

Reem Bassiouney: Arabic Sociolinguistics

(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2020. Second edition. 417 p.)

The second edition of the book *Arabic Sociolinguistics* written by Reem Bassiouney provides an updated discussion on the essential outcomes of recent critical approaches to language and society in Arab-speaking countries. The book gives a detailed description of Arabic sociolinguistics. It deals with recent scholarly works that link language to power and conflict in the Arab world, reflecting the latest wave of political changes in the Middle East.

In addition to the comprehensively revised five chapters – Diglossia and dialect groups in the Arab world, Code-switching, Language variation and change, Arabic and gender, and Language policy and politics – a new dedicated sixth chapter, entitled “A critical approach to Arabic sociolinguistics” addresses the foremost significant current developments within the field of critical sociolinguistics, which questions the tendency to apply Western linguistic methods and terminology to superdiverse societies. By using several examples to further explain the phenomenon under review, the author covers the major trends in linguistic theories and contexts. The work under discussion aims to show the importance of Arabic sociolinguistics and the relationship between language and society.

It starts with a list of contents that provides a clearer description than the main title, charts, maps, and tables, followed by a list of abbreviations of the various languages and dialects mentioned in the volume and a description of the transcription, glosses, and transliteration scheme used to transcribe names and titles. An introduction follows this technical prelude, in which Bassiouney inaugurates the book with an Egyptian saying: “The earth speaks Arabic” (p. 1).

The book describes the term *sociolinguistics* and the key themes that sociolinguists are concerned with. It briefly reflects on the concerns of terminology in the field. Then, it illustrates the contents and the drawbacks of this work as well. In six chapters through 417 pages, Bassiouney unfolds the present sociolinguistic situation in the Arab world.

To highlight the content of this book, the first chapter is divided into two parts: the first section deals with vertical issues (diglossia) and the second section deals with horizontal issues (national dialect varieties/groups). The point of departure is that diglossia is the general norm in Arab countries referring to the co-existence of the languages Modern Standard Arabic and at least one other prestigious vernacular language which is spoken and/or written. The theory of diglossia by Ferguson (1959) is explored in-depth, including the familiar principles of “H” (high) and “L” (low) varieties. It offers a bird’s-eye view of the linguistic status quo of the Arab world.

It is completed by introducing the reader to the diglossia state and its results in the Arab world first, then to the various approaches to dialect classification.

The author goes on to look at the concept of code switching in-depth in the second chapter, primarily between colloquial and standard Arabic. Diglossic switching and code-switching are discussed as a single phenomenon. The chapter is subdivided into two major parts. The first part describes structural constraints on classic code-switching, thereby dealing with the question of how switching takes place, with special reference to the model of Matrix Language (ML) by Myers-Scotton. In connection with Arabic, the second part discusses the social motives and discourse functions of switching, thus seeking the reasons of the phenomenon. The chapter points to research performed by a range of linguists as well as two studies conducted by Bassiouney herself. In a new section that adopts a more systematic, critical approach to code-switching, the questions and problems facing the hypotheses of code-switching are discussed. The author ends the chapter by highlighting the need for a universal theory that can apply to each bilingual and monolingual society.

The third chapter explains language variation and change and different triggering factors. In analysing language variation, the author outlines three main theories: the social class theory of Labov, the theory of social networks as developed by Milroy, and the third-wave approach to sociolinguistics variation studies as addressed by Eckert. First, it sheds light on the quantitative variation analysis approach and related issues concerning both the Western and Arab worlds. Then, because of the many interdialectal communication instances in the Arab world, it focuses on particular variables that affect language variation and change and continue to address diglossia and levelling. For the present second, new edition, an additional section is added in which the approach of the social construct to variation is analysed in the light of new Arabic data related to indexicality, stance-taking, performance, and media. Finally, it offers a conclusion, which is a slightly modified version of the one in the first edition of the book by Bassiouney.

Chapter 4 focuses on gender, beginning with numerous theories (the deficit theory, the dominance theory, the difference theory, and Community of practice theory), which discuss the relationship between gender and language, as well as gender universals, and postulates gender in general and gender in the Arab world specifically. It points at two key principles of the Arab world concerning linguistic gender performance, which are: honour and modesty. In this chapter, it also examines the discourse of educated women in Egypt and how they at times challenge the gender universals using data examined and observations as reference. This chapter concludes that there are two key approaches to researching gender from a linguistic viewpoint, which is the binary approach to gender and the construction approach.

The goal of the following chapter is to provide a snapshot of different language policies and politics to encourage or oppose the use of Standard Arabic.

The history of colonization influenced both ideologies and policies in the Arab countries, and thus the author compares French and British colonization practices and their effect on ideology and policies. Some countries, such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan, Israel, and the Palestinian Territories, as well as the relationship between language policies and ideologies, are discussed in depth. To explain the discussion on the power of language, Bassiouney has to “turn to political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology and history as well as sociolinguistics” (p. 229). She illustrates the status of Arabic and foreign languages in the education system of the countries in the Arab world. Linguistic rights are also discussed. The author defends her claim by giving explanations of how a language can be manipulated to unite or divide people.

The final chapter is a new one for the second edition of the book, presenting an important, critical approach of sociolinguistics in relation to Arabic. In this chapter, in the light of academic data, a variety of constructs that have long been taken for granted by linguists and scholars are challenged, including the binary approach to variation, whether in relation to standards and dialects or to independent and linguistic variables, the native speaker as a reference point and the claim that the “linguist is neutral” as a norm. The Western hegemony of the field of sociolinguistics is at the forefront of the discussion, and here the author warns linguists dealing with the Arabic language to be aware of this, too, by saying that “we need to critically review previous research in order not to fall into the trap of imposing our sociocultural constructed categories on culturally diverse communities” (p. 131). The last chapter offers an outline of some new methods and approaches that need to be considered and adopted in the study of language and society.

The Egypt-centred viewpoint of Bassiouney causes her to make very suspectful assumptions about other nations. For instance, it is claimed by the author that “Tunisia takes this even further, by prohibiting women working in government offices from wearing the veil during work hours. Thus, in countries like Tunisia women have to take off the veil at work, and once outdoors they put it back on” (p. 166). However, the author has no supportive examples to prove that what she indicates is true. If the author edits the misprints, the grammatical and orthographical errors that commonly occur in some pages, the book will be more meticulous.

However, despite the limitations expressed above, the book is readable and well-structured. It undoubtedly catches the attention of those interested in the language situation of the Arab world. Its great strength is its value to researchers interested in studies relevant to the Arab world. The structure of the book makes it convenient for readers to read either the whole book or individual chapters.

The monograph will “help scholars and students begin thinking about how and why matters of language in the Arab world are not always the same as such matters in the west” (p. 7) by all means. For those interested in the Arab situation from a sociolinguistic point of view, this book seems indispensable.

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