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LANGUAGE CREATIVITY: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC READING OF LINGUISTIC CHANGE IN LEBANON

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Abstract

Language creativity in incorporated in everyday conversations and language behaviour. It is present in everyday expression although it might sometimes be invisible, looked down on or disdained. Regardless of whether we are in favour of or against this creativity, it is worth being recognised. As far as Lebanon is concerned, Arabic (i.e. Standard Arabic) is the official language, while Lebanese Arabic, along with English and French, are the main languages used by the Lebanese. This language diversity can be explained in the light of a number of factors and sociolinguistic functions. The language use in Lebanon has many creative aspects such as nativization, code switching, word coinage, Arabizi and transliteration. This paper, therefore, aims to explore the creative innovations introduced by the speakers to meet the needs of the speech community and to fulfil certain sociolinguistic functions in a variety of domains.

Keywords

Language creativity, code-switching, borrowing, nativization, transliteration, Arabizi

LANGUAGE CREATIVITY: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC READING OF LINGUISTIC CHANGE IN LEBANON

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ABSTRACT: *Language creativity in incorporated in everyday conversations and language behaviour. It is present in everyday expression although it might sometimes be invisible, looked down on or disdained. Regardless of whether we are in favour of or against this creativity, it is worth being recognised. As far as Lebanon is concerned, Arabic (i.e. Standard Arabic) is the official language, while Lebanese Arabic, along with English and French, are the main languages used by the Lebanese. This language diversity can be explained in the light of a number of factors and sociolinguistic functions. The language use in Lebanon has many creative aspects such as nativization, code switching, word coinage, Arabizi and transliteration. This paper, therefore, aims to explore the creative innovations introduced by the speakers to meet the needs of the speech community and to fulfil certain sociolinguistic functions in a variety of domains.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language creativity is incorporated in everyday conversations and language behaviours. However, this creativity might sometimes be overlooked, looked down on or even disdained. Regardless of whether we are in favour of or against this creativity, it is worth being recognized. According to Willis et al. (1990), there is a symbolic creativity current in everyday activity and expression. Willis claims, "every person is a semiotician that is we are all capable of considerable creativity and we express this in our language, our bodies, in drama and in practice" (p.2).

Every language is a product of the collective creativity of people expressed over hundreds and thousands of years (Swaan, 2004, p.568). According to Sternberg and Lubert (1999), creativity is defined as "the ability to produce work that is both novel (original and unexpected) and appropriate (useful and adaptive)". Richards (2010) also defines creativity as using two criteria: "originality" which is the rarity of a creation within a given reference group, and "meaningfulness" that is comprehensible to others and is socially meaningful (p.189). The stylistician, Elina Semino, provides an explanation of language creativity through the example of a chair. She maintains that a creative design for a chair may be novel and unexpected, while it still needs to work as a chair (Semino, 2017). Thus, in order for a certain expression to be considered as a creative act, it not only has to be innovative and new, but it also has to be comprehensible by society.

2. BACKGROUND

Arabic is the official language in Lebanon, creating a diglossic situation. Diglossia is a common phenomenon that characterizes most of the Arab World. Ferguson (1959) introduced this term to refer to a situation "where two varieties of a language exist side by side throughout the community, with each having a definite role to play" (p.232). The term diglossia has mostly been used to describe a situation in which the spoken language in a community that is regarded as a Low variety (L) differs considerably from its written form that is referred to as a High variety (H). Ferguson differentiated between these two varieties in terms of function, prestige, literary heritage, acquisition, standardization, grammar, lexicon and phonology.

In Lebanon, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) operates as a High variety since it is used in religious sermons, media, literature and as a medium of instruction and for official documents. It is also used for most formal written and spoken purposes (Thonhauser, 2000). On the other hand, Lebanese or the colloquial variety of Arabic is considered as a Low variety. It is the mother tongue that is usually used in everyday conversations.

As far as the linguistic background in Lebanon is concerned, the four main languages are Arabic, English, French and Armenian. However, French and English are the two foremost languages that illustrate the linguistic and cultural scene in Lebanon. English and French are also widely taught as foreign languages and are used by the Lebanese for a number of functions. In addition to being considered an Arab country, Lebanon is a member of the international organisation of La Froncophonie and it has a very active French cultural center (Esseili, 2017, p.685). This language diversity in Lebanon can be explained in the light of a variety of reasons.

One reason of language diversity in Lebanon is Jesuit and Protestant missionaries that founded a number of schools in addition to two higher education institutions. The American University of Beirut and Saint Joseph University were founded in the 1800s and are still playing a dominant role in Lebanon today (Thonhauser, 2000). Another reason is the French mandate on Lebanon that persisted for 25 years. Therefore, with the French mandate, the French language and culture were promoted in Lebanon. After independence in 1943, the "French language and culture remained very much part of the Lebanese identity" (Bourhis, 1982, p.45). French and English were, therefore, important languages of instruction since a long time, and the period of the French mandate reinforced the position of French even further. However, years after, the use of the English language was no longer restricted to its role as a medium of instruction in foreign schools only; it became the medium of instruction in public and private Lebanese schools as well.

Moreover, in the past, Lebanese elites believed that Lebanon is a bridge that connects the East and the West, and that this role could be served best by "maintaining a dual identity through English/ French/ Arabic bilingualism" (Bourhis, 1982, p.45). So according to Minkara (2013), learning foreign languages encourages tolerance and exposes individuals to diversity and that "language is a channel of acculturation" (p.112).

A further reason for language diversity is globalisation. People around the world have become in contact with different languages, particularly English since it has developed into a global language. Some linguists have even started calling it a glottophage, which means "the insatiable devourer of languages" (Swaan, 2004, p.574). Although English has no official status in Lebanon, it is used for a number of functions, some of which are educational, professional, interpersonal and innovative. These days, the only subjects that are taught in Modern Standard Arabic are History, Geography, Civics and Arabic, whereas Mathematics and scientific subjects are taught in English or French. Furthermore, in addition to schools and universities, there are a number of centers that are dedicated to the study and promotion of the English language in Lebanon, such as the AMIDEAST and the British Council (Esseili, 2017). Additionally, the role of the English language nowadays is not only manifested in educational settings, but it has also become the international language of business, trade, and technology (Leppanen & Nikula, 2007). In business and employment, proficiency in at least one foreign language has become a requirement. Most of the time that foreign language is English. Email communication and announcements in professional settings also take place mostly in English.

3. LANGUAGE INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY

Now that an overview of languages used in Lebanon has been provided, it is worth discussing the creative and innovative aspects of language that the Lebanese, and the youth in particular, use in their everyday expression and conversation. Innovation is a dynamic and systematic process that involves not only language form, but culturally determined and creative uses of a language as well (Bamgbose, 1997). The language that young Lebanese have in their linguistic repertoire draws on different global, subcultural and identity-related meanings. The language is used in emblematic and creative ways both in reference to certain subcultures and in order to express various aspects of young people's particular ways of being, their values and interests (Leppanen, 2007, p.150; Preisler, 1999, p.247). Present youth studies emphasize cultural aspects in the definition of youth. This implies that young people's widely diverse cultural experiences and their means of expressing them have to be paid attention to. It is not enough to base the construction of youth solely on age or social institutions, such as school (Androutsopoulos &Georgakopoulou, 2003, p.3). Thus, Lebanon's diverse and culturally/ linguistically rich background has led to the emergence of a number of phenomena of creative use of language. In the following section, four aspects of language creativity and innovation will be addressed, such as code-switching, word coinage (borrowing in particular), nativization, transliteration and Arabizi.

4. CODE-SWITCHING

Code-switching has become a naturally occurring linguistic feature of the Lebanese everyday conversations. It has even become an identity marker for the Lebanese among other nationalities. Much has been said and written about the Lebanese way of speaking. Beirut has even been called "The Ultimate Code-switching Capital". An interesting aspect of this mix of languages is the way many use them: simultaneously and interchangeably. According to Myers-Scotton (1993), code switching is defined as the mixing of different codes by speakers in the same conversation. The switch may take place at any level of language differentiation (languages, dialects, styles/registers) and can involve units from the morpheme to the sentence. Code-switching has become part and parcel of the spoken Lebanese Arabic, which has become strutted with French and English (Waddell, 2017). To illustrate, the following are very good examples of code-switching from our everyday conversation. "3anjad amazing, chapeau bas!" meaning "really amazing, respect!" and "Maitre, el 7seb please" when we mean to say "Waiter, check please". Thus, it takes a great deal of creativity from the Lebanese people part to combine two, three, or even four languages (for Armenian Lebanese) differently in every conversation.

In Lebanese mass media, the language of televised advertisements ranges from the strict use of English or Arabic (MSA or Lebanese Arabic) with some code-switching (Arabic-French or Arabic-English). In addition, final credits and acknowledgements in Lebanese video clips are often in English even though the songs are in Arabic. TV shows hosts consistently use Arabic with occasional use of English or French words. The frequency of code-switching depends on the TV station. However, some show hosts tend to use more foreign words since they involve younger hosts and they discuss topics related to social media, fashion and technology. Many of the programs on Lebanese TV stations are also named using English words such as, "Hashtag", "Alive", "What's Cooking", and "Get Fit" despite the fact that their content is mostly in Arabic. Besides TV channels, there are 34 radio stations with 11 having either English names like Mix FM and Radio One or French names like Nostalgie and Mont Liban (Esseili, 2017). Many of these stations play songs and broadcast programs in foreign languages as well.

When it comes to social interaction on social media like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter in addition to text messages, different forms of communication are used ranging from English, Arabic, a mix of two or three languages, or Arabizi (which is the Latinized Arabic). A report found that Lebanon "ranks among the top five countries in Facebook usage, topping the list of Arab countries using English language for social media" (BankMed, 2014, para. 20).

As for interpersonal communication, English use away from instructional contexts is not often viewed as snobbish or pretentious in Lebanon, but it reflects modernity and coolness. Such language use is popular in areas around American universities and schools, as well as areas around clubs and movie theatres (Esseili, 2017). Furthermore, she posits that many Lebanese parents choose to use English and/or French instead of Arabic when communicating with their young children in order to facilitate the acquisition of these foreign languages because they perceive English as a valuable commodity. They believe that these children will pick up their native language anyway. According to Zakharia (2010), "foreign languages in general are assigned a scientific and a modernizing function, such as languages of progress, modernity and up-to-date identity" (p.159). However, after English and French have become ingrained in our everyday conversations, some NGOs have organized festivals to encourage the use of the Arabic language and combat the excessive use of English and French in communication. While such initiatives have not been very successful in slowing down the use of foreign languages, they managed to a small extent to raise awareness about the urgency of using Lebanese Arabic only. In addition, this overuse of foreign languages in Lebanon has been critiqued by many public figures, comedians and foreigners. Such critiques have been mostly received as funny, cute and cool since they boosted the Lebanese image of themselves as multilinguals (Esseili, 2017). Nevertheless, because some Lebanese are keen on using English and/ or French even when they are not very proficient in these languages they have been receiving criticism from comedians, bloggers and youth. So this shows that English functions as a performance variety in Lebanon where users "rely upon a native rather than a nativized model as the acceptable standard and norm to approximate" (Al Huri, 2012, p.2). It has become a link language and an identity marker among many speakers of Lebanese Arabic who view multilingualism as a unique cultural and social trait that distinguishes them from other non-Lebanese. Language use marks its speaker's identity. It serves as a proof of identity- a badge (Esseili, 2017). Foreign languages play a significant role in shaping the Lebanese people's perception of their cultural and social identity.

Consequently, English has had a particularly strong impact on the language use of young Lebanese people, giving rise to other new inventive ways of using the language alongside Arabic (Lebanese Arabic).

5. BORROWING

Another creative aspect of language is borrowing, which is the process of importing linguistic items from one linguistic system into another. This process occurs any time two cultures are in contact over a period of time (Hoffer, 2002). Borrowings of English words are very common in Lebanese Arabic. Technology related terms such as Internet, website, link, computer, laptop, mouse, CD, keyboard, tablet, printer, phone and many others, have all been borrowed from English either because there is no equivalent to them in Arabic, or because the English version seems easier to say. Borrowing has not been limited to technology, additional fields include sports (dunk, goal, foul, basketball), fashion (boots, sandal, jeans, T-shirt, model), shopping (mall, sale, food court), food and drink (diet, hamburger, fries, crispy, ice cream, snack), travel (ticket, hotel, boarding, visa), banking (credit card, bank) and many others. Loanwords may even serve the function of labelling the speaker as fashionable and up-to-date (Hoffer, 2002)

6. NATIVIZATION

Code-switching and borrowing have contributed much in nativizing a great deal of words. Honna (2003) (cited in Patel, 2006) claims that when English migrates to foreign countries, "It diffuses and internationalizes, acculturates and indigenizes, and adapts and diversifies, resulting in localized or nativized lexical items". This nativization of English results in a specific variety of English with a linguistic identity and culture of its own. Local nativized varieties of English develop differently, depending on local needs. Many of the lexical items which first started as code-switches and were flagged by italics, quotes and even translations, have over time become established features in Lebanese everyday conversation. Such codeswitches have become a common feature in Lebanese dailies. Over time, they have become part of the local variety of English, signifying objects, ceremonies, titles, etc., which cannot be represented by Arabic terminology. Bilingual and multilingual speakers create a new local variety of English which is influenced by the linguistic systems and cultural norms of the speakers' first languages (Tunde, 2014). Nativization is a process of linguistic change in which a foreign language becomes an integral part of the culture of a society which employs it as an additional language while it still maintains many features of the language as it is by the native speakers. With this process, the foreign language in question loses some of its native-like characteristics. It acquires some features of the language in the community in which it has been introduced. This nativization process, which affects the foreign language, takes place at all levels of linguistic analysis such as pronunciation, grammar, and sometimes meaning (Torto, 2013). However, nativizing words is a long process because speakers need to adapt and introduce innovations in order to de-Englicize or de-Americanize the English language in a specific speech community (Jenkins, 2003). According to Peter (1994), before a foreign language is integrated into a non-native culture, it loses some of its linguistic features. Therefore, because English and French words have become so ingrained in Lebanese Arabic, some of them began to take on Arabic characteristics. Thus, some English words have undergone morphological reconstruction to fit the Arabic syntax. Therefore, "I checked my email" becomes "shayyakit emaili", and "I saved my files" becomes "sayyavit fileti", deleted becomes "dallatit" following the structure of Arabic sentences. Doubling or germinating the middle radical of the verb (which is adding the Arabic shadda) transforms the words into the causative or intensive states. However, number, gender and possession are marked by adding suffixes to verbs and nouns such as "courset", "T-shirtet". Likewise, to express a state of mind, a prefix is usually added to the word like: "I am hyper" becomes "mhaypir" and "I am depressed' becomes "mdapris", and so on.

7. TRANSLITERATION AND ARABIZI

As it has been mentioned earlier in this paper, Lebanese people talk by naturally mixing Arabic, English, and/or French in their everyday conversations. They also text in a similar manner. When it comes to social interaction on social media and text messages, two creative forms of communication along with the ones discussed previously arise. These forms are Arabizi and transliteration. Arabizi is a creative blend that has been coined by merging "Arabic" and "Englizi". Arabizi is very common among the Arab users, for it is used by most youth and the new generation. It is an informal language that is widely used on social media in the Arab region where users write Arabic sentences using English alpha numerals (Tobaili, 2015). There have been phonetic inventories in English numerals and letters that are equivalent to sounds in Arabic that are not found in English, like (5) for خ, (8) for غ, (7) for ح, (2) for أ, (9) for ق, (3) for ع. Because Arabic is naturally rich in diacritics, small signs written above or below a letter to indicate the way it is pronounced; adding, removing, or changing a diacritic in a word might change its meaning, that's why Lebanese youth choose to use this form of communication as it is easier to type. Some might even use it since it has become a habit or simply because they are too lazy (Tobaili, 2015; Esseili, 2011). In addition, exaggerations in social media and texting are very

common, and they are usually done to express emotion such as happiness, anger or excitement, as in: sooooo pretty/ Jameloooooo/ noooo wayyyy.

As for transliteration, it is the representation of a word or phrase in the closest corresponding letters or characters of a different alphabet or language so that the pronunciation is as close as possible to the original word or phrase. The method of transliteration depends on the characteristics of the source and target languages (in this case Arabic and English) (Larkey & AbdulJaleel, 2018). This technique is most popular in social media, texting and advertising. It has been used lately in an innovative way where Arabic words were sometimes depicted in images combined with English text which is an attempt to be innovative through the use of English with a Lebanese flavour.
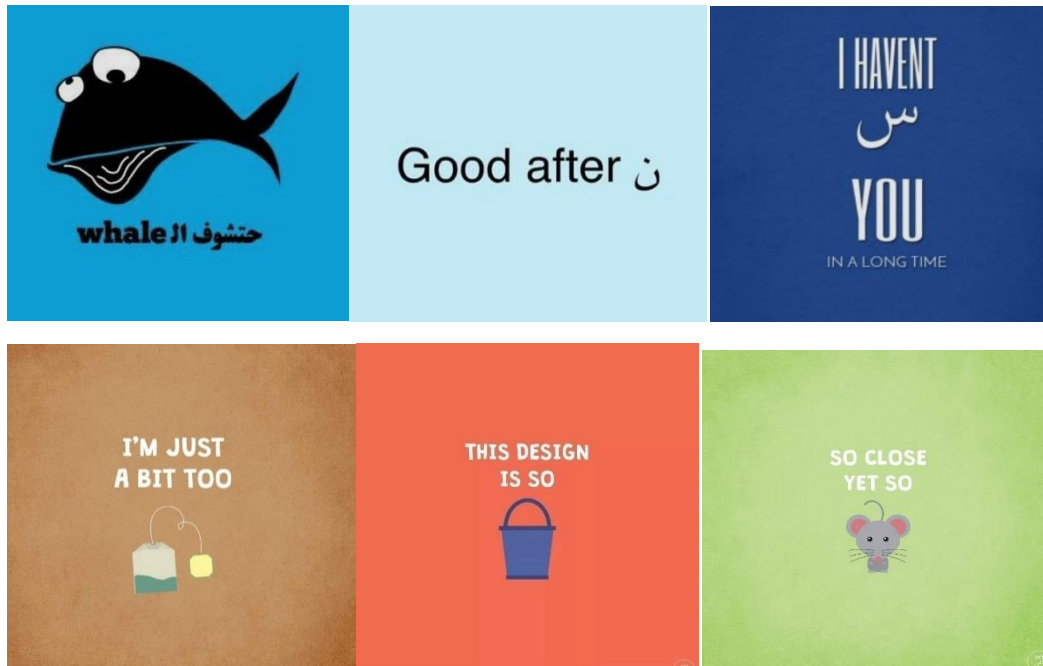

Fig.1 Transliteration between Arabic and English (Art7ake, 2016). It represents a compilation of some examples of transliteration between Arabic and English on social media

There has been an additional new trend that can be noticed lately on social media, ads and some signs of public places which is using diacritics in words that are written with English letters in an attempt to "Lebanize" or "Arabize" these English letters. The following pictures illustrate this creative aspect of language.

Fig.2 A sign at a Gas Station in Taanayel, Lebanon

Fig.3 An advertisement of a Bar in Dbayeh, Lebanon

Fig.4 A sign over the Coffee Machine at a Gas Station in Taanayel, Lebanon

Fig.5 The oil changing section at a Gas Station

Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5 illustrate how Arabic diacritics are being used with English letters in different signs and advertisements in Lebanon

8. CONCLUSIONS

Language is a dynamic system that is continuously undergoing change. Lebanese Arabic has undergone a great deal of changes over the last two decades. These changes have been explained in the light of many sociolinguistic factors, which have led to the emergence of several innovations in Lebanese Arabic. A number of language innovations have been discussed, and almost all of which are a result of blending languages that has become a common feature of the Lebanese. That languages change according to the needs of those who speak it is inevitable. The interaction of languages like Arabic-English, Arabic-French, Arabic-English-French in Lebanon, aids bilingual speakers in selecting words which are culturally associated with the local language and culture.

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