Linguistic Features of Pidgin Arabic in Kuwait

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Abstract

This paper sheds the light on Asian pidgin Arabic, particularly linguistic features of pidgin Arabic in Kuwait. The phonology, syntax and lexicon of the language are described on the basis of interviews conducted with forty Asian informants. The data are discussed in its relation to other studies. Also, the researcher discussed the implication of the findings for the study of pidgin as well as Creole languages in general, and on Arabic-based pidgin or contact language in particular.

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1. Introduction

Pidgin can be viewed as a language that results from contact between people who are not able to speak a common language but who are in a bad need to talk with and understand each other. This may be done in certain cases rather say in extreme situations such as war, colonization, slavery and international trade. In colonization, people from different origins and races need to establish a mutual basis for communication with each other which leads to developing pidgin languages. In spite of having distinctive grammar and vocabulary, pidgin is never spoken as a first or native language. It is worth noting that pidgin with more complex grammar and vocabulary is a developed form of pidgin called Creole (Mayers, 2006).

Many researchers (Mcwhorter, 2001, Graff, 2003, Nerbonne, 2005 and Robinson, 2008) state that there has been a great deal of controversy over the nature of complexity in pidgin. Pidgin language is characterized by having a relatively small vocabulary (Robinson, 2008). Holme (2000: 107-108) views that there are various indications that lexicons of early pidgins are much smaller than that of natural languages or the original languages.

Siegel (2004: 140) focuses on the same point and assures the simplicity of pidgin. He states that pidgin-especially that relates with English language-commonly includes characteristics such as the absence of inflectional morphology, a low number of marked grammatical categories, small lexicon, or few stylistic options. Todd (1984: 11) assures also the simplicity of pidgin in English. He states that vocabulary in a pidgin is less extensive that of Standard English, and that a pidgin it can convey similar types of information with fewer words. Todd views that pidgin expresses abstractions by means of metaphorical extensions of basic vocabulary like (hand, eye…etc.).

The current study focuses on the linguistic features of pidgin Arabic in Kuwait. It describes a long-lived pidginized variety of Arabic language used by Asian housemaids working in Kuwait. The description is based on oral interviews conducted with forty Asian informants who had been working in Kuwait for periods ranging from six to eighteen years over 100 minutes of audio input. Therefore, the interview represents the main means of collecting data. The sociolinguistic situation for this Asian Arabic pidgin (henceforth AAP) is due to the informants' long-living in Kuwait. Those people came from their countries to work as housemaids, housekeepers and drivers (for males). There were not in any kind of contact with Arabic language in their home countries. Also, their employers from Kuwaiti people as well as few residents don't speak their Asian languages. Therefore, both parties (Asian maids and Kuwaiti people) are in an urgent need to find a common means understand each other. Under these sociolinguistic circumstances, there was no available common language. Asian informants in contact with Arabic language formed their own pidgin to respond to the need of understanding as well as being understood from native Arabic speakers.

2. Methodology

2.1 Area Description

Kuwait is a Middle East country found at the northwest point of the Persian Gulf, between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, with a total area of 17, 820 sq. km. Kuwait got its independence in 1961 from Great Britain. Kuwait has a total population of 2, 646, 314 as per July estimates, of which close to 50% (1,291,354) of the population are non-Kuwaitis. Kuwaiti's 98% of the population live in urban centers. The country has 2.227 people in the work force; of those in the workforce are non-Kuwaitis. Kuwaiti's economy is primarily based on oil, although the government intends to diversify economy by 2015 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2012). The progress attained in the country's education system has been attributed to oil (Mohammad, 2008). The geography and the demography of Kuwait, and globalization and internationalization make English an important language in Kuwait. Although the official language of Kuwait is Arabic, however English is widely spoken in Kuwait. Signs of modernization are evident in the country's urban centers. Particularly, shopping centers, cafes, restaurants, and foreign community signal the extent of civilization in Kuwait. These features are, in part, evidence for the increasing importance and relevance of English in Kuwait as a second language. This importance has had its own implications on the education system, especially the English curriculum.

2.2 Methods

The researcher used the qualitative design. This design is the most suitable as it concentrates on descriptions and explanations of various phenomena in the study. In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument or the tool for designing, collecting and analyzing data.Qualitative research, in contrast to quantitive research, generally doesn't translate aspects of phenomena into numbers to be analyzed mathematically. Instead, it analyzes the phenomena through the lenses the researcher brings to bear on the data.

In addition, the researcher used the descriptive research design in order to review the related studies that relate with the current study to know the similarities and differences. The descriptive research design was used also to write down the theoretical background of the study.

2.3 Participants

The researcher has selected forty informants who have been living and working in Kuwait for periods ranging from six to eighteen years. Twenty of those informants have been working in Kuwait for six years;ten of them have been working in Kuwait for eight years and the other ten informants have been working for eighteen years. Thirty of them hadn't been in touch with Arabic language altogether. It is the first time they work outside their home countries. Only ten of them have worked in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The researcher spent more than twenty five minutes at least conducting the written interview orally and writing down their responses. Twenty of the forty informants work as housemaids or servants, ten of them work as in a salon and the other tenare car drivers.

2.4 Techniques

The interviews were conducted orally yet they were written in order to have both a hardcopy (the written transcript) and a soft copy (the audio form). Each interview consists of 50 items with the first fifteen items are designed for clarifying the personal data. The whole interview describes a complete profile of the informant.

3. Analysis and Discussion

In the following, the researcher is going to focus on sketching the main characteristics of the phonology of Arabic pidgin in Kuwait (section A). Section (B) sketches the lexical features of the Asian pidgin Arabic (APA). Section (C) briefly discusses it lexicon.

3.1 Phonological Features of Asian Arabic Pidgin

The phonology of Asian Arabic pidgin is characterized by significant inter-speaker variation due to the influence of the speaker's first language. This type of inter-speaker may be found in other pidgins like the Romanian pidgin of Arabic (Avram, 2010), English Japanese pidgin (Goodman 1967: 51) or Chinook Jargon (Romaine 1988: 120, 121).

Let's consider some characteristics typical of Asian Arabic pidgin speaker with Indian as first language.The most eminent phenomenon is that vowel length in Asian Arabic pidgin is not distinctive in certain lexical items:

- Whda (Eng. a woman) --- Ar. Wahda

  Hout (Eng. to put) --- Ar. Hut

- Aba Heeb (Eng. I love) --- Ar. Ana Heb

It is clear from the previous example that there is no clear distinction between short and long vowels. This phenomenon is attested in other types of Arabic lexified pidgins and creoles (Owens 1989: 12; Avram 1995: 77; Miller 2002: 32; Naess 2008:42, Avram 2010: 21)

Avram (2010: 21) has detected that the marked consonantal phonemes of Arabic are either replaced or lost. The following are some examples.

1. In word – final position the fricative glottal is substituted with approximant glottal /h/ه/or / a /or/Ø/

- Yerua "Eng. to leave" < Ar. Yeruh

- Hut "Eng. to put" < Ar. Hut

- Ahb "Eng. I love" < Ar. Aheb

2. The reflex of the voiceless glottal stop / / and of the pharyngeal voiced fricative/ ع /is Ø

RUS (Eng. bridegroom) --- <Ar. Arous.

Ma t raf (Eng.you don't know) --- <Ar. Te'raf

raf (Eng. I Know) --- <Ar. A'raf

The fourth prominent phonological feature of the Asian Arabic pidgin is the reflex of the voiced velar fricative /g/ which is replaced by /g//gh/ (غ)

Sogol "work" < Ar. sˇugˇul (Shughul)

Another distinctive feature of the Asian Arabic pidgin is the replacement of the velar plosive /k/ instead the pharyngeal fricative /kh/ (خ) which does not exist in English language.

- Kalas (Eng. finished) --- < Ar.Khalas.

- Kashmi (Eng. my nose) --- < Ar. Khashmi

Also, the substitution of the pharyngeal fricative /kh/ with the glottal approximant /h/

- Halas (Eng.Finished) --- < Ar. Khalas.

The absence of "shadda" or "doubling" in standard Arabic is one of the most important feature of Arabic pidginized language. The so-called "emphatics" are replaced by plain consonant.

- halas (ready or finished) --- < Ar. Khallas.

Finally, the geminate consonants of Arabic undergo degemination.

- Sita (Eng. six) --- <Ar. Sitta.

- Sitaas (Eng. sixteen) --- < Ar. Sitta.ash'r.

3.2 Lexical Features

It is clear that the core vocabulary of Asian Arabic pidgin is very small. It doesn't exceed 200 words. Goodman (1967: 54) comments on the scarcity of vocabulary in pidgins that it may be induced by its speakers' time and again stipulated new vocabulary items according to the needs of very specific situations", but "these items did not remain in the permanent lexicon".

One of the most prominent lexical features of Asian Arabic pidgin is the scarcity of vocabulary which leads to using English words or a mixture of English and Arabic words in the same sentence.

- Ana Bebi (Eng. My baby)……< Ar. Tefli.

- Ana Chrishtan (Eng. I am Christian) --- < Ar. Ana Masehi.

- Ana Hindo (Eng. I am Hindu) --- < Ar. Ana Hindousi.

- Ana Huzbnd (Eng. My husband) --- < Ar. Zougi.

- Bink (Eng. Pink) --- < Ar. Wardi.

In spite of the scarcity of vocabulary in this pidgin and the small size of its lexical items, we can find several doublets and /or synonyms / synonymic series.

- Ma yebi (Eng. I don't want) --- < Ar. Ma yebi.

- La Areda (Eng. I don't want it) --- < Ar. Ma Aureed.

Another important lexical feature of the (AAP) is the reanalysis of boundaries between morphemes in words. no

fixed morpheme boundaries in Arabic is used in the Asian Arabic pidgin.

- Muzen (Eng. Bad) --- < Ar. Mu Zain (Not good).
- Sismik (Eng. What's your name) --- < Ar. Shu Ismik.

This phenomenonof reanalysis of the morpheme boundaries is found in other pidgins or creoles of Arabic language (Versteegh 1984: 121; Naeseó 2008:26; Avram, 2010: 33).

3.3 Syntactic Features

Asian Arabic Pidgin has certain distinctive syntactic features which characterizes many Arabic language related pidgins.

3.3.1 Noun Phrase

Gulf pidgin Arabic in general and Asian Arabic pidgin in particular is characterized by the absence of plural markers (smart 1990:93). Plurality is not notified through the addition of "at" or "oun" in Arabic such as Mou'alem (singular) "Mou'alemat / Mou' alemon (plural) <English. Teacher (singular) --- teachers (plural).

- Sita   sana (Both are singular) (Eng. Six years) (Both of them are plural)
- Sitas   Sana (Both are singular) (Eng. Sixteen years) (Both of them are plural)

Another important syntactic feature of Asian Arabic pidgin is that the dual form of noun is replaced by structures with the pre-posed (cardinal normal "two"), as in most of other Arabic-lexified pidgins (smart 1990: 107; Avram 2010: 23)

- Ana fe itnen patcha
- Eng. Two child

    Two children

An exception of this rule is the only class of numerals is that of cardinal numerals. No distinction of gender is shown and irrelevant in form.The dual form of cardinals is replaced by structures with two.

- Sita sana   itnen miya

    Six years   two hundred

    Six years   two hundreds

In addition, the pronouns is poorly developed thus we find only two personal pronouns in the Asian pidgin of Arabic. Therefore, the forty informants consistently use only two pronouns:

- Ana-------Eng. I (first singular)
- Ana-------Eng. You (second singular)
- Ana-------Eng. I study

Concerning pronouns in the Asian Arabic Pidgin as one of the Arabic lexified pidgin and particularly Gulf pidgin Arabic (smart 1990: 108) is the use of single demonstrative. "Haza" or "This".

- Haza nafarat zen

    This men is good

    "These are good men"

- Haza nafar Zen

    This man is good

    "This is a good man"

3.3.2 Verb Phrase

Verb system in Asian Arabic in Asian Arabic pidgin differs from standard Arabic as they are invariant in form.

- Ana Shughul

    "I work" ----1st singular pronoun

- Inta Shughul

    "I work" ----2nd singular pronoun

- Nafarat Shughul

"People work----3rd singular pronoun

One of the most prominent features of Asian pidgin Arabic in its verb system is the use of copula.

- Ana fi doctor----Eng. I am a doctor
- Ana fi Ma'loum----Eng. I know

The lack of possession or inexistence of certain thing "I don't have / there isn't (aren't) are both expressed by using "maku".

- Ana maku Shai----Eng. I don't have anything

Negation is expressed by means of an invariant ways which all occurs before the verb.

- Ana Ma fi ma'loum

   Ar. Ana la aa'reef

   Eng. I don't know.

This in contrast with certain Arabic dialects like the Egyptian dialect.

   ----Ana Ma'rafsh

   Eng. I don't know.

The most prominent syntactic feature of Asian Arabic pidgin –concerning its verb system- is the absence of tense and aspect markers. Therefore, the only way we can decide tense and aspect is to depend on the context.

- Ana rua

   Eng. I go
- Inta rua

   Eng. You went.

It is clear that the same verb form is used to represent two different tenses.

Multifunctionality is one of the most important syntactic features as a result of the lack of inflections as well as the small size of vocabulary.

- Ana Shughul---- Eng. "to work" "works" "worked".

Like Roman Arabic pidgin and other Gulf Arabic pidgin, Asian Arabic pidgin is characterized by the morphological reduplication. This reduplication may be done with words English origin or Arabic words.

- zen (Eng. good, well)
- zen-zen (Eng. Very good, very well)
- sem sem (Eng. similar)
- sawa sawa (Eng. together)

Avram (2010: 29) views that reduplication is common in both Arabic pidginized language as well as Roman pidgin Arabic. It serves rhetorical and stylistic purposes

4. Conclusions

Pidgin language is simplified and makeshift languages. It is mainly developed to fulfill certain needs. People who have language in common yet they need to interact and communicate with others for trade and other reasons. It is worth noting that pidgins are charactized by the scarcity or the limited amount of vocabulary and structures. People who use pidgin use their native languages as well.

Avram (2010: 33) states that pidgin languages undergo successive developmental stages on the basis of linguistic criteria. Three stages distinguish pidgin; 1) Pre-pidgin which is also called jargons or minimal pidgins; 2) Stable pidgins; 3) Expanded (or extended) pidgins. In each one of these stages, a pidgin has its distinctive set of phonological morphological, syntactic and lexical diagnostic features.

Versteegh (1984 as cited in Kremers, 2005: 1) claims that modern Arabic colloquial undergo through certain developmental stages; 1) the process of pidginization, creolization and decreolization.

Asian pidgin Arabic is one of the Gulf Arabic pidgins and it resembles "Araboid" languages. According to Owens (2001: 352 as cited in Avram 2010: 35):

   "a language that belongs to the Arabic complex is an "Araboid"

> Language and "members of the Arabic complex may be forms
>
> of Arabic, though they need not be"

On his analysis, central Asian Mixed Arabic is not

> "a form of Arabic, since it has undergone too many changes,

both quantitative and qualitative, to be regarded as a form of

> Arabic" and "creole Arabic is genetically related to Arabic in
>
> some sense, though itself not a form of Arabic –that is, it is a
>
> different language". (Owens 2001: 352)

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