

## Arabic Conservatism versus English Openness

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**Abstract:** *The paper shows that Arabic conservatism contrasts sharply with English openness. While English opens up freely to colloquial varieties as well as other languages of the world, Arabic retreats to itself in search of purity of expression. It is argued that the roots of this contrast have more to do with different linguistic traditions than the real state-of-affairs. In particular, the tendency of English, as opposed to Arabic, for description rather than prescription of linguistic data had far-reaching consequences in this regard. Further, it is shown that socio-political realities in the cultures of English and Arabic play a key role in the choice between through-argumentation and counter-argumentation.*

### 1. Background

The emergence of 'Linguistics' as 'the science of language' early on in this century, along with the rapid development and ramification it has so far undergone, has led to the creation of indelible linguistic awareness in the West in particular and the globe at large. A cornerstone in this awareness is the statement that all languages are equally good and that all languages are capable of meeting the social and psychological needs of their native speakers that may arise in the course of communication. As a corollary, the preconceptions of language primitiveness and superiority in natural language have been buried once and for all, at least insofar as linguists and language specialists are concerned. Further, there has been growing interest in the similarities rather than the differences between human languages, hence the conduction of extensive research on universal grammar and the relegation of linguistic disparities to parametric variation in Chomskyan linguistics. Also, functional differences between human languages are argued to be a matter of variation in lexical selectivity of world features by different languages (Rabin, 1958 and Dagut, 1981). This means that human languages are increasingly viewed as more alike than ever, thus hastening the advent of a new linguistic World Order that contrasts sharply with the super-imposed political one, both in terms of genuineness and goodwill.

This new linguistic awareness has given rise to the consideration of language as a dynamic rather than a static tool for communication, often likening it to a living organism that is constantly developing and changing. Therefore, modern linguistic theory has condemned the age-long practice of prescriptive linguistics in which the grammarian, as Lyons (1981: 48) puts it, "saw it as his task to formulate the standards of correctness and to impose these, if necessary, upon the speakers of the language." Instead, the grammarian's task should be expressly limited to recording the facts of the linguistic behavior of a language community and subsequently writing his grammar on the basis of the collected data, thus markedly moving from prescribing to describing in the science of language. As a result, prescriptive linguistics has largely given way to descriptive linguistics, thus practically bringing about the welcome demise of do's and don'ts in modern linguistic thought by concentrating attention on how things are on the ground rather than how they should be. In this spirit, Waltz (1981) argues, "Good English [language] is that form of speech which is appropriate to the purpose of the speaker, true to the language as it is, and comfortable to the speaker and listener. It is the product of custom, neither cramped by rule nor freed from restraint; it is never fixed, but changes with the organic life of the language."

In particular, English has taken great advantage of the advancements made by linguistics in this century by opening up toward colloquial varieties as well as other languages of the world. On the one hand, Standard English has been tremendously enriched by colloquial and/or slang expressions, especially in the area of lexis, to the extent that the non-specialist may not be able to tell what is standard and what is not. To give but one example from a multitude, the English basic word *hot* has gone far beyond the standard denotation 'having a high temperature' to mean 'urgent', 'wanted by the police', 'stolen', 'performing well', 'angry', 'sexy', and 'popular', among other colloquial and/or slang senses, given the appropriate context. It is not that these are used as off-the-record senses; rather, they have been documented in English dictionaries and have practically become part of the English lexicon (for more on this, see Andersson and Trudgill 1990).

On the other hand, English has borrowed extensively and unreservedly from other languages. Historically, it is well known that the French loan words in English constitute more than one third of the English lexicon.

More recently, English has been borrowing freely from different languages, to the extent that English dictionaries become out of date as soon as they are printed, because English is in a constant state of change, both intralingually and interlingually. As a matter of fact, no sooner does an important word acquire a large-scale use in its source language than it gets lexically borrowed into English despite, in many cases, the existence of English correspondents that would, theoretically at least, rule out the possibility of borrowing. For instance, English has recently borrowed the Russian word *perestroika* and the Arabic word *intifada*, notwithstanding English possessing the words *reform* and *uprising* that could be respectively employed in the two cases. It can be argued that English openness toward other languages and its smooth integration of foreign words play a key role in the enrichment of the English lexicon. Consequently, the lexicography industry in English has become so competitive that successive impressions of the same dictionary are published every year, in order to keep abreast with what is happening on the lexical scene both within and outside the English language.

## **2. The Situation in Arabic**

Arabic, in contrast with English, has been undergoing completely different circumstances since medieval times, at least insofar as linguistic theorizing and inquiry are concerned. As a matter of fact, Medieval grammatical practice, which is still dominant today on the linguistic scene in the Arab World, was divorced from Arabic in its social context favoring a prescriptive approach where linguistic data were mainly drawn from sacred texts and major literary works. In this connection, Gully (1994) rightly notes that the strength of Medieval grammatical practice springs from the fact that it is supported by religious-inspired metaphysical arguments. The validity of such arguments had never been called into question, thus creating a covenant whose members constituted the Muslim community and the group of Arabic grammarians. Consequently, the pre-meditated mixing up of language and religion has left its far-reaching impacts on Arabic linguistics. The Arab linguistic thought has not yet freed itself from preconceptions such as superiority, uniqueness, and sacredness of Arabic.

Further, there is a strong belief in the completeness and correctness of Medieval Arabic grammar and lexicography. However, knowing the nature of human language, this conviction does not make sense as

language is believed to be dynamic rather than static, with rules being subject to change and/or modification and lexical items acquiring new senses, falling out of use, or coming into existence. By way of illustration, it would be ridiculous if the English word *gay* were used to mean *happy* in day-to-day undertakings nowadays for the simple fact that it historically used to have the said sense as its prime denotation. This is because *gay* has undergone a great semantic shift that renders it highly restricted when used to convey the sense of *happy*. By the same token, it would be practically unscrupulous nowadays to use the Arabic word *'insaraf* (which used to mean *'iðhab* in Classical Arabic) without contemplating the social repercussions it might bring forth. This owes to the fact that this word has been injected with a negative attitude that is diachronically and historically detachable, but inalienable synchronically and socially.

The search for a haven in the past is a characteristic feature of Arab reasoning which has affected all walks of life, with language being no exception. William R. Polk remarks in his introduction to Stetkevych (1970) (p.xii), "Their [the Arabs'] scholars lapsed into a habit of merely repeating past learning, and even in this habit they became so lethargic that not only was the creative impulse lost but the conservation of Arabic learning was jeopardized." Similarly, discussing the future of Arabic, Jubran Khalil Jubran (1883-1931), the renowned Lebanese author, dismisses the likelihood of drastic changes in Arabic comparable to those in European languages because the Arabs are more inclined to look to their past than to their present or future (Na'imah 1949: 559). Certainly, drastic changes of this sort have not been formally recognized and integrated in what may be termed "Standard Arabic" these days, but they have been operating effectively and on a large-scale in Arabic as used in its social contexts across the Arab World. A quick look at various dialects of Arabic shows how the language has tremendously developed in areas such as tautology, politeness, euphemism, dysphemism, etc. in order to meet the social and psychological needs of its native speakers (for more on these subjects, see Farghal 1991, 1995a and b). For instance, Farghal (1991) shows how Jordanian Arabic has managed to work out a highly elaborate network of tautological expressions that encapsulates five major pragmatic functions, viz. assessment, absolute generalization, fatalistic, obligation, and indifference tautologies.

Unfortunately, Standard Arabic has been exhibiting a very conservative stance toward Arabic colloquials, despite the fact that most of them have managed to advance greatly in areas where the standard variety has reached a deadlock. For example, Farghal (1995a) elaborately shows that Jordanian Arabic utilizes 'dysphemism' (the converse of 'euphemism') as a pragmatic resource to convey connotations that would otherwise be missing in the standard variety. The Jordanian dysphemism 'inyamad (He's bloody slept!), for instance, may only awkwardly lend itself to paraphrasing into standard Arabic (Approx.  $n\bar{a}$  ma wa ' $\bar{a}$  malu 'all  $\bar{a}$  yanhada min nawmihi "He has slept and I hope he won't rise again"). Notably, the root of the foregoing dysphemism belongs to the standard variety (e.g.  $\gamma$ amada-s-sayfa "He put the sword back in its case"). In this way, Jordanian Arabic has fallen back on Classical Arabic lexicon to fill in a lexical gap (Dagut 1981) by exercising the sophisticated technique of "lexical compression" whereby denotation and connotation (i.e.,  $n\bar{a}$  ma + negative connotation) are compressed into one lexical item (i.e., 'inyamad). By resorting to roots of standard lexis, the colloquial variety seeks to meet the psychological and social needs of its native speakers in contrast with the standard variety which, instead of opening up and integrating such significant lexical changes, retreats into its shell.

Sometimes, the colloquial variety fills in a gap in a standard lexical set. For example, Standard Arabic lacks the term that completes the lexical set  $d\bar{a}$  fi'/h  $\bar{a}$  r (warm/hot), ?/b  $\bar{a}$  rid (cool/cold). By contrast, Jordanian Arabic completes the foregoing lexical set as follows:  $d\bar{a}$  fi'  $\bar{i}$  /h  $\bar{a}$  r (warm/hot), bar  $\bar{a}$  d/b  $\bar{a}$  rid (cool/cold). This being the case, the standard variety should be enriched by the colloquial variety through integrating this fine lexical distinction that can be accounted for derivationally. There is no good reason to reject a word for the simple fact that it is colloquial. Most human languages have reached the popularity and sophistication they are entertaining mostly because of opening up toward colloquial varieties. One cannot imagine the existence of the highly esteemed bulk of fiction in English, among other literary genres, without the rich incorporation of colloquial varieties and expressions that, in many cases, constitute the essence of works of art. The translator from English into Arabic will inevitably find himself in an awkward situation if he decides to translate such works into Standard Arabic, which usually falls short of relaying the shades of meaning and emotiveness encapsulated in English colloquial and/or slang expressions. This is a natural consequence, as Standard Arabic has, unfortunately, alienated itself from the colloquial

varieties in contrast with English, which has delved deeply and freely into its colloquial repertoire.

Standard Arabic should not only open up toward colloquials, but it should also do so toward foreign languages, in order to influence and enrich each other, especially in the area of vocabulary. Nonetheless, Arabic language academies and orthodox Arabic grammarians nowadays regard foreign lexical borrowings like *rādyū* “radio”, *talafūn* “telephone”, *kumbyūtar* “computer” with disfavor, often claiming that Standard Arabic should maintain its purity by using only words derived from Arabic roots. Consequently, they struggle to promote loan-translations like *miḏyāc*, *hātif*, and *hāsūb*, which correspond respectively to the three foreign loans above. The existence of lexical doublets, i.e., lexical borrowings and loan translations in Arabic, should be regarded as a welcome move rather than a basis for linguistic sophistry that does more harm than good to the language. In point of fact, the final say in cases like these ought to be left for the frequency of use, or sometimes for mere preference, by native speakers of the language rather than empty dictates by grammarians and language academies. One wonders how the people who condemn lexical borrowing would communicate in their version of Standard Arabic to their interlocutors the frequently cropping up situations that they had “punctures” and that they consulted “mechanics”, without resorting to lexical borrowing as an indispensable linguistic reality in natural language. Needless to say, Standard Arabic, just like colloquial varieties, displays a high degree of flexibility and adaptability to foreign loans. Historically, Classical Arabic had received a large number of loans from different languages in the medieval times. In fact, the very word *luḡah* “language”, which is in common use in Standard Arabic today, was a lexical borrowing from Greek, while the Arabic counterpart *lisān* is rarely used in this sense these days.

Looking at classicism and colloquialism from a different perspective, Stetkevych (1970: 121-123) rejects the argument that modern Arabic seeks to bridge the gap between classical and colloquial varieties. Instead, he believes Modern Arabic takes “a straight line of development out of a classical Semitic morphology towards a new, largely non-Semitic syntax which will be dictated by habits of thought rather than by habits of live speech”. In this way, the Arabs would be in possession of a language that enables them to think and subsequently eradicate the problem of conflicting colloquialism and classicism. He believes that it will not take

modern Arabic more than two or three generations to become “a highly integrated member of the Western cultural linguistic family, sharing fully in a common linguistic spirit.” The tremendous change Modern Arabic underwent and is still undergoing has played a key role in striking a balance between parataxis (which used to predominate) and hypotaxis, which is an inherent potential of Arabic that has probably been triggered off by European languages’ influence on Arabic discourse.

Moreover, it is unlikely that the diglossic situation in the context of Arabic (High vs. Low variety) would ever disappear in the way outlined by Stetkevych because it is not a matter of one variety supplanting another (or others), but rather a question of one variety complementing another in terms of domains, functions, and prestige. However, it is quite conceivable to see the classical variety abate in the future, thus giving way to what may be called Modern Standard Arabic to dominate the linguistic scene insofar as the H variety is concerned. For the realization of such a scenario, the spread of literacy in the Arab World will have to play a seminal role by bringing into existence a variety of Arabic that lives up to the aspirations and intricacies of Arab reasoning in a rapidly changing globe. In a situation like that, Classical Arabic will be relevant only for historical purposes, which are primarily religious and literary in nature.

Finally, let us deal with argumentation in Arabic and English discourse and see how Arabic argumentation fell victim to the political and religious milieus in the Arab World. To get started, argumentation in natural language basically manifests itself in two modes: through-argumentation and counter-argumentation. With the rise of Western democracies, English rhetoric in particular and Western rhetoric in general have taken long strides toward counter-argumentation, thus abandoning the simplistic way of looking at things in black-and-white terms, which was pre-dominant in the Middle Ages via through-argumentation. Arabic, by contrast, appears to have followed the opposite directionality by moving from counter-argumentation in medieval ages to through-argumentation in modern times. Hatim (1991: 197) cites Qudama, a medieval Arab rhetorician, as writing (p. 119) “Valid argumentation is that in which the arguer builds his initial premises on what the opponent endorses.” Whereas, a quick look at argumentation in Arabic discourse nowadays indicates that it is built around through-argumentation, whether it is arguing for or against something. To confirm

the discrepancy between English and Arabic argumentation, you may only have to check some English newspaper editorials against some Arabic ones to see how counter-argumentation is the pre-dominant mode in English, while through-argumentation is the pre-dominant one in Arabic. Moreover, medieval Arabic rhetoric explicitly emphasized meaning as opposed to form by viewing form as subservient to meaning. While stressing the importance of meaning compared with form, al-Jurjani (d. 471 H) writes in *'Asr ā r al-Bal ā ghah* (p. 5), "... as forms are servants to and governed by meanings in that meanings steer their directionality and merit their obedience. Hence, that who gives form priority over meaning would be like that who diverts something from its course and subsequently deforms its nature... [my translation]." Ibn al-Haytham [d. 430], a medieval Arab scholar known to Europe then as Alhazen, deals with this matter from an epistemological perspective. He writes "I have been deliberating since early on the various convictions of people and the insistence of each sect on its dogmas; I have been skeptical about all this, believing strongly that the truth is One [my translation, cited in al-Jabiri 1984, p. 350]."

The tragic movement from counter-argumentation to through-argumentation in Arabic rhetoric has given rise to some serious accusations against Arabic as a language. Kaplan (1966) argues that Arabic argumentation is spiral in nature; similarly, Johnstone (1991) claims that Arabic argues by making premises present rather than by proving them. Both claims regard repetition as the focal point in Arabic argumentation. That is, the Arabs argue their premises by repeating them over and over again rather than by substantiating them syllogistically. Notably, repetition is more akin to through-argumentation than counter-argumentation. The former, being unidirectional, is more likely but not necessarily, to proceed spirally or repetitively in seemingly arguing premises by making them present rather than by substantiating them. Whereas the latter, being bi-directional, must start by citing a thesis to be opposed rather than to be proved, thus creating a more fitting environment for syllogistic presentation of premises.

The etiology of through-argumentation and subsequently repetition in Arabic discourse is by no means restricted to the foregoing linguistic and/or discursal factor. On the contrary, non-linguistic factors play a much more important role in creating this rhetorical crisis. First and foremost, the political situation in the Arab World acts against the



emergence of rational reasoning and freedom of expression, which constitute the raw material for counter-argumentation. This means that the expression of mixed opinions about states of affairs can only come to the surface in authentic democracies, where there are no taboos, political or otherwise. Unfortunately, such democracies are practically missing on the Arab scene. Secondly, and equally important, argumentation in Arabic rhetoric has been greatly influenced by religious discourse, which through-argue things by making them heavily present in the minds of hearers/readers rather than by substantiating them. It should be remarked that syllogism and religion are traditional enemies - one cannot flourish in the dominance of the other. While discussing the formation of the Arab mind, al-Jabiri (1984) eloquently shows the inter-marriage between rhetoric *al-bayān* (in both philology and theology) and syllogism *al-burhān* in medieval Arabia. This inter-marriage, unfortunately, culminated in rhetoric winning out on the Arab scene and syllogism seeking refuge in Europe, where it has been nurtured and optimized ever since. The complete divorce between rhetoric and syllogism gave rise to the era of degeneration of the Arabs (and the subsequent long sleep alluded to earlier in this study, which is, more or less, continuing to the present day). By contrast, the adoption of the migrating Arab syllogism by the West gave birth to the era of renaissance whose scholarship is peaking presently.

### **3. Conclusion**

The present paper argues that Standard Arabic is losing much by not opening up both intralingually and interlingually. It shows that Arabic colloquials could greatly enrich the standard variety in many areas where the Standard falls short of coping with the psychological and social needs of its native speakers. By the same token, the paper indicates that foreign loans should be as legitimate as loan translations in Standard Arabic, because lexical borrowing is a natural phenomenon whereby different languages enhance each other, particularly in the area of lexis. It is made clear that the prevalence of prescriptive linguistics on the scene of Arabic in the Arab World, which has been transmitted to us generation after generation from the Middle Ages, plays a major role in preventing Standard Arabic from unleashing itself toward descriptive linguistics and subsequent linguistic development. However, the study by no means advocates the abandonment of Standard Arabic, but it only argues for

liberating the Standard from counter-intuitive constraints that do more detriment than good to the language.

Further, the paper shows that the pre-dominance of through-argumentation in Arabic discourse nowadays has depleted argumentation of syllogism, which used to be the essence of Arabic rhetoric in the medieval times. This, the study argues, is an immediate consequence of the political and religious atmospheres in the Arab World, showing that syllogistic reasoning abates in environments where dictatorships and preachments flourish.

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