

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

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## 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.

**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 Arab-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 linguistics 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).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 4 Palmer adds:

"This passage elaborates 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; the second, that Nasser felt obliged to include some MSA in order to fulfill his role as an educated persona (emphasis added) in a formal setting" (Palmer, 2007: 115).

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## 5 III.

## 6 Data of the Study

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

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

## 8 May

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

IV.

## 9 Methodology

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

## 10 Data Analysis

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

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

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

## 11 MSA EA Meaning

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

162 ART-story ART-comic ART-story ART-comic (41) a. /Ê?"aed-dars-ul-xa:mis ?a?ar/ b. /Ê?"ad-dars-ul-  
163 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 Letter	Arabic Example	Meaning
Short	/a/	???? ? /nahmu/	we
	/i/ /u/	???? ? ?i»?"i?" ? ? ? /?urfa/ /min/	of, from room
long	/a:/	??? ??? ???	door
	/u:/	???? ? ? ? ? ?	/s?a:bu:n/ soap /fi:/ in, at
	/i:/		
Diphthong Arabic		Meaning	English
	Example		Example
	/aw/	???? /jawm/ day	house
	/aj/	???? /ð?ajf/ guest	eye

Figure 2: Table 3 :

## 4

V.

Figure 3: Table 4 :

165 5 6  
166

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

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<sup>5</sup>and<sup>6</sup> -My translation from Arabic.<sup>7</sup> and <sup>8</sup> -My translation from Arabic.

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## .1 a. Addition

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

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

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

## .2 MSA EA Meaning

ii) /Ê?"it-/Addition

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

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

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

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

## .3 iii. Number Disagreement

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

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

## .4 MSA EA Meaning

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

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

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

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

## .5 Global

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

## .6 EA

b.

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

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

## 7 Conclusion

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

## 8 VII. Suggestion for Further Studies

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

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