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Language as one of the targets of COVID-19: A sociolinguistic study

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Abstract

Coronavirus, officially known as COVID-19, is a global health crisis that has been threatening the lives of people like no other disease did before. It is identified as a pandemic disease, in a short time from its very first appearance. COVID-19 has been attacking all the social aspects of life, not only people's health. Language, as being one aspect of social life, is, as it is hypothesized, a target too. Languages all over the world have been affected in a way or another. The current study seeks to tackle the different ways that such a global crisis may affect languages. It investigates the

changes that have been motivated by COVID-19 in a selected language, namely the Iraqi Arabic dialect. It also gives a general glance on some other languages. Further, another central aim is to enrich the sociolinguistic discussions concerning the bidirectional effect of language and society to one another.

Adopting a sociolinguistic perspective, this study presents a short review of literature on its main parameters and it, then, discusses and analyzes the forms of linguistic change as a result of the pandemic COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords: Language, Society change, Covid-19, Coronavirus, Iraqi Speech Communities

1. Introduction

Within few weeks, a pandemic disease technically referred to as COVID-19 has reflected itself noticeably and intensively in the linguistic area of diverse speech communities. Changes such as additions of new vocabularies, associating new senses to pre-existing words and expressions, retrieving old-words to use, etc. have been apparent in languages; the matter which proves COVID-19 to be worth studying.

This study investigates such changes in the linguistic code of the Iraqi Arabic dialect with few references to other languages. So, the main aim of the study is to show the unprecedented effect of COVID-19, as a social aspect, on languages taking the Iraqi Arabic dialect as the data. Also, the study adds supportive evidence to the literature of sociolinguistics about the bidirectional effect of societies and languages to one another.

The data analysed and the information discussed have been collected from a natural environment by the researchers themselves. The crisis is ongoing during the time of writing this paper and, consequently, the data can easily be recorded, collected, and verified.

Study methodology is as follows: (1) a literature review is going to be stated on concepts related to the core of the study; (2) the collected data of Iraqi Arabic dialect is analysed and discussed; (3) a glance on other societies is given by providing randomly selected samples; (4) a reference is made to the effect of COVID-19 on dictionary makers and the sociolinguistic motivation for that; and (5) conclusions are put forward.

2. Language and Society

One of the core discussions of sociolinguistics as a field is the relationship between language and society, more specifically, the question of which affects which. As so far, Wardhaugh (2006: 10) ^[9] summarizes that there are four theories on the relationships between language and society.

The first theory discusses the effect of society on languages. It states that the social structure influences or determines the linguistic form and/or behavior. Evidence supporting this view concerns the age-grading phenomenon. It is whereby young children speak differently from older children, and in turn, children speak differently from mature adults (Hockett 1950:423) ^[4]. The second theory adopts an opposite view to the first. It believes in the effect of language on the way speaker views the society and engages in it. The evidence to support this view is found in Spair-Whorf hypothesis (Wardhaugh, 2006: 10) ^[9].

The third theory promotes for a bidirectional relationship by which language and society influence one another.

Scholars supporting this theory believe that “speech behavior and social behavior are in a state of constant interaction” (Dittmar, 1976: 238) ^[3].

The fourth theory assumes that there is no relationship between linguistic structure and social structure. Each of them has its own independence. Developments, changes, and whatever else in each of them happens independently. The evidence to this approach, as literature states, is the Chomskyan statement of the asocial approach to linguistics. The current study, however, may provide some evidence supporting the view that society affects language. The crisis of a pandemic like COVID-19 has led to changes within languages all over the world. This can show that any small change in whatever society can reflect in changes in their language. Yet, the changes themselves may vary from society to society, to some extent, as a result of in-group differences of each speech community from the other. On the other hand, some details of the study may serve as evidences to the view that society is affected by language. As it is going to be clarified later, the success of spreading knowledge, introducing people to the details of the new disease and educating them depend on the availability of enough lexical items and means of expressing related ideas in addition to the proper employment of the needed diverse linguistic codes, i.e. the languages that can be understood by the largest number of people. This is proved through the direct and insisting need to invent new words and to draw attention to some linguistic phenomena, such as bi/multilingualism and diglossia. Based on these, the current study believes in the third theory, that is, the bi-directional relationship of language and society.

3. COVID-19 Crisis

COVID-19 is an infectious disease which is caused by a newly discovered species of coronavirus. It was first reported in December 2019 in Wuhan City in China. Then, it has spread all over the world and has been reported as a pandemic by WHO in the 11th of March 2020. Later, by assessing the likely number of COVID-19 deaths, it is suggested that the virus may have hit even harder than the authorities initially thought (webs source 1). Moreover, till the moment of writing this paper, the virus has been reported to have no treatment or vaccine. Thus, people all around the world have been advised by the authorities to stay in isolation. Even more, many countries have declared restrictive measures, such as curfew, lockdown, or stay at home orders to contain the pandemic at a local level.

Dealing with the unforeseen challenges caused by COVID-19, the pandemic has taken a significant toll on people all across the world. It has affected all aspects of life; it has extended its effects on the political, religious, economical, educational domestic and every other aspects of life. Based on these facts, this study suggests that language, as one central aspect of social life, is also affected by the pandemic.

4. Linguistic Reactions to COVID-19: Analysis and Discussion

It is a very rare phenomenon to see such changes in such a short period of time and in many linguistically divergent societies all at once. COVID-19 has extensively reflected itself in languages on many levels; on the level of use, lexical meaning and others. In this study, the focus will be on the changes in the Iraqi Arabic dialect in particular. It is necessary to mention that some of the effects are universal;

others are community specific. However, they are as follows:

1. Naming the Disease: As one essential way of communication between people in all societies, naming is an integral process. It helps people to identify and distinguish things surrounding them. Besides, it helps people to establish their social behaviour. Just like everything else, with the first appearance of COVID-19, it has been given names, globally. Naming diseases, specifically such a global disease, is a very important step; it allows people, as it is stated in the World Health Organisation website (web source 2), to discuss "on disease prevention, spread, transmissibility, severity and treatment". Thus, it is one central, and may be the first, step to save societies and the lives of people. This point can show the effect of language on societies, alongside with item 7 below.

The first name used for the disease was "2019 novel coronavirus". This name was announced by the World Health Organization. Later, the final version of the official name "COVID-19" was announced. It is an acronymic form in which CO stands for *Corona*, VI for *virus*, D for *disease* and 19 for *2019*. This name is the jargon (see item 3 below for the definition of jargon) term which is mainly meant for the specialists. The term, however, is used as the key word for the journalists' coverage of the disease as well. Other names which are also used in the Arabic Media coverage are "الفيروس التاجي" - el-vīrūs el-tagīī (means: crown virus) and "الفيروس المستجد" - el-vīrūs elmūstājd (means: the novel virus). Moreover, another newly established jargon is announced which is the name of the virus that causes the disease. Officially, the virus is named "SARS-CoV-2" This name is chosen because the virus is genetically related to the coronavirus responsible for the SARS outbreak of 2003." (Web Source 2)

For ordinary people in Iraq, the term "كورونا – Kūrūna" is the familiar name. For those with some higher educational status or those who want to show involvement or higher knowledge, the term "كوفيد-19 – Kūvid-nineteen" is the one used. On the other hand, very little people may know about the name of the virus itself, namely SARS-CoV-2.

2. Activating Euphemism: One essential reaction to the disease that is made mainly, but not exclusively, by the elders is the avoidance of disease name mentioning. The name of the disease has been treated by some as a taboo term. Allan and Burrige (2006:242) argue that lexical avoidance behaviors often result in a recursive process by which euphemistic replacements for avoided forms come to be established. Euphemism is the substitution of unpleasant term with one that is less bothering or more pleasant. According to Linfoot-Ham (2005, 228), euphemisms are powerful linguistic tools that “are embedded so deeply in our language that few of us, even those who pride themselves on being plainspoken, ever get through a day without using them”. In Iraqi society, people tend to use expressions like "الميتسمى" el-maītsamā (literally means the thing whose name people dislike to mention), or "المرض" elmarad (the disease- a general expression that may soften the danger feeling). Such terms help them to ease the situation.

3. Applying Jargon in Everyday Communication: Another essential change that occurred in speech communities in general, and in Iraqi speech community in particular, is the calling of jargon terms to everyday use, i.e. regulating their

use in everyday communication. It is a kind of change on the level of language use. Jargon terms are technical or specialized terms understood and used only by the members of that specific specialization.

As a result of the global COVID-19 crisis, many jargon terms have come to use by ordinary people. Such terms include:

- COVID-19: which is a scientific name, and it is now globally used by everyone.
- *أوسيلتاميفير* - Oseltamivir: a kind of antiviral medication (for some time people discussed the ability of this antiviral against COVID-19)
- *جائحة* - Ja'ha: means pandemic
- *حظر تجوال* - hader tijūāl: means curfew
- *إغلاق الاماكن العامة* - ighlaq elamakīn elaaḥm: means lockdown
- *المصاب صفر* - el-mūsāb sifr: means patient zero
- *التنفس الصناعي* - eltanafūs el-sina'y: means CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation)

4. Associating New Senses to Pre-existing Words: For long and since their very establishment, many words have had fixed senses, whether positive or negative. By the COVID-19 crisis, some of the mostly used words have got changes in some of their senses. For instance, the expression "التباعد الاجتماعي" - eltaba'ud el'jtīmā' ī; - social distancing" is used to express a negative situation that is unwelcome to people. With the spread of COVID-19, however, it has acquired the opposite implication: social distancing, in this context, is considered a very welcome and important safety factor against COVID-19. It is now highly desirable and recommended by the public, officials, and even sociologists. It is not only words and phrases that have got a change at the time of COVID-19, some metaphoric expressions have gone through a similar influence as well. For instance, one widely used metaphoric expression is the use of "الحرب والعدو" - el-harb w el'adw – war and enemy". On the one hand, "الحرب" - el-harb – war" is used to refer to the seriousness and the danger of dealing with this pandemic, i.e. COVID-19. On the other hand, "العدو" - el'adw – enemy" is used to refer to the virus itself. It is defined as an enemy since it targets all the human beings without exception.

5. Raising Awareness of Different Senses of Some Words: some Iraqi Arabic words, like many words in all languages, can be used in different senses, even in the opposite sense of its first sense, i.e. the literal meaning. For instance, the terms (*إيجابي* - eṭjabī / *سلبی* - sīlbī) (mean positive/negative) can be, each, used in two different senses:

a. in the usual cases, *إيجابي* - eṭjabī is an adjective used to describe some positive thing. This sense is widely spread in the public spaces and between ordinary people. For example, if someone wants to admire the work of another, they can say "خطوة إيجابية" - khutua ijabiya" (which literary means: a positive step- and generally means : a good step). Even when a woman makes a pregnancy test, *إيجابي* - eṭjabī (positive) means a good thing (she is pregnant). On the other hand, *سلبی* - sīlbī – negative stands as the opposite to *إيجابي* - eṭjabī and, thus, raises negative feeling when heard.

b. In medical contexts, the two words (*إيجابي* - eṭjabī / *سلبی* - sīlbī) have the opposite meaning to the one mentioned in (a.) above. That is, *إيجابي* - eṭjabī - positive means a bad news. For instance, a cancer test shows that the person is sick of cancer so the test will be marked as positive to cancer! So, it reveals a negative feeling. On the other hand, *سلبی* - sīlbī- negative is

the one that raises positive feeling. This sense is the one that is used in COVID-19 tests. A person with COVID-19 will confirm positive in his/her test.

Most people, in ordinary days and in normal cases, do not think about sense (b.). Everyone uses the term in almost all cases with sense (a.). Some people even may not know or comprehend the second sense! However, with the COVID-19 crisis, the second sense has turned to be heard and mentioned daily. Thus, many people have newly become aware of sense (b.) for these words and some other have turned to be confused about the exact meaning of each term!

Even more, some people have made jokes on these senses. For instance, some young say " *أني حظي بكُلشي سلبی بس بكورونا* " - *إيجابي* - Anī hadī b kulshī eṭjabī eīla bkuruna sīlbī" which literary means " My luck is negative in everything, except with Coronavirus, it is positive" which generally means " I always have a bad luck". It is a joke that is built on playing-on-words.

6. Recalling Lexical Items into Extensive Use, Again: an interesting effect of the COVID-19 crisis on language is the activation of some lexical items that has lately been much less frequent. In Iraqi speech community and specifically in 1980s, Toyota Corona (called as *كرونا* - Crona in Iraq- see below for more explanation) and VW PASSAT (called as *برازيلي* - Barazili in Iraq which is an employment of metonymy) were two of most used cars in Iraq. In fact, there were very few car brands in Iraq at that time because of the limited trading. Later and after 2013, trading has increased and all brands of cars have become available in Iraq. As a result, Corona cars has been of less interest and, as a result, their name has been very rarely used in the public ground. Suffice to clarify that Iraqi people used to call corona car as "كرونا" - krwna. They used to pronounce the name with only one waw (w). That is, Iraqi people have made some "phonological adaptation" by eliding the first vowel sound in the word. Some people may even do not know the original name of "krona" cars.

With the COVID-19 crisis, Iraqi people have started to re-use the word "كرونا" - krwna", but this time to refer to the disease as a means of making fun and reducing the tension and fear. The reason behind this is the phonological similarity between the two terms "كورونا" - CORONA and *كرونا* - krwna". Moreover, the same process is applied to the VW PASSAT car that was known by the Iraqis as " *برازيلي* - Barazili" as mentioned earlier. For instance, in the current time of COVID-19, Iraqi people ask questions like: " *خائف من البرازيلي؟* " - khaif min elbarazili? – are you scared from the barazili (intending COVID-19) also " *أني ماخاف لا من كورونا ولا من البرازيلي* " - Ani ma akhaf la min el min kuruna wa la min el-Barazili which means " I am not scared neither from Coronavirus nor from Barazili". These examples are both humorous uses making some kind of wordplay.

However, the reason to use Barazili in a similar sense to Krwn's in the age of COVID-19 is that both cars share the same history for Iraqi people and are related to the same period. Both "Barazili and Krwna" had gained fame in the 1980s as they had been imported by Iraq government to be gifted to army officers and sergeants and as they were two of the very few available high quality cars of that time. Thus, recalling one of them naturally leads to the activation of the other.

Other words which have also been retrieved to use in the Iraqi language include: (*سارس* - SARS), (*إيبولا* - Ebola) and (*طاعون*)

- Ta'wwn). These are the names of similar diseases that have spread at some period in the near past. They were also infectious, but found to be less infectious than COVID-19

7. Differentiating Status: people from different educational levels speak about the disease in different terms. One clear example can be seen in the different ways that people consciously or sub-consciously choose to name the disease. For instance, those people with middle or high-status use either "COVID-19" or "Coronavirus" to indicate the disease and talk about it; lower status usually choose the general terms "Corona" but mostly pronounce it as "Carona" with a long a, /a:/ or they use "Kruna".

8. Differentiating Formality level and Register: the distinction between the different names of the disease "COVID-19, Coronavirus, Corona, Carona and Kruna" are applied to different levels of formality and they seem to be context-dependent in their use. The three first names "COVID-19, Coronavirus and Corona" are used in formal situations and in contexts such as media, universities, etc. On the other hand, "Carona and Kruna" are restricted to informal contexts and general contexts. Moreover, the name Corona seems to have neutral use. It is okay to use it in different contexts and levels of formality.

9. Drawing Attention to Multilingualism and Diglossia: one of the main steps of fighting against COVID-19 is raising people's awareness and educating them about the disease and instructing them on how to deal with and prevent from it. To do so, languages are the main weapons. Based on this fact, one central discussion has raised about the necessity of using and covering all the existing languages in directing instructions to people, even the languages of the minorities. For instance, in Iraq, TV propagandas, posters and social media messages and others employ the three local languages of Iraq (Arabic, Turkmen and Kurdish) to clarify the instructions, and even almost all the dialects (such as Musili dialect, Baghdadi dialect, etc.) are used. Moreover, emphases have also been to the need to give instructions using both high (H) and low (L) varieties of all languages.

Talking on fighting COVID-19, on this concern, the current study may also direct the authorities to the need of one more group of people, namely the illiterate one. Illiterate people need to be also taken into consideration in such disasters. Such people may not understand the standard language of Arabic; they may even find difficulties in understanding instructions in their own dialects. Thus, it is recommended to use more pictures and live captures than pure languages, both on TVs and posters in streets and all public spaces. Moreover, the use of pictures can also serve as one solution to the difficulty to covering all the languages of all multi/bilingual communities.

10. Initiating Some Universal Set of Lexical Items: it is actually quite interesting to see people from all over the world and from linguistically diverse speech communities use a set of, though limited, exactly the same words. For instance, "COVID-19", "CORONAVIRUS", "VIRUS", "quarantine", "pandemic", "patient zero" and some others, words like these are used in all communities by (maybe) at least the quarter of the populations in a context or another. These popularized lexical items, by time, may lead to the borrowing of some or all of these words by some languages

and keeping them as loan words.

A website on the wide world web named "citizen sociolinguistics" (web source 3) in an article predicts the future stating that: "we have been able to create a new global Lingua Franca for the COVID-19 era". And, "a generation from now, we will look back on this time and remember our shared language"

11. Drawing Attention to Lingua Franca: lingua franca is the language that is used as a means of communication between people who speak different languages. With the COVID-19 crisis, two different ideas are discussed concerning the lingua franca:

9.1 A group of writers/people/others have stood against the lingua franca concept when it has come to the activities related to "COVID-19 instructions". As it has been discussed earlier in point (8.), they considered the adoption of lingua franca languages or official languages in instructing and educating people on the disease as a risk to those people's life who may not know the chosen language.(Web source4)

9.2 The other group has discussed the need to promote a lingua franca that is doctor-patient specific. Such a lingua franca, as it is hypothesized, will better help the medical staff in emergencies from all over the world in doing their job, communicating with patients, providing better health care and achieving better and faster results.(Web source5)

6. A Glance on Other Societies

The current study finds it useful to refer to other communities as well though the study is specific to the investigation of Iraqi Arabic dialect. This glance on some selected samples from other linguistic varieties can serve as evidence for the widespread effect of COVID-19 to almost all the languages of the world and it may also serve as a guide for other linguists who might like to investigate the effect of COVID-19 on their own linguistic code.

Starting with Arabic dialect, Egyptian people have also had experience with retrieving almost-dead words into use again and with somehow double-meaning, for instance the name of an old kind of chocolate that has no longer found in the public. In Egypt and specifically in 1947, a kind of chocolate named "Corona" was known. Because of the coincidence of having a homonymic relationship with the "Coronavirus" disease's name, people have retrieved the word into use again and have tried to make the situation humorous (Web Source6) Going a little farther to the Indian speech community, the same old-word retrieving process is done. In India, it is again the name of the car "Toyota Corona". It seems that India has also a unique past with the car in which it was having fame for some period in the past (Web Source 7)

In the English speech communities, the main effect of COVID-19 to the English language is the addition of the new vocabulary item "covidiot". It is a newly invented word that combines the two preexisting words "covid" + "idiot" to have one new word that describes a person who does not follow medical and official instructions about the public safety and health, specifically during the COVID-19 crisis. The term has been invented as a result of people's reaction to a picture posted on social media showing a person buying an over-amount of toilet paper during the time people have started to store things for emergency times (Web Source 8)

7. COVID-19 and Dictionaries

One of the controversial topics about the linguistic effect of COVID-19 nowadays concerns the fast addition of new words to dictionaries of diverse languages. On Media, many websites have discussed the unprecedented speed that dictionaries interact with this new global disease and wondered about the reason.

As cited in the WGBH website (web source 9), Peter Sokolowski, editor at large for Springfield-based Merriam Webster, has reported that normally adding words into dictionaries take a long time. When a new word comes into use and researchers identify it, the word goes through several steps to make sure that it is worth adding so it takes a very long time to be added. He mentions that "phonetics experts study its pronunciation. Etymologists examine its history. Definitions are drafted, edited and refined. It's a careful, deliberative, intentionally slow process", to add words into dictionaries and he mentions as an example that the word AIDS that appeared first in 1982 was only added to dictionaries after two years

However, the process with COVID-19 terms, and/or related terms, is unexpectedly different. In just few weeks, COVID-19 pandemic has expanded the English, the Netherlands, among others, vocabulary.

To explain this exceptional process of speeding up word addition to dictionaries, Sokolowski (ibid) says: "what we've never seen is essentially all of the top look-ups in the dictionary relating to one story..., top fifty or so words all have some connection to" COVID-19 crisis. Thus, the dictionaries have normally made their response.

This exceptional treatment of COVID-19 crisis indicates that members of speech communities can control their languages. It is up to them to decide what words must be added to their vocabulary list and what must not. It is their use that determines the content and the conventions of their language, and even the languages of other linguistically diverse speech communities to some degree.

10. Conclusions

The current study has arrived to the following points:

1. Every change in societies reflects itself in the languages of those societies. So, society influences the structure of languages in different degrees.
2. COVID-19 has unprecedented effect on the diverse linguistic varieties of the world in a very short time, when compared to other global and non-global diseases.
3. Language is a main step to comprehend issues related to the social behaviour. Dealing with COVID-19 is impossible without forming a language (set of vocabularies) for it. So, language affects societies too.
4. Based on conclusion 1 and 3, language and society in a bidirectional relationship.
5. The Iraqi Arabic dialect is highly affected by the crisis of COVID-19. It shows changes in vocabulary addition, re-association, retrieving, and regularizing. Also, it contributes in drawing attention to sociolinguistic concepts such as multilingualism, diglossia, lingua franca, and indigenous languages.
6. The languages of communities other than the Iraqi are also influenced by COVID-19 crisis. It seems that the effect is as global as the spread of the disease itself.
7. For a sociolinguistic reason, i.e. because of the community members' united interest, the long routine of adding new words into dictionaries has been ignored and

COVID-19 related new words are added in an extraordinary speed: only in few weeks!

8. One of the best ways of educating and instructing people on COVID-19, as the current study suggests, is the extensive use of pictures and live captures rather than languages. This is of benefit on two levels: (i) to include illiterate people into consideration, and (ii) to solve the problem of impossibility of covering all the languages and dialects of all communities.

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