situations. A deeper understanding of the laughter that comes along bonding among these women may reveal valuable information as to what makes a good laugh in this sub-culture.

Support, the over-arching element in the corpus, was found to be proportional to the level of intimacy of the topic discussed, which would explain why gossip and narratives elicited significantly more supportive responses from interlocutors compared to discussions. So, chunks of the participants' conversations which were categorized as discussions rather than gossip (no evaluation of absent party) or narratives (no chronological recount of events) did not necessarily elicit supportive reactions from participants. Participants felt free to agree or disagree with each other based on their beliefs and experiences.

It seems that in female best friends' groups, the more personal, confidential, or judgmental the speakers' conversation content, the higher the level of support required on behalf of interlocutors who are listening to this speaker. For instance, pejorative evaluations of absent parties present some threats of potential embarrassment on behalf of the speaker unless listeners react cooperatively. Agreement and support serve as a reassurance that interlocutors share the same set of values. Similarly, mirroring a narrative is a marker of deep understanding and a reminder of shared experiences and histories among best friends in this study. Coates (1996) presents mirroring as one of the most supportive conversational strategies among women friends.

Conclusions from this study were derived from a corpus of 9.5 hours of the naturally occurring talk of 28 females, unlike other studies which base their conclusions on very brief excerpts of the talk of four or five participants (Sally Hunt based her 2005 study on a 9-minute excerpt of the talk of college roommates). The corpus may provide rich substance for other studies on content or structural elements of women friends' talk. This group of young, educated, and empowered participants may constitute a sub-culture that is highly worthy of exploring especially in terms of the uniqueness of their identities as reflected in their speech.

These females are considered to have knowledge and they are not afraid to show, negotiate, and sometimes defend it. They would pass judgments based on the strong system of beliefs that they associate themselves with; they expect their female best friends to support them as this system of beliefs is usually shared. They narrate stories

about their controversial life experiences, their romantic relationships, and their daily endeavors as they look life in the face and try to find what they are looking for in terms of career and education, what they are searching for in a partner, family member, friend, etc. Their female friends reciprocate by telling similar stories. A deeper connection is established every time a female feels that her best friend understands exactly what she is talking about as she has been through the same – or a similar – experience. They discuss topics of their expertise: medicine, psychology, philosophy, writing, teaching, etc. Along the way, and although they seem to be looking for stable romantic relationships, they do not necessarily aspire to hegemonic images of femininity or play docile female roles in their society.

This study reinforces the importance of support in female friends' groups, something the literature on women friends' talk has always highlighted (especially Coates, 1996 and Tannen, 1990). It seems that support is one of the prerequisites of a friendship when it comes to females. The findings have also established that in a conversation, female friends sometimes feel free to react to each other with neutrality (Holmes, 1995) or even disagreement and challenge (Guendouzi, 2001). As Guendouzi (2001) suggests, this lack of support could represent a means by which a woman grants herself an elevated level of power status compared to her best friends with whom she is conversing. Support may be absent from parts of the conversations (mostly in discussions as the findings suggest), yet this does not threaten the friendship because the conversation is a free and comfortable arena for this disagreement to happen. Finally, this research study fills a gap in the literature on two basic levels. First, and as mentioned above, it examines a female profile that is underrepresented in the literature. Second, it introduces discussions, a new type of conversational content abundant in female conversations but rarely examined or discussed in the literature.

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