

Language Attitudes: Emirati Perspectives on the Emirati Dialect of Arabic According to Age and Gender

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Abstract: This study examines language attitudes from a sociolinguistic perspective. In particular, it investigates the attitudes that Emirati speakers of Arabic hold towards their dialect of Arabic as well as the extent to which age and gender have an impact on the speaker's perspectives of their dialect. The data was collected employing a 5 point Likert scale in which several statements, aiming to reveal the speaker's attitudes towards their dialect were included. The results reveal that despite the differences in the speaker's answers in terms of age and gender, all participants, regardless of age and gender, appear to feel proud of their dialect of Arabic. These results provide insights into the factors that affect speaker's perception of their dialect and in turn, facilitate the understanding of human's social behaviour in general.

Key words: Socio linguistics, language attitudes, social factors, age, gender, Emirati Arabic

INTRODUCTION

The concept of attitude can be defined in different ways. Obiols (2002) for example, defines attitude as the psychological response an individual demonstrates towards a given subject, connected to the individual's behaviour and opinion. Baker (1992), meanwhile, defines attitude as "a hypothetical construct used to explain the direction and persistence of human behaviour". In the field of sociolinguistics, the investigation of speaker's attitudes towards the language or dialect that they use is a popular and important area of research and one which has given researchers an insight into speaker's linguistic behaviour. For example, the study of language attitudes has contributed towards understanding why speakers, particularly those living in multilingual communities, choose to speak the language or dialect that they speak rather than another language/dialect from their community (Baker, 1992; Fat, 2005). Following on from this, Obiols (2002) observes that issues such as language prestige and speaker's feelings of loyalty towards a language or dialect can be explored through the investigation of language attitudes. Indeed, many scholars in fields ranging as broad as anthropology and education have explored this area of research (Baker, 1992; Haeri, 1997; Ladegaard, 1998; Wardhaugh, 2002; Fat, 2005). Attitudes towards the Arabic language, however have not been investigated to a great extent and Emirati Arabic even less so. This study therefore aims to examine the attitude that Emirati

speakers of Arabic hold towards their dialect of Arabic as well as the extent to which age and gender have an effect on Emirati's perspectives of their dialect.

Literature review: There have been numerous studies conducted around the world which examine certain languages or dialects and speaker's attitudes towards them. The study of language attitudes can apply to multilingual contexts as well as contexts with multiple dialects or accents. Language attitudes in multilingual communities are a particular area of interest. For example, research carried out investigating the status of indigenous languages in various Latin American countries has shown that the co-existence of these languages alongside Spanish in countries such as Mexico has generated social divisions due to the deep-rooted belief that speaking an indigenous language connotes social inferiority (Hill and Hill, 1986). Hill and Hill (1986) have observed a gradual language shift towards the use of Spanish in Mexico by indigenous communities who speak Nahuatl, the language used by the ancient Aztec people. Although, Nahuatl was adopted as a lingua franca throughout central America following Spanish colonisation of the region where colonisers established strong ties with the Aztecs (Lipski, 1994), the Spaniards eventually overturned the Aztec Empire and subsequently instigated the literal and cultural genocide of indigenous Mexicans (Rolstad, 2001). As a consequence of centuries of marginalisation, present day speakers of Nahuatl

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express shame towards the use of their own language as for many speakers the language serves as a marker of “an identity which is worthless and oppressed” (Hill and Hill, 1986). It can be deduced that this is an attitude which has been imposed upon the Nahuatl language and its speakers for such a long period of time that the speakers themselves have adopted this attitude. As a result of this belief that Nahuatl is a language of low status, the Nahuatl language is slowly being abandoned in favour of the use of Spanish.

Mexico is not the only country where such a situation exists in Singapore, Mandarin is considered low in status compared to the English influenced dialects spoken by Singaporeans Leong (2014). Despite a government campaign aiming to persuade the population to use mandarin instead of Chinese dialects (Leong, 2014) observes that although, people have started using Mandarin, their attitude towards it is roundly negative in comparison to how they feel about the dialects they use. This may be due to English being more widely used in Singapore, representing a more modern and international society. Similarly, in Hong Kong, the Hakka dialect of Chinese has gone out of use over the last 50 years, the once most spoken dialect in Hong Kong discarded and replaced by Cantonese (Fat, 2005). Fat (2005) attributes the abandonment of Hakka in favour of cantonese to its low social status and lack of prestige; people refused to speak Hakka even in their own homes. As with the situation in Mexico, it can be observed from studies conducted in Hong Kong and Singapore that speakers in general prefer languages and dialects which denote modernity and prestige.

Attitudes towards language and dialect can also be affected by impressions of standard dialects and accents compared to colloquial ones. Brown *et al.* (1985) conducted a study in which participants listened to a tape recording of a person who speaks two varieties of English; Welsh and standard “received pronunciation” English. Following this activity, participants were asked to rate the 2 varieties of English on a scale indicating which one they thought was better. The results showed that participants chose the standard English accent over the Welsh accent as they deemed it a more appropriate form of language. Ladegaard (1998) found similar results in a study which involved examining attitudes towards three dialects of English spoken in Denmark: Australian, British and American. Like, Brown *et al.* (1985), participants in Ladegaard (1998)’s study demonstrated a preference for standard dialects over ones which may be considered more colloquial. Finally, it has been observed that gender and age have an effect on an individual’s language attitudes. Alahmadi (2016) explored the perceptions of Saudi Arabian speakers of the urban

Meccan Hijazi dialect of Arabic with the speaker’s age, gender and level of education all considered as factors. Results revealed that although, participants generally felt loyal towards their own dialect there were in fact differences between participant’s results which the aforementioned social variables can account for. More specifically, it was found that older speakers of the dialect expressed more loyalty for their form of speech than the younger speakers did.

From the literature review, it is possible to deduce 2 things. Firstly, differences in language attitudes can arise due to issues of language status and prestige as well as preference of standard dialects as opposed to colloquial ones and that social variables also need to be taken into account. Secondly, the literature review has shown that there appears to be to the best of our knowledge a lack of research on language attitudes in the Emirati context. This study therefore aims to provide answers to the following research questions:

- How do Emirati speakers of Arabic perceive their own dialect of Arabic
- To what extent are language attitudes in the UAE towards Emirati Arabic affected by the speaker’s age and gender
- Are there any other social factors apparent which may affect speaker’s attitudes towards their dialect

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The sample: The sample in this study included 40 randomly selected Emirati nationals, born and raised in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and therefore nativized speakers of Emirati Arabic. Participation in the present study was entirely voluntary. The participants represent the 2 independent variables, age and gender, being examined in this study. Previous research has shown that these 2 social variables have an effect on various aspects related to linguistic behaviour (Labov, 1972; Shaaban and Ghaiith, 2003; Altakhaine and Rahrouh, 2015; Alahmadi, 2016). For the purpose of data analysis according to these variables, participants were split into 2 groups as follows (Table 1).

Procedure: Data collection took place in the form of a 21-item questionnaire (Appendix 1). Questionnaires are

Table 1: Distribution of participants according to age and gender

Social variables	No. of participants
Age	
20 younger	(19-42)
20 older	(43-70+)
Gender	
Males	24
Females	16

a highly effective form of data collection in the field of sociolinguistics for multiple reasons: firstly, it has been observed that questionnaires can reveal speaker's sociolinguistic behaviours as well as attitudes towards linguistic issues in social contexts (Meyerhoff *et al.*, 2015). Secondly, questionnaires facilitate extensive data collection in a short period of time, something which has motivated numerous researchers in sociolinguistics to utilise questionnaires in their studies (Carruthers, 1999; Alahmadi, 2016). The questionnaire in the present study consisted of 2 parts, the first of which invited participants to give personal background information such as age, gender and occupation. This information was required in order to examine the variables which may be reflected in the participant's attitudes towards their dialect of Arabic. In the second part of the questionnaire, participants responded to a series of questions on how they felt about Emirati Arabic using a five point Likert scale. One example is a question asking participants if they believe the Emirati dialect of Arabic should undergo conservation in the form of writing.

The questionnaire was distributed randomly to passers-by in the streets of Al Ain, UAE. Data collection was therefore entirely indiscriminate as all individuals who happened to be passing by during the distribution of the questionnaires were equally given the opportunity to participate in the study. Participants in the present study were also given adequate time and space to complete the questionnaire in order to elicit true responses for accurate data collection. Further, insights into participant's linguistic attitudes were provided following completion of the questionnaire when a large number of participants chose to discuss their responses in person.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following study presents and examines the participant's responses to the second section of the questionnaire. Table 2 shows a selection of items from the questionnaire and the extent to which the 2 groups from the age variable agreed with the statements. Results show that these responses did indeed differ according to participant's age. The overall percentage of the responses provided by older speakers agreeing with statements that reflect their pride and loyalty towards Emirati Arabic is 70% whereas that provided by younger speakers is 64%. For example on the item "older people and younger people speak Emirati Arabic to the same extent", 70% of older participants and 80% of younger participants answered 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree'. While these percentages are relatively close, it can be argued that the participants responded accordingly for different reasons. It seems that older participants believe that the

younger people in the Emirati community choose to speak and even use social media in English or in other languages which represent a kind of modernity which Emirati Arabic does not. Indeed, the data shown in Table 2 reflect this with item b demonstrating a stark contrast between older and younger participant's preference for using English.

Regarding this preference, older participants claimed that the fact that most of the TV programmes broadcasted in the UAE are English language programmes is instigating a shift away from Arabic towards English. In addition, older participants commented that the code-switching between English and Arabic which takes place among younger Emiratis impedes their understanding of younger people's speech. Older participants also believe that their attitudes towards the Emirati dialect differ from that of the younger members of the community. It can be argued that older participants in general believe that they feel strongly about using their dialect on a regular basis while younger speakers strive for modernity through adopting English alongside Arabic as a language of communication in social contexts, perhaps as a result of peer pressure to follow the global shift towards modern communication, i.e., English (Leong, 2014).

Moreover, examining the data can lead us to argue that younger people believe that they are not as proficient in Emirati Arabic as older members of the community who may be more familiar with Emirati proverbs and songs and use the dialect more regularly. This may be another reason for younger speakers to use English rather than Emirati Arabic as they have a lower level of fluency in the dialect than their older counterparts. Despite the fact that 80% of younger participants prefer English over Emirati Arabic to use amongst friends, older and younger participants alike agreed that their dialect should be written down in order to preserve proverbs and songs and both age groups expressed agreement with the statement that Emirati Arabic is the best dialect in the GCC community. This shows that older and younger speakers alike although, their usage of it differs are proud of their dialect. Indeed, while younger speakers initially seem to be shifting towards English and its promise of modernity and 'coolness' (Walqui, 2000), the data shows that they do still have a positive attitude towards their dialect. This is reflected in the responses to a further item on the questionnaire: 'if I decide to marry, I would prefer my spouse to be a speaker of Emirati Arabic' with 70% of younger participants and 90% of older participants agreeing with this statement. Overall while the data does show that younger speakers are shifting from Emirati Arabic towards English due to factors such as the language used on TV and in social media as well as

Table 2: Percentages of older speakers and younger participants who agreed with the statements presented in each item

Items	Older speakers (%)	Younger speakers (%)
The spoken dialect in the UAE should be Emirati Arabic	90	70
I prefer to speak English with my friends rather than Emirati Arabic	10	80
I think Emirati Arabic is the best dialect in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) community	90	70
All Emiratis should speak Emirati Arabic	80	70
All people in the UAE want to speak Emirati Arabic all the time	70	50
Emirati proverbs and songs should be preserved in writing	80	70
I prefer TV programmes spoken in Emirati Arabic	70	40
Total mean	70	64

Table 3: Percentages of males and females who agreed with the statements presented in each item

Items	Male (%)	Female (%)
The spoken dialect in the UAE should be Emirati Arabic	83	75
I think Emirati Arabic is the best dialect in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) community	92	88
All Emiratis should speak Emirati Arabic	75	88
All people in the UAE want to speak Emirati Arabic all the time	67	75
Emirati's proverbs and songs should be preserved in writing	92	88
I prefer TV programmes spoken in Emirati Arabic	83	63
Total mean	82	80

external social pressures, older and younger participants alike demonstrated pride and positivity towards their dialect of Arabic as well as a desire to see it preserved in writing.

Let us now move to examining the gender variable. Table 3 shows the extent to which male and female participants, respectively agreed with the statements presented in a selection of the questionnaire items. The questionnaire items elicited disparate results between the 2 genders, depending on the item. For example, the data show that males and females alike agree that Emirati nationals should speak Emirati Arabic (item (j)) while 92% of male participants and 88% of females agree with the statement presented in item i on the matter of the preservation of Emirati Arabic.

Meanwhile, 88% of females and only 33% of males agreed with the following statement: 'I think that females speak Emirati Arabic better than male's. There are several possible reasons for which females believe themselves more proficient speakers of Emirati Arabic than males. One reason may be that it is women who raise children and teach them Arabic and they may therefore consider themselves to be more knowledgeable about their dialect. Another reason is that in most Emirati families, it is the males who go out to work and mix with people who speak different dialects of Arabic or even different languages entirely. The men's dialect may be affected by these external influences while women tend to socialise predominantly with other Emiratis and as a result speak a 'purer' form of the dialect. Conversely, the males do not appear to agree with this and some participants even commented that females abandon Emirati Arabic in favour of adopting the Lebanese dialect which is considered to be highly feminine and the most prestigious dialect of Arabic. As a consequence, males do not believe that females speak Emirati Arabic to a high standard as they, along with a high proportion of females from the entire Arabic speaking community, prefer to speak a dialect denoting prestige and femininity. Despite the

disagreement on which gender speaks the better form of Emirati Arabic, the data from items i, j and l show that all participants, regardless of gender, appear to feel proud of their dialect of Arabic.

CONCLUSION

The data collected in the present study has aimed to and succeeded in finding answers to the following research questions:

- How do Emirati speakers of Arabic perceive their own dialect of Arabic
- To what extent are language attitudes in the UAE towards Emirati Arabic affected by speaker's age and gender
- Are there any other social factors apparent which may affect speaker's attitudes towards their dialect

Responses to questionnaire items such as 'I think Emirati Arabic is the best dialect in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) community', 'All Emiratis should speak Emirati Arabic' and 'Emirati's proverbs and songs should be preserved in writing' provide us with an answer to the first research question. Emirati national's attitudes towards Emirati Arabic are roundly positive with the majority of participants agreeing with the above statements regardless of age or gender. This simultaneously shows us that Emiratis hold their dialect of Arabic in high esteem and that this is the case across all social variables taken into consideration. Participants appear to be proud of their dialect and show a sense of responsibility towards its usage and preservation. Regarding the matter of the extent to which language attitudes are affected by speaker's age and gender, the data collected sheds light upon the differences between younger and older speaker's attitudes, particularly in terms of the use of English within these 2 age groups. Although, younger participants did demonstrate a sense

of pride towards the Emirati dialect, they also expressed a preference for speaking English amongst friends which was not echoed by older participants. Meanwhile, female participants believed themselves far superior speakers of Emirati Arabic than their male counterparts while the males themselves did not agree with this, commenting that the women's preference of adopting the prestigious Lebanese dialect means that they do not speak Emirati Arabic to a high standard.

The above data suggests that language attitudes are indeed affected by social variables such as a speaker's age and gender and to answer the third and final question, that there may be other social factors in play as well. Firstly, English as the language of international global communication with connotations of modernity and prestige, appears to be provoking a language shift away from Emirati Arabic amongst the younger demographic as younger people feel the pressure to conform to modernity

over tradition. Prestige is also a factor to consider when examining how females perceive their proficiency in Emirati Arabic compared to how males perceive female's proficiency; the preference for Lebanese Arabic because of its prestige means that Emirati female's competency in their own dialect may be deteriorating due to their focus on what is prestigious rather than what is the dominant dialect of their country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of these results, it is recommended that more research is carried out to investigate the use of and attitudes towards English in the UAE as well as perceptions of prestige towards languages and dialects other than Emirati Arabic. Further, studies in these areas will help to expose and examine the linguistic and social behaviour of Emiratis to a greater extent.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1 (The questionnaire)

Section 1 (Background information)

- 1) Age:
- 2) Sex:
- 3) Place of birth: _____.
- 4) Place of work/study:
- 5) Have you ever lived for more than one month outside of the UAE?
- 6) If yes, how long? _____.
- 7) Why did you go there?
 - a) Travel
 - b) Study
 - c) Work
 - d) Trade
 - e) Other reasons: _____
- 8) Do you want to work/study in places outside of the UAE?

Section 2 (Attitudes towards Emirati Arabic):

Answer the following questions:

- 9) All people in the UAE want to speak Emirati Arabic all the time:

1- Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3-Neutral	4-Agree	5- Strongly agree
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- 10) Older people and younger people in the UAE speak Emirati Arabic to the same extent:

1- Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3- Neutral	4-Agree	5- Strongly agree
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- 11) I prefer to speak English with my friends rather than Emirati:

1- Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3- Neutral	4-Agree	5- Strongly agree
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- 12) In the UAE, the spoken dialect should be Emirati Arabic:

1- Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3- Neutral	4-Agree	5- Strongly agree
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- 13) All Emiratis should speak Emirati Arabic:

1- Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3- Neutral	4-Agree	5- Strongly agree
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- 14) If people did not use Emirati Arabic, the UAE's culture would disappear.

1- Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3- Neutral	4-Agree	5- Strongly agree
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- 15) The UAE's proverbs and songs should be preserved in writing:

1- Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3- Neutral	4-Agree	5- Strongly agree
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- 16) I think Emirati Arabic is the best dialect in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) community.

1- Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3- Neutral	4-Agree	5- Strongly agree
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- 17) If I decide to marry, I would prefer my spouse to be a speaker of Emirati Arabic:

1- Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3- Neutral	4-Agree	5- Strongly agree
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- 18) TV programmes should be broadcasted in Emirati Arabic:

1- Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3- Neutral	4-Agree	5- Strongly agree
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- 19) I prefer TV programmes spoken in Emirati Arabic:

1- Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3- Neutral	4-Agree	5- Strongly agree
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- 20) If I spoke Emirati Arabic with someone I do not know, I would be able to judge whether they are from the UAE or not:

1- Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3- Neutral	4-Agree	5- Strongly agree
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- 21) I think that females speak Emirati Arabic better than males:

1- Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3- Neutral	4-Agree	5- Strongly agree
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