(Dis)agreement-Making Strategies in Arabic News Interviews: Question Design and Code-switching

I study the sociolinguistic strategies of (dis)agreement and (dis)alignment that participants use in formal institutional settings (broadcast news interviews) in Arabic. I focus on two distinct but related sociolinguistic strategies a) question design and b) code-switching from Standard to local varieties of Arabic that the interviewer (IR) uses to to agree or disagree with the interviewees. Very few studies have looked at how adversarialness is achieved in interviewers in Arabic; their findings resemble findings on Western interviews (Clayman 1988, 2001; Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Heritage, 2002) where IRs express disagreement by controlling the floor and turn taking (Migdadi et al., 2013); prefacing their questions (Al-Rojae, 2003); using rhetorical rather than info-seeking questions (Issa, 2010); and/or alluding to third parties (Alfahad, 2013, 2015) when addressing their interviewees (IE). While these studies offer great insight, certain questioning patterns combined with code switching from Standard to local varieties of Arabic has not been studied as a strategy that speakers employ in the disagreement making process.

While there is an abundance of studies on Arabic diglossia and code-switching in formal settings, their findings suggest there is generally a stability in the indexicalities associated with the High (Standard) and Low (nonstandard) varieties (Mejdell, 1999; Albirini, 2010; Bassiouney, 2014) particularly that switching to nonstandard varieties is done, among others, to index a less serious and less formal function (Albirini, 2010); a local authentic, in group affiliation (Holes, 1993; Eid, 2007; Soloman, 2008; Matar, 2009; Bassiouney, 2012). However, little or no research has been done on the role of codeswitching when combined with other disagreeing and disaligning strategies in formal talk (broadcast news interviews specifically). Additionally, existing studies on code switching or adverserialness in formal settings have rarely dealt with multi addressees nor the notion of reciprocity, and hence the effect on the interaction. Therefore, I treat the speakers’ uptake and their perception of and response to the disagreement strategies being used as an integral part of the (dis)agreement making process.

The data come from Al-Jazeera’s popular news interview program, the ‘opposite direction’ that discusses major political and ideological events in the Middle East. Whereas it is hosted by the same IR, the program invites two new guests with opposing views: one is in the “favorable” position with AlJazeera (hence IE-F) while the other in the “disagreement” or “disfavorable” position (hence, IE-D). This becomes significant when different strategies of (dis)agreement and (dis)alignment are systematically used by the IR with the different speakers whose position either aligns or disaligns with him/the show and the institution.

By combining Conversation Analysis (CA) with theoretical tools from linguistic anthropology (particularly Bakhtin’s ‘Voice,’ ‘Double Voice’), Goffman’s ‘footing’, Gumperz’s ‘contextualization cues’ and Conversation Analysis ‘(dis)preferred’ responses, ten hours of interaction have been transcribed. Attention is given to both linguistic and nonlinguistic features that speakers resort to in this (dis) and (dis)alignment making process. I argue that in their construction and negotiation of a (dis)affiliative identity both with the immediate participants and with the overhearing audience, the interviewer strategically uses different question format and code choice when expressing alignment versus disalignment with the different addressees. The switch from the expected formal variety (SA) to a local one is not necessarily done to achieve an in group affiliation; on the contrary, speakers seem to switch to their local variety upon hearing and perceiving disalignment or disagreement with them or with their institutional affiliation. For instance, the IR tends to switch to local Arabic to quote a third party when expressing disagreement. Other examples include using “laish” (لِيْش, levantine for why) versus “limatha” (لَمَثا) to index disagreement versus real questions respectively; the “laish” prefaced examples are perceived and responded to as confrontational and accusatory rather than real info-seeking questions.

The findings in this presentation shed light on an understudied phenomenon in Arabic sociolinguistics, namely, the role of question-answer design in Arabic in expressing (dis)agreement versus eliciting news/information. It also is a contribution to the study of Arabic diglossia and code switching in that it offers support to recent studies on the changing role and function of the local varieties (e.g. Sayahi, 2014) in formal settings to index a disagreeing voice, which is done based on the participants’ perception of and response to the code choice being used in the (dis)agreement making process.

(Subfields: Sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, diglossia)