



The Application of Religious Words among Iranians

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Abstract

One of the major concerns of sociolinguistics has always been finding the social components which influence language. However, recent studies have shown that one variable rarely made available for sociolinguistic comparison is religion (Dror & Cieri, 2013; 2014). The present qualitative study aimed at demonstrating how religion and being religious can play a role in the choice of language variation. The findings of the study revealed that the use of religious words was more frequent among more devout and committed group approving the claim that religion is a meaningful sociolinguistic variable.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, religion, language variation

INTRODUCTION

Individuals construct their identities based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, culture and religion (Haarmann, 1995). In any kind of interaction, both participants are engaged in judgments about each other's identity and the only yardstick available for such a judgment is the person's use of a particular language or even his choice of words (Haugh 2013). Tajfel (1978) justifies the process of identification as the interaction of two strategies for "demarcation" and "solidarity" and the two factors which play a major role in this process are language and religion. Though there is an amplified research in the literature about different factors leading to language variation, little has been done in the domain of language and religion to define how far religious and linguistic identities correlate. Just in the last 30 years some American sociolinguists have begun to analyze how religious preferences may illuminate, and are reflected in speakers' community of practice (Eckert, 2008). To fill the gap in this area the researchers of this paper aim to demonstrate interconnectedness of religion and language with particular reference to daily conversations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sociolinguistics

As it is the use of language that introduces one as a competent member of a society, language is one of the most powerful symbols of social behavior. Social messages about who we are, where we come from, and who we associate with are all sent by language. We may judge a person's background, character, and intentions based upon his or her language, dialect or even the choice of a single word (Wolfram, 1968). This significant role of language has caused an unprecedented interest in the study of language taken from anthropology to psychology and even philosophy (Wright & Hale 1997). The approach to sociolinguistics dates back to the time when Hymes (1972) criticizing Chomskian theory of "linguistic competence" referred to the speakers' use of linguistic knowledge in real world and this was the origin of the discipline of sociolinguistics.

The history of sociolinguistics indicates researchers attempt to define various factors causing variation in language. Ideologies are regarded central to sociolinguistic analysis because they seem like a link between social structures and forms of talk (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). This focus on ideologies and the ways that they can shape language use is relevant to all languages (Gal, 1998; Giddens, 1984; Irvine & Gal, 2000; Spitulnik, 1998; Woolard & Scheffelin, 1994) and meanwhile religion as an ideological factor has recently been increasingly appealing to many sociolinguists. (Haugen 1953, Fishman, 1966; Stewart, 1968; Crystal, 1966) Religion which is a meaningful sociolinguistic variable and also a sociolinguistic factor has rarely been applied in sociolinguistic comparisons (Dror & Cieri, 2013; Dror 2014, Hary & Wein 2013). Labove (1966) was one of the pioneers who studied the language of people who believed in the same religion but lived in different geographical regions. Later on Fisherman (1968) followed his path. However, as Eckert (2008) notes considering religion as a determining factor in linguistic variation and the study of it in the field of sociolinguistic analysis is the recent focus of researchers (Omaniyi & Fisherman, 2006; Benor, 2011; Mukherjee, 2013; Hary & Wein, 2013; Dror & Cieri 2013; Dror, 2014; David & Powell, 2014; Avineri & Kroskrity, 2014; Zuckerman, 2014; Davis, 2014). The impact of religion on language is so great that according to Kaplan and Baldauf's findings, for some endangered languages, missionary and religious activities have resulted in revival or even standardization of that language. Sociolinguists are now very well aware of the importance of religion and its relationship with language; however, the sociology of language and religion is in its infancy and has not opened its path in the macro sociolinguistic tradition yet.

To expand this area as a field of study Fish man (2006) embarked on elaboration of a framework by which different kinds of studies would be demarcated more appropriately. Though different frameworks have been introduced in the field like the one introduced by Sawyer (2001), the most related one to the field of sociolinguistics is the framework developed by Spolsky (2006):

1. The effects of religion on language
2. Mutuality of language and religion
3. Effects of language on religion
4. Language, religion and literacy

In other alternative frameworks the anthropology of language and religion is studied in which this relationship is a main factor of mankind's evolution. Then the concept of meanings and uses of religious language was introduced by Samarin (1987). He reckons that while "religious language" is known as a language reserved for religious activities in sociolinguistic point of view we see how it can play a significant role in allowance of people in religious groups or ceremonies. (Baker2000). This is also in line with what Haarmann (1995) characterizes as the relationship between religion and identity. Therefore, to quest for solidarity language as well as religion are two main factors. And since a single individual's belonging to any social network influences his/her linguistic behavior (Milroy, 1987), one's membership in a religious society will certainly determine changes in their language behavior (Bosakov, 2006). It is true that belonging to different social networks creating different changes interact and finally it will be complicated to decide which factor is the real reason, however, since religion is something unchangeable in most countries (except U.S.A.) it can be considered as a great determiner of people's identity. And this importance goes to the extent that in some countries, political nominees' affiliation to a particular religion may be a contributing factor for their wining. It may originate from the fact that religiously affiliated individuals demonstrate special religious activities.

In many studies it has been observed that even in regions where people of different religious groups have to speak a standard language, when they are in their own communities they speak their heritage language (Gumperz & Wilson, 1971). In some areas the tie between language and religion as markers of identity is looser while among Muslims (especially the women) this link is still tight. When we are talking about language variation and its triggers we should be cautious not to consider religious affiliation as the sole influencing factor because usually these variations are the result of different factors like nexus of social network or local ideology (Milroy, 1987; Giles, 1973; Bourhis & Giles, 1977). Giles and Ogay (2006) in their paper suggest that attitudinal factors play a critical role with some characteristics indexing commitment to a specific social group while some other papers (Pierrehumbert 2006) suggest that convergence toward any religious or any other social community does not require positive affiliation but merely passive accommodative tendencies suffice. So in some unrelated communities with distinct linguistic heritage and also religious heritage some convergence occurs and the only reason found can be the increase in their interaction. . It can be concluded that we can focus on the role of religion not only in the spread of a language variety but also geographical spread of a language. As Firth (1937) points out men's ideologies derive from their culture, society and also religion while Crystal (1965) opposing this notion indicates that religion can learn much more from the scientific study of language than language ever learned from it.

Religious Language

Religious language is usually interpreted as a language that is consistently used in religious context (Samarin, 1987). Therefore, religious language is associated with religious activities and used for very little else (Fasold, 1987). Another dimension in which religious language can be studied is the use of religious language out of its religious context in colloquial, political and other types of speech in which it is used to support non-religious causes (Chilton & Wodak, 2004). Jean- Pierre Van Nopen is one of the authorities who has worked a lot in the field of linguistics can reveal the misuses for both believers and non- believers. Piet Van Sterkenburg in his study has shown how the process of secularization in the Netherlands has resulted in the decrease in the use of words which were originally inspired by religion.

Religion in Iran

Iran is a country where the majority (96%) of its population is formed by Muslims. However, the meaning of Islam and being Muslim has changed a lot since the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. This brought a new era in Iran in which the new Islamic republic began to Islamize all sectors and foundations (Richter, 2005). Thus, there appears to be a homogenization of Iranian culture as the Islamic traditions and ideology are enforced by the Iranian authorities following the revolution (Daniel and Mahdi 2006). These Islamic traditions originate from Qur'an and Hadith and in case of ambiguity in them a *mujtahid*, a high ranking religious man, uses his own reasoning in addition to the Qur'an and Hadith to arrive at a decision (paidar, 1995). The decisions made by Mujtahids are called fetwa and are usually made as state rules. These Islamic rules are performed by the Iranian authorities to Islamize the whole Iranian nation (Paivandi, 2008; Richter, 2005). This enforcement of Islamic rules has affected all people's beliefs and identity to the extent that the religious language is observed in all aspects of Iranian life including education, (Cheng & Beigi, 2012) to daily conversations.

In this paper researchers intend to portrait how religion has penetrated into conversational discourse of Iranian people whose language is Farsi but their religious language originate from Arabic language.

METHOD

As previously mentioned the purpose of the study was to depict how religion can manifest in all activities including linguistic behavior. The reason why this research has been conducted was the existing of the great gap in literature. Most of the studies of sociolinguistic on religion have considered the religious language in its religious context and have taken Sawyer's (2001). However, few if any have investigated religious language outside its context. Thus the researchers of this study selected Spolsky (2006) framework in which the effect of religion on language is regarded in a non- religious context. The investigators intended to indicate how common it is for Iranian people to apply religious terms in daily conversations of Iranian people. The great focus of the study was on openings and endings of conversations and some other crucial situations

like when a baby is born or when two people get married. The findings of the study showed that the structure of utterances are very similar among most Persian speakers. Even pragmatically they expressed the same theme, however, depending on how devout religious one was, the use of religious phrases fluctuated between Arabic, the religious language of Iranian, and Persian. For example the application of the words like الحمد لله or انشأ الله meaning "Thank God" and "If the God wishes so" respectively, is a lot more frequent in devout Muslims than others. The data will be analyzed in detail in the following section.

Participants and the procedure

The participants of this study are a group of 30 university students whose age range was between 20 to 30. The reason why this range of age was studied was the fact that they were born after revolution and they constituted the generation which grew up in Islamic State. So as to fulfill the purpose of this study which is investigating how religion has interfered in the application of religious language. The period when this study was conducted was when Islamic laws have been ruling in Iran. As the questionnaire distribution took part at university, the group was an amalgam of both strict religious people and less devout ones. Therefore, in order to be able to make a comparison between people another research question was raised and that was a difference in the use of religious words among religious and non-religious people. In order to distinguish between devout religious students and less devout ones a few questions were added to the questionnaire so that the frequency of the use of these expressions could be further counted.

The procedure taken for conducting the study involved providing an open ended questionnaire involving five questions asking these students to assume themselves in a real situation and provide the utterances they actually produce in real situations like that. The questions carefully designed by the researchers intended to elicit information indicating how religious beliefs had entered Iranian people's linguistic behavior to the extent that even in their very daily conversations the use of religious language and the mentioning of the word Allah (God) is extensively observed. And as the majority of Iranian Muslims are Shie as discussed in literature, in some benevolent wishes even Imam's names had been referred to. Some excerpts from the most frequent religious themes along with the questionnaire questions and responses are presented here data are presented to further illustrate both similarities and differences in the use of religious words between the participants of this study.

RESULTS

الحمد لله (Thank God)

1) *What do you say when as greeting someone asks "How are you?"*

It was observed while in students' group the answer was mainly "I'm fine". But the difference emerged after that, sometimes this I'm fine was followed by thank you. While in more than 30 percent of students and more than 50 percent of religious people it was

followed by “Thank God” and what was worth noticing was the point that students applied the Persian phrase (خدا رو شکر) and religious group the Arabic equivalent of الحمد لله.

انشاء الله (If God wishes so)

2) *What do you say to a friend of yours who has newly become a father or mother?*

The most interesting answers were given to this question because there was just one word of congratulations and after that there just came different kinds of praying as:

انشاء الله خوش قدم باشه “may his birth bring you luck and happiness” or:

(انشاء الله زیر سایه پدر و مادر بزرگ شه)

(May he have his parents alive as he grows up)

The point observed in the answers to this question was the commonality or similarity of the answers in both strict and non-strict religious groups. It seems as if this word intact and just with a little adjustment to Persian pronunciation has been adopted from Arabic

3) *What do you say to a friend of yours who has newly gotten married?*

مبارک باشه انشاء الله خوشبخت بشین، انشاء الله به پای هم پیر شین.

(Congratulations! May you be happy together, may you get old together (as you live long together). Though the use of this structure seemed very common among both groups some students had used the more Persian like expression of “امیدوارم” meaning “I hope” instead of “انشاء الله” (If God wishes so). However, the frequency of انشاء الله in both groups exceeded “امیدوارم”.

4) *What do you say to the host of a party while you are leaving there?*

انشاء الله سفرتون به شادی پهن شود “...”

انشاء الله ضیافت زیارت”

5) *How do you say good bye to a friend who is going on a trip?*

انشاء الله خدا پشت و پناهنون باشه. “...”

ماشاء الله (Mashallah)

And the other expression which was very frequent was the religious Arabic exclamation of (ماشاء الله) which is used to mean “May devil eyes be away from him” .This word is used when they see a new born baby. Or in wedding parties they want to tell bride she looks beautiful, so they first use this expression to avoid devil’s eyes and mentioning their compliment. It should be noted that the use of ماشاء الله is not rooted in superstitions, but they it is based in the belief that whatever they have including health, wealth, or beauty is bestowed by God, so before mentioning them they need to remind themselves of god’s benevolence.

CONCLUSION

It seems as if having benevolent wishes and speaking like clergy persons is so customary among Iranian people and the application of religious expressions is a manifestation of their beliefs. And also it was observed that the more religious a person is the more frequent the use of these expressions in his or her utterances will be, and it is a good proof for the claim that religion is a part of one's identity or even more than that language is a manifestation of one's personality, identity and beliefs and it causes great and significant variation in the use of language. This should also be taken into consideration that the same as race, gender, education, and social class religion by itself cannot be the indicative of the variation, as variation is the consequence of the interaction of all these together. One of the hopes is that future work will permit us distinguish between these sources of variation. And in the case of this study the use of religious words is mainly demonstrative of people's beliefs but these words may be heard from those Iranian who are not even Muslims indicating that similarity in the choice of words among Iranian individuals is not only the effect of ideological beliefs but it may also be partly due to their geographical boundaries. This study aimed at providing further understanding of language variation and is intended to remind that questions about religious affiliation are appropriate even necessary for an accurate appraisal of a speakers' linguistic choices, and will lead to new theoretical insights.

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