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Review of:

**Reem Bassiouney (2009), *Arabic Sociolinguistics*.**

**Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press.**

Bassiouney's *Arabic Sociolinguistics* (2009) aims to introduce current theories and methodologies of sociolinguistics with a special focus on the language variation and change situation in the Arabic world. In five chapters, and 311 pages, she unfolds the sociolinguistic situation in the Arab world.

Chapter 1 ("Diglossia and dialect groups in the Arab world") discusses issues related to diglossia, and it introduces the Arabic national varieties and groups of dialects. The point of departure of the chapter is that in Arab communities diglossia is the general rule; Modern Standard Arabic and at least one prestigious other vernacular is spoken and/or written (page 9). Ferguson's (1959) theory on diglossia is discussed in detail, including the familiar concepts of "H(igh)" and "L(ow)" varieties, as this theory – which was refined by follow-up studies (e.g., Blanc 1960; Badawi 1973; Meiseles 1980; Ferguson 1996) – is particularly relevant to explaining the Arab language situation. The chapter presents the subdivision of Arabic into five groups of regional dialects (page 20), and subsequently the differences between dialects are illustrated by giving two English example sentences and translating their syntactic constituents into the various varieties of Arabic.

At the end of the chapter, the author makes the unexpected choice to illustrate the mutual similarities between Arab dialects by translating the sample sentences used earlier into German and Dutch (page 26). She says: "[...] even without knowledge of German and Dutch, the differences are similar to the differences between the different vernaculars examined above" (i.e. vernaculars of Arabic). The author suggests that the German sentence "*Ich lese sehr gerne*" and its Dutch equivalent, "*Ik hou heel erg van lezen*" ("I love reading a lot"), are highly similar. By any reasonable standard these two sentences do not seem similar. Because a constituent-by-constituent translation in English of the German/Dutch sentences is not given, readers are largely left to their own devices in intuitively judging the named similarity. Perhaps the author could have applied the same system as she did when juxtaposing the Arab varieties, on the preceding pages. A more serious problem is the choice to use German and Dutch as examples. The relationship between German and Dutch is by no means analogous with that between Arab varieties. These two Germanic languages do not share a standard language, and this is unlikely to ever happen. The examples given are in the standard formal varieties of these two languages, which makes a comparison with regional/national dialects of Arabic incorrect. The typo in the German sentences (a redundant preposition, namely "*in*", is used in the second sentence) adds to the unfortunateness of the example. Perhaps comparing various varieties of German (from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland) would have been more apt.

The chapter ends with two rather puzzling statements (both on page 26), which perhaps should have been left out. The author says, first of all: "The examples make one wonder about the differences between different languages and different varieties and whether terms like "language" and "variety" are not political rather than linguistic ones." The fact that languages are delineated both through political and linguistic borders is widely acknowledged, and this rhetorical comment thus seems redundant. The second comment which seems less relevant is that "[...] Arabs perceive all the varieties discussed above as 'Arabic'". Readers can only guess about

the purpose of this statement, especially because similar subjective comments are made on several occasions in the book.

Chapter 2 (“Code-switching”) discusses structural constraints of switching between two languages when one of them is a variety of Arabic. The author discusses the relevant theories – amongst others Myer-Scotton’s Matrix Language model and 4-M model (1998a and 2004, respectively). Bassiouney seizes the opportunity to draw extensively from her own research into code-switching to illustrate these models. In the second part of the chapter, motivations for code-switching are discussed as well as discourse functions of code-switching. Abu-Melhim’s (1991) accommodation theory (which is an application of Giles et al.’s (1987) accommodation theory) focuses specifically on communication across Arabic dialects, and this theory is taken as an important starting point, as well as Milroy’s Social Networks research (1987) and research by Holmes (1993, 1999).

Chapter 3, entitled “Language variation and change”, looks at the nature and mechanisms of language variation and change in the Arab world. After briefly discussing Labov’s groundwork investigations (most notably his New York and Martha’s Vineyard studies; Labov 1966, 1972) and work by later researchers, such as Milroy (Social Network analysis, 1987) and Trudgill (his 1974 Norwich study), she moves on to third-wave studies focussing on Community of Practice (e.g., Eckert 2005). This introduction into language variation and change would have fitted well in the first chapter of the book, as it embodies a bird’s eye view of the most important studies in the field of sociolinguistics. After this introduction, the chapter delves into the variables particularly relevant to explaining variation and change in the Arab world: ethnicity, religion, urbanisation, and social class.

In the conclusion to Chapter 3, commonly used independent variables are discussed. On pages 123 and 124, the subdivision is made of independent variables into “fixed independent variables” (such as religion) and “flexible independent variables” (such as urbanisation). At first glance, this is unusual, but, interestingly, it appears that specific characteristics of Arab culture are behind this unexpected splitting up of a term. The author explains her choice for this division by indicating that in the Arab world some independent variables, for example religion, “can be shaped and moulded by the individual” while others, like social class, “are difficult to change” (page 123).

In chapter 3 in particular, there are several comments on statistics which do not seem very well thought out. On page 97, the author states that “the division of variables is flexible and serves only as a guide in our understanding of variation and change”. The reason for this statement, so the author indicates a few sentences earlier, is that variables often overlap and interact. She indicates that it is sometimes difficult to examine a study from the perspective of one specific variable. Laying bare the effects of individual variables when confronted with a plethora of variables, however, is the very point of statistics, making it indispensable in most sociolinguistic research. The author, furthermore, makes the following bold statement: “[...] most of the linguists dealing with the issue of variation, especially those dealing with it in the Arab world, build their work on the concept of quantitative studies” (page 97). It is unclear why studies in the Arab world are singled out in this way, and the suggestion this makes seems incorrect, namely that the use of statistics is more dominant in studies in the Arab world than elsewhere. In Footnote 7 (page 126), then, explicit mention is made of studies into Arab language varieties in which statistics is used; the author mentions five studies and introduces these with: “Studies that rely on statistics relating variation to other social correlates include, in chronological order, [...]”. The fact

that only five studies are mentioned, from the 1978–1992 period, seems to contradict the earlier suggestion that statistics is dominant in Arab sociolinguistic research. All in all, the way the author discusses statistics, and to a degree even brushes it under the carpet, does not seem to do justice to the useful role it plays in mainstream sociolinguistics.

The most distinctive difference between Arabic and non-Arabic sociolinguistics may well be the implications of gender, which is discussed in Chapter 4 (“Arabic and gender”). In mainstream sociolinguistic research, male and female differences are still commonly found, but in western society gender equality has led to males and females increasingly fulfilling similar positions in society. This may be leading to a neutralisation of gender-specific behaviour and is likely to suppress traditional male/female speech differences. For outsiders, perhaps, gender patterns seem more prominent in the Arab world, and one wonders whether, parallel to the obvious external differences between Arab men and women and their positions in society, gendered speech patterns reveal themselves also. In the chapter, the author on several occasions demonstrates how in some social contexts Arab women have the upper hand in communication (there is an Egyptian and a Moroccan example on page 192). The chapter outlines the definitions of gender, amongst others by discussing Thorne and Henley’s Dominance Theory (1975) and Maltz and Borker’s Difference Theory (1982). Community of Practice in a gender context is discussed as well. After that, the chapter moves on to discuss issues relevant to gender studies and zooms in on themes specifically related to Arab culture, such as the role of the veil, of honour and of modesty, and the role of politeness. Furthermore, status and identity are discussed. The author’s own discourse data again serve as important illustrations of the points made, for instance the ways the sexes in radio programmes interrupt one another and initiate overlap (see Table 4.7 on page 185). The results are striking and convincing.

Like all chapters, Chapter 5 (“Language policy and politics”) starts with a quote, a poem this time. The poem points out the function of language in the Arab world as a shield in light of the struggle for freedom from colonialism. The chapter gives the relevant background information: language policy, the concept of “nation” versus “state”, the relationship between the nation and languages, French and British colonisation in the Arab world, language academies, linguistic rights, and, finally, English and globalisation. After that, the language policies of the most important Arab countries are listed and discussed separately. The chapter manages to demonstrate the effects of colonisers on language policies. It also contains an insightful case study of interviews with two presidents of Arab countries, namely those of Syria and Yemen. The author uses the Markedness Theory as developed by Myer-Scotton (1998b; 2006) and the concept of Indexicality (Woolard 2004) to explain the motivation behind the presidents’ switches (and even the switches of the interviewer) between Standard Arabic and other types of Arabic.

Preceding the first chapter is a list of abbreviations (pages xii–xiii) and of notation conventions used in the book. The list of abbreviations of types of Arabic is daunting; no less than twelve “Arabics” are listed with their abbreviation: for instance, CB (Christian Baghdadi Arabic), TCA (Tunisian Colloquial Arabic), SA (Standard Arabic), and ESA (Educated Spoken Arabic). In chapters 1 and 2 in particular this results in difficult-to-read sentences such as: “[...] meanwhile the adverb ‘a lot’ is in fact lexically different in MSA, TCA, ECA, and ICA. In LC and SCA it is phonologically different from its MSA counterpart” (page 24). In chapter 2, the author adds

abbreviations to refer to related linguistic phenomena, making the text even more impenetrable: for instance, on pages 43 and 54, where she uses the abbreviations ML, EL, and CP (“matrix language”, “embedded language”, and “projection of the complementiser”, respectively). Without continuously checking the list of abbreviations, such sentences are difficult both for readers with and without knowledge of Arabic and the literature on code-switching. Not using any abbreviations at all may have been a better choice.

Another notational issue is the overview given on page xiv to represent the pronunciation of the letters of the Arabic alphabet. The symbols used to denote the pronunciation of these letters seem to be largely in line with the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). However, the author refers to these symbols as “Modern Standard Arabic” and uses italicised letters rather than an IPA font (including slashes to denote phonemes). This is confusing for those familiar with the IPA system. The problem may be illustrated, for instance, by page 25, on which the author says that “[...] the *q* is realised as a *q* [...]”, which may make some readers wonder about when spelling or pronunciation is being referred to. It would have been better if the author had indicated for each Arabic sound what its articulatory features are and/or if she had used the IPA system to denote the sounds. The back cover says that the book “should be of great benefit both to the student of Arabic and the general linguist with no specific knowledge of Arabic” (words of Clive Holes). This is not yet the case, but a number of minor notational alterations would make a possible subsequent edition of this book accessible to a wider audience.

For a book that claims to be a general introduction into the Arab language situation in a sociolinguistic context (see the blurb on the back of the book), it contains an unexpected amount of influence of the author’s personal interests and convictions. The term “sociolinguistics” seems to be loosely interpreted. The title, moreover, seems to suggest a broad introduction into various sociolinguistic research techniques and research variables in the Arab world, but this is only partly true. There is no fully-fledged sociolinguistic introduction, discussing common research techniques and recent findings. The focus on discourse and code-switching suggests that these sociolinguistic approaches are the only relevant ones. In classical western sociolinguistics, however, subtle intra- and inter-speaker variation receives much attention (pronunciation, most notably), as it reveals subconscious linguistic preferences and choices. These data are usually elicited amongst larger groups of speakers to reveal tendencies across and between groups. One could expect similar choices to exist in the speech of Arabic speakers, but the accompanying necessary quantitative research is only mentioned in a footnote. In fact, the quantitative approach to sociolinguistics, while being the most dominant one, is hardly discussed in the book. The author indicates that much still needs to be discovered in Arabic sociolinguistics (page 8), and this apparent relative lack of research data is the possible reason that the book has its limitations regarding the breadth of research presented.

Although this book does not perhaps provide a wide spectrum of sociolinguistic approaches and techniques, it is a useful and seemingly complete introduction into the social stratification of Arab language varieties. For those interested in the Arab situation from a sociolinguistic point of view, it seems indispensable. The enthusiasm of the author and the abundant and insightful examples make this a good book to be discovered by readers of traditional introductions into sociolinguistics, which, so this book demonstrates, have as their point of departure a western way of looking at things. For many readers, a renewed acquaintance with sociolinguistics will arise after reading it. The book thus calls for more descriptions of language variation situations that are not western.

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