

LOST IN TRANSLATION

PROLOGUE

There's a nice saying in French, “Un homme qui sait deux langues en vaut deux”, meaning “A man who knows two languages is worth two [men]¹”. I always assumed the saying was meant to place emphasis on empowerment through education and learning languages. The more languages you learn, the more cultured you get, and the more people you can communicate with. For me that was the extent of it, until one evening about a year ago.

Upon my father's request, I was hosting a young cousin of his from Syria who happened to be visiting Boston. We spent the day in the city, then headed back to the dorms where I introduced him to some friends of mine. His general unease with navigating the English language was apparent. But apart from the occasional finger-snapping and “how do you say”, he did get along quite well with one friend in particular, with sporadic intervention on my part to add an idea or fill in a language gap. And then at one point during the evening, when I was translating my own thoughts to English after having just expressed them in Arabic, I noticed something that struck me as very odd. It occurred to me that there was something different between the way I was conveying my idea in Arabic and how I was conveying it in English. It was as though I had a slightly different demeanor in English.

I guess it could have just been a sociological thing. I suppose much of our communication with people builds upon our shared experiences, and whatever I had in common with my friend from New York probably wouldn't always hit too close to home with my friend from Aleppo. But still, something felt off.

1 Presumably, two men who speak one language each.

Have you ever been in the middle of a conversation with a bilingual friend when all of a sudden their “other” friends stop by, or their parents call? It's not enough for you to pretend you know the words to make it all seem completely familiar. Try it. There's something about their character that goes different when they shift language gears.

And for the first time ever, I noticed that I did it too.

I suppose sometimes you get that feeling, when you're straddling two different cultures, that you're two different people depending on what language you're speaking in. And rather than using those pieces of yourself to build something that's greater than the sum of its parts, you just end up juggling the two different “you”s. And then all you have to do is make sure you're juggling them right.

Then if anyone ever asks which part of you is the real you, you just give an answer that's so vague you may as well have said nothing at all.

But it *is* a nice question to know the answer to. How do you reconcile the influence of two different cultures when you're trying to define your own identity?

It's a big question, but I won't even bother to try to answer it in the essay that follows; I'm better off leaving that to the professionals. Instead, I'll just dance around it a little bit. I've found that things tend to become more familiar once you've danced around them for a while.

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I. 1999

“Hooligans!”, I thought. “They're absolute hooligans! Look at them, jumping around, acting like monkeys. You call that dancing?!”

I am an American. Texas. Football. Barbeques. Malls. Denim Jeans. Y'all.

My dad's from Lebanon, and my mom's Syrian, but I was born *in America*. I live in America, I go to school in America, I am from America.

... which is why I really don't appreciate my parents plucking me out of my world and moving me to Lebanon. What am I going to do in the Middle East? Nope, no thank you, I'll pass.

Unfortunately I was only eight, and – little known fact – when you're eight, your parents own you.

The day after I finished the second grade, my parents broke the news that we were moving to Lebanon. And move we did.

From the minute we stepped out of the airport I knew I would hate it there: The crazy driving and the littering on the streets and the lack of personal boundaries and the old men with the really dry hands that kept doing wet triple-kisses on my cheeks and the fact that nobody knew what Magic School Bus was. Then there were the relentless elderly women who *insisted* on feeding me even when I was truly, honestly full, and my mother's male cousins, who, in their TV-based fascination of American culture, would keep asking me about blonde people who were

actually born blonde, and whether I had “peanut-better-than-jelly” for breakfast, like those guys in that movie. Then there's the songs in a language I barely speak, each of which seems to go on for an hour and a half, and the dancing. What's up with the dancing? Why does everybody hold hands to make a big circle and then start doing those athletic kicks? And it gets crazier and more uncontrollable as the song goes on. If *I* started dancing around like that in our living room, my dad would tell me to stop acting like a monkey, but he's sitting right across the table from me, and he seems to be enjoying it. Double standards, man, they're everywhere.

And whatever happened to the Macarena?

Five days later summer school started.

I walked into class an hour late. It was this large but humid room that was packed with students pretending to be awake. There were posters on the walls with inscriptions that reminded me of the Menu cover in that Indian restaurant in Dallas, but given the context, it was more reasonable that these inscriptions were in Arabic.

They were already on second period now: French. The teacher was this tall, dark-haired emaciated woman. She looked mean and spoke sharp French, and for some reason, struck me as a chain-smoker.

Five hours, two teachers, and a dozen “je peux aller aux toilettes?” later, class was finally over. The language still ringing in my head, I stepped out of class and saw this kid leaning against the wall, drawing a Harry Potter sketch on his notebook. I walked up to him and started talking to him in English; he was pretty engaging: calm, nice, interesting. After a while a few more of his friends joined the conversation, which quickly shifted to the fact that I was American. They thought I was interesting, exotic even. “Let's get some food from downstairs”,

one girl suggested. We went down to the kiosk and one kid exclaimed, “oh, cheese pizza” – “Yes! Finally something I can relate to!”, I thought – “... or you could check out the mana'eesh, they're pretty amazing.” He buys one for himself, and lets me have a bite. “Hmm, interesting...”

Fast-forward ten years.

I'm almost 18, and I've been living in this country for the past decade. I know I was the “American kid” when I first got here, but I've been here for a while now. My whole world is here. Arabic is now my main language and after ten years of being soaked in the environment, this culture is just as much mine as it is the next guy's. I love my country's folklore, my literature of choice is old Arabic poetry from the Andalusian era, my favorite dishes are all Middle Eastern, and when I have the time, there's nothing in the world like kicking back to some good old 1960s Lebanese music. And each song is like an hour and a half long. How relaxing.

I vaguely remember a time when I couldn't speak Arabic or French. I don't really know how I communicated with my parents – Arabic seems to be such a defining feature in our relationship. I've fallen in love with old Arabic books, and I think hamburgers are what you eat when your mom or grandma aren't around to make you that heavenly dish we mortals call mjaddra. I remember Dallas vaguely. I think I had a friend named Matt, and then we met another Matt who we just called Matthew to avoid confusion, and there was something about how kids who weren't too ready to go to the first grade would go instead to this other grade called prima-something. I know a lot about the history of Lebanon but very little about American history. I do know that one of the presidents was called Herbert Hoover, although I think I got that from Home Alone 2.

I was born in the West but for some reason or another, I feel very Eastern now.

And it doesn't help that I'm about to go off to America for college. I don't know if I can live in that culture anymore; so much has happened in the past ten years. I've probably missed out on so much.

I am Lebanese. Hummus. Dabkeh. Mountains. Football (the other one). Gibran Kahlil. Weird throat sounds. I think they're called velar fricatives.

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Now it would be nice to talk about how the world completely flipped upside down when I came to America. But let's be honest, we live in a time of globalization. The move back to the US was largely culture-shock free. No overwhelming disorientation, no catastrophic Inspector Clouseau-like miscommunications, and, thanks to this whole Internet business, very little homesickness.

We live in a time of globalization, so it could be kind of difficult to understand what the big deal is. What's the difference? We all have Wikipedia and McDonald's and Nike's and iPhones; it's one world. And to a degree, that's true. We do have similar things at our disposal, but as much as we'd like to pretend otherwise, it's hard to deny that our backgrounds largely influence our attitudes and behavior and outlooks on life. And grab two people from opposite sides of the globe, chances are their backgrounds are very, very different. The collective memory of the Lebanese population of the civil war, foreign occupation, anarchy, and internal strife influences their attitudes and their outlooks on life. It even funnels through to their attitudes on *how* to live their lives. Here's a very brief background that attempts to put this in perspective.

II. LEBANON

a. The Politics

Lebanon is a really interesting country. I think that's the best word I can use to describe it: "Interesting". The reason you'll hear a lot of people call it that is because that's the word you often use to evoke a baffled response. It's the word you use when something shouldn't work in theory, and yet for some reason it seems to be functional. Minimally functional, but functional nonetheless.

Lebanon is in that awkward position of having the eternal "It's Complicated" relationship status. It was under Syrian military control for thirty years until about seven years ago. Syria considers itself Lebanon's big sister; many Lebanese consider Syria that country that just won't leave them alone. Syria is 18 times larger than Lebanon and surrounds it on two sides. For the kind of influence Syria has on Lebanon, think Tom and Jerry but reverse the intelligence quotients. On the other two sides are Israel to the South, with which Lebanon has been at war since 1948, and the Mediterranean Sea to the West, on which Lebanon has not yet declared war. During and before direct Syrian military influence, Lebanon was plunged in a paralyzing civil war for fifteen years and was briefly invaded by the Israelis.

Before that it was the WWII era, and before that, right after WWI, the newly-created League of Nations decided we weren't adult enough to govern ourselves, so they gave us the honor of letting France rule us instead. We were very grateful.

They called it the French "Mandate" and that lasted for about twenty years. Not too shabby, given that before that we were occupied by the Ottoman Turks for four hundred years. We can go even further back in our long history and list our older occupiers. In reverse

chronology, we could speak of the Crusaders, the Arabs, the Romans, the Greeks, the Persians, and the Assyrians. After that we kind of lose track. I wonder why there aren't any "I Occupy Lebanon" T-shirts. Businessmen always say they're looking for sufficiently inclusive products to introduce to the market.

In any case, finally free and sovereign in the 21st century, the Lebanese still seem to have difficulty finding their place in the midst of their surroundings.

Today, Lebanon is roughly an even split between Muslim Sunnis, Muslim Shiites, and Christians, along with other, smaller minorities. This split, and the country's history of political and sectarian struggle, have ushered in a weird interplay of Saudi, Turkish, Syrian, Iranian, French, and American influence.

While many citizens espouse a strictly nationalistic viewpoint, others see their engulfing neighbor Syria as a sister state within a larger nation that only exists in theory. And the two populations do have much in common (not to mention the fact that the majority of Lebanese people have relatives in Syria²). For this group, the borders delineating what constitutes Syria and what constitutes Lebanon today mean very little. They are nothing more than a set of nearly random lines that were drawn out with heavy European influence. Different lines have been drawn out in the past, and still different lines will be drawn out in the future. You'll often hear the opinion "Why should I pledge my allegiance to this side of the border just because a French guy and a British guy got together and decided to draw the line this way and not that way?"^{3,4}

2 I fall under this category. One of my grandparents, for instance, was a Syrian living in Lebanon when the border between the countries was drawn, so he became a Lebanese citizen. His parents and sisters on the other hand, who were still in Syria, were given Syrian citizenship.

3 In the political arena, this point of view was perhaps most bolstered by the Fascist movements of Europe during the earlier part of the previous century.

4 The French guy's name is Picot, the English guy's name is Sykes. The secret agreement that split up the two countries (along with many others) is referred to as the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

Others take this even one step further and, at least on paper, vouch for creating a European Union-like Arab federalism, an ideology commonly referred to as pan-Arabism. This view lies in direct contrast to still a different camp that holds that Lebanon is neither Arab by ethnicity nor by allegiance (this group tends to be friendlier towards France, the “other” self-proclaimed big sister).

The majority of Shiites are in a strong alliance with Iran, whereas the majority of Sunnis tend to be friendlier towards Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Christians are divided no matter how you slice it. Very few Lebanese seem to be in an alliance with Lebanon.

The country is also home to a significant Armenian population, most of whom had fled persecution during the Armenian Genocide that was carried out by Ottoman Turkey⁵, a large Palestinian population, most of whom settled in Lebanon following the establishment of the State of Israel, and many of whom still live in refugee camps. Lebanon also experienced an influx of the Iraqi population following the American war on Iraq, and as we speak, Lebanon is receiving tens of thousands of Syrian refugees each month because of the ongoing civil war in Syria⁶.

In the past ten years the country has experienced a major war, a Sunni Fundamentalist uprising against the Army, a string of high-profile political assassinations, and constant political strife, the roots of which can most directly be attributed to internal divisions and foreign interests, the latter of which never fails to take every advantage of the former.

But it's a great country, you should totally come visit.

5 The Armenian Genocide is believed to have claimed the lives of about 1 to 1.5 million Armenians.

6 Lebanon has a population of 4 million. Current estimates put Lebanon's Armenian population at about 100,000, the Palestinian population at about 400,000, the Iraqi population at about 100,000, and the Syrian population between 200,000 and 500,000 (it's hard to verify because many Syrian refugees are supposedly staying with their Lebanese cousins)

b. The People

Oddly enough, this impossible Boy Scout knot of a country has created one life-loving people. Darwin at his finest. It's amazing what incredibly hostile, stressful, and all-around difficult times will do to a people. When surviving becomes a privilege, you cling on as hard as you can.

Everytime I think about this, I can't help but go back to a very interesting conversation I had some time around 2006 or 2007 with a neighbor two years my senior. This was a conversation that would prove to epitomize the Lebanese spirit.

- Me: Why is everyone saying we don't have school tomorrow? Is it because of the whole election law thing again?
- Neighbor: No, the prime minister resigned, so the cabinet was dissolved.
- We have no cabinet now?
- Nope, and the March 14 Movement is taking to the streets tomorrow...
- In downtown Beirut again?
- Yeah, so schools are out because everyone's afraid they'll start burning tires in the streets like last time.
- ...
- and the March 8 Movement is planning on picketing the elections, so you can expect them to counter with a country-wide strike of their own some time soon.
- Wow, that's terrible... (moment of silence). So what are you going to do tonight?
- Tonight we party!

Out of constant war, political instability, and national strife, emerged this culture of people that couldn't care less. Political strife became part of their daily routine. In fact, most Lebanese people today can't remember a time when they didn't have political problems. If you *were* to give them stability, they probably wouldn't know what to do with it. They'd feel like a chunk of their lives went missing. They'd feel empty and unfulfilled. A serving of politics is just what you have with your coffee in the morning.

I think if you mix that modern, survival-based love for life with the strongly-rooted traditions, family values, and rules of engagement of the old country, you get a fairly good idea of what makes up Lebanon today.

Which brings us to the other half of the recipe, tradition. It's arguable that traditions are necessary for a stable society. They provide for a consistent, close-knit community; they help enrich a civilization and even offer a sense of security. That being said, it's nice not to have to be reminded of them every five minutes of your waking day. Here's one of these hand-me-downs from a conversation I had over the phone with my mother when I first came to MIT.

III. AIYB

- You should offer your friends some chocolate, honey.
- But I just did that.
- No, I mean everybody else.
- Mom, this is America. I'm not supposed to go walking around, knocking on doors with a tray of food everytime I buy something. You're supposed to give them their privacy, they have work to do. Plus, I'm not expected to do that, anyways.

- Well some people here would call that rude.
- Well some people here would call that socialism.
- What? What are you saying? Aiyb.

Aiyb is a word without a real equivalent in English. They don't have it in English because they don't need it in English. It's not a sentiment that typical English-speakers often feel the need to communicate. Literally, it means “flaw”, but it's supposed to imply something between “rude” and “unrefined”.

I suppose it can be translated to “This is not how a civilized, respectful, and socially-aware person would act.” Of course, this phrase has been used so much in Arabic-speaking countries that it's managed to contract itself down to a four-letter word. Sometimes, it feels like a four-letter word.

Anyways, it's something your mom tells you when you don't behave according to tradition and proper decorum.

Examples: (Living in Lebanon, trying to mind my own business).

1. Mom and dad: We have guests over (their guests – not mine). You can't just read a book in your room, you have to sit with us, aiyb!
2. Neighbor to mom: He and his son came in to visit us, and the son sat down and the father was still standing. What an aiyb!
3. Grandma to mom: He's still studying at 2 AM?! He should be asleep right now. Aiyb!
(seriously, grandma?)

Then I come to America...

I really wish I could find a word in English that could somewhat mimic the Aiyb effect. Ah well, I guess it's one of those things that just get lost in translation.

IV. LOST IN TRANSLATION

My school made us read Othello in Arabic once, as part of a sub-series on “Western Literature”, offered within an Arabic class. It must have taken me about a week to drag myself through the pages. It's really hard to read a book when you have to stop every five seconds and count the number of pages left for the chapter to end. I read the book and all the while couldn't help but think about the obvious themes and the dull dialogue; even the lines that could have qualified as a mark of insight or intelligence or elegance seemed so stale and unfulfilled. And the translation seemed fine; it was lucid, easy to follow, even passionately written. It must be the book itself. Granted it's a highly lauded Shakespeare, but I guess it could just be another case of the emperor having no clothes.

A few months after, during a visit by a friend of my father's, a joke⁷ prompted a conversation about Shakespeare and his work. The friend mentioned Othello in passing, at which point I couldn't hide my cringe. My father looked rather surprised. “It's a great book!”, he exclaimed. Funny, I never thought my father would be the type of person to blindly follow the hype over some book. He was usually good at identifying naked emperors.

I found out that my father had an old copy of Othello, in its original Early Modern English, with annotations at the bottom of the page to help the modern speaker. I wasn't too busy

⁷ The joke is mostly a play on words, and has something to do with systematically showing how all of the world's greatest people are originally Lebanese. The name Shakespeare, according to the joke, is just an anglicization of the playwright's real name, the sheikh Isbir.

that weekend so I thought I'd read through the first few pages. By Sunday night, I had arrived at the last page. I remember rereading the last paragraphs a few times in an effort to postpone the end of the book, eventually letting go, scanning through the first few pages, and thinking to myself, "Beautiful."

Something always gets lost in the translation.

Of course, the problem isn't always the lack of appropriate words to translate to. It just seems that some general truths that are held in one language don't always generalize easily to all other languages. Differences in our cultural upbringings sometimes make it difficult to translate values, traditions, jokes, and even emotions to another language without losing some luster. Music is supposed to be a universal language, and even that doesn't carry over easily all the time. What is beautiful and sublime in one culture may seem, at first glance, corny and unappealing in another.

And I think that's where the role of tolerance comes in, as far as human interactions go. We're always talking about being "tolerant" of others, meaning, understanding and accepting of those who aren't completely like us, and yet we rarely stop to think about what that means, exactly. I think understanding this concept of beauty being lost in the translation is a big part of what makes a person tolerant. When listening to an Arabic Muwashah or the Irish Londonderry Air or the African Shosholoza, a tolerant person doesn't just respect the tune because they're supposed to respect it, even though they think the song is stupid and the tune is awful. A truly tolerant person accepts that it's beautiful without really knowing why. An intolerant person refuses to do so.

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But when you're part of both cultures, there comes a time when it starts to feel like a conflict of interest. It's time to pick one. People aren't too evolutionarily equipped with culture-juggling.

It's important to note, though, that the dilemma of self-identification isn't unique to a few isolated cases, and this is especially true in a country as diverse and expansive as the United States. If I was born in Illinois but raised in California because my dad's company reassigned him there, while the rest of his family is still in New York, and my mom's from Maine, and we're Irish Catholic with a little bit of Swedish and some Native American, and I'm so in love with the Godfather I have a map of Sicily hanging off my wall, where does that make me from?⁸

There's rarely an easy answer, and it's probably not because the answer is hard. It might just be because there is no answer at all.

Given the amount of cultural mixing that's had to happen to produce us, attributing ourselves to a particular people or a piece of land or a group of some sort is largely a personal choice. You get to choose what you want to be, and you assign yourself to a certain culture or group of people based on where your values are. I never really realized that until I had a conversation with a man much more intelligent than me.

8 Answer: Not Sicily

V. THE BACKSTORY

It was never really that good, but towards the end of the Turkish Empire, persecution of Lebanese and Syrian nationalists got really bad. It was 1915 and Lebanon was going through one of its worst hells.

The Ottoman Sultan had sided with the Germans in what was being called the Great War, as a result of which men from Lebanon and Syria (who were under Turkish rule) were being drafted to join the Turkish army. Meanwhile, the Lebanese and Syrians, following a string of massacres carried out by Turkish soldiers, began secretly planning for a revolt against their occupiers. When the Ottomans became suspicious of this, the Ottoman army invaded Lebanon, abolished civil liberties, instituted military court, and the Turkish governor conducted even more mass executions of those suspected of being “enemies” of the Empire. The Ottomans cut off Lebanon from its neighbors, for fear of a potential revolt, and the English fleet surrounded Lebanon from the sea, as the land was under Turkish control.

In April of that same year, a plague of locusts hit Lebanon, totally obliterating all of its crops for the next several years. The Ottomans would not let any food in from the land, the English fleet would certainly not allow for anything to be passed in from the sea, and no food could be grown from the inside. Mass famine ensued in what would become one of the darkest years in Lebanon's recent history. The plague, extreme scarcity of nourishment, and the absence of physicians (who were taken to care for the Turkish army) led to epidemic typhus, typhoid, and dysentery. Lebanon lost a third of its population to starvation. Bodies were left out on street curbs to rot, and hunting down stray dogs and cats for nourishment became common narrative.

In 1917, my great-grandfather, a young doctor who at that point was living in a village called Akkar, had been drafted to care for the army, and my grandfather, then a child, would be lucky to survive the famine. My great-grandmother would then decide to send off her only son, a six-year old, on a Central American relief ship that had finally been allowed to dock at a Lebanese port. In 1918, my grandfather reached Honduras. Thirty years later, he would return to the Syrian province he was born in, now a country of its own called Lebanon. He would settle down in the city of Tripoli, would learn to speak Arabic, would meet a woman, marry her, and have a baby boy. That would be my father.

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Fast-forward 55 years. I ask my father the question I am always asked in America. From what I remember from this conversation of my over-eagerness and my father's reticence, the conversation translates to something like this:

– So when people ask you, where do you say you're from?

My father is quiet, takes a long breath. He isn't thinking about the right answer. He's thinking about whether he wants to tell me.

– Akkar.

An unexpected response.

– But you weren't raised there.

– Right.

– and you never lived there.

– Yeah.

– And *your* dad wasn't raised there either.

– I know.

– Have you ever been to Akkar?

– Twice.

– When?

– The first time was when I was seven. Grandma took me to the mayor's house so we could get my residency moved to Tripoli. And the second time I was seventeen, for my father's funeral.

– That was like forty years ago.

– Right.

– Do we have any relatives there?

– No.

– Do you know anyone who lives there?

– I don't think so.

– Well did you inherit a small house or a piece of land or something that's there?

– No.

- And we're not originally from there, right?
- No, my grandfather moved there to avoid persecution. He was from Houran. Syria.
- Then why do you say you're from Akkar?

My father is silent for a second. At this point, I'm wondering if I should've asked.

- It's where my father's buried.

You pick what's important to you, and that's how you construct your identity.

And I guess how you identify yourself is subject to change as your values evolve. That means there are no wrong answers. The only wrong answer is believing that the right answer is permanent. At age eight, I knew exactly what I was and what I cared about. Hooligans, I thought they were, because they didn't dance the way I was used to dancing.

Well, now I dance like that.