

A couple of years ago, I mused here on *Language on the Move* [what linguistic theory would look like if its dominant cultural ideas had not been shaped in 1950s USA but in 21st century Dubai](#). I've recently had the chance to reflect on this question in more detail and examine Dubai as a case-study in contemporary urban sociolinguistics. The opportunity came in the form of an invitation by Dick Smakman and Patrick Heinrich to contribute to a book about *Metrolinguistics: Urban Language Ecologies around the World* they are preparing for publication in 2017. The book will present an attempt to re-examine sociolinguistic theory, approaches and concerns on the basis of city spaces. The concept is to do so on the basis of case studies of language in global cities such as Amsterdam, Cairo, Los Angeles, São Paulo and Shanghai, to name a few.

[A preview of my draft chapter about “language in the ethnocratic, corporate and mobile city” of Dubai is now available here.](#)

[Examinations of the linguistic landscape of Dubai](#) are a regular feature of *Language on the Move* and Dubai is in many ways an ideal city to interrogate many of the concerns that animate contemporary sociolinguistics such as mobility, “superdiversity” or commodification. Dubai is widely seen as a utopian superlative city and a model exemplum of contemporary cities as sites of heightened linguistic and cultural diversity and resulting multicultural conviviality. However, real life is inevitably more complex than the utopian vision and the chapter examines 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.

The first part of the chapter 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

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stratified population. The second part 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.

The chapter identifies three contributions that the study of Dubai can make to urban sociolinguistics:

1. 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.
2. 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 national, ethnic or religious identities. 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.
3. 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

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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.

I hope that [the chapter](#) will make a worthwhile and enjoyable read for both sociolinguists and lovers of Dubai.

Piller, I. (2016). [Dubai: Language in the ethnocratic, corporate and mobile city](#). In: Smakman, D. and P. Heinrich. Eds. In preparation. *Metrolinguistics: Urban Language Ecologies around the World*. Routledge.

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