

Diglossia and Politics in Arabic

Written by Ryan Zohar

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RYAN ZOHAR, MAR 29 2018

“Every Arab-speaking people is an Arab people. Every individual belonging to one of these Arabic-speaking peoples is an Arab. And if he does not recognize this, and if he is not proud of his Arabism, then we must look for the reasons that have made him take this stand.”^[1] These words of famed Arab nationalist thinker Sāṭi’ al-Ḥuṣrī highlight the crucial role of the Arabic language in the construction of a unified Arab identity. While al-Ḥuṣrī’s definition of Arab identity is certainly debatable, it reveals the language’s role as a tool invoked by many for conceptualizing common bonds in the Arab world. The specificities and cultural nuances embedded in the oft called *loghat al-dād* accord the Arabic language its unique linguistic character. Indeed, the language has been embraced throughout history by groups of Arab nationalists who have sought to construct cohesion and a common identity from the Maghreb to the Gulf. And while these broad-based commonalities certainly exist across the Arab world within *fuṣḥā*, which encapsulates *fuṣḥā al-‘aṣr* (Modern Standard Arabic) and *fuṣḥā al-turāth* (Classical Arabic),^[2] the colloquial dialects of each region, nation, and city contain unique aspects that shift this linguistic bond towards a locality. This essay will seek to examine why and how *fuṣḥā* and the colloquial variety of Arabic, *lahja*, are used in Arabic discourse in pursuit of a political goal. Within political discourse, these two registers of Arabic create different rhetorical effects. *Fuṣḥā* appears dignified, official, and more globally focused, while *lahja* can be used to appeal to the masses, to speak to local concerns, and to appear like the *common-man*.^[3]

This paper will first seek to describe diglossia as a linguistic phenomenon and then apply these theoretical findings to the example of Arabic as a diglossic language. Following this will be a discussion on the deeper sociolinguistic meanings associated with *fuṣḥā* and *lahja*. The last portion of the paper will focus on case studies of diglossic Arabic in political discourse both in historical context and more recent examples from the Arab Spring.

Harris and Hodges define diglossia as “the presence of a high and a low style or standard in a language, one for formal use in writing and some speech situations and one for colloquial use.”^[4] While the *fuṣḥā-lahja* split in Arabic is an obvious example of such a phenomenon, according to C.A. Ferguson, the existence of distinct registers of language exist in “Arabic, Modern Greek, Swiss German, Haitian Creole.”^[5] Within the Arabic language, *fuṣḥā* is perceived as the higher variety as it is closer to the Qur’ānic derivative of the language than colloquial dialects, albeit MSA has evolved over time. Indeed, the Qur’ānic variety of Arabic is often accorded a “sacred status” by its speakers.^[6] *Lahja* is widely spoken on streets and in homes across the Arab world. According to Ferguson, the lower variety of a diglossic language, in this case *lahja* is used in the following instances: “instructions to servants, waiters, workmen, clerks; conversation with family, friends, colleagues; radio ‘soap opera’” among other cases.^[7] *Fuṣḥā*, however, also has important functions in daily life. It is the variety used in much of literature, official statements, religious services, and is perceived by many as the *lingua franca* of the Arab world. And yet, the status of *fuṣḥā* as a mutually intelligible variety of the Arab language which can traverse the entirety of the Arab world is increasingly challenged by the pervasiveness of media and entertainment-driven dialects (mainly Egyptian),^[8] the rise of Western languages in the Arab world,^[9] and by the usage of a middle register of Arabic which mixes dialectal varieties with *fuṣḥā*.^[10] It must be said that Ferguson’s promulgation of Arabic as a diglossic language has not gone unquestioned. Linguists such as El Hassan have critiqued Ferguson’s emphatic push for a two-tiered classification, using empirical data from the sermons of Egyptian *sheikhs* in order to push for the intellectual acceptance of a middle-variety known as *al-wuṣṭā*.^[11] Additionally, individuals like ‘Anīs Frayḥa and Georges al-Ḥūrī worked towards a sort of *loghat muyassarāh*, an objective that has now lost much of its appeal.^[12] Indeed, as noted by Versteegh in his book *The Arabic Language*, the diglossic, though multi-lectical is perhaps a better term,^[13] phenomenon is one that has existed

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for many centuries,^[14] and thus is a deeply anchored sociolinguistic characteristic of the Arabic language.

In his groundbreaking work on diglossia, Ferguson laid out a number of criteria for the phenomenon and went on to explain that each register of language has a social function.^[15] *Fuṣḥā* and *lahja* each have their appropriate sociolinguistic applications, but what do the usages of each register tell us on a deeper level? Many students of the Arab world only learn the more formal variety of Arabic through their schooling, having spoken the colloquial variety in their daily life.^[16] The different situations in which Arabic speakers find themselves using *fuṣḥā* or *lahja* likely confer onto these registers different meanings or statuses. Hassan Alshamrani has highlighted this in his discussion of prestige and H (high) and L (low) varieties of Arabic, used to refer to *fuṣḥā* and *lahja* respectively.^[17] In his view, studies of sociolinguistics of the Arabic language are “more concerned with diglossia to understand why the same speech community uses sub-varieties in the same language for different functions.”^[18] He states, “In Arabic, for instance, the classical language, the H variety, is more ‘beautiful’, ‘expressive’, and ‘logical’ than the L variety.”^[19] In a survey conducted in which Arabic speakers were asked which specific effects the specific usage *fuṣḥā* or *lahja* could convey, responses suggested that usage of *lahja* allowed speakers to appear more accessible and to appeal to more broader bases of local or national society, while *fuṣḥā* can invoke a sense of formality or the global-focus of particular discourse.^[20] A study conducted by Reem Khamis Dakwar, likewise noted students’ reasons for the importance of studying *fuṣḥā*: “(1) religious, (2) pan-Arabism, (3) language beauty perception, (4) learning necessity, and (5) communication.”^[21] Such associations with language and social phenomena obviously resonate deeper than the overly simplistic formal-colloquial dichotomy that is often used to characterize the diglossic nature of Arabic.

Sociolinguists like Nathalie Mazraani go a step further in assigning normative sentiments to the usage of *al-lahja al-‘ammiyya*, claiming that Arabs are often hesitant to accord it the status of language or grant it any form of literary merit.^[22] Such contrast between the ‘beauty’ of *fuṣḥā* and the ‘imperfection’ of the colloquial variety is peculiar for Mazraani because, according to her, many Arabs feel “ill at ease” when actually speaking *fuṣḥā*.^[23] For Mazraani much of this relates to the status and values accorded to different varieties of Arabic, “the aesthetic aspect of [*fuṣḥā*] sometimes predominating over intelligibility.”^[24] There is something unique about Arabic in that there is an inherent value associated with speech based not only on what is said but in which lect the phrase is uttered.

Linguists such as Labov, Gumperz, Millroy, and Al Khatib have stressed that patterns in language can display intricacies unique to a linguistic social group.^[25] Examples of social groups with observed linguistic commonalities include gender groups, age groups, religious groups, social classes, geographic regions, and individuals with common literacy levels.^[26] The linguistic commonalities shared within these groups can in many ways represent a sort of latent bond, and such connections can be invoked in the public space, representing a form of interaction ritual which builds common effervescence and group solidarity.^[27] One such outlet for playing on these linguistic bonds is political discourse. Tools such as code-switching and code-mixing (a more localized form of code-switching) serve as tools that can help to bring out common bonds (i.e. switching from *fuṣḥā* to *lahja* for emphatic effect).^[28]

Perhaps the most notable example of an Arab leader who “exploited the rhetorical power of code-switching” is Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser.^[29] Scholars such as Edward Said have underlined the striking contrast produced as Nasser vacillated between *fuṣḥā* and *‘ammiyya*, having written that “Nasser in particular did on occasion address his masses of followers in the Egyptian dialect mixed with resounding phrases from the *fuṣḥā*.”^[30] In her studies of Nasser’s speech on December 23, 1957 in Port Said and one on July 22, 1962 in Cairo, Nathalie Mazraani was able to identify a number of substantive qualities which induced Nasser to alter his speech between MSA and Cairene Arabic.^[31] Nasser’s discursive predilection for Arab nationalism is an important indicator of the duality of his intended reach in his speeches. He is focused very much on the Egyptian nation, his immediate physical audience, but also realizes the implications of his thought in the broader Arab world. As such, Mazraani highlights that Nasser preferred to use *fuṣḥā* when he “presents historical facts” often intended for a wider Arab audience.^[32] Conversely, when focusing on uniquely Egyptian issues he will speak in Cairene Arabic.^[33] Much is made about Nasser’s populist grandstanding, and in accordance with this cultivation of a “man of the people” image, Nasser speaks in Cairene Arabic when “clarifying points which he feels may not be fully understood” by his entire audience.^[34]

Nasser’s successor Anwar Sadat had also been known to use this technique of switching between formal and

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colloquial varieties of Arabic. His prepared speeches would be written in *fuṣḥā*, however, he frequently diverged from his script, improvising and ad-libbing in Egyptian Arabic.^[35] Like Nasser, Sadat paid particular attention to the intended audience of his speech. He spoke with gravitas in *fuṣḥā* as well as English when making more globally-focused speeches, as was the case with his flowing formal Arabic in his 1977 speech delivered before the Israeli Knesset. Saliba Sarsar suggests that Sadat's usage of Arabic and English was part of a larger communication strategy; one which left different impressions on those who heard him speak English versus those who only heard him speak in Arabic.^[36]

The linguistic tact of Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, is perhaps best revealed in the ensemble of his last public speeches. While the discursive intentions of his speeches in late January and in February of 2011 are distinct from many of the other political objectives which marked his time in power, analyzing his communication strategies during the frame of the Arab Spring allows for us to differentiate Mubarak from other leaders in this period. Indeed, the Arab Spring has coincided with the appearance a new linguistic dimension which has altered the regional perception of political discourse. Abdou Filali-Ansary, a specialist of Islamic Studies, has highlighted the Arab Spring's noted departure from the traditional discourse of the Arab world; the Arab Spring has brought with it the search for "*new political language*."^[37] It seems the traditional rules of involvement and ideation, concepts popularized by researcher Reem Bassiouney,^[38] have shifted during the Arab Spring. For Bassiouney, "involvement is a psycho-social aim, and ideation is the translation of this aim into different types of discourse."^[39]

Not only did language play a central role for protest and civil society movements during this time as evidenced by the research of Nazir N. Harb Michel,^[40] but the linguistic choices made by leaders in response to these movements also represent an important, though often overlooked, side of the story. In addressing their people, leaders in the Arab world often sought to highlight many of the themes expressed by the popular uprisings. Their methods of doing so varied, as did their levels of success, thus providing a useful comparative excursus.

The protests of the Arab Spring, according to most accounts, began not in major cities like Tunis, but in the peripheral cities of Tunisia's interior.^[41] Spurred on by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, protests spread across the country in early 2011. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the long-time president of Tunisia, was thus the first of the so-called "Arab presidents for life" to contend with such major uprisings.^[42] Unwittingly becoming the archetypal model for what would become a string of such speeches from Arab autocrats, Ben Ali's words and the way in which he said them were duly noted around the Arab world by leaders and laymen alike. The case of Ben Ali is an interesting one because of his unique history with code-switching choices beginning with his rise to power. According to Naima Boussofara-Omar, upon taking power, one of Ben Ali's most clear departures from the motions and mores of the Bourguiba regime was his insistence on speaking *fuṣḥā*.^[43] Whereas Bourguiba "used a constellation of linguistic codes — Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, Tunisian Arabic, and French," Ben Ali chose a different route.^[44] And, indeed, in his initial addresses to the Tunisian people in which he sought to calm the mounting unrest, Ben Ali chose to express himself in the same Modern Standard Arabic he had used for decades.^[45] This is why Ben Ali's decision to take advantage of diglossic code-switching in his January 13, 2011 speech given in Tunisian Arabic is a powerful one. Ben Ali's staccato "*Ana themtkom*" is now seen by many as his way of invoking de Gaulle's famous, "*Je vous ai compris*."^[46] Ben Ali's choice to speak in Tunisian dialect was a concerted usage of language to achieve a political goal, and the impact of such a speech shows the relevance of Arabic's diglossic nature in the contemporary era. Such a deliberate usage of diglossic switches in Arabic discourse can produce an effect which encapsulates both *pathos* and *ethos*. The January 13 speech by Ben Ali was a last-ditch effort to connect with this people; an effort which sought to harness the unique features of the Arabic language, but an effort that ultimately failed.

Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak soon faced a similar test. With pressure mounting on Mubarak to face the same fate which had brought Ben Ali's rule to an end, the momentum of the Arab Spring seemed almost unstoppable. And faced with this threat of a potential ousting, Mubarak seemed unwavering in his addresses to the Egyptian people. According to scholars such as Tewfik Aclimandos, Mubarak remained resolute in his line of reasoning in a way that conveyed, in essence, "I am the boss, I know that people are suffering. I have made and will make reforms, but it is I who will set the pace."^[47] And in his last speech to the Egyptian people, one got the impression that he was not talking to the people themselves but to history.^[48] According to Lamiss Azab, instead of Mubarak speaking to his

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audience as “brothers and sisters,” they were “citizens.”^[49] The rigid *fuṣḥā* employed by Mubarak was an attempt to retain a sense of dignity and gravitas in a speech that might have sounded inappropriate if uttered in colloquial Egyptian.^[50]

There is a third Arab Spring speech which should be examined in conjunction with those of Ben Ali and Mubarak. On February 20, 2011, Saif Al-Islam Al-Qadhafi gave a speech to the people of the Libyan Jamahiriya. According to legal scholar Philippe Sands, the speech delivered by the son of the country’s leader, Muammar Al-Qadhafi, was not the one which he had prepared.^[51] After having drafted a speech which could have healed Libya’s route, Saif Al-Islam chose a different route: “belligerence and confrontation.”^[52] The fire and brimstone channelled by the Colonel’s one-time heir-apparent decried the uprising as the product of foreign influence.^[53] In his conspiracy-induced tirade, Saif Al-Islam emphasized two other important points: (1) Libya was “not Egypt or Tunisia.”^[54] (2) He represents the true interests of the Libyan people, unlike the foreign forces working to topple the regime.^[55] In the speech, he sought, like Ben Ali had before him, to use code-switching to reach out to the people. Early in the speech, he stated, “Today I will speak with you in Libyan dialect, and address you directly, as an individual member of this Libyan people.”^[56] However, according to Lameen Souag, a researcher at the LACITO branch of the CNRS, Al-Islam did not actually speak in the Libyan dialect, instead he speaks in something close to MSA with select Libyan phrases thrown in and an oscillation between dialect and formal structures.^[57] In his attempt to mirror Ben Ali’s failed ploy, Saif Al-Islam’s diatribe seemingly condemned his father’s regime to the same fate.

Through the lens of sociolinguistics, one sees the many layers of meaning and effect encapsulated in the diglossic features of Arabic. This essay has sought to analyze these features and their impact in the specific area of political discourse. Within this already narrow type of speech, the focus of this work was further narrowed to the speeches of Egyptian leaders and code-switching as a strategy by leaders in the Arab Spring. By first exploring the more theoretical linguistic elements associated with diglossia before applying them to the Arabic language, this essay sought to provide a content overview on a complex topic, consolidating it with the intention of constructing a parsimonious explanation of the diglossic phenomenon as part of a concerted communication choice. The Arab Spring has showed that actors on either side of political contestation movements have fundamentally changed the language around which these exchanges take place. Even as the interconnectedness of globalization strengthens across the Arab world, key components of the Arab Spring movements such as “rootedness” ensure that one can no longer eschew dialect in political discourse.

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