

The Legacy of Arabic: Cultural Heritage versus Global English and Globalization in the Arabian Gulf

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Abstract

The Arabic language is an intangible but important piece of cultural heritage in the Arab world. In the United Arab Emirates there is a concern about the role of Arabic in everyday life as globalization and global English have begun an interminable march into all sectors of society. The older generations and some in the media lament Arabic's fading role, while Arab youth generally have no major concerns about the lessening of Arabic usage in their daily lives. This article discusses the place of Arabic, as a heritage language for young Arabs residing in the UAE, as it faces a consistent battle with global English, spread by globalization.

Key words: Arabic, Arab identity, global English, globalization, heritage language

1.0 Introduction

In a world which is rapidly changing and modernizing due to globalization and the spread of global English as today's lingua franca, people seek out historical or cultural references to hold on to. This is done for many reasons: from the fear of losing parts of their historical memories, to a desire to ensure that the past and its culture remain alive for generations to come. Often times these items which people cling to are not tangible, or even visible, but they are ingrained in their heritage and humans feel the need to make sure they remain relevant. This is especially true with languages: which are definitive pieces of a cultural heritage that people desire to maintain, but are viewed as "intangible." Silverman and Ruggles (2007) argue that "cultural heritage requires memory," and must be "remembered and claimed as patrimony" (p. 1). Due to this factor, "cultural heritage is always, to some degree, intangible" (Silverman & Ruggles, 2007, p. 1). In order to understand language as an intangible cultural heritage, it must be defined. Ruggles and Silverman (2009) use William Logan's (2007) definition of intangible cultural heritage as that which is "embodied in people rather than in inanimate objects" (Ruggles & Silverman, 2009, p. 1). Furthermore, UNESCO identifies oral traditions and languages as being part of intangible culture that are passed down from one generation to the next (Ruggles & Silverman, 2009, p. 1).

This article discusses the place of Arabic as a heritage language in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Arabic has a special place in the Arab world, especially for Muslims. Arabic is considered to be a key element in forming an Arab identity and is thought to be at the heart of Arab culture. In the UAE, due to the prevalence of non-Arabic speakers in the country and the widespread use of English, the place of Arabic is no longer as secure as it once was. The UAE is well-placed to become a nation of bilinguals; however, there is a consistent move towards global English as the language needed for communication, often at the expense of Arabic. It is often the older generations of Arabs, residing in the UAE, who cling to the importance of Arabic. They worry about the overwhelming amount of English that people use in the UAE and the lack of focus on and use of Arabic.

There is concern about Arabic in the UAE because a language, even a mother tongue, can face the possibility of demise if certain factors come together. In fact, how young people feel about their native language and their attitude towards it can lead some to place less emphasis on perfecting that language (Genesee & Gandara, 1999). For example, if a second language becomes dominant, which English appears to be doing in the UAE, and parents and society do not focus on the native language, then children may lose interest in learning and speaking it (Genesee & Gandara, 1999). From the North American point of view, heritage speakers are “bilingual speakers of an immigrant minority language, whose first language often does not reach native-like attainment in adulthood” (Benmamoun, Montrul, & Polinsky, 2013, p. 129). However, Arabic in the UAE is a heritage language due to its place in history and its religious importance. But there are concerns that speakers of Arabic could become more like those described in the West; i.e., lacking native-like confidence in their first language due to the prominent role that globalization and global English have taken in the UAE. The following will discuss the place of Arabic in the lives of Arabs, Muslims specifically, and will reveal the way in which the language is losing importance among younger Arabs due to globalization and global English.

1.1 The UAE

The UAE stands out among its neighbors in the Arabian Gulf due to the major strides it has made since the discovery of oil in the late 1950s. In just over 50 years the UAE has become a nation which celebrates its thriving tourist industry, prides itself on its award-winning skyscrapers and luxury hotels, while enjoying one of the highest standards of living on the globe. This small nation “is the second largest Gulf Arab economy, and among the fastest-growing economies in the world” (Khan, 2013, p. 85). UAE nationals only make up about 20 percent of the total estimated population of nine million. It is believed that the foreign workforce in the UAE is about “90 percent of the working population” (Al-Khoury, 2010, p. 4). Since 66% of this large expatriate population does not speak Arabic, the UAE requires a language in which everyone can communicate, and in today’s globalized world that language is English. The Arabs, who live and work in the UAE, come from the entire Arab world. They all bring their own Arab dialects to the UAE, and most raise their children speaking their dialects at home. However, Arabic literacy is not mandatory in order to get along in the UAE, and this can be problematic.

1.2 Arabic versus English in the UAE

Although the Arabic language is seen as important for the nation in terms of “claiming ‘nation-statehood’ and ‘collective identities’” (Findlow, 2006, p. 24), it is certainly not used or promoted as much as English. Furthermore, there is no overt language policy in the UAE (Gallagher, 2011). Despite the fact that English is a foreign language in the country; it essentially functions as a second language. And although Arabic is the official language of the UAE, “many would argue that English has a *de facto* lingua franca status” (Randall & Samimi, 2010, p. 45). Globalization has brought many nationalities to the UAE, and due to the variety of

languages which are spoken by these expatriates, it is certainly not surprising that a lingua franca is needed, and English is today's lingua franca. English has also become firmly entrenched in the educational system of the country. Arab youth, from all over the Arab world, attend international schools, which offer Arabic, but only as a subject. Since only UAE locals can attend public schools, which are mostly in Arabic, all other Arabs are forced to attend private international schools; most of those are English-medium. And, in fact, even Emirati parents often prefer to send their children to international schools, as there is a concern that the public schools will not give their children the advantage they need to succeed in attaining a place in university, or pursuing a career. This is the current milieu in the UAE, a place where Arabic is the national language and many Arabs of all nationalities reside within its borders. However, despite these factors and the parents and some in the media, who hold Arabic up as a prestigious language associated with Islam, Arab identity, and even nationalism; today's youth live in a world of global English. A world wherein they need English, not only to study, but for its entertainment value as they seek out music, films, books, magazines, and the internet, all in English. As the government continues its initiatives to promote English as a medium of instruction at the tertiary level, there are those who hold onto Arabic as the legacy of Arabs and who, therefore, take issue with the move towards assigning English such a prominent role in society.

2.0 Arabic as a Heritage Language in the UAE

Benmamoun et. al (2013) discuss problems that some heritage speakers face; however, their research is based on these speakers finding themselves in countries where a new language is the main language of communication. This is different from the situation in the UAE; however, the role of Arabic does tend to take a secondary role due to globalization and the rise of global English. The concern in the UAE situation, in light of Benmamoun et. al's (2013) research, is the question of "how long does it take for a native language to be acquired and solidified so that it does not regress with fluctuations in input?" (p. 131). What has been discovered is that "language acquisition which takes place in a situation where there is reduced input due to another language in a bilingual situation" results in language attrition of the first language" (Benmamoun et. al, 2013, pp. 131-132).

In the case of Arabic in the UAE, Arab children speak the heritage language as their first language, but English is introduced very early on, often in primary school, and at that point, English, their second language (L2) often "becomes their primary language at some point during childhood," which can lead to a "language shift" (Benmamoun et. al, 2013, p. 133). This causes the speaker, by early adulthood, to be a strong speaker in English at the expense of Arabic, or the heritage language, which becomes weaker. In the UAE this is evident mainly in the literacy of Arab youth who have attended international English medium schools from the primary level. Since Arabic is a diglossic language, meaning that "its native speakers use different registers of language according to the requirements of the social situation involved" (Allen, 1998, p. 18); the spoken form, made up of dialects depending on the region, is quite different from formal Arabic. The Arabic language, which is seen as "the root of Islamic identity, is divided into two main varieties: classical or Modern Standard Arabic [MSA], the high variety, and colloquial Arabic, the low variety" (Morrow, 2006b, p. 149). "Classical Arabic, known as *fusha*, is the language of the Quran [essentially] frozen in time. MSA is the language of the educated elite, which is a simplified version of the classical. But it is not spoken by people. Various dialects or *ammiyas* are the colloquial language spoken in many varieties from North Africa to Saudi Arabia to the Levant" (Morrow, 2006b, p. 149).

Due to the diglossic situation found with the Arabic language, Arabic becomes the heritage language, as defined by North America, because despite the fact that it was "first in the order of acquisition [...] it did not develop fully at age appropriate levels because of the individual's switch" (Benmamoun et. al 2013, p. 133) to the lingua franca of today: global English. The standard notion about language acquisition is that

“exposure to natural language during the critical period (before puberty) should allow one to develop native-like competence,” but it appears that not all heritage speakers are able to develop “uniform native-like competence in all grammatical domains” (Benmamoun et. al, 2013, p. 171), and this is especially noticeable among Arabic-speakers in the UAE. Currently Arabic-speaking children are attending English speaking schools often starting in primary school. This early exposure to English does have an effect on their ability to obtain strong literacy in MSA. In addition, the consistent use of English in their daily lives also impacts their spoken Arabic, leading to a great deal of code-switching, meaning they insert English words into their Arabic conversations. It is this constant interspersing of English with Arabic which has led to concerns over Arab culture and identity.

2.1 Arabic as Tied to Arab Identity and Culture

Despite the consistent move towards using English among Arab youth in the UAE, and perhaps *because* of that, there are certain parents and some in the media who strongly believe that Arabic must be maintained as part of the cultural heritage of Arabs. However, for those Arabs who continue to hold on to the Arabic language as a piece of culture which is unchanging and must be accepted by their children, they need to become aware of the fragility of their argument. The belief or claim that we all share a

complex culture with our forebears is impossible. [It is impossible] because [culture] changes over time. It mutates, and adapts to changing circumstance. Its shared assumptions are discarded one by one. Sometimes because they need to be, other times because they fall victim to stronger assumptions (Tokeley, 2006, p. 78).

The notion of culture remaining permanent is not something that parents can actually ensure for their children, because “Every new culture discards something of the past, and affirms something that is new” (Tokeley, 2006, p. 82). The same can be said about identity, which is now understood as more fluid and changeable than people had once assumed (Canagarajah, 2006; Nino-Marcia & Rothman, 2008; Norton, 1997). Arab youth are already busy looking for that which is new, innovative, and different, because that is what young people do. However, they are not throwing away their Arab culture or identity, just because they are able to see parts of other cultures and pieces of identity which they are willing to add to their own repertoire. The culture which they are usually most fascinated by is that brought through global English, and as Tokeley (2006) argues, “The present dominance of English derives from its powerful culture. English carries a culture that many crave to adopt. America has gained her preeminence through this craving” (p. 83). Therefore, parents in the UAE need to begin accepting the shifting role of culture and identity among Arab youth. Yet, despite these young Arabs’ fluidity in culture and identity, their ties to Islam seem to remain firm.

2.2 Arabic and Islam

For many Arab youth in the UAE, there is a strong belief that they can maintain their Arabic due to its place in Islam. Since “classical Arabic was the chosen vehicle through which the Quran was conveyed to the Prophet Mohamed. Fifteen centuries later, it remains the language by which Muslims the world over, regardless of their native language, read the word of Allah” (Morrow, 2006a, p. 1). It is this place of importance of the language, which some Arab youth hold on to as they try to justify their use of so much English, often at the expense of Arabic. Arab youth are convinced that Arabic’s place in the world, and their lives, will remain because it is tied to Islam, because Arabic has a “distinctive feature [which includes] the prevalence of phrases and words that include a reference to Allah or God. These phrases and words form a unique language constituent, known as the Allah Lexicon” (Morrow, 2006a, p. 2). Many Arabs, especially in the Arab world, maintain the Allah Lexicon even while speaking English. This may be another reason why

Arab youth feel that their Arabic remains secure, because even while conversing in English, they use phrases such as *insha'Allah* (Allah willing), *alhamdulillah* (praise be to Allah) or *Allahu Akbar* (Allah is the greatest), which are expressions that have [even] entered the American and [western] consciousness in recent years (Castleton, 2006, p. 74). The bond between Arabic and Islam is exceptional and “No [other] religious tradition is as bound to a particular language, both in theory and in practice, as Islam is to Arabic” (Stover, 1983, p. 19). Furthermore, Arabic is unique in that it “is the only language in the world where the word Allah or ‘God’ is the most frequently occurring content word in its lexicon” (Morrow, 2006a, p. 45).

Yet despite the place of Islam in the lives of many Arabs, they cannot use this argument for claiming the longevity of Arabic. Arab youth are not fully aware of the fate of Latin. They do not see that their language could end up being merely the language of the *masjid* (mosque). It is true that millions of Muslims worship and pray in Arabic; however, that does not mean that they use or speak Arabic in their daily lives. Indonesia has the largest number of Muslims in the world, and although they pray in Arabic, they do not need to be fluent in the language in order to worship. These factors are not viewed as anything to cause apprehension for Arab youth. They are content with their ability to speak Arabic and very happy to use English often.

3.0 Arab Youth and English Usage

Young Arabs today consistently code-switch while speaking Arabic, and their conversations are peppered with English words and expressions. They do this for several reasons: sometimes they actually don't know the word in Arabic; some may do it to ‘show off’ that they know English, and others have allowed English to permeate their lives to the extent that code-switching just happens without much thought. There is even a language known as ‘Arabizi’, which is a “form of speech that mixes Arabic with English; the word ‘Arabizi’ comes from “Arabic and Inglizi, [which is the word] English in Arabic” (Villegas, 2010, p. 148). Many young Arabs today speak this language, which is certainly not a dialect specific to one country or MSA; it is a mixture of their own language with a great deal of English thrown into the mix.

What emerges from this complex issue is that essentially Arab youth see the world very differently from their parents. Based on a study I carried out in the UAE with over 300 students who were native speakers of Arabic, it emerged that they do not feel that the Arabic language is what makes them have an Arab identity or ‘proves’ in some way that they are true Arabs. Since English has been part of their lives since they were young, they see language as a means of communication. They see Arabic as a language they can use when needed, while they also see English as a useful language. These Arab youth are willing and able to use both, especially in terms of verbal communication. However, many of them do share some concerns about their written Arabic and even their ability to read the language. Their Arabic literacy, for many, has become quite weak in the face of so much English use in their studies since primary school.

What we discover when we talk with Arab youth currently residing and studying in the UAE is that they believe English is important for their educations and their futures. They look back at all their years of studying in English as a medium of instruction as useful and important. These youth do not believe they have abandoned their Arabic. They have many places where they use it, including at home, or in the *masjid*, or in other social encounters. Very few students, involved in the study, revealed any major concerns that they would lose their Arab culture or identity just because they use a great deal of English.

3.1 The Divergence

In this rapidly globalizing world, where information is available at the touch of a mouse, where young people are obtaining their information about the world through the internet, films, television, and newspapers, often in English; we face a dichotomy. Some of the parents and grandparents of today's Arab

youth, consciously and with great effort try to hold on to Arabic. They try to make it relevant to their children; they want them to see the importance of a heritage language to their Arab identity and Arab culture. And the interminable spread of global English is fueling their fears that Arabic could be in actual danger. But on the other hand, we have Arab youth; secure in their knowledge about what is best for them. Secure and certain, as only youth can be, in their belief that they will always have Arabic, that somehow it will never leave them. They unconsciously dismiss Arabic, as they falsely believe it will remain strong due to its importance in Islam.

This discussion requires the input of Arab youth, because so often the loudest voices railing about the importance of Arabic include the media or religious figures in society, and those who still believe in Arab nationalism, which began in the 1950s, but has since dissolved. Today's Arab youth are very different from their parents and grandparents; this is evident by looking at their roles in the Arab Spring. These are the youth who have attempted to enact change, because they got tired of waiting. This group of young Arabs still holds on to many traditional values; however, their lives have been greatly influenced by the role of global English and globalization. Their views on identity, life, and language are in sharp contrast to their parents and the older generation of Arabs. These are the young people who have grown up with English, lived globalization, and therefore, there is no way they are going to be completely in synch with their parents on this issue of Arabic and their identity and culture.

Young Arabs living in the UAE see English as important for both their higher education aspirations and their future careers. There are very few Arab youth who have strong negative feelings about global English, and most do not worry about their Arab identity or culture slipping away in light of all the English they choose to use. These young Arabs, living in a globalized world, see English as an instrument for communication, just as they see Arabic as a tool.

4.0 The Future of Arabic

Although we can certainly appreciate the outlook of Arab youth, and understand how they are viewing their two languages as having significant roles. It is also important to look at this situation from some of the parents and media's point of view. We have to acknowledge that Arabic is a heritage language; it does impart special meaning in terms of the Arab culture and especially for its role in Islam. Therefore, we can see that it has a pertinent role in the lives of those who speak it and use it.

Because Arabic is so tied to Islam "native Arabic-speaking Muslims look at events of daily life [...] in terms of God's relationship to that event or interaction" (Castleton, 2006, p. 77). Therefore, it becomes anathema to some in the UAE to view the move towards so much English among Arab youth. There is a continued strong belief that somehow Islam should be able to hold people to Arabic, since "the first book ever published in the Arabic language, the Quran established the standard of classical Arabic, [...] the path of eloquence..." (Morrow, 2006b, p. 115). Yet despite these factors, it appears that some Arab youth in the UAE, are unable or unwilling to focus on the need to hold on to their Arabic. Part of the problem may be the way in which parents are approaching this argument. If they continue to present it from the point of view of religion, traditions, and identity this could push young people away. Many youth today, in many regions of the world, seek to be slightly independent from their parents, even in collective societies in the Arab world. They are not choosing this route to be difficult or to go against major norms and traditions, but are essentially being young and testing boundaries. It would seem that the older generations and those in the media harping on the condition of Arabic in the UAE need to find better rationales for why Arabic should be maintained, without always falling back on religion and traditions and things which some youth might see as old fashioned. Furthermore, parents need to accept some of the responsibility themselves, as they are the ones who chose to put their children in English medium schools in the UAE.

Maintaining a language is always important, a language such as Arabic, which is a heritage language, is revered even more than most languages, especially in tandem with its centrality to Islam, Arab culture, and identity. However, due to the intangible nature of language, it is often difficult for young people to develop and then maintain an attachment to something which is so elusive. Since they are young they are not always convinced about some of the arguments that older generations put before them. Arab youth today in the UAE have seemingly made their peace with the duality of languages: Arabic and English. Because they are able to get along quite well in Arabic using their colloquial dialects, they feel secure in their language abilities. Unfortunately, for many, their literacy skills tend to be weak due to all the years of studying in English. It is this part of Arabic that many of the older generation are concerned about. They want their children to have a firm grasp of Arabic, including strong literacy skills. Despite the contrast between the generations, there is still hope for Arabic among Arab youth in the UAE.

5.0 Conclusion

The cultural heritage that is manifested in the Arabic language cannot be denied. Arabic has a rich history and background that has brought many new discoveries to the world through its script. The Golden Age of Islam survived and spread with the Arabic language. This is one of the reasons why many today insist that the language be preserved, not only as one of the *ammiyas*, which are many, but as the original eloquent language which was written in the Quran. Furthermore, seeing the power that globalization and global English exert over Arab youth, Arab parents in the UAE are determined to help maintain the cultural heritage and richness inherent in Modern Standard Arabic. They can see that English is making serious inroads into the lives of Arab youth and they want to ensure that Arabic has the same opportunities. Realistically, this may not happen. English has gained quite a strong foothold, by virtue of being the language of education for so many of these young Arabs residing in the UAE. Most of their lives have been spent studying in English; therefore, their vocabularies for academic subjects are much broader in English than Arabic. Many of them have practiced reading, writing, and using English for 12 years; therefore, they have not had the time needed to reach fluency in Arabic in terms of reading and writing. This is a problem and this is a concern. The implications of this situation cannot be overlooked. If Arabic is to remain a heritage language, it must remain important and valid for the current generation. Arab youth must see, by themselves, the importance of Arabic to their lives, culture, and identity.

There is a solution, but one which has not yet taken hold within the UAE educational system. What needs to take place as policy in the UAE is true bilingualism (Al-Issa, 2012; Garcia, 2009; National Editorial, 2011). It is only when those who make policy regarding education conclude and agree upon the need for bilingualism that this situation with Arabic will start to ameliorate. There is a great deal of proof that bilingualism works and can be part of a nation's educational curriculum. Countries such as Finland and the Netherlands can be used as examples of how to implement bilingualism for all children from an early age. Until and unless true bilingualism is invested in for the young Arabs residing in the UAE, the possibility of Arabic weakening will continue.

The next step for the UAE's ministry of education is to seek input from the outside. This assistance should not come from the US or UK curriculums, which are notoriously monolingual, but instead from those nations who have advocated and succeeded in developing bilingualism among their youth. Those encounters can hopefully lead to new methods of teaching both English and Arabic in such a way that the final outcome leads to bilingualism, instead of today's focus and attention on English.

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