

Diglossia in Arabic

AB. RAHIM HJ. ISMAIL
Jabatan Pengajian Arab dan Tamadun Islam
Fakulti Pengajian Islam
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Diglossia is "a term used in sociolinguistic to refer to situation where two different varieties of a language co-occur throughout a speech community, each of which with a distinct range of social function. Both varieties are standardized to some degree, are felt to be alternatives by native-speakers and usually have special names. Sociolinguistic usually talk in terms of a high (H) variety and or low (L) variety, corresponding broadly to a difference in formality."¹

The term diglossia was first brought into the discussion of Arabic language by the French Arabist William Marçais in his paper entitled "La diglossie arabe" and, then, borrowed and caused to spread in the English speaking world by C. A Ferguson in 1959.² It concerns us here to give more detail observation and discussion about the application of the concept of diglossia in Arabic advanced by Ferguson in his essay "Diglossia"³

Ferguson begins his essay by stating that "in many speech communities, two or more varieties of the same language are used by same speakers under different conditions."⁴ With respect of Arabic he recognizes two varieties namely classical Arabic as a high variety or superposed variety labelled as H (high) and the regional dialects or colloquial Arabic as a low variety labelled as L (low). In order to justify the existence of this dichotomy of Arabic as (H) and (L) in the modern Arab world he sets up various features characterized of both classical and colloquial Arabic.

Functionally, both of H and L have a specialized function. In one set of situations only H is appropriate and in another only L, with the two sets overlapping only very slightly. H is used constantly in speech in parliaments, political speech, sermons in mosques, university lectures, newspapers, newsbroadcast, and other formal occasions, whereas L is regularly used in conversation with family, friends, colleagues, in folk literature and in other informal activities.

In terms of prestige, the speakers of Arabic regard H as being more real, more beautiful and more superior than L. This thought is highly connected with religion as H is the language of the Quran and the Hadith. Moreover H is also the language of the literature. Thus

the bulk of written literature which is in H is held in high esteem by Arabs, and contemporary literary production in H by members of the community is felt to be part of this otherwise existing literature.

As far as language acquisition is concerned, L is invariably learned by children in what may be regarded as the 'normal' way of learning one's mother tongue. It is learned by children at home without any explicit discussion of any grammatical concepts and without any explicit discussion of the construction of the language itself, whereas H is learned by means of formal education, whether this be traditional Qura'nic schools, or modern government schools or private tutors, and it is learned, naturally by the explicit discussion of the construction of the H itself. As a result of this situation L tends to have no written text, no established grammar or pronunciation whereas H has an established norm of pronunciation grammar and vocabulary and becomes highly standardized language.

Further analysis of the elements of both varieties shows that there is extensive differences between the grammatical structures of H and L. H has grammatical categories not present in L and has an inflectional system of noun and verb which is much reduced or totally absent in L. For example, classical Arabic has three cases in the noun, marked by endings; colloquial dialects have none. And, therefore, it seems, in many cases, that the grammatical structure of L variety is simpler than that of its corresponding H.

In terms of lexicon, the bulk of the vocabulary of H and L is shared. However, H has in its total lexicon, vocabulary which have no regular L equivalent, and also L has, in its total lexicon, vocabulary which have no regular H equivalent. The most striking features of diglossia, however, is that the existence of paired items, one H one L, referring to fairly common concepts frequently used in both H and L, where the range of meaning of the two items is roughly the same, and the used of one or the other immediately stamps the utterance or written sequence as H or L. For example, the H word for 'see' is *ra'ā*, then L word is *syaf*. The word *ra'ā* never occurs in ordinary conversation and *syaf* is not used in normal written Arabic.

As regard phonology, it seems difficult to offer any generalization on the relationships between the phonology of H and L in diglossia in view of the diversity of data. Closer examination, however, shows two statements to be justified. On the one hand, the sound systems of H and L constitute a single phonological structure of which the L phonology is the basic system and the divergent features of H phonology are either a subsystem or a parasystem, and on the other, if 'pure', H items have phonemes not found in "pure" L items, L phonemes frequently substitute for these in oral used of H and regularly replace them in tatsamas.⁵

Ferguson, finally, regards diglossia as a highly stable situation in

Arabic. It has persisted many centuries, during pre-Islamic period and continues to exist in the modern period of the Arab world. He ends up his outlined features of diglossia by a definition that diglossia is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standard) 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 is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation”⁵

To this extent, we have assumed, as far as Ferguson analysis is concerned, that diglossia is highly justified to give an account for the language phenomenon in the Arab world. This concept, however, is proved to be a misleading one if we were to give a full account for the actual language situation in the Arab world. It seems obvious enough that Ferguson’s main mistake is aroused by his desire to impose and to prove the duality of Arabic and to posit a one-for-one relation between them. Thus, he failed to give account for other important variations of Arabic and, then makes inaccurate statements about the language situation in the Arab world.

To begin with, Ferguson has only recognized two forms of Arabic: a high form (H) and a low form (L). It is not, however, clear what it is that belongs to each of these categories. He also does not give an explicit recognition to the existence of the spoken language of the educated Arab (esa) and to that of imitative classical Arabic of illiterate Arabs.

The specialized function, which is the most characteristic features of diglossia, for H and L is also proved to be false. That is, for example, the H variety is not necessarily the language used in the sermon in mosque or in political speech or even in university lecture. Infact, these occasions are quite often given in educated spoken Arabic, or even in ‘pure’ colloquial, depending on the type of audience listening to them. It is clear from the discussion that educated spoken Arabic is an important variety of Arabic that should be taken into account when analysing the language situation of Arabic, and it is also important to give it a separate level, as it neither belongs to H or L, from H and L in order to give a fully accurate account for the variations of Arabic.

It is clear from the above discussion that the concept of diglossia cannot give an accurate description of the situation of the Arabic language. Although it might be a useful tool for accounting for other language situation, it is invalid in describing Arabic. It is also clear that any attempt to talk rigidly of Arabic in terms of “one language

one situation" would end up with a misleading picture of Arabic that cannot be approved.

As a reaction against the concept of diglossia, many other approaches and methods are used by linguists to come to term with the variations of Arabic language. And it is worthwhile to give a brief account to a few of those attempts and to see to what extent they managed to cope with the problem of Arabic.

A very similar approach, although slightly different, to the concept of diglossia was suggested by Alan S. Kaye to cope with this particular problem. He described modern standard Arabic (MSA), which he included into it a various kind of spoken Arabic which referred to as inter-Arabic, intercommon spoken Arabic, spoken classical Arabic, middle Arabic - referring to a mixture of MSA and colloquial (C) and spoken literary Arabic, as an ill-defined system and described regional dialects or colloquial Arabic as a well-defined system.⁶

Alan S. Kaye described C as well-defined system because it has "all forms and all sentences which one could elicit must (and do) conform to well-defined rules of phonology and syntax."⁷ For example, if a cairene is asked to supply the word for 'bread' in his colloquial the answer is invariably ^cisy. Similar responses would include 'I will write' /*haktib*/, 'the name Mohammed' /*Mahammad*/, 'man' /*māgil*/, 'house' /*bēt*/, 'what do you want? (mas. sg.)' /^cāwiz 'ēh/ or ^cāyiz 'ēh/, etc.⁸

MSA is an ill-defined system because we cannot describe its phonology with the same precision as we can for a given C. For example, what is the phonetic realizations of the vowels transcribed as /a/ and /ā/ of /*katabā*/ for MSA? and are the allophones of the /k/, /t/, /b/ the same for all native speakers of Arabic? The answers for these, he said, depend on the nature of the C, as well as many other features.⁹

Alan S. Kaye also described MSA as a marked-system and the colloquial as an unmarked-system. That is, MSA marks many more categories of grammar than does any C; C also has marked-unmarked grammatical categories. C is, therefore, always grammatically simpler than is MSA. For examples one marks in MSA for case, for duality in adjective and verb etc. No C has these grammatical categories.¹⁰

Without going into more detail of this approach, as the concept is fairly obvious to us and the detailed is mere illumination for the idea, it is wise to stop and give a brief discussion about this particular approach.

The classification of Arabic into well-defined of C and ill-defined of MSA is likely to maintain the duality of Arabic, as it was done in diglossia, and, therefore, it fails to give any accurate account for the

language situation of Arabic. The main and serious mistake of Kaye's classification is that he summed up those various spoken Arabic such as, inter-Arabic, intercommon-Arabic, spoken classical-Arabic and the like of them under modern standard Arabic, and then described them as ill-defined one. The fact is that there is no Arab who ever recognizes MSA as such, and MSA, in contrary to Kaye's hypothesis, is well-defined system. To include the language of educated spoken Arabic, semi-classical Arabic and the like of them is a very highly misleading decision, for there is no such MSA ever established and ever recognized before, not among the scholars and the Arabs themselves, and it is also meant to impose the features of others, that are the features of educated spoken Arabic, semi-classical Arabic and the like of them, upon the MSA.

Kaye's hypothesis of well-defined system of colloquial Arabic is also invalid for we cannot ascertain, for example, the answer to "what is bread" from the Cairene is invariably ^cis̄ȳh and the question of "What do you want?" in Cairene are only /^cāwiz 'eh/ and /^cayiz 'eh/. The Cairene may, in fact, responded to the first question /*khubz*/ and ask the second question /^cāwiz *hāga*/ or /^cayyi *khidmah* / or /^cayyi *khadamāt jā bē* etc.,¹¹ depending on the situation and the nature of the addresser. However, it is conceivable that we can define colloquial Arabic as a well-defined system if a sufficient amount of data is provided and a careful analysis of it is given.

Finally, we can suggest an alternative solution for that of Kaye's but still applying his two hypotheses, with considerable differences. Our hypotheses are that MSA (Classical-Arabic), in the upper level, and colloquial Arabic (regional dialects); in the lower level, are well-defined systems, while educated spoken Arabic (ESA), in the first intermediate level and imitative spoken classical-Arabic of the illiterate Arabs, in the second intermediate level from below, are ill-defined system. These hypotheses are based on the fact that, on the one hand, MSA has an established norm of phonology, morphology and syntax, and C, though has no written grammar, phonology or morphology, it has a recognizable categories of those and can be defined with sufficient amount of data. And on the other, ESA and imitative spoken classical Arabic of illiterate Arabs have no rules of their own and always produced in attempt to speak the MSA.

Apart from Kaye's approach, many other scholars such as, Blanc and Badawi, attempt to solve the problem of variation in Arabic, by delimiting intermediate language varieties, reducing the amount of variation by increasing the number of linguistic systems and sub-systems. Thus Blanc and Badawi distinguish five different levels of contemporary Arabic, namely in Blanc's terms. Modern Arabic, Modified Classical semi-literary or elevated colloquial, koinezed colloquial and plain colloquial.¹²

Another scholar, Gustav Meiseles, recognizes four varieties of contemporary Arabic.¹³ They are literary or standard Arabic, sub-standard Arabic, Educated spoken Arabic and basic or plain vernaculars. An important point to stress on this various approaches is that the scholars are aware that the concept of diglossia is no longer valid or useful to describe the language situation for contemporary Arabic and it is the responsibility of the scholars who deal with such phenomenon to introduce a more valid and useful technique for accounting for the variations of Arabic and then to eliminate the misleading picture of the language situation they were to describe.

Finally, we have another important point to stress, relating the variations of Arabic, that the emergence of educated spoken Arabic and the imitative spoken classical-Arabic of the illiterate Arabs, is not, as many scholars imagine, the development of Arabic, it is, in fact, an attempt by the Arab to speak standard Arabic and to maintain the classical Arabic as the only standard language for the Arabs of different regions.

NOTES

1. David Crystal, *A First Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1983), 112.
2. See Kaye, A. S., "Modern Standard Arabic and the Colloquials," *Lingua* 24 (1970): 374.
3. Ferguson C. A., "Diglossia," *Word* vol. 5 (1959).
4. *Ibid.*, 325.
5. Ferguson C. A., "Diglossia," *Word* vol. 5 (1959), 336.
6. Charles F. Hockett was the first to use the terms 'well-defined' and 'ill-defined' for linguistics. See his "The State of the Art (*Jinua Linguarum*, series minor, 73) (The Hague, Mouton, 1968/Hockett defines the concepts: "A well-defined system is any system (physical, conceptual, mathematical) that can be completely and exactly characterized by deterministic function" (p. 45). Anything not well-defined is then, according to Hockett, ill-defined. See, Kaye, A. S., "Remark on Diglossia in Arabic Linguistic," *Linguistic: An International Review* vol. 81 (1972), 35.
7. Kaye, A. S., "Remark on Diglossia in Arabic Linguistic," *Linguistic: An International Review* vol. 81 (1972); 35-36.
8. *Ibid.*, 35.
9. *Ibid.*, 33-34.
10. *Ibid.*, 40-41.
11. See, El-Hassan, S. A., "Educated spoken Arabic in Egypt and the Levant," "Artical Review of Diglossia and Related Concepts," *Archivum Linguisticum* vol. 2 (1977), 116.
12. See, H. Blanc, "Style Variation in Spoken Arabic: A Sample of Interdialectal Conversation" in Charles A. Ferguson (ed), *Contributions to Arabic linguistics*, Harvard, Middle Eastern Monograph Series, (1960).
13. See, Meiseles, G., "Educated Spoken Arabic and the Arabic language Continuum," *Archivum Linguisticum* vol. 11 (2), (1980).