

Review of Niloofar Haeri's

***Sacred Language, Ordinary People: Dilemmas of Culture and Politics in Egypt* (Palgrave: 2003). (In *The Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 17(2): 305-307) (2007).**

Although Classical Arabic has been instrumental in the history of Islamic thought as elaborated through the Qur'an and remains central to Arabic speakers' everyday verbal routines, the language variety remains no one's mother tongue. As the author demonstrates, Arabic presents a case of language "diglossia" whose ethnographic study is long overdue. One of the strengths of Haeri's book is its focus on language ideology. Alert to the indebtedness of Arabic studies in the West to the philological methods of earlier generations, Haeri attends to the deployment of Classical Arabic in daily life, while also providing a range of observations on the ways that this variety is conceptualized meta-discursively by informants in debates about modernity, national culture, and moral authority. Especially appreciated is Haeri's simultaneous attention to vernacular Arabic, whose use and ideological elaboration are explored helpfully in relation to Classical Arabic. Indeed, many of the cultural and political dilemmas of modern Arabic for native speakers are underscored in the coding of vernacular as a locus not only of profound cultural attachment but also of considerable ambivalence toward the higher-status, educated, and modern associations of more standardized varieties of Arabic. Ultimately, Haeri shows how language ideology works, pace Pierre Bourdieu, to introduce national and global hierarchies of linguistic value that leave native Arabic speakers deeply ambivalent about modern forms of identity.

The elegance of Haeri's contribution is underscored by her ability to discuss the ideological motivation of Classical Arabic while remaining sensitive to indigenous models of Muslim eloquence that tend to sidestep such motivations. Haeri's attention to the ideological investments in preserving the concept of an immutable "sacred language," however, ultimately defers inquiry into the ways "sacredness" is construed socially through situated negotiations over religious practices both spiritual and mundane. Classical Arabic is fully part of such processes, as is illustrated, for example, when Qur'anic recitations are regulated or affectively embellished depending on audiences' expectations. The book offers much to readers, however, by exploring how a given state-managed language ideology is instantiated in everyday speech contexts.

The introductory chapter outlines the author's well-developed insights into the ways in which language diglossia works for many native Arabic speakers. With great delicacy, the chapter shows how models of diglossia reflect particular legacies of language standardization and state cultural reforms. Historical restrictions in writing and literacy are especially important in this regard, and have helped invest written registers of modern Arabic, along with languages that have long enjoyed writing systems, with a sense of historical contingency or "arbitrariness." Indeed, as Haeri proposes with helpful regard to Ferdinand de Saussure, it is the arbitrary relation between form and meaning, signifier and signified, that defines the very "modernity" of language. Classical Arabic is held, in this respect, to be essentially non-modern, since, for Arabic speakers, its profound associations with the Qur'an link its essential attributes to the non-arbitrary words of God. Haeri helpfully suggests, throughout the chapter, that such an ideology of non-arbitrariness has been disseminated and strengthened over time with the spread of print and textual standardization. Given the scope of her argument, the details of such

trends are secondary to identifying the key features of such a language ideology for contemporary Arabic speakers.

With wonderful ethnographic attention to everyday speech events as well as to written and printed texts, Chapter Two explores how Arabic is used by lower-middle class speakers in Cairo. As Haeri shows through interviews, the source for most anxieties over Classical Arabic is the schooling system. Although conveying inclusiveness when spoken and heard in religious prayers and rituals, such Arabic becomes an exclusionary experience when native speakers are expected to write out its complex grammatical forms without proper educational training. Feelings of estrangement are carried over to print media, which lacks the written vocal cues that are provided in Qur'anic texts to help with oral recitation. More generally, Classical Arabic's associations with the Egyptian state and its ostensibly inclusive nationalist ideals alienate those who find the variety too Islamic, such as non-Muslims, or too abstracted from their everyday needs, such as most vernacular speakers.

Focusing on the publishing interventions of magazine and print media employees, Chapter Three argues that the state has helped pluralize written Classical Arabic by supporting a wider variety of "text-regulators" who help manage its public associations for Egyptians. Haeri sees some possibility in this industry for pluralizing Islam, since text-regulators work with a sacred language and not with vernaculars, as occurred in Europe's early print industry. Nevertheless, the author highlights the ways in which the state's authority continues to be reinscribed by Classical Arabic, even as the variety is tailored to broader consumer markets. While Haeri's argument in this regard is certainly plausible, much valuable work by other scholars on "ethnographies of writing" as well as print (for Muslim societies alone, these include Brinkley Messick, Gregory Starrett, Andrew Shryock, Dale Eickelman, David Edwards, and others) is overlooked, despite her assertion that anthropologists have done little work on such topics and should turn to work by print historians (p.55). More attention to the changing social and political stakes of writing and print might have helped nuance more programmatic statements that, despite text-regulators' active collaborations, Classical Arabic remains a language of authority that "belongs to no one."

Chapter Four is a must read for anyone interested in understanding how diglossia works as a language ideology in practice. Haeri's sharp insights as an ethnologist and a sensitive reader of texts yield rich rewards, especially in showing how the ideology of non-arbitrary Classical Arabic has been assembled and perpetuated, over the course of Egypt's colonial and post-colonial experience, through particular patterns of code-switching and word order. Much mileage is gained by drawing upon writings by Mikhail Bakhtin and V. Volosinov on vocal alienation and reported speech. To my mind, few studies of Arabic language varieties have done as much justice to the influence of post-colonial cultural politics on the assignation of social functions to everyday linguistic forms.

The fifth chapter focuses on Egyptians' deep ambivalence about Classical Arabic as a medium of public communication. As Haeri shows, Egyptians' reluctance to talk about the sociopolitical motivation of the Classical Arabic helps perpetuate impressions of its non-arbitrariness in ways that ensure speakers' sense that the variety is simply not "their own". Such impressions are undoubtedly stronger among the urban writers, poets, journalists and publishers who are Haeri's main informants. In my experience in Yemen,

for example, rural women poets don't hold Classical Arabic to be less shameful or sexualized than vernacular Arabic (as Haeri proposes on p.116); indeed, they can use vernacular pointedly to contest the Classical language norms of literati and especially men. Again, however, the strength of the book lies in showing how dominant language ideologies (such as those that award a high status to Classical Arabic and code vernaculars as "low" and morally inferior) are instantiated in specific communicative contexts.

The Conclusion expands gracefully on Haeri's argument in the previous chapter that Classical Arabic remains an alien variety, in comparison with vernacular Arabic. Drawing attention, again, to Classical Arabic's essential non-arbitrariness for most speakers, Haeri suggests that state efforts to promote its adoption by wider and more diverse groups of speakers, writers, and publishers has not helped revitalize its utility for modern Egyptians. Much of the reason for such failure is pan-Arab nationalism. Celebrated as a potential lingua franca whose non-arbitrary Arab associations could be accessed by every citizen, irrespective of religion, ethnicity, class or gender, Classical Arabic only grew more objectified and inflexible as pan-Arab nationalism sputtered toward failure.

Overall, the book provides readers with a wealth of ethnographic data that will prove useful in future studies of Arabic language practice. The prose are generally enjoyable to read, and production mistakes are relatively infrequent (e.g. the phrase "subject-verb-object" is mistakenly coded "(SOV)" (89); and the reference to "Nichols 1996" (p.55) is absent from the bibliography.) Occasionally, perhaps due to Haeri's desire to reach broader audiences, key theoretical points are obfuscated in the density of case examples. Despite being highlighted at the outset, for instance, discussions of language arbitrariness and "modernity" disappear for much of the book, leaving readers to infer linkages between specific ethnographic examples and this larger argument. The transitions between data and theory in Chapter Three seem especially rushed. In the end, the author's emphasis on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital provides the umbrella for a narrative that sheds valuable light on the reasons that many Egyptians feel ambivalent about a language variety that is not their mother tongue. Scholars who are interested in the ways that Arabic is deployed in multiple "markets," becoming authoritative in relation to more particular systems of social entitlement and responsibility, may have to look elsewhere. Still, they have much to be grateful for in Haeri's fine volume. General readers have a fascinating introduction to the ideological stakes involved in maintaining a living "sacred language."