

**A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF GRAFFITI OF
PALESTINIANS IN REFUGEE CAMPS IN JORDAN
FROM THE VIEWS OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND
SOCIOLOGY OF LANGUAGE**

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UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

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by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Adj	Adjective
Adj. P	Adjectival Phrase
AIPA	Arabic International Phonetic Alphabet
Conj.	Conjunction
Cov. Pron.	Covert Pronoun
Det.	Determiner
FaFo	The Norwegian Institute for Labour and Social Research
Interrog.	Interrogative
N	Noun
NGOs	Non Governmental Organisations
NP	Noun Phrase
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
PP	Prepositional Phrase
Prep.	Preposition
Pro	Pronoun
UN	United Nations
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
V	Verb
VP	Verb Phrase

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KAJIAN DESKRIPTIF GRAFFITI DI KEM PELARIAN PALESTIN DARI PERSPEKTIF SOSIOLINGUISTIK DAN SOSIOLOGI BAHASA DI JORDAN

ABSTRAK

Penyelidikan ini dijalankan untuk mengkaji graffiti dari segi fungsi bahasa, ciri-ciri linguistik, alat retorik dan masalah sosial yang mempengaruhi pelarian Palestin di kem pelarian di Jordan dari perspektif sosiolinguistik dan sosiologi bahasa. Untuk mengetahui fungsi bahasa, kajian ini menggunakan teori yang diperkenalkan oleh Jakobson (1960). Dalam pada itu, teori yang dipelopori oleh Harris (1997) digunakan untuk mengetahui alat retorik dan ciri-ciri linguistik. Selain itu, kajian ini mengenal pasti masalah sosial pelarian Palestin dengan menggunakan model oleh Erlingsson dan Brysiewicz (2017). Untuk menjawab soalan kajian, sebanyak dua ratus empat puluh empat grafiti daripada empat kem telah dipilih dengan menggunakan kaedah persampelan sistematik. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa grafiti pelarian Palestin mempunyai lapan belas fungsi Bahasa di samping isu-isu utama seperti patriotisme dan 'Hak untuk Kembali'. Selain itu, graffiti yang dianalisis memenuhi sebelas ciri linguistik yang merangkumi bidang sintaksis, fonologi dan semantik. Dalam pada itu, graffiti yang dikaji juga menunjukkan enam belas jenis retorik untuk memuliakan tentangan, mempersendakan keadaan hidup, menyatakan cinta dan ironi, menunjukkan penekanan, kontras dan menimbulkan rasa ingin tahu. Berhubung isu sosial, dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa grafiti pelarian dipengaruhi oleh masalah sosial yang diluahkan melalui isu hak untuk kembali ke Palestine dan keadaan hidup. Penemuan ini memberikan pandangan berharga tentang isu sosiolinguistik dan sosiologi bagi yang berminat untuk memperbaiki keadaan hidup pelarian dan mengkaji aspek sosial dan sosiologi. Dapatan kajian ini menyumbang kepada pemahaman grafiti

sebagai fenomena dominan di kem pelarian Palestin di Jordan, menonjolkan aspek sosiolinguistik dan sosiologi dalam konteks pelarian.

A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF GRAFFITI OF PALESTINIANS IN REFUGEE CAMPS IN JORDAN FROM THE VIEWS OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND SOCIOLOGY OF LANGUAGE

ABSTRACT

This research was carried out to investigate the graffiti of Palestinians in refugee camps in Jordan from the perspectives of sociolinguistics and the sociology of language to figure out the language functions of the graffiti, linguistic features and rhetorical devices and the social problems that affect Palestinian refugees. To figure out the language functions, the study adopted Jakobson's (1960) theory, Harris's (1997) theory, and Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) model. To answer the research questions, a sample of two hundred and forty-four graffiti have been collected from four camps using systematic sampling method. The findings revealed that Palestinian refugees' graffiti served eighteen language functions, highlighting key issues, including expressing patriotism, love and personality, feelings and leaving memories. The findings showed that the graffiti fulfilled eleven linguistic features that fell within the areas of syntax, phonology and semantics. The findings also showed that the graffiti employed sixteen rhetorical devices that were used to glorify resistance, ridicule living conditions, express love and irony, show emphasis, contrast and arouse curiosity. Regarding the social problems, the findings showed that refugees' graffiti was affected by their social problems expressing topics such as displacement, homesickness, the call for resistance and living conditions. The findings provided valuable insights into sociolinguistic and sociological issues, offering valuable insights for those interested in improving refugees' living conditions and studying social and sociological aspects. The findings of this study contributed to understanding graffiti as

a dominant phenomenon in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, highlighting the sociolinguistic and sociological aspects of the situation within the context of refugees.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Languages are used by people to communicate with one another. These languages should have a mutually understood message. Otherwise, chaos is what is going to happen. In other words, the message will not be understood by either party, or the extent of the miscommunication will be apparent. According to (Miller, 1963, p.10), communication involves the transfer of information from one location to another. As a result, the data needs to be represented by a set of symbols. He further states that the a symbole “consists of spoken sounds, of written squiggles or whatever other set of symbols is convenient.” Graffiti's history as a communication tool dates back to the prehistoric era, when various images and symbols were discovered painted on the walls or surfaces of caves where ancient civilizations established their houses. According to Tracy (2005, p.22), this phenomenon is significant and represents “freedom of expression” for graffitiists who are frequently anonymous. Academics worldwide examine the content of this type of writing and the motives behind the use of graffiti as a tool for social interaction within a given community. According to Farnia (2014, p.48), graffiti is viewed as “a second diary book” to refer to graffiti where people’s voices are represented in either public or private places “to convey their anger, instantons thought, love, declaration, political proclamation and outcry”. Therefore, the present study sheds light on the graffiti of Palestinians in refugee camps in Jordan from the perspectives of sociolinguistics and the sociology of language to figure out the language functions and linguistic and rhetorical devices on one hand, and the social

problems that affect their graffiti from the other hand in an attempt of understanding the phenomenon of graffiti among Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan.

1.2 Background of the Study

Graffiti has long been employed as a medium for communicating social, cultural, economic, and political messages. Scholars such as Luna (1989, p. 169), Farnia and Tohidian (2013, pp. 2–3), and El-Nashar and Nayef (2016, p. 227) affirm that graffiti functions as a rich source of psychological, social, and cultural information. Its significance extends beyond historical expression to encompass current societal, cultural, and political dynamics. As a linguistic and visual form of expression, graffiti reflects both individual values and collective societal ideologies. Fairclough (1989) emphasises that language is an intrinsic part of society and that the two are interrelated, suggesting that an analysis of graffiti is incomplete without considering the societal context in which it is produced.

This perspective is particularly relevant in conflict-ridden contexts such as Palestine, where graffiti serves not only as a mode of self-expression but also as a form of resistance and political commentary (Nofal, 2021). The Palestinian landscape is marked by walls and borders that have become canvases for articulating national identity, protest, and survival. In this setting, graffiti evolves into a socio-political text, echoing voices that are otherwise marginalised or suppressed (Peteet, 1996; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2020).

Graffiti, as a sociolinguistic artifact, reveals the interplay between language and community issues. It is shaped by and shapes social norms, standards, and power structures. Stocker et al. (1972) regarded graffiti as a cultural element reflective of social attitudes and practices. This is supported by more recent studies highlighting

how graffiti functions as a medium for social commentary and resistance, particularly in urban and marginalised communities (Iveson, 2010; Campos, 2016).

The forms of graffiti are diverse. According to Callinan (2002), they include tagging, political, social, humorous, racist, malicious, and gang-related graffiti. Understanding these categories provides a framework for analysing graffiti's purposes and policy implications. Cresswell (1992) argued that graffiti constructs ideological landscapes by expressing claims related to space, identity, and justice. Through this lens, graffiti becomes not merely vandalism but a socio-political statement embedded in spatial dynamics.

Furthermore, graffiti acts as a communicative act that performs a variety of language functions. Agnes et al. (2014), El-Nashar and Nayef (2016), and Morva and Onyango (as cited in Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2017) found that graffiti conveys messages—both overt and covert—to different audiences. These messages are not random; rather, they are purposeful, context-dependent linguistic events. The theoretical foundation for this is drawn from Jakobson's (1995) and Halliday's (1973) models of language functions, which categorise communication into various functional purposes such as expressive, conative, phatic, and referential.

In light of these perspectives, the study of graffiti, especially in politically charged environments like Palestine, must integrate sociolinguistic, cultural, and geopolitical considerations. Graffiti, therefore, is not a peripheral or deviant linguistic form but a powerful discursive tool reflecting social dynamics, resistance, and identity construction in contested spaces.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Graffiti, historically dismissed as a form of vandalism or youth rebellion, has increasingly been recognised as a legitimate and complex site of sociolinguistic and political expression. Far from being a marginal or chaotic phenomenon, graffiti is a multimodal form of communication that reflects, contests, and shapes social realities, particularly in spaces marked by marginalisation and resistance (Campos, 2016; Teixeira et al., 2021). This shift in scholarly attention acknowledges graffiti's potential as a counter-hegemonic discourse, especially in socio-politically sensitive contexts such as refugee camps, occupied territories, and conflict zones (Cresswell, 1992; Peteet, 1996).

However, despite this growing interest, the scholarly literature on graffiti remains geographically and thematically uneven. Research from global cities such as New York (Adams & Winter, 1997), Berlin (Kramer, 2011), and São Paulo (Campos, 2016) has extensively documented graffiti's stylistic forms, subcultural affiliations, and spatial politics. Yet, this body of work largely overlooks contexts shaped by displacement, political instability, and protracted statelessness—such as the lived realities of Palestinian refugees in Jordan. This omission is not merely academic oversight; it represents a significant epistemological gap. If graffiti is, as scholars argue, a reflection of socio-political struggle, then refugee graffiti—produced in conditions of institutionalised exclusion—deserves deeper empirical and theoretical engagement.

Moreover, existing research on Arabic graffiti, while valuable, has tended to focus narrowly on surface-level thematic analysis. For instance, studies by Eid (2008, 2019) and El-Nashar and Nayef (2016) investigate nationalist, religious, and emotional

themes in refugee and student graffiti in Jordan. Yet these studies fall short of offering a linguistically rigorous account grounded in formal models of language use. Similarly, the work of Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2017) applies discourse analysis to university graffiti but does not extend its insights to refugee populations or examine broader sociological or sociolinguistic implications. Internationally, Farnia and Tohidian's (2013) work on Iranian graffiti adopts a sociolinguistic lens but does not account for the rhetorical strategies or deeper language functions that underlie graffiti communication.

The central problem, therefore, lies in the absence of an integrated framework that brings together three key variables—language functions, rhetorical and linguistic features, and social problems—to analyse graffiti produced within a refugee setting. The lack of theoretical synthesis is especially problematic given that graffiti, in such contexts, operates as both a communicative act and a symbolic resistance to structural oppression (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2020; Nofal, 2021). Graffiti in Palestinian refugee camps is not merely decorative or expressive; it is profoundly political, shaped by generations of displacement, socio-economic deprivation, and contested identity.

Furthermore, the rhetorical and linguistic sophistication of refugee graffiti remains grossly under-theorised. Scholars such as McGuigan (2011) and Harris (1997) have outlined the rhetorical devices—such as metaphor, alliteration, irony, repetition, and personification—that enhance persuasive discourse. Yet little has been done to apply such models to graffiti texts, despite the fact that many examples exhibit precisely these features. Even fewer studies attempt to map these rhetorical strategies onto language function models such as Jakobson's (1995), which are crucial for understanding the communicative intent behind graffiti messages (e.g., expressive, conative, poetic, referential). Ignoring these dimensions flattens the meaning-making

potential of graffiti and overlooks the nuanced ways in which refugees use language to navigate oppression.

Compounding this gap is a problematic reliance in some prior studies on anecdotal evidence or unsubstantiated claims, such as personal observation to frame research gaps. While field engagement is important, academic rigour demands that problem statements be grounded in systematic literature synthesis and theoretical justification (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Claims of novelty must be demonstrated through the identification of clear absences or contradictions in existing research, not merely asserted.

Thus, this study argues for a reconceptualisation of Palestinian refugee graffiti as a strategic, semiotic, and linguistic phenomenon that warrants multidisciplinary inquiry. By examining graffiti through the integrated lenses of Jakobson's (1995) language functions, Harris's (1997) rhetorical model, and Erlingsson and Brysiewicz's (2017) model, this research will offer a comprehensive understanding of graffiti's communicative role in refugee life. In doing so, it aims not only to fill a critical empirical gap but also to contribute to ongoing debates in sociolinguistics, discourse studies, and the sociology of language.

1.4 Research Objectives

This study aims to examine the graffiti of Palestinian refugees in Jordan from perspectives of sociolinguistics and the sociology of language. Therefore, it seeks:

- i) To investigate the language functions of graffiti in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan.

- ii) To find out the linguistic features and the rhetorical devices that characterise graffiti in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan.
- iii) To explore the effect of social problems of Palestinian refugees on their graffiti in Jordan.

1.5 Research Questions

The research focuses on the language functions, linguistic devices and rhetorical devices of graffiti as an informal aspect of language. The study specifically seeks to explore the effect of social problems of Palestinian refugees on their graffiti responses. It seeks to respond to the following questions:

- i) What are the language functions that characterise graffiti in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan?
- ii) What are the linguistic and rhetorical features that are employed in graffiti of Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan?
- iii) How do social problems affect graffiti in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan?

1.6 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in both its theoretical contributions to sociolinguistics and rhetoric, and its practical implications for understanding and addressing the lived experiences of Palestinian refugees in Jordan. While graffiti has long been studied as a subcultural or artistic form, this research elevates it to a linguistic and sociopolitical text that encodes layered meanings and social realities, particularly in contexts marked by displacement, marginalisation, and resistance.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the field of sociolinguistics by applying Jakobson's (1960) theory of language functions to analyse the communicative purposes of refugee graffiti. The study shows that graffiti in Palestinian refugee camps performs a range of language functions—most dominantly emotive, conative, and referential which reflect the graffitists' attempts to express identity, demand rights, convey memories, and transmit political messages. This deepens the understanding of how language operates in non-traditional, informal contexts and expands the scope of sociolinguistic inquiry to include marginalised voices often excluded from mainstream discourse.

Additionally, the study advances rhetorical and discourse studies by applying Harris's (1997) model to examine aesthetic and persuasive elements in graffiti. Identifying rhetorical devices such as metaphor, personification, repetition, and understatement provides insight into how refugees strategically craft their messages to affect readers emotionally and intellectually. Thus, the study bridges the gap between language form and function in applied sociolinguistics and cultural linguistics.

The study also addresses a clear empirical and contextual gap: there is a lack of research exploring refugee graffiti as a combined linguistic, rhetorical, and sociopolinguistic phenomenon—especially in the context of Palestinian camps in Jordan. While prior studies have documented graffiti thematically or politically (e.g., Peteet, 1996; Eid, 2019), this study can offer a systematic and integrated analysis of its linguistic structures, rhetorical features, and social functions within a refugee setting. In doing so, it provides a model for analysing other marginalised communities' grassroots expressions through language.

From a practical standpoint, the findings have implications for educators, sociologists, human rights advocates, and policymakers. The graffiti analysed in this study reflects pressing social problems such as displacement, frustration, unemployment, and political disillusionment which are encoded through language on camp walls. These findings can support nongovernmental organisations, educators, and social workers in designing more responsive educational and social interventions by understanding how refugees express their realities and resistances through informal, public language.

Moreover, documenting and analysing graffiti helps preserve the sociolinguistic heritage of refugee communities that is often overlooked and at risk of being erased through wall-cleaning campaigns or redevelopment projects. This research offers a snapshot of lived experience and discourse that is otherwise undocumented, contributing to the preservation of refugee voices and their cultural memory.

In sum, the study provides a scholarly framework and empirical foundation for understanding graffiti as a tool of communication, resistance, and identity. It calls attention to the linguistic creativity of marginalised populations and offers an interdisciplinary contribution to the fields of sociolinguistics, rhetorical studies, refugee studies, and the sociology of language.

1.7 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study focuses on analysing the written graffiti of Palestinian refugees in selected camps in Jordan. The scope is intentionally restricted to textual graffiti, such as words, phrases, and sentences, rather than visual or graphic elements like murals or images. The exclusion of graphics is not due to oversight but to maintain

methodological clarity and to align with the study's core objective: to explore language functions, linguistic features, rhetorical devices, and social issues using well-established linguistic frameworks—namely Jakobson's model of language functions (1960), Harris's rhetorical devices (1997), and content analysis as outlined by Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017).

While graffiti often contains powerful visual elements that merit semiotic analysis (Chandler, 2022), the present research adopts a sociolinguistic approach, rather than a visual-semiotic one. Future research may benefit from expanding the scope to include visual symbols, drawings, and layout patterns, using semiotic frameworks such as those proposed by Barthes or Kress and van Leeuwen. However, analysing both linguistic and visual elements simultaneously would exceed the analytical depth intended for this study.

In terms of geographical and demographic scope, the study is limited to Palestinian refugee camps within Jordan, including both urban and rural camps to reflect variation in living conditions. This focus is justified by several factors: (1) Palestinian refugees represent the largest and oldest refugee population in Jordan (Issa et al., 2015); (2) their sociopolitical history is unique in the Arab world, particularly after the 1948 Nakba; and (3) graffiti has emerged in these communities as a visible and consistent form of sociolinguistic expression (Peteet, 1996; Lehec, 2017).

The types of graffiti analysed in this study include tagging, political graffiti, religious expressions, commercial and identity-based graffiti, but exclude forms of gang graffiti, which is less relevant in the refugee context under examination (Callinan, 2002; Gómez, 1992). The texts were collected from public walls and surfaces across

selected camps, with ethical considerations adhered to in terms of consent and data access.

Several limitations are acknowledged. First, access restrictions from UNRWA limited data collection in institutional buildings, though this was mitigated by collecting graffiti from residential and public spaces which represent the bulk of graffiti presence. Second, image-based data were not always permitted by residents, resulting in some reliance on manual transcription. Third, the theoretical scope is confined to Jakobson (1960) and Harris (1997); other models (e.g., Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics) could offer different but complementary insights.

Lastly, while this study offers deep insights into Palestinian graffiti in Jordan, its findings may not be generalisable to Palestinian refugees in other countries or to other refugee communities. Future comparative studies across camps or nations would be a valuable expansion.

1.8 Definitions of Terms

To ensure clarity and conceptual precision, the following key terms are defined based on scholarly literature relevant to this study:

- i. **Graffiti:** Graffiti refers to written or drawn inscriptions placed illicitly or publicly on walls and surfaces. Etymologically derived from the Italian *graffiare* ("to scratch") and the Greek *graphein* ("to write"), it is understood as "an irreverent inscription on a wall in a public place" (Gross et al., 1997, p. 50). Castleman (1982) describes it as any form of marking that "defaces public or private property." In this study, Palestinian refugee graffiti specifically refers to written texts (e.g., slogans, statements, poetic lines)

found on walls in refugee camps in Jordan, created by refugees as expressions of identity, resistance, or emotion.

- ii. **Language functions:** language functions are the purposes behind communicative acts. Jakobson (1960) outlines six core functions—referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic—each relating to a different component of the communication process. These functions are essential for understanding how graffiti texts serve to inform, express emotions, persuade, maintain social contact, or reflect aesthetic concerns (Chandler, 2022). In this study, language functions help reveal the communicative intentions embedded in refugee graffiti.
- iii. **Linguistic Features:** linguistic features are the formal properties of language, such as syntax, phonology, and semantics, that shape how messages are structured and interpreted (Crystal, 2008). These include sentence types (e.g., statements, commands), phonological devices (e.g., rhyme, alliteration), and semantic tools (e.g., metaphor, synonymy). In this study, linguistic features refer to text-based structures in graffiti that contribute to meaning and aesthetic expression.
- iv. **Rhetorical Devices:** rhetorical devices are strategies used to persuade or aesthetically enhance communication. McGuigan (2011) defines rhetorical devices as language tools that serve to persuade, inform, or entertain through stylistic effect. While often overlapping with linguistic features, rhetorical devices in this study are examined as textual strategies (not purely linguistic or visual) that include metaphor, personification,

repetition, and antithesis, and are analysed for their communicative function in graffiti.

- v. **Content Analysis:** content analysis is a systematic research method used to interpret meaning from the content of textual data (Krippendorff, 2018). It allows researchers to categorise, interpret, and draw conclusions about communication patterns and themes. In this study, content analysis (following Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017) is applied to graffiti texts to uncover recurring language functions, social themes, and expressive features.

1.9 Thesis Structure

The present study is organised into five chapters. The organisation of the chapters is as follows:

Chapter 1 provides the basic background information regarding the current study, which is the graffiti of the Palestinian refugees in Jordan. It also provides the statement of the problem, research questions, objectives, significance, and scope of the study. The chapter provides an introduction related to the Palestinian refugees in Jordan, sociolinguistics and the sociology of language. Furthermore, it introduces some information regarding language functions and social problems. It also defines some of the terms employed in this study. This chapter guides the readers to understand the structure of this thesis. Finally, it ends with a summary of the chapter.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical models upon which this thesis is based and introduces a concise outline of the various stages of its growth and similar theories. It presents the adopted theories of Jakobson (1960) and Harris (1997) and relates them

to graffiti. It also describes the model Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) of doing content analysis in the context of graffiti. This chapter provides explanations of graffiti and its different types. It also provides a review of related literature, which could answer as many questions as possible. In this regard, it starts by reviewing previous studies on graffiti from the views of sociolinguistics and the sociology of language, as well as graffiti in non-Palestinian and Palestinian contexts.

Additionally, this chapter discusses in detail Palestinian refugees in Jordan, especially those who are still residing inside the camps. The chapter introduces the diagram of the theoretical framework of the study as a blueprint of steps and procedures to be followed while conducting this study. Finally, it ends with a summary of the chapter.

Chapter 3 is designed to highlight how the methodology of the present study is systematically conducted. It discusses and provides a detailed description of research design, research sampling, sample size and data analysis, providing a diagram of the procedural steps of the research design. Following that, the chapter provides research quality considerations regarding validity and reliability. In this chapter, the researcher rationalises the adopted theories of Jakobson (1960) and Harris (1997) the model Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) and other classifications. Ultimately, the conclusion of the study procedures of this chapter is given, followed by a summary of the whole chapter.

Chapter 4 represents the core of the present study. It includes a detailed analysis of the data collected from the camps of the Palestinian refugees in Jordan. This chapter examines the language functions of the graffiti of the Palestinian refugees within Jakobson's theory of language functions. It also finds the linguistic features

and the rhetorical devices as given by Harris (1997) in his classification of language devices. By applying the processes Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) of doing content analysis, this chapter can respond to question three of the thesis and highlight the social problems that Palestinian refugees suffer from. This response and the other responses to the thesis questions can ultimately explain the statement of the problem regarding the spread of graffiti in the camps of Palestinian refugees. Finally, this chapter ends with a summary of the chapter.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the study in detail. This chapter also provides a conclusion of the study in which a summary of the present study, revisiting objectives and research questions, some conclusions of the results, contributions, recommendations and suggestions for further studies.

1.10 Summary

This introductory chapter describes the background of the study. It introduces the statement of the problem, the research objectives and questions, the significance and the scope of the study. The research also provides definitions of key terms that are mostly used in the research. It also gives a summary of the thesis structure and ultimately ends with a summary of the chapter.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Graffiti is more than an act of public marking; it is a socio-cultural and linguistic phenomenon deeply embedded in collective and individual expression. Often dismissed as vandalism, graffiti has long served as a communicative outlet for those denied access to formal channels of speech or representation. As Farnia (2014) and El-Nashar and Nayef (2016) argue, many individuals who engage in graffiti do so out of social and psychological necessity—using walls and public surfaces as platforms to express frustration, identity, and resistance. In contexts of marginalisation and repression, graffiti becomes a powerful, low-cost medium for voicing issues that might otherwise remain silenced.

Socially, graffiti reflects the collective concerns and desires of distinct communities. Stewart (2008) emphasises that graffiti is not limited to delinquent youth or subcultures, but rather encompasses a variety of social groups who utilise public writing to express demands, grievances, or affiliations. These markings often serve as social texts that reveal the aspirations, tensions, and ideologies of marginalised groups.

From a linguistic perspective, graffiti has attracted scholarly attention for its structural and communicative properties. Gross et al. (1997) define graffiti as a linguistic artefact that contains both form and content, making it a rich source for phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic analysis. For example, Eid (2008), in his study of student graffiti in Jordanian schools, identifies a range of linguistic features—including syntactic patterns, phonological devices, and lexical

choices—that characterise how youth express themselves in constrained environments.

The enduring presence of graffiti across human history further illustrates its relevance as a medium of expression. Far from being a modern phenomenon, graffiti has deep historical roots, dating back to prehistoric cave art. Dennant (1997) and Element (1996) both affirm that from early human societies, walls have served as canvases for the communication of ideas, emotions, and cultural narratives. These historical traces suggest that graffiti is not merely a deviant act but a reflection of an enduring human impulse to inscribe meaning in shared space.

Moreover, contemporary graffiti manifests in various forms and locations, from urban walls and alleyways to public transportation and infrastructure. Graffitiists today use a range of materials—such as aerosol paint, markers, crayons, and sharp tools—to inscribe messages and images on surfaces like walls, vehicles, and public seating (Gómez, 1992). These texts, whether written or visual, serve multiple purposes: to provoke, to claim space, to commemorate, or to resist.

In summary, graffiti represents a complex intersection of language, identity, social protest, and spatial politics. It is this intersection—especially in contexts of prolonged displacement such as Palestinian refugee camps—that this study seeks to explore. Through a sociolinguistic and sociological lens.

2.2 Language and Society: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

Language and society are inherently intertwined, with language functioning not only as a communicative tool but also as a reflection of power, identity, and social relations. As Fairclough (1989) argues, language is both shaped by and shapes the

social structures within which it is embedded. Sociolinguistics, therefore, investigates how language varies and functions across social groups, contexts, and hierarchies. In multilingual or marginalised societies, language practices often serve as markers of resistance, belonging, or exclusion. These variations are not merely linguistic preferences but are deeply informed by political, economic, and cultural conditions (Holmes & Wilson, 2017).

In particular, sociolinguistics provides a powerful framework for exploring how language is used to navigate inequality and express agency. For instance, in contexts where freedom of speech is restricted, or where people are socially and economically marginalised—as in refugee camps—language often becomes a subtle tool of resistance. Through informal channels such as graffiti, people voice dissent, assert identity, and construct alternative narratives that challenge dominant discourses (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Graffiti represents a unique sociolinguistic phenomenon—an informal, non-institutionalised form of expression that manifests outside normative linguistic registers. Its presence on public surfaces makes it a mode of reclaiming space and visibility by groups often silenced in official discourse (Pennycook, 2010). Unlike institutional texts (e.g., newspapers, textbooks, political speeches), graffiti emerges from below, often anonymously, and is shaped by the social realities of its producers. It operates in what Blommaert (2005) describes as “low-resource environments,” where people use limited tools to make powerful statements in constrained conditions.

From a sociolinguistic lens, graffiti can be understood as a hybrid of text, context, and ideology. It is an artefact that encodes both linguistic variation and social positioning—reflecting how language is used to construct identity, negotiate power, and resist authority. For instance, linguistic choices in graffiti may reflect local dialects, slang, or code-switching practices that mark social belonging or resistance to

dominant norms (Androutsopoulos, 2009). These practices are not arbitrary but serve specific communicative and symbolic functions.

This is particularly relevant in the context of Palestinian refugee camps, where language not only functions as a tool of everyday communication but also as a mechanism for preserving identity and narrating collective trauma. Graffiti in these camps often transcends the personal to become public memory, serving as a repository of political slogans, martyrdom references, and calls for justice (Lehec, 2017; Mahamid, 2020). In this way, graffiti becomes a living sociolinguistic text—constantly updated, erased, and rewritten in response to shifting political realities.

Moreover, studying graffiti within a sociolinguistic framework allows us to observe how language functions outside traditional power structures. It offers a way to engage with language that is raw, immediate, and often emotionally charged. This perspective highlights the relationship between language and resistance, demonstrating how even simple words or phrases on a wall can carry profound political weight (Shohamy, 2006). It also illuminates the intersection of language with space, where walls become discursive terrains shaped by both constraint and creativity.

Therefore, graffiti is not only a linguistic artefact but also a sociopolitical act—a form of discourse that reflects and responds to broader structures of marginalisation and control. Its analysis offers insights into how language functions in contested spaces and how individuals use linguistic creativity to make sense of their circumstances. As this study will show, examining refugee graffiti from a sociolinguistic standpoint offers a deeper understanding of both language and society in contexts of displacement and resistance.

2.3 Graffiti as a linguistic and a Social Phenomenon

Graffiti, derived from the Italian word *graffiare* ("to scratch") and rooted in the Greek term *graphein* ("to write"), originally referred to inscriptions on ancient walls. Over time, the term evolved to denote any form of writing or drawing found in public spaces, often unauthorised and subversive (Castleman, 1982; Chandler, 2022). Far from being a random or chaotic act, graffiti is now recognised as a socially and symbolically rich medium, encompassing a range of communicative functions.

In academic discourse, graffiti has been studied across various disciplines. In urban studies, it reflects spatial politics and territoriality (Cresswell, 1996; Kramer, 2011). In semiotics, it is seen as a system of signs imbued with layered meanings (Barthes, 1977; Chandler, 2022). In education, graffiti has been examined as a pedagogical lens through which youth engage with public discourse (Pabón-Colón, 2018). Politically, graffiti has been analysed as resistance literature, particularly in authoritarian or conflict-affected societies (Peteet, 1996; Toenjes, 2015; Lehec, 2017).

Although public inscription is still routinely dismissed as mere “defacement,” that label is increasingly contested in contemporary scholarship. Chandler’s (2022) updated semiotic model is helpful here: because any sign is “a structured interruption of the visual field” (p. 97), graffiti’s very transgression of surface decorum is what makes it legible as code. In other words, the spray-painted mark is designed to rupture ordinary seeing so that a second-order meaning can emerge—often political, territorial, or affective. Mwangi (2002) captures this double movement when he observes that graffiti “denotes something beyond its visible form” (p. 41): the graphic trace simultaneously references itself (paint on a wall) and a set of off-canvas social negotiations (identity, resistance, memory). Far from constituting linguistic “noise,”

then, graffiti operates as an intentional, highly economical discourse that leverages disfigurement to force recognition (Blanché, 2021; Ferrell, 2012). Seen in this light, the present study appropriately approaches Palestinian refugee-camp graffiti not as urban clutter but as a strategic text whose stylistic violations and spatial politics demand systematic sociolinguistic and semiotic analysis. What distinguishes this study from earlier work is its focus on the interplay between language functions, rhetorical devices, and social issues within Palestinian refugee graffiti. Earlier studies have largely explored themes, political content, or aesthetic form, but few have examined how language is used systematically to perform social and rhetorical functions in refugee contexts. This study responds to that gap.

2.4 Types of Graffiti

. Classifying graffiti into distinct types is a critical step toward understanding its functions, audiences, and socio-political significance. While typologies may overlap, existing literature commonly identifies categories such as gang graffiti, tagging, throw-ups or bombing, and murals or pieces. These types are not rigidly exclusive but reflect differing stylistic and functional choices by graffitiists depending on context, intent, and risk (Ferrell, 1996; Castleman, 1982; Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, 2017). Though, Gómez (1992) claims that understanding what makes graffitiists to practice graffiti is crucial to control this phenomenon. This is also true for Callinan (2002) who believes that understanding the background of graffitiists aids in comprehending graffiti itself, graffitiists' motivations and possible tactics for dealing with it. Hence, this section sheds light on types of graffiti as well as identifies the motivations behind their graffiti.

2.4.1 Gang

Gang graffiti is the most well-known form of graffiti, and most observers wrongly include all graffiti in this group. However, they are responsible for very little graffiti in urban areas (Gómez, 1992). He adds that the majority of gang graffiti consists of crude scrawls centred on the gang's name or signature. This type of graffiti is used for a variety of purposes, including marking territory and conflict zones, sending messages, insulting rival gangs, and warning invaders. In addition, the defacement of gang graffiti by others increases criminal activity and violence in a given location. Gómez (1992) states that before World War II, gang graffiti was first seen in Mexican and Chicano neighbourhoods in Los Angeles. In the early 1970s, as gang membership grew, the occurrence of graffiti began to increase, though; it remained confined to the inner city. Today, gang graffiti is concentrated in the inner cities of Los Angeles' African-American "hoods" and Hispanic "barrios," but gangs and graffiti have also become part of the everyday atmosphere in some suburban towns. It serves as a means of expressing feelings, expressing group identification, and dictating the laws of their socially built environments. Regarding gang graffiti in the Arab world, XV (2015, p.115) reports that the presence of Iraqi gang graffiti "is very closely related to the gangs in the USA or Latin America and it was reported that some gang members created gang-related graffiti in Iraq, as they were part of the US occupation force in Iraq". What is interesting about this type of graffiti found in Iraq is that XV (2015) relates gang graffiti to Americans who were in Iraq during the time of the Iraqi-American war. However, he adds that gang graffiti in Iraq calls for the significance of education and rebuilding. As mentioned above, Gang graffiti is traditionally associated with marking territorial boundaries, asserting group identity, and intimidating rival groups or outsiders (Adams & Winter, 1997; Ferrell, 1996).

Typically, it includes acronyms, codes, numbers, and stylised names that signify control over a specific space. While gang graffiti is prolific in urban centres of the Global North, especially in North and South America, its presence in refugee camps is limited. However, some parallels may be drawn with factional or political graffiti in camps, where certain writings or symbols (e.g., keys, flags, or acronyms of Palestinian political parties) serve a similar function of establishing ideological space or allegiance (Peteet, 1996; Lehec, 2017). Gang graffiti often carries aggressive or exclusionary undertones, whereas factional graffiti in refugee camps tends to lean toward historical commemoration or national symbolism (Toenjes, 2015).

2.4.2 Hip hop and Tagging

Tagging refers to quick, stylised signatures or names of individual writers or crews. It is often viewed as the most basic form of graffiti and is frequently dismissed as vandalism due to its repetitive and seemingly non-communicative nature (Lachmann, 1988; Snyder, 2006). However, scholars have increasingly argued that tagging is a form of “naming the self” in public space—a performative assertion of identity and visibility in environments of marginalisation (Macdonald, 2001; Tsilimpounidi, 2020). In refugee camps, tagging may be seen in both Arabic and English alphabets, often using nicknames or pseudonyms. While the style tends to be less complex than other forms, its presence on public walls communicates authorship, territorial belonging, or resistance to invisibility. Additionally, tagging is very popular. Alonso (1998) says that it is the most common type that has been scribbled on city walls, buses, and trains, and it is gaining popularity every year. He then adds that tagging began on the East Coast in 1969 as a stylized signature that a graffitiist leaves on places, and it is now a part of Hip Hop culture. This is to say that taggers mainly

seek to spread out with their signatures or nicknames that give them more popularity and proliferation. Gómez (1992) states that tags are basic start letterings of a signature nickname that frequently feature the creator's chosen label or the graffiti team with whom one paints. Any new tagger who wishes to join the graffiti team must design a creative tag or get a sufficient reputation to gain suitable respect. Taggers are just groups of people who go out writing together and provide support to one another. These gatherings can be as small as three people or as large as several hundred. Gómez (1992) claims that these groups are not out to intimidate the public. They only get benefit from being part of a crew since the taggers' work is safeguarded from being scribbled over and other crew members do not dare to insult or taunt them. He adds that taggers are primarily motivated by fame and recognition. Because a tagger's recognition is based on how much he is up, a tagger's goal is to paint his or his crew's tag in as many places as possible. This also goes with Alonso (1998) who states that the purpose of tagging is to dominate as many places as possible. For the tagger recognition as a prolific writer is an important goal. Through prolificacy, fame and a sense of power are acquired by how many tags a writer can complete. Gómez (1992) provides an example of the country's most famous tagger, 'CHAKA', who is known for notoriety, having tagged over 10,000 locations with his emblem from San Francisco to Newport Beach, California. Unlike gangs who want to mark their territory, taggers want to be known and respected. To sum up, Callinan (2002) points out that this type of graffiti entails a person utilising spray paint or large felt tip pens to draw or write a distinguished word, comparable to a nickname, on an area that is normally open to the public, such as trains and building walls. It has originated in New York City since the 1970s. Tagging is intimately aligned with hip-hop music culture, as taggers are also