Linguistic Dissent on Jordanian Radio: Implicature and Stance as Ambiguous Subversion

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Abstract

This paper examines the mobilisation of linguistic ideologies as a form of dissent from dominant discourses of identity in contemporary Middle Eastern media. As part of my broader doctoral research on non-government Jordanian radio today, it takes a linguistic anthropological perspective focused on the notion of indexicality: the non-referential meanings that are invoked contingently in language use, and thus articulate links to broader social and cultural ideologies, including stereotypes of identity categories such as gender and geographic origins.

I examine two case studies in which speakers problematise and reframe such stereotypes. The first involves the indexical mechanism of implicature, whereby a talk show caller mounts a challenge to dominant discourses of urban linguistic refinement through the ironic use of a ‘sanitised’ pronunciation of a local Jordanian dish (čā’āčīl / ka’ākīl). The second, from a programme in honour of a Jordanian pilot executed by the Islamic State (IS) in Syria, exhibits the performance of an evaluative stance towards Jordanian military activity as a form of patriotic nationalism, through the use of the [g] pronunciation of the sound /q/ (qāf) by a female broadcaster – a usage that defies gendered linguistic norms Jordanian radio, which require female speakers to use the [ʔ] (glottal stop) pronunciation instead.

While these contingent uses of implicature and stance form challenges to certain dominant discourses, they are nevertheless ambiguous in that they draw on

other problematic ideologies, including localist linguistic ‘authenticity’ and patriotic Jordanian nationalism. Thus, while details of language use provide important potential for dissent, this paper also problematises this potential – asking whether (1) subversive linguistic practices always need to draw on other dominant discourses in order to be meaningful, and (2) whether such references necessarily make dissent compromised or illegitimate.

1. Introduction

Can language be a viable weapon for resistance? Sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu have long held that language is a central force in reinforcing structures of power and domination – as it may be used to make these structures look *natural*, for instance by negatively evaluating speech styles of lower-class or stigmatised groups and claiming such styles are reflective of natural characteristics of such groups. [Bourdieu 1991] Conversely, in recent years, linguistic anthropologists have drawn attention to ways in which language can also be used to *resist* such structures. True, words and pronunciations may be linked to structures of power. But such links are not inherent. They may be appropriated by speakers of a language for their own ends, and creatively subvert the structures they refer to. They might mock upper-class speech styles, or problematise naturalised identity stereotypes when one marginalised group uses the speech style of another (e.g. in the use of AAVE by young Korean-Americans). [Chun 2001; Bucholtz + Hall 2005]

In this paper, I draw on data from my ESRC-sponsored doctoral research on the use of Arabic on contemporary non-government radio in Jordan, based

on fieldwork in Amman in 2014-15. My thesis argues that the strategies of language use on Jordanian non-government radio stations produce broader socio-cultural effects, such as delimiting audiences and publics, constructing identity categories, and defining legitimate participation in media discourse. [Fras n.d.] Part of this involves creative reference to identity stereotypes in ways that subvert them. Here I quote two cases of such subversion from the radio programmes I studied. But these cases, as I will demonstrate, are also problematic: it appears that, namely, creative subversion invokes *other* dominant discourses that imply different kinds of exclusive identities and social hierarchies. They thus provide a useful starting point for a discussion on (1) whether linguistic dissent can even occur without reference to some other dominant discourse; and (2) whether, in doing so, it is somehow invalidated as a form of dissent.

2. Some conceptual clarifications

One aim of my research is to demonstrate the relevance of linguistic anthropological concepts for studying language – specifically, Arabic – in the Middle East today. My argument in this paper relies to a great extent on the linguistic anthropological notion of *indexicality*. This deserves some clarification before our case studies of linguistic dissent are examined in detail.

The concept of “index” originates in the semiotic theory of C.S. Peirce. It refers to signs which stand for – that is, they “index” – meanings through *co-occurrence*, rather than reference (as symbols) or through physical resemblance (as icons). [Peirce 1932, p. 143-4, 170-2] Viewing language as

indexical thus entails that words or sounds used in communication invoke various non-referential meanings. For sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, one of the most interesting types of such meanings has been identity: that is, the way a person speaks is believed to classify as a member of certain categories of *race*, *class*, *ethnicity*, *gender*, etc. [Ochs 1992, p. 335-58; Silverstein 2003, p. 216-22]

If these links are articulated habitually, they may accrete into persistent stereotypes – for example, regarding the ‘speech of’ women, or lower-class people, or people belonging to a certain ethnic group. But if activated contingently, there are a number of strategies that can resist this kind of stereotypes. The following excerpts are examples of two such strategies.

3. “Do I say *ka‘ākīl*?”

The first excerpt comes from the 26 November, 2014 episode of *Rainbow*, an afternoon call-in programme on the community radio station Radio al-Balad. *Rainbow* normally features a range of callers, most of them regulars, putting forward their opinions on the topic of the day set by the host, Muhammad al-Irsan. Topics touching on controversial political, economic, and social affairs are the norm. For the 26 November episode, however, al-Irsan chose a lighter tone, and rather asked callers to talk about food and other pastimes they enjoy during Jordan’s cold winters.

For the duration of the episode, al-Irsan was joined in the studio by Roz Naser, a newsreader on Radio al-Balad, as a temporary co-host. al-Irsan and Naser here take a call from Ammar (a pseudonym), a regular caller, hailing from

a town in Irbid Governorate in the north of Jordan. Ammar mentioned a local dish, *ča'āčīl* – a type of egg-and-vegetable dumpling cooked in yoghurt – as something he would traditionally eat in winter. However, he then immediately proceeded to make a joke based on the pronunciation of the dish aimed at al-Irsan:

[RR017]: [29:23-29:40]

<p>A: <i>fa m-el-yowm eṣ-ṣubəḥ bagēt tgūl</i> <i>ča'āčīl</i> ((uh)) <i>ṭle'nā</i> [<i>'ala 'ammān 'a- 'a-</i>]</p> <p>RN: [<i>āāā ča'āčīl hāy</i>] [<i>el-akle</i>]</p> <p>MI: [((laughter))]</p> <p>RN: [<i>el-bedawiyye ya'nī</i>]</p> <p>A: [<i>ā ā na-</i>] ((uh)) <i>stāḡ l-əmḥammad</i></p> <p>MI: <i>ā</i></p> <p>A: <i>ṭla'ət</i> ((uh)) <i>ṭla'ət 'a-r-rābi'a w-'a-l-'abdālī</i> <i>ṣərt tēgūl ka'ākīl</i></p> <p>MI: ((laughter)) <i>anā</i> [((laughter))]</p> <p>RN: [((laughter))]</p> <p>A: [((laughter))]</p> <p>MI: <i>anā agūl ka'ākīl</i> ((laughter))</p>	<p>A: So from this morning you've been saying <i>ča'āčīl</i> ((uh)) If we went up [to Amman, uh –]</p> <p>RN: [Oh, <i>ča'āčīl</i>, this] [dish –]</p> <p>MI: [((laughter))]</p> <p>RN: [Bedouin (dish)]</p> <p>A: [Yes, yes –] ((uh)) Muhammad, sir</p> <p>MI: Yes</p> <p>A: If you go to – ((uh)) if you go to al-Rabiah and Abdali, you start saying <i>ka'ākīl</i></p> <p>MI: ((laughter)) Do I – [((laughter))]</p> <p>RN: [((laughter))]</p> <p>A: [((laughter))]</p> <p>M: Do I say <i>ka'ākīl</i>? ((laughter))</p>
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Ammar mentions two pronunciations of the dish: *ča'āčīl* and *ka'ākīl*. In doing so, he draws an explicit contrast between two variants of the phonological variable (k), [k] and [tʃ]. The velar stop [k] is the Standard Arabic, Ammani, and prestige urban Levantine form, and also the variant habitually used by all radio presenters in Jordan, al-Irsan included. By contrast, the affricate [tʃ] (č) is a colloquial variant marked as both rural Jordanian and Bedouin, but relatively more stigmatised than other Bedouin features (possibly also because of its association with rural Palestinian dialects). [Palva 2008, p. 66] Ammar claims that al-Irsan, although himself also originally from Irbid Governorate in Northern Jordan where the [tʃ] pronunciation is widespread, would use the prestige urban form [k] when pronouncing the name of the dish, calling it *ka'ākīl* – just as people would do, presumably, in al-Rabiah and Abdali, two well-off areas of West Amman.

The humour of this exchange hinges on the fact, obvious to the participants, that pronouncing the name of the dish as *ka'ākīl* is an *exaggeration* of urban refinement. It would involve sanitising the rural pronunciation of (k) in a word that is normally pronounced with [tʃ] by *all* Jordanians, even those of non-rural origins. (This is known as “lexical conditioning” in linguistic terminology. [Abd-el-Jawad + Suleiman 1990, p. 304]) Outsiders may, however, have problems interpreting this humour. To understand the joke, one needs to understand the local salience of the [tʃ] / [k] contrast, and possibly also its import for al-Irsan as a crypto-Irbidi in particular.

Ammar's remarks on *ka'ākīl* therefore functioned through a mechanism that linguistic anthropologists have termed *implicature*: that is, using language to invoke identity affiliation indirectly, in a way that requires additional inference

or specialised knowledge. [Bucholtz + Hall 2005, p. 595] The *ka'ākīl* token thus resisted the hierarchical norm of urban speech for broadcasters by satirically exaggerating al-Irsan's sanitisation of stigmatised forms, spreading it even to a word where the sanitisation would not normally happen; but it only did so for the limited audience familiar with the phonetic details involved.

4. Performing a patriotic stance

My second example of creative on-air indexicality is drawn from the day-long programme *Ṣawṭunā wāḥid* ("Our Voice Is One"), run by a number of Jordanian radio stations on 5 February 2015 in honour of the Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh, who had recently been executed by the Islamic State (IS) in Syria. Each running hour of this programme was co-hosted by two or more broadcasters from different radio stations, in an iconic performance of Jordanian national unity through the unification of radio broadcasts.

In the following example, Radio Hala's Randa Karadsheh and Sameer Masarweh from University of Jordan Radio performed Jordanian patriotism in an especially pointed manner. After mentioning a statement from "a military source" announcing that Jordan's air force had begun air strikes on IS positions in Syria, both Masarweh and Karadsheh launched into an enthusiastic round of praise for the Jordanian army's activities:

[MR012]: [05:00-05:14, 05:17-05:35]

[05:00]	[05:00]
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<p>SM: <i>al-ān aṭ-ṭā'irāt al-urduniyye taqṣif</i> <i>ma'āqil wa-mawāqī' hā'ulā'i l-džirdān fī</i> <i>awdžārihā</i> <i>iḍan šey' yab'aṭ 'ala l-ḥamās</i> <i>yā rētnī ṭayyār</i></p> <p>RK: 'ademnā gāsī yā <i>samīr</i></p> <p>SM: <i>yā rētnī ṭayyār</i> [05:17]</p> <p>RK: <i>iḥna ayḍan ra'eynā ((uh)) maḡmū'a min</i> <i>aṭ-ṭā'irāt el-ḥarbiyya</i> <i>allatī ḥallaqat ((uh)) fawq el-kerak</i> <i>fawq beldeṭ 'ayy</i> <i>li-tuḥayyi ahl aš-šahīd al-kasāsbe</i> <i>li-tuḥayyi ḡalālet sayyidnā bi-hāda l-</i> <i>wuḡūd</i></p> <p>SM: [<i>na'am</i>]</p> <p>RK: [((uh))] <i>wa-hāda el- el- el- el-</i> <i>intiṣār illi</i> [<i>'imlū</i>]</p> <p>SM: [<i>na'am</i>]</p> <p>RK: <i>ba'd mā ḍarabū ṭil'ū fōg 'ayy</i></p>	<p>SM: Jordanian aircraft are now bombing The sites and positions of these rats, in their dens Something that inspires enthusiasm If only I was a pilot</p> <p>RK: Our absence is difficult – Sameer</p> <p>SM: If only I was a pilot [05:17]</p> <p>RK: We have also seen a group of military aircraft That had flown over Kerak Over the town of Ayy To salute the family of the martyr al- Kasasbeh To salute Our Majesty (the King) with this presence</p> <p>SM: [Yes]</p> <p>RK: [((uh))] And this – Victory which [they have accomplished]</p> <p>SM: [Yes]</p> <p>RK: After they'd hit they rose up over Ayy</p>
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Here, I draw attention especially to how Karadsheh pronounces the sound (q) (uvular stop [q] in Standard Arabic). She pronounces it as the voiced velar stop [g] in two words: *gāṣī* “hard, difficult” and *fōg* “above.” In colloquial Jordanian usage, [g] is associated with masculine speech, as well as rural Jordanian and Bedouin varieties. But for Karadsheh, it marks a significant departure from the norm. In their day-to-day speech, female radio broadcasters in Jordan almost exclusively use another variant of (q) – that is, [ʔ] (the glottal stop).

The problem with [ʔ] is, however, that it is also present in prestige variants of colloquial Arabic outside of Jordan (e.g. Lebanon and Syria). Using [g] instead of the expected [ʔ] is thus an especially potent display of exclusive *Jordanian* identity on Karadsheh’s part. But [g]’s association with male speech also allows her make at least a partial claim to masculine values – in particular, the kind of aggressive, militant patriotism at stake in a vengeful response to the death of al-Kasasbeh, and consistent with values of masculinity and militancy that dominate Jordanian national identity discourses (e.g. those examined by Joseph Massad [Massad 2001]).

Karadsheh’s use of [g] here can, in this sense, be interpreted as taking an affective *stance* – a display of affective evaluation of, or commitment to, ongoing talk – towards the news of the air strikes. [Bucholtz + Hall 2005, p. 595-6; Du Bois 2007, p. 143-4] In frameworks of stance used by authors such as Alexandra Jaffe and John Du Bois, the air strike news plays the role of the *stance object* – the entity *towards which* an evaluation is being performed by the broadcaster, as two of the three main elements of the “stance triangle” (with the third being the interlocutor, or audience). [Jaffe 2015, p. 162-3; Du Bois

2007, p. 163] By using [g] in this excerpt, Karadsheh displays an affective commitment of support towards the air-strikes. But this performance also resists dominant norms which associate female speakers with the [ʔ] pronunciation of (q), and thus implicitly associate authentic Jordanian identity (marked by [g]) with male speakers only.

5. Discussion and conclusion

We have examined two contingent indexical uses of language on Jordanian non-government radio that represent a challenge to dominant discourses: implicature, in the *ka'ākīl* example of satirising urban Arabic pronunciation styles; and stance, in Karadsheh's use of [g] in dissent from dominant norms of using [ʔ] by women. But these examples of resistance are also ambiguous. In order to be effective, they draw on other problematic ideologies. The *ka'ākīl* case presupposes the local pronunciation *ča'āčīl* as authentic – but it does so through *implicature*, requiring insider knowledge to understand and fencing off an audience of local Jordanians familiar with its implications. Karadsheh's use of [g] challenges stereotypes of female speech – but on the other hand it draws on a very aggressive, militant, and again exclusionary Jordanian nationalism, which postulates only those who pronounce (q) as [g] as *proper* Jordanians.

In a recent article on power in linguistic performance, Jaffe et al. argue that any form of indexical linguistic reference to multiple social ideologies is a sufficient challenge to power simply because it emphasises ideological multiplicity, and thus fragments the dominance of a single prevailing discourse.

[Jaffe et al. 2015] But while this statement may hold in Jaffe et al.'s context of European minority languages challenging monolingual dominance, it is less applicable to Arabic. For speakers of Arabic, multiple ideologies of identity and belonging are the default situation. Not only is Arabic diglossic – involving differently valued linguistic resources associated with 'High,' or Standard, and 'Low,' or Colloquial, varieties of the language – but it also involves a huge variety of different dialect forms that carry varying implications in different contexts. Some of these, as we have seen, are also deeply intertwined with locally dominant power discourses. In order to resist a dominant ideology, speakers may thus have no choice than to refer to another, making their dissent an at best ambiguous challenge to discourses of power.

But does this invalidate any such dissent? I believe not. Even if the cases of dissent considered in this paper resist dominant stereotypes by invoking exclusionary ideologies of their own, their challenge brings *all* of these discourses into the light, making them available for subsequent debate and discussion. In any case, I hope this contribution will initiate further conversations regarding both the potentials and ambiguities of linguistic resistance in the Arabic-speaking Middle East today.

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