Linguistic theory in Dubai

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I’ve often wondered what linguistic theory would look like if its foundations did not lie in 19th century Europe and 20th century America but in 21st century Dubai. Would we still think predominantly in terms of discrete languages or would we take a more holistic view of communication? Would we treat linguistic diversity as the default and consider monolingualism as an exception worthy of special (but somewhat marginal) attention? Would mainstream journals deal with diversity in communication as the norm and would we then have some smaller special interest journals such as a Journal of Monolingualism and maybe another one devoted to International Studies in Monolingual Education?

A coach at the Dubai Ice Rink yells at a group of kids: “Boro, boro! Let’s go, boys! Yallah!” Does it make sense to think about this utterance in terms of code-switching? In the most mainstream current analysis of this exclamation, the coach would be seen as mixing Persian, English and Arabic and we would then have to ask why he is mixing. As the audience remains constant and he is basically saying the same thing (let’s go) three times, we would most likely start to muse about the identities he is claiming by switching: Is he trying to affiliate with the Persian, English and Arabic “speech communities” (another of those theoretical concepts that no longer make much sense)?

I overheard this interaction as a bystander and so cannot claim any further insights as to what the coach was trying to do other than the obvious: he was trying to get a group of exhausted 8-12-year-olds to keep together in a crowd and to keep them moving. From the labels on the kids’ uniforms, I know that they are from a school attended only by Emirati students (rather than non-nationals who make up more than 80% of the UAE’s population). In terms of their ethnic looks, the kids look all different – as befits the inhabitants of a place that has been a kind of way-station at the cross-roads of Africa, Asia and Europe since time immemorial. I cannot guess where the coach is from. As I just said, going by looks is even more pointless in Dubai than in most other parts of the world. He could have been Emirati but the statistics about teachers in national schools suggest that he is more likely to hail from elsewhere.
Khaleeji (Gulf Arabic) has always been a “mixed” language and variationists break it up further into Coastal: Saudi; the former can be subdivided into Emirati, Kuwaiti, Omani etc.; Emirati can be subdivided into Bahrani, Bedouin, Coastal, Shihhi, etc.; not to mention Ajami, another traditional language of the Gulf, which is mostly classified as an “Arabicized Persian dialect” or some such. You get the idea: it’s complicated...

If Khaleeji as the ancestral way of communicating in Dubai challenges linguistic theory, contemporary linguistic and communicative practices render it completely useless. Artists and designers have been among the first to have embraced obvious heterogeneity as foundational rather than condemning it as deviant. Salem Al-Qassimi, a designer specializing in bilingual urban design, for instance, refers to Dubai’s seemingly chaotic linguistic practices as “Arabish.” Arabish originally referred to Arabic texting in the Latin script but “is now more than just that. It is a way of speaking and a way of life,” he explains.

So, what does all this complexity mean for linguistic theory? We need to step back and let go of linear lenses such as the monolingual and variationist ones. In fact, you do not need to spend time in Dubai to do that; we could also turn to the natural sciences. The physicist (and Nobel Laureate in Chemistry) Ilya Prigogine wrote in his 1997 book The End of Certainty that linearity is no longer a viable form of scientific thinking. He explains that linear science only works where it deals with phenomena that are close to equilibrium.

The social contexts where many mainstream linguistic theories developed could be described as spaces of equilibrium and – combined with the desire to imitate classical science – it is not surprising that order and stability became the bedrock of linguistic thinking.

However, the natural sciences have moved on, noting “fluctuations, instability, multiple choices, and limited predictability at all levels of observation” (Prigogine 1997, p. 4). Chaos theory recognizes that, as complexity increases in a system, precision and relevance become mutually exclusive.

Trying to describe even a mundane little utterance such as “Boro, boro! Let’s go, boys! Yallah!” precisely with current linguistic tools (“Arabic,” “code-switching,” “code-mixing,” “English,” “multilingualism,” “Persian,” “speech community”) renders the analysis either meaningless or irrelevant.

Whether we take our inspiration for a new linguistic theory from the chaotic world around us or the natural sciences may be a matter of preference but change our lenses we must. Bob Hodge has a useful preliminary introduction to chaos theory for TESOL practitioners here.

*Standard English: “Spicy Tennessee Chicken and Shrimp"
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