The Language of the People of Bashiqa: A Vehicle of their Intangible Cultural Heritage

Saaed A Saaed and Wafaa Sabah Khuder

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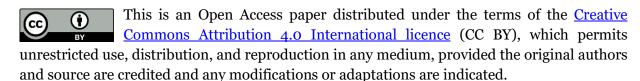Find out more: www.ids.ac.uk/creid.

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Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID), Institute of
Development Studies (IDS), Brighton BN1 9RE, UK
Tel: +44(0) 1273 915704
E-mail: creid@ids.ac.uk
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Charity Registration Number 306371
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Summary

The current study is an attempt to provide a linguistic, a historical, as well as a sociocultural record of the language variety spoken in Bashiqa (Northern Iraq) by one of the communities which represents a religious minority in Iraq known as Yazidis. This language is an example of an under-researched language diversity. This research draws on a sample of eleven in-depth semi-structured interviews with Yezidi men and women from Bashiqa, Iraq. The analysis of these interviews has yielded a number of points which help in documenting and preserving this language variety. The study concludes that the language used in Bashiqa is an ancient hybrid regional dialect in which many values and meanings are embedded. In short, the Yazidis understand their language as a vehicle of their intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Bashiqa dialect, Yazidis, regional dialect, intangible heritage, language diversity

Saaed A Saaed is Head of the Department of English Language, College of Basic Education at the University of Duhok, Iraq.

Wafaa Sabah Khuder is a Lecturer in the College of Management and Economics at the University of Duhok, Iraq.

Contents

1 Introduction

Language is one of the variables which is largely used to characterise human societies. In linguistics, this function of language is commonly known as 'language diversity' (Greenberg 1956; Lieberson and Hansen 1974). This linguistic diversity is part of the cultural diversity. In the 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, the selection of language is considered as one of the human rights as explicitly mentioned in Article 5 of the Declaration: 'All persons have … the right to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice, and particularly in the mother tongue.'

Although the concept of linguistic diversity is one of the core issues in modern linguistics, not all linguists equally perceive its importance. This idea is clearly stated by Bernini (2014: 165): 'The position held by scholars is not unique; some perceive linguistic diversity as an important resource, whereas others consider language shift and language loss as normal phenomena, almost lacking in negative outcomes'. However, since language diversity is one of the forms of cultural diversity, the authors think that it should be preserved. This can be achieved by studying a certain language and providing a linguistic as well as a historical documentation to preserve it as an item of cultural heritage.

Based on this understanding, the current research is an attempt to provide a linguistic, a historical as well as a sociocultural documentation of the language variety spoken in Bashiqa (Northern Iraq) by one of the communities which represents a religious minority in Iraq known as Yazidis. This language is an example of an under-researched language diversity.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses how language is considered a form of intangible cultural heritage; Section 3 introduces Bashiqa as a place; Sections 4 and 5 demonstrate the purpose and the significance of the study respectively; Section 6 outlines the methods and ethics adopted in the current research; Section 7 discusses the linguistic issues; Sections 8 and 9 cover historical and sociocultural issues; Section 10 presents the results and the discussion; and, finally, Section 11 states the study's conclusion.

2 Languages as intangible cultural heritage

Apart from gaining importance for its instrumental function as a means of communication, language is also important for its 'intrinsic value' functioning as a cultural heritage. The contrast between these two functions is discussed by Toscano (2011: 179):

> Anyway, the point is the contrast between the two languages' value dimensions, to the extent that languages have value independently of their communicative potential, or beyond it. More precisely, the crucial aspect of the discussion is how the contrast between both dimensions is formulated in terms of intrinsic versus instrumental value. As cultural heritage, i.e., as an original achievement and manifestation of human creativity, language is intrinsically valuable; as a means of communication, it has a merely instrumental value.

In recent times, the international community has become aware of the fact that all non-material manifestations of culture which are called 'intangible cultural heritage' should be safeguarded. Therefore, in 2003 the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) was adopted by UNESCO (2003a). Let's consider the following core points of the convention:

> 1. The "intangible cultural heritage" means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. [...]
>
> 2. The "intangible cultural heritage", as defined in paragraph 1 above, is manifested inter alia in the following domains:
>
> (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
>
> (b) performing arts;

(c) social practices, rituals and festive events;

(d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;

(e) traditional craftsmanship.

According to this document adopted by UNESCO (2003a), it can be detected that languages belong to ICH, because they are considered the vehicles of the relevant cultures. However, looking at languages as mere vehicles has been strongly criticized by Smeets (2004), who points out that languages achieve all the requirements which entitle them to be an integral part in the ICH. These requirements have been referred to in Bernine (2014: 178) as "parameters" and mentioned as follows:

> They (languages) are transmitted from generation to generation and constantly re-created; they presuppose knowledge and skills; speech acts are linguistic practice and expressions; and languages play an important role in defining the identity of both groups and individuals.

> Along the same line of thinking, anthropologists also support the idea that language should be perceived as an integral part of culture. Anthropologically, language is a "non-neutral medium" which has three main characteristics: 1. "a code for representing experience"; 2. "a form of social organization"; 3. "a system of differentiation" (Duranti, 2011, p. 30). Thus, "language use is constitutive of our social life, that is, speaking does not just happen in social interaction, speaking itself is social interaction" (pp. 38–39); so, language does not only act as "a medium for representing experience", but it plays "a crucial role in the constitution of the social context in which it is used" (p. 42).

These serious concerns about the status of languages have been addressed in another document by UNESCO (2003b) that is expressly dedicated to languages, as they are considered as essential parts of human cultural heritage:

> Language diversity is essential to the human heritage. Each and every language embodies the unique cultural wisdom of a people. The loss of any language is thus a loss for all humanity (p. 1).

> The extinction of each language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural, historical, and ecological knowledge. Each language is a unique expression of the

human experience of the world. Thus, the knowledge of any single language may be the key to answering fundamental questions of the future. Every time a language dies, we have less evidence for understanding patterns in the structure and function of human language, human prehistory, and the maintenance of the world's diverse ecosystems. Above all, speakers of these languages may experience the loss of their language as a loss of their original ethnic and cultural identity (p. 2).

Let's now sum up the main points set out above: language should not only be considered as a means of communication only as it has more than its instrumental value; UNESCO Convention of ICH does not go far enough in recognising the importance of language; the loss of languages can have a devastating impact on communities' culture and by creating a record (such as the one the current study is creating in this paper in relation to the language of the people of Bashiqa), it is possible to both preserve some of these aspects of heritage and to further understand their value to the community.

3   Bashiqa

Bashiqa is a sub-district belonging to Al-Hamdaniya district in the governorate of Nineveh province in northern Iraq. It is located northwest of the city of Mosul in the Nineveh Plain; it is 12km far from the central city of Mosul. Bashiqa is considered one of the agricultural areas, and it is famous for olive cultivation. Most of the inhabitants of Bashiqa area are Yazidis, but it is also inhabited by a small percentage of people of other religions, including Muslims, Christians and Shabaks.

The language of Bashiqa is unique as this paper will illustrate later on. It is a language of their own that is only spoken by the inhabitants of this region, which is historically composed of two villages: Bashiqa and Bahzani.

4   Purpose of the study

The study is a pioneering attempt to describe the language of the people of Bashiqa. Since previous research on this language is scarce, the current study aims at providing a threefold description of this language: a linguistic documentation, a historical background and a sociocultural background.

The linguistic documentation section aims at finding answers to a set of 8 questions:

1. What language do the people of the region speak?
2. How is it similar or different from other languages spoken in the region?
3. What are the origins of this language?
4. Where is this language spoken?
5. What are the features of this language?
6. What are the linguistic roots of the language and how does it overlap with other languages? Is it a mixture of several languages (a hybrid language)? Is it a mixture of words borrowed from other languages? What percentage of Arabic is used? What languages other than Arabic are used? Are these living or dead languages?
7. What grammar structure does the language follow? Are there any grammatical features or sentence structures that are distinct to this language?
8. What characteristics of the language used in Bashiqa today enable its preservation?

The following three questions are asked in the historical section:

1. When and how did this language originate? What is its historical background?
2. How long has this language been spoken? When did it originate?
3. Can the development of the language be considered a unique historical phenomenon that could provide an introduction to the learning of more historical facts about the region?

Finally, a group of eight questions is asked in the sociocultural section:

1. Which communities in Bashiqa speak this language? Is it spoken by all residents with their different religions and nationalities?
2. How does being able to speak this language relate to a sense of community and identity in Bashiqa? How does it connect or exclude certain groups and peoples? How do people perceive this?
3. How did a small village gather together people of different nationalities and religions to share in the use of their own specific language? How did this happen?
4. In what way is the language part of the community's heritage?
5. How does the language impact speakers' relationships with other people in Iraq or Mosul?
6. What would happen if the community lost its language?

7.   Why is this language important and what does it mean to its speakers?

8.   Is there anything else about the language in Bashiqa that speakers would like to add*?*

5   Significance of the study

The importance of the study relies on a number of points. Frist and foremost, since language is an integral part of culture, it should be preserved and one of the ways to preserve a language is by studying it. Secondly, since language is a vehicle of ICT, studying it may manifest different aspects of the culture under investigation such as: heritage, history, intercultural aspects, etc. Thirdly, this attempt will help make linguists and other scholars aware of this language and its characteristics which may open up more research areas.

6   Methods and ethics

This research draws on a sample of eleven in-depth semi-structured interviews with Yezidi men and women from Bashiqa, Iraq. The interview subjects were selected from the population of both Bashiqa and Bahzani villages since these villages use the language under investigation as their mother tongue. The choice of the subjects was made based on several considerations such as their status, experience and expertise. The total number of subjects were (11). These included both male (8) and female (3) participants. The participants who originally come from Bashiqa were (8) and those who originally come from Bahzani were (3). The total number of interviews made was (13) as some participants were interviewed more than once. Although most of these interviews (10) were conducted in-person, few of them (3) were conducted at a distance via phone since (2) of the participants live abroad, and one of these was interviewed twice.

An important element in any piece of research is ethics. Various ethical considerations were made with regard to the current research project, all of which were adhered to: with regard to the issue of informed consent, according to Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008: 34), the 'informed consent entails informing participants about the overall purpose of the study and the main features of the design'. Yet, Eisner (1991: 215) points out that 'thus we all like the idea of informed consent, we are less sure who is to provide that consent, just how much consent is needed, and how we can inform others so as to obtain consent when we have such a hard time predicting what we need to get consent about'. Also, Lincoln and

Denzin. (2003: 286) recommend to deal with such challenges by substituting the idea of an informed consent 'with a dialogue that runs throughout the investigation (...) so that there is a mutual shaping of the research results'. This recommendation was adopted in the present research. Participants were informed about the study and the interview process in an initial preparatory meeting or phone call, and they were informed once again just before starting the actual interview. Also, they were informed of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time and to ask for rest breaks if the interview became too long. With regard to the process of interviewing, anonymity and confidentiality were assured. The language of the interview was the local language of Bashiqa as the interview was conducted by one of the researchers, namely, Dr Wafaa. This is because she is a local citizen of Bashiqa and well-known by the people there. Then, the recordings of these interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the second researcher.

7 Linguistics documentation

This section contains a set of (9) questions which ask about the nature, origin, and some other characteristics of the language spoken in Bashiqa. When asked about the origin of their language, most of the respondents agree that the language of the region is Arabic. One of them links this with the religious innovator of the Yazidi religion, Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir. Sheikh Adi was a Muslim and of Arab origin. He was born in the 1070s in the village of Bait Far, in the Beqaa Valley of present-day Lebanon. For Yazidis, he is considered a divine being and the founder of their religion. He spent some years in Baghdad as student and then he moved to live in Shikhan, Nineveh where he died and was buried there (see YezidiTruth.org n.d.). Another respondent points out that though the region consists of different people belonging to different nationalities and religions, yet they all speak Arabic. Yet another response indicates that it is true the language used is Arabic, but other languages are also used by the people of other sects and religions.

The variety of nationalities and religions in the region prompted some responses claiming that the language source is mixed and cannot be Arabic only:

Participant (P) 9

> *The language of Bashiqa and Bahzani is a language consisting of several languages: 30% Turkish, 30% Kurdish, 30% Arab, 5% Jewish, 3% Shabak and 2% Armenian.*

Still other views mention the idea that this language belongs to 'the area of Mardin in Turkey' and that it is not an Arabic in origin. Finally, one of the views states that the language belongs to the old city of Hatra and that it is a special type of Arabic called *Jazira Arabic*. The term *Jazira* refers to what is commonly known as *The Jazira Region*. As cited in Wilkinson (1990: 87), 'the Jazira will be regarded as the land between the upper Tigris and Euphrates rivers, bounded to the north by the fold mountains of Asia Minor. Thus, it falls within north Iraq, north-east Syria, and south-east Turkey.'

Though it can be pointed out that the language spoken in Bashiqa is Arabic, it is not the same Arabic as the rest of Iraq; it is a vernacular used by all the people of the region regardless of their religion, nationality and sect.

However, when asked how this vernacular is similar or different from other languages spoken in the region, two respondents refer to similarity to Arabic language:

P3

> *The language of Bashiqa and Bahzani is characterised as being closer to the Arabic language (Standard Arabic), and it is also distinguished that there are letters that are omitted when speaking, and also that all residents of Bashiqa of different nationalities and religions speak this language, and this distinguishes the language as well.*

Another respondent pointed out the difference of pronunciation between the different dialects. A few respondents stated that their language is a mixture derived from the different languages, nationalities and religions of the people living in Bashiqa.

To sum up, the answer to the question concerning the similarity and/or difference to other surrounding languages entails the following comparative points:

1. Although the language spoken in Bashiqa is Arabic, it is not identical to the Arabic language used throughout Iraq.
2. Although everyone who lives in the region can speak the Bashiqa language fluently, differences do exist among different people.
3. Therefore, native speakers of this region have a vernacular that is unique to them.

As for the origins of their language, most of the respondents agreed that Arabic is the main origin of this language. However, they varied in what they said they consider the source of

it. Some said they believe the source to be the Bedouin, a term used to refer to the Arabian Peninsula the original home of the Bedouins; others link the source to the fact that Arabic is the language of the Jazira region in general; and a few others trace back the Arabic source of the language to the first coming of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir to the region, as mentioned at the start of this section. On the other hand, three respondents said that the origin is not one specific language such as Arabic but a mixture of languages:

P1

> *Concerning the origins, I said that it is a mixture of Arabic and Kurdish, and also Turkish, and this is because of the Turks' control over some areas and also because there is a possibility that we came from Turkey and brought with us some Turkish terms.*

The language of Bashiqa is not spoken in Bashiqa and Bahzani only; it is also used in other places as many respondents indicated. Some of these places are inside Iraq, such as Al-Dur in Tikrit, and others are outside Iraq, such as the Mardin region in Turkey, al-Hasakah, Qamishli and Aleppo in Syria, and Baalbek in Lebanon.

As far as the features that characterise their language, most of the respondents agreed that the main feature is that it is their language which can set them apart from the rest of the people in Iraq. This unique character was interpreted by some respondents as difficult to understand by strangers. Therefore, one of the respondents described the language as a 'historical and heritage identity' which distinguishes the people of Bashiqa in Iraq.

When asked about the linguistic roots of their language, most of the respondents agree that is the Arabic language. Therefore, when asked about the percentage of Arabic used in the language, very high percentages have been mentioned:

P3

> *The percentage is large, but frankly, I don't know the statistics, but I can say 99%.*

Yet most of the respondents think that the language is not pure Arabic as there are words that belong to different languages. Many languages other than Arabic, Kurdish and Turkish have been referred to. These include Assyrian, Akkadian, Persian, Armenian, English, German and even Russian.

To sum up, it is not difficult to conclude from the answers of the respondents that Arabic is considered as the root of the language used in Bashiqa. Although the percentage of Arabic is so high, words from other languages do exist among the Bashiqa language. These other languages are mainly Kurdish, Turkish, Persian and Assyrian. This can be ascribed to the nature of the region which is made up of people belonging to different nationalities and religions.

Concerning the grammatical structure and grammatical features which are distinct to their language, respondents do not give a direct relevant answer; they only recommended that this subject should be examined by linguists. However, when they are asked about the characteristics of this language used in Bashiqa today that enable you to preserve it, most respondents state that the basic characteristics is that it defines their identity in the region as it is a custom or a tradition. Therefore, most of them necessitate preserving their language and suggest different ways to do this:

P2

> We preserve this language culturally through research and undertaking a project such as compiling a dictionary, or a collection of writings that are relevant to this language. This can be done by guiding students to be specialists in this field. Researchers should focus on researching the language of this region.

One of the respondents stated that language represents their heritage and therefore it must be preserved:

P7

> Language is vital because it represents our heritage. So, we must preserve our dialect, dress and everything related to heritage. One of the positive things after the time of ISIS, is that people, especially young people, seemed interested in this issue, especially in our areas.

8 Historical background

The focus in this section is on history. Respondents were asked to specify when their language began. Although some of them were unable to specify an exact date, several linked it to Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir's arrival in the region, believing that the current language was the native language of Sheikh Adi which he brought to the region and its people. Another respondent stated that the origin of the language is Kurdish but the change to Arabic happened because of the presence of Arabs, mixing with Arabs in the region and also political reasons. However, this respondent added that this view was their own and that it was not based on historical evidence; the respondent stated the possibility that the people of Bashiqa originally came from the Levant.

Also, respondents think that this language is an ancient language, but they suggest different answers for the period when it originated; one of them refers it back to the 'Sumerian era', while another one thinks that it goes back to '… the time of our Lord Jesus Christ', a third respondent thinks that it goes back to 'the time of the Prophet Noah', and a fourth one thinks that it goes back to the period of 'the Aramaic states'. However, as stated, several other respondents think that the origin of the language goes back to the period where Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir moved to the region.

All respondents agreed that the formation of the language itself can be considered a unique historical phenomenon that could serve as an introduction to learning further historical facts about the region. The following is how one respondent described the change of heritage through the different historical stages of the region:

P5

> *Of course, there is evidence that in 1645 the Christians came and brought a language that changed the language of the region, and this is a historical event, which resulted in a change in the folklore of heritage because the language plays a major role in heritage and folklore. For example, I remember when I was a child, the Dabkeh* [a name for a dancing party] *was in the Kurdish language; now it is in Arabic.*

That language should be considered an important part of heritage was raised by another respondent; another respondent suggested a link between the language and the religion, stating that the language reveals much about the religion and its development through different historical stages.

9 Sociocultural aspects

Let us now move to the third and the last part of questions posed in the interviews. First of all, participants are asked about the communities that speak this language in Bashiqa. All the respondents unreservedly confirm that all the communities which live in Bashiqa, regardless of their sect, nationality and religion, speak this language:

P2

> It is the language of the city, regardless of the population. Mainly the Yezidi population speaks it, as well as other groups from the Syriacs, and even those who come from other nationalities and classifications such as Shabak, Armenians and Arabs over time speak the same language and integrate with it and it becomes the language of everyone and this is the case for Bashiqa and Bahzani and their language.

However, some of the responses indicate that though the language is used by all the communities, yet one can detect a pronunciation difference among the speakers who are not Yazidis in origin.

The impact of being able to speak the language of Bashiqa has been indicated in several ways.

First, all responses emphasise that there is a strong relation between being able to speak the language and the identity of Bashiqa community. Some justify this by connecting it to the Yazidi religion. Other respondents see that their language stands for their identity of being Bashiqa people as it distinguishes them from the others:

P10

> Language is considered a feature or an attribute, and our language is our feature that distinguishes us from the other people, and we are proud of that. That is why we must always urge our children to speak and preserve this language. This serves to perpetuate the language.

When asked about how a small place such as Bashiqa could gather together people of various nationalities and religion to share the same language, all the respondents ascribed

the reason to the peaceful coexistence of various nationalities, sects and religions that is witnessed in Bashiqa:

P1

> *The common language is what unites any society, and in fact, Bashiqa and Bahzani are famous for peaceful coexistence, and because many nationalities and religions coexisted in the same region, they had to learn a language and this language is what linked them.*

Language is an essential part of heritage. All of the respondents absolutely agree with the statement. One respondent states that the main reason for considering language as part of the heritage of his community is religion. Some other respondents attribute the reason to the fact that their language is inherited from fathers and grandfathers, so it should be similar to other customs and traditions that are inherited in the community. Finally, some others think that the reason that it is their language which distinguishes them from the others in Iraq.

Participants state that using their local language in other areas outside Bashiqa is limited or often avoided. This is mainly due to the fact that Bashiqa people are afraid of not being understood by others. Therefore, they use the Iraqi language instead:

P1

> *The majority of Bashiqa residents do not speak their language in other areas. For example, in Mosul, they speak the Mosuli dialect so that people can understand their words because most people do not understand our dialect.*

For the people of Bashiqa, their language is highly precious; they do not believe that their language will ever be lost. Most participants indicated that the loss of the language would cause the loss of identity, existence, heritage and history:

P1

> *The region will lose its identity and its history for sure, especially since neither identity nor history is written down, and the only thing that preserves their identity and history to some extent is their language.*

Another respondent considered that the consequence of losing the language would be losing the Yazidi religion as a whole. This is because of the holy connection between the language variety spoken in Bashiqa and the Yazidi religion as it is generally believed that the language was brought to the region by the innovator of the Yazidi religion Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, as mentioned above in Section 7 above:

P9

> This will mean the end of the Yazidi religion completely. The language is like the notebook on which the religion is written. If this language ends, the Yazidi religion will end.

When asked about the importance of the language, all the respondents agreed that their language is important; they pointed out that it means many things for them, such as their identity, mother tongue, existence and heritage:

P3

> We return to the same topic because it is my identity and my existence, and it is the mother tongue that I have a duty to preserve.

Some respondents raised the significant issue of the Yazidis who emigrated from the region and retain no links with local people. These people may not be familiar with the dialect. But one of the respondents emphasised that those who emigrated should preserve their dialect to stay affiliated to the Bashiqa region:

P11

> The dialect of the people of Bashiqa is a cornerstone of the identity of the people of the region, which makes them feel proud as it distinguishes them from other communities; it distinguishes the Yezidis from the people of Bashiqa from the rest of the Yezidis. By just speaking with other Yezidis in other regions and even with the rest of the non-Yazidi communities and neighbouring Bashiqa the listener will know that the speaker is from Bashiqa, so it is his own identity. Even those who emigrated from the region kept their dialect because they feel that it represents their own identity and also represents their religious, physical, emotional, spiritual and cognitive affiliation to the Bashiqa region.

There is a question about future generations of Yazidis who currently live away from the region and whether they are able to preserve their original dialect. One respondent indicated that the children of Yazidi families who have moved away are not able to acquire their language and as a result do not understand it now:

P9

> *Of course, our language is an official identity, and the evidence for this is that it distinguishes us from other communities; note that the children of those who moved away from Bashiqa due to emigration and are now in Germany or Sweden did not acquire this language and do not understand it now when we talk to them. Therefore, our language should be considered a strong link in society.*

Finally, some respondents said that studies in their language are not available; they called upon those who are interested or specialised in this field to consider this:

P1

> *I would like to add that there is nothing recorded and there are no stories written in the Bashiqa dialect and it has not been properly documented so far. Therefore, more studies by specialised people should be undertaken.*

10 Discussion

This section discusses the responses of the participants listed above. To do this, the discussion will be organised in three different parts which represent the main objectives of the current study:

10.1   The linguistic background

The responses point out that the language spoken by the people of Bashiqa is Arabic. The Arabic language is a Semitic language. It appeared in the first to fourth centuries C.E. (Weninger, *et al.* 2011). Nowadays, it is regarded as the *lingua franca* of the Arab world; it is '... the mother tongue of over 200 million people across the Middle East and North Africa' (Shah 2008: 255).

Although most of the respondents agreed that the origin of the language spoken in Bashiqa is Arabic, they emphasised that it is not the same Arabic language as used in other parts of

Iraq or the world. In sociolinguistics, this is called a language or dialect variation and there can be different parts of this variation. Kastrati (2017) distinguishes five types of these variations: standard dialect, non-standard dialect, regional dialect, social dialect and temporal dialect. If a language form is spoken in a specific geographical area, it is called a regional dialect and it is transmitted from parents to children, it is a spoken language rather than a written one, and it is the unstandardised variety used in everyday language (see Siegel 2010). Therefore, the language variety used in Bashiqa can be described as a regional dialect.

Among the other characteristics of a regional language is what is known as 'dialect perception'. Dialect perception is defined as being '... a branch of person perception, an area in social psychology that deals with the perception of human social attributes' (Lee 1971: 410). Many respondents mentioned that their language distinguishes them from other people; some stated that they avoid using their language variety as it is not understood in Iraq by others. However, it should be noted that Iraqi people can easily identify the people of Bashiqa once they listen to their language. This is because a considerable amount of personal information about the speaker, such as his or her age, sex and regional dialect is conveyed by his or her voice (Abercrombie, 1967). Besides, it has been found that adult listeners can divide speakers into dialect groups (Clopper and Bradlow 2009; Clopper and Pisoni, 2006; Clopper, Rohrbeck and Wagner 2012).

As far as the features of this language are concerned, respondents were not able to identify its linguistic features, mainly because it is a spoken rather than a written language. It is not the official or the standard language; the language which is formally used at schools and universities is the Standard Arabic language. Yet some respondents mentioned the difference that exists in the pronunciation of some sounds among the speakers of the language used in Bashiqa. This is a natural phenomenon in regional dialects; relevant studies have proven that '...people in different regions speak the same language differently' (Preston 2010: 89). The other reason for this difference, and pointed out by most of the respondents, is that this language is a mixed language (Yaron and Peter 2008) as the people who live in Bashiqa come from different sects, religions and nationalities. Thomason (1995) categorises mixed languages into two categories: Category 1 languages display 'heavy influence from the dominant group's language in all aspects of structure and grammar as well as lexicon'; Category 2 languages demonstrate a 'categorial specificity of the structural borrowing'. As the dialect of Bashiqa is highly influenced by the Arabic

language, which is the dominant language of Iraq, it is a hybrid dialect of the first category in the categories suggested by Thomson.

10.2   The historical background

Though the present study is not concerned with the history of the Yazidi religion itself, it is important to add here some historical information. The exact origin of the Yazidi religion is a matter of dispute as there are no written documents that provide confirmed answers to this question. However, some scholars believe that Yezidism emerged in the twelfth century, when Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, an Arab Sufi sheikh (see section 7 above), came to study in Baghdad and settled in the valley of Lalish (a small city also known as Sheikhaan, northeast of Mosul). At that time, the local people there were practising an old Iranic faith. After settling in the region, Sheikh Adi introduced his Sufi doctrines and teachings to the local people. The people of the region mixed elements of Islam (Sufi doctrines and teachings) with local pre-Islamic beliefs, namely old Iranic practices. After the death of Sheikh Adi in 1162 AD, his teachings and practices were merged with the old Iranic practices.

The tomb of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir in the town of Lalish is considered a sacred pilgrimage site for the Yazidis. The lands occupied by Yazidis in northwestern Iraq in areas north of the city of Mosul have a religious importance. There are also shrines and ancestral villages there. This explains why for Yazidis there is a strong relationship between geography and religious practice. One of the respondents pointed out this holy relationship which holds between the Yazidi religion and the geographical sites:

P9

> ... I want to emphasise an important topic for the Yezidis, which is the relationship between the region, or rather the regions they live in, and the Yezidi religion. All these areas extending from Bashiqa and Bahzani to the areas of Sheikhan, where the Lalish Temple is located, are considered the motherland of all Yezidis. These areas witness most of the religious rituals, such as the annual pilgrimage to the shrine of Sheikh Adi in the Lalish temple, the feast day on Red Wednesday, fasting and the Jamaia feast.

When asked about the history of their language, all the respondents stated that it is an ancient language. When asked about when the language originated, different answers

were given. Nevertheless, several responses indicated that the language goes back to the period when Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir moved to the region.

Furthermore, all the respondents agreed that the formation of the language itself can be considered a unique historical phenomenon that could serve as an introduction to learning more historical facts about the region. One of these facts is that this language is highly valued among the people of Bashiqa as it is considered a religious language, traced back to Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir. When respondents were asked, 'What would happen if your community lost this language?', one of the responses indicated that the effect of losing the language would be losing the Yazidi religion as a whole. This poses the following question: If this language is considered a religious language, is it a sacred religious language used only by Yazidi people or is it used by other people who are not Yazidis but live in the region? This is considered in the next section.

10.3   Sociocultural aspects

Though the language variety used in Bashiqa is highly associated to Yazidis and Yazidi religion, most of the respondents point out that it is not restricted to Yazidis only since it is used by all the residents of the region regardless of their religion, sect and nationality. It has already been mentioned that this language variety is a regional dialect. This means that it is shared by all of the people of the community of Bashiqa. What matters most is not origin or religion or nationality, but the region. This means that although the language variety used in Bashiqa is highly associated to Yazidis.

Obviously, there is a strong relation between the language used by a group and the sense of community and identity of that group. Identity is defined as 'an internalised, self-selected concept based on experiences inside the family and outside of the family'. This identity is formed by gaining values, beliefs and concepts that better express our personality and sense of belonging (Adams, Gullotta, and Montemayor 1992: 2). As a person's language identity is not only concerned with the language of the country he or she belongs to but also with the variety of language spoken in the region he or she lives, there is a strong relationship between identity and regional dialect. Therefore, Gulabi and Ahmed (2018: 212) state that 'the native language of any community is its identity; hence identity is very important for the social and psychological well-being of the individual or group of people'. Therefore, the existence of a native language variety is necessary to sustain the cultural identity of the community in the region (Usman 2014). This explains why all the respondents

emphasise a strong correlation between being able to speak the language variety of Bashiqa and acquiring the identity of Bashiqa community.

However, the acquisition of this regional dialect and the identity of a Bashiqa community as a whole would not have been possible without the coexistence in Bashiqa of the various nationalities, sects and religions. Borijian (2005) calls this factor 'peaceful coexistence' and argues it is quite possible for countries that have an official language plus one or more regional dialects spoken across the country to 'enjoy a peaceful coexistence between their vernaculars and the *lingua franca*' (65). This is exactly the position in Bashiqa; the standard language of the country in Iraq is Arabic, which acts as the *lingua franca*, and the vernacular used in Bashiqa is the non-standard regional dialect. Furthermore, Borijian emphasises that an implication of this coexistence is positive in that '…it unifies a nation and connects its people to their common past and empowers nationalism instead of nationism (i.e., separation)' (69).

All the respondents confirmed that their language is part of the heritage of their community. Blackledge *et al.* (2008: 536) state that 'heritage refers to elements of past experience which a group deliberately sets out to preserve and pass on to the next generation'. But what are these elements that constitute heritage? Recent studies (Blackledge *et al.* 2008; Ahmad 2006; Smith 2006) indicate that heritage is not only limited to the preservation of buildings, towns and historical locations but it also includes social issues and intangible heritage. As already mentioned, ICH is defined by UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage as:

> The "intangible cultural heritage" means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO 2003: Article 2:2)

As heritage comprises both tangible and intangible elements, dealing with heritage means dealing with sets of values and meanings which include emotion, memory and shared knowledge (Smith 2006). These values and meanings can be represented in language,

history, place, community or belonging (Smith 2004), or "anything that someone wishes to conserve or to collect, and to pass on to future generations" (Howard 2003: 6). They are the things which should be well taken care of and preserved since they are subject to a potential loss (Peckham 2003: 1). This explains why all the respondents strongly stressed that their language is a central part of their heritage. They clearly and regularly highlighted that their language is their identity and history, and is highly valuable as it is descended from their fathers and grandfathers. This means that the people of Bashiqa attach language with a set of values and meanings. Furthermore, they think that there is a fateful relationship between their language and their religion (the Yazidi religion). Some participants pointed out that the loss of their language means the loss of their religion. This implies that this relationship is inevitable in that the use of this language variety is the main key to recognise the person as Yazidi.

11 Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the present study:

From a linguistic point of view, the variety of language used in Bashiqa can be described as a regional dialect which is originally derived from Arabic. This dialect is a nonstandard spoken dialect which is used in everyday language. Although it is based on Arabic, it is distinct in its pronunciation and this feature is what sets its speakers apart from other people in Iraq. This leads to what is known as dialect perception. Also, it is a hybrid dialect as it is mixed by certain words from other dialects and /or languages.

From a historical point of view, this language variety is not new. Most of the participants stated that it is an ancient one that goes back to the period when Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir moved to the region. Moreover, tracing back the history of this language to the first coming of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir to the region indicates a strong connection between the history of the language of the region and the Yazidi religion. Therefore, historically speaking, it is a religious language.

From a sociocultural point of view, the regional dialect of Bashiqa is shared by all of the people of the community of Bashiqa, regardless of their religion, sect and nationality. What matters most is not origin or religion or nationality; what matters most is the region.

A strong correlation between being able to speak the language variety of Bashiqa and between acquiring the identity of Bashiqa community has also been found. This is because the existence of a native language variety is necessary to sustain the cultural identity of the community in the region. However, it has also been noted that this community identity would not have been possible without the positive effect of the peaceful coexistence that is available in Bashiqa among the various nationalities, sects and religions.

Finally, it has been found that the community of Bashiqa views its native language as an essential component of its heritage. Thus, the people clearly and regularly highlight that their language is their identity, history and highly valuable as it is descended from their fathers and grandfathers. This means that the people of Bashiqa attach language with a set of values and meanings. Furthermore, they think that there is a fateful relationship between their language and their religion (the Yazidi religion). Some participants pointed out that the loss of their language means the loss of their religion. This implies that this relationship is inevitable. This justifies the title of the current study: The Language of the People of Bashiqa: A Vehicle of their Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Interviews

P1.   Interviewed in person, July 2021. Male Yazidi from Bashiqa (Iraq). Now living in Bashiqa.

P2.   Interviewed via Phone/Skype from Bashiqa (Iraq) to Berlin (Germany). Male Yazidi from Bashiqa (Iraq). Now living in Berlin (Germany).

P3.   Interviewed in person, July 2021. Male Yazidi from Bashiqa (Iraq). Now living in Bashiqa.

P4.   Interviewed in person, July 2021. Male Yazidi from Bahzani (Iraq). Now living in Bahzani.

P5.   Interviewed in person, July 2021. Male Yazidi from Bashiqa (Iraq). Now living in Bashiqa.

P6.   Interviewed in person, July 2021. Male Yazidi from Bashiqa (Iraq). Now living in Bashiqa.

P7.   Interviewed in person, July 2021. Female Yazidi from Bashiqa (Iraq). Now living in Bashiqa.

P8.   Interviewed in person, July 2021. Female Yazidi from Bahzani (Iraq). Now living in Bahzani.

P9.   Interviewed in person, July 2021. Male Yazidi from Bahzani (Iraq). Now living in Bahzani.

P10.   Interviewed via Phone/Skype from Bashiqa (Iraq) to Berlin (Germany). Male Yazidi from Bashiqa (Iraq). Now living in Berlin (Germany).

P11.   Interviewed in person, July 2021. Female Yazidi from Bashiqa (Iraq). Now living in Bashiqa.

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