

The Situation of Arabic: modernization and attitudes

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Abstract

Modernization is one of the most important activities in language planning that decides upon the vitality of a language. If a language is not continuously updated by specialists in order to serve as a communication medium, it will be divorced from its communicative nature and thus its users will abandon it for being outdated.

Arabic has been undertaken by specialists with the purpose of being modernized. However, this is not an easy task because of many problems that the Arabic speaking world suffers from. These difficulties have obliged the majority of the Arab countries to adopt a foreign language when it comes to developed fields like science and technology. The fact of abandoning or neglecting Arabic in higher education and scientific domains by replacing it by foreign languages in addition to its diglossic nature in which MSA (modern standard Arabic) is never acquired as a mother tongue or used in social interaction, have effected negative attitudes towards Arabic among its speakers.

Introduction:

One of the main characteristics of *Arabic* is that it represents a situation that has been termed as *diglossia* (Ferguson 1959). The term Arabic is often used as a generic term to refer to the classical variety as used in the literary heritage as well as the standard variety, *MSA*, which is, usually, undertaken in *language planning* activities in addition to the different colloquial forms reserved for everyday and in-group communication. MSA is the variety that is reserved for formal situation, media and education. Thus, specialists, often, find themselves responsible of updating this variety through providing the necessary language elements in order to serve as

a language of science. This task is termed in the domain of language planning as *modernization*.

1. The situation of Arabic

After independence of most Arab countries, the decision-makers considered the choice of ‘Arabic’ as axiomatic. They associate it with the notion of ‘a nation’ and consider it as part and parcel of their identity; “the Arab-Islamic” identity. In most of these countries’ constitutions, it is proclaimed that ‘Arabic is the language of the state’.

Modern Standard Arabic or MSA is used in formal settings like media, religious speeches, and education. This variety has witnessed the processes of *graphization* and *standardization* for centuries and it is the nearest to Classical Arabic, the variety of Koran and ancient literature. In Ferguson’s definition of diglossia, it represents the *High variety*. Socially, it is viewed as “the real and the correct form of Arabic”. It is worth mentioning that MSA is no one’s mother tongue while in all Arab countries people acquire their local dialect, be it derived from Arabic or not, as a mother tongue. These local varieties are often considered as “corrupt forms” of the standard variety, and represent the *Low variety* in Arabic diglossia.

2. Modernization and Arabic

The use of MSA in defined domains is usually officialized through status planning, and acquisition planning. These two concepts are activities in the domain of language planning and they include the notion of modernization; a concept worth clarification in our context.

a. Language Planning

Policy makers are responsible for taking appropriate decisions concerning language choice and functions. This task is referred to as language planning. It appears in a set of decisions and procedures in order to reach an explicit goal. Theorists of the field agree on defining three dimensions of language planning, which are status planning, corpus planning and acquisition planning.

Status Planning refers to choosing a given language which often has a moral, religious, or an economic value as an official or a national language. This is the case of choosing Arabic in most Arab countries. This choice explains the terminology in Hamers and Blanc (2000) who call this activity as “*external planning*”, as opposed to “*internal planning*” which deals with the internal structure of the language. The former one deals with decisions about language use while the latter one attempts to describe it and even modify it. This task is referred to as ‘Corpus planning’.

A language cannot serve the functions that it has been assigned to if it is not prepared internally. This activity can only be accomplished with the linguists’ intervention; they manage to decide upon “appropriate” forms of the language and define its structures. It is their task to make a language written and take care of its spelling. They manage to provide documentation in the chosen language. This task is often accomplished by official specialized academies though part of the task can be handled by learnt men. Corpus planning is of prime importance in any language planning process.

Basically, the phases making up corpus planning are described in *graphization* or *regraphization* to provide a written form for the language. It, then, passes through *standardization*, *modernization* and *renovation*. Since the

graphic system is important in any written language, linguists manage to select a vehicle by which they graphicize the language. For Arabic, this phase was accomplished centuries ago, in the era of classical Arabic.

Standardization defines one conventional form of pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary and grammar to cite in specialized books and dictionaries. As far as Arabic is concerned, specialists could systemize this domain, describing rules of Classical Arabic at all levels, since prescribing its use is very important in the religious domain. MSA grammar has always been emphasized and specialized books are set for all those who want to learn it.

Linguists, usually, attempt to control concepts and define vocabulary meanings. If they do not find expressive terminology for new concepts they move on to *modernization*. So, this term refers to any effort to coin terminology for technical use in a ‘creative’ way, in order to enable language users to speak and write about technical topics, mainly academic and scientific domains. This process is, also, labelled as “Intellectualisation” by Trudgill (1992:40). Linguists can rely on borrowing morphemes or whole words or on coining or compounding elements from the language that is being modernized. However, this choice is not made off-hand. It reflects a whole ideology and conception of identity.

Borrowing ready-made terminology from other languages or morphemes economizes much effort, especially for the reason that scientific fields are advancing day after day leaving no time for linguists to invent their own terminology. Another argument held by those relying on borrowing is that the majority of languages especially those associated with science, like English, have borrowed from Latin or Greek. Thus, they

see no harm in following the same path of the worlds' languages by borrowing from other languages.

Yet, many politicians, insisting on identity and viewing 'language' and nation' as synonymous, reject any attempts to borrow from other languages. They conceive borrowing as outrageous to the language of their nation, i.e. they interpret borrowing as a weakness which might mean that their language is inferior and primitive. Therefore, they stress relying on their own languages in modernization and often sponsor specialized bodies to do the task. They may choose to change the language in terms of spelling, graphic system or lexis in a process called *renovation* relying on purely political reasons.

Thus, a language should be prepared in order to be appropriate for technical and scientific use before any implementation. The term language *acquisition planning* was set as a separate activity beside status and corpus planning. This distribution is made on the basis that its approach is more 'practical' and its decisions are rather 'tangible'. Christiane (1988:200) adds further, to clarify this point, that it is "*the plan put into action*" and calls it "*the implementation phase*".

Religion, The media and work places play a role in language planning, as well as education which is paramount in this domain so that acquisition planning is named after it. Hoffmann (1991:214) points out that education is one of the most important domains in acquisition planning stating: "*the education system is by far the most important tool for implementing a government's language planning policy.*" In the same vein, Spolsky (2004) agrees that choosing the language to use as a medium of instruction and deciding on the foreign languages to be taught in school are part of the scope of language planning.

b. Modernization of Arabic

Arabic has been witnessing the process of language planning for centuries; from graphization to modernization. Indeed, great efforts have been done by individuals as well as recognized bodies in order to modernize MSA and keep it updated with the fast scientific growth but this process is not a simple mission to pursue.

One cannot deny that there are many agencies in the Arab world officially or unofficially responsible for terminology productions which include specialists from the entire Arab world so that one cannot say that these efforts have been restricted to one area or produced terminology typical of one country.

There have been efforts even from the part of foreigners; especially that Arabic became one of the official languages of UN. (Sieny, 1988: 169) Thus, there have been oil companies, agencies of the UN and other scientific centers specialized for the arabization of computer terms. In fact, this domain is delicately and seriously worked on by virtue of the fact that the Arab world represents a large market in the domain of computing and technology. So, foreign producers find their benefits in preparing suitable products for the Arabic speaking world, introducing them in Arabic. Therefore, there has been production of bilingual dictionaries, using computer aided translation in order to help the Arab consumers in operating the imported products.

It is worth mentioning that there have been attempts to support coordination and cooperation among the productions of these bodies; being individuals, Arab recognized bodies or foreign attempts. Yet, this project is not an easy task to

accomplish because of a combination of Linguistic as well as administrative reasons.

c. Arabic Modernization Problems

The nature of the Arabic language causes a problem for those who attempt to agree on a unified terminology. In technical use, systemization of terms is so important to the degree that scientific exactness may be offended if one does without it. Terms are exact entities that represent tight notions and refer to well defined concepts. Any ambiguity, duplication, or vagueness should be avoided. Some examples will be given below to clarify this idea

Lack of systemization in MSA modernization is crystal clear if one has a glance at the transliteration method. Vowels transliteration, for instance, differs depending on the accent of the translator. This problem is a result of Arabic vowels quality which is quite in free variation if compared to English or French vowels. In Arabic, the speaker may realize the open back vowel /a/ with more or less opening using the phenomenon of ‘al- imaala’; this change of the quality of the vowel may be distinctive in the case of other languages. This difference may cause an ambiguity in transliteration. For instance the term ‘internet’ is transliterated as ‘انترنت’ or ‘انترنت’, sometimes with and other times without lengthening of the vowel /i/ to show the degree of closing the vowel.

Each country uses a letter to represent a missing sound in Arabic. /g/ for instance is a missing phoneme in MSA and exists just as a phonetic realization in colloquial Arabic that stands for some phonemes in MSA, depending on which geographical area it is. It, however, exists in many languages like French and English, which are often the origin of the

transliterated term. It is transliterated as *ق*, *ك*, or *ج*, depending on which country we are. This problem comes to the surface as soon as one attempts to create a unified database for Arabic terms using a machine, in the sense that one does not know which option to rely on.

Arabic lexis is of polysemous nature. For one scientific term there can be more than one Arabic equivalent. The term Anchor, for instance, is translated as /marbat/ or /mirsa:t/ (مربط or مرسة). There can be also one Arabic term for two different foreign terms, like the terms ‘collect’ and ‘capture’ are both translated as /iltiqa:t/ (التقاط). The layman might think that this is not a problem, but if one comes to translate a scientific text, it may lead to serious ambiguities. The problem becomes worse if machine aided translation is adopted in the sense that one does not know which term to enter when creating the database. This may lead to the problem of ‘duplication of logic values’ which is a serious problem in the domain of databases.

The same problem rises because of multiplicity of translation techniques. There is no agreement on which technique to use when assigning an equivalent Arabic term such as transcription, transliteration, and other literal translation or cultural equivalent. So, one can come across many terms that stand for the same concept. An illustrative example can be advocated in this respect; the mobile is called: /almaḥmu:l/, /annaqqa:l/, /aljawwal/, /almobail/ (respectively: المحمول, النقال, الجوال, الموبايل). Another example is the term television which is translated as /tilifizju:n/, /tilfa:z/ /talfaza/ and /ra:ʔi:/ (رائي, تلفزة, تلفاز, تلفزيون).

Which clouds further the issue is that borrowing linguistic elements in MSA comes from both French and English. Here, one might notice that the borrowing depends on

which Arab country it is; each country uses borrowing according to its historical background. To exemplify, the anagrams /assi:da:/ and /al?i:dz/ (الإيدز, السيدا) borrowed from French and English respectively refer to the AIDS illness. The former is exclusive to the Maghreb area while the latter is used most in the Middle East. A long list of similar examples can be found in the scientific and technical terms. Another example is that of telling the months, in Algeria books used in education cite the term /?u:t/ (أوت) to refer to the month ‘August’ and never use the term /?uɣustəs/ (اغسطس) as used in many Eastern Arab countries. So, in technical use, one has to accept at least two options for the same concept.

There is another problem in Arabic is that the translated term gives a long sentence, especially that there is not a systemization of the use of abbreviations. It is so much easier for the user to use the term LCD screen which stands for “*Liquid Cristal Display*” and is used practically in all languages instead of using the Arabic equivalent /miçra:ð sa:ʔil albill/ (معارض سائل البيل). It is the same for the technical method called FIFO which means ‘*First In First Out*’. In Arabic it is translated as /adda:xilu awwalan alxa:riju awwalan/ (أولا الخارج (الداخل أولاً)). In practical use, one usually prefers to spend the least effort in order to express a scientific idea instead of using a whole sentence. Therefore, specialists should find practical solutions in order to enforce language economy in technical use.

These problems are not solved till now because of absence, as far as I know, of an official terminological body that has the power of standardization and coordination and of putting their publications at the hand of scientists who find themselves obliged to coin their own terms in spite of the fact that they are not specialized in translation. An example in the

domain of computing is the term '*dump terminal*', which is translated in Arabic as /mitra:f maɣtu:h/ (مطراف معتوه), which may sound awkward and does not convey a meaning.

Thus, there is a multiplicity of translation agencies and a lack of dissemination and vulgarization of their publications and this urges specialists to found a central databank of technical terms that is continuously updated with the fast growth of science. With this problem, scientists prefer to access information directly in its original language. And many view Arabic as unable to serve as a language for science.

3. Arabic Attitudes Among its Speakers

Indeed, MSA receives a set of negative attitudes among its speakers. This is attested and agreed on in many writings on MSA. It is viewed as an "antic and old fashioned language" that is unable to serve as a social language and it is often viewed as "an artificial language" that lacks social life.

One may relate these attitudes to the socio-economic situation of the Arab world in relation to Gardner's (1985:39) claim in this respect. He clarifies that negative attitudes towards a language may relate to the culture of its speakers or to the practical use to which the learner assumes he/ she can put this language in. For the case of MSA, its users are aware that the Arab world includes developing countries and their language has not a special status as a language of science or economy. Therefore, many associate MSA with "backwardness" and find it socially and economically "useless" to be learnt.

Negative attitudes may also relate to Language Planning in general *vis-a-vis* MSA. In Algeria, for instance,

MSA is used as a language of instruction in the frame of the Algerian acquisition planning. The educational system implements MSA in literary subjects while the French script is adopted for use as symbols in scientific fields like mathematics. Students are asked to use MSA in classroom and at the same time they are trained to say and write since their primary school time in the French script to refer to hours, minutes and seconds. On the other hand, they have been spoon-fed to claim that MSA is the ‘superior’ language attempting to marginalize and even hate their mother tongue.

The result is that they express some negative attitudes towards colloquial Arabic, the variety that is part of their personality. They, simultaneously, according to Bounider (2000:183), do not accept this claim and express a certain rejection of MSA. Therefore, after a few years, they recognize that they are asked to communicate in a language that is for the educational system “unable” to express the simplest scientific matter like ‘telling time’ (Benadla, 2010: 112).

Bentaliha (1983:28) puts in the same vein that MSA is viewed negatively among young Moroccans because of the school curriculum which always presents it in texts about poverty and past. He urges language planners to take this language delicately and give it special attention when making school syllabi. Marley (2004:38), too, refers to Moroccan youth negative attitudes towards Arabic through expressing a lack of instrumental motivation in learning it because they recognize that they will no more need it in higher studies and scientific research as well as their work life. This generates in their personality a certain rejection of this code. Similar attitudes are attested in other researches about other Arabic speaking countries like in Tunisia, and even in Arabia Saudi in which knowing MSA is not as important as knowing the

foreign language, be it French or English. These two languages are conceived positively and receive instrumental motivation to be learnt and used on the part of Arabs.

Indeed, if a person wants to have an outlet to better higher education and work occasions, s/he has to be a speaker of French in the France-post colonial Arab countries like Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. If the country was under the English rule, like most of eastern Arab countries, then English receives those positive attitudes. In a country like Lebanon, knowing both languages is important because both of them relate to the historical background of the country.

Conclusion:

Forming plurilingual people, who can speak more than one language, became necessary in an era of globalization, however, this should not be at the expense of one's native language. In the case of Arabic, one can attest that it has some problems in modernization that could exclude it from higher education and scientific research. This exclusion could affect negatively the way its speakers conceive it.

One can not ignore the efforts spent, either by individuals or recognized bodies, in struggling in the mission of Arabic modernization, but these efforts could not solve many problems that have to be reconsidered. Therefore, remedying these problems, though is effort demanding and time consuming, is an urgent necessity.

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