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Diglossia in Arabic: Views and Opinions

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Abstract:

Diglossia is a situation in which two languages or two varieties of the same language are used under different conditions within a community, often by the same speakers. Linguists vary in their views regarding diglossia, especially when it comes to diglossia in Arabic. Some view it as a sign of disloyalty to the standard variety of Arabic (Alfusha), and that it leads to deepening the gap between Arabs in different countries, while other see it as a unifying element. In order to eliminate the effect of diglossia, a political as well as a linguistic solution are needed. Linguistics and language academies should work together to bridge the gap between dialects and adopt a single standard variety to be used in schools and in the media. Such a decision should be politically supported.

Keywords: Language, linguistics, sociolinguistics, diglossia, Arabic, Classic Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, Colloquial Arabic, high variety, low variety, media, TV

1. Introduction

Diglossia is a compound Greek word in which di means two and glōssa means tongue or language, (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). It means that there are two forms of the language used for different situations. According to Oxford Dictionary, diglossia is a situation in which two languages (or two varieties of the same language) are used under different conditions within a community, often by the same speakers, (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, n.d.)

Another definition is listed on Wikipedia as a situation in which two dialects or languages are used by a single language community. In addition to the community's every day or vernacular language variety (labeled "L" or "low" variety), a second, highly codified variety (labeled "H" or "high") is used in certain situations such as literature, formal education, or other specific settings, but not used normally for ordinary conversation. In most cases, the H variety has no native speakers, (Diglossia, n.d.) This is not the case with Arabic, which still have native speakers who can fluently speak and write it, though for specific situations.

Zughoul mentioned that the term diglossia was introduced for the first time by the German linguist Karl Krumbacher in 1902. The term became recognized for its current meaning when the French linguist, William Marçais used it in an article in 1930 to describe the linguistic situation in the Arab World, (Zughoul, 1980, p. 201).

Discussing diglossia or even the multi-glossia entails the study of mixed varieties and styles which appear side by side, marking one variety as (H) and leaving the other(s) low (L). The high variety of a language is used in formal contexts; such as religious texts and ceremonies, public speaking, education, cultural indoctrination and other prestigious kinds of uses, thus the H variety is learnt in formal settings. The low variety is used informally in informal contexts; such as everyday conversations, jokes, markets, streets talk, phone calls, and such.

In Arabic, the two main varieties are Classic Arabic (CA) or Al-Fusha which is deemed high (H), and the regional colloquial varieties (CA or Al'Amiya) and are considered low (L), (Maamouri, 1998, p.31). Since the Arabic H variety is used in formal contexts and learnt in formal settings, it is to be "taught", whereas the Arabic L varieties are unconsciously acquired. There are confirmed grammar, dictionaries and standardized texts for the H variety; yet, nothing of those are usually used for the L varieties which are acquired by children first. The L varieties often display a tendency to borrow words from the H variety, particularly when used in semi-formal speech. The result is a certain mixture of the H vocabulary into the L varieties. Colloquial Arabic is strictly oral, almost never written, and is characterized by varying degrees of comprehensibility among Arabic speakers of different regions, (Kaye, 2001, pp. 122-123). A third in-between variety has come to be known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and is used in media, newspapers and for government work. A fourth variety is relatively new, the Educated Arabic (EA) which is used by Arabs with college education for communication. (Zughoul, 1980, pp. 203-206).

Ferguson pointed out that diglossia is not limited to a geographical region or to a language family, (1959, pp. 325-340). Hymes viewed diglossia as "an excellent example of coexistence in the same community of mutually unintelligible codes", (1964, p. 389). Contrary to what Ferguson asserted, Kaye (1972) commented that the diglossic situation of Arabic as changeable rather than stable.

Yet, the question is: how did the colloquial in Arabic develop and sneak formal speech to give birth to diglossia and to create problematic linguistic phenomena among Al-Fusha Arabic (FA), Colloquial Arabic (CA) and Educated Arabic (EA)? To answer this question, we must first consider how colloquial Arabic came into existence. As Islam started to spread beyond the borders of the Arabian Peninsula, mixed marriages between Arabs and non-Arabs took place increasingly in regions new to Islam, which eventually produced a pidgin necessary for communication. As Islam continued to spread to more regions, more pidgins emerged. Slowly, pidgins developed into many varieties of colloquial Arabic, (Maamouri, 1998, p. 20).

Another question is, how far are colloquials from Al-Fusha? And from each other? Al-Fusha and Colloquial Arabic are very different and sometimes almost non-related. It is very difficult for Arabs in many countries to understand Arabs from other Arab countries if they use colloquial Arabic, and they have to resort to either MSA or in some rare occasions to FA. A gulf-dialect is easily understood in Jordan, since the populations of countries are majorly Bedouins, but it can be hard to understand in Tunisia!

Both of the authors of this current article come from Jordan, with one of them speaking the Bedouin dialect while the other speaking the Urban dialect, so let's take a few examples on this from Jordan; a country known for its ethnic and cultural diversity as well as its location.

In Jordan, there are many dialects, (Zoqurti, 2011, p.5). The first one is the Bedouin dialect, mainly spoken by Jordanians in the southern /eastern parts who come from tribes. Jordanians who speak the Bedouin dialect find it easy to understand the dialects of the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia's Bedouin dialect of the northern parts such as Arar and Turaif, and even the Najdi dialect, if to a lesser degree. The following words are examples from this dialect:

- ودي /widi/ which means I want.
- شلونك /ʃlɔ:nək/ which means How are you?
- هاك /hæk/ which means take.
- أمس / ʔms/ which means yesterday.
- باكر /batʃər/ which means tomorrow.
- سَحْلَة /sħelə/ which means a normally metal bowl used to drink water, milk or yogurt.
- العجب /əʃədʒ əb/ which means children.
- مَدْرِي /m ədrɪ/ which means I have no idea./ I don't know.
- مَعْيِي /mʕji:/ which means he refuses something/ refuses to do something.

Another dialect is the Urban dialect or the Madani dialect, mainly used nowadays in Amman, the capital city of Jordan and to some extent in other major cities. It is characterized by the use of the glottal stop /ʔ/ instead of the /ق/ sound. Words like /قال/ {qala} (said) and /قمر/ {qamar} (the moon) are pronounced as /ʔal/ and /ʔamar/ respectively.

Let's take the same words mentioned in the Bedouin dialect and see their equivalents in the Urban dialect.

- بدي /bədɪ/ which means I want. Notice that the sound /b/ is used in place of the sound /w/.
- كيفك /ki:fək/ (masculine) /ki:fək/ (feminine) which means How are you?
- خُد /xud/ which mean take.
- مباح /əmbæriħ/ which means yesterday.
- زبدية /zɪbdji:ə/ which means a bowl used for yogurt or soup.
- الولاد /əʔwɪlæd/ which means children.
- ما يعرف /mæ bʔrəf/ which means I have no idea./ I don't know.
- مش راضي /mɪʃrædʔɪ/ which means he refuses something/refuses to do something.

Taking only these few words into consideration, one can see the huge difference in vocabulary between the Bedouin dialect and the Urban dialect.

A third dialect is the Rural dialect or what is called in Jordan Fallahi which is mainly used by people coming from the rural areas especially in the northern parts, such as Irbid, Ajloun and Jerash. This dialect uses unique words that it can be difficult sometimes for Jordanians of other dialect to understand. Most such words are related to agriculture and other farming activities, which explains why Jordanians of other dialects find it difficult to decipher its meaning. The following are examples of everyday words used in this dialect (Amawi, 2011):

- تدرأيه /teðræji:ə/ which means the process of winnowing (separating wheat grains from the chaff)
- رجاده /rdʒædə/ which is the process of moving crops from the field to storage using animals like camels or donkeys.
- گرم /kɪrm/ which is an orchard normally planted with olive trees, fig trees and grape vines.
- وقادية /wɪqædji:ə/ a handmade oven made of mud, water and barley.
- دُفَّة /dɒgə/ which means dried thyme mixed with spices and sesame seeds, usually eaten with olive oil and fresh vegetables for breakfast.

A fourth dialect is the Southern dialect, a semi-Najdi dialect, used strictly in the southern parts of Jordan such as Ma'an, Othruh and Aljafer. This dialect is a bit similar to that of Najd in Saudi Arabia and people from these parts in Jordan even share blood relations with many families in Najd. The following are examples of this dialect (Ma'an City, 2013):

- بتحنجل /bətħendʒel/ which means to dance slowly.
- امولدن /əmwɪlden/ which is used to negatively describe someone who acts in a childish, not serious way.
- امكوش /əmkɪwɪʃ/ which means completely controls something, especially money, or to have a large amount of money.
- قَبَعَت /qəbɛt/ which means to be fed up with something/ somebody.

- قِظْمَه /qezʔmə/ which means a piece of something edible.
- دَعْر /deʕder/ which means to get swollen after an injury, especially to the head.
- بِيْلُصْف /bjulsuf/ which means (something) glitters.

A fifth dialect is a White dialect, used by Jordanians from all the country to communicate with each other when their original dialects are very different. This dialect uses more vocabulary from MSA and it is less affected by tribal or rural vocabulary.

One might think that with such many dialects in a relatively small country like Jordan children face serious problems when enrolling in schools and beginning their formal education. As a matter of fact, that could be true to some extent, but we should never ignore the role of media and cable channels in specific. Most children-oriented cable channels use a MSA for its programs, which means children at a young age are exposed to the standard variety of Arabic. According to AIBzour, it is not rationale to claim that colloquials hinder children from acquiring the standard variety, since children are exposed to Standard Arabic in school for almost up to seven hours a day and then on TV for three hours. He further claims that this time is enough to "master" any language, (AIBzour, 2015, p.11).

Linguists vary in how they regard colloquial Arabic. Some linguist such as Maamouri (1998), Abdel-Malek (1972) and Mubarak (1970) considered colloquial Arabic vulgar and only used by the ignorant, as well as unworthy of being called a language. For them, the use of colloquial Arabic is perceived as suspicious and shows an unacceptable lack of linguistic loyalty. Other linguists such as Shaaban (1978) and Blanc (1960) talked about a language between Al-Fusha Arabic (FA) and Colloquial Arabic (CA) which they referred to as Educated Arabic (EA). EA is mainly used by educated Arabs from different Arab countries or from different regions in the same country to communicate with each other. Educated Arabic comes with its own problematic nature. For one, it can be considered as an extra dialect for Arabic speakers, since it has to contain words from Classic Arabic or Al-Fusha, colloquial Arabic and even foreign words, (Zughoul, 1980, p. 206). It is also based on colloquial Arabic, which means a lot of classical terms and vocabulary will be forced into it, (Maamouri, 1998, p. 25). This entails that one dialect, the one mostly used as a reference, would be treated as a superior variety, which will be denied by speakers of other dialects who could not accept being considered inferior. On the other hand, Naser AIBzour claims that the so-called problematic nature of diglossia does not in reality exist. He proclaims that Arabic is a "unique" language and the term diglossia should be replaced with uniglossia or Arabglossia. For him, what he calls Standard Arabic (which he used to refer to Al-Fusha) is used by Arabs all over the Arab World on a daily basis as a "standard variety", and that the shift between Al-Fusha and the Colloquials is behind "unifying" Arabs and helping them communicate across dialects, (AIBzour, 2015, p.8).

Making things worse, new fuzzy varieties have come into existence since the 1970s in the Arab World. In the Gulf countries, a new pidgin emerged as a form of communication between Arabic speakers and expats who work there. Arab children who were raised by maids coming from so many different countries acquired such a pidgin, and then went on to use it for daily communication purposes.

Another fuzzy variety can be seen in countries like Jordan and the U.A.E., where English is the language of education and business. In fact, English has become the language of higher education in most Arab universities which shifted from Arabic to English in almost all majors and subjects.

A third fuzzy variety has come into existence in two stages. First, in the 1990s, cable TV channels were an instant hit once it reached the market of Arab countries. A normal person could have at least 60 channels at their fingertips. Channels were mostly News, Entertainment and Sport ones, with only a few using Modern Standard Arabic as a medium of speech, and most other channels were Lebanese, Egyptian and a few Syrian ones, resulting in a pidgin that was a mix of all these dialects, (Alshamrani, 2012, pp. 61-63). Later, in the 2010s, with the social media, smartphones and smart applications sweeping the Arab World, another fuzzy variety emerged. A pidgin used in the Gulf countries that was a mix of the Hijazi dialect in Saudi Arabia, the main Kuwaiti dialect (Hadhari dialect) and a wide selection of English vocabulary. You just need to follow a few Youtubers and Snapchatters to recognize this variety. The bonus such a variety has is that it can reach a huge number of Arabic speakers; virtually anyone with a smartphone and the necessary apps. Hence, it can easily and unconsciously be acquired and later used.

Although diglossia is a widespread phenomenon in the world and is considered problematic for the linguistic community, it still offers solutions. Diglossic speech can bridge the gap between listeners and speakers who try to find the suitable vocabulary using any variety, be it high (H) or low (L), in order to make communication effective. It doesn't spoil the public taste with its many mixed vocabulary and phrases. Nonetheless, raising the level of colloquial Arabic means forcing more classical terms into colloquial Arabic which, as previously discussed, will result in making one dialect superior to others, and who would accept being considered as belonging to the inferior variety?

The big question that speakers of Arabic are up against now is: how could Arabs unite under one variety of Arabic? It's worthy to mention here that unlike Arabic, most languages are influenced by both culture and the people who speak them. What is unique about Arabic is that it is the language of the Glorious Qur'an, the Holy Book for Muslims, its psychological influence is enforced upon its speakers. This means that the demand to bridge the gap between the so many dialects and varieties (CA), Educated Arabic (EA) and Al-Fusha (FA) is growing greater. Hence, there is really a need for a political decision as well as a linguistic one. There should be a serious attempt at simplifying the rules of FA, (Zughoul, 1980, p. 212). This process demands active and real cooperation among language academies and linguists in the Arab World, for it requires tremendous effort and a lot of time. Politicians should work together to adopt the resulting variety of Arabic and to enforce its use among Arab countries. The starting point is education without a doubt. Schools across the Arab World are to use the same Arabic variety, the new simplified variety that is the result of the efforts of linguists and language academies. The educational system should strive hard to strike a balance between enforcing the unified variety,

encouraging students to use it in their education and daily life (applications, forms and job interviews) and at the same time maintaining the sense of pride the students feel about their own variety. Such a political decision should take into consideration that the educational system is no longer the sole influencer on the language of the young Arabs; social media is gaining more and more weight in this regard. These changes can never happen overnight, neither can they be maintained quickly; they need much time and hard work as well.

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