BOOK REVIEWS

**Arabic sociolinguistics: topics in diglossia, gender, identity and politics**, Reem Bassiouney, Washington, Georgetown University Press, 2009, xviii + 311 pp., $29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-58901-573-9

The list in the subtitle gives a better picture of its content than does the main title; the book reads in fact like a collection of distinct articles, each surveying a separate issue, with only a brief introduction and conclusion holding them together. The work is readable and well organised, and will certainly attract those interested in the language situation of the Arab world. Beginning with a short discussion of diglossia, the sociolinguistic phenomenon that first springs to mind in connection with Arabic-speaking communities, Bassiouney goes on to look in detail at the phenomenon of codeswitching, mainly between colloquial and standard Arabic, and here she is able to draw upon her own research. A brief chapter on language variation leads to a much longer one on language and gender, which looks not only at variation in relation to gender but also at such diverse issues as politeness, symbolic associations and women’s poetry. The final chapter surveys language-planning policies across the Arab world.

However, the target audience of this work is not altogether clear. We read that the book ‘addresses both students and researchers of Arabic and linguistics’, and yet that it ‘will not require any knowledge of Arabic’ and ‘does not require knowledge of sociolinguistics or linguistics’ (6). In fact, the desire to cater for a larger, non-specialist public may have led Bassiouney into a certain inconsistency of tone and content. On the one hand, we find her recounting personal anecdotes about her own failure to communicate with a Moroccan woman via Arabic, for example – which may interest the lay reader but seem too obvious to anyone with even minimal knowledge of the Arab world. On the other, we find detailed analyses of stretches of Arabic discourse unlikely to be very accessible to those with no knowledge of the language. Space is taken up with definitions of such general concepts as sociolinguistics and language policy, unnecessary to anyone except the complete novice, and the initiated may be irritated when a well-established view is presented as if it were a new idea – as when Bassiouney wonders ‘whether terms like “language” and “variety” are not political terms rather than linguistic ones’ (26), or attributes to Myers-Scotton alone the view that ‘human beings are equipped with an innate language faculty that enables them to assess linguistic choices’ (37). In short, the attempt to market the book as a student textbook, a work for researchers and an introduction for the entirely uninitiated seems to us unconvincing.

Those who do have some knowledge of sociolinguistics will find the work interesting but uneven in depth and quality. At some points Bassiouney analyses her examples in considerable detail, notably in the chapter on codeswitching. At others she provides only a sketchy discussion, as in her treatment of politeness. Here, after very little theoretical discussion, she is content to make simplistic remarks about people being more or less polite, without offering the slightest indication of how politeness could be measured, or exploring the considerations other than politeness (such as authority or the need to maintain dignity) which may motivate some of the choices she examines. Her observations on phonology also sometimes seem less than authoritative; can palatalisation really be described as ‘a rising movement of the tongue’? (158).

Bassiouney specifically claims to be offering an up-to-date survey. This is an important point, for the last decades have seen sociolinguistic changes in the Arab world, notably in the evolution of the diglossic situation. Yet, on this subject she cites papers published in the 1970s...
and 1980s in the present tense, as if they are contemporary observations. Her discussion of Myers-Scotton's concept of a matrix language is largely based on the latter's 1998 definitions and does not address the many modifications introduced since then, while her only reference to our own work on codeswitching is to a 1983 paper, despite the many later studies available.

Another issue concerns the scope of the work. To live up to the book’s title, Bassiouney makes a valiant attempt to introduce data from various parts of the Arabic-speaking world, most notably in her chapter on language policy, where she contrasts the areas subjected to French colonisation with those occupied by the British. Naturally enough, however, her own background clearly emerges and, even when she is trying to be more general, an Egyptian perspective often creeps in. Studies based on Egyptians are sometimes cited as if they can be considered representative of all Arabs (for instance, the discussion of Badawi). When talking of non-Egyptian varieties, the author sometimes feels it necessary to point out ways in which they differ from Egyptian (as when she comments on the Iraqi possessive construction). She seems to take Egyptian Arabic as a reference point and to assume that all her readers will do the same. Discussing an interview given by President Assad of Syria to an Egyptian journalist, she claims that Assad is adopting a marked code when he replies in Standard Arabic to the interviewer’s mixture of Egyptian and Standard Arabic, contrasting him with Mubarak, who also mixes the two. It would appear that she expects even Syrians to use Egyptian Arabic! Elsewhere she reports on language use in a range of televised chat shows featuring men and women from different parts of the Arab world, but then persists in classifying their utterances in terms of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic, later deciding to disregard the contributions of the women who are not Egyptian. There is of course nothing wrong with using Egyptian data for exemplification, but the book’s title does lead us to expect a more balanced perspective.

Moreover, Bassiouney’s Egypt-centred viewpoint sometimes leads her to make very dubious claims. For instance, it is surely not the case that ‘in present-day Morocco’ the Arabisants have usually been ‘educated in the Middle East, mainly at Al-Azhar University’ (224). More seriously, she is sometimes on very shaky ground when she attempts to comment on data from other parts of the Arab world. Discussing data from Kharraki/C1 illustrating an interaction between a Moroccan woman and a male vegetable seller – Bassiouney is struck by the fact that the woman addresses the seller simply by his name, Hassan, and ‘does not use any forms indicating endearment, like habibi “my love”, azizi “dear”, etc., as is often done in such interactions’ (141, our emphasis). She even feels the need to explain to us that this woman is ‘not particularly rude’ and that the seller does not respond with an insult. These comments seem totally misplaced, for in Morocco it is the endearments that would shock, not the use of an unadorned personal name. For Moroccans such endearments have connotations of intimacy that make them quite inappropriate for a respectable woman to use to a man in what is, after all, a business transaction. This trivial example well illustrates the dangers of attempting to interpret linguistic behaviour in one community in terms of the norms of another.

While the author has obviously made an effort to draw on published studies of other parts of the Arab world, there is always a danger in accepting a particular source as authoritative and unbiased. One wonders, for instance, why she lists only eight varieties as ‘languages used in Sudan’ (245), excluding the many that are used in the south – this book was of course published before the 2011 partition – and on what grounds she asserts confidently that ‘Morocco is 45 per cent Berber’ (229), citing no source, when specialists in the field have put forward widely different figures. So, while Bassiouney’s attempt to survey material from various parts of the Arab world is in itself laudable, the resulting discussions are not always convincing.

The work would also have benefited from more careful editing to remove the misprints and the grammatical and orthographical errors which are particularly abundant in certain sections. There are also some works cited in the text but not found in the bibliography.

However, despite the reservations expressed above, Bassiouney’s book provides a convenient overview of the field. She has indeed succeeded in illustrating the rich potential for further investigation and has at least raised – if not convincingly answered – the question
of whether or not (as she claims in her introduction) western-origin theories need to be modified to account for the situation in the Arab world.

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Honoring our heritage: culturally appropriate approaches for teaching indigenous students, edited by Jon Reyhner, Willard Sakiestewa Gilbert and Louise Lockard, Flagstaff, Arizona, Northern Arizona University College of Education, 2011, xii + 198 pp., $20.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-96705-545-9

Indigenous language revitalization: encouragement, guidance and lessons learned, edited by Jon Reyhner and Louise Lockard, Flagstaff, Arizona, Northern Arizona University College of Education, 2009, viii + 214 pp., $15.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-96705-544-2

‘The child shall lead the way’
Te Kohanga Reo Foundational Principle

I was very fortunate to have witnessed and studied the birth and spectacular growth of a revolutionary language reclamation/learning project as part of a post-doctoral fellowship I accepted in the early 1980s. Language immersion preschools called Te Kohanga Reo (TKR) – Maori language nests – focused on averting the rapid decline of te reo Maori (the Maori language) among the youth (rangatahi) of the different Maori tribes (hapu and iwi) in Aotearoa, New Zealand. The focus of TKR on language skills for infants and preschoolers (mokopuna), through immersion in te reo was unprecedented. Even more innovative was the process, centred on an extended-family (whanau) approach in the design, organisation and operation of each language nest. Instead of enlisting experts and aligning formal teachers with convoluted curricula/pedagogical theories, the authenticity of these language nests relied on the goodwill and voluntary efforts of the entire community – from elders (kaumatua) who offered a culturally safe environment for language and culture (tikanga) learning, to the unpaid contributions and labour of parents and youth in operating full-day immersion on a shoestring budget.

To say that TKR proved a splendid success in mobilising Maori is an understatement. From its inception in 1982, to 1994, there emerged 800 language nests nationwide, catering to some 14,000 preschoolers, and eventually exerting pressure to extend Maori immersion into primary (kura kaupapa) and secondary schools (whare kura), culminating in the establishment of language-based tertiary institutions (whare wananga). With about 60,000 ‘graduates’ of the TKR movement, the decline of te reo appears to have been curbed, thus ensuring its status as a living language. The popularity and success of TKR also contributed to (or perhaps even served as a catalyst in) the politicisation of Maori-Crown relations along the lines of Maori self-determination (tino rangatiratanga) – in effect demonstrating how theory could be put into practice, and vice versa. The concept of community-based language nests was subsequently adopted by other Pacific cultures in New Zealand, including Fijian, Tongan, Samoan and Rarotongan, and then deployed with some degree of success in a Hawaiian context (Puanana Leo).

Images of the TKR project kept dancing in and out of the pages of the books under review here. The collection of articles in Honoring Our Heritage serves to remind us how indigenous students in the USA – like the rangatahi ‘down under’ – experience difficulty in finding