

Microvariation and language hierarchies: A sociolinguistic study in a multilingual setting

Valentina Serreli

(University of Bayreuth)

Keywords: multilingualism; dialect contact; variation; second language (L2); Arabic

This paper explores the behaviour of plurilingual speakers in intergroup communication in the Siwa Oasis (Egypt). The main languages spoken in Siwa are a Berber variety (Siwi: SB) and two clearly distinctive varieties of Arabic (Shahibāt: SA and Cairene: CA); Standard Arabic (MSA), the official language, is marginal to our purpose. As is typically the case in multilingual societies, the languages display a high degree of variation which, however, reflects power structures, ideology and individual competencies in such a way that hierarchies of language usages are easy to discern in a larger speech corpus.

Drawing from two group conversations among seven SB and SA male speakers aged between 18 and 70 years, phonological (e.g., interdentals), morphological (e.g., preverbs), and lexical variables will be statistically analysed with the aim of gauging variation in Arabic, spoken as L1 and L2.

Findings show that speakers engage in multilingual practices characterised by switching, mixing and hybridization at all linguistic levels, though variables behave differently. SB speakers usually accommodate, targeting SA or CA depending on the interlocutor, SA speakers mostly adhere to SA norms but may accommodate towards CA to some extent (see 1). SB is used almost exclusively among its speakers. CA features that cannot be attributed to proficiency (or lack thereof), intercomprehension or convergence occur with all speakers (see (2) where the same verb 'want' is used consecutively in SA – SA then CA by sp4, who is fluent in SA).

(1) switching CA/SA in one turn

sp1_SA, (to CA-speaking interlocutor)	<i>ḥayaṣmil ēh? [...] idīr ʕajīne w iħlib halib ilmaʃaz w yašrab</i> what does he do? [...] he makes the dough he told you about and milks the goat's milk and drinks	CA, SA
---	---	--------

(2) variation in consecutive turns

sp2_SB	<i>māši yibbi ixallaṣ bsurfa</i> okay he wants to finish quickly	SA
sp3_SA	<i>[...] iħid ixallaṣ bsurfa [...]</i> he wants to finish quickly	SA
sp2_SB	<i>yibbi iħaddi [...]</i>	SA

	he wants to leave [...]	
sp4_SB	[...] ՚awām ՚āyiz / ya՚ni [...]	CA
	[...] Awam wants / I mean [...]	

All in all, SA appears strong at the local level, its use largely dependent on the individuals' networks, while CA is a true supralocal variety. These findings demonstrate that microvariation patterns both depend on and reproduce a SB>SA>CA language hierarchy, explained by examining broad categories such as SB minority status, oasis remoteness, ethnolinguistic group cohesion, as well as local and national language ideologies.

Acknowledgments

This research is part of the project “Modernity, Migration and Minorities: Three Case Studies of Arabic in Contact” [ref. SE3049-1] funded by the DFG (German Research Foundation).