

The Political Hero Figure in Egyptian Songs: A Linguistic Reading -- With Particular Reference to Jamal Abdel Nasser

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Abstract

The present paper deals with the political hero figure in Egyptian songs from a linguistic perspective. The researcher attempts to cast light on some linguistic features, including even few grammatical ones, which mark the treatment of the political hero figure in Egyptian songs with particular reference to Jamal Abdel Nasser as a case in point. The researcher, thus, adopts an analytical approach and tries to make use of linguistic techniques offered by discourse analysis. The basic hypothesis of the research is that one can learn a lot about political trends, inclinations and developments through even grammatical features that are hardly confined to mere structure and morphological relations. The claim is that through the investigation of such features, it is possible to trace the historical development of such figure across different periods of time that may reflect the political ups and downs in Nasser's life as well as help gain a better understanding of the possible causes and consequences of the rise and fall of Nasser's national project.

Key words: Political heroes; Songs; Idealization; Nasserism; Jamal Abdel Nasser; Grammatical features and their semantic indication; Discourse analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Topic & Significance of the Research

The relationship between music and songs on the one hand and politics and politicians on the other hand can hardly be undermined. Music is both a weapon in the hands of political rulers to enhance their popularity among their subjects and spread their ideological beliefs, and an effective means of protest as well in the hands of opposition leaders and movements on the other hand. Egypt is certainly no exception and the Egyptian revolution of July 1952 was another instance in which music and songs played quite a significant role in supporting the new regime with its radical and revolutionary ideas amongst the Egyptians, particularly during the fifties and early sixties of the twentieth century. The most popular singers in Egypt during the second half of the twentieth century were Umm Kulthum (1898–1975), Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab (1901–91), and Abd al-Halim Hafiz (1929–77) (Podeh, Elie and Winckler, Onn, 2004, p.325). Their songs, especially Abdel Halim's, may present us with an unintentional yet a fair historical record of the ups and downs of the July revolution and its leader Jamal Abdel Nasser. The present paper deals with the political hero figure image in Egyptian songs with a particular reference to Nasser from a basically discorsal and linguistic perspective.

Objectives of the Research

The research deals with some linguistic and/or grammatical features that manifest themselves in the treatment of the political hero figure in a representative sample of Egyptian songs with particular reference to Jamal Abdel Nasser as a case in point. The researcher even aspires to use these features in casting light on the historical development of such a national figure across different periods of time that may reflect the political ups and downs in Nasser's life as well as help to gain a better understand-

ing of the possible causes and consequences of the rise and fall of Nasser's national project.

Method of the Research

The researcher adopts an analytical approach and tries to make use of linguistic techniques offered by discourse analysis. Original Arabic lyrics, texts and lines of poetry are available in appendixes while all translations have been made by the researcher.

Hypothesis of the Research

The basic hypothesis of the research is that we can learn a good deal about the political history of a given nation through tracing exploring the Discoursal feature of the political hero figure in its songs, even within those linguistic features that may seem to be merely confined to syntactic and morphological relations, such as an agent versus a direct object or the use of an adjective rather than a noun and vice versa. The present paper is an attempt to investigate the validity of these hypotheses with a particular reference to the development image of Jamal Abdel Nasser as an example of the political hero figure in Egyptian songs.

Scope of the Research

The present research is confined to the study of Egyptian songs dealing with late Jamal Abdel Nasser as a case in point of the political hero figure in the period from 1952 to 1967. For limitations of space and time, the researcher confines the research to 3 songs that may be fairly regarded not only as an authentic sample but also a typically representative one. Two songs by Abdel Halim Hafez, who was usually considered the voice of the July revolution, were selected by the research. The first one, "We are the People", is usually referred to as the first song he sang for Jamal Abdel Nasser after the latter had been elected as the new president of the republic in the mid fifties of last century. That song also derives more importance from the fact that it was the first musical work that involved Egyptian Arabic poet Salah Jahine, the composer Kamal Al Taweel and Abdel Halim Hafez. These three shared most of Halim's national and patriotic songs that were the most influential at that time, and had actually remained so for many years later. The other song by Abdel Halim was composed and performed in 1966, shortly before the 6th of June 1967 catastrophic war between 3 Arab countries on the one hand and Israel on the other. The third song, coming in the middle in-between the two songs of Abdel Halim, is that of the famous Mohamed Abd al-Wahhab who also enjoyed recognition as a famous singer and composer. Yet while he was quite "popular before the revolution ... Abd al-Halim Hafiz grew with the revolution" (Podeh, Elie and Winckler, Onn, 2004, p.325).

A SNAPSHOT AT RELEVANT LITERATURE

The relationship between songs and politics can hardly be overestimated. Since the early beginnings of human civilization, perhaps, music has been quite effectively employed in the emotional advocacy of new ideas, movements and trends of thought, as well as the glorification of certain public figures on the one hand and the undermining of others on the other hand. As puts it, "since music is made by human beings, it cannot but be a manifestation of human experience- of the problems and despair, the triumphs and joys which are an integral part of living together in particular social context" (Simon Frith, 1989, p.viii)

Political Heroes of the Sixties

According to Z in HubPages in his article "Songs of Protest, Revolution & Change in America 80", there is a real connection between the kind of person one is and the kind of heroes one witnesses while growing up. "The heroes of the sixties produced a sixties' person" (<http://tomz.hubpages.com/hub/protestsongs>). There were different kinds of heroes in the sixties. Most important were the music heroes. Many of the young people's first thoughts then were focused on non-violence, individualism, justice, and the establishment came from the sixties' music. Artists such as like Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel also spoke out against injustice, violence, and deception. Their music was joyful and up lifting and at the same time they criticized the plastic mentality that held reign in the fifties. They sang about the beginning of change. Their song, The Boxer, showed that the lessons that we learned in school in the fifties were all lies. Their Sounds of Silence rang out for truth and individual freedom. There was Joan Baez, Jannis Joplin, The Grateful Dead, Moody Blues, Pete Seeger, Chicago, Blood, Sweat, and Tears, The Beatles, and many more folk rock musicians who filled the air waves blowing out the signs of change. The Sixties music sang of change, growth, justice, and non-violence.

A sixties person, he goes on, is one who does not fit into any general definition. He or she is very individualistic. Back in the sixties, the young men and women then thought of themselves as unique one-time creations. Sixties people tended to be more gentle and romantic; they were against violence and war. They tended to be more into individualistic religiousness and rather opposed to the views of the established religious institutions. Sixties people have believed in concepts that lead them to believe that, "Everything they tell you is a lie... Everything!" (<http://coyjay.hubpages.com/hub/Comparing-the-Heroes-of-the-Sixties-with-Todays-Heroes>).

Maybe we, in the Arab World in general and Egypt in particular, can say the same about ourselves, our songs

and our heroes What is an Egyptian sixties person then? Most probably, a typical sixties Egyptian would have been a believer in Pan Arabism, Arab Nationalism, social justice, secularism but first and above all, maybe quite unfortunately so, in the miraculous potentials of Abdel Nasser to turn dust into gold, to jump with the whole Arab nation from the dark ages of the Ottoman empire into the second half of the twentieth century, with his enthusiasm and ours as well, rather than with the bare facts of what we can and what we can not. Was it only a dream, an illusion, an act of self-deceit or a false image sold to the people through the propaganda machine of the charismatic leader, with songs and music as one of the most effective weapons as it were in the media campaign to glorify and even, eventually, both idealize and idolize Jamal Abdel Nasser?

In fact, "The link between Nasserism and popular culture was nowhere as salient as in the field of music. Gabriel Rosenbaum shows how Umm Kulthum, Abd al-Halim Hafiz, and Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, all of whom were personally acquainted with Nasser" (Podeh, Elie and Winckler, Onn, 2004, p.23).

Political Heroes

Choosing political heroes is sometimes dangerous and often fairly partisan. So in Britain Conservatives usually choose Winston Churchill (conveniently overlooking the fact that he moved with comparative ease across party lines in his younger career) or Margaret Thatcher. Socialists often choose Nye Bevan or Atlee. Liberals probably choose Jo Grimond who brought their party back from the dead or Paddy Ashdown who remade it.

Cicero has a wider range of political heroes. As philosophers, JS Mill, John Locke, Kant and, to some degree, Friedrich von Hayek capture a philosophical defiance of tyranny. Amongst British political leaders, John Hampden, one of the five members who stood up to the tyranny of Charles I, is sometimes seen as a proto-Liberal. Pitt the Elder, who spoke for the freedom of the American colonists against the foolish authority of George III stands as a giant of a later century. For the nineteenth century, Gladstone, whose rousing speeches during the Midlothian campaign awoke the conscience of Britain over the Bulgarian atrocities stands out as a great man and a great Prime Minister. Then perhaps John Bright and Richard Cobden, who were the first real campaigners for free trade. In the twentieth century, FDR for his personal courage as well as Churchill for his glorious rhetoric in the face of Hitler. Tomas Masaryk, the apostle of Liberal nationalism and Jaan Tonisson, the Estonian leader who spoke for Europe a hundred years ahead of its time. Of course, more conventionally, Cicero also approves of Ghandi and Nelson Mandela. For moral courage, Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish poet or Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright, are both also great heroes to many people.

Villains are often much more obvious and easier to

determine: Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Hitler, Benito Mussolini and Stalin are all vile murderers and their crimes are unfortunately typically human! Heroes are usually more difficult to identify. For several western minds somebody like Mao-tse-Tung is seen as a villain, but for many others he was a hero. In our part of the world too, Saddam and even Muammar Gaddafi may be regarded as national icons by some people, the researcher by far excluded! In the end the heroes have vision and moral courage; the villains are banal or blinkered.

DISCUSSION & FINDINGS

At the beginning of the July revolution, a famous Egyptian song by Abdel Halim Hafez, who was later regarded as the singing voice of the 1952 revolution, depicted Jamal Abdel Nasser as "the beloved of the people" yet the lyrics start with "We are the people, we are the people; We have chosen you from among the people" in which case Nasser was an object, occurring in the accusative case, whereas "the Egyptian people" per se occur as the agent, in the nominative case.

The Early Days

At the beginning of the July revolution, a famous Egyptian song by Abdel Halim Hafez, who was later regarded as the singing voice of the 1952 revolution, depicted Jamal Abdel Nasser as "the beloved of the people", yet the lyrics start with a reference to the people and not the political hero figure. The lyrics go as follows:

"We are the people

We are the people

We have chosen you from among the people"
(Appendix 1).

In this song, performed by Abdel Halim Hafez, the newly emerging singer at that time, the "people" as such are in the nominative. The ordinary man is the agent, while the leader/hero is in the accusative. It is true the song goes on to describe that hero as "The opener of the gate to freedom" and "The kind-hearted boss, yet he is not the doer of the action here. The leader is an object rather than a subject. He has been chosen by the people. It is also worth noting that there is use of proper nouns in the lyrics of this song at all. There is no reference to the name of the political hero figure in this instance.

After 1954

Now, or rather "then", we witness the rise of Nasser's star as a political hero and a victorious leader, after a few events, among which the following 3 stand as obvious landmarks that have extremely enhanced Nasser's popularity, not only within Egypt but across the whole Arab world as well.

First, there was the unsuccessful attempt at the assassination of Nasser in Mansheyya square in Alexandria. The fact that Nasser appeared as an extremely

courageous man, that had just survived an assassination attempt and yet insisted on continuing his political speech, gained the late Egyptian leader an incredible degree of popularity among common Egyptian people. The masses totally ignored the shift in style and focus in Nasser's speech after the shooting. All that mattered was the fact that he did not, at all, try to escape or secure his own safety. The people totally sympathized with Nasser, even though the continuation of that famous Mansheyya speech seemed almost contrary to the part delivered before the shooting; extremely hysterical and verging on overtly insulting his own people, telling them that "they (his enemies) want Abdel Nasser dead (Note the reference to himself in the third person) because I am the one that has taught you (Egyptians) to be proud, I am the one that has implanted dignity in you"! (See original text in appendix 2 and /or on the official Site of Nasser affiliated with the Bibliotheca Alexandrina- available on the following URL <http://nasser.bibalex.org/Speeches/browser.aspx?SID=263&lang=ar>) The exclamation mark is the researcher's! Well, how complimentary and far from egocentric! Before the shooting started, Nasser was dragging on, focusing on the fact that he belonged to the people, that he was one of the common Egyptian people, and he represented them simply because he was one of them!

Second, there was the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company with the consequent 1956 war that has ended with a political victory of Nasser's regime despite the military crack down of the Egyptian army. It has certainly made of Nasser a national hero for the extreme majority of the Egyptian people, including his originally ideological opponents, such as the Marxists and even some of the Wafd party supporters, despite the suppression of the once most popular Egyptian party by the new 1952 regime.

Third, there comes the union between Egypt and Syria at the request of the Syrian president at that time, late Shukry Al Quatly. That soon failing union had at first ignited a dream of an emerging unified Arab nation that would stand tall among the major powers of the world. That, indeed, made of Nasser a national hero across the entire Arab world.

Now back to songs! In 1958, Mohamed Abdel Wahhab, a first rank Egyptian Arab singer, sings a famous song known as "The Hero of the Revolution". In that song, Nasser, the hero figure, is no longer an object. He is a subject, just as the whole Egyptian people also are! They are equal! The song goes as follows:

"Hero of the revolution
We are with you
You are our protector
And we sacrifice ourselves for you!" (Appendix 3)
Again the exclamation mark is the researcher's.

The hero now is not the product of his people. He is the protector, the beloved and the supporter of them. One may also note the use of a proper noun in this song. The

first name of the hero in question is actually used in the song; "You are our beloved Jamal" - and even the nick name derived from the surname of Jamal as Jamal Abdel Nasser is used though as an adjective rather than a noun in this case. So we have "And you are our supporter, Jamal" (Appendix 4). Note that the surname of Jamal, i.e., Abdel Nasser, literally means "The slave of the Supporter" (Appendix 5) with the "Supporter" here indicating God.

Before 1967

Just before the disastrous end of the Nasserist dream of a strong unified Arab world with the melodramatic defeat of Egypt, Syria and Jordan before the Israeli army in six days, Nasser had already turned into a living myth. He is not only the agent/doer of all actions in the Arab world, but he is almost regarded as THE ARAB WORLD as such. He is no longer simply a hero, but an incarnation of all that is worthy and good in the Arab world altogether! Again Abdel Halim sings in praise of Abdel Nasser, but this time Nasser is addressed as an abstraction. Nasser, the political hero figure is idolized, made almost a demigod. Nasser has become a typically absolute ruler of the country. The dream of democracy has totally faded away. Nasser. Abdel Halim Hafez again sings about Nasser. The song, with a chorus of young kids at the beginning, deals with Nasser not as a man, a human being, but as an abstraction. It goes as follows:

"Nasser, you who are Freedom

Nasser, you who are Patriotism

You who is the spirit / soul of the Arab nation"
(Appendix 6)

Note that in this song the nick name Nasser has been used although. Not as an adjective this time, but as a proper noun. It is quite significant here too to note that Nasser in Arabic is a noun indicating the status of an agent "in Arabic Grammar" and that it is also one of the magnificent names of God "the Supporter". So was that simply a coincidence? May be that was the case. Yet it is a reinforcement of the demigod image and it foreshadows the consequent or rather inevitable result. As Shakespeare's Hector puts it in *Troilus & Cressida* "It is mad idolatry to make the service greater than the gods". Unfortunately that seemed to be exactly the case with Jamal Abdel Nasser by the mid sixties of last century. Well, where has all this led us? The melodramatic yet unfortunately inevitable result was the 1967 farcical war against Israel with its tragic impact on the whole Arab nation. In fact, the researcher maintains that all this may be taken as a fair indication and a forecast of the tragic end of Nasser's regime and the dream of the majority of Arabs at that time to build up a modern, secularist and strong Arab nation.

An Afterword/Aftershock

Now, can we really conclude that the development in the treatment of the political hero figure in this sample of

Egyptian songs simply reflects the change of Nasser from an ambitious young Egyptian patriot into a dictator that has led his country, and the rest of the Arab world, into a farcical and catastrophic war that has marked the end of the Arab national dream to a great extent?

The researcher begs to disagree. I believe it works both ways. The lyrics do not only depict the changes taking place in Nasser's character, but also, partly at least, persuade him to become the dictator he had turned into. Maybe it is a good idea here and now to quote a few lines from Ahmed Hegazy's poem "An Elegy for the Beautiful Age" written on Nasser's death and translated by the researcher:

Who is to carry now the blame for the defeat?

The singer, who went around looking for an incarnation of his dream,

Or the king who claimed the singer's dream has been incarnated in him.

Have I been deceived by your dream so thought you were my long awaited prophet-like hero?

Or were you deceived by my song, and then you did not win

Or were we both of us deceived by the mirage of the beautiful age? (Appendix 7)

Thus we come to the end of this paper, but should it really be the end? The researcher would rather believe, or at least hope it is the beginning. Now, what should one expect to happen in Egypt and in the Arab world after the commonly known now as "The Arab Spring Revolutions"? The researcher firmly deems that a bright future lies ahead of the Arab nation. Yet, to able to reach it, we have to reach for it first; we have to do our

homework. What the Arab people really need to do now is to bear their part of the blame; to acknowledge it. Only then we may be able to avoid repeating our own mistakes, or should we say "political sins"? Our leaders often, if not even all the time, turn into dictators, not only because we let become so, but also because we even persuade them to do so with our mythological tendency to idolize our good men and women; our heroes. Maturity dictates to learn from one's own mistakes and lapses of judgment. Maturity comes through a process of growing up; of bearing our responsibilities. We need no more father-figure leaders. We only need statesmen that are truly chosen by their free citizens, not subjects. Maybe within a couple of decades from now, a research would come out, depicting the development in the treatment of the concepts of democracy, freedom and equality in Arabic songs.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix 1

إحنا الشعب .
إحنا الشعب
واخترناك من قلب الشعب

Appendix 2

فليقتلوني.. فقد وضعت فيكم العزة.. فليقتلوني.. فقد وضعت فيكم الكرامة

Appendix 3

بطل الثورة احنا معاك
انت حمانا واحنا فداك
انت حبيبنا يا جمال
انت ناصرنا يا جمال

Appendix 4

وانت ناصرنا يا جمال .

Appendix 5

عبد الناصر .

Appendix 6

ناصر يا حرية .
ناصر يا وطنية
يا قومية
يا روح الأمة العربية يا ناصر

Appendix 7

من ترى يحمل الآن عبء الهزيمة فينا .
المغني الذي طاف يبحث للحلم عن جسد يرتديه
أم هو الملك المدّعي أن حلم المغني تجسّد فيه
هل خدعت بملكك حتى حسبتك صاحب المنتظر
أم خدعت بأغيتي
وانتظرت الذي وعدتك به ثم لم تنتصر
أم خدعنا معا بسراب الزمن الجميل؟!