



The Story of Arabic Language: Historical Linguistics Study



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Abstract. In this study, the researcher studies Arabic as one of the surviving languages of the Semitic family. This study also highlights the historical development of Arabic pre-Islam, after the advent of Prophet Mohammed and Islam, and after the end of the Islamic empire, and all the ups and downs that the Arabic Language went through during its development. Accordingly, these changes resulted in various Arabic languages, such as Classic Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, and Colloquial Arabic. Most Arabs can speak standard Arabic in formal situations and a dialect for everyday communications; this case is named diglossia.

Keywords: Arabic, Arabic Dialects; Classic Arabic, Diglossia Islam, and Standard Arabic.

1. Introduction

It is difficult to give the exact number of the world's languages. This number changes rapidly as people are born and die, and children are considered speakers of a language if they reach a certain age. Another problem is whether



to count only native speakers or those who speak a certain language as a second or third language (Pereltsvaig, 2012, p.11). Nearly 7,000 languages are spoken around the world today. More than 2,000 languages in Africa and Asia, 300 in Europe, Americas with over 1,000 Languages, and the Pacific region with more than 1,300 languages (Leben, 2016, p.1). The majority have few speakers; thus, half will probably disappear in the following decades. These languages are gathered into 430 language families based on their similarities and origin. In addition, 300 sign languages are used primarily in communicating with the deaf (Leben, 2016, p.1).

Arabic holds a prominent position among the world's languages. The language boasts a remarkable number of speakers, exceeding 420 million, in Africa and the Middle East. Arabic is the primary surviving language of the Semitic family, in addition to Hebrew. It is spoken in twenty-seven Arab countries, from Iraq in the east to Mauritania and Morocco in the west, and from Syria and Tunisia in the north to Somalia in the south (Kamusella, 2017, p.118; Leben, 2016, p.5). Arabic is also the first or second Language in neighboring states to the Arab World, such as Western Iran, South Sudan, Mali, Senegal, Chad, Niger, northern Nigeria, Cameroon, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Israel, and South Turkey. There are also Arab communities settled in the Americas, Western Europe, and Southeast Asia that use Arabic in their everyday lives (Khan, 2015, p.4). Among the world's languages, Arabic ranks fourth in the number of speakers after English, French, and Spanish (Khan, 2015, p.4). 1974, Arabic was selected as one of the sixth United Nations official languages, with English, Russian, Chinese, Spanish, and French. (Al-Huri, 2015, p.28; A World Bank Policy Approach Paper, 2021, p.32; Khan, 2015, p.9)

Arabic is a prestigious language in Arabic-speaking countries and among all Muslim societies. It is a Prestigious position because Arabic is the Language of the Qur'an, and it is used for all cultural, religious, scholarly, and administrative purposes (Versteegh, 1997; Al-Huri, 2015, p.28; A World Bank Policy Approach Paper, 2021, p.32). However, millions of Arabic speakers are Christians, and few are Jews (Al-Huri, 2015, p.29). The Arabic Language is also known as the "Language of Dād." Dād is a distinctive letter and sound that is used by the Arabs only (Khan, 2015, p.5)

Language is dynamic and complex. It changes over time, from one generation to the next. Some words die while others come to life; others change their old meanings, and others gain new meanings and grammar. This did not happen in the past but will also happen in the future. Checking previous





documentation, one can notice the changes in suffixes, prefixes, or spelling that disappear or appear over time and variations in word meanings. The Arabic Language is no exclusion, yet it delivers a challenge for the historical linguist. Contrasting several languages where the standardization of writing was a contended and long process, Arabic writing was standardized in the eighth century, if not earlier, while spoken Language has continued to change because of Arabic contacts with non-Arabic languages (Al-Huri, 2015, p.28; Belinkov et al., 2019, p.2). Accordingly, Within the Arab World, one can find an abundance of colloquial forms in Arabic. We can say as thus, classical Arabic serves as the primary foundation for all of them.

Furthermore, local Arabic dialects also appeared due to the massiveness of the Arabic regions. There are distinct Moroccan, Egyptian, Tunisian, Algerian, Sudanese, Iraqi, Hijazi, Syrian, Najdi, Khaliji, and Yemeni dialects; nonetheless, the written system is the same (Khan, 2015, p.8). According to the previously mentioned details, the following questions are raised:

1. How many types of Arabic languages are there?
2. Why do Arabs not speak classic Arabic?
3. Why Colloquial Arabic, despite its default is, the controlling type in the Arabic world?

2. Arabic Influence on the World

Arabic contains 28 characters (or 29 if hamzah is included). Like Hebrew, Arabic is written from right to left, although nearly all other languages are written from left to right. As opposed to other languages, Arabic calligraphy is greatly developed. There are various styles of writing Arabic characters. Among them is the Persian style, which Urdu adopted. The versatility and beauty of Arabic calligraphy dazed the famous painter Picasso. As a result, Arabic became a skillful instrument to describe and express scientific, religious, and philosophical ideas. Arabic, which was pre-Islam simply a language of oratory and poetry, was established as a language of science, arts, philosophy, and medicine after the beginning of Islam. Arabs began writing books a century after the beginning of Islam. Accordingly, in the second century of Islam, hundreds of thousands of books on various topics were written in Arabic. Most of these books are used by scholars (Khan, 2015, p.7).

Arabic is promoted greatly as Islam's official Language, as many Islamic ceremonies can only be done by reading Qur'anic verses and prayers in Arabic. Consequently, every Muslim around the world knows a little Arabic. Over the centuries, some Coptic churches and Jews of the Arab world used Arabic as





their formal religious Language (Khan, 2015, p.7; Danecki 2000: 9-21; Kamusella, 2017, p.118).

In the old world, Arabic spread from Canton in China to Venice in Italy as the Language of commerce, science, and medicine. This continued until the 16th century CE when the colonial attacked and broke the Arab control over naval trade by looting the Arab commercial ships in open seas. At that point, numerous languages in the world were affected by Arabic. Uncountable Arabic words were borrowed from other languages such as Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, Albanian, and Sicilian. Some languages like Urdu, Pashto, Persian, Turkish, Kashmiri, Hebrew, Tajik, Kurdish, Somali, Tigrini, Swahili, Tigri, Hausa, Oromian, Malayu, Maltese, Divehi, Bhasa, Fulani, etc. over 30 percent of their vocabularies are borrowed from Arabic. Many languages adopted Arabic calligraphy, such as Urdu, Persian, Kurdish, Pashto, Kashmiri, Sindhi, Tajik, Bahasa Malayu, and Eastern Turkistani (Khan, 2015, p.8).

Until the 16th century, Arabic was considered the international lingua franca. At that time, many noble Arabic works on science, Islam, and literature were written in Andalu. Additionally, many important Greek, Sanskrit, and Persian books were translated into Arabic and vice versa. Thus, Arabic has added many medical, scientific, and commercial terms that are still used in many European languages today, like alchemy (al-kimiya'), alcove (qubbah), admiral (amir al-bahr), alcohol (al-Kuhl), alembic (imbiq), caliber (qalab), algorithm (al-khawarizmi), algebra (al-jabr), apricot (barquq), aniline (al-nil), amalgam (al-malgham), almanac (al-munakh), alkali (qaly), amber ('ambar), attar ('itr), azure (lazward), azimuth (al-sumut), camphor (kafur), zero (sifr), sofa (suffah), zenith (simt al-ras), Fakir (faqir), sugar (sukkar), camel (jamal), etc. (Khan, 2015, p.6).

3. The Period Prior to the Rise of Islam

Throughout history, Arabic is recognized as a part of the Afro-Asiatic language family that includes more than three hundred languages (Abu-Absi, 1986). Two exemplary instances of this living language are Arabic and Hebrew (Al-Huri, 2015, p.29).

Starting in the fourth century, Arabic was found in the Syrian Desert as an engraving. At that time, a vibrant oral poetic tradition bloomed among the Arab tribes dwelling in the Arabian Peninsula (Al-Huri, 2015, p.29). Ryding (2005) indicates little is known about the essence of Arabic between the third and seventh centuries. He states that "the only written evidence is in the form of epigraphic material (brief rock inscription and graffiti) found in the Northwest





and Central Arabia” (Ryding, 2005). Subsequently, these written works were not documented until the advent of Islam’s advent and the Glorious Quran's revelation (Al-Huri, 2015, p.29). Holes (2004) declares that “the only direct evidence we have of the linguistic structure of Arabic before the time the Prophet Mohammed (570-632) is to be found in orally composed and transmitted poetry” (Holes, 2004). Historically, Arabic scripts have experienced several changes over time. Before the Glorious Quran, the Arabic writing system was in the form of inscriptions on stones or rocks. (Al-Huri, 2015, p.29). The Arabic scripts are mixed with Nabataean and Syriac scripts; both were derived from Aramaic (Abu-Absi, 1986).

Scant information was available about Arab people or the Arabic language in the seventh century worldwide (Versteegh, 1997). Before the advent of Prophet Mohammed and Islam, Arabic was only spoken in the Arabian Peninsula. At that time, Arabic native speakers spoke diverse dialects varying linguistically and socially from one region to another. Therefore, the Mecca dialect was considered highly prestigious merely because it was the dialect of Quraish. Quraish Tribe had a higher position among other Arab tribes as they were considered the masters of the Arabian Peninsula because of Mecca, the homeland of Quraish, a strategic location at a crossroads for exchanging goods and trading. Likewise, Mecca housed all gods worshipped by Arabs then, and all Arabs used to come to Mecca to worship and pilgrimage to their gods. However, after the coming of Islam, Prophet Mohammed was also a member of the Quraish Tribe; thus, their dialect continued to be the highly prestigious Arabic dialect in both pre and during Islam (Al-Huri, 2015, p.30).

4. Arabic at the Dawn of Islam

Universally, Arabs have gained recognition for their proficiency in both migrating as well as trading. These two dynamics, transference and exchange, created many connections among individuals from an Arabic background and those who do not understand the language in Iraq, Palestine, the Nile Delta in Egypt, and Syria (Comrie, 2008). Moreover, the emergence of Islam, the advent of Islam, and Prophet Mohammed greatly added to transmitting (Al-Huri, 2015, p.29) Arabic from an almost unknown language to one of the most important languages in the presence of Islam. Historically, Arabic at the start of Islam had two main sources: pre-Islamic poetry and the Quran (Versteegh, 1997). Such sources were known as the center of Arabic standardization. They played an essential role in the progress of Arabic. Al-Huri (2015) states that “the Quran revelation constituted the cornerstone of Arabic development,





particularly in terms of developing the written system of Arabic. Since the Quran's revelation, Arabic has been a language of poetry and permanently sacralized, as the chosen Language of the Quran" (Al-Huri, 2015, p.29).

Spanning the range of 700 to 1200 AD, the Islamic Empire expanded, a turning point with Arabic progression as a global form of expression for culture, maturation of human communities, administration, diplomacy, scholarly writing in sciences (Ryding, 2005). Many experimental scholarly works in Arabic are still considered references in European scientific research. Thus, Arabic was the top Language in the world during the Middle Ages. The European monarchs used to send their offspring to Arab regions to study various sciences. Arabic was an international language similar to English presently. Various outstanding Muslim scholars created several written works in Arabic, among them the physician and philosopher Ibn Sina (1037), the historian Al-Tabari (923), Al-Bairouni (1048), and many others. Hence, many Arabs, non-Arabs, and Christian scholars added to intellectual life under the Abbasid era (750-1258 AD), During which Arabic sciences and literature reached the golden age (Al-Huri, 2015, p.29). Classical writers of Arabic prose, Ibn Al-Muqaffa, and Arabic grammarian Sibawaih, were Persians. Arabic is the world's richest Language in the number of expressions. In the 14th century, Ibn Manzur wrote the Lisan Al-'Arab lexicon, which contains over 80,000 words, whereas Samuel Johnson's English dictionary in the 18th century contains only 42,000 words (Khan, 2015, pp. 6-7).

5. Post Islamic Empery

After its growth, Arabic got a setback due to the Mongol / Tatar invasion, the Crusades, the Ottoman State control for 400 years, and the Western colonialism that brought its languages. These powers tried to destroy Arabic, and somehow, they achieved their goal. The development of printing and the extent of modern education in Arab countries restricted this process because Arabic books became available everywhere. Soon, in the seventeenth century, newspapers and magazines appeared in the Arabic world (Khan, 2015, pp. 8-9). Accordingly, three commonly types of Arabic co-inhabit side by side "side by side for each has a definite social usage." They are Classical Arabic (CA), Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and Colloquial Arabic (Ferguson, 1959; Al-Huri, 2015, p.31).

5.1. Classic Arabic





Classical Arabic (CA) includes; The Arab literary legacy and the Quran. Classical Arabic holds a prestigious position for all Muslims worldwide because of its historical and religious esteem (Al-Huri, 2015, p.31). Classical Arabic was developed from diverse Bedouin tribes in the Arabian Peninsula, as documented in ancient Arabias poetic heritage before the advent of Islam (Ferguson, 1959). The Quran originally composed in Arabic, which held a deep reverence not only for Arabs but also all Muslims internationalities. All Muslims worldwide must know some classical Arabic to do their religious acts properly (Al-Huri, 2015, p.31). Ennaji (2002) remarks that “the Muslim fundamentalists go even further to claim that only classical Arabic is worth teaching and learning because it reflects Muslim tradition, belief and values” (Ennaji, 2002). The latest states Arabic is linked with origin network, tradition, and genuine cultural identity. Hence, many scholars consider classical Arabic the "real language," while the different Arabic conversational vernacular are inaccurate kinds of this Language (Al-Huri, 2015, p.31).

Haeri (2003) states that the majority of classical languages disappeared, such as Sanskrit, which Urdu, Hindi, and Bengali replaced; Latin ultimately gave way to the European vernaculars till the Vatican quit using it as the Language of prayers (Haeri, 2003). However, Classical Arabic kept own linguistic features and purity for over 1500 years as its religious standing as a language of the Quran is being used in the prayers for five times each day by all Muslims worldwide (Al-Huri, 2015, p.31).

5.2. Modern Standard Arabic

In the nineteenth century, the standard Language began when Arabic dropped some outdated vocab and expressions along to adding new scholarly and technical terminology as the world started to change rapidly. Versteegh (1997) believes that the emergence of recent Standard Arabic (MSA) was the rebirth of Classical Arabic (A World Bank Policy Approach Paper, 2021, p.32). It is derived directly from the Language of the Quran (Kamusella, 2017, p.117), Regardless of the conflicts that usually happen among Arab countries occasionally. Arabic is a vital symbolic factor of Arab unity. Linguistically, Arabic is the mother Language for all Arab states from the Gulf to the Ocean (Al-Huri, 2015, p.32).

Furthermore, standard Arabic is used mainly for writing and rarely for speaking, which indicates that there are no native speakers of standard Arabic. Thus, it has no speech community. It can be likened to Latin, as Latin was the sole written Language in Europe until the Reformation. In the seventh to the



ninth century, Latin spoken Language was not used anymore because the community started using vernaculars. Later, these vernaculars substituted Latin in written use as well. Today, each European community has a spoken form corresponding to a written language (Kamusella, 2017, p.117).

Standard Arabic is used for all Arabic official documents, newspapers, magazines, books, business-related materials, and street signs. The majority of educated Arabic speakers can use Standard Arabic as a "lingua franca" to exchange thoughts with each other despite of their dialects or nationalities as they have been sufficiently exposed to Modern Standard Arabic through religious practices, tradition, social situations, and work-related (Ryding, 2005; Al-Huri, 2015, p.32). Modern Standard Arabic is not the first Language for Arabs; it is learned in school (A World Bank Policy Approach Paper, 2021, p.32). Thus, Arab children understand Standard Arabic well because of their learning curriculum and regular exposure to the cartoon shows in MSA. (Al-Huri, 2015, p.32) If a vernacular term is found in one's standard writing, it can be considered a sign of his/her low level of education. Usually, such people need help to frame their thoughts in an accurate standard language (Versteegh, 2014, pp. 192-220; Kamusella, 2017, p.127).

In conclusion, scholars distinguish between Standard Arabic and Classical Arabic. Chiefly because of Classical Arabic drives Modern Standard Arabic. Nevertheless, Classical Arabic is the origin language of all spoken Arabic kinds across the globe (Al-Huri, 2015, p.31)

5.3. Colloquial Arabic

Arabic multiplicities are all driven from Classical Arabic or, to some linguists' viewpoints, "corrupted forms" of Arabic (Al-Huri, 2015, p.32). Versteegh (1997) states that "important changes occurred in the Arabic language as a consequence of its spread over an enormous territory and its contact with many different languages (south Arabian, Persian, Greek, and Berber)." He shows that the acquisition of Arabs by many speakers of other languages significantly impacted Arabic (Al-Huri, 2015, p.32).

Colloquial Arabic is considered the mother tongue of all Arabs as it is acquired spontaneously with no need to learn or schooling grammar as with standard Arabic. Colloquial Arabic includes diverse Arabic varieties, including Sedentary and Bedouin speech, major cities and the countryside, religious groups, ethnicities, educated and illiterate, men and women, social classes, old and young, etc. (Al-Huri, 2015, p.31). Accordingly, various types of colloquial Arabic exist, including Iraqi, Levantine, Gulf Arabic, Yemeni, Egyptian,



Sudanese Hassaniya (Mauritania), Maghrebi (North Africa except Egypt), and other forms within these dialects. Formal Arabic has mostly stayed the same over time, while colloquial Arabic has changed rapidly, resulting in gaps between the two (A World Bank Policy Approach Paper, 2021, p.32).

In the Arabic world, Children grow up hearing colloquial Arabic in their communities and homes. They are expected to read and write in standard Arabic as soon as they enter school. Usually, oral language proficiency is a requirement for reading acquisition; thus, Arabic students need help with reading. In Arabic-speaking states, parents frequently do not have children's books in their homes, and they do not read books to their children as well, compared to other parents in other nations. Consequently, children can move from their first colloquial Language to standard Arabic more easily if they are exposed in their childhood to Arabic literature (ibid.)

Ineffective teaching methods and Low-quality materials make it problematic for children to learn standard Arabic. In schools, learning and teaching materials use MSA. Children are taught to write and read firmly, with a great focus on word spelling and grammar, and without any spontaneous or creative engagement to develop their speaking skills. Sometimes, teachers use colloquial Arabic to help students to understand certain difficult parts of the class. Hence, this adds a new level of complication. Typically, teachers were the products of poor Arabic language schooling.

Furthermore, they must gain the skills and knowledge to use Arabic. Frequently, students dislike Arabic language classes as they feel insecure about their reading and writing abilities. Due to the need for exposure to standard Arabic literature and vocabulary in their childhood (ibid.32, 78).

6. Diglossia

McWhorter (2004, p. 55) defines diglossia as "the sociological division of labor in many societies between two languages, or two varieties of a language" (McWhorter, 2004, p. 55). All Arabic speakers have two forms of Arabic, the Arabic of public use (writing, media, speeches), which is fundamentally different from the one learned from parents. This phenomenon is common worldwide, and it is named diglossia. (McWhorter, 2004, p. 17)

Lots of researchers considered Arabic as the best illustration of diglossia. In 1959, Ferguson published an article entitled "Diglossia" in the journal Word, in which he used Arabic as an example of diglossia (Kamusella, 2017, p.122). He argues that diglossic communication societies have a "High variety (H) that is 'pure' and very prestigious and a Low variety (L) with no official status."





(Versteegh, 2006; Al-Huri, 2015, p.30). These two varieties are called diglossia, which means "two tongues." In Greek (McWhorter, 2004, p. 17)

However, there is still a debate among sociolinguists regarding how many multiplicities there are in Arabic. Ferguson (1959) states that there are two diverse varieties of Arabic: the high multiplicity (Classical or Modern Standard Arabic) and the low variety (vernaculars). In his article (1959) "Diglossia," Ferguson mentions Arabic diglossic, "where two varieties of a language exist side by side throughout the community, with each having a definite role to play" (Ferguson, 1959). Conventional Arabic represents the variety used in religious sermons, media, literary works, and schools. In contrast, colloquial Arabic represents the inferior diversity and is used for shopping, kin talk, talking with companions, and everyday communication (Al-Huri, 2015, pp. 30-31; McWhorter, 2004, p. 17).

7. Conclusion

After dealing with the important roles that the Arabic Language played throughout history and how it became the global Language of sciences, art, and literature during the golden age, the researcher highlights the various changes that Arabic underwent over all these centuries and how Arabic changed from classical to standard Arabic and different other dialects. These Colloquial Arabic are an un-pure form of Standard Arabic. Therefore, to start using standard Arabic, there are supposed to be some serious steps in Improving Arabic language teaching methods that would increase the total learning outcomes. Secondly, parents should read their children some children's literature at an early age to support their vocabulary development. Encouraging student-teacher and student-student engagement in school using standard Arabic.

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