Language indexes in the Egyptian context: ideologies, attitudes and linguistic realities

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According to Johnstone (2010: 31), indexical forms can imply and construct identity. The concept of indexicality refers to the creation of semiotic links between linguistic forms and social meanings (Ochs 1992; Silverstein 1996; 2003). This study aims to shed light on the associations of standard Arabic (SA), Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA), and foreign languages, especially English, in Egypt. It will offer novel and detailed trajectories of understanding diglossia and the relation between codes and identities. It will also elaborate on the concept of orders of indexes and the layering of indexes across time.

It is usually intellectuals and not linguists who control the public discourse about language in Egypt. For this reason, linguistic habits and ideologies do not always coincide. This study will provide a different perspective that examines unconventional data in relation to language ideology and attitude. Data used in this study comes from both oral and written venues. It includes newspapers, written in English and Arabic in Egypt; books; films; recent TV interviews; caricatures and posters circulated both on Facebook and various web pages. The data chosen refers directly or indirectly to linguistic codes in relation to identity. The data also shows changes in attitude and perceptions that are the result of changes in context and media genre.

The associations of ECA and SA are sensitive to context, whether this context is social, political, cultural, or even demographic and geographical. However, the associations of ECA and SA are also a matter of inclusion and exclusion, as well as a matter of the distribution of resources. It is argued that indexes are not only associations that are the product of habits, but also associations that are the product of ideologies and perceptions. The recent data analyzed in this study will provide evidence for this.

Keywords: identity, ideology, indexes.