Language اللغة Sprache

By Abdelaziz Almulla

English novelist J.R.R. Tolkien–Author of the Lord of The Rings series–describes in his own writing practice, that in order to construct an art-language, it can become necessary to construct a mythology around it. "Your language construction will breed a mythology." What Tolkien means here is that language creates meaning for people.

Within a diverse setting, language can become sophisticated. Therefore, we must be aware of our surroundings and our practice of language. Throughout history, this has developed to become a form of language construction known as Pidgin. Pidgin is defined as the development of a type of language when a group of people who do not speak the same language interact.

While such a construction of language can be used to create bonds between people, it has unfortunately created a dominant-inferior relationship where one language dominates over the other. However, in the UAE, and the Arabian Gulf countries overall, with a majority population of South Asians, this has created a sense of commonality, since many words in the Arabic language and South Asian languages are used on a daily basis in both languages. For example, the words "Seeda," "Baizat," and "Joti" are Emirati words whose origins can be found in Hindi. Meanwhile, Hindi words such as "Kitab," "Dunya," and "Insan" find their origins in the Arabic language.

This is, of course, due to centuries-long trade between the Arabian Gulf countries and the Western Coast of India. Within the current context, this presents itself through the daily life exchanges. That has resulted in the construction of a Pidgin language, but for the past half a century, the pidgin language constructed in the UAE was not predominantly Arabic, but rather a mix of Arabic and Hindi (the predominant language in India).

It is only in recent decades, with the enforcement of a stronger National Identity, as well as immigration of people from different backgrounds, that new generations of Emiratis would speak pidgin that is not necessarily predominantly Arabic but rather a mix of Arabic, English, and Hindi (sometimes also tagalog).

During my time at SAWA, I got to experience language from two different perspectives: the Berlin experience and the Sharjah experience.

The Berlin experience was characterized by an integrationist approach rooted in the modernist tradition, where the German language was deeply embedded into all aspects of life. It was not simply expected but was an inseparable part of social and cultural interactions, reflecting the homogeneity and uniformity often associated with modernist societies. This was also highlighted in the museums in Berlin, where I have often felt as though there is a language barrier between myself and the content of the museum, from a linguistic perspective. During one of my talks with a fellow participant, as we were walking from museum to museum, they talked of how there is a large debate in the German parliament due to the prevalence of English amongst German youth. For me this highlighted a rigidity in the sociopolitics of Germany, where even within political spaces, exclusionary practices are prevalent.

In contrast, the Sharjah experience reflected Edouard Glissant's concept of opacity, a term that champions the right of cultures to remain distinct and resist assimilation. This perspective aligns with postmodernist traditions that celebrate diversity and complexity. Language in Sharjah was fluid and adaptable, blending and changing with each context, illustrating a multicultural environment where different linguistic influences coexisted without a single dominant narrative. This dynamic use of language encapsulates the essence of a society that embraces multifaceted identities and resists the rigid boundaries of integration. Living in Sharjah, this multifacetedness is not only present, it is the norm, as I have explained above with the exchange of words between languages. Jasmin Holtkoetter, a fellow participant in SAWA, provided valuable insights into her linguistic experiences in Sharjah. She articulated that her interactions with souq merchants and taxi drivers who spoke Urdu and Hindi engendered a sense of familiarity and connection. This can be attributed to her Iranian-German heritage, which allows her to recognize the linguistic similarities among Urdu, Hindi, and Arabic.

The SAWA program's commitment to inclusivity and diversity mirrors this portrayal of the Berlin and Sharjah experiences. The Berlin experience, with its modernist, homogenous linguistic setting, contrasts with the more fluid and adaptable Sharjah context, which aligns with Edouard Glissant's idea of opacity. SAWA embraces this postmodernist approach by creating a forum where participants can explore and present their linguistic interpretations, fostering an open dialogue that respects distinct cultural voices and resists a dominant narrative.

It is also important to acknowledge that SAWA's main mode of communication is the English language, which highlights its aim for a global cultural reach, while ensuring that its content and essence are rooted in the Arabic tradition—after all, the name SAWA means together in

Arabic. Meanwhile, the diverse experience that the participants go through also tells an interesting story.

In May 2024, during our time in Berlin, our Berliner hosts influenced the way that we Emirati's spoke and interacted. Not too long after the start of the program, we found ourselves using German words in the way that we heard Berliners say them, rather than the way we thought they sounded. During our time in Sharjah in October 2024, we found that the same was happening with our Berliner guests. They would use Arabic words that we would use on a daily basis—such as "Khalas" which translates to enough—or they would even ask about words that Emirati's use to convey warm and grateful feelings—such as "Akramk Allah" which translates to God Honors You.

These experiences tell us how we construct a language in order to make each other feel more at home. This reflects the late Nelson Mandela's saying "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart." If we look back to the opening paragraph of this essay, with Tolkien's quote on language, what we come to find is that in every instance of our experiences in SAWA, language was used to create meaning for people. It was used to create meaning for their experiences, their bonds, and memories. The SAWA program epitomizes the intricate role of language in fostering connection and cultural understanding. Drawing from both Berlin and Sharjah experiences, SAWA illustrates how language can embody both integrationist and postmodernist ideals. The SAWA program underscores how language shapes connections and cultural understanding, highlighted through museum perspectives in Berlin and Sharjah. In Berlin, museums reflect an integrationist approach tied to modernist traditions, where the German language's prevalence reinforces cultural uniformity but can create linguistic barriers.