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TRANSLANGUAGING AND ACCOMMODATION PRACTICES AMONG EDUCATED SUDANESE YOUTH IN CAIRO

This paper examines how educated Sudanese youth in Cairo navigate identity, belonging, and integration through their use of Sudanese Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, and English. Drawing on ethnographic observations and interviews, it analyzes accommodation strategies and translanguaging as mobilization of the linguistic repertoire. Interlocutor accounts indicate that (non)accommodation can be linked to spatiotemporal contexts (past, present, and imagined futures) while translanguaging enables both pragmatic communication and discursive self-positioning. By centering interlocutors' accounts, the study challenges monolithic views of language as bounded, emphasizing the creativity and criticality of multilingual practice, and contributing to research on migration, identity, and displaced Sudanese communities.

Keywords: Translanguaging, accommodation, language and identity, Sudanese diaspora, sociolinguistics, migration

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how educated Sudanese youth in Cairo use language to navigate identity, belonging, and social integration in the urban context of Cairo, Egypt. Grounded in sociolinguistics and migration studies, the research aims to capture an aspect of the lived linguistic experiences of Sudanese young adults. Methodologically, this paper incorporated participant observation with semi-structured interviews to examine how interlocutors use Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA), Sudanese Colloquial Arabic (SCA), and English across different social interactions and settings.

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The aim of this paper is to gain insight into how accommodation and translanguaging practices interact with the linguistic repertoire of our interlocutors, how they use translanguaging across multiple named languages (e.g. Sudanese Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, and English), as well as what kind of context limit/liberate their linguistic repertoires. Furthermore, we argue that the linguistic repertoire's dependence on context to which speakers accommodate is spatiotemporally layered, reflecting our interlocutors change of views on language over time, which manifest as particular embodied contexts.

1.1 Translanguaging

Linguistics, as a scientific field, is often reduced to the study of either particular, singular, named patterns of speech we tend to call *languages*, or of human speech in general – the singularly human capacity for *language*. To speak a language, such as English, French, Arabic etc., is to know its features – grammar, vocabulary, and further on orthography and stylistics. Many people on the planet speak more than one of these languages, i.e. they can deploy codes that correspond to more than one language. These people are called bi- and multilinguals, with their command of different named languages being called ‘multilingualism’.

Studies into multilingualism have at times inquired into the bi- and multilingual speakers’ linguistic competences – for example, in Sridhar’s (1996) writing on multilingualism:

“Multilingualism involving balanced, nativelike command of all the languages in the repertoire is rather uncommon. Typically, multilinguals have varying degrees of command of the different repertoires. The differences in competence in the various languages might range from command of a few lexical items, formulaic expressions such as greetings, and rudimentary conversational skills all the way to excellent command of the grammar and vocabulary and specialized register and styles.” (p. 50)

As Sridhar also notes, the multilingual’s use of language is heavily context dependent. This insight has provoked further research into practices such as code-switching, i.e. a bi- or multilinguals deployment of multiple linguistic codes within a single conversation, as a communicative strategy (Wardhaugh, 2006).

However, recent scholarship into multilingualism has shed light on certain issues regarding conceptualization of how these speakers use language. Mainly, the multilingual speakers’ linguistic practices are not a mere mix of different *named* languages, but rather, they create practices that are unique to them, separate from the way a monolingual speaker would deploy these codes (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

Furthermore, drawing on both sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic research, there is evidence to show that these codes are not always discrete in the minds and social realities of the multilingual speaker (Garcia & Wei, 2014; Al-Alawi, 2024). These insights culminate in what has been called a *translanguaging shift* in the study of multilingualism.

1.2 The translanguaging shift

The concept of translanguaging traces its roots to the Welsh term *trawsieithu*, originally coined by Cen Williams (1994, 1996), referring to a pedagogical practice common in Wales where students would alternate between languages for receptive and productive use, i.e. input would be in one language, output in another and vice versa. Baker (2011) later translated the term as translanguaging and defined it as “the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two languages” (p. 288). This trajectory of research into translanguaging sees it as a pedagogical practice, wherein a learner’s academic language skills are developed in both languages.

Another turn in the development of translanguaging theory came when García (2009) defined the term as “*multiple discursive practices* in which bilinguals engage in order to *make sense of their bilingual worlds*” (p. 45, original emphasis). This definition includes multilingual practices which had previously been defined as code-switching, code-mixing etc. The main issue that García and other translanguaging scholar’s take with Baker’s definition is that, while going beyond the traditional approach of additive bilingualism (one language *plus* another language), it still mentions *two languages*, rather than a unified system and deployment of the full linguistic repertoire. Writing on the translanguaging turn, García & Wei (2014) say that

“translanguaging does not refer to two separate languages or a synthesis of different language practices or to a hybrid mixture. Rather translanguaging refers to *new* language practices that make visible the complexity of language exchanges among people with different histories, and releases histories and understandings that had been buried within fixed language identities constrained by nation-states” (p. 21, original emphasis).

Li Wei (2011) also relates this concept to the broader psycholinguistic notion of *languageing*, i.e. “process of using language to gain knowledge, to make sense, to articulate one’s thought and to communicate about using language” (p. 1223). Translanguaging, in Garcia & Li’s (2014) later conception, goes beyond languageing, with the trans- prefix taken from Ortiz’s (1940/1978) concept of *transculturación* from the 1940s, in which *transculturación* is explained as “a process in which a new reality

emerges, compounded and complex; a reality that is not a mechanical agglomeration of characters, not even a mosaic, but a new phenomenon, original and independent.” (p. 4)

Furthermore, translanguaging scholars reject what decolonial philosopher Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) called “abyssal thinking”, which they claim has tainted education and language scholarship through the creation of a certain line of hegemonic thinking – including thinking *about* language. Through translanguaging theory, scholars reject the notion of the existence of a “right way to speak”, which had been imposed on the bi- and multilingual speaker through hegemonic language ideologies. In their manifesto on translanguaging, García et al. (2021) wrote:

“Translanguaging rejects abyssal thinking; it is a way to understand the vast complexity and heterogeneity of language practices, avoiding their conception as problems and their evaluation in the negative terms of the colonial imaginary line that values only those socially situated as being above and making invisible those assigned to being below. Translanguaging also leads us to include in the study of language the role of meaning-making resources long considered outside of language – as simply para-linguistic or pragmatic. How bilinguals deploy the sights, the sounds, the objects, and instruments at their disposal is important in our conception of language” (p. 6)

1.3 Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

This section will describe Communication Accommodation Theory, as well as the concepts central to research using it as a theoretical framework. The theory traces its roots to the 1970s and Giles’ (1973) research into how individuals adjust their accents based on both contextual factors (like formality) and interpersonal dynamics (like the perceived social status of the listener). In the study¹, Giles proposed a model incorporating concepts of *accent convergence* (adapting to match the listener) and *accent divergence* (adapting to differ from the listener), categorizing these shifts as upward or downward depending on perceived prestige. However, later on, Giles & Smith (1979) found that, aside from adjustments in their accent, speakers also tend to modify their speech rate, pronunciation, utterance length, and pauses, seemingly in order to be accepted and understood by their interlocutors. These insights gave way to what was first called Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT), and later came to be called Communication Accommodation Theory, as it is known today (Giles et al., 2023).

¹ Giles’s study used a *gestalt-comparison* analysis, employing non-linguists to rate accent changes in recorded interviews, revealing that listeners perceive accent shifts and relate them to grammatical changes. The findings suggest that accent adjustments are complex, influenced by individual factors like personality and social attitudes (Giles, 1973).

At the core of CAT, we find research into predicting and explaining why, how and when people change their communicative behaviors within social interactions, as well as what the implications and potential consequences of these adjustments are (Dragojevic et al., 2015). These adjustments usually manifest through different communicative strategies, namely maintenance and convergence/divergence strategies.

2. INTERLOCUTORS AND DATA COLLECTION

In this study we worked with two educated Sudanese young men in their late 20s living and working in Cairo, Egypt, after having been displaced by the eruption of the civil war in Sudan in April 2023. The data was collected through ethnographic observations, now mainly in the form of written notes that inform analysis, as well as 4 hours of semi-structured interviews and WhatsApp communications asking for further clarification or help with linguistic nuances. The analysis below will present excerpts from these interviews, analyzed with the assistance of the above theoretical frameworks and our interlocutors' own accounts of their language use and motivations behind it.

3. METHOD OF ANALYSIS

This study employed a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis, using a mixture of Conversation analysis (CA) and discourse analysis to parse through the data. The data was firstly coded into themes in order to identify patterns of discourse around particular accounts of accommodation and translanguaging in order to identify potential motivations and linguistic ideologies underlying it. In this particular study, we will present multiple representative excerpts from semi-structured interviews and analyze them through the lens of CAT and Translanguaging theory, which have both been outlined in previous sections in the introduction.

4. ANALYSIS

The following subsections are structured around excerpts from interviews with our two interlocutors, Ibrahim and Jamal, and relate to their accounts of their linguistic practices, along with the theoretical implications of these very accounts. The selected excerpts were marked as representative of the overall recorded conversations due to the fact that they concisely present repeated themes coded within the data. We have also included notes on the discourse present in the excerpts, in order to explain cultural and linguistic particularities that the reader may or may not be familiar with.

4.1 Accommodation, the linguistic repertoire and the embodied context

In their study on translanguaging, accommodation and the linguistic repertoire in the Bahraini Arabic linguistic context, Al-Alawi (2024) wrote that “accommodation

is a spatiotemporally layered process where the embodied memories of context in the repertoire may overlap with (or override) the immediate context” (pp. 29). This builds upon the idea that the speaker’s role in an interaction is paramount to describing and predicting accommodation, as well as connecting accommodation to the linguistic repertoire, the limitations of which tend to be context sensitive. Accommodation practices, therefore, are just as spatiotemporally layered as the context, which does not have to be a *present*, or even a *lived* context, but can rather be embodied by the speaker. Al-Alawi suggests that accommodation can occur as an “embodied memory of context” (pp. 24), i.e. a reflection of their lived experience.

Furthermore, this study proposes that the embodied context does not exclusively have to be related to the past, but can rather be spatiotemporally mapped on a spectrum between past and present. In the case of this study’s interlocutors, they report that their motivation for speaking English was related to the perceived social, cultural and economic opportunities it could provide.

In the following excerpt, one of our interlocutors, Ibrahim, talks about how and why he was encouraged to study in English by his sister:

Excerpt 1 (I: Ibrahim)	Notes on discourse
I: But going back to kind of, like, school and stuff like that, she ((Ibrahim’s sister)) was the one that suggested for me to not continue speaking and learning in Arabic and studying in Arabic and to start studying in English. And how that would benefit me a lot more. Because this was around the time that she joined university and she was speaking English and she was starting to notice the benefit of that and how it’s opened her up to not only different opportunities, but just different cultures, different mindsets and stuff like that that are very different from what most of these people would get	Ibrahim frames his sister’s influence as positive, as setting him on a particular path that had a positive influence on him

In theory around Second Language Acquisition and motivation, Zoltán Dörnyei (2005, 2009) proposed the idea of the Ideal L2 Self – in essence, it is one of the primary sources of the L2 learner’s motivation, understood as the idea of who the L2 speaker wants to be and what they want to do with their L2. In this paper, we adapt the idea of the Ideal L2 Self as it relates to our interlocutors views on English – we understand the Ideal L2 Self as a spatiotemporally indexed figure of personhood, which can fairly consistently be mapped as “English-speaking, “future” and “elsewhere” in

terms of language, time and space, respectively.

This Ideal L2 Self essentially becomes what we called an embodied context to which our interlocutors would accommodate to during their time in bilingual education in Sudan. They report that, at times, they would speak it because they were more comfortable with it, and it imbued them with a sense of liberation, which the following excerpt from a conversation with Jamal shows:

Excerpt 2 (J: Jamal)	Notes on discourse
J: Because even in Sudan, in general, like, when you speak in English in public, you tend to, like, draw attention. Right? It's, like, similar to the way of, like, how, like, oh hawāḡas, like, you walk here and all this people, like, oh, welcome to Egypt, that stuff. Similar to that, but in a way, like, it's kind of, like, more, a lot more aggressive. Like, I've got, I've, I've gotten into fights just because I spoke in English in the public, like, transport. So, coming there ((to an English-language high school)), feeling comfortable, just like, alright, I can just speak it. We're the majority, like, the majority of us speak English. That was absolutely, like, liberating.	Jamal here relates his experience of being a "foreigner" in Egypt (a hawāḡa) to his experience being othered in Sudan for speaking English in public. This could likely be due to the author's own positionality as a foreigner in Egypt, which would make him more likely to understand the connotations related to the term hawāḡa and the phrase welcome to Egypt.

Note that in the above excerpt Jamal hints at an in-group and out-group dynamic between English-speaking and non-English speaking people in his hometown. Though it resulted in a sense of otherness in certain contexts, the personhood of an English speaker in context where Jamal's linguistic repertoire was liberated from perceived English-code restraints induced a sense of relief and liberation, due to the majority of the students in the English-language high school being perceived as members of the in-group.

Ibrahim similarly spoke about his university experience. He enrolled in a university course which was officially supposed to be in English, but turned out to be fully Arabized. This seemed to cause tension related to his Ideal L2 Self, as the Arabic-language curriculum did not correspond with how the reality of his future profession.

Excerpt 3 (I: Ibrahim)	Notes on discourse
I: Now is that I really wish it was in English because I felt like it was extra mental work trying to translate it in my head while I'm, yeah, don't try it like I'm just starting to understand what these concepts even mean. So I felt like it's just an added hurdle that didn't really need to be there ((...))	The speaker is discussing the Arabic-language curriculum at university and his frustration having to "translate in [his] head", hinting at an imposed limitation in the linguistic repertoire which causes mental strain
I: A lot of times they want these specific words, rather than the meaning so a lot of times I would be like well ((...)) I remember one of the first ones I like I remember was ↑ hawārizmiyāt , right, which means algorithms, so when I first encountered like hawārizmiyāt , we had this in math, but I had him like this was in high school.	The speaker mentions the Arabic code hawārizmiyāt in a rising intonation, seemingly to signal the ridiculousness of its deployment in the educational context

During our conversations, Ibrahim referred to these kinds of curricula as “translated”, meaning that, though they were in English, they were still fundamentally Sudanese, i.e. not valued as highly as a fully English curriculum.

4.2 Migration and (non)accommodation

Our two interlocutors have been living in Egypt since 2023, having been displaced from Sudan after the outbreak of the Sudanese Civil War. At first, they reported expecting to be understood as, according to them, Sudanese Colloquial Arabic is very similar to the Egyptian Colloquial. Furthermore, throughout their time in Sudan, they had been exposed to various types of Egyptian media, from films and television to social media content. However, as the following excerpt shows, they struggled with being understood unless they accommodated to a variety closer to the Cairene dialect:

Excerpt 4 (I: Interviewer, J: Jamal)	Notes on discourse
I: So you mentioned, like, sometimes you would come up to people and they would not understand you. So, would you be speaking Sudanese then?	Jamal notes two codes, an ECA one and an SCA one. However, he seems to emphasize these examples because they are very similar and in certain contexts, would be understood in both varieties.

J: Yeah, Sudanese, **‘arabi** ((Arabic)), I’m trying to make it closer to like, **fuṣṣḥā** or something. Because a lot of times we use different terms for stuff, like for specific words. It’s like, I want to say, you know, **‘āwiz arūḥ ba’ūl līhum ‘āwiz amshy** ((the former is an ECA code, the latter an SCA one for “I want to go”)). It’s like, **‘āwiz arūḥ il-mustašfā kida kida kida** ((ECA for “I want to go to the hospital, etc. etc.)). At times I would speak, they would just not be bothered. I don’t know what’s going on in their head. So it was harder at first. But luckily, again, Sudan was very like, Arabic wise, Arabic media and stuff like that. Egypt is very, you know, well, it’s very there.

The above excerpt shows that, in our interlocutors’ experience, ECA speakers tend to be nonaccommodative to the needs of SCA speakers, which then leads the latter to accommodate to the former’s variety of Arabic. Moreover, Jamal mentioned that ECA was very present in Sudan, whereas the opposite was not the case. This also hints at a language ideology among ECA speakers – the idea being that accommodation to other varieties of Arabic is superfluous, as ECA will be understood everywhere.

With the above in mind, our interlocutors began to view speaking SCA as a form of nonaccommodative speech, so they would deploy SCA codes in order to not be understood, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 5 (J: Jamal)	Notes on discourse
J: We had the benefit that this time because now when can speak Arabic, no one would understand us, in the way we speakin’ in Sudan. So we had English, but like there’s a 50-50 chance they would understand as well. ((...)) let’s talk Sudanese for the sake of feeling like, oh, we’re Sudanese, let’s speak it._Only us could understand this. Because it was hard at first, coming to Egypt and speaking Arabic, going to the shop or whatever. They would act like, I don’t understand you	Jamal reiterates that deploying SCA codes would result in a lack of understanding; however, he states that “[t]hey would “act like [it]”, i.e. pretend not to understand, which suggest a lack of belief, or bewilderment at this assertion.

This excerpt presents us with multiple insights – the first being that, after leaving Sudan, Jamal and his friends started seeing speaking SCA as an expression of their identities (“let’s talk Sudanese for the sake of feeling ((...)) we’re Sudanese)). This is the same group of friends with whom Jamal had previously spoken mainly in English while they were still in Sudan. This is why we talk about these embodied contexts being spatiotemporally mapped on a past / present continuum – before leaving Sudan, they embodied a context indexed as “future”, while afterwards, as an effort to embody a rare figure of personhood, they would speak in SCA, indexed as “past”.

4.3 Culturally indexed accommodation

In the following excerpt, Ibrahim and Jamal “reenact” a conversation they would have with a SCA speaker who is not proficient in English. Due to the topic at hand, which is culturally indexed as “Western” and therefore English-coded, they both note that their impulse would be to discuss it in English; however, through verbal and non-verbal cues, they decide to switch codes and accommodate to the less proficient speaker by mainly speaking in SCA.

Excerpt 6 (I: Ibrahim, J: Jamal)	English translation	Notes on discourse
J: Have you seen the last episode of, uh, Game of Thrones? I: ((in Sudanese English accent)) Yes, yeah, I watched Game of Thrones. ((...)) J: lākan yā mān, samḥa walla. al-episode kānat samḥa šadīd. I: ‘ay walla kānat ḡāmda yā mān. J: šadīd! I: ‘ana mutābī‘u ḥasi li fatra, mā (.) huwa āḥir mūsīm da maḥaḍartu, lākan al-mūsīm al-gablu kān ‘i ḥaḍartu.	J: Have you seen the last episode of, uh, Game of Thrones? I: ((in Sudanese English accent)) Yes, yeah, I watched Game of Thrones. ((...)) J: But man, it was really good, wallahi. The episode was very good. I: Yeah, wallahi ((interjection and discourse marker used for emphasis, lit. meaning “by God”)), it was awesome, man. J: Really awesome! I: I’ve been following it for a while, but (.) I haven’t watched this last season, though I did watch the season before.	As this is a reenactment, Ibrahim takes on the role of the less-than-proficient English speaker, signaling this by adopting a Sudanese English accent when speaking English.

J: yā mān episode 6 iḥḍarha, ṣada' nī iḥḍarha. I: min al-mūsīm al-ḡadīd da walla al-ḡadīm? J: lā! yā 'nī 'inta (.) 'okē. I: mā 'ana al-ḡadīd da mā wāṣaltu. J: wāṣil 'alē-ha kullha. I: wāṣil 'alē-ha? J: wāṣil 'alē-ha. wāṣil dī wa kallimmī. I: 'okē 'okē. J: It's fucking crazy, trust me.	J: Man, watch episode 6. Trust me, watch it. I: From the new season or the old one? J: No! I mean, you (.) okay. I: I haven't caught up with the new one. J: Catch up on all of it. I: Catch up on it? J: Catch up on it. Finish this one and talk to me. I: Okay, okay. J: It's fucking crazy, trust me.	
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We can regard this excerpt as a demonstration of what we will call “culturally indexed accommodation, in the sense that a topic such as *Game of Thrones*, a “Western” television series, would be indexed among our interlocutors as an English language topic, whereas among other speakers of SCA, it may not be indexed as such.

Ibrahim and Jamal, in a different conversation, also mentioned non-verbal cues to accommodate, such as smiling and nodding, indicating difficulty in comprehension. This may occur in social settings when they would venture outside of their English-proficient in-group, to which they are also expected to accommodate to varying degrees. As can be seen in the above excerpt, the accommodation to SCA is not always full accommodation, such as with Jamal stating “It’s fucking crazy, trust me”, signaling the end of the SCA-coded conversation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined our interlocutors’ accounts of their linguistic practices, within their positionality as displaced Sudanese youth in Egypt, in relation to processes of identity negotiation and belonging. These speakers’ (non)accommodation strategies were also shown to be bound to certain spatiotemporal contexts (past / present / future; in Sudan / out of Sudan), and inextricably linked to their lived material and linguistic experiences. Their repertoire is, therefore, just as dynamic as the spatiotemporal context they inhabit, drawing on multiple linguistic codes (SCA, ECA and English) and using them as flexible resources to navigate social situations.

Accommodation and translanguaging, as we have argued, can be understood as layered processes informed by embodied memories of past contexts and projections of desired futures, where we can detect spatiotemporal shift. For displaced Sudanese youth in Cairo, the linguistic repertoire becomes a site where these spatiotemporalities interact, enabling pragmatic communication, as well as discursive self-positioning.

One of our main goals was to challenge monolithic views of languages as bounded systems and emphasize the creativity and criticality inherent in a multilingual speaker's deployment of their linguistic repertoire. This was done both methodologically and theoretically by centering our interlocutors' accounts of their own use of language, as well as not treating their translanguaging and accommodation practices as purely a tool for social survival. By highlighting ways some Sudanese migrants articulate their linguistic experiences, our hope is to inform future study on expatriated Sudanese Arabic speakers of a wider scope and different contexts, which could also impact development of migration and education policy in areas with large numbers of displaced individuals.

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Transcription conventions

Note: For Arabic transcriptions, the author used ZDMG transcription conventions slightly modified for Arabic dialects.

Bold	Linguistic code not dominant in excerpt
((...))	Intervening material has been omitted
(.)	Brief pause
(hahaha)	Laughter
(O)	Transcriber comment

Mateja Lazarević

**TRANSJEZIČKE I AKOMODATIVNE PRAKSE MEĐU OBRAZOVANOM
SUDANSKOM OMLADINOM U KAIRU**

Rezime

Ovaj rad istražuje kako obrazovani sudanski mladi u Kairu nagovaraju identitetu, pripadnosti i integraciji kroz upotrebu kodova iz sudanskog arapskog, egipatskog arapskog i engleskog jezika. Na osnovu etnografskih opažanja i intervjua analiziraju se strategije akomodacije (konvergencija, divergencija i održavanje) i transjezičke prakse (*translanguaging*) kao dinamična mobilizacija jezičkog repertoara. Nalazi ukazuju da su (ne)akomodacione prakse povezane sa spaciotemporalnim kontekstima prošlosti, sadašnjosti i zamišljene budućnosti, dok *translanguaging* omogućava pragmatičnu komunikaciju i diskurzivno samopozicioniranje. Ovo istraživanje osporava monolitne predstave jezika kao zatvorenih sistema i naglašava kreativnost višejezične prakse u kontekstu migracija i raseljenih zajednica.

Keywords: transjezičke prakse, akomodacija, jezik i identitet, sudanska dijaspora, sociolingvistika, migracije