

Abstract

Language variation and gender in Egypt; Evidence from talk shows.

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In the Arabic speaking world there is a difference between a 'prestige variety' and a 'standard' one. There is also a diglossic situation. Diglossia is defined by Ferguson (1959) as a language situation in which two languages or varieties exist side by side - each with a different function. In the Arab world there is a standard Arabic which is used in education and sometimes in formal occasions, and there are also the different vernaculars of different countries (cf. Bassiouney 2006). Many linguistic studies in the Arab world have shown that for most people there is a prestige vernacular, the identity of which depends on many geographical, political and social factors within each country. In Egypt for example, for non-Cairene it is Cairene. It is usually the Urban dialect of the big cities. This linguistic situation does not exist in many Western societies, with the consequence that at a first glance the results reached by some Western linguists concerning language and gender seem to contradict those reached by some linguists in the Arab world. For example, Labov (1972) concludes that women use a more prestigious form of language. Gall (1978-79) in her study of a village in Austria found that women use the prestigious variety of German more than men as a form of securing their position in society. The fact that linguists like Daher (1999) may claim that specific women of a specific background may not use some standard features of language does not contradict the findings of Labov and others, since women may still use the prestige form of language which, as was said earlier, is different from the standard one.

Studies done on the Arab world all indicate the following, first that women sometimes do not have access to education and professional life to the same extent like men and thus their use of standard is less than men. On the other hand, when women have a choice between the prestigious urban variety, a rural variety and standard, they are more prone to choose the urban variety as a symbolic means of asserting their identity.

My data consists of 15 hours of talk shows. The analysis includes 5 talk shows. Two are exclusive to one group, males or females and not another. The data is classified according to the quantity of morphemes from Egyptian Arabic and Standard Arabic. Morpho-syntactic, phonological and lexical variables are used in the classification. After analyzing the data, it was quite clear that some of the language and gender conclusions about the way women and men use language in general and standard in particular need to be changed to cater for Egyptian women and perhaps women from different backgrounds and in different contexts.

My data suggests the following: Educated women and men within the same age group use standard in a similar way. In fact, there are some women who use more standard than men. This happens when standard has a discourse function, when it becomes a symbol of authority and status for women. In programs which are exclusive to men or women, there is still no difference in the way standard is used by both. The quantity of standard is related to the role the speaker wants to take and which part of his identity he appeals to. The use of the standard phonological variable 'q' specifically was not exclusive to men. Both women and men used 'q' and sometimes it is women rather than men that do so.