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Dubai: Language in the ethnocratic, corporate and mobile city

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1 Introduction

In January 2012, a billboard campaign around Dubai invited viewers to reflect on the urban identity of Dubai. Designed in the style of the “Love is ...” cartoons, the bilingual billboards contained an Arabic slogan beginning with “دبي...” (“Dubai ...”) and an English translation beginning with “Dubai is ...” underneath. One of these slogans (see Figure 1) read:

“دبي... 195 جنسية وفرصة لتحسين مهاراتك اللغوية”

“Dubai is ...195 nationalities to practice your language skills on.”

The slogan was illustrated by two cartoon images: one depicted three women – two Emirati and one Western – sitting in a café, sipping coffee and chatting animatedly over an Apple-branded notebook computer. The other showed another group of three people in some sort of generic interaction: two women, one stylized as East Asian and the other as Indian, with an African man. In the background a taxi is visible, with a smiling white male passenger and a Turkish (or possibly “generic Middle Eastern”) male driver. The slogan and the images present Dubai as multilingual and multicultural cosmopolitan urban space, where people from around the globe happily mingle and interact but are also clearly marked as racially different. In this poster-case of 21st century urban conviviality, linguistic diversity is not a barrier to communication but constitutes an opportunity to learn and practice new languages.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>



The billboard captures one of the preferred images of Dubai that now circulate globally: Dubai as utopia, including as a multilingual and multicultural utopia. The fact that Dubai is a superlative city – including a “superdiverse” city – makes it an ideal case study to interrogate the vision of contemporary cities as sites of heightened linguistic and cultural diversity and resulting multicultural conviviality. In particular, I examine what forms of urban linguistic practices are enabled or disabled by racial anxieties and ethnolinguistic hierarchies on the one hand and the classed ability to consume on the other. To do so, the first part of the chapter (Sections 2-4) provides an overview of Dubai as a non-liberal modern city-state with a neoliberal free-market economy and comprised of a highly mobile and strictly stratified population. The second part of the chapter (Sections 5-7) then hones in on the linguistic tensions and dilemmas that can be observed in the ethnocratic, corporate and mobile city: dilemmas related to various forms of Arabic variously associated with the weight of tradition, economic dominance, transnational media and youth practices; tensions between English, as the language of globalization and modernity, and Arabic, the official national language; and, finally, the complexities of lingua franca use and the use of Dubai’s languages other than Arabic and English. I close by suggesting implications of the sociolinguistics of Dubai for urban sociolinguistics more generally. Drawing on an argument put forward by anthropologists Vora & Koch (2015) that Dubai’s unique status as a city of superlatives does not make it exceptional, I argue that Dubai constitutes an extreme example of the inclusions afforded by celebrations of the linguistically flexible neoliberal urbanite and the exclusions they hide (Piller, 2016).

2 Development and political organization

Dubai is unique among the cities featured in this volume in that it constitutes a relatively autonomous political unit that is not tightly integrated into a nation state. Technically, Dubai is part of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE is a loose federation of seven emirates – Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al-Quwain – of which Dubai is the most populous although Abu Dhabi, which also serves as capital, is the largest and has the most oil. Furthermore, this union was established only relatively recently in 1971. Prior to 1971, Dubai constituted one among a number of small sheikhdoms that were administered by Britain in a semi-colonial relationship and collectively known as Trucial Oman.

Dubai is also unique among the cities featured in this volume in that it has been a city, and particularly a global city, for only a few decades. This transformation from peripheral backwater to global city is often described as miraculous. For instance, a book describing Dubai as “the world’s fastest city” (Krane, 2009, np) starts like a fairy tale:

This is the story of a small Arab village that grew into a big city. It was a mud village on the seaside, as poor as any in Africa, and it sat in a region where pirates, holy warriors, and dictators held sway over the years. [...] But the village was peaceful, ruled by the same family generation after generation.

The quote points to yet another way in which Dubai is unique among the cities featured here: even today, Dubai is ruled as an absolute monarchy. The current ruler, Sheikh Muhammad, is a member of the Al Maktoum family, who have ruled Dubai since the early 19th century. In fact, the beginning of Dubai is usually dated to 1833, when the Al Maktoum family took power. While archaeological evidence dating back about three millennia exists of human habitation, including activities such as nomadic herding and maritime trade, the corner of the Arabian peninsula where Dubai and the UAE are now located was certainly extremely peripheral until well into the second half of the 20th century. In the 19th century, the British found the area valuable to control access to the Persian Gulf, but not valuable enough to even try to bring it under full imperial control.

While indirect rule through a local strongman was not an uncommon arrangement in the British Empire, the way Dubai gained independence was unique yet again. When the British Empire had been swept away in a wave of nationalist anti-colonial movements across the world, Britain decided to retreat from all its military bases east of Suez of its own accord.

However, the rulers of Abu Dhabi and Dubai pleaded with Britain to stay and to continue to “protect” them. Although Britain did withdraw, they advised their protégés that they could expect to continue to rule the emirates unchanged as long as they kept a “tribal” structure in place, where the alliance between local elites and Britain would ensure stability (Kanna, 2014).

In sum, unlike most other global cities, Dubai has only recently entered a nation state and the relationships within that nation state are not so much based on national sentiment as they are based on tribal affiliations and family relationships. In this context, political movements that might have integrated Dubai into larger socio-political formations such as the pan-Arab movement of the 1950s and 1960s or some forms of political Islam that highlight the *ummah*, the community of all Muslims, have been perceived as potential threats to the authority of the ruling family and have been kept in close check.

3 Economy

Instead of seeking political ideological legitimacy, the ruling family pursued economic legitimacy. Guided by a philosophy of economic liberalism that encouraged entrepreneurial activity, Dubai transformed itself from a small village of around 1,000 inhabitants in the first half of the 19th century into a hub for pearl diving and Indian Ocean trading by the early 20th century. 1902 constituted a major milestone in the development of Dubai: that year, Iran imposed high tariffs on merchants operating from its ports. As a result, major merchant enterprises diverted their activities from the Iranian side of the Persian Gulf to the Arabian side and particularly Dubai, which became an important Indian Ocean port as a result (Pacione, 2005).

The discovery of oil in 1966 constituted another turning point in the fortunes of Dubai. The new oil wealth was used to finance numerous industrial and infrastructure projects, including the expansion of the port. While petrodollars constituted an incredible shot in the arm for Dubai’s economy, Dubai’s leaders began to prepare for the post-oil economy relatively early. Dubai’s oil extraction peaked in 1991 and today Dubai, in contrast to neighbouring Abu Dhabi, no longer has oil reserves of its own. Economic diversification has relied on Dubai’s established role as an entrepôt and transshipment hub. Supplying Iran with consumer goods and equipment during the Iran-Iraq war and through various forms of economic sanctions since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 has been particularly profitable to individual traders and Dubai’s economy as a whole (Pacione, 2005). More recently, Dubai

has also emerged as a hub for Chinese ventures in Africa ("Growing Up: The Gulf State's Expansion Is More Sustainable Than Its Previous Boom," 2015).

In addition to serving as a trading and transport hub, tourism and real estate are today central to Dubai's economy. Mega construction projects including artificial islands and the world's tallest tower undergird both the property and tourism booms and attract capital from around the globe with the lure of tax-free profit in a politically stable and safe environment.

Despite the rhetoric of a free-market economy, Dubai constitutes in fact an example of a highly-planned top-down economic model, where all kinds of business activities are integrated and undergirded by the political dominance of the ruling family. Political scientist Abdul Khaleq Abdulla has described Dubai's economic-political model as "*al madina al sharika*", "the city-corporation" (cited in Kanna, 2010). Indeed, Sheikh Muhammad, the current ruler, likes to refer to himself as "CEO of Dubai" and often speaks of his efforts to "improve Dubai's customer service" (Smith, 2015, p. 40). The economic model of Dubai, where the city is essentially a family-owned corporation, has, according to Abdulla, benefitted three specific groups (cited in Kanna, 2014): first, the ruling family, who own almost all land in Dubai and thus derive associated profits, such as those from oil-extraction; second, a non-royal "local comprador bourgeoisie", who hold a monopoly over the financial and commercial sectors; and, third, "foreign managers and experts", particularly Britons, Americans and Western Europeans.

4 Social composition

If three strata can be identified within Dubai's elite – the ruling family, local merchant houses, and (predominantly Western) managers and experts – who constitutes the rest of the population? For various reasons, the exact population figure for Dubai is not known but estimates for 2014 converge at a resident population of around 2.5 million in Dubai proper and around 5 million in the metropolitan area, which also includes the neighbouring emirates of Sharjah and Ajman (Adomaitis, 2014). It should be obvious that a village of around 1,000 inhabitants in 1833 could not have grown to such a size by natural population increases alone. In fact, it is yet another unique feature of Dubai that it is the city with the highest percentage of migrants in the population globally. Again, statistics differ somewhat but UN estimates put the number of migrants in the UAE at around 85% of the population in 2015 ("United Arab Emirates," 2016). This means that the local Emirati population constitutes a minority of around 15%, and less than 10% in Dubai (Adomaitis, 2014; "United Arab Emirates," 2016).

The difference between locals and migrants is clearly enshrined in law: the former have full citizenship rights, while the latter's residency status is always temporary and contingent on their employment. I will now outline the demographics of these two clearly distinct groups of Dubayyans.

Emiratis are often seen as a highly homogeneous group by non-Emiratis. Sartorial choice is a key marker that identifies Emiratis in public and sets them apart from migrant groups in public spaces: men wear a *kandoura*, a long white dress, and women an *abaya*, a long black dress, both with associated gender-specific head covers. Relative uniformity of dress code gives rise to the perception of a high level of homogeneity in the local population, as is best evidenced through popular Dubai souvenirs such as a set of salt and pepper shakers in the form of an Emirati couple with the male figurine dispensing salt and the female pepper. Despite the appearance of homogeneity, at least three distinct groups¹ can be identified within the local population (Kanna, 2010): first, the most elite groups consider themselves “pure” Arabs and can trace their lineage to the Arabian peninsula, particularly the Bani Yas tribe, to which both the ruling Al Maktoum family belong as well as the ruling family of Abu Dhabi, the Al Nahyan. The second group is constituted by the Ayam, who trace their lineage to Iran. While excluded from the political top stratum, many of the most powerful trading houses belong to Ayam families. The third, and most numerous, group of Emiratis is constituted by the descendants of naturalized Iranians and Arabs from outside the Peninsula.

Unlike the (“pure,” Gulf) Arabs and the Ayam, this group is not considered to have “pedigree,” [...] this means that they cannot marry either Arabs or Iranians, and, [...] are regarded as a “second class” by Emiratis more invested in the pedigree system. (Kanna, 2010, p. 105)

This small group of highly internally stratified “locals” sits on top of a large group of migrants in an organizational structure that has been described as “ethnocratic” (Longva, 2005): oil wealth has not changed the internal ethnic and class structure but has simply meant that all locals have collectively been “promoted” and have now a large ethno-class of migrants beneath them.

The largest group of migrants hail from South Asia, and South Asians account for around 50% of the overall population of Dubai. 2015 statistics identified 25% of the population of the Dubai metropolitan area as Indian nationals, 12% as Pakistani, 7% as Bangladeshi and 3% each as Nepali and Sri Lankan. Iranians and non-Gulf Arabs account for

a further quarter of the population. With Emiratis around 10%, the remaining 15% of the population come from East Asia, Europe and elsewhere, with Filipinos (5%) and Chinese (2%) as further sizable national origin groups ("Indians, Pakistanis Make up 37% of Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman Population," 2015; "United Arab Emirates," 2016).

Different origin groups are relatively segregated by residence and occupation. Many neighbourhoods of the city are stereotypically associated with a particular group, such as historic Al Bastakiya with Iranians or exclusive Jumeirah with Westerners, as in the stereotype of "Jumeirah Jane", the newly-rich trailing wife of a British manager (Garratt, 2015). While neighbourhoods are, in fact, much more ethnically diverse than the stereotypes suggest, there can be no doubt that Dubai is segregated by income. This is a kind of segregation that does not need to be enforced but works through consumer self-segregation, as the manager of an upmarket mall explained to anthropologist Ahmed Kanna (2014, p. 614):

[Kanna]: So even with my beat up Honda Civic I can drive up to the valet section without problems?

Project Manager: You can. But you're probably not likely to and that's the point. You cannot label an area exclusive. You can only make it harder for the people you don't want to be there. People who have nothing to do there. If I'm driving a Honda Civic, I would go to (that part of the mall) and see an Armani shop and realize that there's no way that I can afford anything there, so what am I doing there in the first place?

While the stratification of city spaces by purchasing power is nothing unusual, this stratification translates more visibly into ethnic stratification in Dubai than in many other places. To begin with, Dubai's most well-known exploited group, its construction workers, are almost exclusively from South Asia. These men often live in large labour camps, such as the one in Muhaisnah, better known by its Hindi name of Sonapur ("City of Gold"), which houses around 150,000 workers.² Second, even white collar and middle class workers are remunerated differentially according to country of origin: among migrants, whites can expect to be significantly better paid for the same job than non-whites, and whites are more likely to be hired into senior positions than similarly qualified non-whites. Furthermore, whites tend to receive free housing as part of their remuneration packages while non-whites usually have to

pay for housing out of their salaries (Vora, 2008). Racial segregation is an inevitable by-product of these racist employment practices.

What all migrants irrespective of country of origin and occupation have in common is that their visas are strictly temporary and linked to employment sponsorship in a system known as *kafala* (“sponsorship”). There is no legal residency option for adult male migrants other than as guest-worker. Male guest-workers may sponsor their wives and children if they meet income thresholds. All migrants have to leave the UAE if they lose their job or once they reach retirement age. There is no path to citizenship even for the children of migrants. Male children have to obtain a job – and an associated sponsor – of their own when they turn 18 or graduate from college; female children can be sponsored by their father until they marry. As a result of these legal arrangements, the population of Dubai is one of the most transient populations on earth: statistics from 2000 show that the average length of residency for 40.3% of the male adult population was between one and four years; another 26.5% resided in Dubai for five to nine years, and only 3.9% of the male adult population had resided in Dubai since birth (Pacione, 2005, p. 262).

It is against the socio-political, economic and demographic background outlined so far that the sociolinguistics of Dubai, to which I will now turn, must be understood. The ethnocentric organisation of Dubai is, in fact, reproduced in linguistic and other academic research, which tends to focus on language issues of Emirati citizens and tends to ignore Dubai’s “other” residents. My review of the sociolinguistics of Dubai will therefore also start from the perspective of Emirati citizens, who are politically, economically and socially dominant but constitute a numerical minority. By contrast, my review of sociolinguistic research related to the migrant population will predominantly identify gaps and blind spots.

5 Arabic dilemmas

Country overviews of the UAE usually include the simple statement “Arabic is the official language of the UAE”. However, proficiency in Arabic is, by and large, restricted to Emiratis and Arab migrants; the vast majority of non-Arab migrants rarely have the opportunity nor incentive to learn Arabic in Dubai. Furthermore, amongst the Emirati population a situation of rapid language shift away from Arabic can be observed in the younger generation. Apart from the fact, that only a small minority of Dubai residents are proficient in Arabic, the statement “Arabic is the official language” is complicated in at least three different ways: first, by the heterogeneity of Arabic and the fact that Emirati Arabic is an extremely

peripheral variety (this section); second, by the competition from English, which could be considered the de facto primary public language of Dubai (Section 6); and, third, by the multilingual proficiencies of both Emiratis and migrants, which are rendered relatively invisible by the ideological dominance of Arabic and English (Section 7).

Arabic has been described as “a singularly political and ideological language” (Findlow, 2006, p. 24) and it is no coincidence that the concept of “diglossia” was first described with reference to Arabic (Ferguson, 1959): the literary and written form of the language, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), a simplified and modernized version of Classical Arabic, the language of the Holy Quran, is contrasted with spoken vernacular versions. The vernacular version of Arabic used in Dubai is commonly referred to as Emirati (Arabic) or *Khaleeji* (“Gulf Language”). However, Emirati is not only different from MSA and other vernacular forms of Arabic but also widely considered inferior to other vernacular forms of Arabic (Schulthies, 2015). For example, an Arab from the Levant who lectures at a UAE university, once tried to explain *Khaleeji* to me as “some sort of broken pidgin language.” By this he did not mean Gulf Pidgin Arabic, a link language sometimes used between migrants from different linguistic backgrounds or between non-Arab migrants and Arab locals (Bakir, 2010; Smart, 1990). Rather, the description is evidence of a widespread perception on the part of Arabic speakers – both from within and from outside the UAE – that Emirati Arabic is a form of “bad” language, that it incorporates too many Persian, Baluchi and Urdu elements, and that its speakers sound backward, ignorant and uncouth. In the late 2000s, media reports even blamed skyrocketing divorce rates in the UAE on the supposed deficiencies of Gulf Arabic: it was said that women were repelled by their husbands’ “unromantic” Emirati accents and dreamt of being wooed in the “flowery” and “romantic” Arabic of the Levant (Piller, 2011, p. 117).

The prestige of Egyptian and Levantine Arabic and the associated lack of prestige of Gulf (and North African) Arabic is undergirded by the weight of tradition. In fact, in the past, speakers of prestige varieties might not have understood speakers of non-prestige varieties. However, the current economic dominance of the Arabian peninsula and particularly the fact that Dubai (and Doha) are also emerging as important Arabic media and entertainment centres (alongside established Beirut and Cairo) is increasing the familiarity of Emirati Arabic across the Arabic-speaking world and possibly also enhancing its prestige (Nashef, 2013; Schulthies, 2015).

As a result of these language attitudes, language policies aimed at the promotion of Arabic (see also Section 6) usually do not actually target the home language of Emirati students but MSA (Cook, 2016). The tensions that the differentially valued varieties of Arabic may give rise to is poignantly illustrated in a case study of the linguistic choices and dilemmas faced by one young Emirati woman (O'Neill, in press): the daughter of a Moroccan mother and an Emirati father, Shaikha experienced linguistic denigration from a young age when her father would chide her and her sibling for speaking Moroccan Arabic. When she married into a Palestinian family, her in-laws expected her to speak Palestinian Arabic and, in particular, to raise her two sons as speakers of Palestinian Arabic. Shaikha's experiences with different varieties of Arabic in the family must be understood against the fact that intermarriage between Emiratis and non-Emiratis is widely considered problematic, particularly if it involves an Emirati woman (al Hashemi, 2012). Shaikha today feels that, for her, the most comfortable way to use Arabic is to apply "a mirroring technique." "Mirroring" involves adjusting to the variety spoken by her interlocutor; the result is a vernacular Arabic that bears few traces of the origin of the speaker.

In addition to the complexities of oral variety choice, tensions also emerge over which alphabet to use in writing. In the linguistic landscape of Dubai – as elsewhere in the Arab world – the transliterated use of English words in Arabic script and Arabic words in Latin script is extremely common. As regards, the use of English words or expressions in Arabic script, the practice is particularly common in brand names (see Piller, 2010, for examples). Additionally, it is not uncommon to find complete expressions transliterated (instead of translated). For instance, in 2013 the escalators in Dubai Mall, Dubai's most glamorous mall adjacent to Burj Khalifa, featured huge signs advertising for "Spicy Tennessee Chicken and Shrimp" in one of the mall's eateries.³ The sign was spelt entirely in Arabic letters but featured precisely these English words:

Sign: سبایسی تینیسی تشیکن آند شرمب

Back-transliteration: sbāysi tinisi tšikn 'ānd šrmb⁴

Transliterations such as these were considered incomprehensible and even offensive by 97% of Saudi respondents in a 2006 survey (Al Agha, 2006). While it is reasonable to assume that Emiratis, who are much more likely to be bilingual than Saudis, have higher comprehension rates of English transliterations, the practice periodically stirs controversy in the UAE, too. However, Arabic transliterations of English expressions cause significantly less controversy

than the opposite practice, the use of Arabic in Latin transliteration. The use of Latin transliterations of Arabic has long been a prominent feature of the linguistic landscape of the Arabic-writing world (as in other contexts where non-Latin scripts are used) through the use of Latin transliterations on informational road signs, as stipulated by Article 14 of the international convention on road sign use ("Vienna Convention on Road Signs and Signals," 1968):

The inscription of words on informative signs [...] in countries not using the Latin alphabet shall be both in the national language and in the form of a transliteration into the Latin alphabet reproducing as closely as possible the pronunciation in the national language.

For example, Figure 2 shows signage on Sheikh Zayed Road, Dubai's main thoroughfare: Directions to Jebel Ali, Abu Dhabi and Jumeirah are provided in the Arabic script and a Latin transliteration. Directions to developments known under different names in English and Arabic ("Dubai Pearl" and "The Palm Jumeirah" in English) are given in Arabic and English; as is true for Arabic "مخرج" and English "exit".

<INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE>



While the existence of Latinized Arabic is thus not new, the spread of computer-mediated communication has significantly increased the use of Latinized Arabic and secured an entrenched position for Latinized Arabic. In fact, computer-mediated communication has resulted in the development of written Latinized varieties of the language as opposed to those

using the Arabic alphabet. In the UAE, the practice of texting and chatting in Latin-transliterated Arabic is commonly referred to as “Arabizi” or “Arabish” – portmanteaus of the Arabic and English terms respectively for “Arabic” and “English.” Derived from an original ASCII-constraint, Arabizi is now widely used in computer-mediated communication, even on devices that are today likely to be Arabic-script enabled. In the UAE, which has one of the highest smartphone penetration rates in the world (“Smartphone Usage Rockets across Middle East and Africa,” 2015), Arabizi is immensely popular, particularly among the younger generation (Palfreyman & Khalil, 2003; Yaghan, 2008). No longer restricted to computer-mediated communication, Arabizi is now also used by young people in offline contexts, including as a way to cheat on tests: they have discovered that their teachers are oftentimes unable to read Arabizi irrespective of whether they know Arabic or not (Palfreyman & Khalil, 2003).

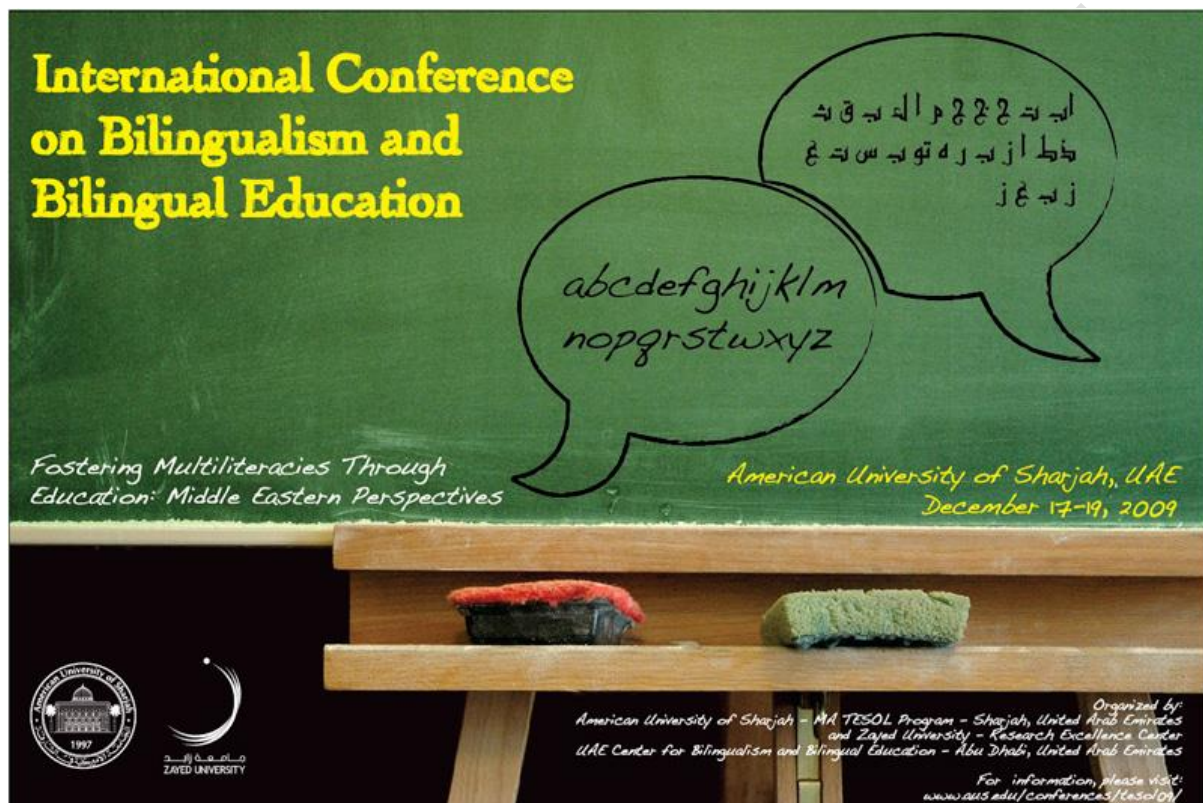
The use of Arabizi is clearly spreading and younger generations seem to relish the use of Arabizi. Additionally, Arabizi is inspiring a burgeoning bilingual art and design scene. For instance, the director of the Sharjah-based Fikra design studio (<http://www.fikradesigns.com/>), which specializes in Arabic-English bilingual graphic design, explicitly credits Arabizi as the inspiration for his work (Alya, 2012). However, just as with vernacular Emirati Arabic, Arabizi constitutes a site of significant language anxiety. If not blamed outright for destroying Arabic (Ghanem, 2011), attitudes are certainly ambivalent and the media regularly report on Arabizi as a source of errors in Arabic or worry how it will create an obstacle to achieving proficiency in Arabic for the younger generation (Leech, 2013). The language panic over Arabizi must be understood against much broader debates about the role of English in Dubai.

6 English entanglements

In 2009, in my then-role as Director of the UAE Center for Bilingualism and Bilingual Education at Zayed University (ZU), I co-chaired a conference on the theme of “Fostering multiliteracies through education: Middle Eastern Perspectives” at the American University of Sharjah (AUS). The organizing committee, which included faculty from both AUS and ZU was constituted exclusively by migrants from “the West” (such as myself) or from other Arab countries. We invited two keynote speakers from the USA, Suresh Canagarajah and Nancy Hornberger, who are well-known for their expertise in TESOL and bilingual education respectively but have no background in Arabic. All internal and external preparatory communication for the conference as well as the conference itself was conducted almost

entirely in English. The minuscule presence of Arabic was restricted to symbolic roles, such as on the conference poster, where the imagery included the Arabic and Latin alphabets juxtaposed to each other. The logos of the two organizing institutions also include their names in Arabic but took up only a very small space in the bottom-left corner of the poster (see Figure 3).

<INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE>



Organizing and conducting a conference devoted to multilingualism in an Arab country but running it entirely through the medium of English may seem a rather bigoted thing to do. However, given the institutional context in which the conference took place, English was the default option. Both of the organizing universities, AUS, a private institution, and ZU, a public institution, have English as their medium of instruction. Almost all students at ZU are Emirati citizens while the student body at AUS is more diverse and includes the children of migrants, who have grown up in the UAE and students from other gulf countries and beyond. In both institutions, the overwhelming majority of faculty members are migrants, particularly from the west and other Arab countries. As a matter of fact, no institute of higher education in the UAE has Arabic as its medium of instruction although some subjects such as Arabic or Islamic Studies may be taught through the medium of Arabic.

The situation in the K-12 system is more complex but also favouring English: Arabic is used as medium of instruction in most public schools, which are only open to Emirati nationals. However, the use of English in public schools is increasing, as evidenced through the ever earlier introduction of English instruction and the popularity of content and language integrated learning, where selected content areas are taught through the medium of English. Furthermore, the majority of private schools use English only as their medium of instruction. All non-national students attend private schools and 40-50% of the Emirati population also attend private schools. The maths is clear: the education system is obviously steering the UAE's young towards English. Furthermore, there is a trend to start English education ever earlier with a boom in English-medium nurseries and preschools. These language-in-education policies create a clear “linguistic dualism”, where Arabic is associated with the private, with childhood and Islam while English is associated with the public, with adulthood and with modern scientific and technical knowledge (Findlow, 2006).

Despite the association of English with the public and Arabic with the private, the favouring of English in education means that children increasingly develop an English-dominant linguistic habitus and English is becoming the language of the home, too (O'Neill, 2014). A young Emirati woman described the process of language shift as follows:

I don't know... it wasn't planned... it was just a natural move towards English, when I started reading books in English...in fifth or sixth grade.
(Quoted in O'Neill, 2014, p. 14)

The increasing preference for English among the younger generation of Emiratis is causing considerable angst and is at the heart of a language panic about the loss of Arabic (see also Section 5). Limited proficiency in Arabic among Emirati youths is now commonly referred to as “a new disability” (Salem, 2013) and policies that would strengthened the role of Arabic in education are regularly discussed and passed, even if not necessarily implemented (e.g., Salem, 2014). Despite the public framing of the relationship between Arabic and English as one of conflict, multilingualism and linguistic heterogeneity are not new in Dubai but constitute a preferred means to express a specific Dubayyan identity, as Kanna (2010) observes, when he notes that young Emirati Dubayyans are typically proficient in Arabic, English and Persian. English may fast become the preferred language of Dubai but it is clearly not a monolingual English but one entangled with other languages in complex ways.

7 Dubai's other languages

The sociolinguistic account of Dubai I have provided so far has focussed on the linguistic dilemmas faced by Emirati nationals – around 10% of the population (Section 4). This is a reflection of existing sociolinguistic scholarship which helps to reinforce the official account of Dubai as Emirati while neglecting the linguistic practices of Dubai's non-citizen population. I will now shift focus to review what we know about the language practices and ideologies of Dubai's mobile residents. I will address lingua franca use and the public role of languages other than Arabic and English.

In his classic study of Dubai and other Gulf sheikhdoms in the 1950s, Peter Lienhardt described typical interactions between Baluchi immigrants and their customers as follows:

Baluchi water carriers, poor immigrants who could not understand Arabic and so were treated more or less like imbeciles by their customers, sold water from door to door, carrying it in paraffin tins loaded in panniers on the backs of donkeys. (Al-Shahi, 2001, p. 124)

Some sixty years later, I observed a similar interaction in a department store in Ajman (a smaller and poorer emirate within the Dubai metropolitan area): an older Arab woman, clearly a rural visitor to the city, was trying to return a purchase. Unable to communicate in English, she was waved away by the Filipina sales assistant, “treated more or less like an imbecile”.

In the same way that the statement “Arabic is the official language of the UAE” hides more than it reveals, the statement “English is the lingua franca of Dubai” equally conceals as much as it reveals. While a number of descriptive linguistic studies of features of English as a lingua franca in the UAE exist (e.g., Boyle, 2011), there is a lack of research that investigates actual lingua franca use in interaction. However, anthropological and sociological studies with a non-linguistic focus often present incidental evidence that suggests that interactions across ethno-linguistic boundaries are problematic (as in the examples above) and, overall, relatively fleeting. Ethnographic research with British expatriates, for instance, notes that these migrants almost exclusively socialize amongst themselves or with other Westerners (Walsh, 2006, 2007). Furthermore, learning Arabic or another local language is not even contemplated by British residents:

Differences in religion and language have discouraged and still discourage cross-cultural socialising. Language was a far greater hurdle in the past – now many Emirati nationals speak fluent English. (Coles & Walsh, 2010, p. 1330)

The remark suggests that the idea that British expatriates might learn Arabic or that there might be opportunities for cross-cultural socialising with groups other than Emirati nationals has occurred neither to the informants in this research nor to the researchers themselves, two British geographers.

While non-English-speaking migrant groups might be more open to language learning in order to be able to interact across ethno-linguistic boundaries, such interactions are unusual for the largest group of Dubai residents, too. Indian nationals feel that Dubai's racial hierarchies largely preclude socializing across ethno-linguistic boundaries and particularly outside the broad group of South Asians (Vora, 2013). Vora (2013) observes that even Indian children, who were born and grew up in Dubai, rarely had any experience of cross-cultural communication until they entered the workplace or university because their schooling had been exclusively in segregated Indian schools. Long-term Indian residents felt that cross-cultural interactions had become rarer and more fraught since the 1990s when Westerners started to arrive in sizable numbers. They felt the latter, who Indians referred to as *goras* ("fair-skinned, white" in Hindi), had upset an established prior ethno-linguistic balance:

Middle-class Indians felt that Emiratis favored them because of cultural similarities, trusted their work ethic, and treated them with respect because of connections with South Asia. But, my informants also felt that the special relationship Indians had with Emiratis was deteriorating. They often told me that many Emiratis have been "corrupted" by Western culture and therefore were mimicking the racist attitudes that whites (and sometimes other non-Gulf Arabs) had against Indians. (Vora, 2008, p. 385)

That established regional intercultural relationships may more recently have become overlaid with global racial hierarchies can also be deduced from an early study of the intercultural relationship between South Asians and Arabs (Ahmed, 1984). In addition to finding that Urdu was widely used as a lingua franca in Dubai at the time of the research in the early 1980s, this study also highlights the important role of class in mediating cross-cultural encounters. For South Asian labourers, who, then as now, constitute the largest group of Dubai residents, the solidarity and support of others in their situation is vital; in a situation

where even a minor misfortune can quickly spiral into a life-threatening emergency, trust seems best achieved among people with pre-existing relationships and solidarities. In the 1980s, it was rural and tribal solidarities between people from the same village or tribe that sustained labourers from Baluchistan and Punjab in their “desperately lonely” lives in the UAE (Ahmed, 1984). Shared backgrounds continue to be important for solidarity networks. For workers who may not have access to established solidarity networks, sharing the same language background, sometimes along with having the same gender and nationality, is assumed to constitute the most likely route to support (Kathiravelu, 2012). In exploring care networks in Dubai, Kathiravelu (2012) recounts a number of incidences where migrant workers helped other migrant workers in distress by guiding them to a co-national. A South Indian man, for instance, encountered a Sri Lankan maid, who had run away from her abusive employer, in a park. Without a common language, he was unable to identify the exact nature of her woes but helped her find another woman from Sri Lanka in the assumption that she would be able to provide support.

The existence of language-specific solidarity networks remains relatively hidden in the public space and form outsiders to a particular linguistic group. However, there is one domain where Dubai’s other languages have a strong presence in the public linguistic landscape and that is in the ubiquitous retail outlets of global money transfer service providers. Money transfer business in Dubai always seem to be doing a brisk business and on Fridays long queues can often be observed as migrants use their weekly day off to send remittances back home. There, a significant proportion of the gross domestic product of places such as the Southern Indian states of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh or Tamil Nadu comes from remittances from workers in Dubai and elsewhere in the gulf. In contrast to other businesses whose commercial signage is mostly mono- or bilingual (in English, Arabic, or another language if it is a specific ethnic business), money exchanges advertise their services in many different languages. For example, a flier advertising for a remittance service that comes with simultaneous life insurance is printed in seven languages: English, Hindi, Bangla, Urdu, Telugu, Malayalam and Tamil.⁵

The prominent presence of migrant languages in money transfer services perhaps most tellingly and poignantly captures their role in Dubai: they serve to sustain a monetized relationship that links migrants back to their places of origin. A Dubayyan from India summed up the dialectical relationship between Dubai and places of origin in a research interview as follows: “Kerala is very much Dubai and Dubai is very much Kerala” (quoted in

Vora, 2008, p. 389). In these schizophrenic transnational circuits where migrants have a purely economic identity in Dubai and sustain community and family relationships elsewhere, Dubai's other languages provide a link to community and family while English and Arabic provide a link to migratory economic livelihoods.

8 Unique but not exceptional: implications for sociolinguistics

The billboard introducing this case study suggests that “195” nationalities meet on an equal footing in Dubai and that intercultural interactions are commonplace; even more than that, these intercultural interactions are pleasurable and enjoyable. In this case study, I have shown that the reality of multilingual and intercultural communication in Dubai is much more complicated. Dubai is a city of superlatives and unique in many ways. However, unique does not mean exceptional (Vora & Koch, 2015). The billboard vision of the contemporary global city as a multilingual and intercultural space where diverse individuals mingle in everyday conviviality is a vision that is widely shared. The complexities hidden behind the multilingual and intercultural *mise en scène* are equally characteristic of social and linguistic city life elsewhere. I will close this case study of Dubai by suggesting three implications for urban sociolinguistics more generally.

First, Dubai is hierarchically organized in the extreme. However, it carries its social inequality on its sleeve so to speak. The structures of inequality in similarly affluent cities tend to be less obvious. To examine how linguistic diversity serves to constitute social inequality remains a central task of sociolinguistics. Sociolinguists are in no way immune to reproducing normative hierarchies in their work, as is evident from the fact that most linguistic research on Dubai I have been able to draw on is concerned with English and/or the linguistic practices of the dominant population group. The most typical Dubayyan – a male South Asian labourer – is absent not only from the billboard image of Dubai but also from sociolinguistic research.

Second, Dubai is an unabashedly materialistic place. The same is true of most cities in the world where neoliberal market ideologies have elevated economic concerns above all else. The linguistic habitus of the flexible entrepreneurial urbanite often sits uneasily with practices and ideologies that sustain themselves from other ideological sources, such as, in Dubai's case, Emirati nationalism, pan-Arabism or Islam. Sociolinguistics can help to illuminate how these ideological tensions produce and reproduce belonging and affiliation but also exclusion and disaffection. As the growing chasm in cities everywhere between the

haves and the have-nots is widely misrecognized as a clash of cultures, this is a task of some urgency.

Third, Dubai is extremely diverse. However, this “super-diversity” rarely translates into strong networks across ethnolinguistic boundaries. Instead, “parallel social lives involving public tolerance, yet little meaningful interaction, are the norm” (Coles & Walsh, 2010, p. 1322). Yet multilingual and intercultural interactions do take place in the workplace, in malls or in housing complexes. Many of these interactions may indeed be superficial and fleeting; what makes them “meaningful” from a sociolinguistic perspective is not so much how sustained they are but whether they reinforce or challenge existing linguistic and cultural stereotypes and hierarchies. Therefore, urban sociolinguistics will have to continue to be based in institutional ethnographies to understand language in the hierarchical, commodified and mobile spaces that make up the city.

Notes

¹ There is a fourth group of locals, the stateless Bidoun, who do not enjoy citizenship rights. Bidoun are the descendants of nomads. Their total number in the UAE is estimated to be around 100,000 (Cella, 2014). While typically assumed to be rural, Elsheshtawy (2013) describes being harassed by Bidoun youths during fieldwork in Hor Al Anz, a disadvantaged Dubai neighbourhood mostly populated by working class men from South Asia.

² For a harrowing glimpse into life in Sonapur, view online photo exhibition by Farhad Berahman at <http://www.berahman.com/#/projects/aec7060e37a2ae8da9080ed48f4e75c7?i=595>.

³ An image is available at <http://www.languageonthemove.com/linguistic-theory-in-dubai/>.

⁴ Transliteration according to the Wehr (1976) system.

⁵ An image is available at [TBA].

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