Identities in early Arabic journalism: The case of Louis bnj
Visser, R.W.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://ueba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
1 Methodology and theory

Two sides of references to identity
The present study focuses on references to identities, made by Şābūnjī in his journalistic texts. On the most general level, this study understands these references to identities as signs, in the sense of Saussurean structural linguistics. Any reference to an identity carries two sides: a signifier and a signified.¹ The signifier is the explicit word that is used, and the signified is what the word refers to, which is the identity under consideration.

I also follow Saussure’s idea that signs are arbitrary. In the case of identities, this implies that the meaning of the East, for instance, does not follow from some intrinsic characteristic that the East or the Easterners possess.² Instead, the East is meaningful in contrast to an Other, a theoretical non-East. I approach the relation between the East and non-East not necessarily as a binary opposition (such as East versus West), but rather as situated oppositions in which the meanings of East and non-East depend on the context of production of the reference to the East. This allows the non-East to manifest itself in numerous shapes, depending on the context of communication. The same principle allows for referring to Christians in contrast to Muslims, Jews, atheists, or other categories of people, depending on the context. Hence, this theoretical principle says nothing about the meanings, expectations, norms, and conventions that are associated with an identity.

As stated in the previous chapter, the present study takes into account the presence of different ideas and meanings about identities. It is for this reason that I depart from Saussurean structural linguistics in the understanding of the signified, the identity that is referred to. I do not approach the signified as a cognitive unit, as one mental image that is invoked when a word is used. Instead, I approach the signified as a discourse, as the constellation of the practices, characteristics, features, and values

Methodology and theory

that are normatively or conventionally associated with the term that is used. In the case of the term *bedouin*, these associations and meanings relate to their independent nature, their hospitality, their skills in handling animals, their living in tents in inhospitable areas, their warlike disposition, their continuous traveling, et cetera. As such, the term *bedouin* signifies a collection of different associated features, and these associated features function as *background knowledge* to the word *bedouin*.3 I therefore approach references to identities as consisting of two sides: the first side is the explicit word that is used in order to denote an identity, and the second side is the often implicit background knowledge that is associated with the word.

Ṣābūnjī and his peers referred to Eastern, Syrian, Lebanese, Arab, Ottoman identities, et cetera, by using the Arabic words, respectively, *sharqī*, *sūrī*, *lubnānī*, ‘*arabī*, and ‘*uthmānī*. I explore the question as to when and under which circumstances Ṣābūnjī used these and similar words. In order to answer this question both sides of identities should be taken into account. Firstly, the *signifier*, the explicit word that is used as reference to an identity, should be taken into account. In this light I intend to make explicit why Ṣābūnjī refers to identities in the context of communication. This demands a close understanding of what Ṣābūnjī intends to communicate to his reading public, i.e. Ṣābūnjī’s communicative goals. Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA, discussed in detail below) gives insight into these issues. Secondly, the *signified*, the background knowledge of meanings that are associated with the word, should be taken into account. This background knowledge makes identities ‘fit’ in Ṣābūnjī’s communicative goals. Discourse Analysis (also discussed in detail below) gives insight into questions regarding why some identities fit Ṣābūnjī’s communicative goals and others do not. The present study therefore combines two approaches, Membership Categorization Analysis and Discourse Analysis, in order to understand Ṣābūnjī’s references to identities.

---

3 The term ‘category of associated features’ is taken from Antaki 1998: 3, and the term ‘background knowledge’ from Kiesling 2006: 266. These terms will be discussed in more detail below.
First side: Membership Categorization Analysis

An analysis of the first side of references to identities implies a focus on Şābūnjī’s communicative goals. On the most general level, this thesis follows an ethnomethodological principle, which stipulates that everything that people say and do in everyday life is a reflection of their understanding of what is going on around them. The everyday practices that people display produce social order, and are therefore topics of study.

Harvey Sacks applied this ethnomethodological principle to the study of communicative processes. He argues that social order is produced and reproduced by making use of the features of language and primarily speech, through communication and interaction. Sacks asks the question what people do when they are interacting with others, and how they attempt to achieve what they want to achieve through language. In his hotrodder study, Sacks demonstrates how the usage of the term ‘hotrodder’ by a group of teenagers in the early 1960s effectively functioned as a strategy to include Selves and exclude Others, and to distinguish an in-group from an out-group. This means that the identities that appear in the language that people produce, both in speech and writing, have functions in the communication with others, listeners and/or readers. Sacks argues that the task of the analyst is to find out why and under which circumstances people call themselves or others hotrodders. He thus argues that the communicative goals of language users should be the focus of attention: the ascription of identity in different contexts thus becomes the topic of analysis, rather than the identities themselves. As such, it is not the task of the analyst to establish what hotrodder – or Syrian, Christian, or Easterner – really means, nor to determine who belongs to these groups and who does not and for which reasons.

This reasoning forms the point of departure for Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA). In MCA, references to

---

4 Ethnomethodology was developed and described by Harold Garfinkel in his 1967 book *Studies in Ethnomethodology*.
7 See primarily Antaki 1998.
identities such as hotrodder or Syrian are understood as *acts of claiming* an identity, either for the speaker himself or for others. These acts are performed in communication, through the words that are used. Language users do so for a wide variety of reasons, depending on what they want to say – their communicative goals – and on the circumstances of communication. In other words, people refer to and make use of different identities in different contexts for varying reasons. From this perspective, each reference to an identity carries a *situated function*, and each reference is therefore a potential object of study. MCA redefines the relationship between identity and behavior. It is not the identity of someone (the “stabilized entity” of the Self\(^8\)) that causes his actions, speech, or texts. Instead, it is the individual who structures and gives meaning to the social world by picking and choosing the available identities, and using them within communication.

Charles Antaki and Sue Widdicombe mention five general principles of MCA, four of which are relevant in this study.\(^9\) The first principle stipulates that “for a person to ‘have an identity’ – whether he or she is the person speaking, being spoken to, or being spoken about – is to be cast into a category with associated characteristics or features”.\(^10\) The performative act of claiming an identity thus becomes an act of associating the individual with the characteristics and features that are normatively or conventionally associated with the collective identity that is invoked. For example, calling someone a Bedouin implies associating someone with the hospitality of the Bedouins, their independent nature, their warlike disposition, et cetera. Claiming an identity is therefore an act of dividing the social world into different categories of people who have different characteristics.\(^11\) Importantly, from a theoretical

---

\(^8\) Gergen 1997: 161.
\(^9\) Antaki 1998: 2-5. The fifth is relevant *only* for talk and speech, and this does not apply to the present study.
\(^10\) Antaki 1998: 3.
\(^11\) The same principle also works the other way around: mentioning various characteristics and features may call to mind particular identities.
perspective, it does not matter if people refer to themselves or to others when claiming an identity.\textsuperscript{12}

The second principle that Antaki and Widdicombe refer to is that claiming identity is “indexical and occasioned”.\textsuperscript{13} Indexicality refers to the idea that the same identity can have a variety of different functions under different circumstances and situations. For example, if uttered by an economist, a mathematician, an art historian, or an activist for the Palestinian cause, the term ‘Arab’ is probably used with different meanings and associations. Someone from New York or Mecca or Jerusalem will probably mean different things and have different associations when using the same term, Arab. The point to be stressed is that the same identity, in this case being Arab, can be invoked with different functions, depending on who utters the invocation, with which intention, and under which circumstances.

Occasionality stresses the idea that the circumstances not only influence, but also inform which identity is invoked. When passing through customs control, it is normative and conventional practice that people are categorized by their citizenship of a state, by way of their travel documents. The classification of a traveler as Syrian is occasioned by the circumstances in which this Syrian person finds himself: passing through customs control. However, when the same Syrian person buys bread in a bakery he finds himself in a different situation, which demands different normative or conventional practices. As a customer he is expected to present money, and not his passport. His identity as Syrian or customer is thus informed by the circumstances. The occasionality of identity might also result in contrasting identities. The same Syrian customer might characterize himself as old in a room filled with children, and as young in a room filled with senior citizens. The identities old and young make sense because of the occasion, just as the identities of Syrian and customer.

\textsuperscript{12} In the words of Derek Edwards (1998: 17): “there is no explanatory primacy given to self categorization, as a psychological starting point for how everyone sees the world” [original emphasis].

\textsuperscript{13} Antaki 1998: 4.
The third principle stipulates that referring to an identity “makes relevant the identity to the interactional business going on”.\textsuperscript{14} This principle highlights the ethnomethodological approach that stresses that topics of analysis are the identities that people \textit{themselves} make relevant, through explicit references, implicit suggestions, or normative and conventional practices. \textit{They} determine when, how, and with which meaning identities are used. In turn, these identities are relevant for analysis when they invoke them. The analyst should only take those identities in consideration that are made relevant by the people themselves. This approach towards identities contrasts with an approach in which analysts decide on the relevance of identities. Simultaneously, this principle also stipulates that references to an identity are never coincidental or meaningless. Instead, there is a reason that underlies every reference to an identity, and this reason is part of the communicative goals of the speaker or writer.

The fourth principle is closely related to the third, and refers to the idea of consequentiality.\textsuperscript{15} This idea implies that only those identities that have a visible effect on the interaction that is going on should be taken into account. For example, when buying bread, presenting money is an act that is the consequence of the identity of customer. Put differently, asking for bread and paying it serve as evidence that the person is indeed a customer, evidence that is demanded before the analyst can conclude that the person involved indeed is a customer. The last two points combined – relevance and consequentiality– imply that analysts should not make use of preconceived identities until and unless interlocutors themselves make these identities relevant and consequential. In this study this means that I do not interpret Şâbûnjî’s writings or behavior as flowing from his Arab, Christian, or Eastern identity \textit{unless} Şâbûnjî himself points this out.

\textsuperscript{14} Antaki 1998: 4-5; Schegloff 1991.
\textsuperscript{15} Antaki 1998: 5. Emanuel Schegloff (1991) first explored and applied the principles of relevance and consequentiality.
Two final points should be stressed. Firstly, MCA is usually applied to speech and conversation, and not to texts.\textsuperscript{16} There are, of course, a number of differences and similarities between speech and written texts. The most fundamental similarity is that both are communicative means. For this reason David Silverman has pointed out that texts are also suitable and valuable material for MCA, and the present study follows this suggestion.\textsuperscript{17}

Secondly, in MCA references to collective identities are understood as acts of including and excluding Selves and Others in different categories. These \textit{acts} should not be equated with any intentional desire of the language user to do so. Understanding references to identities as performed acts is a theoretical approach that helps understand how identities function in communication. The following example, relating to social stigma, demonstrates that intention does not always underlie acts of inclusion and exclusion: “John is overweight, he should go to the gym more often”. MCA finds here an act of \textit{inclusion}, of John, in the category of overweight people. However, the context suggests that the intention of the language user is to \textit{exclude} John from this category, because “he should go to the gym”. This example demonstrates that the acts of inclusion and exclusion that are implicated by referring to identities do not necessarily correspond with the intention of the language user.

**MCA and Discourse Analysis**

As mentioned above, Membership Categorization analysts focus on the \textit{process} of ascribing identity within communicative contexts. In the words of Sue Widdicombe: “their concern [of the analysts] is with the occasioned relevance of identities \textit{here and now} and how they are consequential for this particular interaction and the local projects of speakers”.\textsuperscript{18} MCA does recognize the presence of information that goes beyond the here and now of the communication. This is reflected in the first principle of MCA,

\textsuperscript{16} This applies, for instance, to Tracy’s introductory book (2002) on identities in everyday talk.
\textsuperscript{17} Silverman 1993: 59-89.
which stipulates that 'having an identity' means being cast into, or casting oneself into, a category with associated characteristics or features. MCA presupposes that these associated characteristics or features are known among the participants in the communication. In the hypothetical case that this background knowledge is not known, communication simply fails as the expressions that are used by the speaker or author become non-sequiturs for the reader or listener.

Derek Edwards shows how background knowledge mediates communication. He demonstrates how a woman who takes part in a relationship counseling session invokes associations with married women –that they talk about their children and their problems, and that they do not want to flirt with other men in noisy clubs– by referring to herself *qua* married woman, rather than ‘a girl’. A successful comprehension of her reference to being a married woman or a girl therefore demands an understanding of the meanings that are associated with married women and girls. When these meanings are understood, the listener understands that the speaker attempts to appear responsible and mature. Simultaneously, in the context of relationship counseling, the speaker also has an interest in being seen as a responsible and mature person. Thus, the background knowledge that is associated with the identities ‘married women’ and ‘girls’ inform her references to these identities, and this knowledge is therefore of vital importance for understanding references to identities.

MCA does not aspire to explain where this background knowledge, shared by the participants in the communication, comes from. Nevertheless, this knowledge influences the way people categorize themselves and others, as it informs the woman’s choice of labeling herself as a married woman and not as a girl. The present study understands this background information as the second side of identities. This background knowledge is comprised of many different characteristics, features, meanings, and aspects that are normatively or conventionally associated with the identity. I approach these different meanings and associations not as

---

objective givens, but as variable and changing. To be more precise, I approach these as social constructs, which are produced and reproduced in interaction and communication with other people. From the perspective of social constructionism, each reference to an identity produces and reproduces meaning.\footnote{De Fina 2006: 2.} In the example of the reference to married women, the speaker \emph{produces} the association with responsibility in her attempt to demonstrate that she is responsible and mature. At the same time she repeats an existing sentiment about married women –that they should be responsible– and therefore \emph{reproduces} this association. In other words, the speaker reminds the listeners that married women are normatively or conventionally responsible.

From the perspective of social constructionism, the construction of meaning is an ongoing process that has no end or goal.\footnote{De Fina 2006: 2.} This constant production and reproduction of meaning highlights the fluidity of the meanings of identities. This approach can account for both the capacity for change of these meanings and the stability of meanings that allows for mutual understanding. I approach all the different meanings that are associated with an identity –the background knowledge– as social constructs. The transformation of the meaning of ‘\textit{arab}’ is a fine example of this variability. During the nineteenth century the meaning of this word shifted towards the Arabic-speaking community, whereas before it was usually limited to the Bedouins.

The concept of \textit{discourse} helps us understand how people create identities from this constellation of different meanings. Michel Foucault and Norman Fairclough have argued that there are social conventions, expectations, practices, ideologies, and normative knowledge that function as a lens through which people perceive their environment.\footnote{De Fina 2006: 5-6. Source texts of Foucault and Fairclough are primarily Foucault [1966] 1970: 17-45 and 78-124 and [1969] 1974: 21-55, and Fairclough 1989: 17-108.} This lens provides people with interpretations of what goes on in their social world. A discourse in the Foucauldian sense is an “entire interlocking web of practices,
structures, and ideologies: a system of understanding and expectation that prefigures which practices and interpretations are available, and how practices and structures are understood”.\textsuperscript{23} Importantly, discourses are socially shared. This means that discourses go beyond the level of the here and now of the communicative goals of language users themselves. Discourse Analysis therefore goes beyond the limits of Membership Categorization Analysis.

I approach the background knowledge – all the practices, characteristics, features, and values that are associated with an identity – as a discourse of identity. For example, all the practices, features, and characteristics that are associated with married women constitute the discourse of ‘married women’. This discourse informs the difference between what married women normatively or conventionally do or say – talking about their children and their problems – and what is regarded as not befitting married women – flirting with men in noisy clubs. It is the discourse of identity that ‘guides’ the woman to interpret herself as a married woman, and also guides her to present herself as such. In other words, the characteristics that are associated with married women make this identity ‘fit’ the circumstances of the communication, in Edwards’ example a relationship counseling session. Discourse Analysis of identities studies the social conventions, expectations, practices, ideologies, and normative knowledge that lead people refer to identities.\textsuperscript{24}

A central point of departure in Foucauldian Discourse Analysis is the idea that there is an interplay between power and knowledge in producing discourses. Discourses are not only psychological constructs, mental imaginations, or mental silhouettes. They have coercive power over the practice and behavior of individuals. The identities that individuals construct are therefore not so much the result of the agency of the individuals themselves, but are merely the reflection of a wider discourse of identity. In other words, language users do not have a choice in how they construct identities, but are merely ‘docile

\textsuperscript{23} Kiesling 2006: 262.

\textsuperscript{24} De Fina 2006: 5-6.
Methodology and theory

bodies’ who are guided by the discourses that go beyond them. Thus, an individual language user is understood as one cog in the larger wheel of discourses.

This aspect of Discourse Analysis is incompatible with the notion of indexicality of MCA, the idea that interlocutors construct identities differently on different occasions, depending on their local projects in the here and now. It is also a highly counter-intuitive stance; in the words of Barker and Galasinski, “we clearly have the existential experience of facing and making choices”. Many scholars therefore find the inescapability of Foucauldian discourses and the subsequent elision of individual agency hard to accept. For instance, Edward Said writes in *Orientalism* (1979): “I do believe in the determinate imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous body of texts constituting discursive formations like Orientalism”.

In the discussion on the relation between individual actions and the social field of discourses, Kiesling offers valuable insights. Kiesling asks the question: “Where do Discourses come from, and is the speaker just relying on pre-existing Discourses or is he/she doing something to the Discourses?” As stated above, the present study understands all the meanings that are associated with an identity as constitutive of a discourse of identity. In addition, these meanings are social constructs that are produced and reproduced in communication and interaction between individuals. Each production and reproduction of one of these meanings is therefore also an act of production and reproduction of the discourse of identity. Thus, referring to identities is both an individual communicative act and an act of recreating, remaking, and reifying discourses of identity within the social context. In other words, discourses of identities are created by language users who individually recreate and make relevant the ideologies and meanings –the background knowledge that are constitutive of discourses– associated with the identity within the social context.

26 Barker 2001: 46.
At the same time, discourses offer individual language users a point of departure in their own construction of identities. In other words, the social and discursive field provides the individual language user with information about which identities ‘fit’ the circumstances of the communication. In the example of the married woman, the idea that married women are responsible informs her labeling herself as such. References to identities therefore also reflect a discourse of identity. In this light, Kiesling points out that referring to identities is part of an ongoing process of negotiation between individuals and their discursive context. Discourses simultaneously work top-down, because they present language users with interpretations with which they give meaning to their social world, and bottom-up, because discourses of identities are made and remade by language users with every reference to an identity.29

Finally, discourses should not be understood as uniform sets of background knowledge that are universally agreed upon. There may be multiple interpretations of the different characteristics or meanings that are associated with an identity. In this light Michel Foucault states that discourses are dispersive, that there are different possible interpretations of identities, and that this incongruity of discourses present “spaces of dissension”.30 This leaves open the possibility that identities can be debated, contested, and questioned.

Combining the approaches
The present thesis is a study on discursive practices as performed by Louis Ṣābūnji, and specifically on referencing practices.31 I have defined two sides to identities: the explicit words that denote identities –the signifier– and the background knowledge that underlie these references to identities –the signified. I use MCA when discussing Ṣābūnji’s explicit references to identities and Discourse Analysis when discussing the background knowledge

31 See Tracy (2002: 21-24, 45-61) for an introduction to discursive practices, referencing practices, and identities.
that is associated with identities. However, these two approaches are not entirely complementary; some remarks on the combination of MCA and Discourse Analysis are necessary.

On the one hand, the strength of Discourse Analysis in studying identities vis-à-vis MCA lies in the synthesis between individual actions and the social and discursive context that go beyond the individual. On the other hand, the strength of MCA in studying identities vis-à-vis Discourse Analysis lies in the understanding of how people in real-life situations classify people into different categories. In this study I will combine both approaches. I will focus on the identities that are made relevant and consequential by Louis Ṣābūnjī. The ethnomethodological principle of MCA that prioritizes the perception of social life by the people themselves is therefore central. Moreover, the MCA principle that references to identities are performative acts, made in order to organize and give meaning to the social world, is also maintained. References to identities are thus understood as occasioned, performative acts of claiming identities, done by interlocutors as local projects in the here and now for varying reasons.

A strict approach of the principle of indexicality of MCA implies that the social context is occasioned within the local projects of language users. For this reason MCA prescribes that the analyst should not take into account any extra-textual context, such as discourses, if the language user does not make this context relevant and consequential. Kiesling has criticized this strict usage of indexicality.32 He demonstrates how associations with African-American men, homosexuality, and masculinity in general informed the usage of term ‘bitch boy’ among a group of American fraternity members, without referring to or mentioning African-Americans, homosexuals, men, and women in the first place.33 These fraternity members, however, invoked the background knowledge associated with African-Americans, homosexuals, and men. In the example discussed by Kiesling, the fraternity member emulated

33 Kiesling’s work is based on research conducted in the early 1990s in Virginia among white (non-African-American) university students (Kiesling 2006: 270).
stereotypical African-American speech. The background knowledge of the fraternity members concerning African-American speech was sufficient for the participants in the communication to know who they were imitating and what they were talking about. This knowledge enabled them to understand that their speech was an implicit reference to a collective identity.

With this analysis Kiesling shows that the background knowledge that is associated with an identity—the discourse of identity—can also be indexed and invoked as part of the communicative goals of language users. By understanding discourses of identity as something that language users can refer to and make relevant, discourses also become a resource that can be used in order to refer to an identity. In other words, discourses of identities are also tools with which language users categorize and make sense of their social environment. They are able to do so by implicitly referring to an identity, by relying on the background knowledge that is associated with the identity under consideration. Language users can therefore make use of discourses of identity in their local projects in the here and now for varying reasons. It is for this reason that the following chapter is devoted to an overview of the relevant discourses of identity. This overview is important because the discourses of identity that are current in the context of nineteenth-century Arabic journalism can be made relevant and consequential by Ṣābūnjī without explicitly referring to them.

In conclusion, Kiesling has highlighted that language users can invoke both sides of identity. Firstly, the speaker can explicitly refer to an identity by referring to someone as, for instance, African-American. Secondly, the speaker can implicitly refer to an identity by relying on the background knowledge that is associated with the identity—in the example, by imitating African-American speech. The present study follows Kiesling’s realization that language users can invoke both sides of identities.

The public sphere
As pointed out above, I approach references to identities, made as part of communication by individual language users, as constitutive of discourses of identities that are socially shared among the
members of a community. Habermas postulates a useful distinction between private communication and public communication.\(^{34}\) Private communication takes place in the confined surroundings of the family and of the house, while public communication takes place in situations that are accessible to many people who do not necessarily know each other. The public sphere is historically contingent, which means that it can appear, change form, and disappear again in the course of history. The private sphere lacks this aspect, as private communication does not acquire essentially different forms during different periods and across different cultures. One of the media that people use for communication in the social arena – the public sphere – is journalism. The present study analyzes communication that takes place in public texts, and primarily journalistic texts.

In her analysis of the Arabic magazine *al-Muqtaṭaf*, Dagmar Glaß discusses the contours of the public sphere of Ṣābûnjī and his peers.\(^ {35}\) Glaß refers to Schulze, who briefly addresses the public sphere of nineteenth-century Egypt in the context of his study on twentieth-century Islamic thought. Schulze discerns three public spheres, which he differentiates according to the media that are used in order to reach their publics: the intellectuals, the Islamic scholars (or *ʿulamāʾ*), and the Sufis. It is the first group, the intellectuals, that is of importance to the present study. They communicate among each other through the press, printed books, and learned societies.\(^ {36}\) The periodical press, in particular, sets the intellectuals apart from the *ʿulamāʾ* and the Sufis during this period.\(^ {37}\) Because of the prominence of journalism, a substantial part of the corpus of the present study is taken from the periodical press. A second aspect that sets the intellectuals apart from other public spheres is the character of their intended audience. The intellectuals addressed the public at large, rather than one religious community or one demarcated group of government officials. For this reason I use the term ‘public intellectuals’ in the present study.


\(^{36}\) Schulze 1990: 39.

\(^{37}\) Glaß 2004: 60.
The group of public intellectuals is also discernible in Syria, and Ṣābūnjī was one of them.

Journalistic texts are very suitable for MCA because of their association with news and current affairs. Magazines appear every month or every week, and newspapers appear with even shorter intervals. This temporality demands that authors, editors, and publishers—the public intellectuals—continuously produce new texts in order to fill the new issue of the periodical publication. At the same time, the reading public demands new texts that respond to their interests or expectations. As a corollary of this entanglement between authors and the reading public, the meanings that journalistic texts convey between the two parties are framed by the contemporary circumstances. It is for this reason that public intellectuals, through their texts, contribute to shaping the discursive background of the here and the now of production and usage, of writing and reading. This aspect is in line with the principle of MCA, which stipulates that referring to identities is an act that should be interpreted in the light of the circumstances of the interaction that is going on. Consequently, journalistic texts are better source material for MCA than, for instance, diaries or collections of poetry.

As pointed out at the start of the introduction, the Arab world witnessed significant changes in terms of self-identification during the nineteenth century. Against this background, topics that relate to identity possibly became subject to discussion and debate in journalistic texts, and this is what I will study in Ṣābūnjī’s texts. I intend to draw attention to these discussions by focusing on passages that give information about what Easterners, Syrians, Arabs, et cetera, were like or how they were expected to be. This approach is geared towards highlighting any different ideas about Easterners or Syrians, and therefore towards highlighting the development of controversies about identity. John Bowen has performed a similar study on the development of controversies about Islam among a rural Indonesian ethnic group, the Gayo.\footnote{Bowen 1993.} Bowen looked at how Gayo men and women negotiate their
identity as Muslims in the context of universal ideas “about what Islam is or ought to be”, and of local religious or spiritual practices that may conflict with these universal ideas.

Ṣābūnji’s quarrelsome character is an advantage when attempting to unearth controversies. As will be shown in this study, Ṣābūnji often came into conflict with his peers and his superiors. Various of these conflicts were expressed in his publications, and were therefore “on public display”. As argued by Agassi and Van de Breevaart, it is public display which defines polemics vis-à-vis other forms of contest and criticism. Consequently, polemics form a special category of public texts. In the most simple form there are three parties to any polemic: the two opposing factions and the public. The two opposing factions struggle for “the monopoly of cultural legitimacy and the right to confer or withhold this consecration” in the eyes of the public. In other words, the two warring factions are competing for authority and legitimacy in the eyes of the public. From this perspective, the public “serves as a jury” and therefore “plays a decisive role”.

It is important to remember that there is a link between the public sphere and the emergence and spread of discourses of identity. Benedict Anderson has pointed out how communities – collective identities– become imagined under the influence of print-capitalism in the form of, primarily, newspapers. He argues that the experience of reading the same information at the same time fosters a sense of community among many different readers who do not know each other.

In addition, I argue that the contents of public texts contribute to a sense of community as well. In the nineteenth-century Arabic context, various communities could be imagined. In the absence of a clear-cut nation, I shift the focus to discourses. As social constructs, discourses of identities are produced and

40 Agassi 1988: 2.
41 Agassi 1988: 1-2; Breevaart 2005: 25-26
Methodology and theory

reproduced by language users who refer to identities. Articles in newspapers and magazines that touch upon the topic of identity, for instance by referring to the own community as Easterners or as Syrians, makes this topic unavoidable. From this perspective, public intellectuals and their periodical publications contribute to the emergence and transformation of ideas about identity and community, and therefore to discourses of identity that go beyond the private level of the family and the house.

Theoretical framework

So far, a number of theoretical principles on which this study is based have been discussed. I will briefly summarize these here again. First, the present study assumes that references to identities were made in order to be understood by their readers. Starting from this assumption, I approach any references to identities as indeed understood by the readers, or at least understandable to the intended public. By contrast, communication fails when the people do not understand each other, or do not have access to the background knowledge that is associated with the identities that are referred to. In that case, references to identities are non sequiturs and unsuitable for analysis.

The second and the third principles derive from structural linguistics. According to the second principle, references to identities are understood as signs that consist of a signifier and a signified. The signifier refers to the word that denote identities, and the signified refers to the background knowledge that is associated with the word. The third principle stipulates that identities acquire their meaning in contrast to an Other. This theoretical Other can take a variety of different shapes and meanings, depending on the context of communication. Hence, the East is the East because it contrasts with a non-East. Importantly, this non-East is a theoretical concept that informs references to the East; it does not necessarily equate with the West, or perhaps with the North or the South.

The fourth principle focuses on the signified background knowledge, on the meaning of an identity. I approach this background knowledge as the constellation of all the different
associations with the identity under consideration. In the example of the identity Bedouin, these associations include their independent nature, their hospitality, their skills in handling animals, their living in tents in inhospitable areas, their warlike disposition, their continuous traveling, et cetera. I approach each of these associations as a social construct, which is continually produced and reproduced in social interaction, predominantly in language. Constructing identities is therefore an ongoing process. From this perspective, identities are not essential or objective, but rather fluid. This principle secures, firstly, that language users understand each other when they speak about an identity, and secondly, that the meanings and associations of identities are capable of transformation.

The fifth principle applies to the position of the individual language user within his social environment. The concept of discourses connects these two elements. I approach the social construction of identity as taking place in an ongoing negotiation between, on the one hand, individual language users who talk and write, and on the other hand, discourses of identity which determine what they can normatively and conventionally say and write. In terms of identity, referring to an identity is both a communicative act performed by the language user, and an act of reproduction and reification of a discourse of identity. When language users refer to, for instance, the perceived spirituality of the East, they do so as part of their communicative acts. Simultaneously, the listener or reader is reminded that the East indeed is spiritual.45

Finally, and perhaps superfluously, I approach identity not as a characteristic that people possess and that makes them who they are. Instead, I approach identities as tools with which people aim to achieve communicative goals. In this respect, referring to an identity is an act that is performed as part of communication, depending on the context and on the intention of the language user.

45 The spirituality of the East plays a pivotal role in Chapter Four.
Overview of the method
What remains to be addressed is a short overview of the specific steps that I will follow in the case studies, in Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

Firstly, I will select the passages from the source material that include references to an identity. I will analyze these passages by asking two questions: (1) On whose behalf does Ṣābūnjī pretend to speak? (2) Which practices, characteristics, features, and values does Ṣābūnjī couch in terms of the identity under consideration?

Secondly, I will analyze the reference through the perspective of MCA, by discussing how Ṣābūnjī uses identities as part of his communicative goals. Specifically, I will discuss how Ṣābūnjī makes identities relevant and consequential for the communication that goes on.

Thirdly, I will analyze the reference through the perspective of Discourse Analysis. Why Ṣābūnjī can make some identities relevant and consequential, and others not, is a matter of discourses of identity that are socially shared. I will address how Ṣābūnjī’s references to identity simultaneously reflect and reproduce discourses of identity.

Fourthly, I will take into account the discursive background against which Ṣābūnjī was active. I will relate Ṣābūnjī’s usage of identities with a number of phenomena that relate to identity and that will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. These phenomena are the emergence of a Syrian identity in Chapter Four, sectarianism and religious polarization in Chapter Five, and the idea of native failure vis-à-vis foreign success in Chapter Six. It is to this discursive background that I will now turn.