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A Sociolinguistic Investigation of Language Use Among Syrian Refugees in the City Of Oran

دراسة سوسiolسانية لاستخدامات اللغة بين اللاجئين السوريين في مدينة وهران

¹*Souad Kheloufi, Mimouna Zitouni².

¹ University of Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Oran 2, Oran, Algeria.

² University of Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Oran 2, Oran, Algeria

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Abstract

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The present survey sheds light upon the processes of language maintenance and shift in the speech community of Syrians living in the city of Oran, it takes as a main purpose investigating the degree of language preservation or loss among the community under question through dissecting speech patterns and language use across various domains. Information was collected by means of a semi-structured questionnaire and an interview. Both were designed to obtain research goals and administered to a sample of 30 persons . Findings show that the Syrian community is experiencing a gradual language shift in various areas ,nevertheless,the Syrian dialect is strongly maintained in the family domain.

ملخص

الكلمات المفتاحية:

يلقي هذا البحث الضوء على آليات المحافظة على اللغة وتغييرها ، معتمدا كعينة مجتمع اللاجئين السوريين المقيمين في مدينة وهران ، الهدف الرئيسي من البحث يكمن في تقصي درجة الحفاظ على اللغة أو تركها عند المجتمع المعني من خلال فحص أنماط الكلام واستخدامات اللغة عبر مختلف المجالات ، تم جمع المعلومات عن طريق استبيان شبه منظم ومقابلة تم تصميمها وفقاً لأهداف البحث وتم إدارتها لعينة من 30 شخصاً. تظهر النتائج أن المجتمع السوري يشهد تحولاً تدريجياً للغة في مختلف مجالات استخدام اللغة بينما يتم الحفاظ على اللغة الأم في المجالات الخاصة كالعائلة.

مجالات استعمال اللغة، المحافظة على اللغة، تغيير اللغة، الاقليات اللغوية.

1. Introduction

In a globalized world, where language contact is the norm rather than the exception, two inevitable results might be obtained, either language maintenance or language shift. While some minority language speakers manage to maintain their heritage language despite the pressure exerted by the dominant language or languages, others go through a partial or a total assimilation in the majority language, of course due to a variety of social, historical, sociopsychological and even economic factors. One major dichotomy among scholars is the difference between ‘**Autochthonous**’, Territorial and Allochthonous minorities. Autochthonous refers to indigenous groups found in the country or the geographical space they belong to, such as Kabyle, Mzab or Shlough Minorities in Algeria. ‘**Territorial minorities**’ designate such ancient minorities who settled in a particular area in very ancient times, became part of the country’s history and co-existed with another dominant variety. Native Americans in the United States illustrate this case (Pauwels, 2016, p. 24).

While, ‘Allochthonous’ points to immigrant groups found in different translocations: “not found in the place where it originated”. Aniko Hatos (2016, p. 6). The speech community under investigation exemplifies this type of minorities. Italians, Greek and Chinese minorities in Australia also belong to the category of allochthonous communities (Ibid, p. 7), of course by virtue of many driving forces which paved the way to the displacement of those minorities to other countries.

Syria, under what is called the Arab Spring, has witnessed a civil war since 2011 which started as a reaction to the torture of the children of Daraa town, who protested against the regime. Syrians, then, were soon poured into streets signaling the beginning of the civil war against the regime forces⁽¹⁾ which made the majority compelled to leave the country as political refugees due to insecurity in their country. Their destinations differed; some went to the Arab world while others preferred European countries. Algeria is not an exception, since it has welcomed and hosted all Syrians seeking shelter and facilitated their

residential procedures. Syrian refugees, consequently, got in contact with Algerians and so did their language varieties. This contact, resulted, we believe, in a gradual shift towards Algerian Arabic as a result of many social factors. Therefore, the present research ponders on the following questions: Is the Syrian community in Oran experiencing language shift?, if so, what are the social factors attributed to such shift?

The structure of the present article, it is divided into two parts: the first aims at framing the theoretical perspectives of language maintenance and shift, while the second part is concerned with the practical phase of the study where the main methodological tools adopted to this research are outlined, in addition to a full account of the survey’s findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Maintenance and Shift

Language maintenance and language shift are considered by the majority of scholars as two facets of the same coin. The former points to the process whereby minority groups, in situations of contact, manage to retain and carry on using their mother tongue, in spite of the pressure exerted by their rival or rivals (i.e. the majority language or languages). However, the degree of retention of a certain variety to be considered as a case of maintenance has not been specified based on the definitions found in the literature. Therefore, Stoessel (2003) suggests that the two processes should never be perceived as black or white concepts, they should rather be regarded as a continuum or a scale with speakers placed at different stages, ranging from extreme cases of maintenance to ultimate cases of shift (ibid).

Language shift on the other hand, refers to the gradual abandonment of one’s mother tongue in favor of another language in one or more domains of language use (Pauwels, 2016, Clyne, 2003). Whether or not at the same time they stopped utilizing the language or languages they used formerly. (Fishman 1972, p. 107, as cited in Saskia Stoessel, 2002). In his famous paper, Fishman (1966) contends:

Study of language maintenance and language shift is concerned with the relationship between change or

stability in habitual language use, on the one hand, and ongoing psychological, social or cultural processes, on the other hand (p.33).

Researchers distinguish between two major types of language shift, namely intra-generational and inter-generational shift. The former refers to the functional diminishment in the use of the mother tongue by the actual immigrant generation while the latter points to the “functional or structural” limited use of the first language within the second or third generations (Aniko Hatos, 2016p.23). In this sense, this study is concerned with intra-generational shift. Fishman (1972, as cited in Mugaddam 2006, p.124) came up with a theory of ‘bilingual functioning and domain overlap’. Based on this claim, language shift occurs along four stages. In the first stage, immigrant minorities acquire the novel language by means of their first language and use it in certain domains where it is not possible to use the minority language. The second stage is the stage at which the community size of persons showing mastery of the host community language increases, they can, therefore, communicate with one another in either the minority or the dominant language. In the third stage, both the minority and the new language can be used separately because, at this stage, speakers are bilinguals. In the fourth stage, the mother tongue is completely substituted by the dominant language in all domains of language use (Mugaddam, 2006, p.125). Based on this claim, the case study under investigation is at the first phase of Fishman’s four stages.

2.2 Arabic and Its Nuances

Arabic is the official language of 20 countries and it is used by 250 million people in the world (Omar.Zaidan ,Chris Callison –Burch ,2012). In his book about Arabic sociolinguistics, Abdelkafi Albarinicontends: “Arabic has always been marked by the existence of multiple varieties that converge or diverge based on geographical and genealogical factors” (2016,p.9). Hence, the Arabic sociolinguistic situation is diglossic par excellence. Indeed, Arabic is the world’s most complicated diglossic case (Kaye, 2002)⁽²⁾, since it embraces a standard form of the language called modern standard Arabic(formerly referred to as Classical Arabic) and a large array of

colloquial varieties that vary along the Arab countries, the former is considered by Abdulkafi Albirini (2016) as:

Variety that is officially recognized across the Arab region and is often associated with education and literary. It covers both Classical Arabic(CA) and its modern descendant, namely Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). SA is the official language of Arab governments, education, and print publications. It is more or less the same throughout the Arab World with minor variations mainly in lexical choice and phonological features due to the influence of the local dialects (p.10).

The other set of regional and geographical dialects are used for everyday communicative purposes. Though mutual intelligibility between these varieties is not always achieved, they tend to exhibit some phonological, syntactic, morphological, and lexical resemblances that explain their common linguistic and historical ancestor. In this regard, (Mitchell , El-Hassan⁽³⁾,1994,p.2) note: “Regional differences are lexical (and phonological) before they are grammatical.” The situation is further complicated with the existence of French (mainly in the Maghrebi dialects), English in the middle east, and other linguistically distinct communities such as Berbers and Kurds (ibid).

The different dialects existing in the Arab world are acquired autonomously due to exposure to the mother tongue within the family and even outside in the society, they all share a common feature which is that they lack a written heritage, however, a certain amount of literature can be found in some of the varieties. Regarding the status of these colloquial dialects, contrary to standard Arabic, they do not have any official status in the Arab speaking world despite of some considerable efforts to recognize them (ibid :14). It should be noted here that it is possible to generate a written form of dialectal Arabic through the use of MSA spelling rules, which are mainly phonetic(Omar Zaidan, Chris Callison ,Burch ,2012p.2).

Despite the considerable degree of mutual intelligibility that exists, the extent to which a

person can comprehend another variety of Arabic is relatively dependent on his openness towards the other countries' cultures and languages. For instance, people do not have hard times understanding Egyptian dialectal Arabic due to Egypt's great history in film and television industry and their spread in the Arab world, while, maghrebi dialects (such as Moroccan Arabic) is difficult to be understood by Levantine speakers (i.e speakers from the middle east). Thus, scientifically speaking, these dialects should be considered rather as different languages (ibid,p.3).

Four possible headings or classifications of the Arabic varieties were proposed. **Egyptian** Arabic spoken in Egypt, which is considered as the mostly understood dialect. **Levantine** Arabic, on the other hand, concerns varieties such as Syrian and Lebanese dialects. These varieties differ in some pronunciation principles but have the same written forms (Bassiouney, 2009)⁽⁴⁾. **Gulf** dialects are varieties that bare strong resemblance to modern standard Arabic. They point to varieties used in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain... etc. **Iraqi** Arabic is, most of the time, considered as one of the gulf dialects, despite the fact that it has its specific characteristics with regard to prepositions, verb conjugation and pronunciation (Mitchel 1990)⁽⁵⁾. **Maghrebi** Arabic refers to dialects spoken in the maghreb countries such as Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. These varieties are most of the time unintelligible to speakers of Levantine dialect since they are often mingled with other languages such as French and Berber (Zaidan and Chris Callison, Burch, 2012, p.4).

2.3 research on language maintenance and shift in the arab World

Studies investigating language preservation and loss within the Arab world, penetrated sociolinguistic fieldwork, with scholars being allured and eager to tackle virgin areas of research. The notions of stability and change were widely explored and resulted in a variety of findings. Al-khatib (2001) examined the language situation of Armenians in Jordan where he concluded that Armenians were experiencing a shift to the use of Arabic in many social domains of language use. Mugaddam (2006) investigated language

maintenance and shift among ethnic minorities living in the city of Khartoum, Sudan; where he found that there was a considerable shift towards Arabic in nearly all domains of language use due to attitudinal factors. Similarly, another survey done by Ayman Tawalbeh, Mohammed Dagamseh, and Abdullah Al-Matrafi in Mecca (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), revealed that Saudi Hausa shifted to using Arabic instead of Housa as a main vehicle in their everyday communication. In addition, they all witnessed a regression in their four skills in Hausa. This shift was attributed to the role of Arabic as the language of the holly Quran.

In the same vein Hussein Ali Habtoor (2012), using a corpus of sixty-four teenager, explored the language practices of Tigriniya immigrant speakers in the city of Riyadh (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) where a shift was taking place among the second generation of speakers since they were opting for Arabic rather than their native language. Similarly, Dweik and Tarek Al-Refa'I (2015) surveyed language use of Syriac and Arabic among Assyrians of Jordan who were in their turn shifting to Arabic seeking more security. Ibrahim Aboushahab et al (2015), in their turn, studied language and cultural maintenance and shift among the Palestinian minority living in refugees' camps in Jordan, in which they concluded that the Palestinian community was also experiencing a shift in favor of the majority language.

3. Methodology

3.1 the sample

Our Informants are adult speakers originating from different Syrian towns ; Halab, Damascus, Hemss... etc. They are aged between 25 and 45, living in the city of Oran and exerting different professions . The sample includes both males (22) and females (8) whose mother tongue is Syrian spoken Arabic. Their dialects vary depending on the region they originally come from. All of the informants have been in Algeria since 2010 or 2011, that is by the beginning of the Syrian war. In regard to their professions. Women are all housewives while men are mainly traders (16), barbers (3) shopkeepers (4), waiters (5) and jobless (2). The informants were selected randomly based on their availability and willingness to participate in

the data collection process of the present research. Considerable time was devoted to the process of finding participants and convincing them to take part in this research. Their reluctance to participating in the survey is due to the fact that some of them consider their case as sensitive especially those lacking official papers or legal status.

3.2 data collection

Three Data gathering tools were used in this research: observation, an interview and a questionnaire .The questionnaire was disseminated with the help of an assistant from the community under investigation. In this vein, Bickerton (1971) states⁽⁶⁾:

There are, of course, a number of advantages in using an assistant who forms part of the speech-community under study. In the first place, the uncontrollable variable of speaker-reaction to a stranger is thereby eliminated; this is, to my mind, crucial in all prestigious v. stigmatized situations. Secondly, the awkwardness inseparable from the interview situations and any inhibiting influence from the recording apparatus itself are minimized by the presence of a known interviewer (p.465).

The questionnaire was divided into three parts, the first of which concerns demographic information such as :sex, age, gender, religious affiliation, place of birth, origins and mother tongue. Demographic data is a common feature of language maintenance and language shift studies, in fact, as Anne Pauwels (2016) remarks :

The most extensive use of Census-based language data has been by researchers working on questions of LM and LS in migrant settings(p.62).

The second segment was devoted to language use in various domains. Thus, so as to have a clear idea about the linguistic behaviors of Syrian refugees. The present survey relies on the “linguistic domain” as an approach. The concept of domain is defined by Fishman as: “Institutionally relevant spheres of social interaction in which certain value clusters are behaviorally implemented” (Fishman et al,1971,p.17).⁽⁷⁾Then, speakers were given a set of five multiple-choice answers on dialect use in the

different linguistic spheres which included: Only Syrian Arabic, only Algerian Arabic, Algerian and Syrian Arabic equally, mostly Algerian Arabic and mostly Syrian Arabic). Participants were then asked to cross the column that best describes their linguistic habits across domains. The third part though, aimed at investigating the role of language attitudes and the role of the mutual religious affiliation of Syrians in the processes of maintenance and/or shift. The questionnaire was designed based on prior surveys such as that of Al-Khatib (2011) and Aymen Twalbah et.al (2013).

4. Results and Discussion

The following table summarizes all the results and findings; it demonstrates the percentage of informants based on their answers to each question:

Table .1
Language Use in Different Domains

Questions	Only Syrian Arabic (%)	Only Algerian Arabic (%)	Algerian and Syrian Arabic (%)	Mostly Syrian Arabic (%)	Mostly Algerian Arabic (%)
What language do you speak at home ?	76 %	–	–	24.%	–
What language do you use at work ?	10%	30%	20%	–	40%
What Language do you use in government offices	6.67%	–	20%	–	66.67%
What language you use with neighbors	–	–	43%	17%	40%

In which language do you comment on the Algerian pages you follow on social networking sites ?	10%	–	50%	10%	30%
Which language do you use while sending msgs on messenger ,whatsapp, viber ect	35%	–	65%	–	–
In which language you watch your tv channels ?	6.67%	–	93.33%	–	–
In which language you listen to music	26.67%	–	53.33%	20%	–
In which language you speak to your	–	–	30%	20%	50%
Algerian friends					
In which language you speak to your syrian friends in Algeria	100%	–	–	–	–
In which language you speak to your friends and family members in syria through the net	73.3%	–	10%	16.67%	–
What language do you use while shopping	–	20	–	13.33%	66.67%

As all language maintenance and shift research triggered the question of proficiency, we believe it is of great importance to begin with it. Participants were required to rate their linguistic capacities in both varieties in a three-point scale; weak, good and excellent. Interestingly, 96% developed the ability to speak and understand Algerian Arabic which can be explained by the significant period of staying and exposure to Oran spoken dialect; 8 to 9 years. Similarly, during the interview, the majority of the participants mentioned that they have gained the habit of uttering some expressions from Algerian Arabic. As for the younger generation, Syrian children are enrolled in Algerian schools in which modern standard Arabic is the official language of instruction and interaction with teachers. Thus, schools provide an environment in which Syrian children are in constant and regular contact with their Algerian counterparts. They all mentioned that they have a more frequent use of the Algerian dialect since they are instructed by means of Algerian Arabic though with strong emphasis on standard Arabic and have a more extensive contact with Algerians, some of the parents even said that : “ our children became Algerians” (informant N: 12).

According to Fishman and many pioneers in the field of language maintenance and shift, if a language or a language variety is maintained at home, then it will survive in other domains. Hence, according to the numbers charted in table 1, 76% of the participants mentioned that they use only Syrian Arabic , while 24% said that they use most of the time Syrian Arabic.

As for language use in the workplace, 40% of the informants opted for mostly Algerian Arabic, 30% for only Algerian Arabic, 10% stated that they use only Syrian Arabic while 20% mentioned that they use both dialects . This is due to the fact that their professions require a certain mastery of Algerian Arabic and frequently French specially traders and shop keepers. Interestingly, some of the traders said that sometimes they did not even have to switch to Algerian Arabic as their clients switched to Syrian Arabic. This case is often with females who master the Syrian dialects due to exposure to Syrian series.

On the matter of language choice in the community, as indicated in questions: 3,4,8,11,13, it is clear that Algerian Arabic is widely used for social participation ,43% stated that they use both Algerian and Syrian Arabic with their neighbors and 40% mentioned that they speak mostly Algerian Arabic. Likewise, concerning dialect use in the government offices and administrations, the majority of informants (66.67%) use mostly Algerian Arabic. Similarly, 50% of the respondents mentioned that they mostly use Algerian Arabic when talking to their Algerian friends. With regard to the dialect used while shopping 66, 67% of the informants claimed that they mostly use Algerian Arabic.

As this study embraced language use both in the virtual and real world, some questions were designed to diagnose dialect use in the social networking platforms(Facebook, Twiter, Viber, Whatssap...etc). 65% of the informants said that they use both varieties while sending messages on the net, while 35% used only their mother tongue. Concerning comments on the Algerian pages,50% mentioned that they write in both Algerian and Syrian Arabic while 30% contended that they use mostly Algerian Arabic,10% opted for mostly Syrian Arabic. While 10% said that they use only Syrian Arabic. Besides, concerning entertaining activities 53% stated that they watch both Algerian and Syrian channels. As for music, 93% said that they listen to both Algerian and Syrian songs.

From what has been stated above, we can conclude that the community of Syrian refugees witnesses a gradual change in their linguistic habits since there is a noticeable partial shift towards Algerian spoken Arabic in nearly all domains of language use namely, work, neighborhood and government offices. This shift can be attributed to extensive contact with the Algerian community as an attempt to better integrate in the society, improving their living conditions and gaining decent employments.

Noticeably, the ethnic variety is strongly maintained in the family domain and with friends as strategic practices to preserve the ethnic and national identity. Furthermore, holding the mother tongue within the family ensures that it will be passed to the next

generation. It is worth mentioning here that this survey did not encompass the category of homeless refugees since it was not possible to get data from them. However, with a simple observation of some panhandler women in the streets, we could notice that they strongly maintain their ethnic language which is probably to stress their identity as Syrians in order to receive aid and gain empathy of the Algerian passengers.

There is growing evidence that learning and making use of a certain language is easier if speakers perform favorable attitudes to a language and its speakers (Garrett, 2010, as cited in Sanaa Bichani ,2015p.32). As any linguistic behavior is strongly linked to another social determinant, we hypothesized that such shift is ascribed to the positive attitudes Syrians hold towards the Algerian language, people and culture. Therefore, the last section of the questionnaire was devoted to exploring our respondents' attitudes.

Syrians displayed very positive attitudes towards Algerian Arabic and to Algerians in general, due to the facilities provided by the Algerian government in addition to the resemblance in the revolutionary history of the two people.

The salient role of religion in determining language use has been widely addressed in the sociolinguistic literature, Fishman and Tope Omoniyi's book ; «Explorations in the Sociology of Language and Religion » paved the way for religion to be considered as a major factor underpinning language /dialect maintenance or shift. The literature is plugged with researches that addressed the impact of the religious affiliation on speakers' linguistic choices. It is argued that a shared religious identity with the host community tend to enhance maintenance of immigrants' ethnic varieties. Nicos Gogonas (2012) studied the role of religion as a core value in the maintenance of Arabic by Egyptian speakers in Greece in which he concluded that Islam was behind their ethnic language preservation. However, the role of religious beliefs in the linguistic practices is not always positive because in the present case, the mutual religious affiliation of Syrians and Algerians encouraged more speakers to shift from their dialect ,this was confirmed through

the interview while all informants said that they are not worried about their language use, as long as they are in an Arab and a Muslim country, as one of the respondents puts it clear : “Islam is our language”. (Informant N: 11).

5. Conclusion

In this article, we addressed the notions of language maintenance and shift amongst the community of Syrian refugees in the city of Oran, Algeria. Expectedly, and based on the respondents’ answers to the questionnaire and data enclosed in the interviews, results revealed that Syrians are obviously shifting to the use of Algerian Arabic in many spheres. Though they keep using their ethnic dialects in the family domain, this shift was ascribed, whereas, not restricted to, two factors, positive attitudes towards the Algerian language and people in addition to the mutuality of religious practices among the two people.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Footnotes

- 1- (Inci Aksu Kargin 2018, p.27).
- 2- (Morad El Sahafi 2016).
- 3- Quoted in(AlBirini, 2016, p.13).
- 4-Cited in (Omar.Zaidan ,Chris Callison ,Burch,2012, p.3).
- 5-Cited in(Omar.Zaidan ,Chris Callison ,Burch,2012, p.4).
- 6- Cited in (Al-Khatib ,200, p.156).
- 7- Cited in(Stoessel, 2003, p.101).

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