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Identity and Dialect Performance: A Study of Communities and Dialects

Reem Bassiouney (editor)

Oxford and New York

Routledge

2018

Pp. xviii + 370

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This interesting volume is a welcome addition to the increasing body of research investigating the relationship between individual and group identity construction and dialect use. The collection is in four parts, and comprises nineteen chapters examining dialect performance in a wide range of contexts. Reem Bassiouney's useful introduction covers the groundwork for the scope of the work, and includes a detailed discussion of the term 'dialect', a theme also adopted by some contributors (e.g. John Edwards, Chapter 1; Anne Storch, Chapter 17).

Part 1, 'Dialects in Localised and Delocalised Contexts', begins with a valuable critique of public stereotypes surrounding, and attitudes towards, speakers of non-standard varieties. Edwards' well-articulated observation that particular language varieties are afforded the status of 'standard' precisely because of the (historical) power and influence of their speakers, rather than as a result of any inherent value or aesthetic superiority, is an important point for researchers working throughout the language sciences to note. In Chapter 2, Dick Smakman and Marten van der Meulen – with reference to high levels of mobility and agency, as well as the fluidity of identities amongst many multidialectal speakers in the modern world – present a thought-provoking critical assessment of traditional methods in the drawing of dialect boundaries, and again emphasise the importance of language attitudes. The third chapter of this section, by Anna De Fina, details the findings of an ethnographic study examining dialect performance amongst fifth-grade Italian and non-Italian children in Sicilian classrooms.

The four chapters included in Part 2, 'Nation-states and Identity Construction in Relation to a Standard and a Dialect,' all discuss qualitative findings on the role of, and

tension between, nation-building (language) ideologies in the construction of dialect identities in South Sudan (Stefano Manfredi, Chapter 4), Northwest Italy (Mauro Tosco, Chapter 5), Morocco (Dominique Caubet, Chapter 6) and England (rather than ‘Britain’ as the author – Carmen Ebner, Chapter 7 – maintains). Ebner, in particular, provides a very useful account of the results of an online language-attitude questionnaire study involving 176 participants based in England. Whilst a more comprehensive methodology section would have been useful for the reader – giving further information about the sample, research instrument(s) and methods of analysis – the qualitative responses offered by the participants provide a valuable insight into the ideologies surrounding their perceptions of ‘bad’ English use.

‘Contact, Variation, Performance and Metalinguistic Discourse’, the third section of the volume, is composed of six chapters. The focus here is on different language varieties across a range of contexts: French Guiana and Colombia (Isabelle Léglise and Santiago Sánchez Moreano, Chapter 8); the United States (Katherine O’Donnell Christoffersen and Naomi Shin, Chapter 9); Senegal (Fiona McLaughlin, Chapter 10); Morocco (Ángeles Vicente and Amina Naciri-Azzouz, Chapter 11); England, Germany and Japan (Patrick Heinrich, Chapter 12); and Egypt (Valentina Serrelli, Chapter 13). One common theme of these chapters, as the editor highlights in her introduction, is an emphasis upon the importance of linguistic variation and language contact in the construction and performance of identity. Léglise and Sánchez Moreano’s demonstration of annotation methods to uncover the language practices of multilingual speakers is a particularly worthwhile inclusion. Heinrich’s comparison of language crossing, *Kiezdeutsch* and dialect guise, in three distinct (socio)linguistic contexts, is also a welcome complement to the majority of chapters, which focus upon one specific nation or community.

The fourth and final section of the collection (‘The Media, Dialect Performance, and Language Variation’) again includes six chapters. These concentrate on media performance of dialects – including within social media – in the United States (Scott Kiesling, Chapter 14), Scotland (Natalie Braber, Chapter 15); Egypt (Reem Bassiouney, Chapter 16), Nigeria (Anne Storch, Ch. 17), Libya (Luca D’Anna, Chapter 18), and Syria

(Rania Habib, Chapter 19). Particular highlights include Kiesling's fine-grained analysis of the stances taken by Pittsburgh dialect performers when using 'falling question intonation' on YouTube videos, and Bassiouney's examination of the ways in which a southern Egyptian poet employs phonological variants in his own (stigmatised) variety and in Standard Arabic – in order to create his own local identity, persona and style. As a native of the city myself, I also very much enjoyed reading Braber's investigation of the performance of Glaswegian identities, undertaken through a detailed analysis of the language employed by two characters in the long-running Scottish comedy show *Chewin' the Fat* (1999-2005). Given the recent (post-industrial) renaissance of Glasgow as a cultural, creative and media hub – together with growing expressions of a distinct Scottish identity, culminating in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum – her study provides a solid foundation for further comparative research examining the ways in which (features of) Glasgow speech may be employed to index any shifting social and linguistic identities in other similar shows.

A major strength of this collection is the examination of dialect performance in a wide range of settings, including across the Middle East and North Africa, given the notable dearth of sociolinguistic study in many of these contexts. Throughout the volume, the majority of studies detailing empirical findings focus specifically on the social meaning of linguistic variants within distinct communities and are firmly located within third-wave sociolinguistic approaches. Hence, whilst it is unsurprising that many of the case studies employ primarily qualitative methods (e.g. those by Vicente and Naciri-Azzouz; Braber; and Bassiouney), it is pleasing that a few authors undertake descriptive statistical analysis of numerical data (De Fina; Habib).

In an edited volume of this length, it is perhaps inevitable that the thematic links between the chapters within the four different sections sometimes seem rather arbitrary. Nevertheless, a coherent grouping of sections by language, context, language attitudes versus language use, or empirical versus theoretical research, would have been equally challenging. Overall, the collection makes an important contribution, not least with its examination of the linguistic practices within communities that are often not well studied.

An excellent book, it is indispensable for those researchers and students concerned with the role of dialect in the performance and negotiation of social meaning. Its publication will surely prompt further equivalent research in other contexts.

REVIEWER

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