

Teaching MSA and Colloquial Arabic

Arabic Diglossia and Arabic Language Teaching:

Teaching and Learning Vernacular and Standard Varieties

By Carole Sneed, Sept., 2012

Arabic diglossia poses challenges for teachers and learners of Arabic as a second or foreign language. Arabic speakers use a “high” variety, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), for formal uses, and various “low” vernacular varieties for everyday conversation. Most current university programs teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language only teach MSA. This creates difficulties for students who are unable to converse in everyday language with native speakers. Another problem is that such programs often require an artificial classroom environment in which language varieties are used in inappropriate contexts. It is proposed that a vernacular variety of Arabic should be introduced before or alongside the teaching of MSA in Arabic courses.

Native Speaker Usage of Varieties

Arabic is a diglossic language (Ferguson, 1959) with many vernacular or colloquial “L” varieties and an “H” variety, *fusḥa*, “eloquent language,” comprised of Classical, Qur’anic Arabic and a modernized version, MSA. The vocabulary of some vernaculars overlaps with MSA by as much as 90% (Cadora, 1976, p. 254); however, differences include very common words such as those meaning “see,” “go,” and “not,” as well as morpho-syntactic and phonological distinctions. A continuum of levels is used between MSA and vernaculars (Hary, 1996), and code-switching between levels occurs even in public speeches (Bassiouney, 2009).

Usage of the varieties is complex (Wahba, 2006). Classical Arabic is used in religious contexts and idiomatic expressions. Most written contexts use MSA, including television broadcasts that are read aloud. However, some scripts, novels, personal letters, poetry and, increasingly, Internet posts and texting (Daoudi, 2011), are written colloquially, although there is no standard accepted writing system for vernacular dialects (Younes, 2006, p. 165). Vernaculars are used for almost all oral communication. Egyptians interviewed by Haeri (2003) called their vernacular “the dialect of life,” used for speech “from me to you directly” (p. 38), emphasizing that the vernacular connects speakers personally. Claims have been made that spoken MSA is used for discussions in professional contexts; however, Wilmsen (2006), working in Egypt, disagrees, observing that even intellectuals and professionals almost always speak in the vernacular (p. 131). In conversations between professionals from different countries, forms of Educated Spoken Arabic, or Formal Spoken Arabic, an intermediate variety based on vernaculars, may be used rather than MSA (Ryding, 1991). Thus both a vernacular and MSA are necessary for communication in Arabic. Arabic learners also need the communicative competence to recognize appropriate times to use and mix varieties (Bassiouney, 2009). Communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) includes using language appropriately for a particular context in a particular community, also called “sociolinguistic competence,” defined as “knowledge of the rules of language use” (Canale &

Swain, 1980, p. 4). The complex rules for Arabic use are not quickly learned. However, the Arabic student who only knows one variety, and uses it in all situations, is a “disabled learner who cannot communicate adequately” (Wahba, 2006, p. 141).

Native speakers of Arabic learn a vernacular as their first language. Their first exposures to *fusḥa* are likely to be Qur’anic readings and television programs (Haeri, 2003). They study MSA in school, explained in their vernacular. Ibrahim (2009), using a repetition priming study, found that Palestinian Arabs process MSA as a second language, similar to their processing of Hebrew, rather than as a first language. In general, even a very educated Arabic speaker, while possibly able to read MSA quite fluently, will speak MSA somewhat haltingly, with numerous errors, while being comfortably fluent in a vernacular variety (Stevens, 2006; Wilmsen, 2006). Thus, if students wish to approximate native speaker competencies, they need higher oral proficiency in a vernacular than in MSA (Haddad, 2006).

Classroom Language Usage

It is, of course, necessary to teach MSA so that students can read Arabic media and literature. However, in most MSA-only classrooms, an artificial environment has been introduced as students are expected also to converse in MSA, a variety of language not used for conversation by native speakers. Students and teachers feel a need to use speaking and comprehension to reinforce the vocabulary and structures being learned, but native speakers use a different variety for those skills (Haddad, 2006). For example, the popular Middlebury Summer Arabic Program in the U.S. asks students to sign a language “pledge” to use only Arabic during the nine-week session, meaning that they will speak in MSA at all times (Abdalla, 2006). The goal of immersing students in Arabic is laudable, but the method is artificial, and possibly harmful. Wilmsen (2006), who directs a well-known Arabic program in Cairo, has observed that students who speak MSA in immersion environments “later consistently produce non-native-sounding constructions and uncharacteristic lexis even after spending long stretches of time in the Arab world” (p. 137). As Alish (1992, p. 263) adds, “Many of us who are concerned with sociolinguistic *appropriateness* argue that MSA is a written variety and should never be used for speaking in or outside the classroom.”

To counter this difficulty, the University of Cambridge has adopted “a radically communicative approach” in which students, from the beginning, speak in Palestinian colloquial Arabic, read in MSA, and discuss texts in colloquial, enabling students to become familiar with each variety in its standard context of use (Dickins & Watson, 2006, p. 110). Using varieties for their appropriate functions enables students to communicate more like native speakers (Wahba, 2006). Cornell University follows a similar program, with Educated Levantine Arabic (ELA) as the spoken variety (Younes, 2006). Students use audio recordings in ELA to practice listening and speaking, rather than written materials, thus using varieties consistently and appropriately. When teachers with different dialectal backgrounds teach the program, students learn words and pronunciations from different dialects, which does not seem to create a problem.

Student Motivation

Many students who have studied only MSA in university classrooms share the experience of Haeri (2003): “Eventually, I went to Egypt . . . and was stunned to discover, like many researchers before me, that I was unequipped to have even a rudimentary conversation in the language” (p. ix). While such students may be able to express themselves in language that some educated speakers can understand, they are not able to comprehend the most basic everyday speech (Alosh, 1992, p. 264).

For those students whose goals are translating written materials, reading Arabic literature, or studying the Qur’an, an exclusive focus on MSA or Classical Arabic may be sufficient. Oral interpreters, though, need familiarity with various colloquial varieties (Wilmsen, 2006). Studies show that most students in Arabic university classes place a high priority on learning to speak and listen, as well as read and write (Wilmsen, 2006; Younes, 2006). The majority have orientations or goals including interacting and conversing with people who speak Arabic, and traveling to the Arab world (Belnap, 2006; Husseinali, 2006), for which they need and want vernacular varieties (Palmer, 2008).

In examining student motivation, Qafisheh (1972) compared two groups of students. Each group included some students studying in the U.S. and some in the United Arab Emirates. One group first studied a vernacular, Gulf Arabic (GA), for a year, then studied MSA for a year. The other group followed the reverse order. He found that the group who studied the vernacular first had “higher motivation, higher retention, lower drop-out rate, and more material coverage” (p. 8). At one point they were faster but less accurate readers, and poorer spellers, than the MSA-first group, but by the end of the second year those differences disappeared. Those who started with MSA began by laboriously spelling out unfamiliar words, while the GA group, by the time they started reading in MSA, learned to read more quickly and could comprehend what they were reading. The GA group also learned about local culture, through vernacular dialogues, which increased motivation. In a more recent study in Israel (Donitsa-Schmidt, Inbar, & Shohany, 2004), spoken Palestinian Arabic was taught to Hebrew-speaking students for two years before MSA. Student motivation increased as well as positive attitudes toward Arabs and their language and culture.

It seems reasonable that students would be more motivated by first learning Arabic they can use in conversations with native speakers. Learning one variety at a time, beginning with a vernacular as native speakers do, might also make learning Arabic easier and less confusing for students. In an analysis of Arabic phonology and grammar, Haddad (2006) concludes that, cognitively, it is preferable to learn a vernacular before, rather than after, MSA. He suggests further field research is needed in this area.

This is the reverse of the situation in most Western universities today, in which students begin with MSA, which they are expected to master, and a vernacular may be introduced later and will likely be learned less fluently. Ryding (2006, p. 16) calls this “reverse privileging,” in which the vernacular language of the “primary discourses of familiarity” is postponed or minimalized, while the language of secondary, formal discourse (MSA) is made central. She claims that it is

discouraging and limiting for students to be denied early access to the vernacular skills with which they could informally interact with Arabic speakers.

For students with integrative motivations, who want to become part of an Arab community, the choice of varieties is significant. As Versteegh (2001) states:

. . . [T]he colloquial language as the language of family and home is associated with the in-group, with intimacy and friendship, whereas the high variety is associated with social distance and official relationships. The use of Standard Arabic may thus be a sign of respect, but also of creating a distance between speakers. (p. 195)

Because MSA creates distance rather than intimacy, students studying abroad may experience the frustration of finding themselves excluded from communities (Palmer, 2007), feeling “like strangers” (Anghelescu, 2006, p. 117) because of their use of the formal variety.

Challenges

As mentioned, most university Arabic classes in the U.S. and other countries, including Israel, Great Britain, and Korea, focus on MSA, perhaps offering optional dialect classes for advanced students, or study abroad programs to add a vernacular later (Amara, 2006; Dickins & Watson, 2006; Hee-Man & El-Khazindar, 2006; Ryding, 2006). Reasons given for this choice include teacher’s attitudes, lack of materials for teaching dialects and lack of definition of the vernaculars, the difficulty of choosing a vernacular to teach, and limited class time (Al-Batal, 1992). Each issue is addressed below.

Native-speaking teachers often share the prevalent attitude that MSA (or the Classical Arabic of the Qur’an) is the “real” Arabic, and that the vernaculars are “corrupted,” “ungrammatical” versions (Ryding, 2006, p. 16), “the language of donkeys” (Haeri, 2003, p. 117). Teachers may be embarrassed to teach their native variety of Arabic, considering it full of mistakes (Anghelescu, 2006, p. 117). Also, since MSA is taught in school, and is the language of written materials including textbooks, Arabic teachers often consider it the only possible variety for academic study. Diglossia raises political and religious issues as well as linguistic ones (Al-Batal, 1992, p. 286). Politically, MSA is considered to unite Arabic-speaking countries, and religiously, the Qur’an is only to be read and recited in Classical Arabic. Hashem-Aramouni’s survey of 10 native-speaking Arabic professors found an underlying belief “that MSA should remain untouchable to preserve its sacred status among Arabic-Islamic states” (2011, p. 108). Thus there is a strong disinclination among many Arabic teachers to teach any vernacular variety. However, the gradual expansion of programs including vernaculars indicates that many are overcoming this difficulty. Teacher education in the issues involved may be beneficial (England, 2006), along with a combined emphasis on MSA and vernaculars. The Arab director of a program at Alexandria University including both Egyptian Arabic and MSA says the varieties “complement each other . . . not two independent languages but two levels of the same language . . . Each one has its own function in

terms of utility” (Nahla, 2006, p. 72). This perspective may encourage teachers to include vernacular varieties.

New materials are being developed incorporating vernaculars alongside MSA. For example, the popular university Arabic text *Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya*, which focuses on MSA, has added online video clips of Lebanese and Egyptian speakers to the most recent edition of the introductory volume (Brustad, Al-Batal, & Al-Tonsi, 2011). The goal appears to be student comprehension of vernacular varieties, an important need, as mentioned above. In recent years various materials have been developed to teach colloquial dialects, and grammars and dictionaries defining those varieties have been produced (Ryding, 2006, p. 15).

The difficulty of choosing a vernacular variety is often cited as a reason for teaching MSA, which is common to every Arab country. However, Trentman (2011) has shown that learning one vernacular enables students to more quickly comprehend another vernacular, while learning MSA does not have the same effect. She suggests Egyptian and Levantine varieties as widely understood and central dialects from which students can easily adapt to other varieties; these are also the first preferences of students (Al-Batal & Belnap, 2006, p. 396). Programs with a study abroad component may choose to prepare students for the variety spoken in the country in which they will study. Small university programs may choose a dialect based on their professors' native varieties. Government and military programs sometimes focus on varieties students need for assigned posts. The American Foreign Service Institute (FSI) has chosen to teach Formal Spoken Arabic, a dialect hybrid including lexis and structures of several widely-known vernaculars, described in Ryding (1991). Ryding considers the FSI program, and several others which integrate a vernacular and MSA, “successful,” meaning that some students reach advanced proficiency in all four skill areas: speaking, listening, reading, and writing (2006, p. 17). She comments that university academic-year programs are the least successful in this respect.

It appears that the few hours a week that university students spend in Arabic classes are insufficient for building true communicative competence in Arabic. Learning two sets of vocabulary and grammar, for speaking and for reading, requires more time than the study of a non-diglossic language. Wilmsen (2006) recommends making a degree in Arabic a five-year degree rather than four years, for this reason; he also suggests beginning with two years of vernacular, introducing the “formal written code” at the beginning of the second year (p. 134). Several programs include a study abroad or summer intensive section to add sufficient time immersed in Arabic; previous introduction to a vernacular will enable students to more productively use their time in such programs (Palmer, 2008).

Conclusion

The main challenges involved in teaching a vernacular variety of Arabic along with the “high” MSA variety are lack of classroom time and teacher attitudes towards the varieties. However, teaching two varieties with their normal functions seems to produce students who are more motivated and have communicative competence in a wider range of situations. While some apparently successful programs introduce a colloquial and MSA simultaneously, it may be beneficial to begin with a

vernacular. The teaching of a vernacular variety of Arabic before or alongside MSA may enable students to achieve their goals of learning to speak, understand, read, and write in Arabic.

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