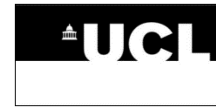

Working Papers in

Urban Language & Literacies

Paper 313

Jerusalem and the limits and affordances of sociolinguistics

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2023

Jerusalem and the limits and affordances of sociolinguistics

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Abstract [1]

The 2018 Israeli Nationality Law defined Israel as a state for Jewish people. What are the implications of this for Jerusalem and its population of roughly 500,000 Jews and 300,000 Palestinian Arabs, and more particularly, what are the sociopolitical implications for the daily life of the Arabic language in the city? Questions like these underpin my research, and in this talk, I reflect on the extent to which traditional sociolinguistics can answer them. I begin with a discussion of shortcomings in established sociolinguistic approaches to intractable national conflicts such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and then move to issues of positionality. After that, I turn to my own methodology, which I discuss in terms of approach, theory, method and analytic frameworks & features of communication in focus, reflecting on my education at Georgetown and illustrating the account with empirical vignettes from ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in the city since Fall 2019. Overall, the paper highlights top-down Israeli policies in Jerusalem alongside bottom-up negotiation/resistance

To talk about difficulties in fieldwork is difficult! I want to start with a little introduction to sociolinguistics and Arabic sociolinguistics in its current state, and then elaborate on questions of positionality. After that, I will turn to my own work which I will discuss in terms of approach, theory, method, analytic frameworks and empirical focus.

1. Sociolinguistics and Arabic sociolinguistics

It has been noted by Jan Blommaert, Dick Smakman and others that the production of sociolinguistics research has been done primarily in the universities of the North (see for example (Blommaert 2020; Smakman 2015).

Many of the most recent books and handbooks on Arabic linguistics and Arabic sociolinguistics published with leading academic presses align with this methodological tradition in the North, and I am quoting one of the most recent book:

> "There has been a surge in recent years in studies that purport to cover 'Arabic sociolinguistics'. In fact, there is almost an obsession among a wide portion of the scholarly community that views virtually every study of Arabic to be sociolinguistic, because of the 'diglossic' nature of most speech communities who use the language. The handful of studies

[1] This is a version of the talk delivered at the University of Westminster Linguistics Research Seminar in London on 12 April 2023. I would like to thank the organizers and colleagues at the University, Petros Karatsareas, Rebecca Metzer and Louise Sylvester, as well as three of my former professors for joining the event, Colleen Cotter, Shalom Lappin and Roger Shuy. I would also like to thank Muzna Awayed-Bishara, Russell Lucas, Michael O'Rourke and Ben Rampton.

presented above make use of principles and methods of ‘general sociolinguistics’, the field of study that attempts to unearth what drives variation (and potential subsequent change) in language both across and within speech communities. It is accepted, and indeed repeatedly proven, that a full account of language variation and change must consider both linguistic and social factors as possible predictors of these phenomena” (Horesh 2021:194-5; see also Al-Wer et al., 2022).

Another book that carries the title *Arabic Sociolinguistics* is broader:

> “In studying language in society and the ways in which linguistic resources and access to them are unequally distributed, sociolinguists give evidence of how patterns of linguistic variation reflect and contrast social differences. In studying responses that language users have to instances of language use, they demonstrate the reality and power of affective, cognitive and behavioral language attitudes. In analyzing how language users create links between language varieties and users, institutions or contexts, they uncover language ideologies that create social realities. These are only some of the things that sociolinguists are concerned with. The list is indeed very long” (Bassiouney 2020: 5).

But even though works like these show an impressive depth and breadth, it is hard to do justice either to the empirical complexities or to the pressures in this field of study.

The first problem can be called ‘national’ and ‘nationalistic’. *National* in the sense that the object of research generally stops at state boundaries, ignoring that modern Middle East states are creations of only a little bit more than a century. Dialect boundaries transcend and intersect these boundaries and borders, and speech communities may not necessarily view themselves monolithically within the national borders of the state. *Nationalistic* in the sense that Arabic sociolinguistic research in, let us say, a north African country ignores for the most part the research accomplishments of the Levant, and vice versa. Thus, the reader does not get a full picture of the field from reading one textbook. Indeed, I am reminded of Jan Blommart’s characterization of the language situation in Belgium as *superdiverse*, due both to the unpredictability of language use/production resulting from widespread online communication, and to the demographic changes in Europe brought about by immigration from the South. But what about the South itself, and more specifically, what is happening to the Arabic language in countries of the South experiencing massive population shifts and the fall of regimes? Where is the research? Where indeed is the Arabic sociolinguistic research on migrants to Europe done by scholars who know these migrants’ original languages? Not enough, if it is there at all.

Second, it is hard to address the upheaval in Arabic speaking lands directly and sufficiently. If a scholar from or of the Middle East writes critical scholarship, there is a price to pay, with potentially heavy consequences. So, when inequality is touched on in Arabic sociolinguistics, it doesn’t go all the way.[2]

[2] When it comes to academic freedom, the only exception is probably Lebanon, but then again it has other existential issues that can create obstacles to academic work. Lebanon is known for having a freer press and freer academic expression, but as part of the global South, it still suffers marginalization in citations and ranking internationally (see Abi-Mershed 2009).

In fact one of these books notes that in sociolinguistics generally, the assumption that researchers are neutral and objective is itself a problem, and many sides to the real issue of positionality become clear if, in that spirit, I disclose that I am a Palestinian.

2. Positionalities in the conduct of Arabic sociolinguistics

One of the anonymous reviewers for a new book of my own stated that I do not disclose who I am until the end. This speaks to an implicit bias when reading or evaluating scholarship of or from the South which I find unfair – I should not have to disclose who I am unless everyone else does. And indeed after disclosure, I have to self-censor more, for fear of being accused of not being objective.

My positionality also makes it difficult crossing national boundaries, and it is hard to be in a Palestinian and an Israeli space at the same time. While I do research, I am generally visiting at the Hebrew University, and over the past two years there, I have taught seminar courses open to Palestinians and Israeli Jews. But that makes it difficult, physically and metaphorically, to cross the boundary to, let us say, Birzeit University in the West Bank. The Wall is real, but when I stay in Jerusalem, it is very stressful crossing the invisible line between the apartment owned by the university near the prime minister's house and the old city. The walk is barely 20 minutes, but a world apart.

To Palestinians from Jerusalem, I am a Palestinian from the interior, a northerner, an Israeli. To northerners I am from/of Nazareth, and to the Ashkenazi establishment of the Hebrew University – where, by the way, less than 20 faculty out of a 1000 are Palestinian – I am married to a Jewish American. Managing these intersectionalities is never easy.

Within both the racialized neoliberal institutional climate of American academia in general and my own university, I often find myself in the impossible position of being visible and invisible at the same time: visible in terms of whether I am speaking about anything Palestinian or not, but – akin to other non-white groups that fall in between the white/black dichotomy – invisible in being interpellated into positions of powerlessness in my institution because of my identity. I sometimes get exhausted even before I do my research or I start writing. [3]

The marginality of my identity in a Midwestern university which does not have a Middle East program let alone a centre, can allow me some calm and peace of mind, and I also know as a fact that many Palestinians in American academia avoid research on Palestine altogether. The perks of abandoning research or activism in regard to Palestinians are good, but the price is also high. Lila Abu Lughod discusses how aware she is of her privilege as an American academic and a 'halfie' (half Palestinian), as she calls herself. She notes that after she does her research in Egypt, it is from the comforts of her office in New York that she recreates the lives of the women in the village she studies. But I do not have these affordances, as I carry Jerusalem along with me when I am writing from my office in the US.

[3] In this regard, Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar (2015) argue that Palestinian women anthropologists in American academia occupy the lowest position in the hierarchy of knowledge/power. They attribute this oppression in part to what they call the 'compulsory Zionism' of American academia. Their research is based on extensive interviews with anthropologists in the U.S. who study the Middle East.

Palestinians and Palestinian Arabic are one of the most conflictual topics when it comes to research. Long gone are the days when Edward Said's office in Columbia would be vandalized, and when Palestinian academics would be harassed when giving lectures.[4] But Arabic sociolinguistics is historically steeped in British, French, German, Russian and even Finnish Orientalism, and hegemonic exclusion is still there in more subtle ways. For example, in the two recent textbooks on Arabic sociolinguistics I mentioned earlier, the discussion of Palestinian Arabic in the first does not mention a single Palestinian sociolinguist – it only cites an Israeli and an American. The second cites two Palestinians on Palestinian Arabic, one working at an Israeli institution and the other retired from the University of Cambridge. The latter is referenced positively, both for his objectivity and for explaining his relationship to Palestinian Arabic, being a Palestinian himself. But, just keeping the lens on Palestine, what about the rest of the scholars who are cited? The identity of a settler is not disclosed when they are cited, and instead, as an unmarked case, it is assumed that they are neutral. Why isn't their positionality brought into the discussion? Is it only scholars with Palestinian/Arabic names that have to be questioned about objectivity? Sadly, some of these uneven practices are enacted by Middle East scholars themselves, writing in English (see also Suleiman 2010).

But what of my own work in the sociolinguistics of Arabic?

3. My own sociolinguistic research

I mostly lean on my primary sociolinguistic education at Georgetown University in the 1990s with Roger Shuy, one of the founders of the field, Deborah Tannen and the late Deborah Schiffrin. Both Schiffrin and Tannen consider themselves interactional sociolinguists, emphasising the transcript as the object of study but with significant differences. Tannen describes herself as a linguist who uses anthropological methods and Schiffrin used to describe herself as interdisciplinary. I am closer to Schiffrin in my understanding of sociolinguistics. Further, Schiffrin used to tell us that while both look into the relationship between form and function and assumed that there isn't a one-to-one relationship between them, she started from form – from, say, a discourse marker and then moved into exploring its relationship to self and social meaning. Tannen moved from function to form.

But I used to struggle with this, as I thought that neither might be sufficient to address the complex situation in Israel/Palestine. Examining the relation there between form, meaning and self, I needed more. How do you account for the conflict, for matters of life and death? I would have loved to record the equivalent of a Thanksgiving dinner – let us say a Ramadan or an Easter dinner – and analyze it turn by turn. After all, as the Palestinian poet laureate Mahmoud Darwish says: "we are a people who love life whenever we are given a path to life". But it is not that easy. So, while still loyal to the legacy of phenomenology, Erving Goffman, Gregory Bateson, Dell Hymes and many others who influenced the scholarship at Georgetown, I aimed at expanding my tool kit, being truthful to interdisciplinarity. In that spirit, Roger Shuy and Colleen Cotter also taught me always to look for inequalities. That's our job as sociolinguists as I understand it, and it is not a choice if we wish to create meaningful scholarship, with real impact. Ben Rampton and the late Jan Blommaert would agree too.

[4] For example Hisham Sharabi from Georgetown University

So with the Arabic language in a city like Jerusalem as my object of analysis, I will now move to an account of my own sociolinguistic methodology, covering approach, theory, method and analytic frameworks and features of communication in focus. In doing so, I will offer a mixture of vignettes, reflections and comments on particularly problematic or productive issues.

3.1 **Approach:** In my interdisciplinary approach to understanding the relationship between form, meaning and self, I take from history, social science, politics, as well as from ideology, which I know is a big word but can explain how habits/ways of being become naturalized. Perhaps 'a utilitarian undisciplining the discipline' is a better description of my approach.

So for example, 'securitisation' is borrowed from Political Science and International Relations and involves moving outside democratic political procedures, driven by claims and suspicions that particular groups or phenomena present an existential threat, calling for special measures to intensify security (see Buzan et al. 1998: 23). Rampton and Charalambous (2019: 3) argue that sociolinguistics in the global North needs to pay more attention to how everyday life is increasingly permeated by micro-practices of securitisation, but these processes have been major concerns in the South and in Israel in particular for a long time. 'Center and periphery' are also important interdisciplinary concepts, which Edward Said often used when commenting on how the Palestinian position is burdened with many overlapping, intersecting and often contradictory discourses all at once.

I also borrow the concept of 'seamline' from Gil Eyal's (2006) *The Disenchantment of the Orient* to consider the state of Israel's ambivalence about three identity categories: the Israeli Arabs (the term the Israeli state uses to refer to the remainder of the Palestinian communities who stayed in what became Israel in 1948); the Arab Jews or "*Mizrahi* Jews", (Jews who came from Arab countries); and the "infiltrators" (Jews who studied Arabic, and could pass as Arab for intelligence purposes). These three categories fall in the gray area between the boundary of 'us' and 'them' in the nation-state – in fact, in any nation-state. The Arabic term for this is literally 'contact line' or 'khaṭ attamās', and I find it a more accurate description than the seamline, as it presupposes that the gray area is inhabited, not void. I can give three examples to illustrate this.

In May 2022, I taught a seminar at the Hebrew University on Mediterranean women novelists, in which half the class were Jewish women and half were Palestinian women mostly from E. Jerusalem. A student commented to me at the end of the course:

> "The classroom was an escape into a reality that can be, in a city full of borders (both physical and metaphoric). We had this fantastic time together, united by the readings and the discussions they generated. We touched each other's humanity, in ways, that don't happen. But, only in Jerusalem, this third space for us as Jewish and as Palestinian women bonding together can happen. Jerusalem is this remarkable city, like Istanbul for Elif Shafak."

The second example involves Dania Alamy, an East Jerusalem student at the Hebrew University who studied Hebrew in a private institute, one of many which are now frequented by Arab Jerusalemites, before she joined the Hebrew University. Dania is fluent in English and French,

in addition to her native Arabic, and she comes from a line of scholars who have populated the city for many centuries. She narrates her experience of learning Hebrew as follows:

> "My encounter with the Hebrew language was full of difficulty. The learning experience was obligatory and not optional; the obligation stemmed from my need to advance in a country where the main language is Hebrew and not my mother tongue. This feeling of obligation not to use my mother tongue but to learn Hebrew aroused a lot of dislike and anger towards the language itself. My lack of confidence when using the language evoked feelings of embarrassment and a hesitance to use it. *Arabic was a cornerstone in my identity. Using Hebrew for those purposes under non-optional circumstances therefore created an identity crisis*." (20 November 2019; emphasis added)

The third example occurred on 13 November 2019, when tension was in the air in Jerusalem and at the Hebrew University. Israel had launched an attack on Gaza, and a student from E. Jerusalem described her feelings as follows:

> "Today as I went walking in the corridors of the Hebrew University, I felt the stares because of the rockets coming from Gaza and the killing of the HAMAS leader, Nuhad Abu Al-Ata. I feel the stares, baḥiss al-nazarāt. They unsettle me, but Jerusalem is always tense."

3.2 **Theory**: Ways of being and seeing the world, the performative aspect of identity, and how to do things with words. Sense-making in the here-and-now and the archaeology of this. The weapons of the weak, and everyday resistance/accommodation.

I am very interested in how the community organizes experience – what they label, how they label it, naming, as well as the absence of a label or category (Erving Goffman and Dell Hymes come to mind here). These processes can be seen in play in three examples.

First, when I met Nir Hassoun, a journalist who covers Jerusalem for the leftist Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, he told me:

> "Let's start with the name of the city. It is a city that its Arab residents (about 330,000) refuse to call it by its Israeli official name Yirushalayim, or its Arabic translation of Yirushalayim, 'Urshalim'. Rather, to them it is 'Al-Quds'. This is a ridiculous situation."

Another example comes from a meeting with Jamil Salhout, a journalist from E. Jerusalem. The meeting was around the time that the Jerusalem municipality was naming the streets in E. Jerusalem. Many streets did not have names, but some names were changed against the will of the community. Only names of historic Islamic figures, names after the topology of the city, or after flowers were allowed. Salhout says:

> "They [Israelis] say, 'If Salah El-Din (Saladin) deserves a street name in [East] Jerusalem, so does Mordechai Gur', w-qīsi 'alaiha shawāri' ktīri ['and make a parallel from this example to other examples'], and from this one example, make your own conclusion about many other street names" (Mordechai Gur is the Israeli general who entered Old Jerusalem in 1967).

A third example of naming and labeling involves students from E. Jerusalem at the Hebrew University who call themselves Maqdisi – literally of 'Bayt Al-Maqdis', the name by which Muslim historians referred to the city – rather than simply Qudsi (literally 'of Al-Quds'). The reason they give me is that Maqdisi gives historic weight to their presence in the city, thereby distinguishing themselves from West Bankers, Northerners (Palestinians inside the Green Line), and lastly, Gazans.

3.3 **Method:** Ethnographic, thick description, inductive, comparative (juxtaposing), interviews, conversations (sometimes transcribed), site visits (with decisions on what sites to visit – schools, universities, local organizations, museums), the press, archives (demographic data, maps), libraries, bookstores, signage.

But what about recording, which is often an obvious problem. In spite of the trust I build with the community, how are Palestinians in Jerusalem going to agree to be recorded? I have noticed that when I record conversations/interviews, there are things that are not said or avoided. Years ago, I accompanied Israeli Jewish women peace activists to a checkpoint south of Nablus, and when we arrived, they designated me to take a few pictures of the checkpoint interactions. An army officer came and asked me politely to stop taking pictures and I obliged. So if I were to make this event/situation an object of analysis, how was I going to record the interaction between the Jewish military and the Palestinians trying to go through? One practical solution was for me to take notes, thick notes, and more generally in various sites like this, I get aided by taking a student – or even a niece – with me, who would help me take notes. When possible, I also send notes like these to my research participants to verify if this is indeed what they said, what they would like to omit or change, and whether they want me to mention their names or not. Generally and understandably, Jewish participants are more open – the potential consequences are not the same for them.

3.4 **Analytic frameworks and features of communication in focus:** These are not mutually exclusive and can work together, with innovation often emerging in the way that traditional frameworks and foci are addressed in different sites, generating different perspectives.

To give one example of this practice in operation: there is a lot of research on how Palestinian Arabic conversation among Palestinians, both from inside Israel and around Jerusalem, is borrowing from Hebrew, even in text messages. This research draws on interviews, recorded conversations and attitude surveys. But in a forthcoming paper that still holds to the importance of situated interaction emphasised at Georgetown, I and my collaborators show that in the most popular public Facebook page in E. Jerusalem, *AskJerusalem*, Arabic is not mingled at all with any Hebrew, not even when people are discussing Covid regulations that come from the state (Suleiman et al., forthcoming). We could have missed this if we had just stayed with e.g. recorded conversations and had not looked at social media.

The range of overlapping and interacting frameworks and communicative foci that I engage with can be found in my books, and these include, for example, orders of indexicality, code-switching/mixing, direct quotes, narrative structure, and repetition (Suleiman 2011, 2017, 2022). But we can look at some examples of the relevance of Linguistic Landscape analysis, with its

interrelated concepts of ‘chronotope’ and ‘voice’. As Palestinians from E. Jerusalem love to say: “every stone speaks history in this city”.

In Jerusalem itself, I wanted to see Edward Said’s house in Talbiyyeh. I am not sure if I found it, because different friends pointed at different houses, whereas the houses of Martin Buber and Yeshayahu Liebowitz were clearly marked. But other historic houses in Said’s neighborhood are marked, and one of these was a villa with the name ‘Harun Al-Rashid’, after the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad when Baghdad was at its zenith:

The house has a plaque explaining its history in Hebrew, Arabic and English:

The plaque explains in three languages that the house was built in 1926. The Arabic, however, does not mention the name of the original Palestinian owner, whereas Hebrew and English do, and the Hebrew also identifies Israeli politicians who lived in the house, Golda Meir included.

Lastly, Jaffa Gate in the Old City leads to Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Square. The square was never renamed because it is named after an old Islamic figure, the second Rightly Guided Caliph. The sign seems to be the original from before 1967, with Hebrew inscription added on top. I find keeping the name ironic, as Ibn Al-Khattab was the Caliph who brought Jerusalem under Islamic rule (see also Spolsky and Cooper 1991; Suleiman 2013).

4. Conclusion

Referring to canonical work in sociolinguistics, Rampton and Charalambous ask whether

> "urban sociolinguists in the west [can] really continue to treat the 'language of life and death' only as data for studies of sound change and story structure… Or should they also now try to make sense of the fear, precarity and/or silences to which this data may also point?" (2019: 4)

These issues are unavoidable in my research on the Arabic language situation in Jerusalem and what it can tell us about the Palestinians. I look at what is happening on the ground in regard to the 2018 nationality law which stipulates that Israel is the state of the Jews, that Hebrew is the language of the state, and that Jerusalem is its capital. Top-down language policy impact versus bottom-up resistance/accommodation. Institutional erasure and resistance against oblivion.

And oblivion is what I fear the most in regard to us Palestinians. It was the fear of Edward Said as well. Oblivion has many levels and aspects to it, from the persistent destruction of Palestinian archives to the absence, for example, of a Palestinian national library and other important cultural institutions, which I discuss in my most recent book.

On the day of the death of the Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, I was driving through the Jordan Valley from Nazareth to Jerusalem. I was listening to the Palestinian authority's radio with one official after another talking about her death. I was bored with their talk, and then unexpectedly, an elderly Palestinian woman from Jenin refugee camp who knew Abu Akleh spoke. It was metered and clear, spontaneous and from the heart, a most beautiful improvisation, a form of folk expression in Palestinian folklore very close to the *Tahlila*. I could not record it. But who is studying these cultural forms of expression as they are disappearing from Palestinian public domains?

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