

Multilingualism and the role of English in the United Arab Emirates, with views from Singapore and Hong Kong

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A former British protectorate, the UAE has witnessed unprecedented economic and cultural development since its foundation in 1971. Foreign labor and investment play a central role in this development, yielding a sharp imbalance between the local Arab and the foreign population. A share of no less than 85% of highly transient foreigners strongly impacts the local linguistic texture, with many languages competing in the public sphere, creating a highly multilingual landscape. English occupies a special and highly prominent role in this texture, as it is used as a foreign language, a second language, and as a lingua franca. Moreover, it occurs in its standardized varieties (British or American English), but crucially also in several non-standard forms, as foreign labor is recruited from places formerly under British or American influence (India, Pakistan, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Ghana, Kenya, etc.). The UAE thus offers a unique linguistic laboratory in which the interaction and competition of Arabic and English can be studied, in addition to the blending and perhaps levelling of English non-standard varieties. In the present contribution, we present evidence from the ongoing research project *Language Attitudes and Repertoires in the Emirates* (LARES), exploring the tension between English and Arabic, the use of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in relation to local forms of Arabic, the prominence of English in specific sectors of society (education, economy, tourism), the increasing use of English as a home language, as well as the presumed emergence of a new variety of English that may tentatively be called 'Gulf English'. We conclude by comparing the situation in the UAE with the similarly high-contact urban areas of Singapore and Hong Kong, city-states that differ in their histories and their local use of English in several ways. Specifically, we argue that while Hong Kong, and Singapore to a lesser degree, remain firmly situated within Kachru's outer circle, the UAE shows signs of moving from the expanding circle inwards towards the outer circle. Moreover, due to the high influx of foreign labor from former British and American colonies (India, Philippines, etc.), the UAE has developed into a melting pot of different varieties of English that we endeavored to refer to as 'Milton Keynes II'.

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