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The case of the “innocuous” middle-class migrant employee: English language use and attitudes in Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Recent literature on the presence of English in the United Arab Emirates has shown an increasing change in focus from the English Language Teaching (ELT) domain, to a more sociolinguistic and economic one (Boyle, 2012; Weber, 2011; Randall & Samimi, 2010; Karmani, 2005). While these studies have been significant to the field of World Englishes, this case-study charts new ground by observing the innocuous middle class migrant workforce hailing largely from Outer Circle countries, in an Expanding Circle context such as Dubai. It also provides a brief sociolinguistic backdrop of the emirate. The project employed mixed methods (observational accounts, field notes, a survey, and interviews) to garner data. It surveyed a convenient sample of 133 participants (of largely Indian, Filipino, and Pakistani origin) and interviewed a subset of 10 Indian participants to understand their use and attitudes towards English, as well as their impression of the Arabic language. Findings from this study reveal a sense of English occupying a ‘default’ space in these employees’ lives, rather than a nefarious, or an empowering role, while the Arabic language is seen as a plausible empowering asset. This study provides not only particular descriptions of English language use of these migrant workers, but also pushes for a new theory where the presence of English is no longer dominated by the vestiges of linguistic imperialism, but has become an important part of participants’ identity, existing in a parallel realm with their first languages, without necessarily encroaching it.



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