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Diglossia and Illiteracy in the Arab World[1]

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This paper examines the negative impact of the linguistic situation in the Arab world, characterised as it is by the phenomenon of diglossia, on Arab children's ability to acquire reading and writing skills in Arabic; and hence on their academic attainment in general. Specific obstacles posed by contemporary Arabic diglossia to the acquisition of literacy are discussed, including the attitudes of parents and teachers to the colloquial and standard forms of Arabic. Some remedies are suggested. These include modification of the Arabic script, and improving the status of Arabic as a language of instruction in the schools, where it is often replaced by English or French. Above all, the paper emphasises the necessity to expose young children to literary Arabic, by means such as story reading to preschoolers, so that it is not, in effect, another language that they have to learn as soon as they enter school.

According to a 1985 UNESCO publication, the incidence of illiteracy in Arabic-speaking countries is the highest in the world, amounting to 56.5% among Arabs aged 15 years and over. If the present educational trends continue, it is expected that the Arab world will enter the twenty-first century with half of its youth at the age of schooling still functionally illiterate (cf. Doake, 1989). This figure is by all standards alarming, requiring a thorough examination of the various factors underlying this high rate of illiteracy if adequate solutions to the problem are to be found.

While various reasons can be given as an explanation for the high rate of illiteracy in the Arab world (varying from political, to social, to economic) this paper will focus on one factor which I think is to large extent responsible for perpetuating illiteracy in the Arabic-speaking countries, namely the mismatch between spoken Arabic (local vernacular) and literary Arabic, a linguistic situation that has come to be called diglossia (Ferguson, 1959). In order to demonstrate how and to what extent the phenomenon of diglossia in Arabic-speaking countries contributes not only to illiteracy, but also to poor scholastic attainment of Arab students, it is important to first explain what we mean by illiteracy and diglossia.

Literacy and Diglossia

Although there are several definitions of literacy, I will confine myself to so-called functional literacy. Functional literacy has been defined as people's

ability to read print material, such as a newspaper or magazine, and to understand instructions for using common household appliances and comprehend information accompanying common medicines and doctors' prescriptions. Functional literacy also involves the ability to communicate successfully through writing, for example filling out voting papers, questionnaires, passport applications and driver's license forms. Such reading and writing abilities make it possible for people to actively participate in their societies politically, civicly and socially.

The question at hand is: how does the diglossic environment in Arabic-speaking countries affect people's ability to perform these functions, thereby restricting their ability to take control of their lives and become affective members in the development of their societies? (cf. Freire, 1972, 1985) Of equal importance is the question of whether and how this diglossic environment affects students' academic attainment. Before attempting to shed some light on these questions, an understanding of diglossia itself is needed.

According to the classic definition of Ferguson (1959: 336), diglossia is

> 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 is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.

The definition applies to the Arab world insofar as there are two coexisting varieties of Arabic, each having a specialised function. On the one hand, colloquial dialects (henceforth local vernaculars) are the medium of everyday communication which are acquired natively by Arabs. On the other hand, literary Arabic, sometimes referred to as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), 'written', and 'formal' Arabic (henceforth literary Arabic), is used mainly in formal situations such as in written activities, political speeches, religious sermons, lectures, news broadcasts, etc. It is acquired through a formal schooling process and is not spoken in everyday life. Literary Arabic is readily understood by educated Arabs.

In addition, the two varieties of Arabic, as Ferguson's definition requires, are valued quite differently. While local vernacular are disdained by many Arabs and are considered a kind of aberration (cf. Payne, 1983), literary Arabic is considered prestigious and sacred, being the language of Quran and a vast body of literature produced over many centuries. At the same time, local vernaculars are usually associated with ignorance and illiteracy, and are viewed as incapable of expressing abstract and complex concepts.

This binary distinction between local vernacular and literary Arabic has been questioned by a number of studies (Blanc, 1960; Badawi, 1973; Michell, 1978; Meiseles, 1980; Al-Batal, 1992), on the basis that it is too simplistic and does not reflect the various levels existing between these two forms of Arabic.

Thus, in addition to these two varieties, there is also the so-called 'educated' or 'intermediate' Arabic, a form of spoken Arabic that is usually used among educated Arabs, and among Arabs coming from different countries in order to facilitate communication.

In order to realise how the discrepancy between the local vernacular and literary Arabic contributes to illiteracy and perpetuates it, it is important to keep in mind that this discrepancy (the magnitude of which varies from one dialect to another) is, on the average, considerable, and exists at various linguistic levels (lexicon, phonology, syntax and grammar). As a result, it is not unusual to hear people from the Arab East complaining that they find Moroccan Arabic, for instance, unintelligible. This is also true of other North African countries, where the problem of diglossia is aggravated by the problem of Arabic–French bilingualism. According to Payne (1983: 266), 'a Tunisian who aspires to become a writer must learn what amounts to a second language (MSA) or an imported language (French)'.

In many Arabic-speaking countries, the difference between local vernacular and literary Arabic is compounded by the phenomenon of bilingualism. Because of the colonial legacy, French and English are two languages that are being used in many Arabic-speaking countries not only as a medium of instruction, but also in some countries as official languages side by side with Arabic. These foreign languages, the structures of which differ from literary Arabic significantly, have affected the local vernacular in fundamental ways, further exacerbating the discrepancy between the two varieties of Arabic.

Effects of diglossia on literacy

Even among literate Arabs who manage to 'master' literary Arabic, and are able, for instance, to read and write in it well enough to satisfy academic requirements, many will admit that they are not able to engage in reading and writing processes with any degree of pleasure, confidence, or skill. According to Doake (1989: 2), 'Students themselves frequently express a lack of confidence, skill, and interest in reading and writing Arabic, and confess to engaging in these activities only when absolutely necessary'.

Arab students' poor writing skills, whether in their native or second languages, can be evidenced, among other things, by the pervasiveness of the oral mode of discourse in their academic writings. It has been consistently shown (cf. Allen, 1970; SA'Addedin, 1989; Ayari & Elaine, 1993) that the English writing of Arabic-speaking students departs from English rhetorical conventions in fundamental ways, exhibiting features of the spoken discourse that fall short of the expectations of the English native speaker. One can argue (cf. Mohan & Lu, 1984) that such writing difficulties are developmental, and can be attributed to many Arab students' failure to develop reading and writing skills in their native language, Arabic.

Lack of reading and writing skills in these students' native language — skills which Cummins (1984) might characterise as cognitive, academic language proficiency (CALP) skills — has a negative impact on the learning

of reading and writing skills in a foreign language, such as English. In a study conducted by Ayari & Elaine (1993) it was shown that the failure of many Arab students to comply with English rhetorical conventions in their writings highly correlates with their failure to exhibit writing skills in their native language, Arabic. At the same time, students who exhibit good writing skills in their native language, Arabic, also tend to do so in English.

Some Proposed Solutions

Many Arab intellectuals and educators have long realised the negative impact of diglossia on the educational achievement and literacy acquisition of Arab children. Several of them (cf. Chejne, 1965) called for the use of local vernacular as a medium of instruction in order to overcome the mismatch between the spoken and written languages. It has been argued that the challenge posed by the learning of standard Arabic heavily burdens the Arab child, delaying his/her learning of academic skills until the language of literacy (literary Arabic) is mastered, if at all. To put it in Spitta's slightly exaggerated terms: 'how much easier would the matter become if the student had merely to write the tongue which he speaks instead of being forced to write a language which is as strange to the present generation of Egyptians as Latin is to the people of Italy' (cited in Altoma, 1969: 5).

Support for the use of local vernacular as a medium of literacy acquisition comes from the UNESCO report (UNESCO 1968). This report advocates the use of the mother tongue in the initial stages of education to facilitate the smooth transition to the language of school, even when another language must be used for further training. The argument is as follows:

> It is better, psychologically and pedagogically, to achieve literacy by two short jumps (that is, from illiteracy to literacy in the mother tongue, and from literacy in the mother tongue to literacy in a second language) than by one long jump (that is, from illiteracy in the mother tongue to literacy in a second language). (Unesco 1968: 699).

This view is further supported by several studies conducted in the United States on the relationship between language of instruction and the academic achievement of students. Such studies have suggested that the existence of minority students whose vernaculars are different from standard English is responsible for massive failure in the teaching of reading and other language-based skills (cf. Ogbu, 1983). As a result, it is not uncommon in many American schools to find minority students taught in their native vernaculars, such as Spanish and African–American English, in order to facilitate the acquisition of literacy skills.

Bilingualism

The negative impact of diglossia and bilingualism on the educational life of many Arab children can best be seen in their poor academic attainment,

and hence in the high rate of school drop-outs, a problem that has been recognised by many Arab educators, parents and linguists. In Tunisia, for instance, where the problem of diglossia is aggravated by French–Arabic bilingualism, it has been argued (Chettaoui, 1976; Zghal, 1993) that the use of French as a medium of instruction is responsible for poor the academic achievement of the vast majority of the school population, resulting in a high drop-out rate. According to Maamouri (1983: 147)

> The French–MSA dichotomy in Tunisian schools is, it seems, partly responsible for the high drop-out rate which is draining an already extremely costly educational system. In 1974, the annual budget of the Ministry of National Education reached 40% of total government spending. The acquisition process of the basic linguistic skills in French and MSA by Tunisian children is definitely slowed down by the lack in both cases of extra-mutual reinforcing structures and opportunities.

Political and attitudinal factors

Because the debate over language policy in the Arab world, as in other parts of the world, is usually driven by political, economic and religious, but not necessarily by academic considerations, the call for the use of the local vernacular as the language of instruction has been met with strong resistance. Opponents of the vernacular argue that the vernacular is itself an outcome of illiteracy and does not have the expressive power (i.e. rich vocabulary) to be used as a vehicle of knowledge acquisition. They also argue, and justifiably so, that replacing literary Arabic with the vernacular would cut off future generations from the vast body of works written in literary Arabic over the centuries (Al-Jundi, 1987). In addition, the replacement of literary Arabic with the vernacular would undermine efforts to strengthen the unity of Arabic-speaking countries.

In addition to the above argument, attitudinal factors play an important role in preventing the local vernacular from being used as a means of literacy acquisition. Even among illiterates who speak only colloquial Arabic, negative attitudes towards local vernacular make it difficult, and even impossible, to introduce it as a means of learning reading and writing skills. In describing the dilemma faced by language policy makers in Tunisia after its independence, and their choice of literary Arabic as a medium of instruction instead of Tunisian Arabic (TA), Maamouri (1983) wrote:

> The choice of MSA for adult education, seen as the acquisition of basic reading and writing skills, seems to be a logical one. Any literacy teaching in TA would have been laughed at and looked down upon by the potential literates themselves, who would have considered it a sub-standard and therefore a useless form of education which was not likely to secure them a better job or improve their low social status.

Today, despite the growing awareness among many parents, educators, linguists and language policy makers that the mismatch between local

vernacular and the language of instruction, literary Arabic, is to a large extent responsible for many children's difficulties in acquiring reading and writing skills, there is no evidence that local vernacular will replace literary Arabic as a medium of instruction in the future. Literary Arabic continues to be the only variety of Arabic, though not the only language of instruction, used in academic settings. Nowadays, the debate among policy makers and intellectuals (see the publications of the Language Academies in Cairo, Baghdad, Amman and Damascus for more on this issue) is not whether to keep literary Arabic as a medium of instruction, but rather how to strengthen it, making it an effective tool of teaching and learning. Not surprisingly, even in countries that have a strong bilingual policy, such as the three ex-French colonies in north Africa, important steps of Arabisation have been undertaken, especially in elementary schools, to replace French with literary Arabic as a medium of instruction (Fitouri, 1989).

Obstacles to Literacy

Having briefly discussed the negative impact of the mismatch between the spoken and written varieties of Arabic on literacy acquisition and students' academic achievement, it is important to go beyond this mismatch, and focus instead on the linguistic environment in which the Arab child grows up. Such a perspective will allow us to see whether and to what extent this environment is conducive to literacy acquisition.

Several studies that investigated the linguistic environment in which the average Arab child grows up have shown that the mismatch between local vernacular and literary Arabic is not necessarily the direct cause of illiteracy and poor academic performance, but is in itself a symptom of a larger problem that should be addressed if the high rate of illiteracy in the Arab world is to be curbed. Perhaps in addition to asking how the mismatch between local vernacular and literary Arabic is impeding the acquisition of literacy skills, an equally important and related question is: how does the environment in which the child grows up acquiring language affect his/her ability to read and write in the language of instruction? Such an environment can be characterised by the following aspects:

Lack of exposure to literary Arabic

It is not unusual for many Arab children to grow up in an environment with no exposure to reading material. In a study conducted by Iraqi (1990) on Palestinian kindergarten children, it was found that only a very small number of Arab families (1.8% of the 290 families that were studied) buy books and read from them to their children. According to Iraqi, this phenomenon is the result of parents' misconceptions that their children are unable to understand and enjoy books written in literary Arabic.

Needless to say, parents play a major role in creating an environment that is conducive to literacy acquisition. Their role is crucial in their children's

acquisition of desirable discursive practices as well as the learning of language-based skills such as reading and writing. Unfortunately, many parents themselves do not master the language of instruction; hence their inability to impart the kind of language-based skills needed for their children's academic success. Even among those parents who master literary Arabic, lack of awareness of the role of reading and modelling in their children's acquisition of literacy is a common problem. According to Doake (1989: 8),

> Very few preschool children in the Arab world are read to on a regular basis in standard Arabic. Instead, parents often translate the standard form of the language used in books to the colloquial form, assuming that the former is too difficult and complex for their children to understand and use.

The view that literary Arabic is too difficult for children to be exposed to at an early stage of their life is common even among teachers. In his survey, Iraqi (1990), reported that kindergarten teachers firmly believed that 5-year-olds are too young to be exposed to literary Arabic, claiming that children would be unable to understand the stories read in this language.

Language-of-instruction policy

In many Arabic-speaking countries, literary Arabic is not the language of instruction for all school subjects. In fact, in many of these countries, most scientific subjects are taught either in English or in French (cf. Al-Khouri, 1991 for more on this issue). This language-of-instruction policy gives the impression that French and English, unlike Arabic, are languages of the sciences and upward mobility (cf. Payne, 1983), an impression that lessens the motivation of children to master literary Arabic. As a result of this policy, a large number of school children find it difficult to master either literary Arabic or the foreign language.

Arabic writing system and the Arabic script

Many linguists and educators have argued that the Arabic writing system, characterised as it is by absence of vowels and the plurality of letter shapes to represent the 28 graphemes of the Arabic alphabet, impedes the acquisition of writing and slows down the act of reading. Because Arabic is an inflectional language and its writing system does not use diacritics systematically to represent vowels in printed material (except in children's books, language textbooks, and sometimes just for the benefit of the reader), the act of reading in Arabic requires the reader to scan the whole sentence, go through more grammar decoding, and utilise guessing strategies before arriving at the correct semantic interpretation of words. In other words, reading in Arabic involves, among other things, the reader's alertness to the thematic role of words that have the same graphemic representation in order to resolve the great number of alternative interpretations.

To illustrate this point, one can think of the word *K-T-B-T*, in Arabic (كتبت). When this word is written without diacritics (the usual case), it can be read *KaTaBTu* 'I wrote', or *KaTaBTa* 'you (Sg/Mas) wrote', or *KaTaBTi* 'you (Sg/Fem) wrote', or *KaTaBaT* 'she wrote', or *KuTiBaT* 'it was written', all of which are alternative possibilities until the reader determines from the surrounding environment what semantic interpretation to give to this word. This is not the case for readers of French or English, for instance, who can link the graphic representation of a particular word directly to its semantic interpretation.

Alternative Courses of Action

Exposing the child to literary Arabic

Contrary to the prevailing misconceptions among many Arab parents and teachers that children should not be exposed to literary Arabic very early because it is too difficult for them to understand, a growing body of literature (cf. Cazden, 1979; Griffin & Humphrey, 1978; Heath, 1982; among others) shows that if children are to become familiar with the language of literacy, it is imperative that they grow up in an environment where books are available, and where language modelling is provided by the parents. Unfortunately, it is very common for Arab children to reach the age of schooling without being exposed to the language of instruction, by which time the child will have acquired only one form of Arabic, namely the vernacular, the structures of which impede the learning of literary Arabic.

Several researchers (Feitelson *et al.*, 1993; Doake, 1989) have drawn attention to the lack of story reading in Arabic preschool education. According to Feitelson *et al.* (1993: 72) 'an unfortunate consequence of the absence of story reading among Arab kindergartens is that these young children are deprived of knowledge and skills that are believed to aid transition to literacy'. In other words, the smooth transition to literacy requires that Arab children be familiarised as much as possible with the structures, sounds and rhythms of literary Arabic during the first few years in their lives. Doake (1989: 8) puts it more bluntly: 'Waiting until children enter school before exposing them to standard Arabic requires them to learn, in effect, a second language'.

Reform of the Arabic script

As a result of the complexities involved in the act of reading in Arabic (illustrated in the discussion above), it has been suggested that the reform of the Arabic script is 'a weapon against illiteracy' (Khattar, 1955). According to these reformists, what is needed is the simplification of the matrix of the graphimic forms and the introduction of vowels into the Arabic writing system 'in a way aesthetically acceptable to the majority of Arabs' (Maamouri,

1983: 153). This simplification can facilitate both the act of reading and writing in the Arabic language.

Strengthening literary Arabic as a medium of instruction

Greater motivation and serious efforts on the part of students to master literary Arabic and become fluent in it can only be expected when these students realise its importance for their academic success. Enhancing the importance of Arabic for students' academic success can be achieved by introducing it as the language of instruction of all school subjects and not just literary subjects. In fact, not only will the introduction of literary Arabic as the medium of instruction motivate Arab students to learn it, but there is evidence that the use of literary Arabic (which is closer to the spoken language of the child than a foreign language) can yield better academic results. According to Al-Khouri (1991), an experiment was conducted at the American University in Beirut in which two groups of students were randomly assigned to two treatments: One group was taught a scientific subject in English, while the other was taught the same subject in Arabic. Upon evaluation of the two groups of students, the group that was taught in Arabic significantly outperformed the group that was taught in English. The same experiment was conducted with the same groups, but this time to measure their performances on reading comprehension. Again, the students that read the text in Arabic significantly outperformed the other group in terms of reading comprehension, suggesting that, on the average, students' academic performances are likely to improve if they are taught in Arabic instead of a second language, such as English or French.

Fostering literary Arabic as a medium of instruction in order to enhance its learning among Arab students and improve their academic performance should by no means be viewed as an argument against the teaching of foreign languages such as French and English. In fact, if anything, the teaching of these languages as separate subjects should be strengthened and improved in order to make knowledge more accessible to students, teachers and educators.

Conclusion

The problem of illiteracy in the Arab world is acute. The linguistic environment, characterised by diglossia and bilingualism, is not conducive to the acquisition of literacy, and is partly responsible for the lack of active participation of a large number of the Arab population in the development of their societies. In order to alleviate the negative impact of this environment, collective efforts of parents, educators, linguists and language policy makers are needed. The argument has been made in this paper that it is important to expose children to literary Arabic during the first few years of life in order to pave the way for the mastery of the language of instruction, Arabic. Moreover, it has been argued that the use of literary Arabic needs to be

strengthened in the academic setting by making it the language of instruction of various scientific subjects, and not just literary subjects. Strengthening literary Arabic as the language of instruction will enhance the need for all students to master it to ensure academic success.

Notes

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