

# Diglossia in Arabic A Comparative Study of the Modern Standard Arabic and Egyptian Colloquial Arabic

Dr. Mohammad Jafar JABBARI<sup>1</sup> and Dr. Mohammad Jafar JABBARI<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Yasouj University, Yasouj, Iran.

Received: 14 December 2011 Accepted: 4 January 2012 Published: 15 January 2012

6

## Abstract

Diglossia is a language situation in which there are two distinct varieties of a language used side by side. One variety, referred to as the High variety (H), is used only on formal and public occasions, while the other one, referred to as the Low variety (L), is used under normal, everyday circumstances. The distance between the H and L are sometimes to the extent that the two varieties are mutually unintelligible. One good example is the diglossic situation held between the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (EA). This article aims to compare the two varieties, at different linguistic levels, to illustrate how these differences have made the two varieties mutually unintelligible.

16

**Index terms**— Diglossia, Standard Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, High Variety, Low Variety etc.

## 1 Introduction

Some languages have two totally distinct varieties used through a speech community, each of which with a different range of social functions. Whereas one variety, referred to as High (H), is used only on formal and public events, the other one, referred to as Low (L), is used under normal daily-life circumstances. This situation, referred to as "diglossia", is very common especially in Arabic-speaking communities. Varieties of Arabic form a roughly continuous spectrum of variation, with the dialects spoken in the eastern and western extremes of the Arabic-speaking world being mutually unintelligible. The best example of this mutual unintelligibility is the diglossic situation, held between the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the Egyptian colloquial Arabic (EA). This article aims at illustrating the differences between the two varieties at different linguistic levels, which have resulted in this mutual unintelligibility.

## 2 II.

## 3 Background

Diglossia is a situation in which two distinct varieties of a language are used. One variety is used only on formal and public occasions, while the other variety is used under normal, everyday circumstances. The term diglossia was introduced into the literature by Charles Ferguson (1959):

Diglossia is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the dialects of the Author : Faculty of Literature & Humanities, Yasouj University, Yasouj, Iran. E-mail : mjjabbari@mail.yu.ac.ir , mjjabbari@yahoo.com language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly coded (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a 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 (p.336).

Diglossia for ??rudgill (2009), "is a particular kind of language standardization where two distinct varieties of a language exist side by side throughout the speech community (not just in the case of a particular group of speakers, such as Scots or Blacks) and where each of the two varieties is assigned a definite social function"(p.113).

## 4 PALMER ADDS:

---

43 It is noticeable that Ferguson's definition of 'diglossia' is quite specific in that the two varieties should belong  
44 to the same language. Some other scholars, however, have extended the term to cover situations which do not  
45 count as diglossic according to Ferguson's definition. For ??eyerhoff (2006:103) diglossia is a situation in which  
46 "One language may be used for some social functions or in a specific social context, while another language is  
47 served for other". ??ishman (1971:75) refers to Paraguay as an example of a diglossic community, in which the  
48 two varieties do not belong to one language, but are Spanish and Guarani.

49 According to ??arduaugh (2005:89), "the phenomenon of diglossia is not ephemeral in nature: in fact, the  
50 opposite is true: it appears to be a persistent social and linguistic phenomenon." In a diglossic situation, the two  
51 varieties have co-existed for a long period, sometimes, as in Arabic-speaking communities, for many centuries.

52 A key point in diglossia is that the two varieties are kept apart functionally. One variety, referred to as Low  
53 (L), is used at home or in other informal situations, however, if someone needs to give a lecture at a university or  
54 in any formal circumstance, (s)he is expected to use the other variety, referred to as High (H). For Wardhaugh,  
55 the two varieties cannot be interchangeably used. He asserts: "You do not use an H variety in circumstances  
56 calling for an L variety, e.g. for addressing a servant; nor does one use an L variety when an H variety is called  
57 for, e.g., for writing a serious work of literature"(2005 P: 90).

58 In a diglossic society, all children acquire the L variety. Some may concurrently learn the H variety, but many  
59 do not learn it at all. Therefore, the two varieties are not regarded as having the same degree of prestige. For  
60 example, this "diglossic situation may also be found in Egypt, where both classical Arabic and colloquial Arabic  
61 is used" ??Finch, 2005:214).

62 Ferguson identifies four situations which show the major characteristics of this diglossic phenomenon: Arabic,  
63 Swiss German, Haitian (French and Creole), and Greek. In each situation, there is a 'high variety' (H) of language  
64 and a 'low' variety (L).

65 In an Arabic-speaking diglossic community, the two varieties are standard Arabic (H) and the various regional  
66 colloquial Arabic (L).

67 There has been this view that the spoken varieties of Arabic are corruptions of MSA (Modern Standard Arabic)  
68 or CA (Classical Arabic) as found in the Quran and are, therefore, less prestigious varieties of Arabic. According  
69 to Wardhaugh (2005):

70 "The H variety is the prestige variety; the L variety lacks prestige. In fact, there can be so little prestige  
71 attached to the L variety that people may even deny that they know it although they may be observed to use  
72 it far more frequently than the H variety]??[This feeling about the superiority of the H variety is reinforced by  
73 the fact that a body of literature exists in that variety and almost none in the L variety. That literature may  
74 reflect essential values about the culture. Speakers of Arabic in particular gain prestige from being able to allude  
75 to classical sources. The folk literature associated with the L variety will have none of the same prestige" (p.  
76 90). Watson (2002) asserts that" Dialects of Arabic form a roughly continuous spectrum of variation, with the  
77 dialects spoken in the eastern and western extremes of the Arab-speaking world being mutually unintelligible"  
78 (p.8).

79 There have also been views against teaching Spoken Arabic which focuses on the impossibility of dealing  
80 with the full range of Arabic dialects and the difficulty of choosing one dialect to teach, however, some surveys  
81 are indicative of the fact that "86% of students who expressed interest in learning Spoken Arabic prefer either  
82 Levantine 1 or Egyptian Arabic" (Al-Batal & Belnap, 2006, p.396, cited in Palmer, 2007, p. 115). These two are  
83 not the most commonly spoken and understood varieties of Spoken Arabic, yet " there are abundant materials  
84 available in each that would make it relatively painless for even a native Moroccan or Iraqi speaker to teach a  
85 class in Levantine or Egyptian; though the reverse is not viable" ??Palmer, 2007:115).

86 To shed light on the diglossic nature of Arabic and to sport his argumentation in favor of incorporating Spoken  
87 Arabic in program curricula. ??almer (2007:115) cites the following sentences:

88 "On the political level, a rather spectacular case of this manipulation of linguistic variation is to be found in  
89 the political speeches of the late President Nasser. He used to begin his speeches at an elevated level, spoken  
90 slowly and rhythmically, because of the formality of the situation. But then his sentences would become gradually  
91 more and more colloquial, spoken in a faster tempo, until he reached a purely colloquial level. At the end of his  
92 speech, he would conclude with a few sentences in Pure Standard Arabic. Such a mixture reflects the inherent  
93 problem for politicians in the Arab world: on the one hand, by identifying with colloquial speech they wish to  
94 involve their audience, who for the most part do not use or even understand the higher levels of standard Arabic,  
95 on the other hand, they cannot simply switch to colloquial language, since this would be regarded as an insult  
96 to their audience" ?? Versteegh,2000, p. 196).

## 97 4 Palmer adds:

98 "This passage elaborates the diglossic nature of Arabic in two ways:"first it reveals that Nasser's audience-the  
99 common people- do not use or even understand " MSA; the second, that Nasser felt obliged to include some  
100 MSA in order to fulfill his role as an educated persona(emphasis added) in a formal setting" ??Palmer, 2007:  
101 115).

---

102 **5 III.**

103 **6 Data of the Study**

104 The data of the study are collected from the Lingaphone Egyptian Arabic Course. The course includes 30 written  
105 and tape-recorded dialogs in Global Journal of Human Social Science Volume XII Issue VIII Version I

106 **7 24**

107 Diglossia in Arabic A Comparative Study of the Modern Standard Arabic and Egyptian Colloquial Arabic 1 -A  
108 dialect spoken in part of Syria. Palmer (2007), pointing out to a great increase in the number of Arabic programs  
109 and students interested in learning Arabic, argues that most students learn only the formal variety of Arabic.  
110 This situation "creates a fake of model of oral proficiency by presenting the students with an artificial variety that  
111 is not used by the native speakers since no one uses [formal Arabic] for daily-life situations"(Al-Batal, 1995:122).  
112 It is also believed that these programs must not be limited to the formal variety of the language if they are to  
113 train future professionals to communicate effectively with the Arabic-speaking world."The Arabic classrooms can  
114 and should be a place in which multiple registers co-exist, as they do in real life"(Al-Batal & Belnap,2006:397).  
115 Younes (1995:233) commenting on the need for such Arabic programs to help learners communicate successfully,  
116 argues that "If the goal of an Arabic-as-a-foreign language program is to prepare students to function successfully  
117 in Arabic, then they should be introduced to both a Spoken Arabic dialect and [formal Arabic] from the beginning  
118 of an Arabic course."

119 **8 May**

120 Egyptian Arabic. The dialogs are translated in writing into Standard Arabic and then tape-recorded, by Qamari  
121 (1993), for the purpose of teaching the two varieties of Arabic to students majoring in the Arabic Language and  
122 Literature, at Iranian universities. By Standard Arabic is meant the variety based on the speech and writing of  
123 educated native speakers of Arabic.

124 IV.

125 **9 Methodology**

126 To illustrate the linguistic differences between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and Egyptian Colloquial Arabic  
127 (EA), the Surface Strategy Taxonomy has been utilized. This perspective, "highlights the ways surface structures  
128 are altered" ??Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982: 150). Categorizing linguistic items according to the surface  
129 strategy taxonomy helps researchers analyze linguistic alterations, in more details. To achieve this, (1) the  
130 collected data are transcribed phonemically 2 , (2) the meanings are given in English, (3) when needed, a rough  
131 literal (morpheme-based) translation of the (Arabic) examples into English is given, to help the non-Arab reader  
132 follow the discussions, and (4) necessary explanations are provided. a) Pronunciation Key Arabic shares a good  
133 number of phonemes with other languages. Yet , there are a number of phonemes, only found in Arabic and  
134 some sister languages. The Arabic phonemes are presented in tables (1) to (4). 3 Table ?? : Arabic Vowels.

135 **10 Data Analysis**

136 In a diglossic situation "most linguistic items belong to one of the two non-overlapping sets" ??Hudson, 2005:55).  
137 The differences between H and L are manifested in (1) grammar, (2) lexicon and (3) phonology. According to  
138 Dittmar (2000): 1. L has fewer grammatical (morphological) categories and a reduced system of inflection; H  
139 has a greater grammatical (morphological) complexity. 2. H and L have, in the main, a complementary lexicon.  
140 It is a particular characteristic of the diglossic situation that pairs are used situationspecifically with the same  
141 meaning in the H variety and the L variety. 3. H and L share one single phonological system, in which the L  
142 phonology represents the basic system and the deviant characteristics of the H phonology from a subsystem or  
143 parasytem"(p. 120) In the forthcoming sections, phonological, lexical and morpho-syntactic differences between  
144 MSA and EA will be introduced and analyzed. a) Phonological Differences Standard Arabic, lacks consonants  
145 /?/, /?/, /g/, /v/ and /p/, however, the first three sounds, are not ruled out in different colloquial varieties of  
146 Arabic. The only phonemes not found in the standard and colloquial varieties of Arabic are the voiceless bilabial  
147 stop /p/ and the voiced labio-dental fricative /v/.

148 In Egyptian diglossia, like any other diglossic situation, the H and the L variety "share one single phonological  
149 system, in which the L phonology represents the basic system and the deviant characteristics of the H phonology  
150 from a subsystem or parasytem" ?? Dittmar, 2000: 120). Some phonological differences are: i. Productive  
151 Phonological Alterations Consonants /?/,/?/ and /q/ in MSA change to /t/,/?/ and /?/ in EA respectively.  
152 These consonant changes happen systematically to the extent that the former three consonants are neutralized  
153 in EA. In other words, /?/,/?/ and /q/ are not produced (frequently) in EA. The following examples show these  
154 alterations: ??almer (2000:120) asserts that " L has fewer grammatical (morphological) categories and a reduced  
155 system of inflection; H has a greater grammatical (morphological) complexity". This implies that the two varieties  
156 do not necessarily follow the same set of grammatical rules. The following examples support this claim to some  
157 extent: i. Gender Disagreement In Standard Arabic, "the adjective should be in accord with the noun in gender  
158 4 " ??Jorr,1973:26). This rule is violated in (39 and 40 b).

## 11 MSA EA MEANING

---

159 (39) a. /na:hi:ja jumna:/ b. /na:hi:ja jami:n/ right side (fem.) (fem.) (mas.) side right side right

### 11 MSA EA Meaning

161 (40) a. /Ê?"ar-rava:ja Ê?"ael-ku:mi:di:jja/ b. /Ê?"ar-rava:ja Ê?"ael-ku:mi:di: / a comic story fem. fem. fem. mas.

163 ART-story ART-comic ART-story ART-comic (41) a. /Ê?"aed-dars-ul-xa:mis ?a?ar/ b. /Ê?"ad-dars-ul-xamista:

164 ART-lesson(mas.)-ART 15 th (mas.) ART-lesson(mas.)-ART 15 th ( (a)?ar/ the 15 th lesson fem.) <sup>1 2 3 4</sup>

### 2

Figure 1: Table 2 :

### 3

Vowel	Arabic	Arabic Example	Meaning
	Letter		
Short	/a/      /i/ /u/	????? ??? /nahnu/      ??? ??? ??i??"r??"? ? ??? /?urfa/ /min/	we      of,      from room
long	/a:/      /u:/      /i:/	??? ??? ???      ????? ??? ??? ??? ???	/ba:b/      /s?a:bu:n/      /fi:/ door      soap      in, at
Diphthong	Arabic	Example	Meaning
	/aw/      /aj/	????? /jawm/ day      ????? / ð?ajf/ guest	English Example house eye

Figure 2: Table 3 :

### 4

V.

Figure 3: Table 4 :

165      5      6  
166

<sup>1</sup>© 2012 Global Journals Inc. (US) © 2012 Global Journals Inc. (US)

<sup>2</sup>-The transcription is read from left to right although Arabic is written from right to left in the script.3 -The symbols used are taken from: Wikipedia-Arabic Phonology.

<sup>3</sup>May© 2012 Global Journals Inc. (US)

<sup>4</sup>May 4 -My translation from Arabic. © 2012 Global Journals Inc. (US) © 2012 Global Journals Inc. (US)

<sup>5</sup>and6 -My translation from Arabic.7 and 8 -My translation from Arabic.

<sup>6</sup>May© 2012 Global Journals Inc. (US) © 2012 Global Journals Inc. (US)

167 .1 a. Addition

168 In EA, verbs receive some phonological additions which are not there in MSA. These additions do not add any  
169 meaning to the verbs, i.e. they act as empty morphs. Some very common additions are /bi-/ /Ê?"it-/ and /?/.  
170 Some examples are as follows: i) /bi-/ Addition

171 The CV syllable /bi-/ is added before a good number of (first and third person) verb roots in EA. Some  
172 examples are: /bi-/ addition is a very productive process in EA. It comes not only before the verb roots identical  
173 in the two varieties (as in 10 to 13), but also before the verb roots specific to EA, as in ??14 and 15) :

174 / Ê?"uhibb(u) / /bi-Ê?"uhibb(u)/ I would like?. (11) /Ê?"al?ab(u) / /bi -Ê?"al?ab(u)/ I play?. (12)  
175 /ja?mal(u) / /bi-ja?mal(u)/ (He) works. (13) /ta?mal(u) / /bi-ta?mal(u)/ (She) works. (14) /juqabbiluna /  
176 /bi-jbu:su:/ (They) kiss (one another). (15) /nata?allamu:/ / bi-naÊ?"xuðu: / (We) learn??

177 .2 MSA EA Meaning

178 ii) /Ê?"it-/Addition

179 The CVC syllable /Ê?"it-/ is added to the beginning of a good number of second person verbs, including  
180 imperatives:

181 iii) /?/ Addition Consonant /?/ comes after the root of a good number of negative verbs, including  
182 negative imperative verbs: /Ø/ /Ê?"it-/ (16) / In standard Arabic "ordinal numbers should be in agreement  
183 with the preceding nouns in gender 5 " ??Jorr,1973:26). (41b) is an example of the violation of this rule.

184 (42) a. ?ala?:a ?unhi:jja:t/ b. / tala:ta ?unhi:jja / three (Egyptian) pounds (mas.) (fem.) (fem.) three  
185 genes three gene

186 In Standard Arabic, " numbers 3 to 9 and the respective nouns are opposite in gender: a plural masculine  
187 noun(phrase) occurs with a feminine number and vice-versa 6 " ??Awn & Al-Rajehi, 2003:148). Example (42b)  
188 has violated this rule.

189 .3 iii. Number Disagreement

190 In Arabic, the number 2 is regarded as dual. Plural starts from 3. Cardinal numbers 3 to 10, in Standard Arabic,  
191 "must be followed by plural nouns 7 " ??Jorr,1984:26). In (43b), this rule is violated.

192 (43) a/?ala?:a ?unhi:jja:t/ b. /tala:ta ?unhi:jja/ three (Egyptian) pounds (pl.) (sin.) three pounds three  
193 pound (44) a. /mirÊ?"a:ta:n kabi:rata:n/ b. /mura:jatajn kiba:r/ two big mirrors mirror-dual big-dual mirror-  
194 dual big-pl.

195 .4 MSA EA Meaning

196 (45) /bi-s-sukkar/ / bi-sukkar/ with sugar with-ART-sugar with -sugar (46) /Ê?"at-tadbi:r-il-manz-il-i:/ /taedbi:r  
197 manzil -i:/ home making The le icon of a language is said to be an open ended system. There are different strategies  
198 for adding new words to the lexical inventory of a language. Borrowing is the most familiar technique of adding  
199 words. No language variety is needless of borrowing. MSA and EA are not exceptions to the rule, though there  
200 are some differences. On the one hand, MSA borrows much fewer non-Arabic words than EA. On the other hand,  
201 whereas EA borrows many words from MAS, the reverse is not the case. In diglossic situations, especially in  
202 the Arabic Diglossia, the "low" variety borrows many words from the "high" variety, especially formal, official,  
203 academic, cultural and socio-political words. Some examples of borrowing are as follows. The borrowed words  
204 are underlined with the name of the source language underneath: 9 -The Turkish word ba:? 10 -/ and the Arabic  
205 word "ka:tib" mean "head" and "writer", respectively. Borrowing words from Turkish dates back to the epoch  
206 of the Othman Empire.

207 Ê?"antik/ is the European word "antique" and /xa:na 11 , 12 , 13 and 14-/P/ does not exist in Arabic, so it  
208 changes to /b/.

209 / is a Persian word meaning "house". 9 -The Turkish word ba:? and the Arabic word "ka:tib" mean "head"  
210 and "writer", respectively. Borrowing words from Turkish dates back to the epoch of the Othman Empire. 10  
211 -/Ê?"antik/ is the European word "antique" and /xa:na 11 , 12 , 13 and 14-/P/ does not exist in Arabic, so it  
212 changes to /b/.

213 / is a Persian word meaning "house". The above-mentioned partial differences, hand in hand, result in total  
214 differences at the levels larger than phonology and lexicon. MSA and EA use phrases and sentences made of  
215 totally different words, in the same situations. This is an important reason behind the mutual unintelligibility  
216 of the two varieties. The following example clarifies the extent of the difference:

217 .5 Global

218 (129) MSA a. /Ê?"ae-lam taðhab Ê?"il-al-madrasa Ê?"al-Question wordnot-went-you to-ART-school ART-day

219 .6 EA

220 b.

221 /Ê?"inta ma-ruhti? al-madrasa naha:r da/ you(mas.) not-went ART-school day this  
222 Haven't you gone to school today?

223 Sentences 129 (a) and (b), uttered in the same situation and bearing the same general meaning, are totally  
224 different . They are different, except for the word / al-madrasa/ (the school), borrowed by EA, from MSA 15  
225 . This is an important reason why the two varieties are so mutually unintelligible. -stics and swimming. and  
226 (exercise) gymna-VI.

### 227 .7 Conclusion

228 The data of the study manifest a good number of differences between Modern Standard Arabic and Egyptian  
229 Colloquial Arabic. They appear at the levels of phonology, morphology, lexicon and syntax. These differences,  
230 going hand in hand, make the two varieties totally different, to the extent that they are mutually unintelligible.

### 231 .8 VII. Suggestion for Further Studies

232 Diglossic relationship holds between the Standard Arabic, on the one hand, and such other varieties of spoken  
233 Arabic as Iraqi, Jordanian, Lebanese, Algerian, Syrian, etc, on the other. It is advisable that similar studies on  
234 any of the said varieties be conducted. Furthermore, while this article studies the differences between MSA and  
235 EA synthetically, narrower analytic studies on the subject are recommended.

236 [Al-Mu] , Al-Mu . (jam-ul-Arabi-Al-Hadith)

237 [Larousse] , Larousse .

238 [Routledge] , London Routledge .

239 [ Arizona Working Papers in SLA Teaching] , *Arizona Working Papers in SLA & Teaching* 14 p. .

240 [ Arabic Phonology. Wikipedia] , *Arabic Phonology. Wikipedia*

241 [Ferguson ()] , C A Ferguson . *Diglossia. Word* 1959. 1959. 15 p. .

242 [Jorr ()] , Kh Jorr . 1973.

243 [Awn and Al-Rajehi ()] *Al-Dirasat-ul-Lughawiah. Al-Matba'at-ul-Khadhra*, A Awn , M Al-Rajehi . 2003. Libya.

244 [Warduaugh ()] *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, R Warduaugh . 2005. Oxford: Blackwell. (5th edn)

245 [Palmer ()] *Arabic Diglossia: Teching Only the Standard Variety is a Disservice to Students*, J Palmer . 2007.

246 [Qamari and Keshavarzi ()] *Arabic Language Course: Lingaphone*, A Qamari , M A Keshavarzi . 1993.

247 [Meyerhoff ()] *Introducing Sociolinguistics*, M Meyerhoff . 2006.

248 [Al-Batal ()] 'Issues in the teaching of the productive skills in Arabic'. M Al-Batal . *The teaching of Arabic as a foreign language. Issues and directions*, M (ed.) (Provo, Utah) 1995. American Association of Teachers of Arabic. p. .

251 [Finch ()] *Key concepts in Language and Linguistics*, G Finch . 2005. Palgrave Macmillan.

252 [Dulay et al. ()] *Language Two*, H Dulay , M Burt , S Krashen . 1982. Oxford University Press.

253 [Hudson ()] *Sociolinguistics*, R A Hudson . 1996. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (2nd edn)

254 [Fishman ()] *Sociolinguistics: A Brief Introduction*, J A Fishman . 1971. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.

255 [Dittmar ()] *Sociolinguistics: A Critical Survey to Theory and Application*, N Dittmar . 2000. London: Edward Arnold.

257 [Trudgill ()] *Sociolinguistics; An Introduction to Language and Society*, rev.edn, P Trudgill . 1983b. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books.

259 [Versteegh ()] *The Arabic Language*, K Versteegh . 2004. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

260 [Watson ()] *The phonology and Diglossia in Arabic A Comparative Study of the Modern Standard Arabic and Egyptian Colloquial Arabic 2012 May morphology of Arabic*, J C E Watson . 2002. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

263 [Al-Batal and Belnap ()] 'The teaching and learning of Arabic in the United States: Realities, needs, and future directions'. M Al-Batal , R K Belnap . *Handbook of Arabic language teaching professionals*, M Kassem, Zeinab A Wahba, Liz Taha, England (ed.) (Mahwah, New Jersey) 2006. Lawrence Erlbaum. p. .

266 [Younes (ed.) ()] *The teaching of Arabic as a foreign language. Issues and directions*, M A Younes . M.Al-Batal (ed.) 1995. Provo, Utah: American Association of Teachers of Arabic. p. . (An Integrated Curriculum for Elementary Arabic)