Feature Political conflict

Political conflict as a catalyst for language change: The case of Palestinian Arabic

William Cotter discusses the relationship between language change and protracted conflict for speakers of Palestinian Arabic

Jerusalem behind barbed wire

Palestinian Arabic is a grouping of a number of smaller Arabic varieties, spoken by the majority of the 12 million ethnic Palestinians throughout the world. To non-native speakers and non-linguists, Palestinian Arabic is largely indistinguishable from the other Arabic varieties of the Levant, the area comprising modern day Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. However, Palestinian Arabic is unique in the sense that change and evolution within this variety of Arabic can be tied to larger social and political forces in the Middle East. In order to understand this relationship, it's necessary to first understand the history behind the linguistic situation of Palestinian Arabic today.

The importance of history

When discussing sociolinguistic change in Palestinian Arabic, it is impossible to truly separate linguistic processes from political forces and the emergence of the nation-state. What was once a geographically localized community of Arabic speakers has, since 1948, been displaced and forced into contact with other varieties of Arabic and completely different languages (namely Modern Hebrew).

In the period surrounding the creation of Israel in 1948, roughly 750,000 Palestinians were displaced from their lands in historic Palestine. As a result of these forced migrations, Palestinian Arabic went from being predominantly spoken in the areas that today comprise the State of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, to a disjointed, non-contiguous, and diasporic linguistic community. While it is true that most speakers of Palestinian Arabic still reside in the areas of historic Palestine (Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip), today this variety of Arabic is also spoken by Palestinians in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. The majority of these speakers are political refugees. In addition, speakers of Palestinian Arabic with the financial means have left the Middle East, emigrating to locations such as the United Kingdom and the United States.

This has created vibrant communities of Palestinian Arabic speakers in cities like London, Chicago and the greater Detroit area in Michigan. Some view these communities as disconnected, both physically and linguistically (given that they now reside in predominantly English-speaking areas), from the larger Palestinian Arabic linguistic community. However, while they have received little academic attention, they can show us how Palestinian Arabic has changed over the past seven decades. As an example of this, based on what Arabic linguists know, the variety of Palestinian Arabic spoken in Ramallah (a city just north of Jerusalem) has been subsumed by the Jerusalem variety of the language. Today the middle and younger generations of Ramallah residents speak a dialect that is quite close to that spoken in Jerusalem. The traditional dialect of Ramallah – which scholars of Arabic describe as being a more rural variety given that Ramallah was historically a small town – has largely disappeared.

> **Rural:** Arabic linguistics often describe Arabic dialects as falling into four broad categories: urban vs. rural and Sedentary vs. Bedouin. These categories are not set in stone, but represent a grouping of specific features that, generally speaking, coincide with these labels.

However, anecdotal reports suggest that the traditional Ramallah variety of Arabic is still spoken by Palestinians abroad, specifically by residents of the Detroit metro area who emigrated to the United States generations ago. According to the Ramallah Club of Detroit, a non-profit organization whose goal is to maintain the culture and heritage of the community, Ramallah immigrants in metro Detroit number over 600 households. Immigration by Ramallah families into metro Detroit began in the early 1920's. These early Palestinian immigrants, alongside scores of Syrians, Lebanese, and Yemenis, came to Detroit as laborers in the automotive factories built by Henry Ford. As time went on, they left the auto industry and began to open small businesses throughout the Detroit area, with particularly vibrant communities taking root in areas like Dearborn.

Linguistic research on this community has yet to be carried out, so the extent to which traditional Ramallah Arabic is still spoken in Michigan remains unclear. However, a number of the members of this community are historically Christian. Research conducted in the Middle East has suggested that Christians show a tendency to retain older Arabic linguistic features. As a result, it would not be surprising for research on this community in the Detroit area to uncover more traditional forms of Ramallah Arabic that are largely absent in the dialect of Ramallah today. This type of research, coupled with more recent work carried out in the Middle East itself, would allow scholars to comparatively map out changes that appear to have taken place in the dialect, providing a window into processes of language change in Palestinian Arabic.

The political and social forces that continue to push and pull the Palestinian community are an essential part of the story for sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists researching how this community, and its language, has changed. Examining the place of Palestinian Arabic in the wider Middle East provides a regional picture of how this dialect is changing through contact with other varieties spoken in the countries where Palestinian refugees now reside. However, outside of limited cases, diaspora varieties of Palestinian Arabic remain an area where researchers are ultimately in the dark about what the language situations of these communities look like.

Palestinian Arabic in the wider Middle East

In addition to being spoken throughout historic Palestine, Palestinian Arabic has played a major role in the formation of the dialect of one of the region's main cities, the Jordanian capital of Amman. Prior to 1948, Palestinian merchants from the West Bank emigrated to what was then a small town along with large communities of indigenous Jordanians from areas northwest of Amman. These two communities formed the core of this rapidly growing city and through daily contact between these groups, who speak mutually intelligible but distinct varieties of Arabic, a new dialect emerged in the Jordanian capital. Research on the formation of the Ammani dialect has shown that speakers today, regardless of their ethnic background, use a dialect that shares features with both Palestinian and Jordanian Arabic, what has been termed by researchers a **koienized** variety.

> **Koineized:** A linguistic variety that arises from contact between mutually intelligible varieties of the same language.

Outside of the role Palestinian Arabic has played in the evolution of language in Amman, a sizable portion of Jordan's residents are ethnically Palestinian. Many of these individuals arrived in Jordan as a result of the forced migrations which took place in 1948 and later in 1967, following the Six Day War. This has created a situation in which many varieties of Palestinian Arabic are spoken throughout Jordan, not only in the United Nations refugee camps that house Palestinian refugees, but also in villages and cities throughout the country.

One area of ongoing research in Jordan is the investigation of the speech of Palestinian refugees in Jerash refugee camp, an hour north of Amman and 45 minutes south of the border with Syria. Jerash Camp, known locally as 'Gaza Camp', was established in 1968 to house Palestinian refugees fleeing the Gaza Strip during the Six Day War. These refugees are from areas in the south of Palestine, such as the Naqab desert region and in particular the area surrounding the city of Bir i-Sab' (Beersheba), today inside of Israel. Their dialects of Arabic are distinctly different from the Jordanian varieties spoken in this part of the country and as a result of this contact some speakers' casual speech appears to be shifting towards local varieties.

Additional research on Palestinian refugees in the Lebanese capital of Beirut has suggested that, as earlier sociolinguistic work has shown, spatial, economic, and **social networks** play a role in language variation and change. In this respect, Palestinian refugees in Beirut's refugee camps have been shown to retain quintessential features of their Palestinian

dialects. For example, the long vowel /a:/, typically pronounced as [a:] in Palestinian Arabic is often pronounced in Lebanese Arabic as [e:]. In the speech of Palestinian refugees in Beirut, those Palestinians who largely interact only with other Palestinians have retained their traditional [a:]. In contrast, those Palestinians who have overcome the obstacles of being a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon, which limits one's economic and social prospects, have converged in their speech towards the Lebanese Arabic pronunciation, [e:]. In addition to these diaspora communities, within historic Palestine the political situation also plays an important role in language change.

Social network: A social structure that details who an individual or group of individuals interacts with on a regular basis.

Palestinian Arabic in contact with Modern Hebrew

In 1948, along with the displacement of Palestinians to areas outside of what became the State of Israel, many Palestinians were internally displaced, while a smaller number managed to stay in their homes. The creation of Israel also brought with it a complex system of bureaucracy, governance, and education that takes place almost exclusively in Modern Hebrew. This has resulted in many Palestinians inside of Israel becoming bilingual in Arabic and Hebrew. In fact, in many cases Palestinians in Israel report that they are actually more comfortable speaking Hebrew as opposed to Arabic.

In addition to the bilingualism that has resulted from this politically induced **language contact** between Arabic and Hebrew, there has been significant phonological and structural change to Palestinian Arabic in these communities. When Hebrew was 'revived' by European immigrants to Palestine, it was done by using a linguistic system that borrowed heavily from the European languages spoken by those immigrants, notably Yiddish. These European languages lack many of the historic sounds quintessential to Semitic languages.

Through the revival of Hebrew, the varieties of Arabic spoken in Israel, over time, have also lost some of these historic Semitic features. For example, Modern Hebrew lacks some of the guttural consonants common in Semitic languages like Arabic. Contact between Modern Hebrew and Arabic in Israel has significantly changed the structure of the linguistic system of these varieties of Palestinian Arabic, particularly with respect to these guttural sounds.

Language contact: When the speakers of two or more different languages interact with each other.

Outside of Israel proper, research on Palestinian Arabic in the West Bank has shown that contact with Hebrew has also had some effect. Research conducted in the refugee camps of the West Bank has shown that Hebrew words have been borrowed into Palestinian Arabic, sometimes even replacing their common Arabic counterparts. Additionally, some West Bank speakers of Palestinian Arabic, predominantly middle aged men, report being at least partially bilingual in Hebrew as a result of prolonged periods spent in Israeli prisons. Through their interactions with prison officials, these Arabic speakers report learning some degree of Hebrew in order to improve their situation within the prison system.

The Gaza Strip

Resting on 360km2 of land on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, the Gaza Strip represents what may be one of Palestine's most well-known communities, at least in the international media. Despite being at the center of the Israel-Palestine conflict and regularly appearing in the international news as a result of the ongoing conflict, linguists actually know very little about the varieties of Palestinian Arabic spoken in this area.

Gaza represents what is perhaps the most intense, and now most isolated, site of contact between different varieties of Palestinian Arabic. During 1948, many Palestinians from areas like Jaffa, Ramle, Lydd, and Beersheba fled to Gaza as refugees. Today, statistics suggest that at least 70% of the population of the Gaza Strip are refugees from other areas of historic Palestine. This means that speakers of the indigenous varieties of Gaza Arabic are now the minority.

After 1948, Gaza came under Egyptian control. This resulted in the increased influence of Egyptian Arabic in daily life which, coupled with Gaza's geographic location, appears to have resulted in the dialects of Gaza sharing some limited features with Egyptian Arabic. As an example, most Palestinian city dialects pronounce the Arabic feminine gender marker as [e]. Egyptian dialects like that of Cairo, on the other hand, pronounce this sound as [a]. Gaza City, a city of over half a million, is somewhat unique as a large Palestinian city that does not pronounce this vowel as [e], instead pronouncing it as [a], like the dialect of Cairo. However, after the Six Day War of 1967, Gaza became increasingly isolated from other areas where Palestinian Arabic was spoken. This isolation intensified during the 1980s and 1990s. However, the most extreme cases of isolation have occurred in the past 15 years.

The outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising in 2000, followed by the removal of Israeli settlers in 2005, isolated Gaza even further. The Palestinian elections of 2006 signaled a major victory for the Hamas movement, who subsequently took control of Gaza and expelled most officials from the previous government. Since the beginning of Hamas control of Gaza, the Israeli government has put the region under a military blockade which has almost completely sealed off the Strip from the outside world.

We still know little about what this type of contact and subsequent extreme isolation does to language. However, recent sociolinguistic research conducted in Gaza City in 2013, has begun to shed some light on at least part of this situation. Research on dialect contact in Gaza between indigenous

Gaza street scene after Israeli bombing

Gazans and Palestinian refugees originally from the city of Jaffa has shown that this contact has resulted in rapid linguistic changes to the varieties of Palestinian Arabic spoken by Gaza's residents.

In particular, a number of linguistic features that are hallmarks of the traditional dialect of Jaffa appear to be disappearing in Gaza City. For example, the dialect of Jaffa pronounces the sound /q/ as a glottal stop, but in the speech of Jaffa refugees in Gaza City many speakers now pronounce this sound as [g]. This pronunciation is in line with the traditional dialect of Gaza City. In addition, the [e] pronunciation of the feminine gender marker, discussed above, is also common in the Jaffa dialect. However, it has been lost in the speech of Jaffa refugees in Gaza, who now pronounce this sound as [a]. While linguistic change as a result of dialect contact is not at all surprising to sociolinguists, the speed with which these changes have occurred – with some being incredibly advanced even after only one to two generations – sets Gaza apart from other sites of contact. The catalyst of this dialect contact in Gaza can be directly tied to the wider Israel-Palestine conflict. The massive influx of Palestinian refugees who came to Gaza in 1948 have dramatically altered the demographic and linguistic makeup of the territory. With a population that is today is at least 70% refugees, many of whom speak different varieties of Arabic, the linguistic situation of the Gaza Strip represents one of unfortunately many cases where the political situation in the region has had a tangible and lasting effect on language.

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Conclusion

Sociolinguists and anthropologists looking at how Palestinian Arabic has changed and how it is used today must take into account over seven decades of political conflict. For speakers of Palestinian Arabic, the two remain inseparable. When comparing early descriptions of these Arabic varieties to what we know of these varieties today, we see that substantial changes have taken place. While not all are the direct result of political conflict, occurring instead as part of natural processes of language change, the sociolinguistic work that has been conducted over the past decade has shown that some of these changes are part and parcel of the conflict itself.

The Israel-Palestine conflict has resulted in massive social, political, cultural and demographic changes for the Palestinian community. Further, it has drastically changed the face of the modern Middle East. Language is part of this larger constellation of changes and researching the place of language within the conflict helps not only scholars of Arabic to determine how language has evolved in light of these conditions, but also makes it possible for historians, political scientists and the community of Palestinian Arabic speakers themselves to more fully understand the effect that the conflict has had on the community.

Investigating these relationships in Palestine may also help linguists and anthropologists to better understand the linguistic situation of other communities throughout the Middle East. As a result of the American war in Iraq beginning in 2003, millions of Iraqis were displaced. Similarly, as a result of the Syrian civil war millions of Syrians have fled fighting to other areas of the Middle East. Although certainly not the most visible outcome of conflict, language change remains intimately tied to political forces in a region that has been a site of continuing violence over the past seven decades. This research not only shows us a great deal about these varieties of Arabic, but also helps to better understand the human cost of conflict through its effect on language. ¶

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Find out more

Books

Nancy Hawker (2013) *Palestinian-Israeli Contact and Linguistic Practices,* Routledge.

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Article

William Cotter and Uri Horesh: Social integration and dialect divergence in coastal Palestine, in *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 19(4).

Ask a linguist

Experts answer your questions

"How do emojis mean?" – Rebecca Brown, via Twitter

Emojis, from the Japanese, meaning 'picture character', are single character glyphs found in the digital keyboards of internet-capable mobile computing devices such as smartphones. There are currently a little under 1300 available – the colourful smileys, winks, love hearts, and so on – which are determined by the California-based Unicode Consortium, responsible for setting the international standard for the appearance of digital text. Although emojis were invented in Japan in the late 1990s, they only became available to a global audience in 2011. Today, over 80% of adults with smartphones in the UK, for instance – which amounts to over 70% of the adult population – use them on a regular basis in digital communication. The figure is likely to be higher for the under 18 cohort.

Emojis function in a similar way to nonverbal cues in spoken face-to-face interaction. When we engage in spoken communication, especially in social contexts, one estimate suggests as much as 70% of the meaning we derive comes from nonverbal cues. This includes features of speech such as the rise and fall of pitch contours, stress and rhythm, as well as body language such as facial expressions and gestures. While language – our vocabulary and the grammatical rules that enable words to be joined together into meaningful utterances – provides much of the factual content of spoken meaning, the emotional expression, the personality of the speaker, and even the way in which we manage our spoken exchanges largely comes from nonverbal cues. Moreover, nonverbal cues can complement, nuance and even add information not provided by language. For instance, an expression such as 'I love you', uttered with falling pitch, is a declaration of undying love; change the intonation to rising pitch, so that it becomes a question, and it is a derisive counterblast that can be an ironic put-down (best not said to your dearest if you wish them to remain your nearest). This is an example of the way in which speech prosody can even change the meaning of words.

Emojis are to textspeak what nonverbal cues (prosody and body language) are to spoken language. They provide cues as to the sender's attitude towards the linguistic elements of the message (often their emotional stance), which adds nuances to the message and personality to the text. In so doing, they induce greater emotional resonance on the part of the addressee and facilitate better empathetic resonance. This ability to facilitate empathy is essential to effective communication in any medium. Moreover, research findings reveal that nearly three quarters of under 25s in the UK believe that emojis better enable them to express their emotions in textspeak, and over 50% believe that these colourful glyphs make them better able to communicate – emojis really are more than mere splashes of adolescent colour.

Emojis can also function in language-like ways. Oxford Dictionaries made the 'face with tears of joy' emoji its 2015 word of the year, making headlines in the process. And the world's first recording of an alleged emoji terror offence occurred in January 2015, when a New York teenager was arrested for threatening violence against the NYPD on the basis of gun emojis pointing at a police-officer emoji in a Facebook status update. Here, the emojis were conveying an alleged threat of violence; like the words we speak, emojis, it seems, can and will be used in a court of law against you. ¶

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