Speaking to Domestics in Lebanon:

Power Issues or Misguided Communication?

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Abstract

The Lebanese use a combination of Arabic and English telegraphic speech, along with gestures and other forms of speech adjustments to address their domestics. This pattern of inadequate speech is based on the misconception that domestics understand exactly the same way they speak. Using interviews, questionnaires, and participant observations, the researchers identified some of the underlying issues, power and trust, related to this form of fragmented speech. The investigators recommended that communication with domestics be in one language and in complete sentences, not only for the sake of language acquisition but to ensure a fair treatment of foreign helpers.

Keywords: Foreigner Talk, Critical Discourse Analysis, Code Switching

1. Introduction

In Lebanon, the practice of hiring domestics, natives of Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Ghana, and Ethiopia, is commonplace among middle and upper-middle class households. One pattern of communication with these individuals is typically foreigner talk (Holmes, 2001), that is, speaking in telegraphic speech, without prepositions, with simplified syntax, at a lower rated delivery, using gestures and a combination of Arabic and