

The American University in Cairo

Graduate School of Education

LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT IN EGYPT'S SCHOOLS TODAY:
WHAT DOES ARABIC MEAN TO ARABIC NATIVE SPEAKERS?

A LITERATURE REVIEW

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DEDICATION

To my students

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ABSTRACT

Sociocultural education initiated by Leo Vygotsky strongly believes that language of instruction affects thinking. With regards to the present situation in Egypt, the present research explores the current literature on the value that Arabic has in the Arabic speaking world. Over against a wide-spread opinion that English should be used as the *only* medium of instruction in early years of literacy, literature shows that some forms of immersion have negative impact on the mastery of mother tongue, and on the very development of cognitive skills. The linguistic and educational scenario is further complicated by the fact that Arabic is a diglossic language, in which high and low variants are far apart. After carrying out a historical overview of the value associated to the learning of different languages in the region and discussing the psycho-social implications of diglossia, the research presents some recommendations for school-level language education.

Keywords: Arabic language, identity, bilingualism, diglossia, literacy.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I remember attending a lesson for kindergarten educators where the instructor explained how to use visuals to teach vocabulary to children. As we were in Cairo, the language of instruction was Arabic. The instructor would raise the picture of an animal and say the name of the animal in Arabic. When showing the picture of a bull, she uttered '*thaur*'. One of the participants could not understand what word was being said and asked it to be repeated: she was unable to connect the standard-Arabic word '*thaur*' with the colloquial-Arabic word '*tor*'. That raised the hilarity of the entire group, who smiled at the fact that this teacher was not aware of the use of the two words, which correspond to each other. Later on, during that same lesson, the instructor role-played the kindergarten teacher who asks a child to identify different animals by finding out their pictures on a table where several pictures are randomly disposed. She would ask the child '*Feen el-thaur?*' ['Where is the bull?'], a two-word sentence where the word 'where' was being said in colloquial Arabic and the word 'bull' in standard Arabic. Nobody even blinked at this combination of colloquial and standard. Being the only one who realized the contradiction, I raised a question on the possibility of using the standard '*aina*' in place of '*feen*', only to get a smile as a reply: 'Standard Arabic is too difficult for young children.' The strange thing about such a reply is that the one who said it works in a nursery that uses an English immersion curriculum, i.e. a curriculum in which the teacher communicates to children only and exclusively in English. It made me wonder: how can standard Arabic be too difficult for native Arabic speaking children, while English is not?

The idea that standard Arabic is too difficult for young children is very much spread in the Arabic world (Abu-Rabia, 2000). What makes English such a much more

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natural option than teaching children the standard variation of their mother tongue? What is the problem with teaching them standard Arabic from the start? What value is perceived in teaching Arabic, and what value is perceived in teaching English?

In the Arab World, feelings towards English language and the West in general are very contradictory: many people love *in practice* what they *declare* to hate. One of the greatest thinkers and writers of modern Egypt, Taha Hussein, wrote:

Strangely enough we [Egyptians] imitate the West in our everyday lives, yet hypocritically deny the fact in our words. If we really detest European life, what is to hinder us from rejecting it completely? And if we genuinely respect the Europeans, as we certainly seem to do by our wholesale adoption of their practices, why do we not reconcile our words with our actions? Hypocrisy ill becomes those who are proud and anxious to overcome their defects. (Hussein, 1954, p. 15)

The words of Taha Hussein are tremendously relevant today, and the clear contradiction between what politicians and mainstream society say and practice is bewildering. Ancient Roman writer Horace once commented on his contemporaries “Captured Greece captured his fierce conqueror”, meaning by this that Romans colonized Greece only to find out that in a few decades they were all speaking the language of the country they had colonized. The course of action taken by modern-day Egypt is not less ironical: she was born out of the war against British domination and has always proud herself of her resistance against the creation by the West of a country such as Israel (Abd el Nasser, 1954); yet, in a few decades she has started adopting the language of those same countries that were fought before (Morrow & Castleton, 2011). While claiming she has rid herself of the Western colonial and neocolonial powers, she is adopting English as

an indispensable language for her future. Where is her identity going, as a multi-millenary ancient culture, if in order to do that she forgets her own mother tongue?

In the words of the African poet Gĩthora, a people's tongue is "the keeper of their traditions / the mirror of their knowledge and skills / it's the granary for the nation" (cited in wa Thiong'o, 2013, p. 158). What are Arabic speakers doing with the cultural heritage they inherited from their ancestors, and what is happening to their "granary"?

1.1. Rationale

Having a strong personal interest in languages, the researcher feels that there is little awareness in Egypt of the role that the mother-tongue of the people plays in their lives. It is the researcher's conviction that Arabic is being neglected for the pursuit of early English literacy programs in a very uncritical way. What does research say about the proper timing of language acquisition? Is it true that the sooner foreign language and second language are acquired the better? Would it not challenge common sense – and perhaps research too – the idea of learning a foreign language *before* mastering one's own mother tongue? And what does it mean to master Arabic, which is famously a diglossic language, i.e. a language with two distinct levels of communication (Ferguson, 1959), that sometimes sound so far apart from each other to suggest that they may in fact be two different languages (Safouan, 2007)?

What the present work addresses is the general awareness deficit on how complicated and yet important it is that Arabic language be mastered in the early stages of education. In the opinion of the researcher, there is a strong need to compensate for the large insufficiency of academic thinking on this issue: both bilingualism and diglossia are far from being fully developed and appreciated by would-be educators (den Heijer, 2012; Nikolov & Djigunovic, 2006; Wang, 2008). Many schools are adding more and more

lessons-per-week of English *at the expense* of Arabic language, and they are doing so only to please parents, without backing their pedagogical choices with hard scientific evidence (Carmel, 2009; Marinova-Todd, Brandford Marshall, & Snow, 2000). Skutnabb-Kangass (2013) refers to this tendency as ‘subtractive multilingualism.’ The present research contributes to the debate by putting forward what current literature has to say on the issues of mother tongue acquisition and identity formation, in the specific context of the Arabic world.

1.2. Research Question

Language is an irreplaceable component of identity. Not only we communicate using words, but words are the building blocks of our thinking (Vygotsky, 1962). We organize our memories according to the words that are associated to them (Heredia & Altarriba, 2001), and memory, as Locke pointed out, is an irreplaceable part of identity (cited in Kihlstrom, Beer, & Klein, 2002): people who have lost their memory feel they lost their very identity. Parents hand down their identity and culture to their children through the language they speak, which is a “gift” – among the most important ones that children will ever receive (Morrow & Castleton, 2011, p. 308). My experience of coming into contact with different languages in different countries tells me that even dreams are language specific, so deep is the impact that language has on our subconscious. Each language that we learn is an incredible enrichment that we benefit from, not only socially, but more so culturally and spiritually: “when the planet loses a language, more than words are lost” (al Issa & Dahan, 2011, p. 15). Indeed each language is a bearer of a worldview (Skutnabb-Kangass, 2013).

Beyond its significance in the realm of psychological and cognitive development, language stands also at the core of a society’s struggle for liberation. Critical pedagogy

and all forms of cultural-relevant and socially-sensitive education take very strong stances on issues of language. The language that is used in schools is an implicit, yet very strong, political message (Bracken, 2014; Freire, 1975, 1978).

In light of the psychological and sociocultural relevance of mother-tongue acquisition, the question that the present research addresses is: what value does the learning of Arabic add to its native speakers today, in the Arab world, and in Egypt in particular? More specifically, how is the perceived value of Arabic affected by the strong presence of second languages, and the fact of Arabic itself being a diglossic language?

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research is based on the sociocultural constructivist theory of Lev Vygotsky (1962) and the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1975).

Language is essential to articulated and fully-developed thinking, which in its own turn is fundamental to authentic formation of the person as a free individual. Freire himself was highly aware of the importance of language as much more than a neutral tool: it not only describes the world, but – by creating culture – it creates the way in which humans relate to the world, and so it shapes the world itself (Wink & Putney, 2002).

In the fields of linguistics, the combination of the Vygotskyan and the Freirean traditions is nothing new (Wink, 2011). Language is at the center of children's natural quest for identity and integration (Cummins, 2000; Fielding, 2011), as the researcher has personally seen from his experience in refugee community schools. Integration is much deeper than learning a foreign language: it takes an inner process of development of one's own thoughts and feelings (Fielding, 2011). It is with these convictions that the researcher has felt it is extremely relevant to Arabic speakers today to appreciate more

deeply how the language they speak and they learn at school plays a pivotal role in their lives.

Over the past decades and particularly in the Arabic speaking world, the marketization of education as a commodity has overlooked the importance of liberal education as a liberating process, and has promoted the materialistic idea that education is all about job attainment and economic security (el Baz, 2009). While not rejecting *tout court* the fact that education is a key factor in economic well-being, critical pedagogies believe that *both* conscientization (in the Freirean sense of personal and societal humanistic empowerment) *and* economic prosperity should be promoted by formal education. Far from subscribing an 'either-or' narrative, transformative education can achieve both social justice and economic development, as the two are not mutually exclusive.

1.4. Methodology

The present work is a literature review on the current research on mother tongue acquisition and its impact on identity, with specific reference to the Arabic world. While the focus and the implication of the research are on Egypt, a large part of the material considered has been produced on research carried out in the Arabic speaking world at large. The nature of the methodology here adopted is intrinsic to the question at stake: while Arabic-related studies of linguistics and sociolinguistics are numerous, practitioners on the field take curricular and pedagogical decisions that are not based on the data and observation presented by literature (May, 2008a, 2008b; Marinova-Todd, Brandford Marshall, & Snow, 2000): hence, there is a need for a deeper understanding of what research says in the field of linguistic, so as to inform linguistic and pedagogical choices.

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When considering which methodology to choose, the researcher preferred not to opt for a field-related research. On one side, linguistics is a field that is already all too rich in quantitative studies, to the point that Suleiman (2003; 2011) and Zheng (2012) lament a sort of pro-quantitative bias in the discipline. On the other hand, a meaningful qualitative field-observation research would have demanded a longitudinal approach (Ellis, 2008; Nikolov & Djigunovic, 2006; Wang, 2008) and a level of Arabic language proficiency that are beyond the capacities of the researcher.

Approximately 80% of the sources of this literature review was directly collected through academic online search engines, mainly by entering keywords such as “Arabic language”, “identity”, “diglossia” and “metacognitive skills”, and their synonyms. Other sources were found through the reference lists of the material being read, or from course material that had previously been studied by the researcher, especially with regard to critical pedagogy. Collection of literature was organized under three main thematic areas, i.e. history of teaching of Arabic language, sociolinguistics on diglossia, and multilingual education, which correspond to chapters two, three and four of the present research. Material collection and organization aimed at breadth of coverage, which was sufficiently achieved, even though the debate on the sociolinguistic implications of diglossia brings to two opposed schools of thought, which advocate for standard Arabic and for colloquial Arabic respectively.

The aim of the present research is to provide a meaningful synthesis of the scientific literature on this issue, as well as to highlight practices that can be adopted in the teaching of Arabic *and* of foreign languages, especially within the years of pre-primary and primary education. Chapter one focuses on the issue of the perceived value of Arabic language from the historical point of view with a post-colonial theoretical approach. The value of Arabic is defined in relation with the perceived value of foreign

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languages, English being the main one among them. Chapter two deals with diglossia, mainly from the sociolinguistic point of view. The debate triggered by the very concept of 'diglossia' is divided between advocates of the high register (standard Arabic) and those of the low register (colloquial Arabic): as the literature shows, the discussion is far from resolved. Chapter three presents some possible ways forward, both at the level of curricula development and in terms of pedagogical choices that can be taken at the school level and the classroom level. With this section, the researcher contributes to the debate with the presentation of some language education practices.

CHAPTER 2

THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF ARABIC

IN THE RECENT HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN EGYPT

In this chapter, the researcher highlights the role teaching and learning Arabic has played in the educational landscape over the time. Special attention is given to the unfolding of historical educational changes that have characterized the Arabic speaking world since the incursion of Napoleon in Egypt, which is usually taken as the inception of modern Arabic world history (Heyworth-Dunne, 1939). The main source of this historical overview is to be found in Suleiman's *The Arabic language and national identity: A study in ideology* (2003). To the non-native speaker of Arabic this book provides an invaluable reference resource, as it summarizes the main contributions of Arabic thinkers, many of whose works have not yet been translated into other languages.

2.1. Suleiman: Language as Symbol

For sociolinguistics, language addresses two fundamental functions: it is the master tool for communication, and it plays a role as a symbol around which groups can identify themselves. To the scope of identity formation, it is in this second function – the symbolic one – that language constitutes not only one element among others, but undeniably a privileged one (Suleiman, 2003). As a matter of fact, in sociolinguistics anyone who claims to be a speaker of a language qualifies *ipso facto* to be considered so (Chomsky, 2014).

In the quest for self-assertion that a nation may endorse for the sake of defining their identity, history plays a major role. Nationalism, as described by Suleiman not without some cynicism, relies heavily on the fact that actual history is codified, edited and partly forgotten in order to give life to official history, which is closer to myth than to the

unfolding of facts. The mythical version of history is then used by nationalists to propose their memory of a golden age, which works as a catalyst for political power. Language can help a lot in this process: to put it in the words of Anderson, “the deader the language the better” (*quoted by* Suleiman, 2003, p. 23). That is, the further away language is from common daily use, the more it is charged with symbolic strength. The case of Arabic language, which is notoriously anchored to the fourteen-hundred-year old writing of the Quran, is a very strong point in case. Also, as history shows, another important principle is Gelliner’s law of the third generation: “the grandson tries to remember what the son tried to forget” (Suleiman, 2003, p. 33). Leila Ahmad (cited in Suleiman, 2011) observes that while in the past the anti-conformist would speak Arabic in Cairo’s Groppi Café [i.e. the historical downtown café of the Cairene elite], today speaking exclusively in that same language is considered a sign of backwardness.

2.1.1. The Post-Napoleonic Ottoman Century

It is commonly accepted that modern history of the Arabic World started with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 (Heyworth-Dunne, 1939; Suleiman, 2003). As also in history to each action there is a reaction, modern colonization triggered in the apparently-dormant Ottoman Empire a reaction on the sociopolitical level. The military invasion operated by the French troops was also a cultural and administrative invasion, thus leaving a lasting mark on the history of the Arab World, because it awakened within the Empire a succession of fierce debates, first among them the cultural clash between the Ottomanists and the Turkists. While the former called for a deeper Arabization of society by a stronger connection between life and religion, the latter advocated the separation of language and religion, thus promoting a secular society (Heyworth-Dunne, 1939).

Even though the religiously conservative current of the Ottomanists could count on a long-established tradition that holds the superiority of Arabic over all other

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languages on earth and – in fact – the Islamic conviction that Arabic is the sacred language of God himself, let alone of his revelation, the secular minded current seemed to win the day when in 1876 Turkish was declared the official language of the Empire.

The imposition of the Turkish language brought about the Arabic renaissance movement, better known as Nahda, which gathered intellectuals from greater Syria as well as Egypt. Heyworth-Dunne (1939) argued that while Mohammed Ali in Egypt adopted French cultural and educational affiliation as a means of forming his army to his anti-Ottomanist agenda, his successors after him progressively favoured the spread of Arabic among the masses in order to build a national independent identity, again with the interest of distancing themselves from Istanbul. Thus Turkish, French and Arabic were constantly used for political reasons. If the 1841 peace agreement between Istanbul and Cairo scored a setback in this development, it is worth mentioning that by the early 1880s Egyptian schools considered Turkish one foreign language among others, the difference between missionary schools and governmental ones being that the former hardly gave any Turkish lesson at all, while the latter would have Turkish as the first foreign language, before French and Italian (Heyworth-Dunne, 1939).

The complaints of the advocates for Arabic were presented to the Congress of Paris in 1913, where it was stipulated that Arabic would also be an official language for the Arabic provinces of the Empire. This change, though, was soon to be challenged by the rapid emergence of the Young Turks movement, which came to power in 1914. When in Turkey the proposal was made that the *adhan* (the call to prayer) be done in Turkish instead of Arabic, the Arabic native speakers started demanding with more and more insistence that their regions be independent from the Empire (Suleiman, 2003). The victory obtained in Paris by the pro-Arabic-language movement was further downsized in Egypt, where the political opposition of the British occupiers imposed in all possible

ways that Arabic should not be used in public environments. Pro-Arabic leading figure Saad Zaghloul, who worked as minister of education from 1906 to 1910, was personally opposed by the Scottish missionary Douglas Dunlop, education affairs consultant of the British administration of that same period. Freedom to use Arabic in formal settings was one of the reasons of contention that brought about the 1919 anti-British revolution (Hozayin, 2015).

2.1.2. The Post-colonial Century

The exacerbation of the terms of the debate between the promoters of Turkish and those of Arabic was accompanied by an increasing westernization of the Christian intellectuals, who adopted French as their new linguistic preference, leaving Arabic to the Muslim intellectual (Heyworth-Dunne, 1939). As the Turkish cultural atmosphere was dominated by secularism, which established itself with strength as the Caliphate was abolished in 1923 and Turkish shifted from Arabic to Latin alphabet in 1928, the Arabic-speaking movement grew more and more Islamic-minded.

From the methodological and material point of view, the historical analysis presented by Suleiman makes a significant change for the period that runs from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire onwards. In the second part of his book, he focuses on major thinkers who bear witness to the fact that the new intra-Arabic debate was not less lively and less complicated than the previous one (Suleiman, 2003).

While Catholics had secluded themselves into their French-speaking ghetto and Evangelicals had done so in their English-speaking one, Arabic language was not left to the debate between the Muslim and secular intellectuals alone, as some few representative of the Coptic world would also contribute in a meaningful way. Among the thinkers presented by Suleiman, in fact, there are a rather substantial number of Coptic writers who are not ashamed of their Arabic language at all. What is more striking to the

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researcher, though, is that most writers, be them Christians or Muslims, tended to agree to a wide number of issues, mainly related to the fact that the teaching of Arabic needed to be revived and modernized.

Among the earliest group of twentieth century thinkers, Suleiman lists Abdallah al Alayli from Lebanon, and Sati al Husri and Zaki al Arsuzi from Syria. While al Alayli saw in the use of language a tool to the making of local national identities, in a position that reminds of Abd el-Nasser's view (1954) that language was the unifying factor *par excellence* of post-revolutionary Egypt, al Husri believed that the real vocation of the Arabic language was to promote the pan-Arabic agenda, to the extent that Egyptians should feel they are completely Arabs on the basis of their being Arabic-speakers. Analogously to al Husri, al Arsuzi too believed that Arabic should unite all Arabs; nonetheless, the two differ in their linguistic approaches: al Husri was more pragmatic and suggested a simplification of the grammar and the pedagogy, while al Arsuzi put forward a much more speculative view of the modernization of Arabic, which is also influenced by the age-old conviction that Arabic is by far the most perfect of languages ever heard on earth (as he would prove, for example, when arguing for his principle of contiguity between word and meaning, as the researcher will mention later on).

The second group of thinkers presented by Suleiman includes Antun Saada, Lutfi al Sayyid, Salama Musa, Taha Hussein and Luwis Awad from Egypt and Abdallah Lahhud and Kamal Yusuf al Hajj from Lebanon. This second group of thinkers is much more in favor of the promotion of Arabic on a national basis. Thus, for example, Saada viewed language as a product of social interaction, rather than one of its makers. Al Sayyid proposed that Arabic should not refuse vocabulary borrowing, as this is a natural process of all languages in all ages and actually can be seen in the Quranic version of Arabic itself. At the same time, though, he argued against the *tamsiir al-lugha*, the

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'Egyptianization of the language', as a development of the language that should be avoided. Thus, the position of al Sayyid can be seen as open to development, but within the boundaries of standard Arabic in its traditional sense.

Among the thinkers who were in favor of stronger linguistic reforms, Suleiman recalls Musa and Hussein. Musa, who was a Coptic secular thinker, argued that Egypt rightly belongs to the West more than it does to the East, the reason being that the Pharaonic civilization was the mother of the Greek one, which in turn generated the European. In line with this, Egyptians should consider the coming of the Arabs as an invasion. Arabic is the language of the Bedouins, who live in a world-view that is violent and brutal, incompatible with the dignity of the Egyptian multi-millenary long history of civilization. To mark their '*turn to Europe*' (an expression that willingly counteracts in the Muslim mind the religious injunction of turning to Mecca), Egyptians should not feel afraid of adopting the Latin alphabet, like the Turks did.

In his cultural and educational manifesto *Mustaqbal al-thaqafa fi Misr*, 'The future of culture in Egypt', Taha Hussein started from a position that only appears to be like Musa's, namely that Egypt belongs to the West. Quite the contrary, though, Egypt does not belong to the East because the East is the *Far East*: India, China and Japan, compared to which it is undeniable that Egypt has much closer a relationships with the other nations that were born around the Mediterranean Sea. To keep defining Egypt as part of the East is, in his words a "shocking misconception" (Hussein, 1954, p. 5). Yet Hussein came to conclusions that are opposite to those of Musa. Education should be structured in a way that Egyptians should familiarize with western cultures, and of particular interest is his insistence on the study of Greek and Latin not only in the university, but as early as in secondary school. Nevertheless, education should cherish and value standard Arabic so well that in the end we should eradicate from Egypt any

spoiled version of Arabic. It is evident from his writings that Hussein did not regard colloquial Arabic as having the dignity that standard has (further details are discussed in Chapter Three).

Of opposed opinions on the value of colloquial Arabic was Awad. He too made strong claims in favor of Egypt's proximity to the West more than to the East, but on the grounds of the history of languages (glottochronology): ancient Pharaonic was a language within the Semitic family, to which the Phoenician is also cognate, thus Greek and Latin would not be too far away (*see also* Beeston, 1970). In the opinion of Awad – who was a Copt like Musa – Egyptians should be proud of their colloquial variation of Arabic, because it corresponds to standard Arabic pronounced in a Pharaonic way, thus bearing an unmistakable mark of Egyptianity.

The last two thinkers presented by Suleiman are both from Lebanon, and thus reflected on the perennial feature of their country, i.e. bilingualism. Interesting enough, the contribution of Lahhud calls on Christians not to be afraid of Arabic as if it was a threat to their survival: instead, they should regard it as *the* unifying factor of the country in which they live. On a more speculative tone, but with similar conclusions, al Hajj advocated the integration of the Christian and the Muslim souls of Lebanon as two complementary halves. Confessions are a question of form, not of substance, and the substance of Lebanon is *naslamiyya*, i.e. 'Christislamism'.

2.1.3. Two Lessons Learned from Modern History

The literature review provided by Suleiman (2003) is extremely dense, and the summary of his contribution presented above is hardly enough to delve into the specifics of the history of how Arabic has been defended and accused over the past two hundred and fifty years. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw two broad conclusions, which relate to the

present research: one in terms of sociolinguistics and education, while the other in terms of psycholinguistics.

First, the sociolinguistic datum that history shows clearly is that the value ascribed to Arabic (and to other competitor languages) has always been affected by political agendas and developments. Even though one cannot help noticing that the tendency for most Christian thinkers, especially in the last century, has been to look at standard Arabic with suspicion, history clearly shows that religion has had a smaller impact than politics on Arabic language education. It was not religion, but politics and economics that played the major role in the minds of thinkers. This consideration is extremely important because it applies to the present sociopolitical situation and it helps us understand the agendas being pursued when Arabic is being challenged by Western languages.

The second important lesson to be drawn from history is that most major Arabic thinkers believe that language is part and parcel of thinking and identity. Metaphorically, it could be said that Leo Vygotsky had a large number of Arabic cousins. One needs just to take al Alayli's "I think in Arabic, therefore I am an Arab" to get the grasp of what is meant here. Likewise, al Arsuzi spoke of the deep connection between *ma'ana* ('meaning') and *lafz* ('sound', 'utterance'), while al Hajj – with an unmistakable aristotelic touch, spoke of *jawhar* ('essence', or 'substance') and *wujud* ('existence') as being represented by language's *ma'ana* and *mabna*. Even though they differ remarkably in their appreciation of colloquial and standard Arabic, all these authors say in an unequivocal way that the language we speak is not just a *marker* of what we think and what we are, but a *maker* of it. Taha Hussein (1954) was no alien to these ideas when talking of the importance of raising the quality of today's speaking to standard-like Arabic, as well as when arguing that diglossia needs to be taken with utmost seriousness, as it is a phenomenon that borders on bilingualism, so much so that failure to address it

seriously in the first years of formal education may leave entire generations lost in the buffer zone that runs between spoken and literary variations of the language. This need for a deeper understanding and tackling of diglossia is what the second and third chapters of the present research address.

2.2. Conclusion: Are Arabs Saying 'Yalla, Bye' to Arabic?

The value attributed to Arabic has been always conditioned by that attributed to other languages being taught alongside it. In a way, it could be said that Arabic has never been understood *per se*, but always *in contrast* to some other languages, Turkish being the earliest example in the historical period we have considered. Coming closer to our present age, Suleiman (2006) points out how languages both local and foreign have more often than not been interpreted as statements of political affiliation. In Israel, the Druze minority was forced by Ben Gurion to abandon their use of Arabic, because it was suggesting a deficiency in their commitment to the cause of national unity. Ennaji (2009) argues that in Morocco French has been associated to colonialist nostalgia or neocolonialist affiliation, and the proponents of standard Arabic have been opposed by the proponents of colloquial Arabic, the former being expressions of pan-arabist or islamist movements, while the latter being associated to nationalistic and secular currents of thought.

In a context where all languages and variations stand for implicit yet strongly perceived political affiliations, it is with no little irony that Suleiman (2006) questions the fact that *only English* is being perceived as the politically neutral language. Quite the opposite, behind the appearance of being neutral, the widespread adoption of English reveals the cultural domination of the West over the Arab World (Mami, 2013).

“English learners are growing in number and decreasing in age” (Graddol, quoted in Carmel, 2009, p. 404) is not a politically neutral statement. Schools all over the Middle East region are adopting English immersion programs, with the effect of raising generations of children who will be proficient in English and nearly illiterate in standard Arabic. To these students standard Arabic is becoming a dead language like Latin (Morrow & Castleton, 2011), and one could honestly wonder “Are Arabs saying ‘Yalla, bye’ to Arabic?” (Gawab, quoted in Morrow & Castleton, 2011, p. 332). Research shows that at this rate Arabic as a language is already endangered in the Emirates (Tristram, 2008), where the government had to re-impose it as the sole national language, apparently with very limited, if any, results (al Issa & Dahan, 2011). It comes with no surprise to the researcher that Egypt follows the same pattern – even though with a slower pace due to demographic differences. As a matter of fact, it is becoming common that Arabic speakers coming from different parts of the region do not converse in standard Arabic, but take English as their favourite option in order to understand each other (al Issa & Dahan, 2011; Sinno, 2011).

Categories like ‘glottophagy’, ‘linguicide’ and ‘language murder’ (al Issa & Dahan, 2011, p. 16), ‘linguistic cannibalism’ (Calvet, 1998) and ‘linguistic genocide’ (Skutnabb-Kangass, 2013) tell us that linguistic imperialism cannot be understated, as the propagation of the English domination is facilitated not only by schools and media, but even by fast foods: with Pizza Hut and McDonald, we no longer only *speak* in English, but we even started “*eating* in English” (Sinno, 2011, p. 346, *my emphasis*). The language and the culture we consume become part of us to the extent that Arabs look down on their mother tongue and mother-culture with contempt. They end up developing an inferiority complex and an “internalized racism” (Sinno, 2011, p. 343).

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The language of self-contempt and the delusional desire to imitate those who are economically strong in the world, namely the Americans (Carmel, 2009), cannot but remind us of the Freirean concept of alienation as opposed to conscientization (Freire, 1975). In elaborating the idea of alienation, Freire developed Hegel's dialectic of the master and the slave (Torres, 2009): the oppressed, hating his/her condition of enslavement, does not naturally desire the end of enslavement, but is content with becoming the oppressor. In order to do so, the oppressed adopts the language and the symbols of power of the oppressor, whose behavior he/she replicates. In so doing, the oppressed not only becomes a new oppressor, but perpetuates the very injustice that provoked the social struggle. In the wake of African independence, and exactly talking of the struggle for political independence of Algeria, Frantz Fanon (1988) wrote that while political independence was not only achievable but even "inevitable" (p. 104), the cultural one was much more difficult to achieve:

True liberation is not that pseudo-independence in which ministers having a limited responsibility hobnob with an economy dominated by the colonial pact.

Liberation is the total destruction of the colonial system, from the pre-eminence of the language of the oppressor and [...] the meshes of the culture, the fashion, and of the images of the colonialist. (p. 105)

If political independence is an end point, cultural independence (which is close to Freire's *conscientization*) is a starting point: sovereignty, meaning the freedom of one people to cherish their collective dreams, i.e. dreams that are deeply in-built in the character of the nation (wa Thiong'o, 2008). For them to be able to do this, they not only need to get rid of the colonizer's language *at the beginning* of their post-colonial history, but they need to keep to their worldview by cherishing their own languages. With regards to this, it is insightful what wa Thiong'o (2008) has to say:

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In the colonial and even the post-independence school, language plays a crucial role in producing and reproducing cultural dependency on the mother country, for language is the rubber stamp that certifies the neocolonial mind as being truly made in Europe. (p. 168)

Failure to promote national language in schools is equal to perpetuating the colonial dynamic of power, namely dependence. Yet, given the fact that we are talking of Arabic, a problem arises: which version of the language is to stand the attack of neocolonialism's English? As a matter of fact, it seems that in modern-day Egypt and Arab World at large very little has been done in the process of sorting out whether formal education should enhance standard Arabic, which connects Arabic speakers to their past, or the colloquial one, which relates more vividly to their day-to-day living. For this reason, the following chapter turns the focus on the complicated issue of diglossia.

CHAPTER 3

DIGLOSSIA AND IDENTITY

The literature we have considered in the previous chapter, and especially the historical overview provided by Suleiman, has put forward alternating values placed on Arabic over the past few centuries. As it has emerged, the definition of the value of Arabic as the mother tongue of the Arab nations has always been related to the definition of 'the other'. For this reason, the whole debate was sparked by the invasion of Napoleon, then it developed with the late Turkish and European attempts to obliterate the Arabic language and culture, both of which came about for merely political purposes.

As the debate on the value of Arabic has unfolded, though, it has emerged with stronger and stronger emphasis that a clearer definition of 'Arabic' itself is needed. National identities are made around the regional variations of colloquial Arabic, thus constituting a legitimate alternative to the uniform and (seemingly) untouched-by-the-course-of-history Quranic Arabic. This chapter will focus more closely on the issue of diglossia, that poses not a few questions for the future not only of the teaching of Arabic, but on the very nature and character of the language itself.

In the first part of this chapter, after considering the original definition of diglossia presented by Ferguson (1959) and considering some of its limitations and possible developments, literature shows that from the theoretical point of view the difference between bilingualism and diglossia is one of form rather than substance (Khamis-Dakwar, Froud, & Gordon, 2012). This is of relevance to the educator on the field, because it suggests that many techniques that are used in a bilingual setting can also be adjusted to the needs of a diglossic one. In the second part of this chapter the focus is on the relationship between the standard Arabic and colloquial Arabic, and how this affects the thinking and the making of personal and collective identity.

3.1. Arabic as a Diglossic Language

It is a well-known fact that Arabic is a diglossic language, meaning a language where there exist considerable variance between the official standard form and informal colloquial variations. For the sake of simplicity, the researcher here prefers to follow the indication offered by Beeston (1970), who pointed out that all definitions such as “classical”, “literary”, “written” and “standard” have limitations, and opted for the less problematic of them, which is – as he argued – ‘standard’.

3.1.1. *The Basic Understanding of Diglossia: Ferguson*

The starting point for any piece of work on diglossia is the rather short, yet extremely rich, article by Ferguson (1959), which went by the very unequivocal title ‘Diglossia’. First and foremost, Ferguson defined diglossia as a “relatively stable” situation (p. 245) in which there can be two registers of one language, one being called H (i.e. ‘high’), the other L (i.e. ‘low’). Interestingly – and perhaps that is a first point where there might be some disagreement – Ferguson stated that the two registers are “overlapping only very slightly” (pp. 235-236). Thus a graphic representation of relationship between H and L would look like the following.

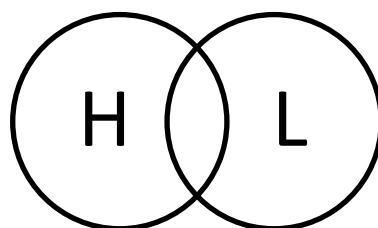


Figure 1. High and low register of a diglossic language. The overlapping represents shared features.

There are three conditions that make diglossia possible, according to Ferguson: (1) there exist a large body of literature in H, and in H only; (2) literacy is limited to few people in the community; and (3) some centuries have passed between the realization of

the previous two points. The third condition deserves attention because it implies that a language is not born diglossic, but instead a speech community develops diglossia after encoding a wealthy corpus of literature in the original language (the H variance). This understanding of acquired illiteracy implies a negative description of diglossia. More importantly, Ferguson suggests that the gap between H and L is not only dynamic, but it also tends to grow, which can bring to the idea that diglossia is a sort of *bilingualism in the making*.

While Ferguson does not elaborate on the historical consequences of the third point, he does anyway concur that diglossia is the by-product and at the same time a catalyst of the *status quo* of social division, whereby higher classes do not speak like the lower ones. Something similar was described by the students of the Italian educator Lorenzo Milani, who wrote that languages are made by farmers, but later on the bourgeois come along and create grammars to snub all those who do not speak like them (Barbiana School, 1976).

Ferguson points out that it is natural for a speech community not to be completely aware of the difference between H and L nor of the fact that everyone, even the most acculturated, makes use of both registers on a daily basis. Any non-native speaker of Arabic will smile at this observation and point out that this attitude, which Ferguson calls “self-deception” (p. 237), is all too present among native speakers, seldom with their knowledge: quite the opposite, there native speakers have the tendency of denying that there are two registers at all, while – if anything – all suggests that the distance between H and L is comparable to the distance between two different languages.

On this last aspect the researcher finds a problem with Ferguson: the difference between bilingualism and diglossia seems to be blurred (of this same opinion see also Khamis-Dakwar, Froud, & Gordon, 2012); in other words, we are left in a state of

confusion when Bassiouney (2009) admits that the two variants of a language can be as far away as two European languages like German and Dutch (on the fact that linguistics uses double standards and calls languages in Europe what in Africa or anywhere else would be termed a dialect, see also wa Thiong'o, 2009).

On a second note, it is unclear why Ferguson insists on calling diglossia a stable situation, while suggesting four different scenarios for four different diglossic languages: within the next two centuries, he speculates, the Arabic region would develop three main regional variations of their language (the Eastern, possibly with some Syrian and Sudanese sub-developments, the Egyptian and the Maghrebi), German language would remain unchanged, and Haiti and Greece would codify the dialects of their capital cities into the standard versions of their modern languages (Creole and modern Greek respectively).

3.1.2. Diglossia Beyond Ferguson

If anything is clear about diglossia, it is that it is a very unstable linguistic environment, one that defeats oversimplifications and frustrates predictions. For this reason, Bassiouney (2009) points out that diglossia and bilingualism are different. While two different languages, like Spanish and Guarani (*see below*), differ to the extent that they do not share anything, the two variations of a diglossic language (H and L) are such that they overlap, but to a limited extent, which is not the case with variations of one and the same language, such as it might be with British English and American English (BE and AE). In this way, diglossia is intermediate between bilingualism and languages with dialects.

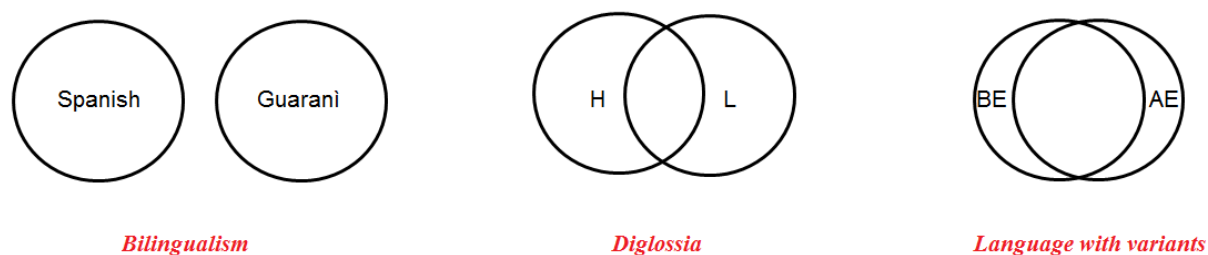


Figure 2. Different relationships between languages and language variants.

To this elaboration of Ferguson's theory, Bassiouney (2004) adds a second development to the idea of H and L: the two are not 'registers' which the speaker's mind and tongue switches on and off, but rather two 'poles' of a spectrum of possibilities. Actually, Ferguson had made mention of diverse scenarios in which diverse ratios of H and L are used: thus in the religious domain H tends to be the sole element, while in a domestic environment L is by far the dominant. What Ferguson had failed to do, though, was to conceive these different domains hierarchically, thus suggesting a diverse gradation of the two elements: when one increases, the other subsides. Badawi (1973) does so by listing five 'levels' (*mustawayāt*): the standard of the heritage (*foshā al-turāth*), the standard of the modern age (*foshā al-'aṣr*), the colloquial of the educated (*'āmmiat al-muthaqqafīn*), the colloquial of the literate (*'āmmiat al-munawwarīn*), and the colloquial of the illiterate (*'āmmiat al-amiīn*) (pp. 89-91).

The idea of the levels well enriches the concept of the two registers, which – as we will see later when discussing the effects of diglossia on thinking – renders a more accurate picture of how complex the situation is. Yet one more important contribution is made by den Heijer (2012), who introduces the variable of time. All languages develop in the course of time, and history too adds important elements to the understanding of diglossia. In the words of den Heijer himself, diglossia needs to be addressed with a

diachronic and a synchronic approach: the first focuses on time and makes use of philology, while the second focuses on geography and relies on sociolinguistics.

Language variations are always expression of the life of different communities, and therefore they evolve along the flow of centuries: for example, the Christians of Baghdad would have their own dialect, which they would use only among themselves, while they would switch to the mainstream Baghdadi Arabic dialect when dealing with Muslims.

If we combine the idea of levels of language (Badawi, 1973; Bassiouney, 2009; Ferguson, 1959) and the idea of diachronic and synchronic analysis (Beeston, 1970; den Heijer, 2012), we come to a three-dimensional paradigm of diglossia, which includes time, geography and situational variations (between the poles of H and L).

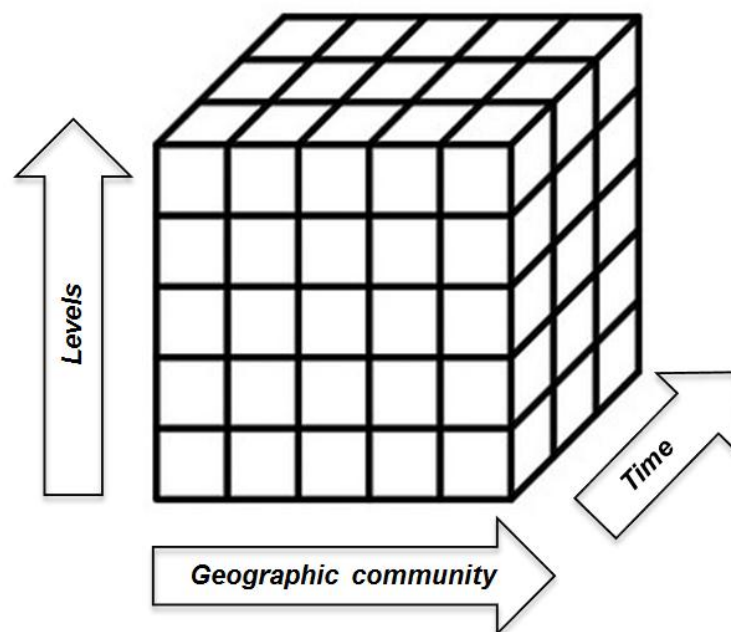


Figure 3. A three-dimensional framework for diglossia

Language being a very complex phenomenon, the number of its variations is potentially unlimited. Pieces of vocabulary, types of pronunciation and grammatical rules

that are considered high standard in Egypt may not be so in Saudi Arabia, and what is high level today somewhere was not necessarily considered so in other periods of time. The friendly use that Egyptians make of the word *ḥabīby/ḥabīby* ('my dear') is considered affectionate and familiar in Cairo, but sounds inappropriate to a Sudanese Arabic speaker. Vice-versa, the latter will use even among friends verbs and syntactic patterns that to the Egyptian sound rather formal.

While proposing this three-dimensional framework, I am aware of at least two apparent limitations, one in method and another in content. The first one is the idea of disposing geography on a line. Social geography, needless to say, is on two dimensions, and it does not work well on a straight line: for example, where would one put the Sudanese, the Jordan and the Palestinian variations, if they all fall somehow between the Saudi and the Egyptian? At the same time, it is hard to break down to the particular regional variations, each one of which fades into its neighbors. This is the limit of the human-made concept of national borders, as they cut across communities that are transnational, so the problem is hardly avoidable.

The second problem lies with the fact that H and L are not equally diversified. It is undoubted that colloquial is extremely varied, but the same cannot be said of standard. The idea that standard Arabic is unaffected by time and space needs to be abandoned. Arabic linguists agree that even in the Quranic texts – considered the standard of standards – we can find elements of the sixth-century western Arabian dialect known as Quraysh (which differed from the Eastern), as well as some traces – in the vowelings of the official text – that can be attributed to Southern Iraqi seventh-century graphologic peculiarities (Beeston, 1970; Suleiman, 2012). Without taking this to a far extreme, it is safe to argue that even standard Arabic is varied according to regions and history, and its evolution bears the marks of the impact of colloquial Arabic (den Heijer, 2012).

3.2. The Impact of Diglossia on Thinking

We have seen that the understanding of diglossia has developed in a remarkable way over the past few decades. Once again, it is important to remember, that while a deep appreciation of the debate ignited by Ferguson has brought us to appreciate the multifacetedness of the issue, over against common oversimplifications of the two registers and their interaction. Most are content with acknowledging that there is such thing as standard Arabic, which is taught in schools, while colloquial Arabic is learned effortlessly at home and on the street; anything more than this is simply ignored. The evaluation of diglossia is mainly characterized by this dualistic and rather minimalistic approach.

3.2.1. Perception of Diglossia as a Problem

The majority of authors who speak at all of diglossia do so in a rather negative tone. For al Issa & Dahan (2011), Arabic is endangered by other languages for its very being diglossic and having colloquial variations that are so far from each other that they are mutually unintelligible. Bassiouney (2009) calls diglossia a “dilemma” (p. 9), comparable to having two tongues in one mouth or two hearts in one chest.

Yet, beside the suggestive metaphor used by Bassiouney, it may be that the issue is more complicated than that. As the gospel line goes, “No servant can serve two masters” (Luke 16:13), so it can be argued that no mouth can have two tongues, nor a chest can hold two hearts. It may *feel* that way, but it does not mean that it *is* that way. I would use a computer metaphor: no computer can run two operative systems at the same time, unless one of them is virtual. And indeed that seems to be the case with diglossia: the colloquial version is the *real* operating system of the brain, while the standard one is a *mounted* program, an application that has been installed in the system in a second moment and therefore is – by all accounts – a guest. This idea nears the bilingual mental

process described by Morrow & Castleton (2011), who describe code switching as a process in which a language 'of insertion' rides on a train of thought which is in the mother tongue, the tongue 'of flow'. Early stages of secondary language acquisition are not any better than a form of code switching where all words that are uttered come from the language of insertion, but their selection and their order betrays that they still hang on the mother tongue thinking system. This can be easily understood by anyone who has learned a second or third language in his/her adult age, when there was more metalinguistic awareness. Sinno (2011) also supports this view when describing the interaction between colloquial and standard. She speaks of auto-dictate practice: rather than learning *to think* and therefore speak in standard Arabic, most Arabic speakers write in standard by patching together phrases and expressions that they learn by heart. These patches are memorized in fixed forms and once you forget a word you forget the entire phrase and get stuck. Therefore, Sinno argues, students do not learn to communicate in standard Arabic, but to parrot pieces of it.

3.2.2. Diglossia and Development of Thinking: a Vygotskian Interpretation

The remarks made by Sinno (2011) with regard to the practice of self-dictation deserves more attention. Muhammad Abduh, Salama Musa and Taha Husein have come to similar conclusions when arguing that the learning of standard Arabic seems an end to itself and does not help students achieve understanding of what they read and write (Sedgwick, 2014; Suleiman, 2003). Of particular interest is the observation made by Taha Hussein (1954) when he wrote that standard Arabic is a necessity for native Arabic speakers because not only it is a condition for mutual understanding, but it is also a condition for self understanding:

Arabic is our national language and as such constitutes an integral part of the Egyptian personality. It is the medium for transmitting to the younger generation

the legacy of the past and serves as the natural tool by which we help one another realize our personal and societal needs. We use it every day *both for mutual understanding and for self-understanding*. When we think in a purposeful manner we become conscious of our existence, changing needs, emotions, and contradictory desires. We conceive of things only through word pictures which we either pass on to others or keep to ourselves. (p. 84, *my emphasis*)

This paragraph deserves close attention. First of all, it mentions how standard Arabic connects Arabic speakers to their own history. As it was already mentioned above, memory is at the center of identity. The case is even stronger with Arabic than it is with other languages, as its development through the centuries has not been as dramatic: whoever reads standard Arabic today can attain a higher degree of understanding of texts that are over one thousand years old, which is not the case with other languages (e.g. English) that in the course of few centuries have developed past the limits of intelligibility (Hozayin, 2015). This element of retroactive intelligibility is an asset of Arabic language that should not be underestimated.

Secondly, Hussein highlights the importance of standard language for the development of thinking. As Vygotsky (1962) taught, language is an irreplaceable component of this process. After dealing with the genesis of verbal thought as the interaction of the child's original word-less thinking and adult's oral language, he highlighted the relevance of written language as an important stage in the development of thought.

A graphic representation of Vygotsky's understanding of the interaction between thought and language is presented below. While human thought develops from within the person throughout his/her lifespan (the expanding circles), language (i.e. the body of grammar and vocabulary that the person 'receives' from outside) is virtually static and is

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met by the person as he/she grows. Thought originates as wordless (1), then moves into spoken language, first passively through decoding the spoken language of adults (2), then progressively it becomes an active production of speech (3); by the time the child encounters written language (4), the child speaks out his/her mind: self-awareness has been developed.

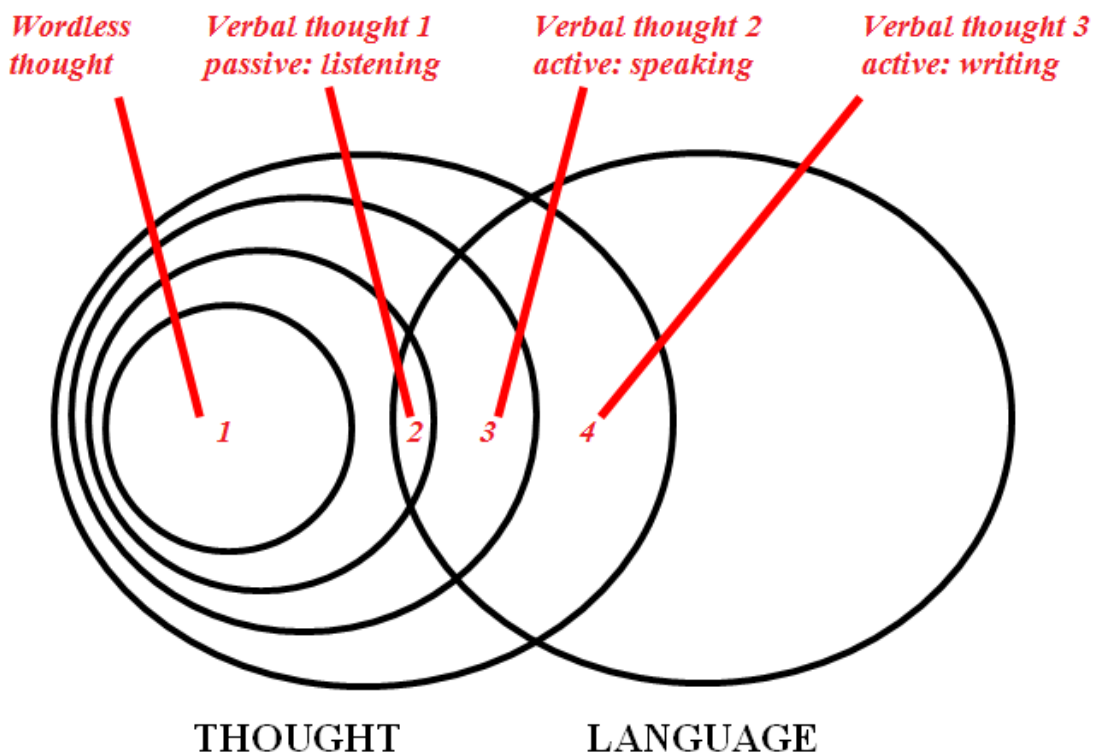


Figure 4. Vygotskian development of language in relation to role played by language.

Written language plays a role in the thinking process of the child because it forces him/her to organize ideas according to standards of phonology, grammar, word order, syntax. It can be said that written language plays the role of thought organizer. Writing accompanies and ensures the mastering of thinking and speaking.

In a situation such as Arabic diglossia, everything suggests that the standards of written language are partly beyond the grasp of comprehension, thus precluding a full incorporation of 'written-ness' into thinking. Metaphorically, written language appears like an alien body, which thinking is unable to absorb or digest.

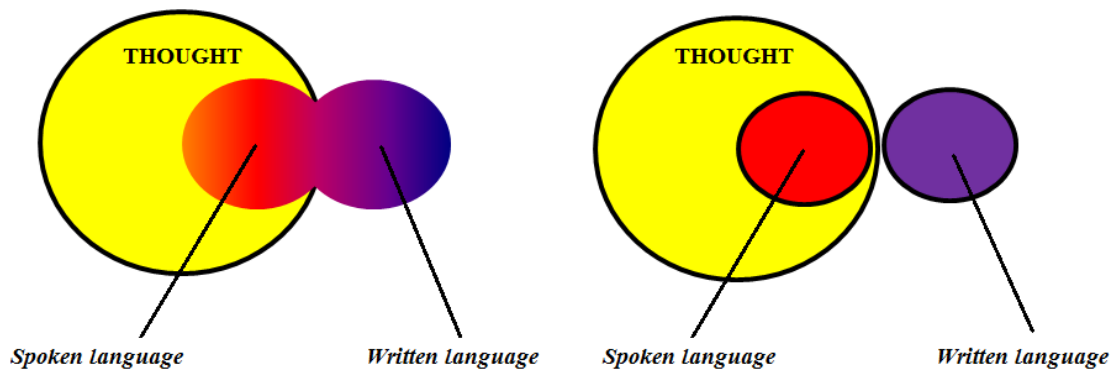


Figure 5. How spoken and written language relate to thought in a diglossic language.

Figure 5 shows that – in the diglossic predicament – while developing and integrating spoken language, thought does *not* integrate written language, i.e. in our case standard Arabic. Written language is not learned in the sense of acquired, but crammed, which means that it has little impact on deep thinking (Said, 2004; Sinno, 2011). Failure to order one's thought in a syntactic sequence and according to standard grammatical rules is failure to develop thinking itself to its full potential. Writing has a deep impact on the development of consciousness, as research on literacy and oracy shows: "Writing introduces division and alienation, but a higher unity as well. It intensifies the sense of self and fosters more conscious interaction between persons. Writing is consciousness-raising" (Ong, 2002, p. 174). The consequences of this failed process might be as far-

reaching as they constitute an impediment that is acquired in the early years and that is doomed to leave scars throughout the person's life span.

3.2.3. Diglossia and the Mind of the Arabs

Strong remarks on the impact of Arabic on the mind of Arabs are found among the authors of the historical overview we have considered in chapter two. It is interesting to notice that of all authors mentioned by Suleiman in his excursus, it is the Egyptians who felt the strongest on the issues of diglossia: Salama Musa, Taha Hussein and Luwis Awad. Arguably, this is because in Egypt the gap between standard and colloquial is larger than elsewhere, as argued by Safouan (2007).

Musa said that Arabic perpetuates the violent and deceitful thinking of the beduin culture, which elevated crimes such as 'honour murder' by codifying them in a dignified fashion; standard Arabic is a foreign language to Egyptians, who find themselves therefore lost in a world of translation, i.e. a situation in which the speaker is never sure he/she has said what he/she meant to. While acknowledging that diglossia is the main challenge to early literacy of Arab children, Musa fought against any suggestion that education should give in to a literary use of colloquial as the only language. He agreed that grammar was being studied as an end to itself, and he called this an absurdity; but he would immediately add that the issue was not to abandon standard Arabic, but rather to reform the way grammar and language were taught. At the same time, the language itself should also be modernized. Awad, instead, was so negative about standard Arabic that he hardly recognized any bearing of it on the minds of Egyptians. He called the Arabic conquest of Egypt an invasion, on a par with more recent experiences of colonization, and he said that the existence of a colloquial Egyptian Arabic that is so different from the standard one demonstrates that Egyptians have never been Arabised in the way they

speak, as their variant of Arabic comes from the mixture of Arabic structure and Pharaonic phonology (Suleiman, 2003).

In order to appreciate Musa's and Awad's opinions, one needs to be reminded of the cultural atmosphere in which they worked. Rifa'a Tahtawi, in the previous century, had introduced the notion that the teaching of Arabic was in dire need to be modernized, possibly in a fashion that would resemble the way Europeans taught their languages (Tahtawi, 2004). What appears in Tahtawi's observations on his mission to Paris is that he felt that scientific and technological development come only after a nation has deeply mastered their own language. Some decades after Tahtawi, Muhammad Abduh also lamented the backwardness of traditional teaching and learning of Arabic, which were based on rote learning (Sedgwick, 2014). Tahtawi and Abduh stand as two of the most influential figures in a call for cultural and intellectual renewal (Newman, 2004; Sedgwick, 2014), without which it would be impossible to understand the opinions of thinkers like Musa, Awad and Hussein. Safuan (2007) laments that today's debate is not as liberal as it was in the days of Muhammad Abduh, and blames this on the cultural decline caused by Nasser and Sadat's intellectual censorship and secular-minded educational policies.

However fierce the opinions of Musa and Awad, the harshest criticism made against diglossia can be found in 'The influence of the Arabic language on the psychology of the Arabs', by E. Shouby (1951). Himself an Arabic native speaker, in his call for researchers to delve into the psycholinguistics of Arabic, he spares no criticism to the fact that Arabs are 'stuck' with the teaching and learning of standard Arabic. The idea of being stuck with something old is also expressed by Beeston (1970) when highlighting that the Nahda movement of the nineteenth century had no better choice to make than to refer to the grammarians of the Abbasid period. According to Shouby (1951), Arabs are

unwilling to move on because they are deeply infatuated by the myth of their glorious past and charmed by how good standard Arabic sounds. Arabs are so obsessed with the musicality of language that they care more for the sound than for the meaning of what they hear. The end result of their endless playing with words is to be found in empty arguments and overstatements, which are very common among Arabic speakers, even the well-educated ones.

Further than that, Shouby suggested that the presence of two registers enhances the natural gap between human's perception of their real and their ideal selves. While the real self speaks colloquial, the ideal seems to be kidnapped by standard Arabic, which is high but ultimately meaningless:

[T]he separation between the literary Arabic ideal-self on the one hand and the colloquial Arabic real-self on the other, together with the necessity for overstatement, overassertion, and exaggeration, is a major cause of the conspicuousness of this contradiction in Arab personality structure. It needs hardly be mentioned that the separation that brings about these results can be manipulated by external agencies to lift the real [...] when extreme efforts are required. (Shouby, 1951, p. 302)

In other words, diglossia is not only *a weakness* of the Arabs, but *their Achilles' heel*, which can be used to manipulate them. Said (2004) seems to be of the same mind when he writes that colloquial and standard Arabic are like two different personalities. Also, he agrees that Arabs are obsessed with eloquence and have a bias for the sound of language rather than for its content. Nevertheless, though, he discards the idea of Arab mind being irredeemably violent as a misconception created by American fiction.

Suleiman (2013) accuses Shouby of not producing any hard evidence to back up his "sweeping generalizations" (p. 270). While it *is* true that no hard data are presented, it

is also true that, from a methodological point of view, sociolinguistics allows for the use of personal informed opinions, as Suleiman (2011) himself acknowledges when defending the value of autoethnography. Suleiman's critique of Shouby would hold if the latter was not a native speaker of Arabic, but that is not the case.

3.2.4. *Safouan: Diglossia as an Issue of Power*

In the reflection on how diglossia affects Arabs' thinking, the Egyptian psychoanalyst and philosopher Mustafa Safouan (2007) contributes with far-reaching consideration. First of all, he argues that standard Arabic and colloquial one are not simply two registers, but two different languages:

[T]he differences between the spoken Arabic – and I am mainly thinking of the idiom spoken in Egypt – and the *Qureish* or Koranic Arabic are as significant as those between Italian and Latin. Whatever the semantic and syntactic affinities between Italian and Latin, an Italian speaker has to study Latin in order to understand it. (Safouan, 2007, p. 47)

The differences between the two registers are many: compared to standard Arabic, the colloquial has different word ordering, does not decline nouns, has no dental fricative sounds (*th*, *dh* and *z* are substituted by *s*, *t* or *z*), has diverse meaning of shared pieces of vocabulary and easily accommodates neologisms (more on this also in Carter, 1996) or pieces of vocabulary from ancient pharaonic language. Safouan highlights how each language has its own worldview and therefore the tremendous differences between standard and colloquial result in a form of alienation of the masses *vis-à-vis* the language used by powers. And it is exactly the issue of power that stands at the core of Safouan's argument. As the ancients used the written language as a tool to dominate the masses, modern-day Arab rulers do not want people to own the language and to master thinking: if they were to develop their language into the written form, they would increase their

potential for critical awareness. Promoting writing in colloquial Arabic would be way more revolutionary than anything else.

Using a historical approach, Safouan points out that Europe found the way to scientific progress *and* democracy only after it freed itself from the oppression of Latin. He sees in Dante's "*De Vulgari Eloquentia*" ("On the eloquence of vernacular", 1305) the declaration of independence of European languages and the starting point of a process that – through Martin Luther's translation of the Bible in German and Galileo's publication of his scientific discoveries in Italian – led European thinkers to a fuller development of science, philosophy and the arts. Safouan calls this linguistic emancipation process 'linguistic humanism' and argues that until it takes place in the Arab world, Arabs will not raise their thinking to the maturity that modern science requires.

The idea of measuring a language on the yardstick of modern science is not new in the Arab world, if we consider the succession of Egyptian thinkers who expressed similar ideas. Rifa'a al Tathtawy (2004) spoke of how the development of a proper teaching of language helped the French to develop scientific thinking. Mohammed Abduh, Qassem Amin and Saad Zaghloul displayed very open-minded and progressive attitudes in the fields of religion and ethics (Newman, 2004; Safouan, 2007; Sedgwick, 2014). It is of extreme interest to notice that Safouan argues that the complete emancipation of colloquial language will produce in the Arabic mind "both greater self-understanding and greater understanding of others" (p. 64). Far from the opinion held by Taha Hussein (1954) that standard Arabic was necessary to save the cultural heritage and the interconnectedness of Arabs, Safouan argues that open-mindedness and modern thinking are the real asset that would break down the cultural stagnation and political fragmentation of the Arab world.

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Suleiman (2011) criticizes Safouan for exaggerating the psychological power that written language has on the masses. However, from the cultural point of view, he agrees that as long as colloquial Arabic does not claim literary dignity, it is reduced to a language that is short of its potential. For this reason, he cites an article by Sir William Willock, published in 1893, in which it was argued that Egyptians were doomed not to develop their socioeconomic potential because their thinking was constrained by the use of a language – i.e. standard Arabic – that did not reflect their thinking.

Safouan has the merit of raising the issue of diglossia beyond the issue of language style: it is the very issue of orality and literacy, which from the psychological point of view is hard to underestimate. Literacy as the ability to elaborate one's ideas and produce culture is a *conditio sine qua non* for self-awareness and critical thinking (Ong, 2002). In his book review of Safouan's 2012 second edition, el Wardani (2013) describes this oppressive relationship using the category of 'censorship': the official language censors what is acceptable and what is not. Safouan does not use any of Freire's (1975) terminology, but in the correlation between literacy, conscientization and democracy his argument is extremely Freirean. Of one mind with Foucault (1995), he sees that the established power is reluctant to allow the development of creative thinking, because creativity is a threat to the *status quo*.

MacCabe (2007) elaborates on the issue of power presented by Safouan: while the oral register is homely and female-dominated and thus promotes intimacy, the written one is schoolish and male-dominated and implies the oppressor-oppressed power relation. On this specific point, the most important supporter of Safouan can be found in the father of diglossia himself, Ferguson (1996), who also states in strong terms that the written register is purposely used with a nearly-sacred value, to frighten the masses rule over them.

3.2.5. Diglossia and Neuroscience

If the arguments of Safouan suggest that colloquial and standard Arabic are two different languages, neuroscience seems to claim just the same. Experimental research on brain activity during reading tasks (Nevat, Khateb, & Prior, 2014), carried out on bilingual diglossic subjects, shows that Arabic speakers read standard Arabic better than they read colloquial one: as colloquial Arabic belongs to the domain of oral skills, decoding it from a written form demands from the brain the same kind of activity that is required when decoding a foreign language. This research shows that the distance between colloquial and standard is so wide that the two are not equal when literacy skills are employed. It also bears evidence to the fact that the association between words and meaning is language-specific: meanings are stored and retrieved according to the language in which they have been recorded (Tel, 1990). Research on bilingualism and memory shows that knowledge that can be expressed in more than one language is a deeper-seated knowledge, i.e. if you can name it in more than one language, it means you really know it (Heredia & Altarriba, 2001; Uccelli & Pàez, 2007).

Similar opinions are held by other pieces of research that show how oral skills and phonetic accuracy impact on reading ability: subject who have not mastered the skills of speaking in standard Arabic have more reading difficulties (Ibrahim, 2013a). For this reason, early exposure to standard Arabic is important, as it enhances phonological awareness (Ibrahim, 2011). As both the researches carried out by Boudelaa (2014) and Eviatar & Ibrahim (2014), reading in Arabic is highly demanding in terms of phonetic decoding, and all suggests that reading should be supported by metalinguistic skill training and phonetic awareness enhancing. The implications of these findings will be further developed in chapter three of the present research.

3.2.6. *Diglossia and Religion*

Another element that emerges from the debate on diglossia is the feeling that opinions tend to be divided across religious lines. As we saw in chapter two, the advocates of standard Arabic support the Islamist agenda (Ennaji, 2009; Suleiman, 2006), and for this reason non-Islamists – be they Christians or secular – tend to gather under the banner of the pro-colloquial campaign. Similarly, in their study on the loss of religious language in Arab bilinguals, Morrow & Castleton (2011) note “[o]ne can only wonder if English will become the global language of business and education in the Arab world, relegating colloquial Arabic to the family kitchen and classical Arabic to the mosque” (p. 324).

The feeling felt by most is that standard Arabic is the property of Islam, and oftentimes any attempt to promote it is labelled as Islamist. Yet there is a very long tradition of Muslim Arabic thinkers – among whom Sati’ al Husri and Taha Hussein – who advocated the teaching of Arabic as completely detached from religion (al Jazeera, 2008; Suleiman, 2003). One would wonder why language is a religious issue for Arabic-speaking Muslims, when that is not the case for non-Arabic-speaking ones (Safouan, 2007). It is with regard to the secularization of the teaching of Arabic that Taha Hussein (1954) strongly stated: “We must banish forever the ancient myth [...] and treat Arabic forthrightly as the secular thing that it is” (p. 85).

Prior to that, he spent words on the fact that Arabic does not belong to Islam:

Those who assert that we study and teach Arabic just because it is a language of religion are deceiving the people. Although Arabic is a language of religion [...] it must be as free from narrowness and stagnation as religion itself. It belongs not to the men of religion alone, but to all the people, regardless of nation or race, who speak it. Each individual is at liberty to treat the language as any property owner does his possessions when he has fulfilled certain necessary conditions. It is

absurd, therefore, to think that the teaching of Arabic is the inalienable and exclusive right of al-Azhar and its satellite schools. Absurd, because al-Azhar cannot be imposed on all speakers of Arabic [...] Absurd, because Arabic has been studied and taught in both Islamic and non-Islamic milieu. Absurd, too, because the various disciplines of Arabic arose and flourished before al-Azhar was established. (pp. 83-84)

A strong repetition of the word “absurd” can be noted, associated to al Azhar’s monopoly over language. As a matter of fact, Taha Hussein’s opposition to the fact that Dar al Uloom (i.e. the college that in Egypt is deputy for the preservation of language standards) was under al Azhar is spelled out more than once throughout his book. In the opinion of Hussein, who himself had been schooled in the centuries-old institution founded by the Fatimids in the tenth century, al Azhar could not possibly be entrusted with the responsibility for the language because it lacked the scientific culture and the resources that such a duty would demand, such as experts in philology, linguistics and Semitic languages.

Anecdotally, it can be observed that the editor of the 1954 edition of his book was happy that since the days of the first edition of “The future of culture in Egypt”, Dar al Uloom had been moved under Cairo University; yet the researcher cannot share in that enthusiasm, as it is clear that the institutional shift does not mean that the teaching of Arabic has become any less religiously tainted: on its website, references to the centrality the Holy Quran are more than abundant, and the vision statement of the institution reads, in its broken English:

To make the College Dar Al Uloom - Cairo University, a monument to publish *the Arabic language and Islamic sciences* and the protection of *Arab and Islamic heritage* through the system a variety of scientific and integration of a creative

blend originality with modern life in order to preserve the *Arab-Islamic identity*, and Keep up with the movement of the global progress, and the creation of appropriate conditions for the contribution of *Arab-Islamic culture* in communication and dialogue with other in the context of centrism and moderation. (*sic!*, Vision of the faculty of Dar El Uloom, 2012, *my emphasis*)

Arabic is hardly half of what Dar al Uloom is concerned about: it is just the half before Islam. One may wonder if Hussein would repeat what he wrote in 1938, when he wrote that Dar al Uloom had done “an utterly insignificant and disappointing contribution” to the cause of Arabic language, because in its attempt to be neither bigot nor scientific it had failed to produce any meaningful result at all (p. 106). As a matter of fact, it is hard to believe any rapid change can happen, if religion still holds such a strong influence on the institutions that are in charge of preserving the language. An argument could be made that these institutions stand in a conflict of interest: on one hand they have to comply with a religious intellectual affiliation which hardly allows for any change; on the other hand, they have to serve a language which – like any other language in the world – is owned by common people who are free to develop ever new ways of communicating. Suleiman (2012) argues that these “extralinguistic motives behind grammar making” (p. 210) are as old as Arabic language itself.

3.3. Conclusion: Three Ways out of Diglossia

As we have seen, diglossia is difficult to define, and it gets even more difficult to deal with, once we are faced with the consequences it produces at the level of thinking. It is no wonder that most literature considers it a problem. It can be said that three different proposals have been made in order to overcome the impasse, the first two of them falling inside the domain of linguistics, while the third being purely educational.

First and foremost, a linguistic theoretical proposal is *not* to take the Fergusonian understanding of diglossia too strictly and develop instead a third, mixed variant of Arabic. When revisiting his widely-acclaimed definition of diglossia, Ferguson himself (1996) specifies that there is a ‘variety’ of registers; similarly, Hary (1996) subscribes to Badawi’s (1973) five levels and introduces the idea of ‘multiglossia’.

Sati al Husri had advocated the use of a *lugha muwahhada wa muwahhida*, i.e. a language that is united and that unites (Suleiman, 2003); Ferguson (1959) proposed the idea of *al-lugha al-wustā*, i.e. the middle language (p. 240). After introducing the diachronic and the synchronic approaches to diglossia (*see above*), den Heijer (2012) develops this idea by speaking of a *middle* Arabic and a *mixed* one: the middle is between the classical and the modern (the diachronic), while the mixed is between the high and the low (the synchronic). Placing these two concepts on the three-dimensional framework we have introduced with Figure 3, the following can be drawn:

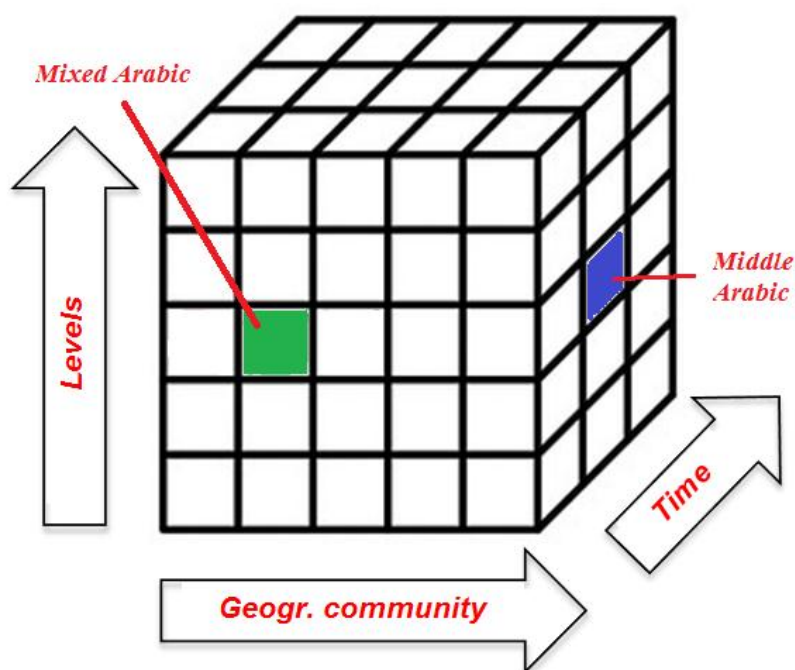


Figure 6. Mixed Arabic and Middle Arabic.

In this figure, attention is not given to the geographic variable: there are more than one mixed Arabic and middle Arabic variations that could take place in different geographical areas and populations. Alternatively, other authors prefer to speak of 'Educated Spoken Arabic' (Badawi, cited in Bassiouney, 2009; Mitchell, cited in Khamis-Dakwar, Froud, & Gordon, 2012), meaning with this a version of spoken Arabic which is more similar to the standard.

While the idea of middle and mixed Arabic might be interesting from a speculative point of view, from the formal point of view it relies on an incorrect assumption, namely the idea that standard Arabic is unchangeable. Versteegh (1996) laments the persistence of this misconception and argues that it has been infused in Arabic speakers' minds by traditional grammarians, to the extent that most Arabs fail to acknowledge that the colloquial variants that they use are the proof that Arabic, just like any other language, has *always* been changing. In fact, the in-built conviction that standard Arabic is immune to change is so strong that many Arabic speakers will even argue that strictly speaking vernaculars do not exist (Versteegh, 1996), or do not have a grammar (Ferguson, 1996).

The second linguistic-based proposal consists in reforming standard Arabic. In the age of social networks and speed-of-light media production, colloquial Arabic has impacted the production of written texts (Johnstone, 1990). But the impact of diglossia is much deeper than word order and syntax. Many authors have called for an update of very fundamental rules, such as the way Arabic is written, starting from the all-famous *tashkeel* system. Al Husri suggested that the case system should be dropped altogether, while Taha Hussein proposed that a new way of writing vowels may be worked out. Some other thinkers, such as Musa, would go further than that and propose the abandoning of Arabic alphabet as such, as Turks did in the days of Ataturk (Suleiman,

2003). While the argument of Musa was that if Turks could afford this change, Arabs likewise should have no fear, other linguists feel that such a shift should not be taken light-heartedly: the Maltese people, whose language is considered a part of the Arab spectrum of dialects, have opted for the Roman alphabet, but this choice has cost them a chronic unintelligibility with all the rest of their fellow Arab speakers and has cut them off their cultural heritage (Beeston, 1970; Walter, 2006).

The third proposal is pedagogical in nature. Since both the adoption of a mixed version of Arabic and the reform of standard Arabic seem to be difficult to attain, due to the political flavor that is inherent to language itself (Safouan, 2007; Suleiman, 2006; 2013), it is advisable that education finds a way of handling the coexistence of the different levels of the language. The following chapter will focus on this last option.

CHAPTER 4

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A DIGLOSSIA-AWARE ARABIC LANGUAGE EDUCATION

The previous two chapters highlighted how the learning of Arabic is charged with far-reaching implications. Among the unquestionably central points, there lies the fact that language has always been a political issue, and it remains to be so (Herbert, 2011; Suleiman, 2006, 2013; Wiley, 2008). Ever since the end of the colonial era, policymakers worldwide have felt that language was a tool for the creation of national unity, and therefore nothing should stand in the way of a top-down imposition of the one, standardized national idiom. The implementation of the 'national language regime' which believed in the equation "one language, one people, one nation" (Herbert, 2011, p. 201) is what has justified the deficit view of all other minorities, who had to be sacrificed in the name of national security. As the post-colonial national-unity era faded into a neocolonial globalized era, a shift has taken place from the imposition of national standardized language to the adoption of worldwide renowned languages, English *in primis*.

Postcolonial thinkers took the issue of language of instruction with utmost seriousness and believed that the language of the colonizer should not be used again in post-independence new emerging countries. Many educators all over the world argued that perpetuating the language of the colonizer would perpetuate the dialectic of oppression (Fanon, 1988; Freire, 1975, 1978; wa Thiong'o, 2008). Thinkers who fought for the emancipation of their nations were deeply convinced that thinking is shaped by language and that to hold on the colonizers' language would hinder their cultural emancipation.

Nowadays, instead, formerly English-ruled Egypt seems to have a different attitude to English language. The 'the-sooner-the-better' idea has become the default

choice of parents and private school owners alike, with little-to-no consideration of how the foreign language of their choice should integrate with the learning of the mother tongue (Carmel, 2009; Marinova-Todd, Brandford Marshall, & Snow, 2000). While still many people – both parents and educators – believe that *age is the only factor* in learning any language, the literature is unanimous that there are many more factors that should be taken into account before age, such as skill-oriented teacher training of language teachers (Feitelson, Goldstein, Iraqi, & Share, 1993; Khamis-Dakwar, Froud, & Gordon, 2012; Lin, 2012; Moon, 2009; Uccelli & Pàez, 2007), and the socioeconomic status of the students (Fiano, 2013; Mattheoudakis & Alexiou, 2009).

While research is adamant that “the strongest predictor of student achievement in L2 [is] the amount of formal L1 schooling they experienced” (May, 2008b, p. 28; cf. also Wiley, 2008) and that the learning of L2 does not work like the learning of L1 (Ellis, 2008; Bialystok, Peets, & Moreno, 2014), practice has it that many immersion programs in Egypt have been working and still work on the assumption that learning Arabic is not important and that in order to succeed in the job market children have to learn English – and English alone.

“Everybody” wants to learn English – fine. But exclusive English-medium education is often axiomatically promoted as the best method of achieving the English language proficiency that people desire, despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of [...] mother tongues and ample evidence to show that effective mother-tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education [...] and home language maintenance provide a springboard for strengthening the learning of English as a second foreign language. (Skutnabb-Kangass, 2013, p. 83)

Literature speaks of two opposite paradigms of multilingual education: the subtractive and the additive (Cummins, 2000; Francis, 1998; May 2008b; Skutnabb-Kangass, 2013). The subtractive model is the one that best describes most of Egypt's private international schools, where it is believed that the development of L2 (English, the foreign language) is independent from mastery of L1 (Arabic, the mother tongue). Energies and time that should be given to L1 are 'subtracted' from it and invested in L2. The additive model, instead, holds that a good mastery of L1 is a prerequisite for more articulate linguistic thinking, and thus opens the way to a better learning of L2, which by definition is not learned spontaneously, but through formal education (Ellis, 2008).

Parents need to know that all languages are fit for education, and that either/or is a false ideology. Children can learn both their own mother tongue and one or several dominant languages well if the education is organised to make this possible. [...] [P]arents who demand and choose mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MLE) rather than dominant-language medium education are in fact promoting their children's social mobility even economically. (Skutnabb-Kangass, 2013, p. 111)

Children in Egypt (and elsewhere in the region) *can* master English to a native-like level, and attain much more than that, even without starting as early as kindergarten with an immersion program. Even though – on a national perspective – the main challenge to all education remains the low literacy rate, estimated by UNESCO to be at 73.8% for all population above 15 years of age (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2013, p. 37), much can be done to improve the bilingual education of those who do have access to formal teaching of English as foreign language. Arabic language native speakers are 'born bilinguals' as their language forces them to develop metalinguistic tools to

codeswitch between colloquial and standard Arabic. These metalinguistic skills should not be ignored, but rather considered an asset and be made use of.

The following two sections will deal exactly with both these priorities: the mastery of first language (in early literacy) and the acquisition of metalinguistic skills.

4.1. Recommendations for the Mastery of Arabic as First Language

First of all, it is clear to many that Arabic language books printed by ministries of Education need to be improved. It is commonly lamented by Arabic speakers that the Arabic language books from which they learned standard Arabic are unappetizing and characterized by a conservative understanding of religion and society, especially if compared to English language books, which are always on the cutting edge of marketing and pedagogical trends (Morrow & Castleton, 2011; Sinno, 2011). Unfortunately, this seems to collide against religiously-related conservatism, which is reluctant to allow innovation of book formatting. History of education, especially in Egypt, has suffered from being charged with religious connotations as early as 969, when the Fatimids built Al Azhar (Sayed, 2006); the first secular-minded schools were to be found only with the non-missionary foreign schools of the second half of the nineteenth century, while Christian missionary schools had also subscribed to the idea that Arabic language and Islam belonged together, hence their choice to neglect Arabic all together (Heyworth-Dunne, 1939). In the words of Svalberg (2012), good language instruction should start with “visual input enhancement” (p. 382). Motivation is an asset to all forms of learning, and academic language acquisition demands that books be attractive and enjoyable. Nobody can expect young learners to spend time reading if the books they are provided with are visually unattractive.

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A second major shift that is to be advocated is that colloquial Arabic finds a legitimate place in newly-designed curricula. The issue here is not as simple as including some texts in colloquial Arabic *within the books*, but rather to expand the curricula beyond the paper-bound book. Current studies on internet-age literacy are calling more and more for multiple literacies and information literacy, i.e. the expansion of the very idea of language beyond the printed one (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008; Ong, 2002). However, as in his *Phaedrus* Plato expressed his pessimism for the advent of the epoch-marking cultural revolution of writing, it is no surprise that the present academic generation is still hesitant about new technologies. Nonetheless, the fact remains that a tremendous cultural change is under way, also in the way we understand literacy and oracy: wa Thiong'o (2012) has suggestively proposed the concept of 'cyborature'. If ministerial guidelines in the time of Mubarak called on each class of each school to read daily the newspaper (Sika, 2010), time has come that other media make their contribution to the life and the learning of today's school students. Media are constantly shaping language (Johnstone, 1990).

For these changes to take place, though, there is need of a structural reform of the formal educational system as such. In his days, Taha Hussein (1954) observed that the educational system was obsessed with supervision and thus promoted a culture of mistrust; quite the opposite, in the opinion of the 'dean of Arabic language', trust of the government in their teachers and of teachers in their students would ensure a much more functional system, one that would not produce "trivial-minded" young people (p. 56) who do not care about culture, but only about passing exams (no matter how).

The same opinion expressed by Taha Hussein in moral terms is held by modern research in terms of system efficiency. The Egyptian educational system has always been characterized by a strong centralization, which has usually been justified for the sake of

national security; the main limit of such a structure is that any change comes with the appointment of a new minister of education. While one can appreciate the Egyptian intent to build national unity through a unified system of education, it can be argued that a more decentralized system would ensure more continuity (Sika, 2010). Admittedly, not all forms of decentralization may be beneficial, as there are no few concerns, for example, on the Lebanese paradigms, which is one of the region's and the world's less unified educational systems, where local and religious communities have undermined national cohesion (Georg-Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, 2009), without ensuring that decentralization would bring about more efficiency and less corruption (Karam, 2006). Nevertheless, literature suggests that only a wisely decentralized assessment system would make it possible for schools and districts to experiment new forms of literacy of which we spoke in the previous paragraph. Scandinavian models of blending centralized and decentralized elements seem to be among the best policies in place worldwide. For example, Norway has a mixed assessment system, whereby some of the exams are designed at the national level and others at the school or district level (Nusche, Earl, & Maxwell, 2011).

4.1.1. School-level Practices: New Approaches to Reading

As far as school potential is concerned, reading is beyond any doubt the area where diglossia-aware teaching and learning either stands or falls. In the proposals of Taha Hussein, Egyptian schools should postpone second language acquisition. European countries can afford early L2 acquisition for two factors that make them completely different from the Egyptian case: first, European countries do not have to face the challenge of diglossia; secondly, most European languages are cognate, i.e. close to one another. Keeping this in mind, Egyptian schools – in his opinion – should dedicate the first years to the empowering of Arabic, and especially through reading, in order to

proceed into writing later on (Hussein, 1954). Surely, the opinion of the great Hussein in this matter is strongly opposed to the current mainstream social perception, which believes it is preferable to enroll children into English immersion nursery schools, as well as ensuring that children read and write *before* they join kindergarten (the admittance to which, as the trend is growing, is based on a test).

4.1.2. Story Reading

Among the most important suggestions made by field-based research, storytime reading is one of the most recurrent. The kindergarten teacher should devote some time to read stories to children in order for them to get used to standard Arabic, as exposure to a language or a language variation is one of the foundation elements to learning it (Kovacevic, 2008; Ibrahim, 2011). The teacher would not read out loud the entire story in standard Arabic from day one, but would first mediate it with some explanation, in colloquial or mixed Arabic, in order to maximize understanding. *Reading* to children from a printed book has a positive impact, over against the practice of just *telling* stories while flipping the pages of print-free books (Abu-Rabia, 2000). On the other hand, though, current literature seems not to have focused yet on the content that such books should contain. More research might be needed on the content of children books in Arabic; are there a mere imitation of western children story books, or to what extent are they originally designed from an Arabic cultural point of view? Or is the Arabic component dominated by an Islamic religious framework?

According to longitudinal studies, children that are exposed to standard Arabic story reading prove later on to have more familiarity with the high register and display enhanced desire to learn to read (reading being an opportunity to enhance the child's sense of autonomy), as well as increased use of standard Arabic vocabulary and improved pronunciation. Moreover, asking children to repeat and elaborate the story to the teacher

and peers increases their sense of causality and temporal sequencing, which are logic skills. Lastly, children ask their parents either to borrow story books from school teachers or to buy them, as their demand for bedtime story reading increases (Feitelson, Goldstein, Iraqi, & Share, 1993). This last item might need special attention from school leaders and educators; in fact, not all families can afford to buy children books, even though the researchers say that their subjects came from families with “a lower-than-average income level” (p. 72). While suggesting there is a correlation between socioeconomic status and readiness to help children with home reading, Aram, Korat and Hssunah-Arafat (2013) also highlight the potential of book borrowing and the fact that low socioeconomic status does not preclude any possibility of homereading; effort, instead, need to be put on the nurturing of positive reading habits also in low-income households.

Printed books can be accompanied by multimedia videos, which enhance attention to story line and trigger more elaborate decoding of the story. Research on the use of multimedia over against fixed images shows that seeing a motion video of the story helps the children go deeper into the dynamics of the story, which turns out to be useful once they are asked to tell again the story with their own words (Verhallen, Bus, & de Jong, 2006).

4.1.3. Whole Language Approach

With relation to reading instruction, teachers of Arabic might benefit from what Othman (2007) defines as Whole Language Approach. Starting from the fact that correct Arabic text reading implies deeper understanding of grammar and syntax, Othman speaks of ‘deep’ orthography over against English’s being ‘shallow’ (*see also* Eviatar & Ibrahim, 2014; Hussien, 2014; Ibrahim, 2013): reading Arabic scripts requires the decoding of short vowels, which are not written but need to be processed through some articulate grammatical thinking. According to the Whole Language Approach, children at early

stages of learning should focus first of all on *the meaning* of words, not spending more mental energies in figuring out smaller-than-word elements. Children are invited to activate their knowledge of vocabulary based on the context. This method emphasizes that reading is made up of a complex set of skills which should be acquired over a long period of time: there is no hurry to insist on declinations early, but more focus is devoted to word meaning first.

The valuable point of this method is the idea that meaning, phonology and grammar do not necessarily have to be taught together and with the same depth from day one. Nevertheless, research is still divided on when it is best to introduce grammar decoding and remove short vowels; for example, Ibrahim (2013b) argues that by eighth grade the use of full short vowelings is more an obstacle than an asset to fluent reading, as children are used to grammatical decoding of vowels. Other pieces of research, like Al-Shdifat (2014), suggest that full vowelings should be removed from grade four to grade six, but in a more gradual way than it is done in most curricula. The question might need much more extended studies.

4.1.4. Class Conversations

Abu-Rabia (2000) proposes a method of teaching standard Arabic in grades one and two that comprises three thirty-minute-long daily sessions. The first session in the morning is a language activation conversation where the teacher discusses with students on the day that is in front of them, their feelings, what they are going to do and what is happening (e.g. the weather, or events taking place); this first session reinforces mastery of basic vocabulary. Secondly, the mid-morning conversation focuses on a weekly topic, which children are going to know each day more about, thus enhancing vocabulary that is specific to domains. Finally, the end-of-day session recaps the activities of the day, accompanied by either a game, a song or the reading of a story. In this way, the three

sessions provide more than mere transmission of new information, because they focus on good metacognitive practices such as prior knowledge activation, vocabulary anticipation and self-assessment of the day's learning experience.

4.1.5. Home-bound Reading Practices

Feitelson, Goldstein, Iraqi and Share (1993) observe in their research that kindergarten children would ask parents to repeat at home the story reading they got at school. This fact calls for careful preparation and assistance of home reading practices. Khamis-Dakwar, Froud and Gordon (2012) criticize any easy enthusiasm about home reading by saying that, left to its own, it runs the danger of being *random reading*. Teachers should give parents tips on how to select books and how to read them in a way that is as close as possible to standard Arabic. Needless to say, each kindergarten and each school will have to see what can be done with the population they serve, but the principle should hold that parents need to be made aware of code switching and diglossia-aware practices of reading. One good way of following up with parents is to engage them through home visiting and weekly newsletters on new pieces of vocabulary that are being learned at school (Fiano, 2013). Surely, social media can be used in an infinite variety of ways for these purposes.

An ethnographic investigation carried out by Simpson Baird, Kibler and Palacios (2014) on home-time story reading practices highlights that as each family relies on a unique cultural capital, therefore should work as a household community of practice where each member contributes to the reading development of the child. Parents and older siblings can play different roles (reading, story recall, elaborating, drawing, etc.), and indeed young learners too can enforce good reading practices when demanding from parents accuracy in their pronunciation or in story elaboration. What the family needs to be made aware of is the importance of question-based prompting and the awareness that

different members of the family may contribute to the same purpose giving their different contribution – also from the point of view of time-management .

Home outreach should also address the widespread problem of low habit of reading. It is a commonly held observation that young people do not read much, part of the blame being put on the hassle of modern urban life (el Aref, 2015). Schools should instead function as centers for the spread of the habit of reading. Once again, technology should play a role in this field, with digital literacy being explored as an avenue for reading.

4.2. A New Language Education Framework: Teaching Language Awareness

As a guiding principle, it should be said that Arabic speakers are bilinguals, and in order to reinforce both their thinking and their communication skills work must be done on their language awareness, or their metalinguistic skills. It is to be noted, though, that a lot of literature does not present any definition of language awareness that goes beyond the knowledge of one's own language in terms of grammar. For this reason, not all literature on metalinguistic skills is of help in dealing with bilingual and diglossic speakers. What is needed, instead, is the development of skills that clearly and purposely apply across different languages or across variants of the same language – as the diglossic nature of Arabic would call for.

One very interesting framework with such *translinguistic* outreach is presented by Corson (1999), who mentions nine areas of language awareness (pp. 135-143):

1. The structuring patterns of own language: speech, writing, word, phrases and sentences, discourse. This corresponds to the traditional knowledge of language's grammar.

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2. The similarities and differences between own language and others: history of own language, history of vocabulary assimilation and borrowing, comparison of structures and grammars across languages.
3. Own language's variations in the country (to be done with attention, as it may rise some issues of geographic and ethnic discrimination).
4. Own language's variations in other countries.
5. Other languages in own country.
6. Ancient languages, and their relationship with own language (this is similar to point 2, but deeper).
7. Appropriateness and correctness of language use: developing social skills of talking in a way that fits the context.
8. Metacognitive skills: self-monitoring and self-evaluation of own communication: it implies also to develop solid reasoning habits, and calls on use of semiotics, which sometimes requires to work on the conscious and subconscious meaning associated to words.
9. Appreciation of language as conventional and ever evolving.

In the opinion of Corson, these nine areas are prerequisites to any further critical language awareness discourse, in which power relations are also analyzed. In a later work (Corson, 2000), the same author suggests teachers should appreciate non-standard language varieties as assets and not as hindrances, giving up on the “ideology of correctness” and the “tendency to hyper-correct” (p. 70). Teachers should assume a more community-sensitive approach to the way students communicate. Far from being naïve, the idea here is not just to allow *any* variety, but instead to make students aware of when and to which extent these varieties are acceptable. Francis (1998) argues that children know how to adapt their register to situational variables as early as in fourth grade.

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A similar, but less elaborate, paradigm is presented by Kovacevic (2008), who says that language awareness is made up of linguistic awareness, psycholinguistic awareness, discourse awareness, sociolinguistic awareness and strategic awareness. To her opinion, language awareness is “the ability to employ intentional, conscious mechanisms” (p. 114).

Ranta (2008) elaborates on the relationship between explicit and implicit metalinguistic skills, which correspond to what Nikolov and Djigunovic (2006) call declarative and procedural knowledge of the language. Ranta calls for the adoption of ‘structured output practice.’ First, students are allowed to create pieces of speech and writing in a free fashion; secondly, they are helped to consolidate the form of what they are communicating in order to make it more compelling; last, they deliver their product. The idea that pursuing *precision* in language output is in itself a language awareness raising activity is also shared by Zheng (2012). The approach used by Ranta sounds more directive than the one adopted by Corson, but it relies on the same basic Vygotskyan ideas of scaffolding and zone of proximal development: language awareness is not attained in one go, but is rather the result of a gradual process.

In a similar way, Svalberg (2007, 2012) argues for the development of language awareness through a constructivist approach. Like Corson (1999, 2000), she calls on teachers to be community sensitive and fine-tune their sociolinguistic critical awareness of social dynamics both within the class and in society at large. Learning a language is after all largely dependent on motivation and readiness level, so the affective component should never be underestimated. In terms of language awareness strategies, she invites teachers to spend time with students to discuss their understanding of language. Language talk and ‘engagement with language’ diary, in which they retrospectively elaborate in a metacognitive way their engagement with the language being learned are the two

activities she suggests. D'warte (2012) is even more explicit about the idea of language talk and says that the class should become a community of practice, where students leverage on each other's understanding of language. This idea is deeply in line with the fundamental social-constructivist belief that learning is done first and foremost through socialization (Sullivan, Hegde, Ballard, & Ticknor, 2014).

In general, language awareness calls for a paradigm shift, from old-fashion culture consumption to constructivist-minded culture production. School and class webpages, blogs and tweets should become normal ways in which the school speaks of itself to the larger community (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008). School-wide competitions on literature production, be it in standard Arabic, colloquial, or mixed, both verbal and non-verbal should be enhanced, so that children find ways of developing their linguistic talents and skills beyond the narrow limits of curriculum coverage.

4.2.1. Teacher Training: Enhancing Linguistic Awareness

Teachers of Arabic need to be taught what diglossia is. This requires a deep knowledge of the language, and as a matter of fact Taha Hussein (1954) argued that teacher training faculties should contain experts of Arabic and other Semitic languages with a full grasp of the foundations of their subject matter. The differences between standard and colloquial Arabic goes far beyond phonology and relates to morphology, syntax and grammar (Khamis-Dakwar, Froud, & Gordon, 2012). Moreover, teachers should be made aware that “[c]hildren acquiring a diglossic language system are also acquiring sociolinguistic competence in code-switching” (p. 86), which means that learning to switch between codes entails not only mastering of content, but also social-dynamic awareness, which is a valuable component of the all-famous twenty-first century skills.

From the theoretical point of view, teachers should acquire a deep understanding of sociocultural constructivism, which is the school of thought of Vygotsky. Of particular

value in the work of Vygotsky (1962), they would need to acquire a solid understanding of the interplay between language, thinking and internalization. One element that is extremely clear in the sociocultural tradition is the importance of the teacher-student relationship (Moon, 2009). Language teachers should be made aware of this, so that the student does not learn Arabic “in spite of” them (Hussein, 1954, p. 54) but *from* them, in a conscious, volitional manner. Let it be said once more: never as with a diglossic language, is the mastery of standard Arabic going to happen ‘spontaneously’.

Teachers of Arabic need to learn from the skills developed by teachers of bilingual students. For example, code switching, which is adopted by teachers of bilingual students, should be adopted by teachers of Arabic too; not *any* form of code switching, though, but rather a purposeful approach to it, which is similar to the one suggested by Lin.

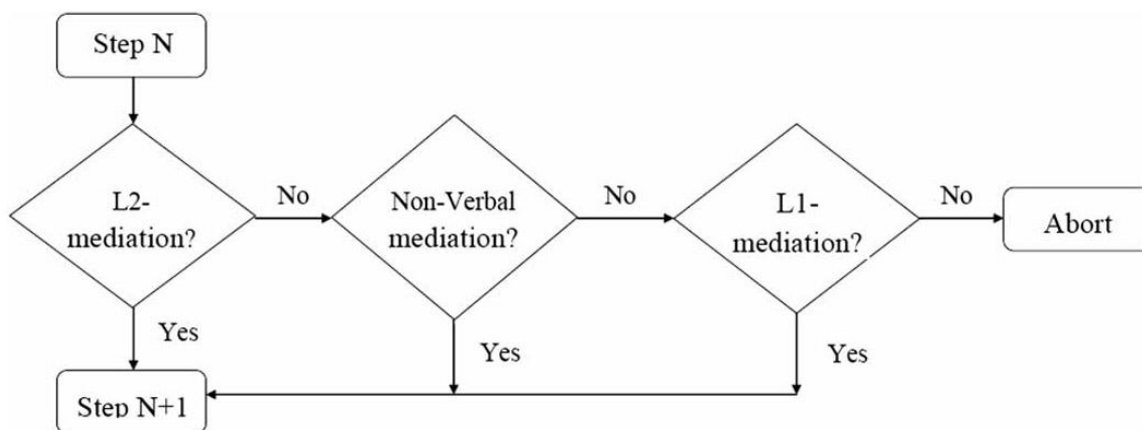


Figure 7. Teacher’s use of code-switching in a scaffolding situation. (Lin, 2012, p. 374)

The figure shows how the teacher should scaffold (again, a term that is dear to Vygotskyans) in a code-switching situation. For teachers teaching Arabic to Arabic speakers, replace L2 with standard Arabic (or at least with mixed Arabic) and L1 with colloquial Arabic. First the teacher gives the piece of instruction using only standard

Arabic, which is the target language that is being taught. Only if the student fails to understand instruction, then a different code is used, maybe also with some non-verbal mediation. The point here is that instruction should never be done only in colloquial Arabic and that code switching should be purposeful, not random. For early learners and for children with very low linguistic proficiency, the teacher should not use purely standard Arabic. The principle to hold to, here, is that students should hear that the Arabic spoken in class is different from the one spoken in their kitchen at home. This principle is nothing else than the application of the idea of *zone of proximal development*: you cannot expect the student's language to improve if you never stimulate it to do so through a meaningful exposure.

Beside the teacher's use of the two registers while teaching to early learners, code switching can be used as an area to which teachers should draw older student's attention. Code switching is "an indirect exploration of register" (D'warte, 2012, p. 129), and as such it can be used as case-study material to engage the class on discussion about language use and language varieties.

4.3. Conclusion: The Paradigm Shift Called For

After introducing the universal critique to subtractive paradigms of L2 teaching, this chapter has presented the two main areas that – from a school leadership point of view – need to be closely monitored and promoted: the mastery of Arabic and the acquisition of language awareness and metalinguistic skills. While the dominant culture would like children to learn English language and English alone, research shows that it is possible – and indeed preferable by all accounts – to learn one's mother tongue first and master a foreign language later on in the years of early literacy. Away from the 'the-sooner-the-better' mentality, the idea proposed here is to adopt first a pedagogically strong learning

of Arabic, and then to move into the learning of the foreign language by means of enhanced metalinguistic skills. In the concise words of Skutnabb-Kangass (2009), the ideal should be to follow a program that takes the child into her mother tongue first, and secondly “from mother tongue to other tongue” (p. 342).

As far as instructional practices are concerned, some working principles can be drawn. First, the idea that change has to happen both in the official and in the hidden curriculum. Changing books and tools would not affect as much as the change in the language we use within the school corridors and playgrounds. Secondly, the Vygotskian principle of zone of proximal development should be upheld; the language spoken at school needs to sound familiar and meaningful enough to be understood, but also different enough from the language spoken at home in order to stimulate students' linguistic skills. With regard to this, schools and district should develop their own language policies (Corson, 1999), and devote professional development programs that enhance teachers' language awareness. Thirdly, grammar should function for the sake of communication and culture production, rather than being made of formulae that sound more like magic ancient spells.

With regard to language awareness, there is need for a paradigm shift: language learning needs to be understood as a bottom-up process, where meaning is constructed in a variety of ways (Sullivan, Hegde, Ballard, & Ticknor, 2014; Verspoor, 2008). Language awareness helps students not to ‘cram’ abstract rules better, but to make use of linguistic tools with deeper understanding, and so to effectively make use and own the language they speak.

CHAPTER 5

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The combination of two dilemmas, namely the English-versus-Arabic one and the Standard-versus-Colloquial Arabic one, draw a very complex picture of what is at stake in the teaching and learning of Egypt's national language. History shows that languages carry a heavy political value, and therefore any attempt to change the course of action is doomed to be opposed from the higher political spheres. Psycholinguistics and neuroscience, though, make very strong claims for the complex reality of Arabic as a diglossic language, and call for dramatic changes in educational practices.

This literature review addressed the question of which value native Arabic speakers give to their mother tongue in their formal education, especially *vis-à-vis* the role played by foreign languages and the fact that Arabic is a diglossic language. The answer that the researcher is to draw from this investigation is that the value of Arabic is overlooked. Mainstream popular perception in Egypt and in the region underestimates what it means to master their mother tongue from a linguistic and pedagogical point of view. The literature presented in this research complains that the learning of Arabic language is taken for granted, as a spontaneous process, which hardly needs any explicit formal effort; quite the opposite, if all languages need direct, purposeful, explicit instruction, the case is even stronger for Arabic, where the gap between colloquial and written variants is undeniably wide.

All too often, parents and school owners are making the choice to teach children English and English alone, with the delusional perception that this will assure their children a bright future in the job market. Literature, instead, shows that the mastery of L1 is an irreplaceable resource for the learning of other foreign languages: the more you know your own language and you are aware of its structures and varieties, the more you

will be ready when facing a second or a third language. The implications of this cannot be underestimated, and indeed all school leaders and educators should be made aware of what research has to say in regard to language acquisition, and counteract superficial opinions held by parents (no matter how good their intentions).

All parents dream to win for their children a guarantee of employment, but very few seem to consider carefully what the Vienna Manifesto calls “the cost of monolingualism.” To limit children to the mastery of only one language, without paying due attention to their mother tongue is in fact harming not only their humanistic formation, but also the very possibility of a better cognitive development. This might have a negative impact on job attainment in a way that should not be underestimated. Schools in Egypt and elsewhere in the region ought to consider very seriously the foundations of the language policy reform called on by the Vienna Manifesto, namely:

- a. the right of all citizens to learn and use their own national and minority languages,
- b. the right of all citizens to learn at least two foreign languages in compulsory school education,
- c. the duty of all governments to encourage and promote foreign language learning even beyond school education,
- d. the duty of all governments to promote multilingual undertakings, institutions, homepages and the like by tax relief and bonus systems (e.g. in contract award processes) or similar measures,
- e. the duty of all governments to organise in an exemplary way the establishment, access and utilisation of public terminology resources and to promote standardization activities by different measures (incentive systems, legal provisions). (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2001, pp. 1-2)

5.1. Limitations

There are at least three main limitations to this literature review, the first two being methodological and the third conceptual. From the methodological point of view, not being a native-like Arabic speaker, the researcher could not access literature in Arabic. Reading academic material on the topic would have required much more time than the researcher had at his disposal. While it is true that a research in the literature that is available in Arabic might produce different results, nonetheless it should be pointed out that the majority of the sources that have been made use of are written by native Arabic speakers, which in itself helps to ensure the insider's perspective. It should not be underestimated that major reference sources such as Hussein (1954) and Safouan (2007) are translations of original works written in Arabic.

The second methodological limitation consists in the difference between the researcher's theoretical framework and the material he found at hand. Needless to say, the theoretical framework sets the researcher's expectations, and in the present literature review it is fair to say that they were not met, or at least not completely. To the best of the researcher's understanding, the reason of this mismatch is due to sociopolitical factors. While English-world literature on bilingualism and multilingualism is largely concerned with the life of immigrant communities and the economically underprivileged (refugees *in primis*) the same cannot be said of Arabic-world sociolinguistics, which is instead much more concerned with issues of the national identity of the Arabs, which is challenged by national borders. In light of this, it can be said that the European debate on multilingualism is closer to the Arabic paradigm, as it also challenges the very idea of national borders, while the North American one is much more focused on the post-colonial perspectives of language as power relation.

For this reason, the contribution of critical pedagogy is much more felt in the English speaking world than it is in the Arabic speaking one, where daily experience of the researcher himself clearly shows that policy makers and society at large have little-to-no concern for minorities, or at least for immigrants and refugees from the rest of the African continent. Emerging literature on how critical pedagogy and post-colonial critiques are being adopted into the Arabic-speaking world might produce, in the future, some more reflection in line with the theoretical framework of the researcher.

Finally, the conceptual limitation of the present work lays in the very use of the idea of diglossia. After reading how the definition of diglossia has evolved since the days of Ferguson and Badawi, one is left wondering why linguistic academics should stick to this category at all, since it is biased to a dualistic oversimplification of the issue. Perhaps it is with regard to this concept that an access to Arabic sources might have produced a more elaborate conceptual framework.

5.2. For Further Research

As far as the relationship between Arabic and English is concerned, there is still much research to carry out on the use that is made and that can be made when teaching scientific and technological subjects. Studies on the role played by Tahtawi in the introduction of scientific language into Arabic, through word borrowing and creation of neologisms that made use also of non-standard Arabic, have generated divided opinions on the fact that Arabic may in fact be able to produce its own scientific vocabulary (Elkhafaifi, 2001; Sawaie, 2000). More needs to be found out from practice-informed evidence, rather than only philological speculation.

Secondly, further research should conduct case studies, from a longitudinal perspective, on how subtractive and additive multilingual programs compare in terms of

language proficiency and accuracy. While there is abundance of evidence from the quantitative point of view (Bialystok, Peets, & Moreno, 2014), qualitative longitudinal studies would add more relevance and would voice out children's own understanding of diglossia and bilingualism, which seems to be an important element to be included in the debate. For example, there is not yet enough research on code switching, vocabulary borrowing and neologisms as they are made on social media, nor on the impact of such phenomena on student's formal education. Valuable questions on how much of their informal Facebook language do they reproduce in schools and what should language teachers do about it could direct research on code-switching within the contemporary era of increased use of social media. For the sociocultural constructivist researcher the field to explore is limitless, especially if exploring which worldview and which aspirations the young generations have for their own.

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