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Language Use among Emirati College Students: Examining the Attrition Rate and Variation across Genders

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Abstract

During the last decade, the Arabian Gulf region has headed towards an increasing use of a ‘Pan Gulf vernacular’, “...a homogenized form of ‘Gulf’ speech not identifiable with any particular Gulf community” (Holes, 2011: 130), where new words are introduced or borrowed from neighboring Gulf countries while many others disappear from the local lexicon. This paper is an extension of a previous study (Balfaqqeh, 2015) in which the Emirati vernacular was investigated in order to identify which words had become obsolete from Emiratis’ mental lexicon and been replaced by what were considered to be more accessible words borrowed from neighboring Gulf countries. The method used is twofold: a vocabulary test generated from two popular Emirati TV serials: ‘*Sh-hafan*’ (1970), and ‘*Firi:d3*’ (2006). In addition, a Likert scale survey measured students’ perception of their use of the Emirati vernacular and the possible reasons that may have led to the disappearance of some of these words. The aim of this study is to measure the attrition of Emirati vocabulary among young people and measure their attitudes (mostly opinions) towards language use and language change. The research also concentrates on multiculturalism, the media and social media, and the economy and each of these areas’ possible roles in driving language change in the UAE. Finally, the researcher considered whether masculinity and exposure to culture and heritage play roles in the subjects’ competence in Emirati. The analysis of the data confirmed that despite the male

subjects' exposure to culture and heritage, it did not have any impact on their competence or use of the Emirati vernacular. It also confirmed that the subjects are aware of the impact of the above-mentioned factors and their implications for identity.

Introduction

Over the last decade, the United Arab Emirates has witnessed a shift in its vernacular towards a new hybrid, described as "...a homogenized form of 'Gulf' speech not identifiable with any particular Gulf community." (Holes, 2011: 130) This phenomenon which has had a huge impact on the Emirati youth has manifested itself in the vernacular used in recent drama productions. The use of this vernacular has, as a consequence, popularized certain words that were used in different Gulf countries and led to the dismissal/downgrading of other words that were formerly used by local people.

This follow-up study expands on an earlier paper titled, "Generational Change and Language in the UAE: The Desertion of the Emirati Vernacular" (Author, 2015) which aimed to measure the impact of "...modernity, globalization, the economic crunch and the extensive use of English by the new generations" on the use of the Emirati vernacular (Balfaqeeh, 2015:17). The current study aims at looking at gender as a possible variable versus the aforementioned factors. Thus, this study investigates whether masculinity has granted young male Emiratis more exposure to their own culture and heritage which may, therefore, have helped them to preserve their Emirati vernacular and expand their lexicon. It also seeks to establish whether both genders hold the same views as far as 'word loss' or 'word use' are concerned.

This study is based on the data collected through the use of two vocabulary tests and a survey. These vocabulary tests were based on the scripts of two popular Emirati TV shows; the first is '*Sh-hafan*' which was broadcast in the late 1970s, and the second is a popular animation called '*Firi:d3*,' a media artifact first introduced in 2006 in which the protagonists were four old female characters that represent varieties of the vernacular currently used within the UAE. The survey is divided into six parts; the first is created to gather the student's demographics, while the second part measures students' perceptions and attitudes towards their use of the Emirati vernacular versus L2, namely English. The survey also aims to capture the students' insights into the reason behind this language change; thus, it focuses on the possible impact of the media in section three, on social media in section four, followed by

globalization and multiculturalism, and finally in section six, recommendations are made based on the results.

The main research questions that were explored were:

- Is this generation conscious of any linguistic shift in the UAE?
- Can this vernacular shift be traced/ documented in the two Emirati TV serials?
- What are students' attitudes towards language use in the UAE?
- What are the most influential variables that may have led to this linguistic shift?
- Can gender be considered as an influential variable that may have an impact on students' use and knowledge of the Emirati vernacular?

Language change in the UAE

Since the founding of the United Arab Emirates in 1971, the Emirati vernacular has gone through a generationally-based shift, a shift that can be attributed to a variety of causes. Among the reasons reported in the literature are the “semi-permanent population of South Asian workers and South East Asian nannies” (Holes, 2011:130) and the daily interactions among UAE residents who come from more than 200 countries. This has led to the creation of a new pidgin or, according to Holes (2001: 141), of ‘a business language’ used to communicate with the massive Asian population residing the country.

Another factor contributing to this change concerns the reforms that took place a few years ago within the Emirati educational system whereby English was introduced as the medium of instruction in all public universities and public schools. A final component was the global financial crisis which had an impact on the regional drama industry, as seen through the newly encouraged collaborative productions of TV serials and soap operas.

This caused viewers to experience a shift from serials and shows that represented individual GCC countries linguistically, socially and culturally, to linguistic and social hybrids of all GCC countries. This shift popularised words that used to be identified as Kuwaiti or Emirati, and at the same time created a hybrid vernacular that is understood and used across GCC countries.

Another instance of vernacular shift is the massively popular code switching among youngsters which Holes refers to as "a complex (that exists) about their knowledge of Arabic grammar, which they are ashamed to admit is poor. They often say they feel more at home writing English..." (Holes, 2011: 140).

This phenomenon was strengthened by language use in social media, where code-switching has been identified as a global phenomenon changing the way people describe and use languages. Crystal (2001) stated:

The web is an electronic medium, and this is seen also in its multi-linguistic inclusiveness... It offer(s) a home to all languages - once their communities have a functioning computer technology. This has been the most notable change since the Web began. It was originally a totally English medium... but with the Internet's globalization, the presence of other languages has steadily risen (Crystal 2001 in Peel, 2004:81).

Despite this presence, Arabic is no longer used as such. We see "...students often write Arabic 'in English' whilst mailing and chatting –i.e. they write Arabic employing Roman characters and attempt to replicate the sounds phonetically 'in English'"(Peel, 2004:88). As a result, the use of Arabic has receded in favour of English which can be heard and seen in the oral and electronic communication between school-age and university students. Furthermore, social media has had an impact on the communication among the members of households such that it has limited the verbal interaction among family members keeping it to a minimum.

The Issue of Language and Gender

Gender has been studied by a number of linguists as a variable that may have an impact on language use, especially when it comes to spoken discourse (John et al., 2012: 322). Although the study of gender might be considered by some as an overstatement of the possible impact of biological differences, others believe that these biological differences might have imposed different social roles that consequently led to the creation of “two separate subcultures” (Almazroui, 2010:13). According to McElhinny, “[G]ender designates a set of categories to which we can give the same label cross-linguistically or cross-culturally because they have some connection to sex differences” (McElhinny 2003 in Alkadi, 2012: 118-119).

Lakoff (1973) led this discussion to explore the differences between the genders in the way they carry themselves linguistically as well as the implication of language use on their social statuses. Whereas “girls use language more collaboratively... boys use language to

show competition and their position in the group” (Almazroui, 2010: 14). Also, research shows that “females are more flexible in embracing and using new forms of language than males” (Almazroui, 2010: 14). According to Chavez, “Particularly in foreign language learning, females are often pre-conceived as superior to their male peers” (2000:1023), a belief that makes language study a “woman’s area” (Nyikos, 1990:274). On the other hand, when it comes to the use of the English vernacular, research shows that boys “adopt newer features of language as language changes” (Almazroui, 2010:15) while girls like to use the standard version of the vernacular. However, it is widely known that the “study of Arabic from a gender perspective is still at its beginnings in spite of the fact that Arabic sociolinguistics has attracted the attention of scholars worldwide” (Sadiqi 2006 in Alkadi, 2012:121).

***'Firi:d3'* and *'Sh-ḥafan'*: A dramatic representation of national identity**

'Firi:d3' or 'The Neighbourhood', is a 3D animated series that was created in 2006 and instantly became popular among the younger generation. The show successfully managed "to reflect the local customs and values of Arab Gulf culture and lifestyle" (Hussain 2009 in Fallata 2012: 10) and vernacular and to popularize words that may have diminished due to modernity and all the previously mentioned factors. *'Firi:d3'* which was described as "the UAE's answer to *The Simpsons*" (Hussain 2009 in Fallata, 2012: 10) allowed "... individuals to integrate their own perceptions and meanings of their local society" (Fallata, 2012: 10-11).

A more simplistic but similar TV serial is *'Sh-ḥafan'* created in 1978 and named after the main character in the serial who was known for his stinginess. The serial is currently considered as a landmark in Emirati drama production since it marked the first attempt at drama in the United Arab Emirates.

Both shows have also been considered as representative of the Emirati national identity, in the 70s and nowadays. This was why they were chosen as benchmarks to examine language change in the UAE.

Methodology

In this study, two different methods were used to investigate the questions at hand, vocabulary testing and a Likert scale survey. Seventy (70) students, evenly distributed between male and

female freshmen, were provided with two vocabulary tests in which they were asked to define or provide synonyms for a set of words. Students were given the freedom to choose to answer in either Arabic or English. They were also asked to mark words whose meaning they were unsure of with a question mark and to cross out words they had never heard of. Each vocabulary test was composed of 30-35 words. The selection of these words was based on the script of ten (10) episodes from each show, '*Firi:d3*' and '*Sh-hafan*,' and the author identified and chose pure Emirati words which were not shared with other Gulf countries. The students were informed of how these lists were created, and since '*Firi:d3*' was recent and popular among the target age group, the students had an assumption that the '*Firi:d3*' list would be easier for them to answer.

The second method used was a survey that included thirty-five (35) statements measured through the use of the Likert scale. The survey was divided into six (6) sections. The first section was comprised of questions about demographics to establish a link between the vernacular use and students age and gender. The second section was designed to measure the students' general perceptions about the current status of the Emirati vernacular and the reasons they think might be behind the alleged change. In this section, the author also asked the students about their use of L1 versus L2, which in this case was English, in terms of fluency, their ability to express themselves and the reasons behind their personal decision to favour one language over the other. The third section examined the impact of the media and the students' perceptions of the vernacular currently used in new, hybrid, pan-Gulf drama. Section four concentrated on the effects of social media on the Emirati students' vernacular, and their overall use of language. Meanwhile, section five measured the effect of multiculturalism and globalisation on students' use of both the Emirati vernacular and Modern Standard Arabic. The last part of the survey outlined a number of recommendations to measure students' preferences. Students were also given space to express any additional thoughts in relation to the topic.

Results and Discussion

'Firi:d3' and the Revival of the Emirati Vernacular

According to the results of the research, the female students identified 32.2% of the '*Firi:d3*' list correctly; they were not sure about 32.2%; and finally, they identified 34.1% as

new words. In other words, students classified a third of the word list items under each category. On the other hand, the male students identified 30.6% of the same correctly and declared they were not sure about 27.8%; finally, they identified 41.3% as new words (see fig.1a).

In the *'Sh-hafan'* vocabulary list, some variations were evident among the three categories. The female students identified 21.1% of the items in this list correctly and declared they were not sure about 27%, a percentage very much similar to the percentage of words that they were not sure about in the *'Firi:d3'* word list. However, they identified 53.2% as new words, which was the highest figure of all and was twice as many new words as in the *'Firi:d3'* word list. As far as the male students were concerned, they identified 21.4% correctly, a very similar percentage to that of the female students. They were not sure about 32.2% and identified 45.9% of the words as new words which is the highest figure among the three (see fig.1a).

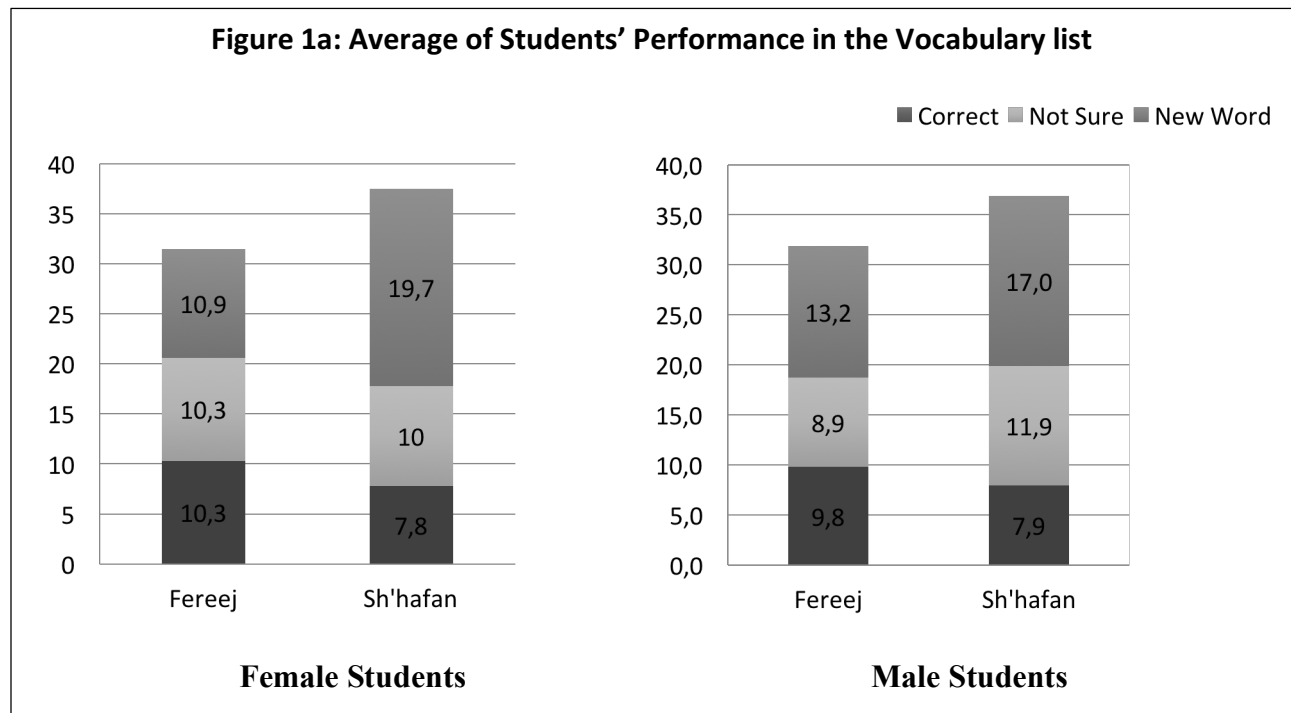


Figure 1a: Average of Students' Performance in the Vocabulary list

If the students' overall performance in both lists is merged and considered, a huge variation between the students' individual performances becomes noticeable. The ratio of correct words seems to be the lowest in the results of both genders, in comparison to the

number of words they identified as new, which is the highest among all the results (see fig. 1b). In other words, known words purely from the Emirati vernacular formed the smallest part of the results, while new words formed the largest part.

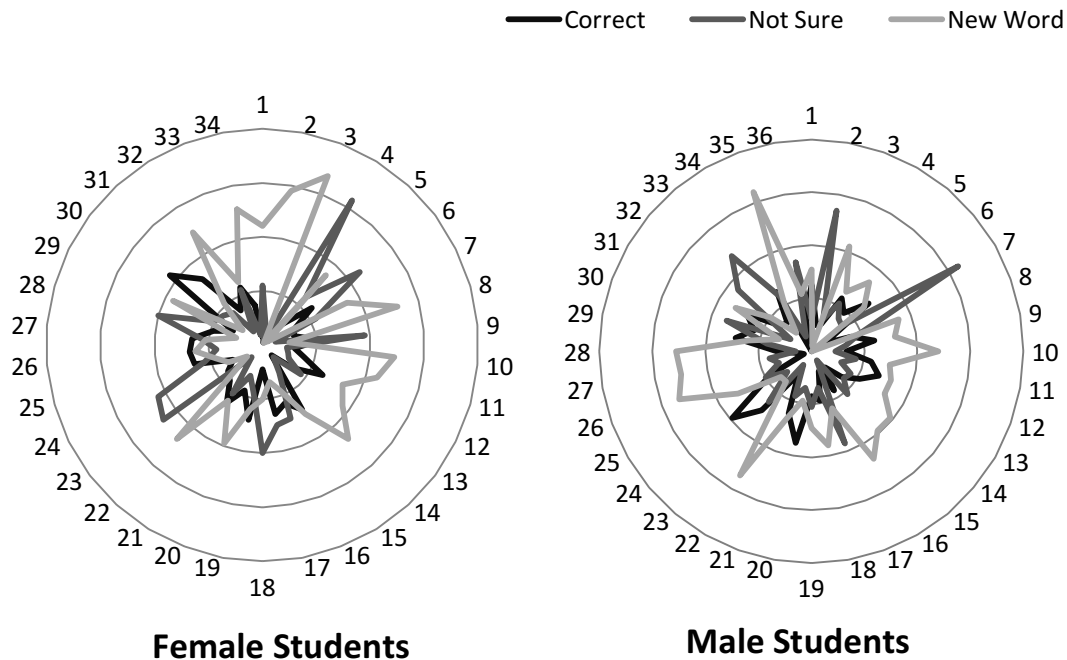


Figure 1b: Students' Overall Performance in Both Lists

Interestingly, the female students had an assumption which some of them expressed verbally as they handed over their tests and which supported the researcher's hypothesis, that the male students would perform better than the female students. This assumption was attributed to Emirati culture in which Emirati men seem to relate their culture or heritage to manhood, which makes it a matter of pride for them to sound like real nomads (Bedouins). This has led to the popularization of many traditional outdoor activities such as fishing, hunting and desert camping and has also created peer pressure to act and sound like a Bedouin. This lifestyle may not be that appealing to the opposite gender, thus curtailing these experiences and perhaps keeping the female students from preserving their vernacular. Consequently, the researcher anticipated a significant difference in the overall performance of the students, particularly between genders.

While the researcher, as well as the students, expected both genders to do better with the '*Firi:dʒ*' vocabulary since it was more recent and popular in comparison to the other

show, students still did not recognise a third or more of the words which were used in 'Firi:d3' (34.1% female, 41.3% male students) and were unsure about another third (32.2% female, 27.8% male). In other words, an average of 68% of the words that could be identified as strictly Emirati words were not understood by the targeted population. This means that the media represented by 'Firi:d3' is making an attempt to popularize the use of the Emirati vernacular among this age group.

The Survey: Locating the Emirati Vernacular

The first section of the survey aimed at measuring students' perceptions on very general statements related to the use of the Emirati vernacular. The results show that students' perceptions vary according to gender; whereas 64.9% of the female students strongly agreed/agreed that they did not speak their grandparents' vernacular, only 48.6% of the male students strongly agreed/agreed with this statement. On the other hand, merely 8.1% of the girls and 24.3% of the boys disagreed/strongly disagreed with this statement, representing a quarter of the overall males' sample. A similar variation appeared when both genders responded to the following statement: "I cannot describe my language as a pure Emirati vernacular." Comparing male and female students, 32.4% and 45.9% respectively strongly agreed/agreed, while 37.8% male versus 24.3% female students disagreed/strongly disagreed (see fig.2).

The vast majority of both the female (73.5%) and male students (62.2%) strongly agreed/agreed that language use is generational, a fact that reflects their awareness of the shifts that may have accrued between their use of the UAE vernacular and that of their elders (See fig. 2).

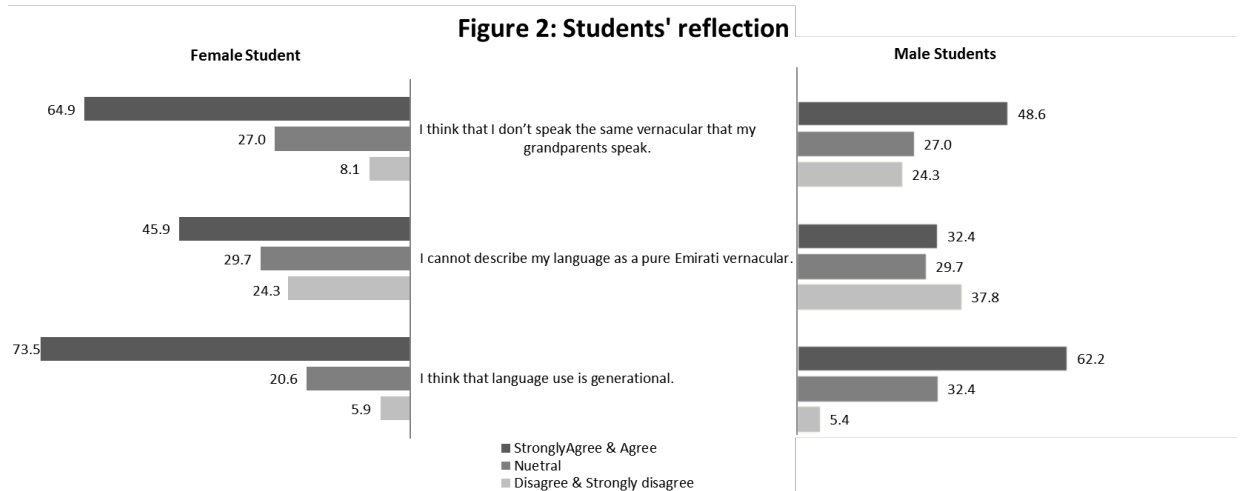


Figure 2: Students' Reflections

Students were also asked whether this vernacular shift could be attributed to the language used in the media, age difference, the use of technology and social media, or to their own low competence in Modern Standard Arabic/the Emirati vernacular. Both genders seemed to agree generally on all the factors except for the last one. Of the girls, 81.3% and, of the boys, 73% strongly agreed/agreed that the use of technology and social media could be a reason behind this shift; this was the highest ranking among all the causes. Age difference was rated second highest by the female students (78.1%), while the male students rated media as the second strongest reason (70.3%). An average of 66% of the students (67.6% male / 64.5% female) strongly agreed/agreed that this shift could be attributed to their low competence in Modern Standard Arabic/the Emirati vernacular. This factor was identified as the third most influential factor by male students, while female students identified it as the least important among all. The variation between the two genders on this point seems most apparent when examining the percentage of those who chose neutral (12.9% of the female and 24.3% of the male students) versus those who disagreed/strongly disagreed (22.6% of the female and 8.1% of the male students) (see fig. 3).

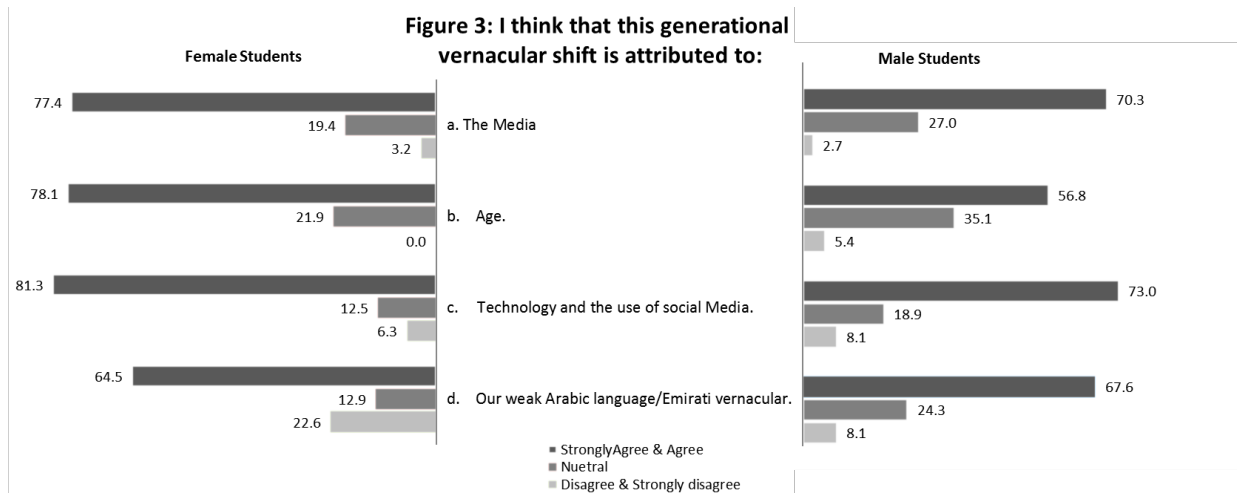


Figure 3: I think that this generational vernacular shift is attributed to:

The fact that the use of ‘technology and social media’ came first as a possible reason for the shift in the use of the Emirati vernacular for both genders reflects an ‘international phenomenon.’ This generation has not just redefined communication, but youngsters have really liberated themselves through the use of different forms of semiosis such as symbols, emoji’s, Instagram pictures, and video and audio short notes in order to convey their messages more quickly and easily.

As mentioned earlier, it was the last factor, ‘competence in modern standard Arabic/the Emirati vernacular,’ that generated variation. This can likely be attributed to two different reasons: students’ ‘self-awareness’ and their ability to admit that this might be the real reason behind the shift. Those who were neutral (12.9% of the female students and 24.3% of the male students) might not have possessed a real awareness of their command of the Emirati vernacular, or might never have stopped to assess it. The second reason might be their hesitancy to admit such a low competence, considering that they have established an immediate connection between their Emirati vernacular and their identity.

The author also asked students to evaluate their use of the English language in comparison to their use of Arabic/ the Emirati vernacular (see fig. 4). Of the female students, 52.6% and, of the male students, 62.2% disagreed/strongly disagreed with the following statement: ‘I use more English than Emirati words,’ while an average of 18.6% from both genders were neutral. Meanwhile, 28.9% of the female and 18.9 % of the male students strongly agreed/agreed. Similarly, when asked whether they found it easier to express

themselves in English in comparison to Arabic/Emirati, 52.8% of the female students disagreed/strongly disagreed and the vast majority of the males (70.3%) strongly disagreed/disagreed, while 25% of the females and 18.9% of the males strongly agreed/agreed. Both genders (70.6% female, 73% male) disagreed/strongly disagreed that their use of English can be attributed to their fluency. Also, both genders (87.2% girls, 83.8% boys) disagreed/strongly disagreed that their use of English is due to their low competence in Arabic/Emirati, a fact which conflicts with their earlier answers.

Surprisingly, just a quarter of the male student population (24.3%) strongly agreed/agreed that the use of English enhances their overall image in comparison to 11.1% of the female students. Meanwhile, 67.6% of the females in comparison to 48.6% of the males disagreed/strongly disagreed that they use more English words to enhance their overall image or their education.

When asked whether they do not use Emirati words because they do not know them in the first place, half of the girls' population (52.6%) strongly agreed/agreed in comparison to nearly half of the boys' population who disagreed/strongly disagreed (see fig. 4).

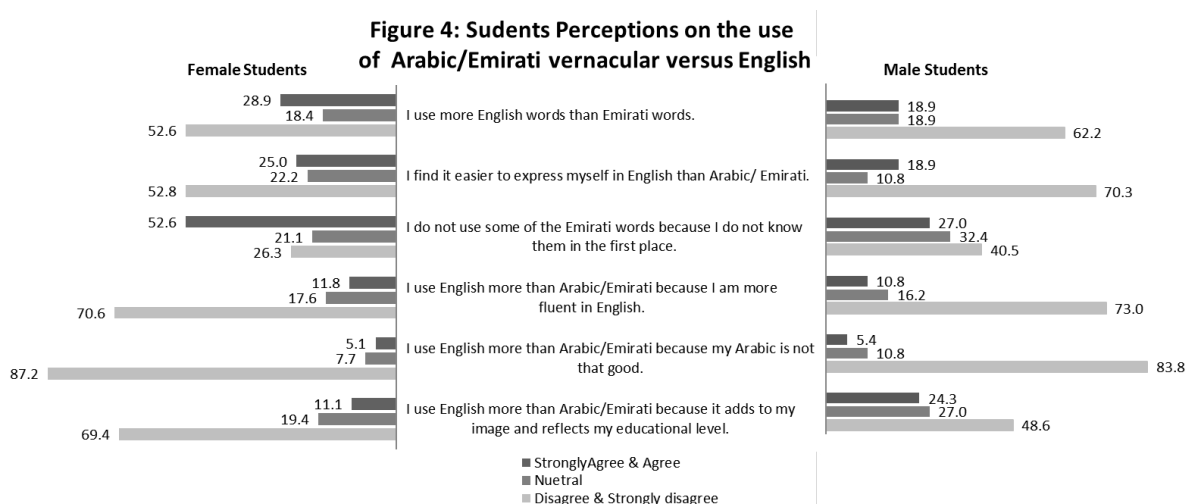


Figure 4: Students' perceptions of the use of Arabic/Emirati vernacular versus English

In addition, 52.8% of the female students reported that obsolete Emirati words designate objects that are no longer used. Yet, no female consensus emerged on the question of whether the words that have disappeared were related to professions or contexts that no longer exist, since the female population was distributed equally across the scale (38.9%

strongly agreed/agreed, 38.9 were neutral and 22.2% disagreed/strongly disagreed). Similarly, more than half of the boys were neutral when they were asked similar questions, though more male students leaned towards strongly agreeing/agreeing with both questions.

Next, in considering the effect of the media on the use of the Emirati vernacular, 58.3% of the female students versus 51.4% of the male ones strongly agreed/agreed that they would prefer watching an American TV serial to an Emirati TV serial, while more male (32.4%) than female students (22.2%) disagreed/strongly disagreed. On the other hand, 80.6% of the girls and 54.1% of the boys thought that there are very few purely Emirati TV serials. Beyond that, 65.6% of the female and 62.2% of the male students strongly agreed/agreed that such serials might not appeal to everyone living in the UAE (see fig. 5).

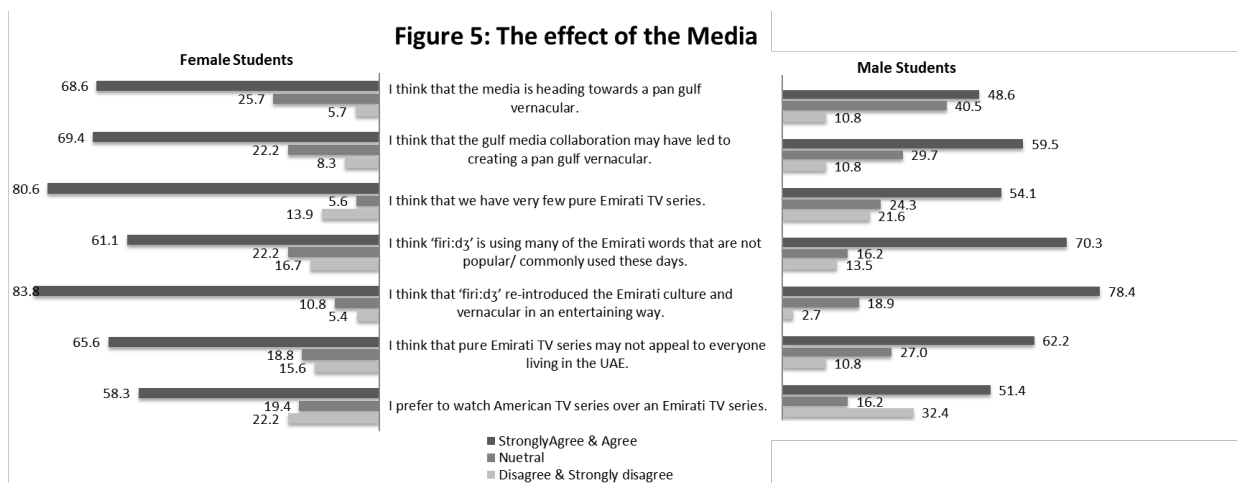


Figure 5: The effect of the Media

One of the variables of interest is the effect of social media on the students' use of the Emirati vernacular. Majorities of both the female (63.9%) and the male students (60%) expressed their preference for using the Emirati vernacular on social media. On the other hand, when students were asked if they preferred to use English, 40.5% of the female students and 31.4% of the male students strongly agreed/agreed (see fig. 6). These results shows that the female students paradoxically expressed a preference for both languages.



Figure 6: The Effect of Social Media

Furthermore, students declared that they preferred to use Arabic letters to write the Emirati vernacular (66.7% of the female and 65.7% of the male students), as compared to 23.5% of the female and 22.9% of the male students who preferred to use Roman letters. Also, 69.4% of the female and 54.3% of the male students confirmed that social media affected their use of the Emirati vernacular, while 66.7% of the female and 54.3% of the male students supported the view that social media use makes their use of their second language even greater (see fig. 6). A quick look at these results proves that gender can be considered as a variable that may affect first and second language usage. Although the overall pattern of answers seems to be similar for both genders, the numbers do vary across the two genders in such a way that a higher number of male students seems to be either neutral or unsure about the effects of social media on their language usage.

As an observer, the author questions the girls' results: a quick look at any of the local universities' student forums, or even a short visit to any of the female students' campuses in the UAE, proves that female students prefer to express themselves in English. Although one may notice frequent code-switching, the students also tend to use the Roman alphabet to communicate Arabic words in the aforementioned forums.

With massive percentages of 94.4% and 77.1% respectively, the female and male students attributed language shift to the multicultural nature of the United Arab Emirates' society. In addition, 91.7% of the female students along with 68.6% of the male students think that some Emirati words disappeared because they were replaced with English words. As well, 58.3% of the female and 54.3% of the male students strongly agreed/agreed that they

speak the same way with both their family and friends, while 31.4% of the male students and 13.9% of the female students disagreed/strongly disagreed with this statement.

On the other hand, 48.6% of the female and 43.2% of the male students strongly agreed/agreed that they do not use some Emirati words because they do not think that they would be understood. With that being said, 14.3% of the female students disagreed/strongly disagreed along with 29.7% of the males. Surprisingly, 91.7% of the female students strongly agreed/agreed that the Emirati vernacular will disappear as time passes in comparison to 62.9% of the male students. This overwhelming female consensus was surprising as it contradicts a number of their other responses (see fig. 3 & 4).

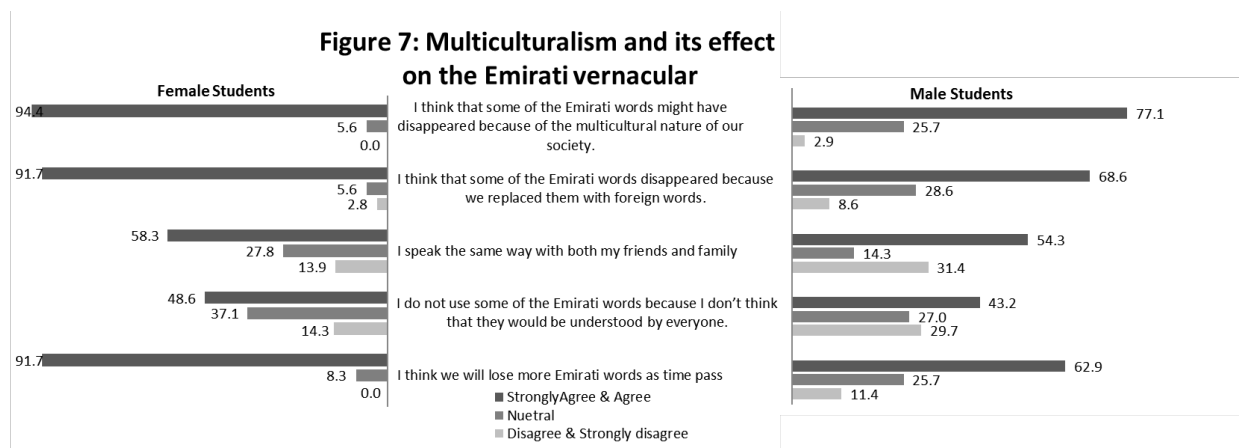


Figure 7: The Effect of Multiculturalism on the Emirati Vernacular

Finally, students were asked to express their opinions concerning a number of recommendations on how to encourage the use of the Emirati vernacular. The students strongly agreed/agreed with all of them (see fig. 8). Thus, 91.9% of the female and 70.3% of the male students strongly agreed/agreed with recommending an increase in the number of TV serials as a means of reinforcing obsolete Emirati words, while 80.6% of the female and 70.3% of the male students strongly agreed/agreed that organizing summer language camps would probably have a positive effect on the reactivation of Emirati vocabulary. Plus, 88.9% of the female versus 67.6% of the male students think that teaching the Emirati vernacular and culture should be integrated in the Emirati national curriculum; they, also, strongly agreed/agreed (86.1% of female and 73% of male students) that Emirati courses should be made available for youngsters as a means to revive the use of the Emirati vernacular (see fig. 8).

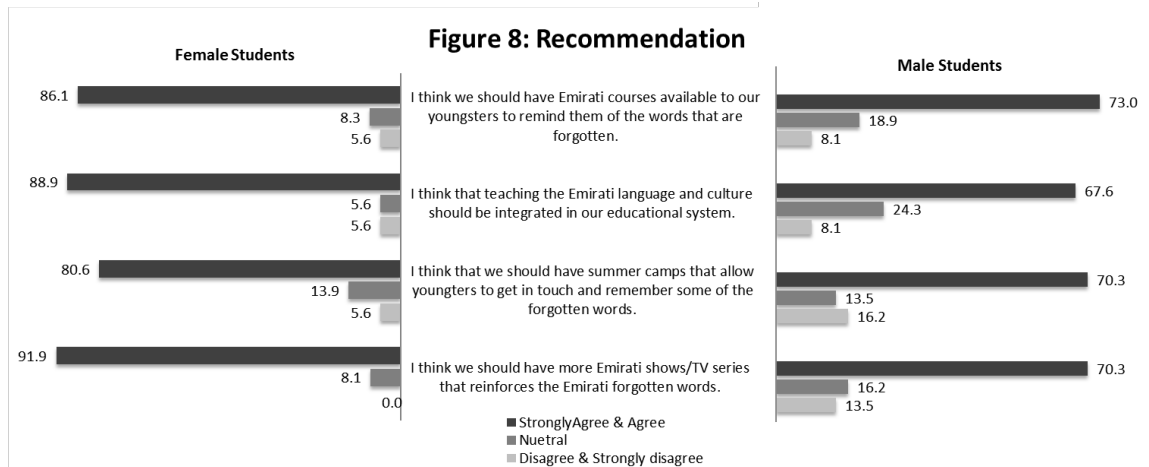


Figure 8: Recommendations

English vs. Arabic: perceptions vs. reality

From an observer’s point of view, this research has unearthed some prejudices among both the male and female students. The current status of the Emirati vernacular used is not the same across genders here in the UAE. The female students seemed to rely extensively on code switching that goes beyond the use of a few English words to the use of extended phrases and sentences. The male students, on the other hand, were attached to the use of the Emirati vernacular, which may answer the researcher’s hypothesis that the male students’ performance would and should surpass the female students’ performance. Furthermore, although more than half of both genders thought that they used more Emirati than English words, and despite the fact that the distribution of their answers on the Likert scale was very much the same, the male students overestimated their use of the Emirati vernacular in comparison to the female students. A staggering number of students stated that they were not more fluent in English than Arabic (70.6% female, 73.0% male students) and that their Arabic was not weak (87.2 female, 83.8% male students). However, when they were asked whether they found it easier to express themselves in English in comparison to Arabic/the Emirati vernacular, nearly half of the female population either strongly agreed/agreed (25.0%) or were neutral (22.2%), whereas only 18.9% of the boys strongly agreed/agreed and 10.8% were neutral, a difference which reflects the variants across the two genders. This might be seen as a sign of prejudice especially among the female students. According to Holes, “they also often have a bit of a complex about their knowledge of Arabic grammar, which they are ashamed to

admit is poor. They often say they feel more at home writing English, but like to speak in a mixture of their native Arabic dialect, and their semi-native English” (Holes, 2011: 140).

Interestingly, a substantial proportion of the male students established a link between self-image and the use of the English language and explained that they use English more than Modern Standard Arabic/Emirati because it adds to their self-image and reflects their educational level. Of the male students, 48.6% disagreed/strongly disagreed and 27% were neutral in comparison to 69.4% of the girls who disagreed/strongly disagreed and 19.4% neutral. (see fig. 4) The high percentage of those who disagreed/strongly disagreed and neutral versus our observation on students’ overall use of English and code-switching may raise another question of prejudice among the male students. While Holes’ comment on the students’ low competence in Modern Standard Arabic may be applicable to the female students, the male students’ persistency in using the Emirati vernacular could be related to their low competence in English. The male students overestimated their performance in Emirati vocabulary because they had established a link between masculinity, identity and the Emirati/Arabic language. On the other hand, they evaluated their fluency in English positively because of the economic value of the language within the Emirati society.

More male students than female students established a connection between the use of English and self-image, and thus, their continuous reinforcement of this image might have required that they conceal their low competence in English rather than emphasizing their use of the Emirati vernacular. Holes discusses this relation between image and the use of language, explaining, “...there is undoubtedly a great deal of pride in what has been achieved in the Gulf in terms of people’s general standard of living and, in a sense, this kind of linguistic ‘showing off’ is part of it” (2011: 140).

Despite the noticeably hazy self-awareness, both genders seem to agree on their ranking of the most influential factors in their use of the Emirati vernacular: multiculturalism is ranked first, the media second, and social media third (see fig, 5, 6 & 7). This ranking is another interesting finding, as the researcher anticipated that the effect of social media might be the largest of all, since TV serials and the media in general might not be as appealing to this generation as they were a couple of decades ago when they were the only source of entertainment. Also, the researcher did not anticipate seeing any form of social/self-awareness. The fact that these students, at this young age, managed to identify multiculturalism as a factor that may have contributed negatively to their use of the Emirati

vernacular is promising. However, the extent of this awareness and the depth of their understanding of multiculturalism as a concept are unknown. Interestingly, in this section a staggering percentage of students (91.7% female, 68.6% male students) confirmed that some of the Emirati words disappeared because they were replaced by foreign words. This may reflect their awareness of the impact of their use of a second language or even their exposure to many other languages in a multicultural society like the UAE.

They also identified the impact of multiculturalism as a two-way effect. Students were asked whether they think that pure Emirati TV serials might not be understandable to everyone living in the UAE; and 65.6 and 62.2% of the female and male students respectively strongly agreed/agreed. They were also asked whether their limited use of Emirati words is due to the fact that they think that they would not be understood by everyone, and 48.6% and 43.2% of the female and male students strongly agreed/agreed. These results reflect the students' awareness of the shift led by the TV serials which have started to reinforce the use of the Emirati vernacular. This reinforcement, which might have been initially conceived as a way to simplify it, is in fact an attempt to make the vernacular more accessible to the majority of those living in the UAE. Historically, the Emirati vernacular has gone through a number of simplification phases; the first one resulted in the creation of a new pidgin or, what Holes (2001) referred to as 'a business language.' The most recent simplification took place when the pan-Gulf vernacular, which can be considered as a financially-driven language change, was created.

Identity Construction

The one shared and unanticipated reaction witnessed while collecting the data was the link students established between their use of the Emirati vernacular and their national identity. Identity is defined as "fixed and stable and is what people speak of when they talk about 'who we really are'" (Baker & Ellece, 2011:58), while "...a national identity... begins as the signifier of a signified that exists initially only as a desire. With sufficient motivation, those who hold this desire can cause it to be shared by a critical mass within the putative nation" (Joseph, 2004: 5).

Witnessing the students verbally expressing their shock or their pride while handing over the vocabulary test made it clear that both the male and the female students saw this as a direct link between their personal identity, national identity and language despite the abstract

nature of such recognition. However, one of the notable differences between the two genders was the verbal cues they used to convey that link. The female students were more vocal, expressing their shock at their poor performance while completing the vocabulary list task, and they were openly critiquing themselves based on their presuppositions that their performance on this task was a reflection on their national identity. The males, on the other hand, were quieter while completing the list; they asked many questions which were mostly attempts to facilitate the task in hand. However, their blunt creation of this link was verbalized at the end of the task or while handing in the vocabulary list, saying things like, ‘That was easy. It should be; I am an Emirati.’ Similar phrases were conveyed to support the researcher’s and the female students’ hypothesis that the male students’ performance would surpass the female students’ performance. In other words, while the vocabulary list questioned the female students’ self or personal identity represented by their use of the Emirati vernacular, the male students took pride in their performance and focused on their national identity and on identity “maintenance strategies” (Weatherall & Gallois, 2005: 491).

According to Van Dijk, personal identity is divided into two parts, the mental representation of the ‘personal self’ versus the mental representation of the social self which consists of “a collection of group membership and the identification processes that are related to such representation” (2000: 180-120). I think that this research, or exercise as the students perceived it, pushed the students unexpectedly both to put these two representations face to face and to evaluate themselves. Understandably, this kind of mental process, despite its complexity, enabled them to establish a connection even at this young age between such an exercise, their personal identity, and their role in reinforcing this identity.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that language change is inevitable, countries in the Arabian Gulf find themselves facing a number of unique challenges. The first challenge is that these countries have limited cumulative experience, especially when it comes to language planning and preservation. The second is the impact of the waves of workers who were critically needed to implement the countries’ developmental plans. In addition, globalization moved these countries from being third world countries to being part of an open virtual village that is affected by each and every international social or cultural phenomenon. Lastly, the research clearly showed that the international trade market’s effect on the local economy has

contributed to the expansion of GCC countries' exposure to all other languages and cultures. All of these factors make language change not just inevitable, but also greatly expected. They also raise the value of language planning to preserve the local vernacular and ensure the continuity of its use.

This research enabled the researcher and the students involved to measure the current status of the Emirati vernacular; the fact that the students immediately recognized an abstract relationship such as that between language and identity is promising. The reaction of the students reflected more than just their global awareness, for it was substantially stronger than their self-awareness. However, their reaction gave a glimpse of their motivation to preserve the vernacular which might be one of the most effective motives behind preserving any language.

In addition, although the scope of this research focused on a limited number of factors which may have had an impact on the use of the Emirati vernacular, students showed a greater understanding of other factors that might also have contributed to this change. Also, they raised their concerns about the use of the Arabic language and whether there are any efforts to promote and preserve the Emirati vernacular through the national curriculum. Beyond that, they voiced the need to carry this discussion into their homes for two reasons: the first was to investigate the words with which they were acquainted; the second, interestingly, was to carry on this discussion with their household members. Their desire to carry on a discussion based on their experience with the vocabulary list and survey reflects their understanding of the urgency of this matter and the need to create a dialogue, not just to preserve the national vernacular, but also to preserve the national identity by all possible means. This unplanned discussion that followed the data collection reflects a realization that seems to be even more significant in the light of what this generation is going through globally.

The clearly demonstrated motivation to preserve the Emirati vernacular and get themselves out of this “awkward linguistic amalgamation” (Al-Allaq, 2014:118) seems to be the winning card in this struggle, especially given that the male students' linguistic exposure and social freedom unexpectedly has not contributed to their performance. Both genders seem to use and understand the Emirati vernacular equally. This fact emphasizes the need for real collaboration between language planning organizations and the youth to “interfere deliberately” (Wardhaugh, 2006: 357) with all available resources and utilize the motivation of the youth.

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