

REVIEW

Language and Identity in Modern Egypt

Reem Bassiouney

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. xvi + 400pp., appendix, bibliography, index.
ISBN: 9780748699940. Paperback £24.99

Reviewed by William Cotter, University of Arizona

L*anguage and Identity in Modern Egypt*, the most recent book by Reem Bassiouney, provides an overview of the relationship between language and identity in Egypt based on a survey of public discourse data. The text is divided into six chapters plus an introduction and conclusion, covering methodological issues, the historical development of Egyptian identity, the relationship between social indexes of Arabic varieties, and the place of Arabic in defining and contributing to the development of Egyptian identity up to the 2011 Egyptian revolution.

The introduction provides a general overview of the book, highlighting the need for a book like this in Arabic sociolinguistics. Additional background details are also given for why Egypt is a suitable case study for this kind of work. Issues related to Charles Ferguson's (1959) conceptualization of diglossia, along with a more limited discussion of linguistic prestige as it relates to the case at hand are also included. The introduction ends with an overview of the data to be examined in the book, the intended readership, and limitations of the work.

Chapter 1 outlines the theoretical foundation of the book, drawing on work related to stance, positioning theory, and indexicality to frame the wider argument. This argument rests on the idea that language is used as a method of classification while at the same time individuals use language to adopt stances in discourse that

Al-Arabiyya, 49 (2016), 163–166

in turn index various aspects of Egyptian identity (41). Chapter 1 concludes with a discussion of some of the types of discursive and structural resources that the author uses in the data analysis provided later in the book.

Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of the place of language in the development of Egyptian identity. The chapter traces the formation of modern Egyptian identity as a pushback against colonial powers. At the same time, language is tied to other factors like locality that the author argues have worked together to forge a notion of what being Egyptian means. The chapter concludes with a nod to the ongoing debates regarding standard versus colloquial varieties of Arabic and to language attitudes and ideologies more generally.

The third chapter discusses the indexes of Arabic within Egyptian society and the relationship between indexicality and language attitudes and ideologies, tying some of Ferguson's foundational ideas about diglossia to indexicality. One crucial point in Bassiouney's treatment of indexicality is that it is not actually linked to linguistic practice; instead, second-order indexicality specifically is linked to access or a lack thereof to varied Arabic codes. This move, in and of itself, is not problematic. However, the reader is never really provided with an explanation of what the author's take on indexicality buys us analytically that previous indexical methodologies did not.

Chapter 4 draws on popular Egyptian media to argue that public discourse presents a cohesive community in Egypt by employing varied stances and specific social variables. In this respect, Bassiouney identifies historicity, locality, and ethnicity as variables that are at the core of the cohesive notion of community present in public discourse. In drawing on Yasir Suleiman (2011) in this chapter, the author effectively sidelines a great deal of variationist work within Arabic sociolinguistics. The critique of variationist research in this chapter comes across as flatly dismissive. This is curious since a great deal of the third-wave sociolinguistic research on identity, style, or indexicality has productively used variationist research as a foundation for building on and advancing theory. Religion, which chapter 4 discusses at length, is an area where I think a better understanding and use of sociolinguistic theory could have been useful for the author. While Bassiouney is correct in noting that there has not been a study that links religion to linguistic variation in Egypt, the author appears to accept at face value the homogenized representation of religion presented in Egyptian public discourse.

My gut reaction as a sociolinguist is to agree, since the link between religion and language has largely eluded Arabic sociolinguists thus far (see Al-Wer et al. 2015; Blanc 1964; and Holes 1987 for exceptions). That being said, the author's claims regarding language and religion in Egypt do not appear to be based on actual research that she or other researchers have conducted. At the same time, research by Clive

Holes (1986) is misrepresented in Bassiouney's work, suggesting that the author does not understand the Bahraini case that Holes has described.

Furthermore, the author notes that locality, gender, and social class play a larger role in influencing linguistic variation in Egypt than religion but the reader is not provided with a grounded discussion based on earlier research to support this claim. Niloofar Haeri's (1996) work is mentioned seemingly as an afterthought and Haim Blanc's (1964) foundational work on Baghdad is left out of the larger discussion on language and religion entirely. While the author readily admits that we are dealing with public discourse and not actual linguistic production, issues with the data and what appears to be a lack of empirical evidence hurts the analysis. The claims that the author makes need to be supported by something other than the homogenized representation of Egypt presented in public discourse.

The fifth chapter of the book deals with identity in a selection of Egyptian novels. Carrying on with the general theme of the book, the author relates stances that she argues the characters adopt through language to varied indexes that constitute larger notions of identity. The latter portion of the chapter focuses more closely on code switching as it surfaces in dialogues in Egyptian literature. This portion of the work provides the reader with an interesting take on the way varied codes are used in literature, which makes one think about the more general issue of writing in Arabic dialects and the need for additional research in this area, and for that the author should be commended.

The book's final chapter offers an examination of the main themes of the book within the specific context of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. The chapter rests on three main areas of data analysis. The first section focuses on an article published before the revolution by Fathī Surūr, the former Speaker of Parliament. The second section focuses on how language was used by state media and protestors to contest or display specific notions of identity. The final section argues that indexes of Standard Arabic reinforce political credibility and legitimacy through an examination of an article by Fārūk Shūshah, Facebook posts by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, and debates surrounding changes to the Egyptian constitution.

Bassiouney may be right in noting that disinterest in the constitution from the public stems less from a lack of access to Standard Arabic and more from the reality that historically the constitution mattered little in the overall political climate of Egypt. In making this point, however, the author makes a sweeping claim about the ability of Egypt's residents to understand spoken Standard Arabic. This claim, whether it has a basis in reality or not, is not backed up by evidence in the text. This case is one of a number wherein the reader is not given evidence to back up the author's claims, which makes it challenging to support the larger argument.

The conclusion offers a general overview of the larger argument and is a fairly straightforward account of the findings from the analysis. The main issue that arises in concluding the book, however, is that the data the reader was provided throughout remains largely insufficient and the analysis in many cases is built on a foundation of faulty or absent linguistic information. The question is then, is what we see based on the public discourse presented to us actually grounded in the linguistic realities of Egypt?

Language and Identity in Modern Egypt waded into uncharted water. On the one hand, we should thank the author for identifying a hole in research on Arabic sociolinguistics. Still, although there are bright spots, on the whole the book leaves a lot to be desired. The book comes across as deeply troubling from a sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological standpoint given that in multiple areas the text is built on mischaracterized linguistic situations from other Arabic-speaking communities.

These mischaracterizations and a general lack of linguistic evidence make it challenging to support Bassiouney's conclusions. Egypt is one of the most well-studied linguistic communities in the Arab world, and a wealth of scholarship is available on the linguistic diversity of the country. Unfortunately, much of that absent in Bassiouney's text. The author argues to have provided the reader with an alternative view of diglossia in the Arab world related to identity formation in public discourse, but the book largely results in the homogenization of the linguistic, social, and political situation in one of the Arab world's largest states. This is, in actuality, exactly what public discourse in Egypt appears to do based on the data that we are given in the book.

References

- Al-Wer, Enam, Uri Horesh, Bruno Herin, and Maria Fanis. 2015. "How Arabic Regional Features Become Sectarian Features? Jordan as a Case Study." *Zeitschrift für arabische Linguistik* 62:68–87.
- Blanc, Haim. 1964. *Communal Dialects in Baghdad*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ferguson, Charles. 1959. "Diglossia." *Word* 15: 325–40.
- Haeri, Niloofar. 1996. *The Sociolinguistic Market of Cairo: Gender, Class, and Education*. London: Kegan Paul International.
- Holes, Clive. 1986. "The Social Motivation for Phonological Convergence in Three Arabic Dialects." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 61:33–51.
- . 1987. *Language Variation and Change in a Modernising Arab State: The Case of Bahrain*. London: Kegan Paul International.
- Suleiman, Yasir. 2011. *Arabic, Self and Identity: A Study in Conflict and Displacement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.