Title of Project:
Living Language Policy Through Stratified Space:
A Linguistic Ethnography in the United Arab Emirates

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TIRF Research Topic Investigated:
Language Planning & Policy

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Final Report

Motivation for the Research
This project was an in-depth ethnographic investigation of the lived language policy experiences of the foreign residents living in Ras Al Khaimah, a city in the United Arab Emirates. It focused on teachers, students, and staff at a private English language school in the city but also included perspectives from inhabitants of other city spaces. The project not only explored language practices in the school but also narratively followed participants as they lived their daily lives in the city.

The project set out with several goals. First, there was a practical need for this research in Ras Al Khaimah and the UAE more generally. National policy initiatives, such as the Arabic Language Charter and Vision 2021, had set clear Arabic language goals for the country while there also appeared to be a simultaneous push for English in public school curricula. However, very little policy or research attention had been given to the expatriate population which makes up approximately 90% of the country. I wondered how impactful such policies could really be if they only targeted a small fraction of the population. What was required to explore these issues was in-depth sociolinguistic research with residents, in particular expatriates, to better understand what was actually going on in people's everyday lives in the country. I felt that expatriate residents had to be treated as important policy actors who both influence the outcomes of official government language policy goals and generate the *de facto* language policies that emerge in local communities. Better understanding the dynamic that results from the interaction of government language policy with private school and community language policies and practices seemed an important step towards better understanding the policy context.

The project was grounded in theoretical goals that would allow it to make it an important contribution to the field of language policy. First, the project added to a growing body of work that investigates highly diverse and complex linguistic contexts, such as Ras Al Khaimah, with greater attention to language mobility and fluidity rather than languages as static and discrete entities. Second, there was a need for language policy research that explored the interaction between official government policy texts and unofficial, *de facto* language policy that emerges in

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local communities. Third, by drawing on the work of Foucault (1988, 2007, 2008) and debates from human geography in its framing of language policy, the project set out to provide an interdisciplinary discussion of how language policy might be understood in this context.

Research Questions
The project began with two broad research questions (RQs) that served as an exploratory starting point:

> RQ1. How is language policy negotiated in the city?
> RQ2. How does it come to shape language practices in the city?

Based on my participants' experiences in the school context, I hoped to understand how language policy was produced in and through a private language institution, such as Ras Al Khaimah (RAK) English School. I wanted to get a sense of how administrators, teachers and students were involved in policy production and processes. Based on my participants' experiences in the wider community, I wanted to get a sense of how particular spaces in the city impacted the deployment of language practices. I wanted to know who had access to which kinds of spaces and what language practices could or could not be deployed in a particular space. Finally, by attending to national and international language policies, institutions, and debates, I hoped to explore how these highly localized policies and practices are woven into structures of power that extend beyond the communities of the city that I was investigating.

Research Methodology
The project used an ethnographic toolkit and interviews grounded in narrative inquiry to explore these questions. The core of the investigation centered on a small group of seven participants who studied or worked at a language school in Ras Al Khaimah. These were mobile, middle-class residents of the city who came from a range of countries (including Australia, Europe, the Philippines, Egypt, Jordan and Afghanistan). Most of these individuals participated in six semi-structured interviews over the course of the six months that I was collecting data. Participants were also given a notebook and asked to jot down linguistic experiences Ras Al Khaimah that they felt were interesting or representative of common linguistic decisions or challenges that they faced in their daily lives. In this discussion, I also encouraged participants to tell me about specific city spaces they frequented and about their language practices in these spaces. Each interview involved some discussion of these reflections, with the notebooks serving as a memory aid, and then followed more general topics around questions I prepared in advance. These topics included background information, experiences with teaching or learning language, language use with family/friends, identity, and language policy. I encouraged participants to tell stories of specific events where possible to ensure that our discussions remained closely connected to real life experiences.

As I started to collect a set of city spaces that my core participants discussed, I also began exploring them myself. This involved visiting these places with a notebook and making observations of demographics, language use, signage and collecting flyers and information about formal policies tied to specific spaces. Once I was familiar with a specific space, I also conducted some interviews, if possible, with regular inhabitants of that space (e.g. managers, employees, customers, visitors). These individuals made up a second group of participants who I interviewed only once and helped develop a clearer picture of both these specific city spaces and

other aspects of life in Ras Al Khaimah that were not a part of the accounts of my core group. In total there were 33 of these participants from a range of ethnolinguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Data analysis began in the field, as I began to compile case summaries for both core participants and city spaces. At the same time, I tried to keep track of ongoing themes or issues that seemed to be emerging across cases so that I could continue to follow up with core participants in their later interviews. After data collection was complete and the interviews were transcribed, I went back and holistically coded individual cases. Rather than a densely-coded analysis, I used codes to identify specific stories or reflections that would then potentially contribute to the themes I saw emerging across cases. I did this in part to retain the structure of the many short stories my participants told as well as their reflections on them.

Summary of Findings

This project contributes a fuller picture of how different dimensions of language policy in the UAE can be pieced together around the more extensive work done with the Emirati population. By focusing on foreign residents, I was able to explore the major policy apparatuses that have direct and indirect effects on everyday language practices in Ras Al Khaimah. I found that many of my participants, especially the more mobile, middle-class core group, seemed to make space for themselves within formal language policy (despite being largely unacknowledged within such policy), generally having more space to act as English policy agents than Arabic ones. This seemed especially true of teachers and staff at the private language school who saw themselves as providers of an essential service not adequately offered by governmental institutions or public education. More important, however, were economic and social policies mainly produced in the private sector. Public policy allows the private sector to operate with a great deal of policy freedom, and as a result, the *de facto* language policy that emerges is often characterized by the laissez-faire economic policy that produces it. However, this seemed to produce much more linguistic complexity than other accounts of *lingua franca* English in the UAE suggest. English is instead constructed as one of many linguistic resources to draw on for a maximally flexible and competitive neoliberal subject. Various types of private sector social policies also produce *de facto* language policy. This occurs through the mechanisms of segregation that produce different policied spaces, which are engaged with (or avoided) differently by different socioeconomic and ethnolinguistic groups. Language practices are fundamentally shaped by the deep racial and economic hierarchies that define specific city spaces and determine who has access to a given space and on what (linguistic) terms. Finally, these spaces often contain moments of crossing socioeconomic and ethnolinguistic boundaries. This is managed by *de facto* language policy that has emerged to govern the language practices required to make such crossings possible. For working-class residents, this generally takes the form of language accommodation that is imposed by corporate policy, racism, or both at the same time. For middle-class residents, this work takes on a more clearly defined ethical dimension as they try to manage the inequality and prejudice they see and experience in their everyday lives.

These different language policy effects across different spaces and scales, as well as ethnolinguistic and socioeconomic groups, are exemplified by varying engagements with English language policy, such as IELTS requirements for education or employment. While such policies (and investment in English as a whole) appeared to impact significantly the lives of my middle-class participants, they were largely irrelevant to the working-class participants, who generally also inhabited very different spaces and engaged in different work-life routines. For those

individuals, what mattered were the *de facto* language policies produced by mechanisms, such as workplace demographics; neoliberal economic policy; repeated interactions between strangers with no common language; routinized negotiation of linguistic, racial, ethnic, and gender differences; and processes of racial and socioeconomic segregation. These factors tended to make Hindi/Urdu much more important as a *lingua franca*. While middle-class residents emphasized the importance of English for every aspect of life in the Ras Al Khaimah, working-class residents generally said that English was not an essential language for daily life in the city.

Implications
Although these findings are framed within Ras Al Khaimah city space, and are valuable for that specific context and the UAE as a whole, the implications stretch well beyond the country. With its privatization of migrant labor flows and stark, rigidly demarcated inequalities, the UAE is an important context for exploring the relationship between language policy and global capitalism. This project highlights the importance of investigating broader sets of social and economic policies and the racialized, socioeconomic hierarchies that are produced through them. Exploring how language policy is produced in such contexts and how different ethnolinguistic and socioeconomic groups engage with it in different ways can help provide much needed nuanced discussions of relationships between language, power and inequality.

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