

Language variation and change in sultanate of oman

Linguistics, Language



Arabic, the sixth largest spoken language in the world, which consists of 186, 000, 000 speakers around the globe and being the central language of the Middle East, is one of the most significant languages in this century.

Sultanate of Oman which is an Arab nation and its national language is standard Arabic may not make up much of those 186, 000, 000 speakers but it surely has and maintains an essential part in the Arabic language.

In this paper I will be discussing language variation change in Oman, focusing on Gender, Social Class and Religion. I will be especially look at the change in the use of vocabulary, dialects and tone used by the people of Oman. The Sultanate of Oman which is located on the southeast coast of the Arabian Peninsula and has borders with UAE, Saudi Arabia and Yemen is one of the biggest countries in Middle East in terms of its land area. The reason I'm selecting this country as my main focus is because I have lived there for almost 18 years and thus I've had the opportunity to closely interact with its people and language.

The Sultanate of Oman has a very rich culture and follows the monarchy ruling approach. The first king was His highness Said Al Said and later on and till date his son, Sultan Qaboos Bin Said. In the early days, Oman was ruled by the Portuguese and then later on by the British. These two ruling parties left a huge impact on many aspects of the country, including language. Addition to that during the 19th century Oman took a lot of influence from East Africa, which included Tanzania and Kenya.

Poole (2006) said " These links between East Africa and Oman are evident today African features of some Omanis and in the use of Swahili in the

Sultanate, particularly among 'Zanzibari Omanis', who may have been born in East Africa or else can trace their family history to that region. " This influence leads to the addition of more languages in Oman and the main one being Swahili. Other languages which are spoken all around Oman are Baluchi and Farsi and English which is also the official second language of the country. English has official approval as the second language of Oman " Poole (2006). As a result, different varieties of Arabic and different languages are spoken all around the country. Even though Oman has a low population rate compared to other Middle Eastern countries, it has number of regions in the country; Governate of Muscat, Dhakliya, Sharkiya, Wusta, Dhofar (salalah), Batinah (Sohar) and Mussandam. Muscat being the capital of the country has a cosmopolitan society which means that all types of Arabic varieties are spoken there, including Hindi as well.

As the Indian Ocean is attached, Oman took a lot of influence from India and many local Omanis understand Hindi. [" Indian varieties of English used in Oman often exhibit the lilting intonation patterns sometimes labeled ' Bombay Welsh"'] Poole (2006). The other main region which is the Dhofar region has taken the Yemeni Arabic influence because Yemen's border touches the dhofar region. There is another rare dialect which exist, called the Jabali which is spoken by the people living in the mountains and " speak a variety of unique South Arabian languages that are not mutually intelligible with modern Arabic. Minority groups speak Arabic" (Anonymous). There are number of varieties which exist in the Arabic language especially in Oman but the two chief divisions of Arabic are Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic. Classical Arabic is the old Arabic, which originates from the

holy book, Quran. While modern standard Arabic on the other hand is used in the current era in various domains such as home and work place and media as well. This paper will be focusing more on Modern Standard Arabic in Oman.

Initially when the first king was ruling the country, Oman was not able to mark its existence strongly due to the methods the king had adopted. Few people really recognized Oman as a country and the people of Oman and the economy of Oman were not able to grow at the same level as rest of the Middle East. It was just recently when the present king took the throne; Oman was able to grow in various ways. Out of many factors which were developed immensely, I personally believe education was given the most importance by the current Sultan.

At the moment Oman is ranked 126th out of 183 countries for having a literacy rate of 81.4%. For instance there was a time when there were only two schools which were controlled by the expatriates but now Oman has number of government and private schools and universities and one huge well reputed university-Sultan Qaboos University which is funded by the Sultan. The reason I mention this fact is that I believe education plays a very important role when it comes to being fluent at any language be it even the mother tongue.

In addition to that, it supports my first main sub topic which is gender. Gender is defined as a variety of characteristics used to differentiate between males and females, and to sign the masculine and feminine attributes. Linking gender and Arabic will lead to

other variables such as education and age which I will be discussing below. In the whole of Middle East, we can clearly see that men are usually more dominant in many aspects. However in recent times we can see a change in how women are treated and given more importance. In the case of Oman, one can see this change clearly.

By promoting education, the sultan not only allowed girls to attend school but also offered them jobs in the government. This change has definitely influenced Oman as the literacy rate of women aged 15-24 in Oman rose from 75% in 1990 to 97% in 2005. (Reem Bassiouney, 2009). Also currently Oman has the highest number of women ministers compared to other Arab countries. All around the world all languages have certain words which are only used on a specific gender, for example in Arabic if you want to address someone by saying "you", we would say "inta" for a man and "inti" for a woman.

Thus this establishes a difference between the two genders and the language differences that exist. In Oman, women are generally expected and seen in the household, doing regular chores and taking care of the kids. Girls are less likely to be found using slang or even vulgar ways of speaking unlike boys and especially younger adolescents. When Oman was underdeveloped and there was no sign of literacy, these women would just interact with their family members and learn whatever is being taught to them. Now things have changed and women talk and work freely. This has brought some significant changes in language use in Oman.

For instance, if we compare two women from the same tribe but one is educated and lives in the city while the other still lives in the village, we will see that the tone and the words both of them use will be different. Example: the woman from the tribe would greet another lady with a long hello which will be " Asalam le kum wa rahmat ul wa bara kato" in a high pitch, while the other lady will have more of a mellow tone and greet with just " Asalam le kum". This might not always be the case, but as far as what I have observed this is what is happening these days.

Commonly women in Oman who have not been provided with formal education are likely to speak in a higher tone and perhaps use vernacular vocabulary. The men in Oman are considered to be very kind and generous in behavior. However depending to whom they are communicating, they will use certain words and even change their accent. If a group of friends are talking they will use a lot more slang, regardless of what age group they belong to but if they are talking to their elders we will see that they would use prestigious dialects and make it formal as much as possible which is the similar case in women as well.

Back in the days, men would interact in a more strong tone with harsh words which in today's modern Oman it might be considered as rude as well but this was just a way of expressing the masculine side and power of the man. Jones and Ridout (2005) found " [Of equal importance in the discussion of recent developments that follows below is what Fredrik Earth characterizes as Omani male society's powerfully internalised " ideology of politeness," 4

which turns out to be more than just a matter of superficial grace and elegance, but integral to a sense of social identity"]

The next topic we will be focusing on is social class. In Oman one's identity and from where which tribe or family one belongs to, has tremendous importance for the people. Omanis do not have the caste system but have a hierarchy of families, which divides people and as a result shows where they belong socially. The top of the hierarchy we have the Saids, which come directly from the Sultans family. Under them we have the Al Busaidis and so on. In Oman a person's social status is judged by identifying which tribal family one belongs to.

The use of language in these different tribes only starts varying if we keep going down in hierarchy. The group belonging on the top uses the prestigious Arabic consisting of modern standard Arabic, while the lower class would use the Bedouin Arabic. Aside from Arabic, we will focus more on English under this topic. As mentioned above, English has been made the second official language of Oman after Arabic due to various reasons which is one of the main language change we can see in this society.

Even though I have observed, most Omanis including the youth are not able to speak English fluently. Speaking English in Oman, reflects your social standing and education level, so if one speaks English fluently he or she is considered to be from the upper class. As (Jabour, ..) found English language is associated with many stereotypes and issues. Social status and levels are also associated with learning English. Wealthy people take advantage of their high status in most aspects of life whether in employment or education.

Many wealthy people may have lower score on their national exams, but may still get access to higher educational opportunities and in turn develop better English skills by virtue of their class standing. From the above findings we can clearly see that English in the omani society has a lot of importance as it is connected with one being educated, getting a better job and just generally being respected in the society. Islam is the official religion of Oman and most of the population consists of Ibadhis followed by Sunnis and the Shias.

According to US department of state " Non-Ibadhi and non-Sunni religious communities individually constitute less than 5 percent of the population and include various groups of Shiite Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Christians" (Oman, International Religious Report, 2007). As known the language used in Islam is Classical Arabic in holy book of Quran and hadiths and thus even regional ceremonies and prayer classical Arabic used. According to Reem Bassiouney, In Arab countries, religion is not seen as an individual's personal choice but more as person's identity and " family affiliation". 2009). Thus we will not see a huge change or variation in religion in Oman. Addition one other main reason is that unlike other religions such as Hinduism or Christianity which have different holy books, Islam only follows one book since the origin of the religion and till now. This gives less chance for the language used in religion to change. Having said that, we can still point out minor details the three Islamic groups have. As Hoffman (2004) found " Ibadhi Muslims complain that although they read the literature of all sects, non-Ibadis hardly ever look at Ibadhi literature".

This shows that even though this group has their own work, not many people are aware of it and thus the new generation just follows and reads what the sunnis and shites have provided which leads to less variation between language use. According to western thinking, Islamic women are suppose be covered at all times and just working at home at all times. Addition that it is also interpreted that Islam does not have any women right and that they are always under mens authority.

To change such concepts from the peoples mind and show them the true role and Islamic women has, many educated Omani women wanted to take the advantage of knowing English language to tell and explain the other societies what they do not know about them. They would like to share why they believe in Islam and what they see as the real message behind the religion. They expressed concern over how the media is delivering a distorted picture of Islam and over the lack of awareness about the prophet Mohamed, his life, and his morals. Jabur, 2008) In conclusion I think that there has been number of language changes in Oman in many aspects. In Arabic itself and the use of English language all over the country is the main change one can notice in this society. Oman as a country is very much stable, compared to other Middle Eastern countries and is developing in various ways which gives the people of Oman the opportunity to learn and diversify themselves more. The importance of education in this country will surely make Oman stand out and this shows the beginning of a successful nation.

However we can say that this is just the beginning and in future we are likely to see more language changes in this society due to more exposure the people will get and the recent boom in tourism. More influences from different societies will occur and Oman will be an impressive cosmopolitan society. As I was conducting my research on this paper I also realized that not many research and studies have been performed on Oman, which indirectly shows that a lot more is yet to be discovered and can be learned from this nation. I expect that the English language will be the dominate language in Oman within a few decades.

Sadly to say, the Arabic language might lose its users, its elegance, and its influence on the Arabic culture and individuals, but English might help them in overcoming their obstacles and constraints. (Jabour, 2008). This last statement leaves the reader with a thought provoking feeling that maybe the country which is known to keep its tradition and values intact is losing its official language while on the quest of developing as an educated society. On a personal note I disagree as living in this society I strongly believe that Omanis, no matter how educated or modern they get will always remember their mother tongue and