

Arabic Uniglossia: Diglossia Revisited

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Abstract

Diglossia is primarily concerned with displaying sociolinguistic diagnosis of linguistic duality or even multiplicity that can result in evident sense of exaltation of one language or variety and its subsequent prejudice against other varieties within the same speech community. This has been unfortunately the case and the trend in most studies that have approached Arabic over the past six decades, evidently driven by *Fergusonianism* as a commensurate corollary of pan-Arabism, which thrived and mushroomed under totalitarian regimes and dictatorships in 1950s & 1960s. However, this paper primarily aims at rebutting such predominant assumptions and thereby disambiguating their consequential implications in various linguistic, cultural and pedagogical disciplines. This study, therefore, argues in principle that such linguistic variation in the Arab World results in a state of unity and convergence instead of any presumed divergence by virtue of opting for Standard Arabic cross-regionally; thus, its socio-cultural manifestations may prove how this sociolinguistic phenomenon can be best perceived as *uniglossic* rather than being diglossic.

Key words: Diglossia; Uniglossia; Sociolinguistics; Classical Arabic; Standard Arabic; Ferguson; High variety; Low variety

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INTRODUCTION

The originally Greek prefix and root have been borrowed and thus widely and technically used in sociolinguistics to refer to a problematic state of manipulating two (or more) varieties or even two related languages within the same speech community with socially motivated attitudes towards one of these as superior to the other or to others (Fishman, 1972). Admittedly, it was Ferguson's (1959) *seminal* paper on Arabic Diglossia and his other subsequently pertinent argument that has triggered such copious works in this particular field hinging upon many of Ferguson's relatively unattested assumptions of identifying Diglossia in the Arab world as an inevitable resultant of divergence between Classical Arabic and the current Vernacular Arabic varieties. Unfortunately, inaccurate hypotheses and associated misconception have led to erroneous judgment in many of these academic works due to *Fergusonian effect*, which has been wholly taken as a truism, yet the onus of the misleading trend is on some Arab scholars who have blindly or inadvertently advocated such a prognosis based on irrelevant diagnosis, (Belnab & Bishop, 2003). What is interesting and appealing about this issue emanates from the antithesis of two major premises to which this paper can posit rational counterargument. First, it questions the Fergusonian stretchy characterization of diglossia as opposed to standard dialects, (Al-Wer, 1997). Second, it casts serious doubts on the Fergusonian misty vision about the reality of Arabic status and the unique affiliation of hundreds of millions of Arabic users.

1. ASSUMPTIONS & ANALYSES

The following sections can systematically and succinctly elucidate some basic aspects that have triggered this state of fuzzy demarcation of diglossic analyses pertaining to Standard Arabic and its vernacular variants, and thus misconceptions can be eventually redirected and corrected

within a specialized framework of relevant sociolinguistic and sociocultural analyses.

1.1 Demythification Anchor

Unlike the hypothesis posited by Zughoul and El-Badari (2004), this paper, therefore, is hoped to demonstrate the opacity of these claims that has disastrously generated tens of works by Arab and non-Arab scholars calling for the demise of their native language on the pretext that SA has created serious problems in different domains such as ethnography, language acquisition and translation (Abu-Rabia, 2000; Albirini, 2011; Zughoul, 1980, et al). The analyses in this paper are coherently organized to highlight such dominant claims that inaccurately cast sheer blame on Arabic for all aspects of degeneration and deterioration in the Arab World, to the extent that some of those prejudiced advocates hold ‘diglossic Arabic’ culpable for the political chaos in Iraq and Lebanon. Therefore, this work is an endeavor to prove that Arabic is used in the Arab world as a standard variety frequently spoken by a vast speech community, and this oscillation between Standard and nonstandard varieties is not only similar to a great extent to the choice between varieties of English but it is also behind unifying millions of Arabs and allowing them to better communicate when cross dialect difference emerge, (Niloofar Haeri, 2000). Therefore, the researcher would specifically proclaim that the case of Arabic is unique and can be thus described as *Uniglossia or Arabiglossia*, but not diglossia.

1.2 Fergusonianism

Ferguson (1959), mostly recognized as the true originator of the term ‘diglossia’, initiates his argument explaining the nature of the concept ‘diglossia’ in its different manifestations stressing that diglossia operates when some varieties of language exist through a particular speech community with each having a definite role excluding the other. He argues that the first hallmark to be pinpointed is the ‘specialization of function’. Whenever a variety is suitable in one occasion, the other variety will be less apposite and sometimes it would be ridiculed. He, furthermore, maintains that there are substantial differences between L and H varieties at various levels: literary heritage, acquisition, standardization, grammar and phonology, so in some languages, only poetry written in H variety is recognized as a piece of art while it is barely admitted when written in L varieties. Therefore, H varieties are usually associated with *power, influence, eloquence and prestige* unlike L varieties.

Ferguson unreluctantly admits that his work is rather ‘impressionistic’ in nature since it relies on his personal experience rather any empirical analysis, so it would be irrational to consider his argument as an axiom upon which subsequently crucial judgments to be taken a posteriori. It is not true that the existence of different dialects in the Arab world is a token of diglossic Arabic because this premise postulates that Standard Arabic

enjoys power and prestige unlike the vernacular dialects, which are assumed to be socially stigmatized, (Edward, 2002). Definitely, this claim lacks objective accuracy since almost all dialects in the Arab world stem from the so called ‘Classical Arabic’. In addition, it is erroneous that a literary work would lose its value if written in any of these vernaculars. For instance, it is Niguib Mahfouth, the only Arab *Nobel Prize laureate* novelist, who has published most of his works in Egyptian vernacular.

1.3 Post-Fergusonianism

Ferguson’s paradigm of description and analysis predominantly explores structural aspects of Arabic, (Ferguson, 1989). This being the case, Belnab and Bishop (2003) try to investigate Arabic diglossic nature through some aspects of the use of Arabic dialectal elements that are ‘regularly used and more formal structures that are regularly avoided’ in personal correspondence. They pinpoint some factors that contribute to an increasing trend in using Arabic vernaculars instead of standard Arabic as a result of the spread of literacy as well as the impact resulting from the contact with Western rhetorical styles. Consequently, they conclude that there is a pervasive use of colloquial Arabic in present correspondence. Thus, they basically draw a dividing line between MSA and Arabic vernaculars, claiming that MSA is just a replica of Classical Arabic which intuitively assumed to be alien to these dialects; ironically they maintain that some interviewees use colloquial Arabic although they know the rules of MSA lest they would be “seen putting on airs’ (p.16).

Unfortunately, Belnab and Bishop unjustifiably differentiate between what they call MSA and Classical Arabic although the concept for them seems obscure. Their results do not reveal any tendency to replace the standard variety with non-standard ones; on the contrary, they reveal a mixture of using both varieties to some extent. Unexpectedly of academic scholars, they claim that Syria is ‘conservative’ to justify why Syrian correspondence proves the antithesis of their claim in some studies. Nobody should claim that Syria is more conservative than Jordan or Saudi Arabia at any linguistic or even non-linguistic level. Furthermore, Arabs know that many television and space channel stations have been broadcasting many vernacular programs at all levels during the past two decades in most Arab countries, not only in Lebanon, yet it has been never proven that these programs have contributed to enhancing the dominance of vernaculars at the expense of ‘Standard Arabic’, as they claim since the opposite would be true.

Likewise, Keith Walters (2003) tries to defend and advocate Ferguson’s assumptions, to the extent that she considers them a matter of prescience to be highly esteemed. She assumes that Fergie’s grandeur is acknowledgeable not only because he inimitably diagnoses the diglossic nature and characteristics of

Arabic, but also because of his prediction of 'how and why it might change'. She concentrates on Tunisia in particular, but she implicitly triggers her implications to the situation in the rest of the Arab World. Thus, she highlights the correct analysis of Ferguson's analysis with reference to the 'communicative tension' that Diglossic Arabic creates in Tunisia. Therefore, she maintains (p.88) 'Tunisians have a passive competence of Arabic varieties like Egyptians and Arabic "Fusha". Consequently, the diffused nature of the vernaculars is the solution for the Tunisian linguistic problem as a result of three main factors: noticeable spread of literacy, increase in means of communication and the national desire of autonomy.

1.4 Diglossia Revisited

Nobody would disagree with Walters concerning Fergie's reputable contribution in many fields of linguistics; however, his, and hence her assumptions in terms of the analytical grounding and the prognostic outlook seem to be inconsistent with the reality nor the future of Arabic. He might be excused for his analysis six decades ago when the roaring Nationalism came to the fore and seized power in most Arab countries. Nevertheless, the distinction made between Standard Arabic and Arabic vernaculars was made by a group of political dictators and the late president of Tunisia at a particular stage was one of them, so it was not set by linguists nor by the oppressed Arab peoples themselves. That was a transient phase that elapsed, hopefully forever. It is beyond understanding to claim that getting rid of standard Arabic is a priority of a national desire to achieve autonomy in Tunisia at a time French is permeating almost all official and non-official aspects of life.

John Eisele (2003) pays tribute to Ferguson's (1959b) contribution in his 'Myths about Arabic'. In fact Eisele unhesitatingly acknowledges the basic assumptions and prognosis of Ferguson's concerning myths in Arabic, one of which is diglossia in Arabic; hence he argues (p.44): "Ferguson's "Myths About Arabic" is remarkable both for the scope and insight of some of his most wide-ranging and general statements". Therefore, he tends to 'critically examine' some of these ideas and methods' in order to be more coherent and more objective. He, therefore, poses the same 'myths' proposed by Ferguson: classical-colloquial diglossia, superiority of Arabic, dialect rating and the future of Arabic. He proposes to use the term 'presentation' instead of 'myths' to be more objective; in addition, he insists to follow a scientific approach in his analysis relying on some Arabic references and texts in his analysis and conclusions like some prominent Arab writers such as Al-Aqqad.

This paper is interesting in its formal scientific approach at the face value, but the contribution of John Eisele is to a minimum in essence since he is almost introducing nothing new in his analysis except the claim that his analysis is much better than Ferguson's in

terms of his objective and scientific approach. It can be definitely seen that Ferguson's analysis would be more objective than his because Ferguson was more lenient and less categorical in his judgment while Eisele is trying to persuade the reader that his conclusions prove no contradictions because he is using scientific tools. Using the word presentation or 'misrepresentation' instead of Ferguson's 'myths' would never change anything, it is irrational to believe that Arabic is diglossic because of the tendency among speakers to maintain its purity. It would be more plausible to broaden such a generalization to French where the French academy has a prevalent prescriptive role in preserving the purity of French!

In addition, the status of English in some Arab countries can be incorporated in this vein. Mark Schaub (2000) examines the status of English in Egypt. He tries to investigate the forms and functions for English use in present day with a rough comparison to the situation in the past. His study reveals the significant use and spread of English in different aspects and at various levels for the majority of Egyptians. This wide spread, manifested in the increasingly continuous enrollment in English courses among members of several professions, leads him to reiterate that English in Egypt is essentially part of what Kachru (1992) 'Expanding Circle'. However, Schaub stresses that in the interpersonal function of language, Arabic is by no means rivaled by any language because it is the language of Islam. Nonetheless, he reiterates that there is a diglossic situation in Arabic because Ferguson's definition fits that situation, though unjustifiably or rather contradictorily he admits that average college educated Egyptians could be competent users of MSA.

Mark Schaub, primarily explores the function and use of English in contemporary Egypt. The spread of English in Egypt is undeniably true; however, it has nothing to do with the status of Arabic as a first language. He unconvincingly passes his judgment that Ferguson's definition of diglossia exactly applies to the situation in Arabic. If the average of such a huge number of students master MSA and have true linguistic competence, then what kind of diglossia that might exist there? Moreover, Schaub, commits the same mistake he posits that Arabic is a sacred language at the interpersonal level because it represents the language of the religion of the majority of Egyptians. He, furthermore, commits another mistake when he argues that "many Muslims cannot accept the idea of accurately translating the Koran into languages other than the language God, Allah, chose for it" (p.232). In fact, the Holy Qur'an has been translated into dozens of languages around the world.

Historically speaking, Classical Arabic has undergone many semantic and phonological changes. Al-Wer (1997) endeavors to explain that understanding variation in terms of approximation to Classical Arabic is not true, so she assumes that her empirical data show that variation and change in these vernaculars involves interaction between

local varieties and regional standards independently of Classical Arabic which is highly esteemed as the language of the Holy Qur'an. Therefore, she strongly believes that Arabic is diglossic, yet she maintains that prestige is not associated with CA because in many situations, using a particular sound representing a certain vernacular speech community would be more prestigious than the Classical choice. Surprisingly, she differentiates between Standard English and Standard Arabic claiming that "standard British English with an RP accent derives its prestige from its native speakers. CA on the other hand, has no native speakers, and it is not used by any social group consistently" (p.255); that's why Arabic is diglossic unlike English according to her! This can be simply refuted as it is well-known to any researcher that the Standard Variety of Arabic used at *AlJazeera Space Channel* and received by hundreds of millions of Arabs is not much different from the English mandated by the BBC, unless the RP would be deemed as diglossic too!

Al-Wer's paper is so interesting and important for four reasons. First, she admits that Classic Arabic is highly esteemed for its religious value. Second, her data support that the vernacular choice more often than not can be more prestigious than the CA or MSA choice, and this is evidence that Arabic is not diglossic because of CA as a high variety. She needs to attest her claims that Arabic 'is not used by any social group consistently', which is akin to Ferguson's criterion 'regularly' because vast hosts of Muslims use CA in their prayers five times a day, let alone scores of millions of students who use it at schools and colleges every day. Fourth, the situation in British English is much worse because, she admittedly implicates that RP is socially privileged, so Cockney vernacular is by default stigmatized. Following the same irrational quasi-logic, this kind of evidence can be tailored *ipso facto* that British is diglossic unlike Arabic!

The diglossic analogy has been extended to basic issues that concern translation studies as well. Zughoul and El-Badarien (2004) investigate an important aspect of problematic fields of translation pertaining to Sociolinguistic aspects of varieties of language and language variation and their impact on "equivalence" 'in terms of the appropriateness of the variety to the context'. They tend to assume that more appropriate approach would cater for incorporating diglossia in addition to dialect variation. Their argument ensues, therefore, from the basic assumption that Arabic is diglossic, so translating some texts from English into Arabic would create several problems. Hence, translating formal and authentic literary or religious texts from English into vernacular Arabic would look so funny. Similarly, translating slang English into Standard Arabic is inappropriate to and may create much misunderstanding about the intrinsic meaning of the text and the socioeconomic features of the language user of the source language, which is English in this case, of course.

The assumptions posed by the two researchers are inconsistently presented and thus their a posteriori findings would be incoherent and invalid. It is absolutely true that translating from SL into TL causes such serious problems, but again that has nothing to do with the diglossic nature of Arabic. It simply reflects the serious consequences of violating the register parameters that delineate different style levels of any language. If we translate these texts in the same manner from Arabic into English, the same inappropriate impact will definitely occur. In such a situation, would they claim that American English is diglossic? However, translators, have the choice to manipulate 'monitoring and managing' of the SL according to their ultimate objectives of translation, whether it is text-oriented, reader-oriented or author-oriented. These are the primary factors that determine the yardsticks of any rendition. Therefore, the translators' choice of equivalence in their samples should be understood within this specific framework of analysis without any diglossic implications.

In her review, Niloofer Haeri (2000) aims 'to contribute to a dialogue between anthropologists and sociolinguists who work on the Arab world'. She explains how Classical Arabic national vernaculars co-exist with each other. She investigates the proximity/distance between the CA and these vernaculars and views how it is still controversial whether these dialects are inferior or not. Then, she reviews the impact of this polemical 'diglossic' feature on literature and education with recurring implications of relevance to colonialism, nationalism, and modernization. Therefore, she restates what she believes to be the source of such debatable issue about SA (p.65) since "at the same time it is the language of I slam, of the state, and of pan-Arab nationalism, and it is explicitly foregrounded as a central marker of Arab identity".

There is no doubt that Haeri, reviews various viewpoints and attitudes from different perspectives, yet she tends to implicitly support the claims that Classical Arabic creates the complexity of this diglossic situation. For instance, she goes for the explanation of Standard Arabic 'centrality' in most publications as evidence of diglossia. It is normal that most languages of the world tend to present most of their publication in a standard variety especially in academic writing. English is no exception since most; if not all academic production is written in a standard variety which seems much different from many colloquial varieties of English. The situation is similar in Arabic in his regard. However, many renowned authors use both the vernaculars and the SA in their creative literary works, and more interestingly, many of them have been frequently prized for their vernacular works rather than the standard ones; Al-hakeem, Mafouth and T.Saleh are some evident examples of this objective claim.

2. ARABIGLOSSIA WE LIVE BY

The impacts of Arabic diglossic assumptions have been extended to the areas that have some affiliations to learning Arabic as a foreign language. Therefore, Jeremy Palmer (2007) touches upon a kernel issue frequently ascribable to the alleged 'diglossic Arabic'. He reports that students learning Arabic in the United States express a desire to learn vernacular varieties instead of the SA. He explains that Spoken Arabic is often stigmatized and consequently less prestigious than the standard counterpart. He advocates that what students learn is quite different from what is really used by Arabs to the extent that SA is barely understood by the populace in these countries. To support his claims, he cites an excerpt describing Nasser's, X-president of Egypt, demagogic speeches. He notes that such a passage "sheds light on the diglossic nature of Arabic in two ways: first, it reveals that Nasser's audience – the common people – "do not use or even understand" MSA; and second, that Nasser felt obligated to include some MSA in order to fulfill his role as an educated persona" (*ibid*, p.115).

The implications of teaching languages in diglossic contexts have been raised by many scholars since it is agreed upon that diglossic contexts are detrimental to language learning and language acquisitions. However, it would be unfair to claim that students desire to learn spoken varieties because Arabic is diglossic, since many Arab students are anxious to learn 'American street language' instead of standard ones. Interestingly, Palmer's analysis of the Egyptian speeches is unrealistic because, Nasser used to switch to different styles within the same speech because of his inability as an orator to use formal style; Palmer needs to compare Nasser's to Hussein's, late King of Jordan, eloquent speeches to realize that his analysis is utterly implausible. In addition, Palmer's examples of discrepancy between SA choice and vernacular choices for the English "I want to go now", reveals that he does not have a clear idea about Arabic. In fact, these vernacular options are more formal than the alleged standard one because all of them are real manifestations of other synonymous standard lexemes derived from various standard consonantal roots such as 'ʔawz, 'baya' and 'rada'.

Interestingly enough, Edward Said (2002) elicits some aspects of the unique *coexistence* between standard Arabic and other vernaculars in the Arab world. He explains how these varieties smoothly go hand in hand without any clashing force of dominance, yet he admits how he feels the beauty and the eloquence of the standard version without underestimating the significance of his Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian vernaculars, though he tends to be more enthralled by the delicacy of Lebanese Arabic. This unique equilibrium leads him to conclude: "the two languages [standard

and vernaculars] are porous, the user flows in and out of them is an essential aspect of what 'living in Arabic means"; he further argues that "educated Arabs actually use both the demotic and the Classical, and this common practice neither prohibits naturalness and beauty of expression nor, in and of itself, automatically encourages a stilted and didactic tone" (p.227).

Edward Said, one of the most recognized literary and linguistic critics presents an objective and smoothly flowing logical analysis of the intrinsically inseparable liaison between Standard/Classical Arabic and vernacular offspring. He deems the relation between these varieties in an integrating spirit of unified existence. Though Christian, he unhesitatingly enunciates that 'Arabic is Islam and Islam is Arabic'. On the one hand, it is the conviction of hundreds of millions of Muslims that Standard Arabic is the container of the Holy Qur'an, which they read day and night, and which represents the doctrine of existence for them. On the other hand Arabic is the crucible of most Arabs' dream of unity and the only means that may guarantee their 'Paradise Regain'. This is the secret and the elixir of Arabic's unique status among throngs of hundreds of millions who 'live in Arabic', and Edward Said is one of them. Thus, when Moroccans or Algerians converse with Palestinians or Jordanians, Standard Arabic and any approximation to SA is frequently exploited as it can facilitate the process of communication and reflect a sense of solidarity and unified identity, but it does not show any kind of prestige since such prestigious or High Variety implications can be rather ascribed to some vernaculars such as Lebanese and many other urbanite dialects in various socio-cultural contexts.

An evident spirit of confusion has haunted some scholars as they persist on the impact of Arabic diglossic nature and the consequent practices of teaching standard Arabic at schools that created many serious problems in language acquisition since children are only exposed to Standard Arabic for a very short time at school only, and in front of TV for a while! It seems less plausible how can they claim that such a time of exposure is too short because mathematically it is more than half a day long. Arab children in average spend six to eight hours at school, and at least three to five hours watching TV. It's almost a perfect daily time span to master any foreign language! This atmosphere of uncertainty also can be envisaged in the very claim that the relationships among varieties of Arabic are exactly similar to the ones among European languages these days. It is far away from any linguistic reality and even superficial to say that Damascene and Cairene are like Italian and Portuguese because the Proto language in the latter case, i.e. Latin is technically dead while Standard Arabic is incessantly used by hundreds of millions day and night.

CONCLUSION

This paper has endeavored to shed light on the explicit issue of having more than one variety within Arabic speech communities; all these varieties are just logically descendants of Classical Arabic, which has historically merged as Modern Standard Arabic and a plethora of current vernaculars. The status of Standard Arabic in relation to any other variety can never be objectively portrayed as superior-to-inferior relation-governed; rather, it can only be a source of **unifying** millions of Arabic speakers phonologically, morphologically, semantically and culturally. The linguistic and the socio-cultural differences that Arab people hold among them can be successfully neutralized and leveled by virtue of evident daily exchanges of Standard Arabic among interlocutors at various levels. In other words, this phenomenon can be totally the opposite of the Diglossic and schismatic nature of German and Greek; and thus it can be characterized as socioculturally and sociolinguistically **uniglossic** in essence.

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