Status and Dynamism of an Endangered Language in Saudi Arabia: Towards a Revitalization Project

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Language attitudes research is potentially a powerful asset in the revitalization projects of endangered languages as it uncovers subjective factors, ranging from positive to negative attitudes, that indigenous people have towards their languages. Understanding these subjective factors work as a backdrop for revitalization projects of endangered languages (Sallabank, 2013). In the context of Saudi Arabia (SA), Arabic is predominantly the first language, and it is spoken with many varieties (Ryding, 2005). Yet, there is a minority group language in SA called the Faifi language. The Faifi language is spoken by approx. 200,000 people (General Authority for Statistics, n.d.). Therefore, it is an endangered language. This could be attributed to the many historical, social and geographical factors. For instance, Faifi is spoken in a mountain area, thus making it difficult to reach. Moreover, the language is only maintained by speaking amongst its indigenous people, as it lacks an official writing system. Research in the Faifi dialect is almost marginalized, and very few studies that investigated the language predominantly focused on production research, such as grammar and structure of the language (see Alfaifi & Davis, 2021; Alfaifi, 2016). Hence, none of the previous research has dealt with the language ideology the indigenous people have towards their language. The evaluation of language ideology will significantly pave the way for future revitalization projects of the language. The present study uses a conceptual approach from language attitudes research methods through an online questionnaire in Arabic language. A representative sample of 258 was recruited for the study through random sampling. This paper aims to investigate two research questions. First, what is the language ideology of the indigenous people towards their Faifi language? Second, to what extent do socio-demographic variables affect the indigenous people's attitudes towards their language? Data are analyzed through factor analysis and multiple regression. In line with the previous research, findings reveal a bidimensional model that operates between status and dynamism dimensions. Much of the variance is shared by status dimension at 47%, as compared to only 10.5% by dynamism dimension. The model yields the following contributions to the Faifi language ideology and the language attitudes theory in general: first, the model reveals that indigenous people deliver overall positive language ideology towards their language, especially in the status dimension, and second, components of status and dynamism dimensions reveal some correlations between them. For example, 'educated' appears to be included in the dynamism dimension rather than the previously widely revealed inclusion of 'educated' within the status dimension. Thus, I argue that the dimensional model provides new insights to the previous discussion in language attitude research. With regards to the socio-demographic variables effects on the data, the only salient factor appears to be age, where older participants deliver more positive attitudes than younger participants. The study suggests a documentation and revitalization project that focuses on younger generation as they showed fewer positive attitudes. Thus, this study calls for a linguo-culturological dictionary addressed to younger generation that not only aims to document but also revitalizes the Faifi language. Furthermore, the study suggests a revitalization project through educational scheme. It should be included in schools and focuses on younger generation as they showed fewer positive attitudes.

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