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THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 3/3/2022

16:15-17:45

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The misrepresentation of pharyngeals in parodic imitations of Mizrahi Hebrew Speakers

The Hebrew pharyngeals [ħ] and [ʕ] are associated with an atypical combination of social meanings. On the one hand, they are enregistered (Agha 2003) as the quintessential Mizrahi feature; as such, they are socially stigmatized, a fact that is not surprising given the ethnic inequality among Jewish Israelis (Bentolila 2002, Gafter 2016). However, unlike many stigmatized features, the pharyngeals are not considered non-standard. As the pharyngeals are both linguistically conservative and orthographically faithful, they are seen as prescriptively “correct” (Morag 1990), and are valued in certain formal registers (Bentolila 2002, Gafter 2016).

While actual speakers who use pharyngeals are generally underrepresented in Israeli media, pharyngeals do occur quite often in parodic imitations of Mizrahi speakers, which contribute to the social stigmatization of the feature. This paper draws its data from a corpus of Israeli TV commercials that feature such imitations. A critical analysis of these commercials reveals that the depiction of the “pharyngealizing” characters reinforces persistent Orientalist tropes stereotypically associated with Mizrahis (Shoat 2010): they are portrayed as uneducated, vulgar and irrational. From a linguistic point of view, these characters produce pharyngeals in a manner that is unattested in natural speech: rather than maintain a phonemic distinction between pharyngeals and non-pharyngeals, as real native speakers of the unmerged variety do, they produce [ħ] and [ʕ] inconsistently in both historically pharyngeal and non-pharyngeal environments. This public misrepresentation of Mizrahi speech patterns creates an imaginary Mizrahi Hebrew in which “anything goes,” contrary to the linguistically consistent system actually used by speakers. Building on the notion of *iconization* (Irvine and Gal 2000), I argue that these representations have the effect of disassociating the positive social meanings of the pharyngeals from Mizrahi speakers while leaving only the negative stigma, thereby reinforcing racist stereotypes.

References:

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