

Surveying Workplace Language Ecology among Foreign Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This paper examines language use among foreign domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. The linguistic situation for foreign workers in the domestic sphere in Saudi Arabia differs from that of foreign workers in many other countries or spheres in that their communicative partners may be strictly limited to members of their employing family and other domestic employees. Since the foreign domestic worker has few other sources of linguistic input, their acquisition of any form of Arabic may depend on interactions with this small number of people. The issue of language acquisition is also relevant for the children of the employing family. Many Saudi children are raised by foreign domestic workers, who may speak little Arabic, or speak Arabic that is error-ridden. Some Saudi families are known speak to their domestic workers using Saudi Pidgin Arabic (SPA) or English, but the languages that Saudis speak with foreign domestic workers has never been investigated through research before. This paper reports on a survey of 400 Saudi householders, examining self-reports of the languages spoken with their foreign domestic workers, and correlations with employer age, employer region, worker job description, and place of origin for the workers, among other variables. This study is a first step toward quantifying the extent to which languages other than Saudi Colloquial Arabic (SCA) are used in Saudis' homes. As such, it should prove valuable in aiding a national programme for Arabic language acquisition by foreign domestic workers.

Keywords: communicative partners, employers, language use, Saudi Pidgin Arabic, Saudi colloquial Arabic