Diglossic Situation of Arabic Language in Egypt: Is Low Variety planned to get standardized?

Mohamed A. Yacoub

English Language Lecturer, Missouri State University, Springfield, USA

Abstract: **In this paper, I introduce the three coexisting language varieties in Egypt- CA (Classic Arabic), EAV (Egyptian Arabic Variety), and EV (English Variety). Then I argue that Low variety (Egyptian Cairene dialect) of the diglossic situation of Arabic language in Egypt is getting special attention in an intentional attempt to standardize it. Diglossic situation is a problem as some researchers believe. However, in the case of Egypt, the problem is not in the diglossic situation itself, but it is in the existence of the CA that some thinkers believe is the reason for Arabs' backwardness. In here I show the different plans of thinkers and mass media to standardize the EAV at the expense of CA. The paper concludes that CA is firm enough because it is strongly related to the Muslim religious book (Quran) and that it is extremely hard to replace.**

Keywords: **Diglossia, Low variety, High variety, Egyptian Arabic, Standard Arabic, Standardization, Language planning and policy, History of Arabic Language, Code switching.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The term Diglossia was defined by Charles Albert Ferguson as:

A relatively stable language situation in which in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature either of an earlier period or in another speech community which is learned largely by formal education and used for most written and formal spoken purposes but not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation (16).

However, there has been dispute among linguists regarding who coined the term first. Dimitri Sotiropoulos believes that the term diglossia was first introduced by the German linguist Karl Krumbacher, in his book Das Problem der Modernen Griechischen Schriftsprache translated as "the problem of the modern Greek literary language" (10). Others believe that diglossia was first coined by the French linguist William Marpais describing the situation in the Arab World (Zughoul 201). Regardless this situation of disagreement, the above definition of Ferguson best applies to the diglossic situation in Egypt. I argue that tremendous efforts have been made to standardize EAV over other varieties in Egypt. In the following lines, this paper is going to briefly dive into the historical background of each existing variety in Egypt which will help understanding the nature of the coexisting situation of these varieties.

II. THE MAJOR VARIETIES

A. Classic Arabic (CA):

Classic Arabic is the variety that is believed to be the highest and most respected among other varieties since it is the language of the Quran— the holy book of Muslims— that was revealed more than fourteen centuries ago. It's the standard version, also used in academic writing, of the language called FusHa which dates back to about two centuries

before the Quran— or more as some researchers claim— and it is documented in various and different mediums such as books, pieces of paper, walls … etc. The most authentic example after the Quran is the Arabic poetry which is still memorized by a vast number of educated people. According to Niloofar Haeri, this variety is perceived as "[a] language whose aesthetic and musical qualities move its listeners creating feelings of spirituality, nostalgia and community" (qtd. in Stadlbauer 5)[1]. Sheikh I'niyatullah in his book Arabic as the Religious Language of the Moslem World states that "Arabic [CA Variety] is of supreme importance as the religious language of the Moslems", he continues saying whatever Muslims' tongues may differ in many languages such as Berbecr, Hausa, Pashto, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Javanese, Malay, they pray in Arabic and repeat it five times a day (242).

What makes this variety unique is its stability throughout this long period of time. The pronouns, tenses, prepositions, verb conjugations, adverbs, adjectives, morphology, syntax, orthography, and pronunciation are still the same without even slight change. If there is a change, it would be in the vocab since many of the vocab are deserted into more simplified ones alongside the change of the life rhythm. This change prompts some researchers to claim that there is another variety within CA variety called modern classical Arabic MCA or Modern Standard Arabic MSA, the thing that I reject for the reason mentioned above. Sherif Al-Shubashi—although being against CA—reveals that "Arabic [CA] is the only language in the world whose rules haven't changed for 1500 years" (13). Even those who claim the existence of such variety MSA or MCA don't agree how to define it. Guided by the researches of Haeri, Dilworth Parkinson, and Van Mol, Stadlbauer states that many researchers show disagreement as to what constitutes MSA or MCA, and she quotes Van Mol saying that perspectives diverge as "to what extent and in what way Modern Arabic deviates from Classical Arabic" (6). Despite these views, classical Arabic remains the strongest variety. Richard Yorkey expresses this meaning when he says "As diverse as these [Arab] countries may be, there is one significant unifying force: the language of Classical Arabic" (qtd. in Zughoul 204)[2]. This variety as some believe will never vanish because of many reasons. For instance, in Egypt alone there are, at the very least, more than five million people memorize the Quran—which is written in the highest form of classical Arabic— from cover to cover by heart.[3] Furthermore, CA serves as the highest intelligible form of Arabic among all nations of Arabs and the learners of Arabic as a second or foreign language.

B. Egyptian Variety (EVA):

Egyptian Arabic variety[4] occupies L position in the diglossic situation in Egypt. It is the everyday-used-variety in Egypt. Perusing the researches written on the diglossia in Egypt, one can't locate the history of when this variety started being used. However, there are some claims that this variety started being in use hundred years ago through the movements of trade and conquest. The mixture of multi-rooted words and lexical borrowings from different languages such as Turkish, Persian, Pharaonic (language of Pharos), Coptic, Latin, English, Italian, and French were their evidence regarding the start and origin of the EAV. People's opinions towards this variety vary according to their backgrounds and education. Religious people and pan-Arab nationalists consider EAV as a vernacular spoken with no writing form. However, vast number of laymen people, even some educated, would refuse that because EAV started being used in different forms of writings, and because it marks the Egyptian identity. In addition, EAV (so-called Al-'amiyyah "the colloquial") is, according to Haeri, considered to be the mother tongue spoken by the Egyptians in every-day communication and it serves as their identity marker and/or the national culture. She claims that some laymen believe that this Al-'amiyyah is more beautiful, lighter, and full of humor (37). However, I don't think Haeri was fully correct in what she claimed. As an

---

[1] Susanne Stadlbauer, University of Colorado at Boulder, wrote a research entitled Language Ideologies in Arabic Diglossia of Egypt which surveys studies on language ideologies in the Arabic diglossic environment of Egypt. The study focuses on the linguistic and cultural implications of language ideologies associated with four varieties in the Cairo area which she describes as: Classical Arabic (CA), Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), Egyptian Arabic (EA), and English.

[2] Muhammad Raji Zughoul, Yarmouk University in Jordan, believes, in his research Diglossia in Arabic: Investigating Solutions, that the diglossic situation in the Arabic language is a major sociolinguistic and educational problem that faces the Arabic-speaking countries. He first discusses diglossia and Arabic dialects, then he puts the problem in a historical perspective, and finally presents the results.

[3] I couldn't find any statistical studies showing the real number of the Quran memorizers in the Arab World, but for example only Al-Azhar—an educational institute established in 972 and one of the religious schools in Egypt— conditions that all of its students can't graduate until after they memorize the whole Quran. The average number of the graduate students from Al-Azhar University is 4, 0000 (forty thousands yearly). In 2009, 42.343thousand students graduated from Al-Azhar University, according to Al-youm Al-Sabi'a newspaper.

[4] In Egypt, there are many dialects among which intelligibility exists. The dialect that is meant here in this paper is the Cairene. Some other Egyptian dialects are: Alexandrian, Upper Egyptian, Sinai, and Eastern region.

Egyptian and a linguistic researcher, I claim that simple (laymen) people of Egypt show limitless respect towards the Holy Book to the extent that they never put it (Quran) on the floor or put any other book on it; it should always be on the top of anything, and their young children behave the same. Being so, they can't prefer any other variety over the variety used in Quran, and they can't claim that it is more beautiful than the one used in it. All what they can say is that it (Al-'amiyyah) is simpler to use.

C.   English Variety (EV):

Egypt was colonized by the Kingdom of Britain between 1882 and 1922[5] when Egypt won its independence after the July 23rd, 1952 Revolution. During the time of colonization, the colonizer set anti-Arabic, pro-English language policies (Stadlbauer 2). Girgis Salama devoted the whole chapter five in his book أثر الإحتلال البريطاني في التعليم القومي في مصر 1922- 1882 "The effect of the British Colonization on the National Education in Egypt 1882-1922" illustrating how the colonizer carried their language-enabling policies. They started by establishing 18 English schools and changing the language of elementary and high schools' curricula into English. Continuously, they did their best to root the English language and replace all other languages including French[6] (234-265).

English Variety in Egypt is now considered to be prestigious. A main street in Egypt—especially in Cairo—is rarely found with no crowded private centers for English language courses full of students from all ages; these centers are everywhere. Although Arabic is the language of teaching in public schools in Egypt, some departments have created a section for teaching the same classes but in English. Alongside Medicine schools, now there are Accounting, Law, and Engineering in English, and even Al-Alazhar itself has some sections taught in English. EV has an essential planned role in the attempts of standardizing the L variety.

III.   THE INTERACTION AND CODE-SWITCHING AMONG THESE VARIETIES

Egyptians use the L variety during all their daily communications; whereas, they use the H variety in formal speeches and writing.[7] English plays the prestigious form among these varieties indicating the speaker's social class, high level of education, wealth … etc. Most educated Egyptians code switch at least among two or among the three varieties. Researchers speak of metaphorical and situational code switching[8] which apply to the case in Egypt. Functionally, Egyptians code switch in various situations according to the topic, the interlocutor, solidarity, and affection. However, speakers switch—fleet—from CA to EAV and EA more than they do—deplore—the other way around.[9] Code-switching has intentionally been taken advantage of by speakers who ironically switching to CA and/or laugh at whoever switches to it in an indication that CA is only used by religious fanatics.[10]

IV.   DIVERGENCES BETWEEN EAV AND CA

To fully understand the claim of the paper, one should put hand on the nature of the divergences between the two verities EAV and CA. EAV diverged from CA in terms of five main linguistic aspects: lexical, semantic, phonetic, morphological, and syntactic. These divergences are worth a whole separate paper since this research is not addressed to these differences. Pro- EAV argue that these dissimilarities deserve standardizing in the EAV variety.

---

[5] The last British troops withdrew from Egypt 32 years later, precisely on October 19th, 1954.

[6] By the time of the English colonization, Egypt had still been under the effect of the language policies of the French colonization— from 1798 till 1801—which was dominating at that time and which the British colonization struggled to replace with English policies (Salama 234-240).

[7] The situation has changed slightly now as this paper is going to clarify in the next few pages.

[8] These two terms were coined by John J. Gumperz and Jan-Petter Blom in their 1972 paper *Social meaning in linguistic structures.*

[9] *Fleet* and *deplore* are two words I choose carefully to refer to the case of switching back and forth from the L to the H and vice versa. The word *fleet* connotes how fast speakers switch to L (EAV) because it is easier, and *deplore* is found to properly connote the feelings of speakers when they desert the H (CA) for a long time as if they commit a sin, and that feeling becomes the reason for them to speak—even for a short time—in CA. Subsequently, when the word *fleet* is mentioned, it means "switching from CA, and *deplore* switching to CA.

[10] This doesn't contradict that the Egyptians esteem their Quran as mentioned above in page 4 and that they feel sorry when deserting CA for a long time, it rather means how a group people are affected by media as a plan to standardize EAV; this paper is going to address this issue in detail under the mass media section.

V.   STANDARDIZING EAV AS A LANGUAGE PLAN

Theory of language planning have been discussed by linguists since 1957 (Ford 349). Terms *status planning*—the status and role of a language in its society— and *corpus planning*— the language and its vocabulary— were coined by Einar Haugen (270). Milorad Radovanovic was more specific and illustrated a process of language planning containing 10 phases: selection, description, prescription, elaboration, acceptance, implementation, expansion, cultivation, evaluation, and reconstruction (qtd. in Ford 350). In *the Earliest Stage of Language Planning: The "First Congress" Phenomenon*, Joshua Fishman defines first congresses as "early efforts at both corpus planning and status planning, i.e., efforts to purify, enrich and/or standardize the language itself, on the one hand, and efforts to protect, foster, and require the language, on the other hand" (2). According to Fishman, standardizing a language—and therefore a variety of a language—needs efforts. This paper, hence, is going to show the efforts made in Egypt to standardize the EAV.

VI.   THE EFFORTS OF THINKERS

Very well-educated literary figures launched a campaign[11] calling for amendments, simplification, or—in many cases— getting rid of the syntax system of CA. These calls started many years ago by tens of writers writing books, articles, and several other mediums of publications about this very specific topic. I am going to deal with two authors Salama Musa 1887- 1958, and Sherif Al-Shubashi. Salama Musa was one of the first advocates of socialism who started writing as an author after he spent three years in Paris followed by four in England. In his famous 1945 book about standardizing EAV is titled البلاغه العصريه واللغه العربيه "Modern Rhetoric and the Arabic Language", Musa says "our language [CA] is anomalously uphill and needs extraordinary procedures" (146). He continues saying "there has been rigidity in Arabic since it [CA] detests scientific terms and detests any change in its insufficient alphabet" (152). Musa finds a connection between loyalty to Arabic and religion for he believes that whoever defends Arabic [CA] hates women's freedom, future, brain, and development. He believes that those people are burden on the society (152). "Our language can't express technology… and we will never rise and develop as long as we keep it [CA]" said Musa (159-160). On the other hand, Al-Shubashi—first Undersecretary of the Ministry of Culture— 2004 book which entitled لتحيا اللغة العربية: يسقط سيبويه "For Arabic to Long Live: Down With Sibawayyh[12]" advocates the same idea when he states "Arabic language [CA] has become a jail imprisoning the Arabian brains inside its steely walls" (13). Al-Shubashi continues "if we want to maintain Arabic, we have, indeed, to subject it to the requirements of the modern age" (91). "Convergence between the Classic Arabic *Al-Fussha* and the dialects is the only method to find a way for Arabic language to develop", said Al-Shubashi (142). He ends his book describing the diglossic situation in the Arab world to be "a linguistic Schizophrenia" (181). Although all of those authors call for getting rid—either directly or indirectly—of the CA, all of them unexceptionally use very eloquent and sound CA in their advocating calls for EAV!

Nafossa Zakaria Said in her 1964 book تاريخ الدعوه إلى العاميه وأثارها في مصر "the History of Calling for Standardizing *Al-Amiyyah* and its Effects in Egypt" explains that the call for standardizing EAV among the literary figures in Egypt has a long history—Ahmed Lutfi Al-Said called for Egyptianizing CA, and Abdelaziz Fahmi and Salama Musa even called for Latinizing the CA alphabet (vii). They claim that EAV is more flexible than CA in digesting new terms and words from other languages in general and English in particular since English is the most international language nowadays and the language of modern technology, furthermore, it is an existing variety in Egypt. These calls have resulted in authors start compiling books for teaching the Egyptian dialect. Now you can find many books in the book market about teaching Egyptian Arabic (EAV) side by side with dictionaries about it, the thing that meets with the first four phases of Radovanovic's process of language, and Fishman's The mentioned above "First Congress" Phenomenon, but not in formal way.

VII.   MASS MEDIA

Egypt was one of the very first countries in the world to hug Cinemas. The first cinema show in Egypt was in January, 1896 in Zuwani Coffee in Alexandria. Since then, and as it is known for all Arabs, Egyptian production of movies, soap operas, and plays are far huger and larger than any other Middle Eastern country's. Subsequently, Media plays one of the biggest roles in addressing the collective level of the Egyptians regarding any issue. It has been preparing Egyptians to receive the idea of standardizing EAV. For instance, the image of teachers of Arabic has been distorted in many of these

---

[11] This word is used figuratively here in this context.

[12] Sibawayyh (760-796) was the first to put rules for CA. Sheikh and Imam of Arabic language were two of his epithets.

movies. Once you watch the 2008 movie *Ramadan Mabruk Abu El-Alamin Hamoda*, you are faced with non-count consecutive images—in a comedian style— of the backward Arabic teacher which leave you laugh ceaselessly. The name of the movie, which is the name of the protagonist (the Arabic teacher), indicates the mouthy function of those teachers whose   lessons are dramatically fruitless.

In 1992 movie *Al-Erhab wa AlKabab* "Terrorism and Kebab" explicitly establishes a robust kinship between classic Arabic—spoken by a religious character— and terrorism and marries them off. In minute 109 from the movie, the following dialogue in EAV takes place:

Minister of Interior to a young boy: What did you see inside the building?

The Boy: A man with a long beard.
The Minister: What did he say?
The boy: he said *Thakalet Omak* [A very standard CA phrase]
The minister: Do they have weapons?
The boy: Guns, rifles, bombs, knives, and all kinds of things!

In minute 108, a long-beard-man with a fierce face and protruding eyes confronting a little boy with these words ثكلتك أمك, خسئت *Thakalatk Omok, Khasy't* "May your mother lose you, shut your trap" which are completely pure CA words. Using these CA words only in this context delivers a bad connotation on classic Arabic. Not only in this movie but in many others, one can find such scenes that alienate people from CA. Tens of scenes in hundred movies expresses how difficult this CA is, and on the other hand, most love and romantic scenes are exclusive to EAV. Among hundreds of movies Egypt produced since the dawn of the 20th century, only very few, maybe less than 10, movies—mostly historical ones— are delivered in CA.

VIII.   CONCLUSION

Low variety (Egyptian Cairene dialect) of the diglossic situation of Arabic language in Egypt is getting special attention in an intentional attempt to standardize it. Diglossic situation is a problem as some researchers believe. However, in the case of Egypt, the problem is not in the diglossic situation itself, but it is in the existence of the CA (Classic Arabic). Some literary figures in Egypt combines between the backwardness of the Arabs (Egyptians in particular) and the adherence to CA variety. That is why those figures write books calling for standardizing the EAV. Their calls were accompanied by efforts on the level of mass media. Many soap operas and movies were produced to deal with this issue for a certain purpose of preparing people to accept the idea of separating the EAV from CA and then standardize it. Dramatically, the diglossic situation of Arabic language in Egypt needs a lot of study especially, in the area of the reaction of the people against these efforts.

REFERENCES

[1]   Al-Shubashi, Sherif. For Arabic to Long Live: Down With Sibawayyh. Cairo: Egyptian General Organization for Books, 2004. Print.

[2]   Blom, Jan-Petter, and John Gumperz. "Social Meaning in Linguistic Structures: Code Switching in Northern Norway." In: John Gumperz and Del Hymes (eds.): Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication (1972): 407-434. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. Print.

[3]   Ferguson, Charles A. Language Structure and Language Use: Essays. Redwood: Stanford University Press, 1971. Print.

[4]   Fishman, Joshua A. The Earliest Stage of Language Planning: The "first Congress" Phenomenon. Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 1993. Print.

[5]   Ford, Curtis. "Language Planning in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The 1998 Bihać Symposium." The Slavic and East European Journal, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2002): 349-361. Print.

[6]   Haeri, Niloofar. The Sociolinguistic Market of Cairo. New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996. Print.

[7]   Inayatullah, Sheikh. "Arabic as the Religious Language of the Moslem," Muslim World 29: 3. 242. (1949). Print.

[8]   "Jame'at Al-Azhar." Elyoum Esabi'a. Nov. 17, 2010. Web. Accessed on 9 Nov. 2013.

[9]   Musa, Salama. Modern Rhetoric and the Arabic Language. Cairo: Future Press House, 1945. Print.

[10]   Said, Nafossa. Z. The History of Calling for Standardizing Al-Amiyyah and its Effects in Egypt. Alexandria: Publishing Culture Press House, 1964. Print.

[11]   Salam, Girgi. The Effect of the British Colonization on the National Education in Egypt 1882-1922. Cairo: Egyptian Anglo, 1966. Print.

[12]   Sotiropoulos, Dimitri. 1977. "Diglossia and the National Language Question in Modern Greece", Linguistics 197. 5-31. Print.

[13]   Stadlbauer, Susanne. "Language Ideologies in the Arabic Diglossia of Egypt." Colorado Research in Linguistics. Vol. 22. Boulder (2010): 2-16. Print.

[14]   Yorkey, Richard. "Practical EFL Techniques for Teaching Arabic Speaking Students in J. Alatis and R. Crymes," eds., The Human Factors in ESL. Washington D. C.: TESOL. 1971.

[15]   Zughoul , Muhammad R. "Diglossia in Arabic: Investigating Solutions". Anthropological Linguistics, Vol. 22, No. 5 (1980): 201-217. Print.