

The 'Linguistic' Image of the Other in Jordanian and Syrian TV Dramas

In this paper I present an initial report on the way an 'other' is linguistically depicted in Jordanian and Syrian dramas. The study is based on hundreds of hours of these dramas, usually broadcast in Ramadan. By linguistics depiction, I mean the kind of Arabic an 'other' uses. 'Other' is taken to mean someone who speaks a different language or a dialect different from the main characters.

The Levant have had to deal with a large number of foreigners, i.e. others. throughout its history. The other depicted in the series came from the following groups: Turks/Ottomans, British, French, German, Israeli, Jewish, Other Arabs (speakers of other dialects), Albanian-Egyptian (Ibrahim Pasha), Crusaders, Moguls, Amazigh and finally, believe it or not, jinni.

Regardless of the perspective or the point of view of the writer or the director, when all characters speak MSA, the linguistic distinctions between the different characters are neutralized. This type of series seems to be reserved for historical series. For example, the series 'Salhu Al-Diin' utilizes MSA for everyone. The write, Walid Sayf strives for historical accuracy and not for stereo-typing. Salh Al-Diin is superior not in the language he uses, rather his deeds make him so. The same thing can be said about the series 'Biibers' where all characters speak MSA. In the same way as in Salh A-Diin, the Moguls are negatively portrayed by their brutality and not by the language the characters use.

The 'other' in the majority of the series speaks either MSA which no one else speaks, or s/he speaks in the dialect of the majority of the characters. MSA is used in this context to affirm the 'foreignness' of the other. Consider the following interesting dialogue between a British archeologist and a Bedouin Sheikh, upon their first encounter. Here the British is trying to disguise himself as North-Eastern individual under the name 'Sheikh Hassaan'.

(1) gilli int wej smak
tell.me you what name'your
'Tell me, what's your name?'

Sheikh Hassan: هل تريدون مال؟ ...

(2) hal turiiduuna maal
Q want.3pm money
'Do you want money?'

Sheikh Freehan (sarcastically):

(3) Sheikh Freehan: هل تريدون مال؟

As can be seen from (4) Sheikh Freehan did not buy the man's story.

In (1)-(3), MSA serves a dual purpose: it sets the two characters apart and gives the 'other' away. This series, like many numerous others, the other speaks MSA. Just as in (1)-(3), MSA serves to set the characters apart.

The other can also be shown to be different by speaking a 'broken' form of the majority dialect. Here the intention is not only to show the foreignness but also to deride the 'other'. When the otherness is to be kept obvious, whatever the motive is, the other speaks either MSA, a different dialect or a 'broken' form of the same dialect. This conclusion is supported by hundreds of hours of TV episodes.

