

A Bird's Eye View of the Diglossic Situation in Arabic

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Abstract: This article aims to examine diglossia with reference to Arabic; the structural and functional relationships which hold among the language varieties and review some of the arguments concerning solutions to this problem. This, I hope, will shed light on this phenomenon and perhaps give some insights into linguistic description, historical linguistics, and language typology.

Keywords: Diglossia, High variety, Low variety.

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Introduction:

Since the term "diglossia", modelled on the French diglossie, was first introduced by Ferguson (1959), it has been used in the description and analysis of diglossic situations in many languages and language varieties as regards their structural and functional relationships. Ferguson (P.235) defines diglossia as:

A relative stable language situation in which in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety the vehicle of large and respected body of written literature either of an earlier period or in another speech community which is learned largely by formal education and used for most written and formal spoken purposes but not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.

He gives four examples of languages with diglossia i.e Greek (Catharevousa and Dhimotiki), German (Hochdeutsch vs. Weizerdeutsch), Haitian Creole (French vs. Creole Haitian) and Arabic (Classical vs. colloquial). These

languages have distinctly superposed varieties in addition to the primary dialects of the language. Other studies (Trudgill: 114) add Tamil (literary vs. Colloquial), as having a diglossic situation.

These varieties are used on a large scale by the community and are assigned definite specialized social functions and no section of the community would use, for example, the high variety as the normal medium of everyday conversation. If this happens, this is felt in Arabic, to be artificial, pedantic, snobbish and even disloyal in Creole. On the other hand, the use of the (L) variety may be seen, as Rubin (1972) puts it, as an expression of solidarity meaning it may not be offered to speakers whose social position is superior or distant. Similarly, the (H) variety may be the only variety appropriate in a given situation because the use of L would imply a solidarity that is only reserved for members of a particular in-group. Rubin also mentions that the use of Black English by white speakers of American English in conversations with African-Americans would probably be considered insulting

unless individual allowances had already been negotiated. The use of L-variety Tamil by non-Indians is considered inappropriate by many educated Tamilians, who may respond in H-variety Tamil or in English unless the use of L-variety has already been negotiated. The use of the (H) variety German in the German speaking part of Switzerland conversely may be seen as a power-trip designed to put the Swiss speaker at a disadvantage.

Ferguson's binary model of diglossia was extended by Fishman (1967) to encompass dialects or registers. He included the most subtle differences within the one language as well as the most distinctive differences as between two languages. For him, the important factor was that the variety was functionally different, that is, restricted to a particular set of communicative circumstances. One example would be Latin in medieval Europe, which was used for religious, educational, literacy and other such prestigious domains, while another language, the vernacular, of that era was rarely used for such purposes, being only employed for more informal, primarily spoken domains. However, Harold Schiffman of South Asian Regional Studies of the University of Pennsylvania maintains that diglossia is different from Standard-with-dialects. He says that in diglossia, *no-one* speaks the H-variety as a mother tongue, only the L-variety, but in the Standard-with-dialects situation some speakers speak the high variety as a mother tongue, while others speak the low varieties as a mother tongue and acquire (H) as a second system.

Kloss (1966: 138) quoted in Freeman (1996) adds another dimension to diglossia by proposing the terms 'in-diglossia' for closely related two varieties and 'out-diglossia' for situations where the two languages are unrelated or at best distantly related. This, he says, would be

useful in situations found in South Asia, where some L-varieties are associated with H-varieties that are not in fact their closest genetic ancestor. A case in point would be eastern varieties of Hindi (Bihari dialects, etc.) that have long been noted to have descended from eastern apabhramas but are treated by their speakers as being dialects of standard Hindi. He also includes Sri Lanka Tamil as more closely related to Malayalam than it is to Tami.

This article will seek to examine diglossia with reference to Arabic, the structural and functional relationships which hold among the language varieties and review some of the arguments concerning solutions to this problem. This, I hope, will shed light on this phenomenon and perhaps give some insights into linguistic description, historical linguistics, and language typology.

Historical Background:

Most probably Arabs have known diglossia since Al-Jahili (pre-Islamic) period where at the time every tribe had its own dialect in addition to a common standard dialect, the characteristics of which were derived from the middle and eastern part of the Arab peninsula under the influence of, inter alia, pilgrimage, and trade. Arabs would use their local dialect among themselves and the common standard dialect when communicating with members of other tribes (Blachere, R.1952, pp.79-80). However, the colloquials as we know them today most probably emerged with early Islamic conquests when Arabs mingled with non-Arabs, yet it was only later that they became established and their phonology and syntax matured (see Fück, J.1955, p.11 and p.87)

Issa, k. (1987: 62) tells us that the difference among the colloquial dialects prevailing in the Arab world today can be easily attributed to the different dialects

of the tribes that immigrated to these parts during and after the period of Islamic conquests. These tribes kept (al-fusha) Arabic, the language of the Quran and literature, for reading and writing purposes manifested mostly in poetry and oratory, however, among themselves they would use their own dialect. Another factor that contributed to this difference was that the inhabitants of the places conquered by the Muslims had their own languages such as Coptic, Roman, Persian, Berber etc. which initially resisted linguistically but later succumbed to the dialects of Arabic but not before leaving some impact, at least, phonologically, on them. Moreover, the wave of colonialism that swept the Arab world after that added to this difference.

In fact what supports the points above is that a considerable number of words can be traced back to those ancient Arabic dialects, although some of these words went through some semantic change. The word (hawwiš), for instance, used to mean "to collect" in general, but now it has become specific in Libyan Arabic "to collect money". Issa, M. (op.cit: 64) mentions some examples of some language features used in present day colloquials which can be traced back to ancient Arabic dialects:

- The word "madyun" ' in debt ' which is used now in modern dialects instead of "madeen" belongs to the dialect of Tameem.
- The use of the "i" vowel sound instead of "a" occurring in the prefix of the present tense verb form in Egyptian Arabic as in "yisrif " "to spend " is attributed to the tribes of "Bahra" in "Quda'a".

Functional and Structural differences:

By applying the structural and functional criterion to the language situation in Arabic, we notice that Arabic language has two varieties or more which

exist side by side with each other and have specific kinds of structural and functional relationships. Firstly, classical Arabic (al-fusha), also referred to as the high (H) variety, is considered to be the literary, written and formal form. It is also the official language in all Arab countries. It is used in formal, situations including political speeches, lectures, news broadcasts and journalism, highly codified, superposed; used in respected body of literature, learnt through formal education and used for written and spoken purposes. Being the language of the Quran, it is highly respected by all Arabs and Muslims and enjoys the prestige of being beautiful and who speaks it impeccably is regarded as cultured, educated and knowledgeable. This attitude which is taken consciously reinforces and gives a special value to this variety.

Secondly, colloquial Arabic (ad-dārija) or (al-ʿammiya), also referred to as the low (L) variety, is everyday spoken form of all Arabs, albeit it can now be written in novels, personal letters and plays. It consists of the spoken regional dialects of the different Arab states within which there exist one or more other distinctive dialects. The difference between the dialects is mainly phonological and lexical.

The binary H-L division of functional differentiation originally proposed by Ferguson can be expanded to include another category i.e. Modern standard Arabic (MSA). This is the contemporary form of classical Arabic which emerged as a result of the rapidly increasing sophistication of modern age, especially in science and technology. Bakalla (1983:11) points out that it is a kind of:

Classical, literary Arabic, which has adjusted the requirements of modern life and, in particular, arts, science and technology. It is not only a written language employment by the press and

authors when writing books, but also spoken language for both the educated and the semi-educated people, and is used extensively on the radio and television. It is the language of administration, of lectures, and of official correspondence.

Some Arab writers refer to it as "luġat-al jarā'id" meaning "the language of newspapers". Others call it "luġat al-muṭaʿafī:n" meaning the language of the cultured and educated (Fraiha, A. 1955: 181). This variety shares most of its morphology and syntax with the classical language of the Quran and canonical literature of Islam and this, in turn, enhances its prestige as a model of the eloquence and excellence (Mitchell, T.F. 1975). MSA is very flexible in its optional representation of the short vowels and endings in the written form and also in its flexibility in the use of foreign idiomatic expressions and loan translations. The following examples, except no 1, are from Anis, I. (1972, p113):

1	Yue Tihi addaw? u al-axdar	to give (some one) the green light
2	?inna aḥadan la yastaTi: ε	nobody can
3	wa huwwa bilaṣak ḍaruri	it is undoubtedly necessary
4	ḍar ar-ramad fil eiyu:n	to throw the dust in someone's eyes
5	la jadida taḥta aṣṣams	nothing new under the sun
6	alqa al-masʿala eala bisaT al- bahṯ	to put the matter to discussion

(My translation)

Furthermore, it uses the common words in the language rather than the difficult and cumbersome ones used in Classical Arabic.

El-Said Muhammed Badawi of the American University of Cairo (quoted in

Freeman 1996) has proposed five levels for Arabic linguistic situation. The levels can be translated into English as: the Classical Language of Tradition, the Modern Classical Language, the Colloquial of the Educated, the Colloquial of the Enlightened and the Colloquial of the Illiterate. It adds that this system is here in this five level model every level includes mixing from all the other elements of the system. This is different from Ferguson's description of diglossia which states that the two forms are in complementary distribution.

Compared with the high variety, the low variety is less complex. The differences between them can be divided into phonological, lexical and grammatical. The low variety cited in the examples below is Libyan colloquial Arabic, (henceforth LA) which is the variety spoken by the author.

a. Phonological:

1-The use of certain consonants

Word	consonant	High	Low (LA)
Near	q	qari:b	gri:b
Eight	θ	θamanya	tmanyā
This	ḍ	haḍa	hada

2-The use of different vowels, stress, or final pause.

	High	Low (LA)
Different vowel	ḍaraba" to hit"	dr^ b
Stress	'manaεa " to prevent, stop"	m'na ε
Final pause	mu ealimun" teacher"	muealim

3- The use of different vowels in the present tense verb form as well as in some other words.

High	Meaning	Low
yarmi	" to throw"	yirmi
yaqtul	" to kill"	yugtəl
maʿun	" water"	maiya

b. Lexical:

The difference can be found in many words such as the following:

High	Meaning	Low
?ayna	"where"	wein
maða	"what"	šinu
yaæu:d	"to return, come back"	yirawih
eulba	"a tin"	ħukka

c. Syntactic:

The syntactic differences between the H and L varieties can be shown as follows:

1. The unmarked sentence pattern in the H variety is VOS (verb subject object) whereas the L variety (LA) is SOV (subject verb object).

High	?ata al waladu mina l-madrasati
Low	l-wild je min l-madarsa
Meaning	The boy came from school

2. In negation the (H) variety uses four initial negative markers whereas the (L) variety has only two.

High

ma	ma qumtu biha l-ʿamal	I didn't do this work.
lam	lam yaqud assayratu	He didn't drive the car.
la	la yastamiʿu ila našihatu ?abadan	He never listens to advice.
lan	lan yahðura haði l-muħaðaratu	He will not attend this lecture.

Low

ma	ma šuftið ħaja	I didn't see anything.
mið	mið læib kura	I am not playing football.

3. In the interrogative, the H variety mostly uses question words whereas the low variety resorts to rising intonation at the end of the sentence.

High	hal? axaðta dawa?aka haða aššabah?
Low	xdeit dwak l-jo:m ušubuh?
Meaning	Did you take your medicine this morning?

However, when the low variety uses question words, they are different forms.

elað drabt l-wild iðgi:r?
Why did you hit the little boy?
minu ftaħ l-bab
Who opened the door
Gidað dfaet ħag issayyara
How much did you pay for the car?

4. The high variety has endings to indicate nominative, accusative, and dative cases, whereas the low variety hasn't.

Nominative	H	?akala l-waladu attufahata
	L	il-wild kle ittifaħa
		The boy ate the apple.
Accusative	H	ra?aytu ġazalan
	L	Šuft iğzal
		I saw a deer.
Dative	H	sallamtu ʿala ar-rajuli
	L	sallimit ʿle ir-rajil
		I shook hands with them.

5. As far as tense is concerned, the (H) and (L) varieties, although both have two tenses i.e present and past, they employ different verb forms and particles to express the same function. This is illustrated in the following

(i) The (L) variety would use the participle "ism l-faʿil" in contexts where the (H) variety would employ the present simple form with future time reference.

H	sa?aqumu bi jawlatin ðumma aæudu
L	rani dayir dora u jay
	I am going for a walk and will be back later.

(ii) in expressing the past perfect the (H) variety uses " qad+ the coupla + the past simple form whereas the (L) variety uses only the coupla and the participle as shown in the following examples.

H	kan ar-rajulu qad raḥala qabla ?an narahu
L	kan ir-rajil maṢi qabil man nṢufah
	The man had left before we could see him.

Attitudes towards the (H) and (L) varieties:

Sifting through the literature concerning the various views as regards the adoption of the a particular variety of Arabic whether for the purposes of communication or education, it generally appears that the views are oscillating between pros and cons of the (H) and (L) varieties. Proponents of the High variety argue that it must be adopted because it is a factor that unites all the Arabs whereas the dialects are of a divisive nature (nationalistic reasons). Furthermore, the (H) variety is always regarded as more beautiful, more expressive and more logical even by the illiterate. Besides, it is greatly revered by all Arabs and Muslims being sacred as the language of the Quran. They assume that if the regional dialects replace " al-fuṣḥa", the result will be separate languages and, of course, this will have its political and nationalistic effects. One example would be Maltese, the variety of Arabic which broke off and formed its own language, and most scholars would agree that this happened because the Maltese were Christians and didn't consider Arabic language sacred in the same way as Muslims did. Another example was the emergence of Romance languages which broke away from superposed Latin. The dialects then became different languages, and the change was so great that an Englishman, for example, would find it difficult to read and understand Shakespeare in the

original, whereas Arabs, with little difficulty in the vocabulary, can still read and enjoy poems from the pre-Islamic period.

Proponents of the low variety do not admit that the colloquial is a corrupt form of classic Arabic. They believe it should be adopted for all functions as it is easier and closer to the thinking and feeling of the people. It also makes education easier, in addition to the fact that it is acquired in childhood as a mothertongue. They think that by adopting it the dichotomy will be eliminated. (Al-Maaluf 1902, Assayed 1913, Fraiha 1955).

Both views stated above faced problems. Those in favour of adopting the (H) variety for both spoken and written purposes believe that it will bridge the gap of dichotomy, albeit they may differ on whether the (CA) is to be simplified or left without any modification. What really made their task difficult is the wide use of the colloquials in works of literature and those of artistic nature. Zughoul (1980: 213) believes that the problem mainly lies in illiteracy which contributed to a large extent in widening the gap between the two varieties. By eliminating it the gap will be narrowed and eventually bridged. He views the diglossic situation as a natural phenomenon that occurs in many languages such as English (standard vs. substandard) and French (patois), although he admits that the gap in those languages is narrower. He staunchly supports the use of the high variety for all functions so that it gradually replaces the colloquial dialects and also linguistic reform through making rules of grammar easier to perceive and use. This, of course, is not new since Arab scholars and academics have always called for this linguistic reform but their efforts are often resisted by the conservatives. Jacob (op.cit, 162) suggests that diglossia, though a natural phenomenon can be overcome by simplifying language rules,

reforming methods of teaching and improving teachers' standards in the High variety.

Advocates of the low variety ignored the fact that (CA) is a unifying factor of all Arabs, and it is sacred as the language of Quran, Hadeeth (speeches of the prophet Mohammed) and the heritage of the past. If Arabs were to adopt one standard low variety as spoken and written media, this would lead to a child learning another different variety and the problem becomes triglossia. In addition, this would sever the strong spiritual and common linguistic bond that unites all Arabs. Ziada, N. (1992: 51) said in article in "Huna London" magazine that:

The second matter that became firmly established in myself and my conscience at an early time of my life is the importance of Arabic language for it is the strongest bond that unites those who speak it and the source of the feeling that they are Arabs.
(My translation)

Conclusion:

I conclude that a solution to the diglossic situation will not be found unless previous arguments particularly as regards the perception of Classical Arabic as a religious, nationalistic and social bond that unites all Arabs, and the de facto existence of regional dialects are taken into consideration in arriving at a compromise to resolve this pending situation. This is necessary given that the individual arguments are quite limited ; the former argument being largely a sentimental and ideological one ignoring the realities of the low varieties and colloquialisms, and the latter being one which would restrict or impede the expression of philosophical or intellectual concepts. Clearly, the proliferation of regional colloquial dialects is divisive when viewed in the broader Arab context and the promotion of classical Arabic as a universal language permeating all levels

of social activity, however, would demand as its prerequisite the remoulding of historically established social attitudes and patterns.

Given these differences and limitations, one wonders whether a problem really exists so long as Arabs are able to enjoy their unique social lives and yet transcend these differences when involved in socio-cultural, intellectual and economic inter-activity, is there really such a serious or over-bearing problem of incompatibility?

Note:

The symbols used in the phonemic transcription of Arabic are those of the International Phonetics Alphabet (IPA) as well as the following:

X voiceless velar fricative	T voiceless emphatic dental plosive
ḏ voiced emphatic dental plosive	Š voiceless palato-alveolar fricative
ʃ voiceless alveolar fricative	θ voiceless dental fricative
ğ voiced uvular fricative	ε voiced pharyngeal fricative
ħ voiceless pharyngeal fricative	? glotal stop
q voiceless uvular plosive	

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