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DIGLOSSIA: AN OVERVIEW OF THE ARABIC SITUATION

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ABSTRACT: *One of the most distinctive features of the Arabic language is the existence of diglossia. Arabic largely exists in a diglossic situation, which is manifested through the co-existence of Standard Arabic and Colloquial Arabic (Ferguson, 1959). Any discussion of the language situation in Arabic-speaking communities in the Middle Eastern and North African countries and elsewhere cannot overlook the existence of diglossia. Indeed, Arabic represents the world's most complicated diglossic situation (Kaye, 2002). This paper provides an overview of diglossia in Arabic. It attempts to outline the meaning of the concept, its different types and its relationship to language stability and change. The overview is* meant to be representative *rather than comprehensive.*

KEYWORDS: Diglossia, Standard Arabic, Colloquial Arabic, Language variety

INTRODUCTION

Ferguson (1959) and Fishman (1972) are among the major sociolinguists who have developed this notion of functional differentiation of languages or language varieties in order to explain patterns of language use and choice. Ferguson (1959) first introduced the notion of *diglossia* to describe the functional distribution of two genetically related varieties in different settings. Since then, the notion of diglossia has been developed and become widely and usefully employed to describe patterns of language use and choice in diglossic and bi/multilingual communities in different places around the world. The following section provides an overview of diglossia, outlining the meaning of the concept, its different types and its relationship to language stability and change.

Classic diglossia

In his now classic article, Ferguson (1959) is credited with introducing the concept of diglossia. According to him, the term diglossia refers to:

> A relatively 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 a 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 is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation. (p. 325)

Ferguson formulated this definition based on a multidimensional characterization of diglossia in relation to attitudes and usage that included function, prestige, literary heritage, acquisition, standardization, stability, grammar, lexicon and phonology. Ferguson used the concept of diglossia to refer to the coexistence of two genetically related varieties of the same

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language in a particular society. An important feature of Ferguson's definition of diglossia is related to the complementary nature of the two varieties involved. These two closely related varieties are in complementary distribution with each other. This means that the use of each variety is allocated to different communicative purposes, leading to the development of remarkably stable types of sociolinguistic situations. The two varieties are referred to as the high (H) variety and low (L) variety. The H variety is the one that is more prestigious and used for formal purposes such as writing religious texts and education. On the other hand, the L variety is used for informal spoken purposes such as everyday household conversation (see Table 1).

Table 1: Possible situations of language use in diglossic communities (From Ferguson, 1959)

Situation	High Variety (H)	Low Variety (L)
Sermon in church or mosque	x	
Instructions to servants, waiters, etc.		x
Personal letter	x	
Speech in parliament, political speech	x	
University lecture	x	
Conversation with family, friends, colleagues		x
News broadcast	x	
Radio 'soap opera'		x
Newspaper editorial, news story	x	
Caption on political cartoon		x
Poetry	x	
Folk literature		x

Ferguson identified only four representative diglossic situations: Arabic (in the Arab world), Modern Greek (in Greece), Haitian Creole (in Haiti), and Swiss German (in Switzerland). Such diglossic speech communities are characterized by the functional compartmentalization of the H and L varieties:

- Arabic-speaking communities: the coexistence of literary (H) and dialectal Arabic (L)
- Greece: the alternation of Greek Katharevousa (H) and Dhimotiki (L)
- Haiti: the alternation of Standard French (H) and Haitian Creole (L)
- Switzerland: the alternation of Standard German (H) and Swiss German (L)

It is to be noted, however, that a number of researchers (e.g. Ennaji, 2002a; Hudson, 2002) have pointed out that neither the functional compartmentalization of codes nor the linguistic distance between them suffices as a criterial attribute of diglossic situations. What appears to characterize the conceptual unity of these diglossic situations, according to Hudson (2002), "inheres in a quite specific set of relationships between functional compartmentalisation of codes, the lack of opportunity for the acquisition of H as a native variety, the resulting absence of native speakers of H, and the stability in the use of L for vernacular purposes" (p. 40). This type of diglossia is referred to as classic diglossia in the literature. Its main features include: (a) the two varieties involved are genetically related, i.e. two dialects of the same language with some degree of mutual intelligibility and therefore it is important to emphasize

that diglossia, in this sense, is not bilingualism; (b) the H variety is not usually acquired as a mother tongue and its mastery requires some kind of formal learning; (c) the L variety is acquired as the home language by members of the diglossic speech community; and (d) although the H and L varieties coexist side by side within the speech community, they are used in different types of situations.

One of the best examples of classic diglossia is observed in Arabic-speaking communities. Indeed, any discussion of the language situation in Arabic-speaking communities in the Middle Eastern and North African countries and elsewhere cannot overlook the existence of diglossia (Al-Sahafi, 2016; Amara & Mar'i, 2002; Clyne & Kipp, 1999; Eisele, 2002; Ennaji, 2002a; Ferguson, 1959; Fishman, 1985; Ibrahim, 1983; Kaye & Rosenhouse, 1997; Zughoul, 1980). The classic diglossic situation of Arabic will be discussed in detail in the next section.

ARABIC AS A DIGLOSSIC LANGUAGE

As previously mentioned, Arabic represents one of the four languages first identified by Ferguson (1959) as being diglossic due to the co-existence in Arabic-speaking communities, of the standard literary variety, called "al-lugah al-fusha," (the H-variety) and the colloquial variety, called "al-lugah al-aammiyya," (L-variety). According to Fishman, the situation of Arabic represents an example of classic diglossia in which the two varieties involved are "genetically related" (1985, p. 40). It is to be noted, however, that the situation of Arabic diglossia is indeed more complex than is suggested by this H-L dichotomy (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992; Al Wer, 2002; Ennaji, 2002b; Kaye, 2002; Rosenhouse & Goral, 2004). As Kaye (2002) rightly points out, Arabic represents the world's most complicated diglossic situation. The next subsections attempt an anatomy of the Arabic varieties employed in Arabic-speaking communities.

Varieties of Arabic: A historic overview

The existence of diverse Arabic varieties is not a new phenomenon. It can be traced back to pre-Islamic times (before the seventh century) where different Arab tribes used different dialects (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992; Chejne, 1969; Elgibali, 1988). These tribal dialects were generally viewed as *lisan Fasih* (pure tongue) spoken in the western area of Hijaz and the eastern area of the Tamim and other Bedouin tribes (Fischer, 1997). The tribes in Arabia always maintained their own tribal dialects as a mother tongue and as a symbol of tribal honour and pride (Elgibali, 1988). The early Arab philologists relied on native speakers of such dialects as one of the sources of their linguistic information. As Chenji points out, "the nomads [a'rab] were often used as informants and were even called upon to arbitrate linguistic disputations among philologists and the caliphs" (1969, p. 40). It was in Makkah, which served as a commercial, literary and religious centre, that tribal dialects came into regular contact. Such regular contacts among members of different Arab tribes "contributed to the evolution of a language with a much wider scope than any isolated dialect" (Chejne, 1969, p. 54). Thus, out of these various tribal dialects "emerged the first form of a *collative* language globally known as the 'poetic or literary *koine*'" (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992, p. 263).

With the rise of Islam (from 610 AD on), the linguistic model of the Qur'an immediately enjoyed, and still does, an unparalleled privileged position over all other regional dialects. Consequently, "the rivalry among the various dialects for the position of the superposed

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standard came to an abrupt end" (Elgibali, 1988, p. 49). The Arabic variety in which the Qur'an was revealed, i.e. Classical/Standard Arabic, which is also taken to be the dialect of the Prophet's tribe, *Quraysh* (Eisele, 2002), acquired a far more prestigious function as the language of Islam. The Qur'an represents the first text written in Classical Arabic (Fischer, 1997). In this sense, the Qur'an is regarded as the most perfect book of the Standard Arabic tongue. As a result, "Muslims in general and Arabs in particular have long regarded Arabic as a God-given language, unique in beauty and majesty" (Chejne, 1969, p. 6).

The spread of Islam outside the Arabian Peninsula and the increasing number of non-Arab Muslims who had to learn the language of this new religion initiated the process of language codification, i.e. recording and systematizing the language, led by a group of Arab grammarians. The motivation behind this influential work was to protect the Qur'anic Arabic (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992), and also to preserve the "purity" of the language among Arabic-speakers in order for them to teach it to non-Arabic speaking Muslims (Eisele, 2002; Elgibali, 1988). To codify the language and prescribe its use, the Arab philologists (e.g. al-Du'ali, Sibawayhi, Ibn Durayd) adopted a number of models and sources, the first of which was "the Qur'an – 'the clear Arabic book' – considered by virtue of its divine origin to be a paragon of purity and eloquence" (Chejne, 1969, p. 40).

The question of when diglossia evolved (before or after the rise of Islam) in the Arabic-speaking community is a controversial one. Two general views can be identified in this regard. The traditional Arab view is that diglossia developed as late as the first Islamic century as a result of the Arab conquests, when non-Arabs began to speak Arabic (Fischer, 1997). The other, less common, opinion views Arabic diglossia as an old pre-Islamic phenomenon. The more widely accepted view is that diglossia is not a pre-Islamic phenomenon. Non-standard Arabic varieties slowly arose as a consequence of the many language contact situations that developed between Arabic (Standard Arabic spoken in Arabia) on the one hand, and other languages spoken in places outside the Arabian Peninsula as a result of the spread of Islam, on the other. The increasing number of non-Arab Muslims who struggled to learn the language of the new religion and the expanding Islamic *ummah* (community) led to the development of *lahn* (non-native features) among non-Arabs, particularly when reading the Qur'an. As previously mentioned, it is for this very reason, i.e. to protect the proper Arabic tongue and to establish the grammatical norms governing the use of the language, that the process of Arabic codification started.

Classical/Standard Arabic

Classical/Standard Arabic is a language universally understood by all Arabs (Eisele, 2002; Tayash & Ayouby, 1992). Despite the existence of a wide range of spoken (non-standard) national varieties throughout the Arab world, Classical or literary Arabic has long been established as the official language in all Arab countries. Amara and Mar'i (2002) discuss two major factors that contributed to this official status of Classical Arabic. The first factor is the important role of Classical Arabic as a liturgical language of Islam. Classical Arabic serves as, "a constant source for the maintenance of the Islamic heritage and Arabic culture through generations" (Amara & Mar'i, 2002, p. 45). The second factor is pertinent to the role of Standard/Classical Arabic as a unifying cultural force in Arab nationalism. Unlike Colloquial Arabic (a collective term for Arabic spoken varieties) which stresses local identity, Classical Arabic, and its modern form known as Modern Standard Arabic (Palmer, 2008), is regarded as a source of integration that works in favour of pan-Arab national identity and cultural heritage (Suleiman, 2003). This role of Standard Arabic as a bond of

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solidarity that raises a feeling of "us" (Arabic-speakers) versus "them" (non-Arabic speakers) has also been observed in immigrant Arabic-speaking communities. For example, Rouchdy (2002) points out that Standard Arabic, as a language common to Arab immigrants who belong to different speech communities, creates a sense of ethnic identity among Arab Americans.

Standard Arabic is the variety that is favoured for use both in its spoken and written forms in a wide variety of formal contexts including religion, education, the media, the government, and documents. When discussing the complex situation of Arabic diglossia, one cannot overlook the existence of a number of intermediate varieties between Classical/Standard and Colloquial Arabic. Various terms and taxonomies are used in the literature to refer to such Arabic varieties or levels including, "written", "literary", "educated spoken", and "(modern) standard" Arabic (Albirini, 2015; Ibrahim, 1983). It is to be noted, however, that although the dichotomy between Standard Arabic (*Fusha*) and Colloquial Arabic (*Amiyya*) is widely recognized among Arabic speakers and scholars alike, the split between Standard Arabic and other intermediate varieties (e.g. MSA: modern standard Arabic which may be viewed as a development of Classical Arabic) is a controversial one (see Albirini, 2015, for a review of various models and taxonomies of Arabic varieties and levels). Thus, clearly, as Fakhri (1995, cited in Al-Mamari, 2011, p.5-6) points out, the complexity of the diglossic nature of the Arabic language is reflected in the "proliferation of terminology of reference in the levels or varieties of Arabic, as well as the inconsistency of their use and the lack of definition of each terminology."

Zughoul (1980, p. 204-205) outlines some of the major differences between Standard/Classical and Colloquial Arabic:

1. Generally, Classical Arabic is characterized by a more complicated grammatical system than Colloquial Arabic.
2. Classical Arabic is richer than Colloquial Arabic in its lexicon.
3. Colloquial Arabic represents only a spoken variety used for everyday communication. It has not been written.
4. The term Colloquial is used to refer to a large number of non-standard varieties (dialects) of Arabic developed within and across Arab countries.
5. Colloquial Arabic is acquired natively while Classical Arabic is learned in school and thus is sometimes referred to as not being natural.
6. In general, Arabic speakers hold more positive attitudes towards Classical Arabic than the colloquial varieties.

The following section provides an overview of a multiplicity of Arabic varieties known collectively as Colloquial Arabic or *al-lugah al-ammiyya* (the common language).

Colloquial Arabic: A multiplicity of dialects

Unlike Standard Arabic that is common to all Arabic-speaking countries and understood by all Arabs, Colloquial Arabic, a term used to refer to a large number of nonstandard spoken varieties, varies both horizontally (geographical variation) and vertically (social variation) across the Arab World. Thus, colloquial Arabic is a collective term which refers to a wide

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range of non-standard Arabic varieties existing along a dialect continuum reaching from the Maghreb countries (e.g. Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya) through Egypt, Sudan, and the Fertile Crescent (e.g. Jordan, Syria, Iraq) to the Arabian Peninsula (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Kuwiat, Oman). These dialects are the Arabic national varieties that Arabic native speakers acquire as their mother tongue before they start learning the written standard through mainly formal education.

In this connection, Rosenhouse and Goral (2004) identify four major classifications on which Colloquial Arabic can be defined. The first type of classification is based on geographical dimension: Eastern vs. Western dialects (see also Kaye & Rosenhouse, 1997). The Eastern group includes the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, Oman and the United Arab Emirates), Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt. The Western dialects include Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. The second classification is based on the social division; dialectal variation based on the sociolinguistic background of the speaker, i.e. nomadic vs. sedentary background (Bedouin vs. *al-Hadar* dichotomy). Sedentary dialects can be further categorized into urban and rural dialects. The third classification is based on religious affiliations of Arabic speakers (Islam, Christianity, Judaism). While the majority of Arabs are Muslims, other religious minorities (mainly Christian and Jewish) exist in some Arab countries. Religion, therefore, has contributed to the communal sociolinguistic division of Arabic dialects (Kaye & Rosenhouse, 1997). The fourth classification includes gender, age and education (see for example Al Wer, 2002 for a discussion of the education variable in spoken Arabic).

Mutual intelligibility between these colloquial forms often exists and varies depending on degree of interdialectal contact and geographical proximity. For example, Arabic colloquial varieties differ slightly between areas that are geographically close (e.g. Arabic spoken in Syria and Jordan), and diverge quite considerably as the distances become greater (Arabic spoken in Morocco and Iraq).

Clearly, the influence of Arabic diglossia and the degree of correspondence between Standard Arabic and the colloquial forms tend to have an impact on patterns of language development among Arabic speaking children. For example, while Arab children grow up acquiring a spoken Arabic dialect, they later learn to read Standard Arabic, another genetically related form. Their situation becomes even more complex in Arabic speaking immigrant communities where different colloquial national Arabic forms are in contact, in addition to the major interlingual contact between Arabic and the majority language in the migration country (Al-Sahafi, 2016).

So far I have described the Arabic diglossic situation, which represents an example of Ferguson's notion of (classic) diglossia. The following section provides a discussion of Fishman's notion of extended diglossia which involves the coexistence of two different languages in a given speech community.

Extended diglossia

Fishman (1972) is primarily responsible for extending the scope of diglossia to cover any sociolinguistic situation where two distinct languages operate for different functions. Thus, the distinction between an H and L variety can be used to refer to situations (e.g. immigrant minority contexts) that involve the coexistence of a majority (H) and a minority (L) language, used in complementary functions. Fishman employs the term diglossia in this broader sense

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in his social characterization of bilingual and multilingual speech communities where two or more distinct (related or unrelated) languages are used side by side, each with a set of compartmentalized roles. Thus, according to Fishman, the coexistence of Spanish (the language of the colonisers) and Guarani (the American Indian indigenous language) in Paraguay should also be considered an example of diglossia. Spanish is the H variety used in the domains of education, religion and government, while Guarani represents the L variety used for everyday conversation.

Fishman introduces the concept "domain of language use" (e.g. family, friendship, religion, education, employment). According to Fishman, domains of language use govern language choices in multilingual settings since "'proper' usage dictates that only one of the theoretically co-available languages or varieties will be chosen by particular classes of interlocutors on particular kinds of occasions to discuss particular topics" (1972, p. 244).

Fishman's extended use of diglossia differs from Ferguson's original, rather narrower, definition of the term in two major aspects. First, the codes used in extended diglossic communities are not varieties of the same language. Each of the codes involved represents a separate variety spoken as a home language by a particular group in the community. However, only one of these varieties functions as the H variety, while the other plays the role of the L variety. In this connection, Pauwels (1986, p. 15) refers to this extended type of diglossia as "interlingual" diglossia as opposed to the "intralingual" type observed in classic diglossic communities. Second, speakers of the H and L varieties in extended diglossic communities belong to different social groups and use the H and L varieties for different occasions of intra and intergroup communication.

It is to be noted, however, that not all theorists favour the extension of the scope of diglossia to cover cases of both related and unrelated varieties. Hudson (2002), for example, argues for restricting the meaning of diglossia essentially to cases envisioned by Ferguson (1959). Thus, according to Hudson, the sociolinguistic arrangement in bilingual communities where two distinct languages are used does not qualify as diglossia. Instead, he refers to such bilingual situations as cases of "societal bilingualism" on the assumption that diglossia and societal bilingualism are "fundamentally different in their social origins, evolutionary courses of development, and resolutions over the long term" (Hudson, 2002, p. 2).

Nevertheless, as Myers-Scotton (2006, p. 86) points out, although speech communities characterized by extended diglossia are quite different from those showing classic diglossia, "they are not different in the consequences for a society for viewing one or more varieties as H and one or more as L." Such communities employ the two or more languages in their repertoires for different communicative roles. For example, while the majority language in immigrant multilingual contexts plays the role of the high variety, the immigrant minority language plays the role of the low variety. Each of these languages is used for different purposes (see Table 2)

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Table 0: Situations for Majority (H) and Minority (L) language in extended Diglossia (From Baker, 2006)

Context	Majority Language (H)	Minority Language (L)
The home and family		x
Schooling	X	
Mass Media and WWW	X	
Business and commerce	X	
Social and cultural activity in the community		x
Correspondence with relatives and friends		x
Correspondence with government departments	X	
Religious activity		x

Diglossia: Stability vs. language change

One of the major differences between classic and extended diglossia is the degree of stability in the ascribed roles of the H and L varieties. Myers-Scotton (2006), among others, observes that unlike situations of classic diglossia which is relatively stable, it is difficult to maintain stability under extended diglossia (or societal bilingualism). Myers-Scotton points out that in order for extended diglossia to be stable (i.e. to maintain functional use of both the H/majority and L/minority variety), those speakers who speak the H variety as a second language "have to maintain their *own L1 as the L variety alongside the L2* that they also know and to value mainly the H variety for status-raising [original emphasis]" (p. 86). In other words, the maintenance of extended diglossia seems to be determined by the allocation that bilingual speakers make of the languages in their repertoire to different domains of language use (see Fishman 1972, for a discussion of Fishman's typology of the possible relationships between bilingualism and diglossia that may exist in language contact situations). According to Schiffman (1997), the allocation of functions in a diglossic speech community is not based on the language per se, but on the "linguistic culture" of this community. By "linguistic culture", Schiffman refers to those "behaviours, beliefs, myths, attitudes, and historical circumstances associated with a particular language" (p. 215).

Polyglossia

It seems difficult to ignore the fact that there coexist in some communities more than two distinct codes or varieties that are used for distinct purposes. Such a societal arrangement is referred to as triglossia (or sometimes as multiglossia/polyglossia). Triglossic (or polyglossic) communities can be represented by different combinations of language variation including, but not limited to, two dialects of the same language and another language or three different varieties of the same language. These varieties coexist and play different roles based on their H or L status. For example, in Hong Kong three varieties are used: Cantonese, Putonghua, and English. Both Putonghua (Standard Mandarin) and English are official languages and thus can be considered H varieties. Cantonese, a native local dialect, functions as an L variety.

It is worth mentioning that there are generally no clear-cut boundaries demarcating the domains where speakers in societies showing extended diglossia (or societal bilingualism) use their languages. Many analysts, therefore, find it useful to view diglossia as a continuum

of variation (Kaye, 2002; Myers-Scotton, 2006; Schiffman, 1997). For example, people in a particular diglossic society sometimes codeswitch between different varieties or languages within a domain or social situation. In this connection, Schiffman argues that, "in any event, though linguistic cultures think of diglossia as either-or, it is often a gradient cline, with one variant shading into another" (1997, p. 211).

The societal arrangement usually experienced in immigrant Arabic-speaking communities is another example of triglossia where Arabic speakers codeswitch between three language varieties, i.e. Standard Arabic, Colloquial Arabic and the majority language of the wider society where they live (see, for example, Al-Sahafi & Barkhuizen, 2006; Clyne & Kipp, 1999). In such immigrant contexts, the situation of the Arabic language is a complex one and is viewed as both diglossic (for Standard and Colloquial Arabic) and as a dialect continuum (for various colloquial forms).

During situations of Arabic dialect intralingual contact, speakers of different Arabic dialects tend to modify their speech styles to adapt to each other's dialect (Ryding, 2005; S'hiri, 2002). This process is referred to as convergent accommodation (Giles, 1973; S'hiri, 2002). For example, speakers of Western Arabic dialects (e.g. Tunisians, Moroccans) tend to converge in their dialect, which diverges quite extensively from Fusha/Standard Arabic, with that of speakers of other Eastern dialects (e.g. Iraqis, Jordanians), which are closer to the standard form of Arabic (S'hiri, 2002).

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided a selective overview of diglossia in the Arabic language. Clearly, the diglossic situation of the Arabic language represents one of the most complex distinctive features of this language. The concept of diglossia proved to be a useful analytic model characterizing the rather complementary distribution of Standard Arabic and Colloquial Arabic in terms of context of use. Generally, the dichotomy between Standard Arabic (*Fusha*) and Colloquial Arabic (*Amiyya*) is accepted by Arabic speakers who tend to switch between these two Arabic varieties depending on the context of interaction. That is, when they wish to use Arabic to express themselves orally in informal situations (e.g. at home, with their relatives and friends), they tend to do so in their colloquial dialects. However, they had to resort to Standard Arabic in reading, writing and in formal situations. As mentioned above, numerous terms and taxonomies were used in the literature to describe intermediate varieties of Arabic which, despite apparent terminological confusion, can be regarded as "a sign of healthy intellectual activity and development in the field of Arabic sociolinguistics and its affiliate disciplines" (Albirini, 2015, p. 24).

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