Chapter 12
Intertextuality and Constructing Islamic Identities Online
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ABSTRACT
This chapter explores, from a sociolinguistic perspective, the role that the Internet plays in the online discursive construction of the Islamic religious identity of an enlightener. It does so by examining chatroom conversations between a man with a disability from the Islamic Arabian country, Oman and individuals of diverse religious backgrounds and nationalities with whom he frequently chats. The chapter illustrates how an enlightener identity is constructed through juxtaposing two contrastive religious identities: a liberal identity (when interacting with other Muslims) and a far more traditional one (when interacting with non-Muslims). The findings of the study suggest that the Internet is helping transform many Islamic discourses from being “authoritative,” i.e., unquestioned, to being “internally persuasive,” i.e., open for debate (Bakhtin, 1981). The analysis also reveals how the Internet is offering new possibilities regarding the constitution of an Islamic identity while additionally posing increasingly poignant questions about the role of Islamic religious leaders in this digital age.

INTRODUCTION
In his anthropological analysis of new media technology use in Arabia, Anderson (1999) states that the Internet has caused changes in what it means to be an Arab. What the Internet has done in particular, Anderson explains, is that it gave its users (a) an unaccustomed measure of agency and self-authorization and (b) the freedom to sample alternative authoritative role models. This newfound freedom resulted in loosening boundaries between Arab youth and authoritative figures—especially religious figures, who traditionally control access to and interpretation of religious texts. New media technology also has accentuated diversity within the Arabic nation, especially religious diversity. Specifically, Eickelman (1989) has argued that even introducing cassette tapes to Arab countries in

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-773-2.ch012
the 1980s created changes in how Arab Muslims practiced religion (as was the case in Oman): Cassette tapes made it possible to move sermons from being owned by few religious figures to belonging to the masses. This was an early step in creating a diversity of religious views, questioning religious authority, and distributing religious knowledge. Such steps, in turn, have led to the creation of self-authorized new interpreters of religious texts.

In this chapter, I conduct a sociolinguistic analysis of the discursive construction of the identity of one of these new types of interpreters in the context of chatroom discourse involving both Muslims and non-Muslims. This new religious identity is that of an "enlightener," whose sole mission is to elucidate the true essence of Islam to Muslims themselves. In my data, it is a 38-year-old quadriplegic man named Yahya from the Islamic Arab country Oman who creates this online interpreter identity. Yahya was a participant in a longitudinal ethnographic study I conducted from 2003 to 2006 to examine the relationship between technology and disability. Analyzing his online interactions over a lengthy period has enabled me to shed light on how several "local" identities can be used together and juxtaposed in an intertextual fashion to create a more complex one. In this chapter, I also provide qualitative documentation of the changes that Muslim religious texts and discourses have undergone as a result of the Internet. Since this is a qualitative sociolinguistic study, questions pertaining to its validity as a research method are addressed in the concluding remarks of this chapter.

The contributions of this study are manifold. From its conception, the field of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been fraught with the question of how identities (personal or social) have been affected or changed by the Internet, given its supposed facilitation of identity play. Yet, we still do not always know specifically the nature of these transformations. One reason could be that the nature of identity itself is complex (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004). That is why identity is best examined not through quantitative analyses alone, as has been the custom in CMC, but also by qualitative means to capture its complicated essence. Thus, while there are many studies that look at the relationship between identity and the Internet, few provide a detailed analysis of the nature of this relation. In this chapter, I fill in this gap in CMC research by conducting a qualitative analysis of one of the changes the Internet is causing in the manifestation of the Muslim identity. This analysis is particularly relevant in this day and age when Muslims’ identities are under constant scrutiny.

INTERTEXTUALITY AND IDENTITY

The term ‘intertextuality’ was first introduced in English by Kristeva (1967/1986) based on her interpretations of Bakhtin’s (1981, 1986) notion of dialogicality. The basic idea of intertextuality is that all texts—oral or written—consist of numerous “intertextual weavings” of what Becker (1995) calls “prior texts” of different sorts (see e.g., Gordon, 2006, 2009; Tannen, 2007). This view of text as an amalgamation of multiple voices, transformations, and interventions stems from Bakhtin’s realization that in using language, we are constantly mixing our own words with those of others. That is, while texts (in theory) stand alone, in reality, they tie back to previous usages of language and simultaneously anticipate future usages. This traditional definition of intertextuality, however, which limits the idea of dialogicality to texts alone, blinds us to the fact that dialogicality also involves actions. Scollon (2007) thus suggests broadening the concept of intertextuality to include repeating prior actions in addition to texts.1

Two terms related to the concept of intertextuality are Bakhtin’s (1981) authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse. According to Bakhtin, authoritative discourse is the word of
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