Ya Habibi يا حبيبي: The linguistic performance of an emerging Arab American identity

This study explores the expression of identity within an Arab American community as indexed by language choice and practice. Relying on theories of linguistic ideology, we examine the influences of linguistic appropriation, code-switching, code-blending, Mock Arabic, and lexical borrowings in the linguistic performance of identity among second-generation Arab Americans in Dearborn, MI, a city with the second-largest population of Arabs outside of the Middle East. Interested in the linguistic practice of identity, we collected data from participant observation, personal anecdotes, and social media sources such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, screening posts through location settings and recognized lexical borrowings. We identify and analyze the use of Arabic present in internet posts such as the use of “Habibi,” or “loved one,” said in relation to friends or even attractive celebrities. Similar to Myers-Scotton (1993), we find that within this younger generation, language is used to negotiate and perform identity. These uses then index both solidarity within the younger generation of Arab Americans and resistance to the older generation. Further, we see that the linguistic appropriation of Arabic lexical features interacts with English to define this younger generation as a community of practice resulting from negotiated convergence and divergence with Standard American English (*SAE) and Arabic. These negotiations and performances are further exemplified by everyday language use with examples of Mock Arabic used jokingly in both casual and staged contexts gathered anecdotally and presented on YouTube. Compared to the work of both Hill (2008) and Barrett (2006), we find that this use of mock language is not significantly pejorative, but instead Mock Arabic is used to simultaneously converge and diverge from native Arabic. We find that the appropriation of these linguistic features creates a new hybrid identity among second-generation Arab Americans that happens in a social space not significantly impacted by the relationship between language and power. Thus, we propose that the consequences of linguistic appropriation and mock varieties exist on a spectrum that balances social domination and identity construction dependent on social context and group identity. Considering the heavy stigmatization of Arabs in American society, our research is significant for speakers, citizens, and linguists in understanding how language choice and identity performance are subject to both internally and externally defined ideologies with social consequences.