SAME BUT DIFFERENT: PERCEPTIONS OF INTERPERSONAL ARGUING IN TWO ARABIC POPULATIONS (UAE & LEBANON)

CHRYSI RAPANTA*
DANY BADRAN**

ABSTRACT
In a region characterized by internal socio-political differences and instabilities, such as the Middle East, the need to study and understand interpersonal arguing is becoming more and more critical. Our focus is on the perception of two socially different populations, the Emirati and the Lebanese, regarding their everyday argumentative interactions. Our sample consisted of 50 Lebanese and 34 Emirati young adults, all of them University students in different majors. The standardised interview used aimed at identifying how people define and perceive the process and outcomes of arguing with one another in different contexts. The Lebanese sample displayed a major understanding of efficient argumentative processes, while the Emiratis seemed more susceptible to the power of the speaker as a prerequisite to success in argumentation. Moreover, the Lebanese mainly defined argument as a process of learning from each other, whereas the Emirati mostly defined it as a fight or strong disagreement leading to an outcome.

Keywords: Argumentation, culture, Middle East, perceptions, grounded theory

INTRODUCTION
“Arguing is a fundamental human activity, perhaps the primary means of coming to new understandings” (Hample, 2005; p. 1). Together with explaining, arguing is a main tool for constructing social reality, since it is the process of reasoning that people apply in order to “make sense of their worlds, and (perhaps) impose that sense on other people” (Antaki, 1994; p. 1).

* College of Business, Zayed University, PO BOX 19282, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, e-mail: chrysi.rapanta@zu.ac.ae
** School of Arts and Sciences, Department of English, Lebanese American University, PO BOX 135053, Beirut, Lebanon, e-mail: dany.badrani@lau.edu.lb
Definitions of what arguing is could be grossly classified into those that focus on argument as a product (type1 argument in O’Keefe’s definition) and argument as a process (type2 argument, O’Keefe, 1992). In the first case, the main focus is on defining those components and structures internal to what people express, whether in written or oral form. Arguments are then analysed using linguistic and logic-based methods. In the second case, focus is on the complex synergy of components that make the process of argumentation more successful or less so. These components are normally defined using a variety of approaches, including cognitive, dialectical, rhetorical, pragma-dialectical, socio-political, as well as others. In this paper, our use of the term ‘arguing’ includes both definitions of argument (as product and as process) with particular focus on the action of presenting reasons in order to defend one’s ideas.

Arguing can also be both intrapersonal and interpersonal. The former refers to cases in which reality is socially and logically constructed in the mind of a person. The latter focuses on a communicative situation in which at least two people are involved. An argumentative perspective on communication “involves the study of reason given by people as justification for acts, beliefs, attitudes and values” (McBath, 1984, p. 5). On the other hand, not all interpersonal arguing follows rules of successful communicative interaction. That depends on what each of the interactants involved defines as the goal of this interaction and the possible means to achieve it. A first distinction refers to perceiving arguing as a constructive interaction or as a quarrel. These are two different communicative situations with different goals. As Hample (2005) explains, “the point of dialogic arguing is to move toward resolution; it is stimulated by the perception of opposition, and its means are evidence, weighing and integration” (p. 18). Also, according to Walton (1989), “all dialogue arises from a problem, difference of opinion, or question to be resolved that has two sides” (p. 10). Hence, a quarrel is a type of dialogue which starts from a state of emotional disquiet and has the ‘hitting’ out at the other as its main goal (Walton, 1989). And so, all types of dialogue, including a quarrel, might include an argumentation element. However, if the appropriate rules and methods of argumentation are not honoured by both participants, this might lead to a series of personal attacks, to an absence of the listening component, or even to physical harm as a means of imposing oneself. Alternatively, constructive interpersonal arguing is associated with successful problem solving, deep learning, reflection, collaboration, and other states of positive socio-cognitive growth.

With this polarity in mind, the Middle East comes across as an interesting testing ground due to its history of conflicts (especially in the last three decades) and mainly because of the variety of religious, social and political thoughts and movements (see Rafizadeh, 2011 for an overview). As the strive for freedom and democracy has been a major motive for people feeling oppressed, arguing has been an important means of
interaction in different forms. Yet the term itself is by no means an easy one to conceptualize nor is the active application of it easy to bridge into real life situations. In fact, our personal experience of conducting debate trainings with numerous Arab students and activists in different parts of the Arab world, confirms that the terms ‘debate’ and ‘argument’ are generally misconceived and are, in most cases, linked with violence. In the first instance, ‘debate’ is generally confused either with the more circular type of ‘talks’ or ‘discussions’ that have no proper structural basis nor make-up, or with an activity that inadvertently leads to violent outcomes as most Arab television talk shows present (the most famous example of which being the popular Aljazeera show entitled “The Opposite Sense”).

The same ill-defined image emerges when someone attempts to define the qualities of Arabic argumentation as a linguistic strategy aiming at convincing an audience of the truth of an opinion. Although Western traditions place a great emphasis on logic and counter-argumentation, Arabs tend to apply a rhetorical strategy described as presentation, which consists of “repeating, rephrasing, clothing and reclothing one’s request or claim in changing cadences of words” (Johnstone Koch, 1983; p. 48). This repetition in form of paratactic sentences creates presence, which means that the arguer speaks to the heart of the opponent, through “bringing rhetorical claims into the affective present” (Johnstone Koch, 1987; p. 95). However, the adoption of such strategies that mostly depend on the moment of the arguing or the character of the arguer rather than the effective goals and components of argumentation as process and arguments as products does not guarantee consistency in the definition of what constitutes a good argument for a specific dialogical context.

Hence, the present paper addresses this confusion and potential differences in perceptions towards interpersonal arguing, internal to the Arab region. It focuses on two Arabic-speaking populations, living in two Middle-eastern regions (the United Arab Emirates and Lebanon) with different realities and a contrastive past and present. Compared to Lebanon, the UAE is considered to be a more conservative society with all locals following the Islamic religion and law (sharia). At the same time, the two biggest Emirates, i.e. Dubai and Abu Dhabi, have become multicultural hubs for different nationalities and types of immigrants, with the very rich living together with the very poor. Yet interestingly, while the integration of Western business models and media in the life of the locals, especially in Dubai, has led to a convergence of western attitudes and beliefs, it has not really affected core behaviors of the locals in this Islamic society, such as the gender segregation (Hills & Atkins, 2013). Lebanon, on the other hand, is more of a westernized country; highly multicultural and multi-religious in nature, with 18 officially recognized religious groups (United States Department of State, 2011). Historically, Lebanon was a financial hub in the Middle East and was a top tourist destination especially in the 1960s and early 70s. Unfortunately, changes in demographics mainly due to the Palestinian influx of refugees to Lebanon in the late 40s, 50s and 60s led to a predominantly Sunni uprising against the Christian, west-
Same But Different: Perceptions of Interpersonal Arguing In Two Arabic Populations (UAE & Lebanon)

oriented president in 1958 and eventually to a 15-year civil war in 1975. Currently, Lebanon continues to face sharp divisions within the governing parties especially since the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011.

METHOD

The aims of this research are to describe the perceptions of interpersonal arguing among young adults in Lebanon and UAE, and to identify any comparable patterns that differentiate the two populations. Our hypothesis is that given the different historical, linguistic, religious and socio-cultural and political exposures of the two populations, the Lebanese would perceive arguing differently and probably more deeply than the Emiratis.

Data Collection

The method we chose as most appropriate for the data collection is the standardized interview. This method allows for scheduled probes and, therefore, comparable answers between the participants (Berg, 2001). Moreover, in comparison to self-response instruments, in standardized or structured interview, “there is the opportunity for the interviewer to interpret questions, clear up misunderstandings, or even gather data from those not fully literate in the designers´ language -for example, in cross-cultural studies” (Black, 1999; p. 238).

As the topic of arguing might be considered as sensitive, especially in the more conservative UAE, due to its implied relation with democracy and democratic values, we opted for two ways to increase the participants´ sincere and bias-free response. Firstly, we asked locals (three trained research assistants) to conduct the interviews on their compatriots with possible explanations in Arabic when appropriate. Secondly, we asked all three assistants to follow exactly the same format and order of questions, to avoid any misinterpretations from part of the participants.

The total number of interviewees was 84 (50 Lebanese and 34 Emirati), all University undergraduates in different majors and from both genders. The reason why the UAE sample was smaller was due to difficulties in hiring a male assistant to complete the task. For this reason, the females are more than the males in the Emirati sample since it is necessary for the interviewer to be of the same sex as the interviewee in the UAE.

The questions used were based on recent cross-cultural research, which aims at identifying attitudes towards interpersonal arguing in different cultural populations, such as India, China, and the United States (e.g. Hample & Anagondahalli, 2014; Xie, Hample, & Wang, 2014). However, all these studies use quantitative methods. To our
knowledge, the research in this paper is the first effort to use qualitative methods in describing how people from different cultural backgrounds perceive arguing. Due to an absence of similar studies, we designed our interview on the basis of the quantitative instruments used in the previously mentioned studies, and more precisely on the scales of argument framing, motives, and influence on personal relations (for more information on these scales see Hample, Warner, & Young, 2009).

**Data Analysis**

According to Brown and Yule (1983), the cognitive structuring of ideas, especially when it comes to the thematic organization of sentences, does not necessarily follow linearity. This, in the case of an interview, implies that an answer to a question might be found in the answer to another question, or that pieces of answers might form a thematic category that would interest the researcher more than the actual answer to a question. Especially in the case where the topic of interpersonal arguing is ill-defined and cultural-specific, we expected a certain circularity in the thematic categories to emerge together with several inter-connections within the discourse. This is why the grounded theory and especially the constant comparative method (CCM) seemed most appropriate for our data.

Applying the grounded theory steps to the analysis of interviews (Boeije, 2002), we performed the following comparisons to the data:

1. Searching for criteria of comparison within the same interview
2. Comparing the criteria found in one interview with others in the same sample
3. Defining codes for all criteria
4. Comparing codes among them, in the same interview, and between interviews
5. After all codes are identified and classified according to the criteria, comparing interviews of the same group and between different groups

In the end we came up with five criteria for comparison and 50 codes, among which some of the most frequent were: fight/quarrel (60/84), different perceptions/viewpoints (44/84), prove oneself/someone right/wrong (41/84).

**FINDINGS**

The first major finding, which confirmed our hypothesis, was that two clearly different patterns of perceiving interpersonal arguing emerged among the participants and these were distributed unequally in the two populations, implying that the difference might be due to distinct socio-cultural and political realities of the two countries.
More precisely, a first clear distinction was observed between participants who believe that arguing is about fighting and quarrelling and those who do not. This was expressed only by one out of 50 Lebanese participants, whereas it appeared with a high frequency (16 out of 34) among the Emiratis. This finding was also confirmed by approaching the issue from the opposite sense. While 27 out of 50 Lebanese agreed that a calm discussion leading to an agreement corresponds to an argument, only 7 (out of 34) Emiratis saw the same thing. Paradoxically, of these 7 participants, 2 claimed that arguing is also about fighting. This perspective was consolidated mainly by the Emiratis who consistently pointed out that it is the outcome of the argument which is the deciding factor in whether arguing is seen as a positive or negative experience; i.e. whether the arguer came out ‘winner’ or ‘loser’. Again, interestingly, while the word ‘outcome’ did not appear in the Lebanese sample at all, it emerged 27 times in the transcripts of the Emirati interviews. The Emiratis also described arguing as a process that can start as a discussion and then evolve into a loud disagreement, sometimes including violence. Another interesting pattern for the Emirati sample, was that there is a normative character to arguing, i.e. what argument should be, which is very rarely respected; thus, what argument actually is might more look like a fight. Table 1 shows an example of comparison between a Lebanese and an Emirati perception on the five criteria emerged from our analysis.

Table 1 Two Perspectives of Participants from Lebanon and UAE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria for comparison</th>
<th>An argument is a set of reasons given to support an idea (P17)</th>
<th>Arguing is a disagreement between two people which can end up either with a good outcome or a bad one (P61)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structure components</td>
<td>Reasons/logic, standpoint/idea/opinion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process components</td>
<td>Disagreement, Express oneself/opinion, sharing ideas/learning</td>
<td>Disagreement, Fight/quarrel, problem, one-sidedness, reach agreement/conclusion, different perceptions/viewpoints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influencing factors</td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>Listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types/criteria</td>
<td>Strong vs weak</td>
<td>Professional vs non proper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinctive from</td>
<td>Settlement/compromise, Fight/quarrel, Negotiation</td>
<td>Have the same goals, Anger/emotions/tension</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although reaching an agreement or conclusion was one of the most common process components for both groups, this agreement was more like a settlement or compromise for the Lebanese, while it was the result of imposing oneself on the other for the Emiratis. For the Lebanese, learning and sharing ideas could be itself an important outcome of arguing, whereas the outcome is considered positive for the
winning party and negative for the losing party in the Emirati sample. Table 2 shows representative explanations from the participants regarding the above.

Table 2 Lebanese and Emirati Answers Regarding Outcomes of Arguing on Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you believe that arguments can promote personal and/or professional relationships?</th>
<th>Yes, because when you understand the other and his point of view, your relationship gets better (P21). Yes, because there’d be more interaction between people. This will help them learn from each other, and they learn how to communicate with each other (P17). Yes, because one can get more information. One would be satisfied if he/she listens to the other and gives his/her opinion (P10).</th>
<th>If the person I am arguing with agreed on my opinion and what I have to say about something, then my relationship with that person will for sure strengthen. But if the person I am arguing with thinks I am wrong, then my relationship with him/her will definitively weaken (P64). If I am arguing with someone and I feel that this person is not accepting what I am saying then for sure my relationship with that person will weaken. But if the person is arguing back to me and is starting to be convinced by what I am saying, then my relationship could either stay the same or even strengthen (P22).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

In terms of those factors that influenced the quality of arguing, listening seemed to be one of the most crucial for both groups. The second most frequent factor, related to that, is the person’s character or attitude. However, there was a difference in the perception of the role of the person’s attitude for the two groups: although for the Lebanese (8 out of 50 participants), the person’s attitude was just another factor to take into consideration together with the topic of arguing, for the Emiratis (15 out of 34) it emerged as a deciding factor in influencing the outcome of arguing as being positive or negative. This difference might also explain why the comment “take it personally” only appeared as an obstacle to arguing among the Emiratis, in contrast to the Lebanese who did not mention it at all.

Last but not least, one similarity between the two groups was the implicit reference to power distance as an important contextual dimension in both societies. However, as Table 3 shows, another perceptual difference was evident: although the Lebanese almost exclusively related power distance to work situations, i.e. between managers and employees, for the Emiratis it was more of a shared reality in a variety of life situations. The fact that these notions relate to culture rather than to other variables was also expressed by the participants in several instances, both by the Lebanese (e.g.
“If it’s like children arguing over a toy, like the Lebanese politicians, it would be a fight. If it is civilized, it would be an argument”; “Diplomats are negotiating with one another: if they are like Lebanese, it is no arguments. The Lebanese focus on one point without proof”) and the Emirati (e.g. “In western cultures they would end an argument and give space to each other, but for Arabs it could get physical and rough”).

Table 3 Lebanese and Emirati Implicit References to Power Distance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If there is a disagreement at work, it depends: if it is the employee’s fault because he did not submit something on time, it would be a fight (P11). If there is a disagreement at work, it is an argument to a certain extent. If it is not an argument, then one of them is imposing himself on the others (P12).</th>
<th>If you are arguing with your friends or family members it will be easy going because they know your personality. But for example if you argue with a professor, some professors think that they are always right and if you argue against their opinion they may find it offensive (P57). Since I view argument as a negative thing like shouting and yelling and talking back. I think that it will weaken the relationship for sure especially between a man and women (P60). Another example maybe in a meeting if there is an argument between the employees and the boss after the argument it will weaken the relationship and the employees will have mixed feelings (P65). (People argue) I don’t know maybe to prove that they exist (P66). If I know if I will lose the argument, I would not get into it, and if I am on the weaker side I won’t go through this argument. Some arguments are obvious, so you can’t tell why a red light is a red light (P72).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If there is a disagreement with your boss at work, it had better be an argument not a fight. However, if it is with your co-workers, it may lead to a fight (P13). If there is a disagreement with a boss at work, you cannot defend yourself; the boss is definitely going to win, so it is not an argument (P16). If there is a disagreement with my boss at work, I have no right to say anything; I have to follow his orders (…) If I am the manager, my employees have no reason to argue with me because I can fire them (P18).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

Looking at these findings in the context of the two countries’ social realities, there seem to be some gross contradictions between the emerging patterns regarding arguing and the socio-cultural and political realities, mainly of Lebanon. To begin with, Lebanon has been, and continues to be, a highly unstable country, almost always at the verge of war, whether internal or external. Since its inception in its modern form and after its independence from France in 1943, Lebanon has witnessed numerous violent conflicts including a 15-year civil war that completely devastated the country. More recently, sharp divisions within the government have also placed the country in a power vacuum, almost one year (to date) without a president to the Republic, all as a
result of the power struggle between the pro-Iranian and pro-western socio-political factions. These divisions have, in the recent years, led to numerous assassinations, continually failed talks (mainly sponsored by other Arab nations) and a general absence of any sense of security and stability. In such a context, it is extremely difficult to explain the advanced understanding of the positive elements of argumentation that the Lebanese sample exhibited.

To begin with, there is a semantic/language acquisition element to explaining the differences between the Lebanese and Emirati samples in reference to their different descriptions of the process and structure components of the term. The term ‘arguing’ obviously has more than one sense: one including the violence/fighting/quarrelling aspect; another, the mature evidence-giving and knowledge-enhancing aspects, among others. Yet between these two, the quarrelling sense is the one that children learn first, at least in the context of English as a second or foreign language. This means that until they begin their more advanced academic education (secondary school or even university), the term is used predominantly to reflect the violence sense. Consequently, and since the two senses are almost contradictory in nature, one being more of a lower level emotional reaction, the other a higher level rational activity, it is understandable that the two meanings can still be confused, thus explaining some of the internal, group contradictions that students exhibit in describing the process components of the activity. On the same note, what can further explain this variance is that the level of English of the Lebanese sample is generally better than that of the Emirati, possibly because Lebanon’s school educational systems teach one or two foreign languages starting at grade one, and also keeping in mind that Lebanon is traditionally considered to be a more cosmopolitan and westernized country, whose population sometimes seems more comfortable using English and/or French to express ideas.

Another possible interpretation for the presence of more consistency within the Lebanese sample and less so in the Emirati sample is that many of the Lebanese students who took part in these interviews were at the time taking a course in argumentation and rhetoric. In other words, they were familiar with the main elements and constituents of an argument, and the information was still fresh in their heads. And this explains the contradictions between what is seemingly an overwhelmingly consistent positive attitude to argument and a deep understanding of it on the one hand, and the social reality of a university in a country that is generally dysfunctional when it comes to one of the most argument-prone activity of all: elections. An earlier comparative analysis of argumentative strategies in editorials conducted on Lebanese, Syrian and US newspapers suggests an emerging pattern in the Lebanese editorials which is somewhat transitional in nature: not as circular, repetitive and evidence-lacking as Syrian editorials, but not yet as evidence-based and as counter-argumentative as US editorials (Badran, 2013). This could explain the above mentioned contradictions; i.e. that the Lebanese sample knows enough about the constituents and features of proper arguing but is not yet in a position to apply it fully in their everyday lives. The reality of the country suggests precisely that.
Finally, concerning the differences in perception of power distance between the two groups, this is yet another clear reflection of a society in transition (the Lebanese) vs. a more conservative Arab society (the Emirati). While it is undeniable that power distance does exist in situations beyond the workplace, the choice of the Lebanese sample to point out that situation exclusively in their interview is a clear indication of the current will of the youth to move towards a western-like society where personal or family connections play less of a determining role in one’s life. What stands out, however, is their reference to politicians’ practices as an example of improper argument. That particular perception of power distance is clearly different than in the Emirates.

From the Emiratis’ point of view, arguing resembles a continuum of which one side is a discussion and the other side a fight. For them, both are sides of the same coin, as the same situation might turn out to be a quarrel. What matters, in the end, is the outcome of arguing. This view is related to the pragmatic view of arguing described in Mercier (2013) as being expressed by the Chinese philosophers in contrast to the Greeks, who give emphasis to deductive arguments eligible to convince a large audience of the truth or right of an opinion. Being pragmatic in arguing means that pursuing a given course of action determines the scope of the argument. Another interesting aspect that emerged in the Emirati sample is the danger of taking argument personally as it might harm relationships. This attitude might be related to the extreme value that Emiratis give to their families, as result of their recent Bedouin past, but also to their fear of losing face, or of making others lose face through insulting them (Merkin & Ramadan, 2010).

**CONCLUSION**

As a conclusion, it can be said that there was an evident degree of sociocultural influence on the perceptions of interpersonal arguing as expressed by Middle Eastern participants. This result can be read through a cross-cultural as well as an educational research paradigm. From a cultural perspective, we believe that a person’s arguing perceptions and patterns are clearly influenced by the social and political contexts. As Mercier puts it, “when it comes to argumentation, an important part of the context is made of the arguments one hears being produced and evaluated. These arguments can influence one’s own argument production and evaluation in different ways” (p. 408). However, and again from a cultural perspective, what we feel has generally been lacking in current studies is a clear account of the variety in Arab sub-cultures that need to be differentiated in regard to how they reason, argue and behave. The case of Lebanon and the UAE is a clear indication of real differences that exist.

From an educational perspective, one of the variables that might have led to the differences which emerged between the two groups is the fact that the Lebanese sample had a recent exposure to argument teaching. Of course, the positive effects of explicit training on general argumentative skills among young adults has been shown elsewhere. Nonetheless, more research is necessary to be able to identify any possible influence on how people define and perceive arguing, especially in the Middle Eastern region where constructive arguing is of crucial importance in political negotiations.
Debate training, for example, is a promising starting point in attempting to change the perception of power distance influence especially on women and possibly to lead to their empowerment and leadership self-efficacy.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to thank our student research assistants (Ms. Stephanie Estephan Farah, Ms. Zeina Al Deeb, and Ms. Shamsa Faisal Al Mualla) for their excellent work in conducting the interviews; also, Professor Dale Hample for some initial discussions on the subject that also led to the questions of the interview used. Also, this work was possible due to the Research Incentive Fund (R14028) granted to the first author from Zayed University, Office of Research.
REFERENCES


