How Arabs can win back their language

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How Arabs can win back their language

To best understand Arabic education, especially in minoritized Palestinian communities in Israel, it is necessary to decolonize Eurocentric frameworks in linguistic research.

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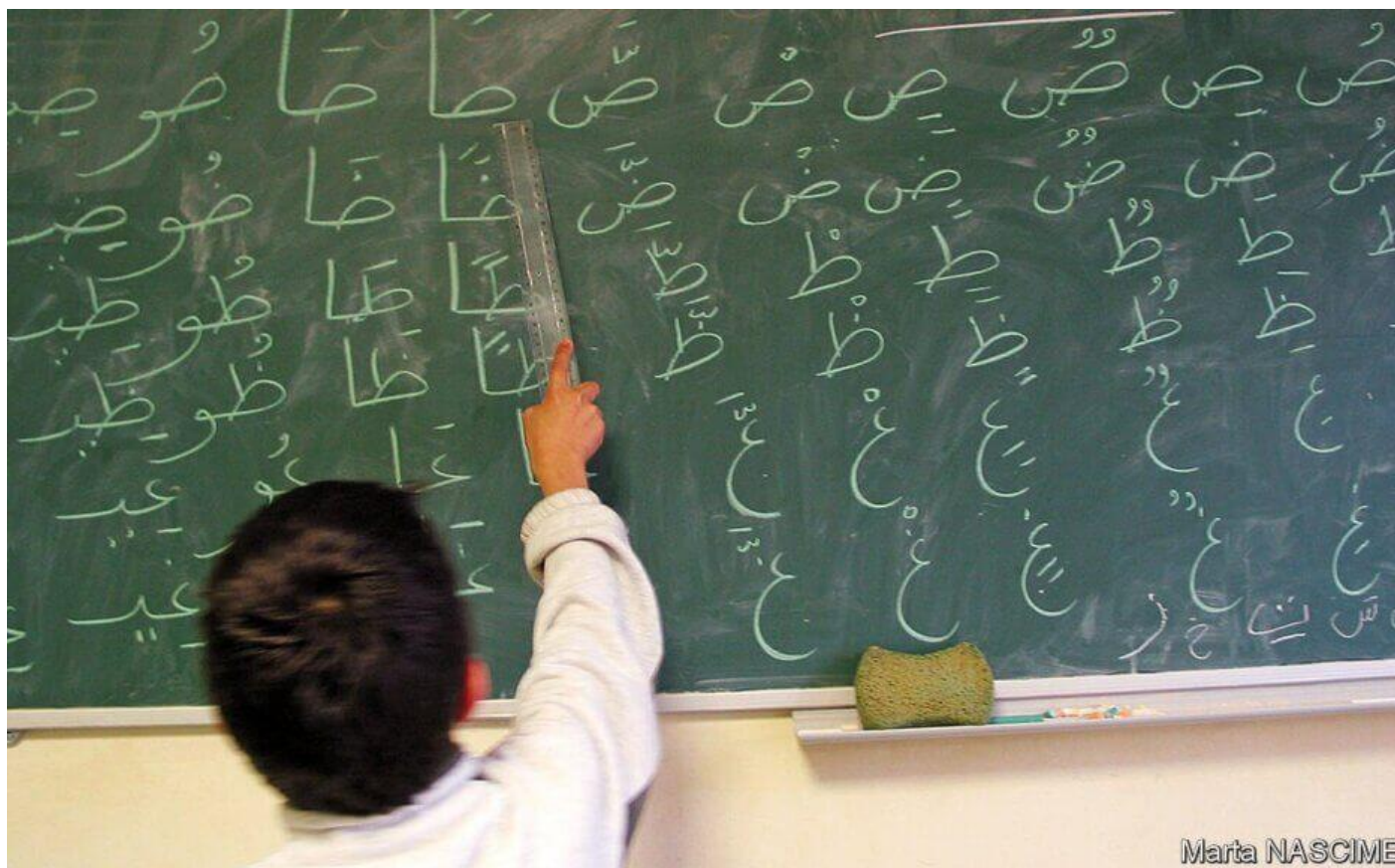
Public discourse about Arabic [diglossia](#) and reading for children has been on the rise as of late, garnering the attention of many across both the Arab world and its diaspora populations. It has also been used as a vindication of colonial praxis specifically emerging from public discussions regarding the academic achievements of Palestinian minoritized communities in Israel. As scholars and institutions engaged in research and service within Arabic speaking communities, we would like to discuss the status quo of Arabic language development, teaching, and decolonization efforts followed by practical steps to address

questions raised by both Arab parents and community members about diglossia and reading. We believe that future discussions and actions must be driven by unbiased research-based evidence and a structural understanding of the challenges expressed in order to improve accessibility to social and academic success.

The study of Arabic language development

The study of childrens' Arabic language acquisition is sparse and has primarily focused on only one of the language's varieties; the vernacular dialect. This is understandable given the predominant use of this dialect in daily communication. However, investigating the majority of the literature in this domain reveals a general disregard for the sociolinguistic reality of children raised in diglossic communities. In diglossic communities, speakers are exposed to their spoken dialect (*Amiya*) and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) (*Fusha*) in complementary and progressively functional distributions. Generally, the spoken dialect is used for daily communication and MSA for formal communication, reading, and writing. However, the two varieties are in constant interaction and with the increased exposure to MSA, children's verbal productions of these two varieties become organically integrated. For example, 5 years old children role-playing a reality TV show like The Voice shifted between the two dialectal varieties with ease. Due to the monolingual-biased frameworks of inquiry dominating studies of language acquisition, researchers often overlook the relationship and organic interactions between *Fusha* and *Amiya* in the course of typical language development among children in the Arab world. This theoretical understanding has only been transferred to professional action by few pioneering scholars in recent investigations of Arabic language acquisition. These initiated the examination of the development of diglossic knowledge as well as the interactive role of diglossic variables in the course of learning Arabic sounds, words, and grammatical structures. Therefore, a more robust understanding of societal context on the typical course of language acquisition is imperative while additionally considering the epistemic force of coloniality on language.

It is also important to acknowledge that exposure to MSA is affected in specific sociopolitical contexts including the minoritized indigenous Arab community in Israel, heritage learners (HL) learning Arabic in the diaspora, and refugee children in war zones who often do not have

access to a quality education. Living in these linguistic contexts where there is limited access to schooling in MSA, or to MSA due to the contextual setting of their location, severely impacts language and literacy development. It should be highlighted in that regard that the vast majority of studies on Arabic diglossia have come from studies of Arabic-speaking children in Israel which is far from representing a typical Arabic language context due to multiple factors but mostly due to the systemic linguistic racism against Arabic language and its speakers. While many researchers have been looking exclusively at diglossia as the problem, however, we would like to argue, that the larger context and interactive effect of diglossia with other factors such as poverty, structural inequalities, language status in a specific context, and underdeveloped teaching and learning practices underlie the lack of proficiency in Arabic language.

The study of Arabic teaching pedagogy

In the midst of all the talk about diglossia's effect on Arabic teaching and learning, the elephant in the room being Arabic teaching pedagogy has been largely overlooked.

Teaching practices in the Arabic language classroom have not been the focus of much research and as such tend to be forgotten as a viable reason responsible for the unimpressive performance on international

Arabic language reading and literacy tests including the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Fifty-one countries took the PIRLS test in 2016 including eight Arabic speaking countries all of whom scored below the international average on Arabic reading comprehension. The UAE came in the 43rd rank ahead of all the participating Arab countries with a score of 450 which is 11 points higher than the 2011 score (Bahrain 44th place, Qatar 45th, Oman 47th, Kuwait 48th, Morocco 49th, Egypt 50th). Results, moreover, indicate that students were able to retrieve information that they could directly access from the texts they read on the test, however, most of them were unable to tackle questions that required higher order thinking skills including interpretation, inference, understanding meaning, and items that require students to analyze and reflect on longer texts with questions focused on ideas that came later in the text. Students didn't have the needed fluency to read the full texts. It is worth investigating whether Arabic teaching and learning practices might be responsible for students' low proficiency in Arabic. Such an effect would be more robust in a state that uses education as a tool for control like the Arab education system in Israel, which is under-resourced with security forces interference in its vision and mission in addition to the control exerted in the selection of educational leaders.

Aside from the effect of state control, classroom observations across the Arab world have revealed that Arabic language teachers rarely engage students in reading beyond what is in the textbook and rarely expose students to daily or frequent read-alouds from children's literature. Classroom observations also reveal that most teachers speak in their dialects rather than in MSA which limits children's exposure to MSA and limits accordingly the opportunities to acquire new academic vocabulary which is key to academic success. Closely linked to classroom practices of teaching and learning, is the quality of preservice preparation that Arabic teachers receive before joining the teaching cadre. In a study by the second author of this Op-ed from 2017, the researcher reviewed six Arabic teacher preparation programs in various Arab universities. In five of the six, the coursework and field experience were outdated and did not give teachers the skills needed to manage a diverse classroom, support struggling readers, design learning activities and assessments that are in line with the standards, and implement science of reading concepts into their planning and general practices. This means that teachers are being sent to the classroom without the needed skills and support to teach Arabic language. Moreover, very few schools are invested in training inservice teachers and when they do professional

development, it is usually not planned around students' and teachers' needs or around a clear training agenda and vision, but rather training is mostly haphazardly done based on the latest fads and buzzwords in the field.

Another teaching and learning obstacle to proficiency in Arabic language learning relate to limitations in designing quality Arabic curricula due to a shortage of experts specialized in Arabic language pedagogy and curriculum design who are able to engage in the development of textbooks, standards, scope and sequence, appropriate pedagogies and assessments. This is in addition to varying levels of resources allocated for developing evidence-based resources and practices which would be more costly given the documented shortages in research and experts manpower. The price of all that pedagogical falling and failing is borne by students and communities in general who have been frustrated and struggling to find out why their kids are failing.

There is a pedagogical imperative that needs to become a centerpiece in research funding and discussions on Arabic language learning. Looking beyond the language into what is surrounding the language including teaching and learning practices might enrich the conversation and might accelerate the quest to finding solutions to issues of illiteracy, low performance and equity gaps when it comes to learning in Arabic.

Decolonized inquiry in the study of Arabic

For the last few decades, researchers have identified the exclusion of anthropological and sociological research insights in the study of literacy acquisition. These directions aim to steer away from individualistic psychology-cognition driven research — or place it in wider context — and focus on the lived experiences of learners embedded in the social, political and cultural systems.

Until recently, the majority of research has been based upon Eurocentric frameworks in linguistic research, which aspires to a global linguistic ideal that fails to accommodate variations within a language and the political and cultural influences that shape linguistic education. With the rising awakening effect of Black Lives Matter movement on higher education the discussion of the long history of which science been used as a tool to justify racial hierarchical ideas in education and health care

services for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities have been intensifying in discussing needed reforms in the scientific inquiries to be just and inclusive and emptied from all effects of isms – racism, sexism, ableism. The latest publications in this domain highlight how colonial linguistic frameworks resulted in a vision of language that is unrelated to ways people understood language locally. This uniformed global view has resulted in inadequate understanding of learners' needs. Globally, these frameworks are used to measure success in language education in one size fits all metrics. These metrics and the standardized language education undermine local linguistic variation and heterogeneous cultures.

Arguments related to Arabic learning in light of diglossia may overlook the advantages of linguistic variation due to its rooted uniformed global view that is built on a superficial and instrumentalist ideology of language. Such bases of discussion that does not consider the complementary functional use of 'Amiyah' and 'Fusha' and presents an idealized national 'Amiyah, in its quotidian specificity, a sufficient variety to embody the living social truth of an Arab people. *Fusha* by contrast is presented as sterile, static, artificially imposed, and almost colonial, the relic of an imagined community long gone which is inaccurate representation of Fusha, a variety that has undergone different processes of transformation and standardization and is also a major force in the reality of an Arab world and Arab identity.

Any future serious discussions about teaching Arabic need to reflect on the obstacles and the risks of inquiries and perspectives shaped by Eurocentric ideological framework. A language lives in a body of its speakers and a great corpus of texts. The non-binary spectrum of Arabic language from *'Amiyah* to *Fusha* operates as an organic whole, and with the rise of majority literacy over the last two generations, it is certainly filling new roles and has been subject to modernizing change since the *Nahda* of the 19th century. In addition, future discussions need to account for the social value of the body of Arabic texts, modern and ancient, and the cultural and material value of access to these works in constant contemporary production. Arabic is a global language, one of six official languages of the UN, the unity of which can only be realized in *Fusha*.

New research has focused on questioning the conceptions of linguistic education, building on the observation that students are losing mastery of various forms of Arabic literacy to globalized forms of education that

are indifferent to peripheral linguistic traditions. In grappling with this linguistic and cultural erosion, questions about whether *'Amiyah* can compete with European languages in terms of access to knowledge and whether it could form the foundation for modern higher education need to be addressed. Neoliberal education systems aim (among other things) to prepare students to be global citizens, but in transnational settings where identities are malleable and transformative. Education in our Arab world is an arena for conflict between competing ideologies making education an important site for cultural struggle, especially in relation to the construction of national identity. These aspects need to be accounted for in any discussions about Arabic learning and a one-size fits all approach may not be the solution. For example, the contributions of *Fusha* and local language variation differ among different groups of Arabic speakers. For heritage speakers in transnational settings, exposure to the *Fusha* might be an exclusionary experience, as it is not part of their daily lived experience and restricted to storytelling or religious instruction. For speakers in the Arab world, daily exposure to media, religious education, professional settings, and distinct forms of literacy like stories and different registers, expose learners to *Fusha* differently. These different lived experiences may shape different positionalities and different ideological and affective stances towards *Fusha* which may necessitate different Arabic learning goals and vision for these different groups and means that what might work or not work for one is not necessarily the right fit for the other.

Practical suggestions

Suggested actions for promoting Arabic acquisition for L1 learners in the Arab world

Recent studies in Arabic language learning in children reveal that the integrative nature of diglossia within a society has effects on a child's language development before they enter school and is apparent in their language development in all language domains at all developmental stages. Hence, parent education programs are essential to facilitate parents' knowledge of early literacy based engagements with their children and enhancing equal preparation of children to school. This process does not start with schooling and does not end after school. It is actually acquired at differing paces, in accordance with the amount of exposure and use of MSA, with identifiable developmental milestones

that affect children's implicit competence and explicit knowledge of the two language varieties. Hence, teachers training and expanded research in understanding these norms is critical for addressing the needs of children in their language and literacy learning in the Arab world. Diglossia is an integral part of language acquisition, just as it is an integral characteristic of Arabic-speaking societies, but also has many advantages at the cognitive, communicative, and even career level that deserves the transformational structural support to maintain success in learning it given diglossic situation.

1. Training teachers in cutting edge pedagogies & best evidence based approaches that are relevant to Arabic language.

2. Ensuring that teachers have a well developed MSA proficiency in understanding the interactive role of diglossia in Arabic learning and literacy, and

3. Preparing preservice teachers in skills needed to manage diverse classrooms, support challenged readers, design learning and assessments that are aligned with the standards, and implement science of reading research findings into their planning and general practices

4. Developing authentic innovative curriculum for teaching Arabic that is detached from pedagogies that may not relevant for the context of Arabic and designed to facilitate opportunities for MSA usage and diglossic awareness development that is developmentally appropriate and linguistically and culturally responsive

5. Developing parent education opportunities to facilitate parents engagement in child's language development and learning that is culturally responsive

Suggested actions for promoting Arabic acquisition for heritage language learners in the diaspora

At this current moment, Arabic tops the most represented languages spoken at homes across the U.S. (Spoken by 2.6% of all K-12 English learner students in the U.S.) and it is expected to increase. Most of these

students are referred to as heritage language learners, which is defined as students who are raised at a home of which a language other than English is used at home and exhibits use of the heritage language to some degree. Cutting edge research into Arabic language learning in heritage speakers reveal that children's acquisition in heritage speakers differs from its course of development for Arabic-speaking children growing in the Arab world where Arabic is the language of the majority. Heritage learners show an incomplete acquisition or attrition of Arabic with the decreased input and use of Arabic once children's input shift to become English dominant usually at the time of which they start school. Moreover, the limited access to MSA in the diaspora for heritage speaking children impacts their learning and mastery of MSA which many seek as adults during college as a way to connect to their roots, identity, to learn, read and write, and connect with their Arab community. Hence, support for Arabic speaking parents in the diaspora needs to address the decreased usage of Arabic, the relationship between language dominance and exposure and use, as well as parents role in language policy planning and the importance of empowering minoritized parents to support maintenance of Arabic dialects spoken at homes as well as meaningful opportunities to access MSA .

1. Establish cultural centers for Arab community in the diaspora to provide opportunities for children activities to promote Arabic language learning and Arab identity development

2. Establish programs for Arabic teaching in schools and summer camps

3. Facilitate socio-political transformation within the west towards inclusivity of Arabs and Muslims

4. Provide parents with empowerment opportunities to maintain their bilingual language use with their children and in the community

5. Provide accessible Arabic language and culture children friendly and developmentally appropriate learning sources