



## #Vaccine\_for\_Lebanese\_first debate on Twitter and argumentation strategies: a pragma-dialectical approach.

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**Abstract.** At the end of January 2021, a Twitter thread began with the hashtag “#Vaccine\_for\_Lebanese\_first, advocating the privileged access to the vaccine for Lebanese nationals. The context of Lebanon’s political and economic crisis as well as the Syrian and Palestinian refugees issue were the background to a debate which triggered heated reactions among both the Lebanese and other Arab nationals, especially Saudi. The topics dealt with were beyond a simple opinion polarization, touching issues ranging from national identity to regional politics. The complexity of the debate provided for an interesting case to be examined through argumentation analysis. The present paper looks into the argumentative strategies employed by the means of pragma-dialectical approach, especially concerning strategic manoeuvring, in order to reconstruct the argumentation schemes employed, explicate implicit standpoints and assumptions, and finally interpret them in the context of Twitter’s mediated communication by the means of qualitative analysis. The findings show that the specificities of the channel (Twitter) and the political implications and understanding of the hashtag resulted in a reduplication of assumed starting points at topical choice level, a high degree of variation at presentational device level, and the construction of multiple simultaneous ingroups and identities.

**keywords:** discourse, argumentation, Twitter, Lebanon, Covid, vaccine.

### 1. Introduction

By the mid of January 2021, the Lebanese Ministry of Health announced that 1,100,000 Pfizer vaccines would arrive in February, followed by a second shipment of 1,700,000 doses. The World Bank was expected to cover the biggest part of the expenses within the context of a 15 million dollars loan granted to the Lebanese government, under the condition that 600,000 doses of the first shipment (paid by international donors) would be made available to Syrian nationals, through the Lebanese Ministry of Health.

In this very context, Wadih Akl, a member of the Political Bureau of the Free Patriotic Movement (right wing Christian Political Party), made a proposal that would allegedly grant an equitable access to vaccination, provided that vaccines were administered exclusively to Lebanese citizens. Naji Hayek, a member of the same party, followed this matter up and posted a thread on his Twitter account, basically stating that no country in the world would let foreigners have access to vaccines before its own citizens. These tweets immediately triggered a stormy discussion on social platforms, to which both supporters and critics of the hashtag #Vaccine to Lebanese First (*al-laqāḥ li-l-lubnānī awwalan*) contributed. A remarkable number of non-Lebanese Arabs also joined the discussion thus giving the debate a regional dimension; the debate was reported by newspapers such as the London-based (and Saudi established) *Ash-sharq al-Awsat*<sup>1</sup> and *al-Jazeera*<sup>2</sup>, which is proof of its relevance and pervasiveness<sup>3</sup>. The debate revolved around the possibility for non-Lebanese nationals to access the vaccine. The category of non-Lebanese nationals comprises Palestinian and Syrian refugees, identified respectively as “refugees” and “displaced”, highlighting the temporary nature of their stay in the country. The differentiation between “refugee” and “displaced” is but a hint of the complex and decade-long debate on refugees in Lebanon.

While the majority of those who supported the hashtag’s objective mainly base their claim on national right or economic principles, arguments raised by participants who opposed the hashtag cover a bunch of different topics ranging from human values, rational pragmatism, religious ethics, confessionality, state corruption and regional alliances.

### **Context: Covid vaccination in Lebanon**

As of 6th September 2021, 20% of the population has been vaccinated with at least one jab, and slightly less results completely vaccinated. Over 60% of the population expressed concerns on the vaccine and its safety, either because it was experimental, for fear of side effects, or for adherence to conspiracy theories (Alhaffar et al., 2021).

In the present paper, we will analyse the discussion developed around the twitter thread containing the hashtag by the means of pragma-dialectical argumentation, in order to understand how the main standpoints were supported and which identities and values were assumed.

## **2. Historical background**

Lebanon is a small Mediterranean country that was established as a consociational democracy, a unique form of government where fixed shares of political power are distributed along sectarian lines. The Lebanese State officially recognizes 18 religious communities. Such a sectarian system hindered political stability both internally and regionally. Since Israel was established, Lebanon’s history has also been strictly connected to the Palestinian issue. Between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the presence of Palestinian fighters on Lebanese soil divided Lebanese society in two, with some perceiving the Palestinian armed resistance as a state within a state. In fact their military activity resulted as one of the major factors contributing to the eruption of a fifteen years long and excruciating civil war (1975-1990), during which nearly every single community formed their own militia. The Taif Agreement, which marked the end of the civil war, could not bring about significant changes to the form of government, nor could the recurring social demonstrations protesting against political corruption and calling for secularism that took place over the last ten years.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://aawsat.com/home/article/2754946/انقسام-لبناني-حول-حق-النازحين-واللاجئين-في-الحصول-على-لقاحات>, last access: 24/09/2021

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/aja-interactive/2021/1/19/اللقاح-اللبناني-أولا-العنصرية-تصل-إلى>, last access: 24/09/2021

<sup>3</sup> For further information, the following article is particularly clarifying, as it addresses and explain the debate and the social and political implications of differentiating “displaced” from “refugee” in the Lebanese context: al-Akhbar, *al-bath fi ġins al-malā’ika: as-sūrī nāziḥ, lāġi’ am ḍayf?* (Debating the sex of the angels: are Syrians displaced, refugees or guests?), 25/03/2014, <<https://al-akhbar.com/Community/29000>>, last access: 09/09/2021

Demography is also a core issue: since the Syrian war break-out nearly 1 million Syrian nationals were registered in Lebanon (the actual figure including irregular entries is estimated to be around 1.5 million), joining over 210,000 Palestinians who are still residing in refugee camps, and 50,000 Iraqis. Since fall 2019 Lebanon has been facing what the World Bank has defined as the world's worst financial collapse since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the Lebanese pound has lost 90 percent of its value. Prices for consumer goods have risen nearly four-fold in less than two years (as of June 2020). On August 4<sup>th</sup> 2020 a huge load of ammonium nitrate that was stored at the Port of Beirut exploded injuring over 7000 people and causing 218 fatalities other than 15 billion dollars damage to properties and infrastructures. This event only added to the catastrophic socio-economic situation that Lebanon is going through.

### 3. Methodology and preliminary considerations

The sample includes 501 tweets published during the last two weeks of January, containing the hashtag “Vaccine to the Lebanese first” (*al-laqāḥ li-l-lubnānī awwalan*), that started trending in January 2021. In the context of the analysed debate, a health measure becomes an object in the public debate, and this implicates a series of practices and political decisions that can potentially polarize the social actors (scientific experts, politicians, law makers, general public) ideologically, and, consequently, produce different attitudes towards the proposed measures (for example, free access to everybody versus priority for citizens), values concerned in enforcing and legitimising such attitudes, and semantic mental models related to the context (van Dijk 2016).

More than one topic of discussion emerged from the analysis. Two core standpoints were related directly to the issue of *access*, namely granting priority to the Lebanese on the ground of national affiliation and granting universal access from the start, either to enforce protection for the Lebanese and to abide by international measures. In this perspective, a relevant superstructure is certainly argumentation, a semantic structure that is developed around contrasting claims and arguments respectively in support.

#### 3.1. Argumentation

For a long time, argumentation was included in studies on classical rhetoric, and conceived of as a means to persuade a heterogeneous audience of the position defended by the orator, and its study was mostly practical and aimed at finding effective means of persuasion (Plantin, 2002). Recent studies on argumentation, especially after the 1960s and the “informal logic” turn, have disregarded the traditional bond with formal logic and classical rhetoric which was traditionally put in opposition with rationality, as such excluded as being a possible topic of scientific research (Plantin 2002; van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2015). In the context of discourse analysis, it is described as “superstructure”, broader than the single proposition and comparable to that of a narrative schemata, in being extendable up to the whole text (Van Dijk 1992, p.244).

The connection between argumentation production and cognitive processes started to acquire relevance in recent years. For example, the “natural logic” programme rebutted old formal logic by proposing a study based on “logic of dialogue and logic of objects”: “The theory deals with ‘objects of thought’, ‘images’ or ‘representations’. The aim of natural logic is to investigate the thought processes at work in the production or reception of a text” (Plantin 2002:352). Subsequently, the theory started to gain space among other theoretical frameworks, such as semantics, pragmatics, and theory of communication.

The pragma-dialectical approach of van Eemeren and Grootendorst proposes a kind of pragmatic analysis concerned with interpreting the functions of argumentation as a way to refute or

justify a standpoint. This is framed within other pragmatic categories, such as Searle's categorization of speech acts (Searle, 1985; Searle, 1969/1992).

The emphasis on the "dialectical" element stands for a re-inclusion on the "reasonableness" as a defining feature of argumentation moves, after a long tradition where it was put in opposition with rhetoric. This too is an inheritance of the long-standing classical approach to argumentation: in fact, it was Aristotle that defined dialectic as the "art of inquiry through critical discussion", built on the grounds of logic and evidence, while rhetoric was regarded as anti-rational, only aimed at persuading by any means necessary (van Eemeren 2016). Reintegrating dialectic in an argumentation theoretical framework is important, because it presupposes the existence of some critical criteria through which an argumentative move might be considered valid. This implies common and accepted knowledge, or reasoning and interactional patterns. The peculiarity of this approach is not only applying a pragmatic perspective, but also considering the interactional element as a distinctive feature. In fact, if argumentation is conceived of as a divergence of opinions, it is possible to identify opponents (even in monological structures) and to consider agreement between them as a possible scope. This is the reason why pragma-dialectical approach conceives of argumentation as a self-regulating discourse device, where repair mechanisms might intervene in order to achieve agreement (van Eemeren 2016) and preserve cooperation.

This perspective justifies other relevant elements, such as the embeddedness of argumentation in a discourse and also the fact that, if cooperation is the ultimate goal, there are a series of expectations on how it can or cannot be structured. In fact, in a way that mirrors the violations or floutations of Grice's cooperative principle and Searle's felicity conditions, we talk of *fallacies* whenever the argumentation takes an "inadequate" or "invalid" pattern (van Eemeren, 2015:4, van Eemeren, 2016).

Moreover, according to Guillem (2009), the cognitive processes related to argumentation are tied to externalization of arguments, as a cognitive passage is necessary in "thinking out" an argument. This is more evident in conversation contexts, where the arguments must be "blurted" out by the arguers (Hample 2007). According to Hample, the research focus should be placed on the arguers more than on the arguments, so that a certain attention is restored on the role of individual and social variables.

Other aspects, such as the acceptability or rebutting of an argument, are connected to beliefs and attitudes. In fact, as Guillem says,

It is important to examine argumentation as a process through which we organize and make use of knowledge, in the form of personal beliefs but also of (assumed) shared attitudes, and to analyze the ways in which this is achieved in discourse (2009, p.730).

The argumentative point, which might be an opinion or a recommendation, is backed up by propositions "that are assumed to be acceptable by the reader or listener" (Van Dijk, 1992). Such acceptance is dependent on background knowledge and beliefs, thus cognitive processes are involved to create and understand the relations and strategies that build up to a certain argumentative structure. Chang and Mehan (2008), for example, show that researching for validation criteria can provide information on how truth values are managed within an ideological system. In fact, in a system where the source of validity is authority, as happened with the Catholic Inquisition, we have internal criteria that can result in paradoxical argumentation (if the suspect is innocent, God will save him; so, it is possible to argue someone's culpability if he / she drowns when thrown in the water). Validation criteria are not absolute, are prone to change and are context-dependent (historic moment, society, values, beliefs). Claiming a specific identity or owning an expertise can also be a source of validation, even if this falls, as has been said, under the category of fallacies.

Considering the nature of the present corpus of tweets, we can affirm it is a case of monological argumentation when they do not reply to another tweet; nonetheless, being short texts and appearing in significant number and frequency, we can collect “clusters” of monological argumentation related to the same topic or claim; consistently with Van Eemeren (2016, p.14), the existence of a contrasting voice and “antagonist” is implicit.

Van Eemeren considers multiple levels of analysis in the pragma-dialectical approach (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2006, p. 381):

The pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, 1992, 2004) enables the analyst of argumentative discourse to make a normative reconstruction of the discourse that results in an analytic overview of all elements that are pertinent to a critical evaluation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992). The analytic overview clarifies the difference of opinion at issue and the positions that serve as the starting point of the discussion. It surveys the arguments that are -- explicitly or implicitly -- advanced, the argument schemes that are used, the argumentation structures that are developed. And it determines the conclusion that it is reached.

Van Eemeren and Grootendorst extended the theory by introducing the concept of strategic maneuvering as a strategy to complement rhetorical effectiveness and the precondition of “reasonableness in argumentation, because each argumentation phase pursues a specific dialectical goal”. The theory presents itself as a means of conciliation of dialectics and rhetoric. In pragma dialectics, dialectics is redefined “pragmatically as a method for dealing systematically with critical exchanges in verbal communication and interaction to move from conjecture and opinion to more secure (describing, evaluative of inciting) standpoints”, while rhetoric is considered as the “theoretical study of various kinds of persuasion techniques that can be effective in argumentative practice” (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2015, p. 384).

The three aspects of strategic maneuvering are *topical potential*, *audience adaptation* and *presentational devices* (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2006, p. 383). This means that, while adhering to dialectal constraints, many moves (ie. the speech acts realized) are possible for each stage of argumentation that elaborate on the available topics and aim to be effective on the public, for example by expressing the standpoint as judgement or opinions that may be accepted as subjective in the opening process, or by calling for arguments that the addressee may easily agree to; such aims are best met when strategically crafting the presentational devices, namely the phrasing of the moves (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2015, p. 386). Stages of argumentation are:

4. Confrontation: the conflict of opinions and the divergent positions are made explicit;
5. Opening: The roles (protagonist and antagonist) of the conflict are made explicit, together with the procedural and content starting points;
6. Argumentation: the arguments in support of the standpoint(s) are provided by the arguers;
7. Conclusion: the resolution of the conflict (or return to initial situation).

Relevant to our work is also the classification in different types of “argumentation activities”: adjudication (a third party expressive an authoritative decision), mediation (third party with no formal authority), negotiation (decision up to the two parties), public debate (divergence of mixed views, aimed at non-interactive audience). The tweets might fall in the latter category, whose stages and characteristic maneuvering are reported in Table 1.

Table 1, Stages of public debate, adapted from van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2015, p. 389.

Confrontation stage (initial situation)	Opening stage (starting points: rules, concessions)	Argumentation stage (argumentative means)	Concluding stage (outcome)
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divergence of mixed views; decision up to a non-interactive audience	Largely implicit intersubjective rules; explicit and implicit concessions	defence of standpoints in critical exchanges	resolution of difference to some member audience or maintenance of initial situation
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Parameters to define the strategic maneuvering include the *results* that can be achieved, the *routes* taken to achieve them, the *constraints* imposed by the institutional context, and the *mutual commitments* among the parties.

In this perspective, fallacies are considered a critical violation of strategic maneuvering, because they can hinder the resolution of the conflict (van Eemeren, 2018, p. 53).

The argumentative types are three: causal (establishing a cause-effect or correlation connection to support the standpoint), analogy / comparison (establishing a comparison with another situation), symptomatic (something being a sign of something else) (van Eemeren & Garsen, 2013, p. 7; van Eemeren, 2018, pp. 45–49). External or institutional constraints can give rise to specific argumentative patterns, where a certain sequence of moves is expected.

### 3.2 Internet linguistics

According to David Crystal (2006, pp. 3-4, 10), the expression “computer-mediated communication” comprises a wide range of languages and channels employed when communicating on a digital device. The number of variables in such a field is so large that the scholar proposes instead “internet linguistics” in order to identify studies concerned with the use of language and the internet. Studies in this field started with many beliefs concerning language that were later dismissed, such as the belief that computer-mediated communication was characterized by abbreviations. Nonetheless, there are features specific to internet communication that cannot be ignored: first of all, it is the largest corpus ever seen and it comprises not only web pages but also chat services and every other resource available. The second feature is the higher rate of changing speed. Another very important feature is the fact that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter use a prompt communication sentence: Twitter, until November 2009, had the prompts *what are you doing* or *what's happening*, while Facebook introduced the posting space with *what are you doing right now?*; such prompt is considered by Georgakopoulou (2019, pp. 314–315) as an “affordance”, since it constrains the shaping and framing of communication and, at the same time, puts the speaker inside the focus. The latter feature appears to be shared by Twitter, where a *thread* may include multiple simultaneous posts and replies on the same topic.

### 4. Analysis

A first approach to the corpus was to identify the evaluation expressed towards the hashtag in terms of polarity, so two values were first proposed: *supporting* (positive) and *opposing* (negative) to mark each tweet. Surprisingly, a third category emerged: *unrelated content*. In fact, the hashtag was used also in posts concerning funny videos or commercial advertisements, very often in combination with other hashtags, such as *#aḡwā' Riyaḍ*, a Saudi weathercast television programme. While a specific stance is not expressed, the hashtag is laden with political implications, and its use in advertising content still adds to its trending statistics. Thus, whether it is not clear if those users had a specific position on the matter, they considered it relevant enough to promote their contents on the social network.

Not all tweets were produced from Lebanese citizens. Sometimes the source is unclear, but the use of personal deixis clarifies the matter. In fact, first plural personal pronouns sometimes occur when the source is Lebanese, with a “call to action” intent or a self-criticizing attitude. Sometimes the nature of this source is explicit: a significant number of tweets include the emoji of the Saudi flag and this identifies them as Saudi nationals. Saudi nationals usually elaborate on the comparison with their own internal politics to either support or protest the hashtag.

Among linguistic strategies to be noticed, there is certainly the use of pragmatics and rhetoric. Most tweets perform a fatic function, involving an addressee, usually in combination with modality expressing duty or imposition (ie. modal *must*, imperatives). This denotes high involvement and the need to produce an effect, namely the promotion of the hashtag and the action described in it.

We will now proceed with examples from the analysis of the two expected stances: opposing and supporting tweets.

#### 4.1 Analysis of opposing tweets

The number of tweets criticizing or rebutting the stance expressed in the hashtag clearly exceeds those in support. Most of them ground their argument exclusively in moral principles, maintaining that in a situation of humanitarian emergency such as the pandemic caused by COVID-19, vaccines should be granted to everyone regardless of their ethnicity, creed or nationality. Hence discrimination is equated to racism. Sometimes, however, rational grounding is provided together with moral legitimation, as shown in the following example:

.1  
للأسف نحننا عم نواجه أصعب موجة يلي هي الغباء والعنصرية قبل الوباء ، الوباء إلو دوا بس الغباء والعنصرية  
أمراض مستعصية، الكورونا مثل أي مرض ما بيفرق بين الدين واللون والجنس والجنسية ومهنتنا بتحرم علينا التمييز  
، جربوا لاقوا لقاح لامراضكم لتصيروا بشر قبل #اللقاح\_للبناني\_أولاً

{ *Confrontation, assertive*: Unfortunately we’re facing the most difficult wave, which is stupidity and racism before the pandemic. The pandemic: there’s a cure for it, but stupidity and racism are incurable diseases. }

{ *Argument, symptomatic, assertive*: Corona, like any other virus, does not discern religion, colour, gender, nationality and profession. }

{ *Opening, directive*: It is forbidden for us to discriminate } #vaccine\_for\_Lebanese\_first

{ *Conclusion, directive*: #Try to find a vaccine for your diseases so that you become human first. }

Though not in canonical order, this tweet features all the stages of argumentation. Associating stupidity with racism in the confrontation allows for both argument framing and adaptation to audience: while pointing out the utter irrationality of the standpoint assumed by the hashtag, the arguer addresses people who share the belief that discrimination is immoral. The use of personal deixis, which is limited to the opening and conclusive stages, creates a clear-cut distinction between the targeted audience (in-group), who are referred to by the first-person plural pronoun and hashtag supporters (out-group) referred to by the second-person plural pronoun. The metaphorical relation established between STUPIDITY/RACISM and DISEASE accounts for an effective presentational device which is revived in the conclusive stage, when the arguer performs a directive speech act addressing the out-group and ironically asking them to find a vaccine to become human.

Most tweets based on rational arguments highlight the uselessness of having just a share of the population vaccinated. However, some replies to the thread have touched upon social issues specifically related to the Lebanese demographic situation:

.2

والله لو كل الناس بتفكر مثلك لنشوف الصراعات داخل عائلات لبنان المختلطة باصول فلسطينية وسورية تخيلو ام لبنانية تاخذ اللقاح وتترك زوجها الفلسطيني او السوري واولادها الفلسطينيين او السوريين يواجهو مصيرن مع كورونا  
#اللقاح\_للجميع  #اللقاح\_للبناني\_أولاً  <https://t.co/Iagib9cPcw>

{*Argument 1, causal, assertive*: Surely, if everyone thought the way you think we would see struggles within the various Lebanese families of Palestinian or Syrian origin.}

{*Argument 2, symptomatic, directive*: Imagine a Lebanese mother taking the vaccine and leaving her Palestinian or Syrian husband and her Palestinian or Syrian children facing their destiny with Corona}

{*Confrontation, directive*: #Vaccine\_for\_everyone.}

#Vaccine\_for\_Lebanese\_first

Argument 1 is a direct response to the thread. A second-person singular pronoun is implicitly used to address the interlocutor. Here the arguer uses counterfactual rhetoric to highlight the unreasonableness of the stance expressed in the hashtag: in fact, the Lebanese law does not concede nationality on Palestinian (or Syrian) men who are married to Lebanese women, and the same applies to their offspring. Therefore, it can be inferred that administering vaccines solely to Lebanese citizens would create a paradoxical situation within mixed families. In this first move, not only does the arguer implicitly define the scope of her argument, but she also designates the set of values shared by anyone disapproving of such discriminatory measures. In argument 2, the speech act category shifts from assertive to directive. Here the arguer addresses the audience, implicitly referred to by the second-person plural pronoun, and resorts once again to counterfactual rhetoric. Emphasis is placed on the preposterousness of conjecture. Finally, confrontation serves as a counterproposal of the hashtag #Vaccine\_for\_everyone.

Within the internal debate, some Lebanese dissociate themselves from the stance of the hashtag and polarize against the March 8<sup>th</sup> alliance, a political coalition incorporating both the Free Patriotic Movement (those who launched the thread) and the Shia Muslim party of Hezbollah, who have their own militia and play a crucial role both at the national and regional level:

.3

يا جماعة رجاء لا بد من التفريق بين حلفاء ايران بلبنان يلي هنة حزب الله والتيار العنصريين وبين باقي الشعب اللبناني يلي ما بيقبل بهالعنصرية #اللقاح\_للبناني\_أولاً

{*Opening, directive*: Hey there everyone, Iran's allies in Lebanon, that is Hezbollah, should be differentiated from the Aouni Racist Movement, and the remainder of Lebanese who do not accept racism.} #Vaccine\_for\_Lebanese\_first

This tweet shows further evidence of the relevance that context has in this type of public debate. Once again, the argumentation can only be inferred on the basis of previous shared knowledge, namely the fact that the #Vaccine\_for\_Lebanese\_first stance has been accused of being racist and discriminatory. Hence, we can infer that the arguer deems that stance racist and favors an inclusive approach of the vaccination campaign. No argumentation is really articulated here; all we can assume is that the directive speech act is primarily addressed to those who launched the thread. At the same time, however, the arguer seeks support from anyone in the social community who opposes the March 8<sup>th</sup> coalition at the national level and Iran's policy at the regional level. This is strategically achieved through lexical choice: in fact, the Free Patriotic Movement has been renamed as Aouni Racist Movement, centering the whole party around the figure of Lebanese President Michel Aoun, and suggesting that his political party is inherently racist.



The internal debate also prompted a relevant number of participants to manifest their scepticism and lack of trust in a political class deemed corrupt, or simply to show the groundlessness of the notion of Lebanese citizenship, reigniting the discussion around sectarianism:

.4

AShehade@ #اللقاح\_للبناني\_أولاً اللقاح ماروني أولاً اللقاح رومي أولاً اللقاح كاثوليكي أولاً... و إلى ذلك 😊  
لبنان نظامها طائفي بحت و شعار "البناني" هو شعار وهمي لانه بالواقع كل شيء يمضي على الطائفة و بعدين الانتماء  
الحزبي و بعده بالطبقة الاجتماعية و الواسطة... و الله يعين لبنان ☹️

#Vaccine\_for\_Lebanese\_first

{*Confrontation, directive*: Vaccine for Maronites first! Vaccine for Rumi Christians first!  
Vaccine for Catholics first! And so on...}

{*Argument 1, symptomatic, assertive*: Lebanon has a purely sectarian system,}

{*Opening, assertive*, and the notion of Lebanese is a fake one,}

{*Argument 2, symptomatic, assertive*: because in reality everything here works on the basis of community affiliation, and then political party affiliation, and then social class affiliation... and pulling strings...}

{*Conclusion, expressive*: May God help Lebanon!}

This tweet introduces one of the many subject matters springing from the main thread of discussion. Here the arguer resorts to irony and anaphoric repetition, in order to parody the patriotic spirit of the hashtag: the directive speech act performed in the confrontation stage are a mockery of the slogan's phrasing and aim at proving the utter baselessness of its nationalistic drive. The claim is clearly stated in the second confrontation stage, namely that the very notion of "Lebanese" is void. Argument 2 defines the topic suiting the targeted audience, who is supposedly accepting their validity. Despite that the argument is not grounded in factual evidence, it still preserves the feature of reasonableness, since it taps shared knowledge for the community of participants: it is worth recalling that confessionalism and its systemic corruption were two major issues that Lebanese social protest focused on, over the past ten years.

Among the non-Lebanese Arabs who joined the discussion, Saudi and Emirates nationals stand out for using the arena of the debate in order to formulate derogatory comments aimed at Lebanese residents, or simply to extol their own country, as a model of good management:

.5

#اللقاح\_للبناني\_أولاً و #الامارات كل البشر في الدولة مستحق اللقاح ، كم انت كبير يا وطني

#vaccine\_for\_Lebanese\_first

{*Argumentation, comparational, assertive*: Emirates, every human in the country is entitled to vaccination.}

{*Opening, expressive*: How great you are, oh my homeland!}

There are quite a few tweets sharing this very structure and leaving much of the message implicit. No personal deixis is even used, and all that can be inferred must be drawn from the context. In fact, what the arguer states needs to be compared with the Lebanese case. The fact that in the Emirates nobody is excluded from vaccine access is in stark contrast with what the hashtag claims, and hence identifies a targeted audience of people sharing the same moral values of inclusion. This perspective is also reinforced by lexical choice: the word human being (*bašar*) is here used instead of resident (*muqīm*).

Quite expectedly, also Palestinian and Syrian nationals joined the debate, in response to more or less explicit criticism made by Lebanese opponents. In previous tweets, Syrians were accused of smuggling wheat, fuel and international currency into Syria. Here's a response:

.6  
اذا كنت لبناني و رجل ارجوا منك فرد عضلاتك وعنترياتك على حزب الله المتسبب في تهجير السوريين و اعادة مقاتليه الى لبنان و بعدها يحق لكم التكلم عن اي لاجئ سوري وطرده حزبكم الارهابي سبب في تهجير وتدمير مواطني سوريا صورة مع التحية #اللقاح\_للبناني\_اولا <https://t.co/bPrDDBNMnM>

{*Argument 1, symptomatic, directive:* If you're Lebanese and if you are a man, I beg you to show your muscles and prove your heroism to Hezbollah, which has caused the evacuation of Syrians, and make them bring their fighters back to Lebanon, then you will be entitled to talk about any Syrian refugee and to expel him.

{*Argument 2, assertive, causal:* Your terrorist party is responsible for our displacement and the annihilation of Syrian citizens. Picture with regards.}

#Vaccine\_for\_Lebanese\_first.

Here is one yet another topic springing from the main thread, that touches upon the civil war in Syria and connected regional alliances. As we just noted, the arguer may be responding to previous accusations formulated by some Lebanese hashtag supporters. The text is built on different premises and does not actually provide any relevant argument to the threaded discussion. Instead, it aims at discrediting the opponent. Counterfactual rhetoric is chosen as a strategic move and sets unlikely conditions that the interlocutor cannot meet. The whole argumentation is phrased as a directive speech act, which indicates that the targeted audience is also the recipient of communication. Once again historical context is necessary to fully understand textual hints: Hezbollah actively took part in the Syrian civil war by providing President Asad with military support, thus contributing to the involuntary displacement of civilians, for which the arguer holds the Lebanese party responsible.

## 4.2 Supporting tweets

The tweets holding a supporting position with regards to vaccinating the Lebanese first revolve around two main moves: asserting the priority on the grounds of national identity, sometimes supported by arguments (but not necessarily), and the use of a disclaimer concerning the fact that it is not "Lebanese only", hence the claim is not racist. In summary, the two prevailing types of argumentation are symptomatic (if you are Lebanese you have a right to priority) and maintain a dialogical nature in response to accusations of racism.

The following examples show the core topics dealt with when supporting the hashtag: money, national belonging, and help given to Syria and the Syrians. The last tweet is of a non-Lebanese national who shows support. With the exception of the last one, they show a trend common to most tweets, probably as a consequence of the forced 46 characters limit: the argumentation is reduced to few stages, usually argument and conclusion. The text production is immediate and the context of discussion, being a Twitter thread, thus it allows for easy inferring of the missing information, to the point that even the conclusion phase or the opening phase can be omitted.

.7  
أكثر من 70 مليون دولار كاش

هي كلفة تلقيح النازحين الأجانب من احتياط دولارات اللبنانيين  
#اللقاح\_للبناني\_أول

More than 70 million dollars in cash is the cost of foreign displaced vaccination, coming from the reserves of the Lebanese

This constitutes a *Single argument*, is an *assertive* grounded on the notion that expense implies property and/or privilege as implicit starting point, thus follows a *causal* scheme. It also implies the fact that Lebanese spent on the vaccine of Syrian refugees (“foreign displaced vaccination”). The lexical choice “displaced” may be symptomatic of a political stance: in fact, an internal debate exists on the usage of “displaced” or “refugee” to refer to Syrians in Lebanon, because the former term emphasizes the temporal nature of their stay, somehow failing to acknowledge the status of refugee.

.8

وين المشكلة اذا كان #اللقاح\_للبناني\_اولا ، البنزين واتهزّب على سوريا، الدولار وسحبته سوريا، والقمح المدعوم راح على سوريا، وبترات الامونيوم طلعت لسوريا. انه اذا مش غشيم بتكون عنصري؟

{*Opening, assertive*: Where is the problem if were #the\_vaccine\_for\_Lebanese\_first[?]}  
{*Argument 1, causal, assertive*: the gas is smuggled to Syria, the dollars were taken by Syria, the wheat bought with subsidies goes to Syria, the ammonium nitrate turned out to be Syrian}.  
{*Opening, assertive*: So, is someone racist for not being naive?}

.9

اتفق مع اللبنانيين تماما. اللقاح لابناء البلد اولاً. هم من يبني البلد ومن يدافع عنه بدمه وماله. لبيت وزارة الصحة لدينا تفهم. ابي وامي واخي واختي اولى من غيرهم. تباً لإنسانية تجعل اهلي في المؤخرة بعد الفلسطيني والسوري واللبناني وغيرهم. #اللقاح\_للبناني\_أولاً

{*Confrontation, expressive*: I totally agree with the Lebanese.}  
{*Opening, assertive*: The vaccine is for the nationals [literally: children of the country].}  
{*Argument 2, causal, assertive*: It is them who built the country, on which they spent their money and their blood.}  
{*Confrontation, expressive*: I wish our Health Ministry understood [this].}

The few stages present are mainly assertives, especially for what concerns supporting tweets. For what concerns style, we can see the use of rhetorical interrogatives, repetitions (“to / from Syria”, 2). In example 9, the causal argument is reinforced by a topicalization of the metaphorical expression ‘children of the nation’, a well-established Arabic expression to refer to citizens.

The use of personal deixis is realized mainly by the use of adjectives of nationality and third person plural referring mainly to the Lebanese or the refugee. They might be sometimes addressed directly by the means of second person plural, as a single national category, or implied in an inclusive “we”, assuming that the tweet is posted by a Lebanese national. Third person and inclusive first person plural are very frequent in the tweets of Saudis supporting the tweet on the grounds of national belonging. This is frequently paired with the argumentative style of comparison:

.10

كل بلدان العالم تتنادي بأولوية المواطن إلا في #السعودية, السعودي أخرا. شوفو كيف زعلانين على اللقاح. أجل أحننا وشو نقول؟

{ *Confrontation, assertive*: Every country in the world calls for priority of the citizen except for #Saudi Arabia. }

{ *Argument, comparison, assertive* The Saudi is last. }

{ *Confrontation, directive*: Look at how upset they are about the vaccine, so what should we say? } #the\_vaccine\_for\_Lebanese\_first [link to screenshot of tweets with the hashtag, NdA]

The previous tweet is not directly supportive of the hashtag but of the concept of giving priority to nationals. The comparative argumentation is built on the recurrent topic of what “the other nations” do, very recurrent in this thread. No further details are provided on who exactly are the other nations, but the assumption is that being the exception is negative, which is the key to infer the standpoint and the conclusion. It closes on a rhetorical interrogative, with inclusive first person plural and allows for inference of the conclusion: the Saudis should put citizens first. This “Saudi” branching of the thread makes a substantive use of first person pronouns to define speaker and addressee, and shows a very interactive style.

Argumentation styles are mainly causal. In the first case, they usually reply to accusations of racism thus consist in defence or self-defence, as in example (8), while causal argumentation is grounded on notions such as access to property and rights as consequences of citizenship because it involves tax paying and / or direct contribution to the rise of the nation: since you are a citizen (hence you have paid taxes/ contributed actively), you deserve priority. This is supported by moral legitimation, as is the case for example (7, 9).

## 5. Discussion

The analysis of strategic maneuvering resulted in the following considerations.

For what concerns topical potential, we can observe its differentiation in three main lines of discussion. Such differentiation seems undetected by the users, who act as contributors to the same line of discussion, acting as if their premises and assumptions are shared by other users. If we were to classify the topic potential, we would have:

1. a “central” line of discussion and argumentative structure: arguing the privilege of accessing health measures for citizens would be the “expected” line of discussion (polarising those advocating for or against such privilege);
2. “side” topical potential 1: debating the legitimacy of Hezbollah, the accountability for the economic crisis in Lebanon and the explosion of the port, ties with Iran and Syria, the refugees crisis are “oblique” topic potential;
3. “side” topical potential 2: debating the consistency of expatriate Lebanese and Saudi choices on access to the vaccine.

The “side topical potential” argumentative structures may appear irrelevant; however, they are not, although for different reasons. In “side topical potential 1”, we see the consequences of a very specific inference that resulted from the interpretation of the hashtag: providing access to Lebanese citizens meant negating or delaying the vaccine for refugees, not just any other temporary resident or migrant. Secondly, refugees were generally considered to be the Syrian refugees, hence involving discourses concerning internal and regional politics. In this case, topical potential was thus influenced by pre-existing political debates stemming from a very specific context-bound inference. The second oblique lines of debate concern the massive intervention of Saudi nationals, already debated previously.

For what concerns audience adaptation, we shall see which assumptions and systems of values are addressed, through the type of argumentation and legitimation strategy (Van Leeuwen, 2007). We see that supporting arguments concern a (de)legitimation of privilege: citizens have a right to priority because they pay taxes and have contributed materially to the country (causal argumentation; rational theoretical legitimation), thus grounding the argumentation on an economic line of reasoning, where spending money gives privilege, and public money is the reason why citizens have priority; on the other side, a moral legitimation line is opposed (everybody should equally be vaccinated, because it is morally right) and a rational legitimation / pragmatic argumentation (if everybody gets vaccinated, Lebanese will be safer). Comparison argumentation is also very common, in the form “every other country gives privilege to its citizens, therefore we should do the same”, or “other countries give the vaccine to everybody, therefore we should do the same”. Discourse line 3 is based essentially on comparison argumentation, and side topical potential 2 pertains mainly the ad-hominem fallacy, by delegitimizing Lebanon for hosting Hezbollah or refugees for being (assumingly) connected to Hezbollah and/or Syria and/or Iran, and having benefited from Lebanese aids or having damaged the country, adopting again similar argumentation patterns and legitimation strategies of topic potential 1.

Some other issues may be occasionally addressed, such as the Lebanese confessional system. Other times, the topical potential is redirected to put into discussion the will of refugees to take the vaccine or the efficacy of the vaccine.

Finally, for what concerns presentational devices, we can register a wide variation of linguistic and rhetorical structures. Rhetoric interrogatives are very common, as are anaphoric constructions and wordplay. Opposing tweets are those who seem to rely on a more “creative” style the most, very often playing with the hashtag and rewording it or forging a new one. Both Modern Standard Arabic and spoken varieties are used, sometimes in the same tweet; personal deixis privileges third person plural pronouns and references, although the second person plural is often used to address the Lebanese in derogatory terms, and sometimes an inclusive first person plural is present. Nonetheless, the personal deixis frequently changes its referent, and parallel to multiple topic potential we find a reduplication of ingroups.

## **6. Conclusive remarks**

In this paper, we have presented the qualitative analysis of 60 tweets from a larger sample of 501 containing the hashtag “Vaccine for Lebanese first”, in order to understand how the argumentation was carried out. Some preliminary hypotheses were advanced accordingly with the nature of the thread: the hashtag was considered as a sort of thematic device, establishing the starting point of the tweet and inserting it in a wider discussion, and, from an argumentative perspective, it was considered as a possible opening (expression of the standpoint and roles) with the function of constraining the topical potential (beliefs about access rights, health, national identity as starting points). However, the findings have confuted this preliminary hypotheses: although appearing as an argumentative opening, for being phrased as an opinion expressed through an assertive, the hashtag in the thread actually works better within the confrontation stage, because it always refer to the general discussion and conflict of standpoints but it does not always correspond with the user’s own standpoint.

In conclusion, since users use the hashtag item to follow a thread, we can acknowledge the hashtag as a sort of pragmatic valence in defining a thread or discussion around a topic; however, the characteristics of the medium (Twitter) allow especially for a reduplication of topic potential and for the presence of many simultaneous ingroups and outgroups within the same hashtag-constrained discussion. Further studies may help to understand the extent of this phenomenon to other threads and languages, and clarify the dynamics behind topic selection, shared assumptions, and relevance.

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