AN IDEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON COMPETING LANGUAGES AND IDENTITIES: THE CASE OF ARABIC AND ENGLISH IN SAUDI ARABIA

Ahmad Alzahrani
University of Southampton
Email: aka3n18@soton.ac.uk

ABSTRACT: *The spread of English is being promoted as an important driver of social and economic development (Pennycook, 2009, p.116). However, this view can be "misguided", as English can also be problematic, a source of inequality, and a "formidable obstacle to education" (Tollefson, 2000, p. 9). In this sense, the spread of English is seen as a form of the "linguistic imperialism" in which English enjoys an ideologically higher status over other languages, thus encouraging new forms of capitalism and endorsing the practice of homogeneity (Phillipson, 1999, p.274). In the same vein, it is argued that "language ideology represents statements of identity" (Cummins, 2000, p.xi). With regard to the context of Saudi Arabia, it is argued that if English can be a threat to the Arabic language, then it can also be a threat to the Arabic and Muslims identity (Elyas, 2008a, b), which may not be the true reflection of the Islamic view on learning other languages (Elays and Picard, 2010). Therefore, this article aims to evaluate the linguistic situation in Saudi Arabia in response to the spread of English and the tension this might have created with the Arabic Language to compete with English over gaining access to power and politics in different domains.*

KEYWORDS: Arabic, economy ideology, identity, media, Saudi Arabia.

Historical Background

A better evaluation of the status of English language from an ideological perspective in Saudi Arabia can be arrived at when exploring the wider context of the colonisation of most of the Arabs' world countries in the past century by the Western powers (English, French, and Italians). These powers forcefully implemented an anti-Arabic policy that has eventually led the Arab colonised countries to seek independence, which was much influenced by linguistics (Albrini, 2016). The Arabian Peninsula was a part of the wide Arabian areas that were under the rule of the non-Arab Ottoman Empire for about four centuries (Sulieman, 2003, p. 86). Similarly, the Ottomans implemented an anti-Arabic language policy by teaching Turkish in schools. However, these schools were "boycotted" by the Arabs (Al-Ghamdi and Al-Saadat 2002). After defeating the Ottoman Empire after World War I, Britain and the French took control of the middle eastern countries (Shlaim, 1995). However, during this long period, Arabs "never ceased to think of themselves as Muslims and as Arabs and they, certainly, did not forget their Arabic language" (Zeine, 1966, p. 146). This strong sense of belonging and identity might have created another natural sense of the need to defend the Arabic Language. Additionally, the value of Arabic language also stems from the fact Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of the Islamic religion that was delivered in the Arabic language and which is the language of the Quran (the Holy Book of Muslims) to the Arab messenger Muhammed (PBUH).

The above seemingly simple relation entails other complex relations that might have defined the Saudi state identity and its people as we see it today. For example, a defining feature of an Arab person is her ability to speak Arabic (al-'Aql, 1999). This kind of breadth in Arabs identity belongs to the intellectual property of the people and can be understood as "linguistic" one (Joseph, 2004, p. 12). In Saudi Arabia, this extends to include the religious identity as the Saudi state was established on a religious basis. In 1744, an agreement was held between two people: Ibn Saud (the current ruler) representing the political power and Ibn Abdul-Wahab who represented the religious dimension of the state (Lacroix, 2011). This agreement is the skeleton of the Saudi socio-political structure that shapes the current ideological stance towards the *West*. Therefore, we can understand that Saudi Arabia, being an Arab country in the first place, holds a unique religious position that is empowered by its responsibility in safeguarding the sacred Islamic places. Now, the important question here is how this bond between Saudi Arabia, Islam, and Arabic language is reflected in the ideological stance toward English and how this can be considered a tension between the two languages.

Particular to the Saudi context, another two factors came into play. The first is the *Sahawa* Islamic *Movement* (means awakening in Arabic), that was founded in the early 1980s and that was criticized for excluding other moderate Islamic voices in the Saudi scene (Al Samadani, 2013, p.12). Moderation here can be understood as accepting the others, their values, and their products, the diversity of the modern society or as describe by the Muslim orientalist Dale Eickelman "moderation as pluralism" (Al Yahya, 2011). The second factor is the incident of the 9/11 terrorist attack that destroyed the World Trade Centre in 2003. Being falsely blamed for this incident, Saudi Arabia faced great pressure to rethink its educational system (Karmani, 2005, p. 262). The pressure stems from the ongoing debate between the West and Arab world regarding the link between the teaching of Islam and such attacks (Bar, 2006). This particular debate had ramifications on the teaching of English, being the product of the *West*, in Saudi Arabia (Elays and Picard, 2010). Now, we can see that the Saudis are under pressure from the West to change; something reflected in how Saudis see the West and its products, such as language. Therefore, this chaotic socio-political and socio-religious landscape in Saudi Arabia is echoed in two important domains: the education and the media (Al Yahya, 2011). Additionally, the domain of economy has shown similar tension and thus will also be discussed. In the next section, such tensions within the educational system are discussed.

Domains of Tension between Arabic and English
The Domain of Education
We have seen the origin of the tension between Arabs and the *others* (the West and the Ottomans) over power and politics. The long and the historical building up of this tension extends to include other local domains, such as education, through the rejection of the western values, including the English language. This is portrayed in the early introduction of formal education in Saudi Arabia through the "*madrassa*" (means a school in Arabic) (Tibi, 1998). A madrassa is a modern form of the schooling system that replicates the Islamic teaching methods in which the teacher (the cleric) teaches Islam (ibid). Most important here is that, in the *madrassa*, the introduction of English language into the classroom was not welcomed because of the fear that teaching the English language would lead to a decrease in the teaching of Islam (Azuri, 2006, p. 1).

It is worth noting here that the position of Islam from learning an additional language is very encouraging and a positive one. This is evident from the Islamic *hadith* (the words of the prophet Muhammed PBUP) that says "*He whoever learns other people's language will be secured from their cunning*" cited in Elays and Picard (2010). On the contrary, the ideological stance toward English in the Saudi teaching system is fuelled by the argument that English is not "neutral" but ideologically-loaded and that the values presented in the English curriculum are "at odds" with the teachers' Islamic values and identity (Elyas, 2008a, b). In fact, languages are "anything but neutral", which is very evident in multilingual societies (Pavlenko and Blackledge: 2004: 3). This is also evident when we know that Arabic has "an ideologically faith-based" role to play in the Arab world (Abuhamdia, 1988, p. 42). Here, having a strong bond between Arabic and Islam, it is possible that his fear might have been echoed in the teaching of the Arabic language, especially in the early years at schools.

With regard to this, the introduction of English in the Saudi primary schools was a topic of heated debate over opposing ideologies for years. At one hand, in response to the pressure put on the Saudis after 9/11, it was seen as a great step forward in the introduction of the idea of living "in harmony" with the West and others (Azuri, 2006, p.6). Additionally, on the linguistic level, English is seen as an important subject in this early age (between 6 and 12 years old), where young Saudis start to receive their first formal Arabic education and are thought of as the right age to acquire other languages (Al-Jarf, 2004). On the other hand, English can be seen as an ideologically loaded language that bears anti-Islamic values as "a missionary language" (Pennycook and Makon, 2005). Moreover, English can be a threat that might hinder the development of Arabic that should be prioritized at this critical stage (Al- Summary, 1989). However, arguing against teaching English in primary schools lacks empirical research and should be considered speculative (Al-Naser, 1991). Therefore, despite all this debate, there is the political will to introduce English in the primary schools, which is evidence of the ideological shift in how English or the West are seen by the education sector in Saudi Arabia (Elyas and Mahboob, 2014).

The Domain of the Media
The tension between Arabic and English is also present in the media, particularly social media and public discourse. In social media platforms, this is represented by the use of English/Latin/Roman alphabet letters and some verbs to write Arabic words; a phenomenon called "*Arabizi*" (Yaghan, 2008). Arabizi became popular among young Saudis, and Arabs in general, as a way to express one's self on the internet during times when the most popular websites (e.g., Facebook and Yahoo) were not translated into Arabic (until 2009), and has remained popular since (Black and Kiss, 2009). Now, the attitude toward Arabizi is ambivalent. On the one hand, Arabizi is found to be easier and faster than Arabic, stylish and trendy, and is not harmful to the Arabic language (Alghamdi and Petraki, 2018). On the other hand, Arabizi is seen as problematic and has a negative impact on the Arabic language (Romaih, 2014) as it might lead to a decline in the young generation's ethics and morals (Boyd, 2014). Moreover, Arabizi is used in writing religious text, which could be considered a prohibited act as it might lead to what is called "*Tahrif*"; "a corruption in the [Quranic] text" (Oxford, n.d). Therefore, Arabizi is a good example of the kind of tension between Arabic and English.

Another media domain that is being increasingly problematic with regard to the influence of the speared of English on L1 is public discourse. For example, using English in the public landscape (e.g., shops names) is being prohibited by a governmental Act, especially in Mecca city where the two holy mosques are located, and that receives about 19 million visitors annually for the pilgrimage (Stats, 2019). The prince of Mecca argues that using English to name shops is an act of *westernization* that would lead to a loss of the Islamic and Arabic identity, which is a marker of Saudi Arabia, especially in this holy area (Alriyadh, 2019). Acting accordingly, the new legalization issued by the Meccan prince gave shops owners only 6 months to change the names of their shops from English to the Standard Arabic (Talib, 2018). In this, the Saudis realize that the media is an important factor in the making of ones' identity, or even more particularly "the national identity" (Park, 2009).

The Domain of Economy

The final domain in which there is a tension between Arabic and English is the economic domain, particularly the petroleum industry. Saudi Arabia is one of the largest oil producers in the world, producing 7 million barrels a day, which accounts for 70% of its total exports revenues in addition to the 18% of the world's oil reserves (OPEC, 2018). This major oil market is run by the Saudi Aramco Company, founded in 1938 (Elyas and Mahboob, 2014). Although the company is run by the Saudis, it has issued a strict English-only communication policy among its personnel (Al Essa, 2009). This policy puts pressure on the demanding job market as well as Aramco workers to learn English to be able to communicate "effectively" with each other as well as with the Americans who work with them. In fact, it is argued that Aramco can be the company that has the most influencing power on the English instruction in Saudi Arabia through its early programs to teach English to its employees (ibid). The spread of English along with the discovery of oil in the gulf regions (Saudi Arabia, Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait) is a phenomenon named "perto-linguistics" (Karmani, 2005c). This phenomenon explores the impact of oil on the status and dynamics of English in Saudi Arabia, and it is worth further investigation to explore its impact on the status of Arabic.

It must be noted that the unstable oil markets have led Saudi Arabia to announce an initiative that aims to reduce its dependence on oil and to promote a knowledge-based economy (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). In this regard, there are internal calls to the Saudi Vision to recognize the role of the English language in the building up of the world's economy as we see it today (Alzahrani, 2017). Moreover, the tension with the West has led the kingdom of Saudi Arabia to seek new allies in the east, particularly China. In recognizing the power of the Chinese economy, the kingdom announced taking steps to teach the Chinese language in Saudi schools (Arabiya, 2019), which is expected to create further tension between Arabic and English.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We have seen that the linguistic situation in Saudi Arabia is very much influenced by that of the surrounding Arab world, which had long been colonized. The sufferings are echoed in how Saudis value the English language as one of the products of the West. This was evident when looking at the different domains that used to be preserved solely for the Arabic language. These domains include education, the media, and economics. In education, we have explored the heated debate with regard to the teaching of English in primary schools and how this can be

regarded as a threat to the Arabic language and the identity of young Saudis. In the media domain, we have seen that the phenomenon of *Arabizi* is regarded as a threat to the Arabic language and the young generation as well. Additionally, the spread of English in the public discourse in the holy city of Mecca was banned by a governmental Act, which symbolizes the tension between Arabic and English. As for the economy, we have seen that Aramco, the Saudi oil company, adds more to the tension through its English-only policy. We have also seen how the unstable oil markets have led Saudi Arabia to seek new relations with China, which has led to the introduction of the Chinese language in Saudi schools; something that might take the tension between Arabic and English to its peak.

References

Abuhamdia, Z. (1988). "Speech and language unity: Arabic as an integrating factor", in Luciani, G. and Salame, G. (Eds), *The Politics of Arab Integration*, Croom Helm, New York, NY, pp. 33-53.

Ahmad bin Abd al-Halim bin Abd al-Salam Ibn Taymiyyah, edited by Nassir bin Abd al-Karim al-'Aql 52 .166 -164.Riyadh: Daar Ishbilia, 1419 A.H./ 1999 C.E.) pp (, اقتضاء الجحيم أصحاب لمخالفة المستقيم الصراط

Azuri, L. (2006). "Debate on Reform in Saudi Arabia, Inquiry and Analysis Series. No. 294, pp. 1–6.

Al Arabiya English, (2019). Saudi Arabia to include Chinese language in educational curriculum. Available online in: http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2019/02/22/Saudi-Arabia-to-include-Chinese-language-in-educational-curriculum.html. Accessed on [25. May, 2019].

Albirini, A. (2016). "*Modern Arabic Sociolinguistics: Diglossia, variation, codeswitching, attitudes and identity.*" Abingdon, Oxen: Routledge.

Al-Brashi, A. (2003). "*English language invasion in the Gulf.*" Cairo: Roz Al-Yousef.

Al-Essa, A. (2009). "*Education reform in Saudi Arabia between absence of political vision, apprehension of the religious culture and disability of educational.*" Beirut: Dar AlSakee.

Al-Ghamdi, A., & Al-Saddat, I. (2002). "*The development of the educational system in Saudi Arabia.*" Riyadh: Tarbiat Al Ghad.

Alghamdi, H., & Petraki, E. (2018). "Arabizi in Saudi Arabia: A Deviant Form of Language or Simply a Form of Expression?" *Social Sciences*, *7* (9), 155.

Al-Harthi, H. (2019). A Wave of Westernization in Shops Names . *Alriyadh*. Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2009/mar/10/facebook-launches-arabic-version. [accessed on 22. May. 2019]

Al-Jarf, R.S. (2004). Should we teach English to children under the age of six. *Early childhood*.

Al-Naser, M. (1991). Teaching foreign languages to children. *Al-Bayan Magazine*, 36, 71-73.

Al Samadani, H. (2013). *The representation of Saudi modernists in the sahwa discourse: a critical analysis of the discursive construction and argumentation*. MA dissertation, Lancaster University: UK.

Al-Shammary, E. A. (1989). "Teaching English in Saudi Arabia: To whom, when and how should English be taught?" *The Journal of King Saud University*, 1(2), 195–222.

Alzahrani, A. (2017). "Markets and language policy in Saudi Arabia: How the English language can contribute to the success of The Saudi Vision 2030." *International Journal of English Language and Linguistic Research*, 5(6), 11-12.

Al Yahya, E. (2011). "*Moderation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: An Analysis of 'Pragmatist' and' Puritanical' Discourses.*" Doctoral Dissertation.

Bar, S. (2006). "*Warrant for Terror: Fatwas of Radical Islam and the Duty of Jihad.*" Roman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD.

Boyd, D. (2014). "*It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens.*" New Haven: Yale University Press.

Black, I. & Kiss, J. (2009). Facebook Launches Arabic Version. *The Guardian*. Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2009/mar/10/facebook-launches-arabic-version. [accecced on 22. May. 2019]

Cummins, J. (2000). Forward. In Gonzalez, R. & Melis, I. (Eds.). Language ideologies: Education and the social implications of official language (pp. ix-xxi). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Elyas, T. (2008). The attitude and the impact of the American English as a global language within the Saudi education system. *Novitas-Royal*, *2*(1).

Elyas, T, & Picard, M. (2010). "Saudi Arabian educational history: Impacts on English language teaching." *Education, Business and Society: Contemporary Middle Eastern Issues* 3 (1), 136–145.

General Authority of Statists, 2019. Umrah statistics bulletin. Retrieved from https://www.stats.gov.sa/sites/default/files/umrah_statistics_bulletin_2018_ar.pdf. Accessed on 25 May. 2019.

Joseph, J. E. (2004). "*Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious.*" New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Karmani, S. (2005). "English, 'terror' and Islam", *Applied Linguistics,* 26 (2), 262-7.

Karmani, Suhail. 2005c. Petro-linguistics: The emerging nexus between oil, English, and Islam. *Language Identity and Education* 4 (1), 87-102.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Vision 2030. (2019, May 25). Retrieved from http://vision2030.gov.sa/en

Lacroix, S. (2011). "*Awakening Islam.*" Harvard University Press.

Mahboob, A., & Elyas, T. (2014). English in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. *World Englishes*, *33*(1), 128-142.

Novitas-ROYAL (Research on Youth and Language), 2 (1).

Oxford Dictionary. (n.d). *Tahrif* . Retrieved from http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2306 Accessed on [05, May, 2019].

Pavlenko, A., & Blackledge, A. (2004). Introduction. In A. Pavlenko & A. Blackledge (eds.) *Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts*. Multilingual Matters. 1-33.

Pennycook, A. (2005). The modern mission: The language effects of Christianity. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, *4*(2), 137-155.

Pennycook, A. (2009). "English and globalization." In Maybin, J., & Swann, J. (2009). *The Routledge Companion to English language studies*. Routledge.

Phillipson, R. (1999). 'Voice in global English: Unheard chords in Crystal loud and clear', review of D. Crystal, *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, *Applied Linguistics*, 20(2): 265–76.

Romain, M. (2014). Thaqafat tagheer alloghah lada shabab alaalam alaraby wa atharaha alaa alhawyyah althaqafyyah [The culture of language change and its effects on Arab youth cultural identity]. In *Loghat alshabab alaraby fi wasayel altawasol alhadithah [Arab*

Youth's Language In New Social Media]. Riyadh: King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Center For The Arabic Language, pp. 235–60.

Saudi Arabia facts and figures, 2018. Retrieved from https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/169.htm. Accessed on 20 May. 2019.

Shlaim, A. (1995). "*War and Peace in the Middle East*." NY.: Penguin.

Suleiman, Y. (2003). "*The Arabic language and national identity*." Washington, DC, USA: Georgetown University Press.

Talib, A. (2018). Alfaisal using Arabic in social media. *Makkahnewspaper.* Retrieved from http://bit.ly/2FuCGrk. Accessed [15. May. 2019]

Tibi, B. (1998). "*The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder*." University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Tollefson, J. (2000). "Policy and ideology in the spread of English", in Hall, J.K. and Eggington, W. (eds) *The Sociopolitics of English Language Teaching*, Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 7–21.

Yaghan, M. A. (2008). ""Arabizi": A contemporary style of Arabic Slang." *Design Issues*, *24* (2), 39-52.

Zeine, N. Z. (1966). The Emergence of Arab Nationalism: With a Background Study of Arab-Turkish Relations in the Near East (Beirut: Khayats).