

Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers

Episode 4: Using Different Language Varieties and Dialects in Government Jobs

[Intro music]

Jamie Morgan: Are you a learner of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Persian, or Russian? Do you have a connection to these languages through your family or community? This is the podcast for you!

[00:30] Hello, and welcome to Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers. We believe in the power of multilingualism, and in this podcast series we'll discuss how your language skills can help you get hired and work successfully in the federal government. By sharing experiences that link language study to potential federal careers, we'll teach you how to leverage your language skills to get a fulfilling job.

I'm your host, Jamie Morgan. Have you ever wondered what place language varieties have in the government? In this episode [01:00] we're going to talk about using heritage languages and different language varieties, dialects, and registers in government jobs.

Our guests today are Fatemeh Towhidi and Walid Abu-Ulbah. Fatemeh Towhidi has a bachelor's degree in Foreign Languages, a master's degree in Education, and a business degree focusing on global affairs. She has taught English and Farsi to kids and adults, worked as an interpreter in public schools, and designed dozens of Farsi curriculum projects for government agencies.

[01:30] She has been a Department of Justice court interpreter for Farsi and Dari and now serves as an Assistant Professor for the Defense Language Institute.

Walid Abu-Ulbah works as a Language Training Supervisor at the Department of State's Foreign Service Institute. He started working at the Institute in 2010 as an Arabic instructor. He earned his graduate degrees from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, including a master's degree in TESOL and a PhD in Language Education.

Thanks so much for joining us, and let's get [02:00] started!

[Transition music]

Jamie: Our first question is, can you tell us a little bit about your language background? What languages were spoken in your home? What languages did you study, and where did you study them?

Fatemeh Towhidi: We speak, and we spoke Farsi, Persian Farsi at home in Iran, and I learned to speak English in [02:30] Iran when I was 12. So, I went to language schools to learn English. I

also learned Chinese while I was living in China, so a bit of Chinese here and some dialects of Farsi, Persian Farsi, especially Dari, Pashto, Urdu and also some Tajik.

Walid Abu-Ulbah: In my home in Jordan, we spoke Arabic and, in my home, currently, we speak a mix of Arabic and English, the children and I. I [03:00] studied in schools in Jordan. English is a required subject starting with the fifth grade throughout high school, so I studied English in high school, and I continued my studies in English. It's a subject I was attracted to, and I liked, and I studied it in my post high school institutions.

Jamie: Great. So, can you tell us a little bit about your background and experience looking for and obtaining a federal government [03:30] job?

Walid: I started by applying for the Foreign Service Institute as an instructor. And I was a contractor, instructor contractor in 2010. Then soon after that, I think they looked at my qualifications and decided I can do more. So, I became a training language supervisor, and this is how I got into the federal government. The reason I was hired was my knowledge of the language. [04:00] I know Arabic. I knew how to teach it; I knew how to write it. And my knowledge of the language actually is what got me the job in the federal government.

Fatemeh: Yes, I heard about this opportunity with the EHLS program and scholarship (NSEP) from Georgetown University. And I really like to use my expertise with Persian Farsi language and also my university, like my college degrees in that regard, I had studied foreign languages and translation [04:30] as well as literature. So, I wanted to kind of use my expertise in the language, along with my academic skill in the federal field. So, I did participate, and I did get accepted in that program. I was awarded the scholarship and I pursued with that, and it helped me a lot. We got to know many of these agencies and offices, we got to know the networking.

Jamie: So, in your experience, what are the benefits of using critical languages and specific [05:00] language varieties, dialects, or registers in the federal government?

Fatemeh: I believe that nowadays that with the global relationships and the contacts, and also the conflicts that are in the world, we all need to ease the communication. And maybe not a long time ago the emphasis was on other languages, but I feel now that we need to know those languages that are spoken in Middle East and being one of them, Persian Farsi. So, I thought [05:30] if I could use my expertise in this language and help the government employees with that, we could ease the relationship. We could ease the misunderstandings that there are sometimes there, especially with the culture. That's my end goal.

Jamie: Great. And in terms of any specific dialects that you've used, can you tell us a little bit about your experience there and how that's applied in your job?

Fatemeh: With Department of State, sometimes they had some places that they needed help with analyzing the pieces that they were either [06:00] Dari or Pashto. When I help with Department of Justice, like with the court system, I interpret for courts. I think that most of the cases that lately I have been receiving are for Dari. But again, both, I have been using both. And also with teaching, I've been teaching Persian Farsi to adults with government agencies, in different agencies. It has been mostly Persian Farsi rather than Dari.

Walid: In my case, [06:30] I'd like to talk about our students who are potential Foreign Service Officers. And these students need to know, to speak the heritage language. And when you speak Arabic, you speak a variety of Arabic. You don't speak Modern Standard Arabic. You speak a variety; you speak a dialect. Everybody who speaks Arabic speaks a dialect. So, our students, some of whom are also heritage speakers, when they come to us, they speak a heritage [07:00] language, and it's usually a variety.

And that's important because when they go to these posts, they need to know how to speak. If they are consular officers, for example, they know how to speak to someone, an applicant for a visa across the window. Now that applicant is going to speak a variety of the language that is spoken over there in that country. And that's what we teach them. Something they can use, and they understand when they listen to.

Jamie: Great. [07:30] And I'm wondering, are there specific varieties or dialects that would be particularly valuable to the federal government?

Walid: No variety really is preferable to another variety. A variety is important where you can use it. If someone is going to Cairo, we're going to teach them the Egyptian dialect. If someone is going to Sudan, Sudanese, and so on and so forth. So, there is no one dialect or variety that's preferable to know than the other.

Now our teachers here, we assign [08:00] teachers to teach the dialect that they know and that they can teach and speak. That's an advantage for the students because we teach them the authentic dialect that's spoken by someone who speaks it. So, our teachers are qualified native speakers of that dialect or variety that we teach.

Fatemeh: There is a high need, I know that for Azari or Kurdish and also for other dialects, and we do need people who speak those dialects. So, if there are people that they are interested, I would [08:30] highly recommend for them to go and pursue these things. I know that there are some like Luri Bakhtiari, we don't have anyone. I don't know if there are many people speaking that. We have Mazandarani from the north, Rashti and Gilaki dialects. We have other like, you know, Sistan and Balochistan, those Balochi dialects, I don't know if we have people, but I know that their needs are there. For like, they are at the government that they are looking for people who speak those dialects.

So those students [09:00] who have parents that have been speaking these languages, please don't hide it. You are needed, they want you there. And find that dream job that you want.

Jamie: I think that's helpful to know because a lot of our listeners may be unsure of whether or not the particular variety or dialect that they speak is valuable in a federal government job.

Walid: Absolutely. They are all valuable. And something specific to the State Department, there is a policy that was put down by the State Department: [09:30] that is one Arabic. Any variety of Arabic you speak is acceptable. Say, when you take a test, if you come to me and I'm testing you in Jordanian dialect, but you happen to speak in MSA or speak in Egyptian, it's on me to understand what you say. So, any variety that's spoken is really valuable and acceptable.

Jamie: So, let's just talk a little bit about promoting the value of language varieties within the federal workplace, since we're already on this topic. [10:00] Have you had to deal with people's beliefs, assumptions, or perhaps biases related to different language varieties? And if so, can you tell us a little bit about your experience there?

Walid: Actually, yes that was an issue that we faced when we developed our current curriculum. Our current curriculum is developed in seven varieties plus Modern Standard Arabic. Now, it is a belief that if you want to speak in depth [10:30] about an idea, you need to use Modern Standard Arabic, you cannot express that depth of thought in a dialect, which is really not true. When our students come to be more advanced, we teach them what we call a blended dialect or an educated dialect, which is a blend of MSA and a dialect. If you go to an Arab country and you listen to a speaker being interviewed about some topics [11:00] that are really deep in thought, you'd hear them speak in a blended dialect. So, we had to work against that belief that only Modern Standard Arabic is fit to express deep ideas.

Some students also come to us having graduated from universities where they have studied Arabic. Now the Arabic they teach at universities is Modern Standard Arabic. You take a course in Modern Standard Arabic; you pass it and then you go [11:30] on. Now our students' needs are different from that. We want them to be able to go in the field to their posts and actually be able to use the language with the clients that come to the embassy. So, when the students come to us, having studied Modern Standard Arabic, and then we say, okay, we're going to teach you a dialect that is spoken where you're going, there is a shock there. And we need to deal with that and make it easy for them to transition from what they have [12:00] learned into a dialect that is spoken.

Now, there is an issue that is misunderstood. When we say we teach dialect, that doesn't mean we ignore, or we abandon Modern Standard Arabic. We teach the dialect in spoken language. When they speak, they speak dialect. But when we teach them reading or writing, it is Modern Standard Arabic.

Jamie: Great. What is your personal experience using different language varieties, perhaps in formal and informal contexts [12:30] within the federal workplace?

Fatemeh: Well, formally when we teach, when I'm working with students especially at higher levels, we need to use more of a formal language and also different registers for different purposes.

Different agencies have different needs and purposes for their employees. So, let's say an agency wants their students to learn a special register of the language that's just like for speaking [13:00] the language, so they need to know other dialects. But there is another agency who needs their students to learn the language just for analyzing and reading through the lines. So those two are different and we teach for different purposes and therefore we have to use different registers of the language.

Walid: Well, you understand when we talk about my usage of Arabic in the workplace, I supervise teachers who teach Arabic, [13:30] so I need to know the language. I need to know Modern Standard Arabic. I need to know the varieties that are being taught. So, when I go and observe my teachers who teach Iraqi Arabic, or who teach Gulf Arabic or teach Egyptian Arabic, I need to be able to understand what they're doing and actually discuss the lesson with them afterwards. So, I need to be able to use that, listen to it, understand it, and actually use it, if I were to give an example.

Also, when the curriculum [14:00] was written, I reviewed the content, all of it. So, I needed to know all that, if I were to be able to actually edit and make the curriculum teachable. So, it was important for me in my capacity as a supervisor and as part of the team that developed the curriculum to know the language, either MSA, Modern Standard Arabic, or dialect.

Jamie: And speaking from your experience as an instructor or from the perspective of your current instructors, are [14:30] they also using their different dialects in informal situations?

Walid: Oh, okay. When they teach in the classroom, they teach the variety that they are assigned to teach. Now, when our teachers get together for lunch or outside the classroom, no matter where they are from, I see they speak their own dialects, but they are understood by their colleagues. Now, when I talk to my Egyptian colleagues, they talk to me in [15:00] Egyptian. I talk to them in Palestinian. We both understand each other. I don't need to change my dialect for them.

Jamie: All right, so now we're going to move on just to talking a little bit about looking for and applying for jobs. So, when looking for, or applying for jobs, what is it like in terms of identifying which language variety a specific job is looking for?

Fatemeh: Well, personally, if I wanted to search, I would go from a bigger aspect to more, you know, down. I would [15:30] search for if there are any like Persian Farsi jobs or any jobs that are with my expertise of the language. And in that line, then I would search for different dialects. And I even put the dialect that I need with, like, let's say for example, USAJOBS.com, and I search if there are jobs in that dialect as well.

But it's good to search for languages. Sometimes they do not mention the language that they need, but when you go and see and read the details of that language, you will see that they need [16:00] for example, Kurdish or Azari dialect. And plus, networking is also always a very good way to get to know the agency.

Walid: Usually when we advertise our need for candidates for jobs, we also indicate the variety that we need. For example, currently I am looking for someone who can teach the Jordanian dialect. So, when I advertise, I tell my colleagues in the Contracts section [16:30] to advertise for someone who can teach the Jordanian dialect.

Now, what happens in the federal government—if some other place in the federal government needs someone who speaks Arabic, I don't think it matters what varieties they speak. As long as they speak the language, I think they'll be fine.

Jamie: Great. And how did speaking a dialect help you get your job?

Fatemeh: I speak Persian Farsi from Tehran. So, I wouldn't say that it has a very specific dialect [17:00] difference because this is the official, the formal language of Iran. But I do understand, my father used to speak Turkish, so Azari Turkish. So, it helped me a lot with some smaller projects. So, I would say yes, the more we know, the more dialects that you know, the better and easier job that you can get. I mean, you never know where you can help the government, where you can help your country and contribute with that little knowledge of that dialect that you have. That dialect might not seem [17:30] a big thing from outside, but there are places that they need you there and you need to be there.

Walid: I would like to say that knowing a language or a variety of the language is always useful in applying for any job, it gives you a dimension that others do not have. So, knowing any variety of Arabic is useful and it's good. And I think it would be an advantage for anyone who might apply for a federal job.

Fatemeh: [18:00] One last thing I would like to add—I don't know if there are parents listening to this podcast—is that some parents, they do not want to teach the language of their home country to their kids, and I totally disagree with that. The more languages our kids know, the better, and a better future, a brighter future they would have, they could have, both culturally and language-wise. So, I would like to ask all parents here, if they are listening, to do [18:30]

teach your kids, do talk with your kids when you're at home, the language, the dialect of your own native hometown.

[Transition music]

Jamie: Well, that's all for today's episode of the Language Pathways Podcast! Thanks for joining us, and a big thank you to our guests Fatemeh and Walid for sharing their thoughts on the usage of language varieties and dialects in [19:00] government jobs. Let's sum things up.

First, we learned about some ways in which different Persian and Arabic dialects are used in the federal government. We also learned that federal government employees need to learn and use different registers and levels of formality in different contexts. Finally, we learned that there is always a need for speakers of any dialect, including lesser-known dialects, so it is important to recognize the value of the dialects you speak and build on your knowledge of one dialect to learn more.

In the next episode, [19:30] we'll continue to build connections between language learning and federal careers by discussing how U.S. government jobs evaluate their employees and future employees on their language skills using the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale.

To continue on your journey through federal career pathways for heritage language learners, check out the other episodes in this series. You can also find the resources we discussed and additional links in the episode description and on our website. Thanks [20:00] for joining us and see you next time!

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[Outro music]