

## Previewing Arabic Language's Diglossia in the Short and Long-term Future

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### Abstract:

This study explores the phenomenon of Arabic Language diglossia with the purpose of identifying indicators that may help forecast its short- and long-term future. The research focuses on the approximately 400 million Arabic-speaking population across the 22 Arab countries, representing diverse regional and sociolinguistic contexts. Employing an exploratory and comparative analytical method, the study is based on an extensive review of sociolinguistic literature, supported by theoretical perspectives from Ferguson (1959), Fishman (1967), Aitchison (2001), and others. The analysis examines Arabic diglossia in comparison with other world diglossic languages, emphasizing the unique interplay between Classical Arabic (CA or *fus'ha*) and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). The findings reveal that Arabic diglossia differs significantly from other diglossic languages in both motivation and structure. Unlike other linguistic communities, Arab societies' inclination to preserve and readopt *fus'ha* stems from a profound spiritual and cultural attachment rather than purely linguistic or pragmatic factors. Moreover, the study identifies the Arabic grammatical system—particularly its complex syntactic-phonological agreements—as the greatest barrier to mastering *fus'ha*. Despite this difficulty, evidence suggests that the gap between CA and MSA has been narrowing due to mass media exposure and digital communication. In conclusion, the study asserts that while the complete return to Classical Arabic across all domains is unlikely in the near future, the persistence of *fus'ha* in religious, legal, academic, and literary contexts ensures its ongoing vitality. The evolution of a semi-standardized “formal Arabic” variety reflects a gradual convergence between the two existing forms, positioning Arabic diglossia as a distinctive and enduring linguistic phenomenon where tradition and modernity in dynamic balance.

**Keywords:** Diglossia, Language Change, Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic

## استشراف حالة ازدواجية اللغة العربية على المدى القريب والبعيد د. رشا علي خير – أستاذ مساعد – قسم اللغة الإنجليزية – كليات الخليج- حفر الباطن المملكة العربية السعودية المستخلص :

تستكشف هذه الدراسة ظاهرة ازدواجية اللغة العربية بهدف تحديد المؤشرات التي قد تساعد في التنبؤ بمستقبلها على المدى القصير والطويل. يركز البحث على ما يقرب من 400 مليون من السكان الناطقين باللغة العربية في 22 دولة عربية، يمثلون سياقات إقليمية ولغوية اجتماعية متنوعة. باستخدام طريقة تحليلية استكشافية ومقارنة، تستند الدراسة إلى مراجعة شاملة للآداب الاجتماعية اللغوية، مدعومة بوجهات نظر نظرية من فيرغسون (1959)، فيشمان (1967)، إيتشيسون (2001)، وغيرها. يتناول التحليل ازدواجية اللغة العربية مقارنة باللغات العالمية الأخرى، مع التركيز على التفاعل الفريد بين اللغة العربية الفصحى (CA أو fus'ha) واللغة العربية الفصحى الحديثة (MSA). تكشف النتائج أن ازدواجية اللغة العربية تختلف اختلافا كبيرا عن اللغات الثنائية الأخرى في كل من الدافع والبنية. على عكس المجتمعات اللغوية الأخرى، فإن ميول المجتمعات العربية إلى الحفاظ على الفصحى وإعادة تبنيها ينبع من ارتباط روحي وثقافي عميق وليس من عوامل لغوية أو براغماتية بحتة. علاوة على ذلك، تحدد الدراسة النظام النحوي العربي وخاصة اتفاقاته النحوية الصوتية المعقدة باعتباره أكبر حاجز أمام إتقان الفصحى. على الرغم من هذه الصعوبة، تشير الأدلة إلى أن الفجوة بين CA وMSA قد ضاقت بسبب التعرض لوسائل الإعلام والتواصل الرقمي. في الختام، تؤكد الدراسة أنه في حين أن العودة الكاملة إلى اللغة العربية الفصحى في جميع المجالات أمر غير مرجح في المستقبل القريب، فإن استمرار الفصحى في السياقات الدينية والقانونية والأكاديمية والأدبية يضمن حيويتها المستمرة. يعكس تطور التنوع شبه الموحد «العربي الرسمي» التقارب التدريجي بين الشكليات الحاليين، مما يجعل ازدواجية اللغة العربية ظاهرة لغوية مميزة ودائمة حيث التقاليد والحداثة في توازن ديناميكي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ازدواجية اللغة، تغيير اللغة، اللغة العربية الفصحى، اللغة العربية الفصحى الحديثة

### 1.Introduction

Ironically, a native Arabic speaking person like myself –author of this paper, would find hard time keeping up with the non-Arab learners of the language who are speaking the fus'ha or the Classical Arabic (CA) version of Arabic. These non-Arab speakers are the students or graduates of institutions that exist in all the Arab countries and known as Arab Language Schools for Non-native Arabs, and mainly as part of the Islamic studies programs. I personally have experienced a similar situation with a few of those at the Khartoum based Africa International University at my home country, Sudan. In fact, the situation replicates throughout the 22 Arab societies to the extent of Al-Azhar non-Arab

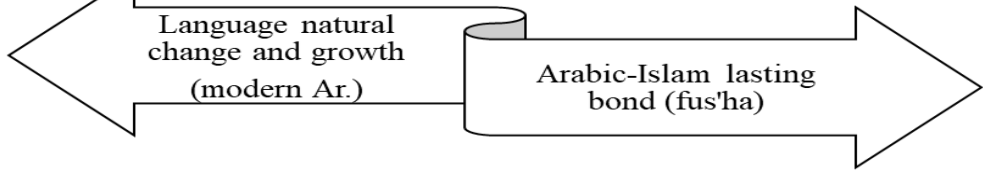
students. Another even more recurring instance of the Arabic speakers' strife with the fus'ha version of their own tongue, is the frequent "glitches" in formal speech situations. The scope of this study is evidently broad, as it encompasses multiple Arabic-speaking populations across various geographical regions, each demonstrating different levels of Classical Arabic usage. The study has two main objectives. First, it aims to highlight the uniqueness of Arabic diglossia in comparison with the few other diglossic languages that exist today. Second, it seeks to outline the prospective trajectory of Arabic diglossia by examining the evolving relationship and pace of change between its two existing varieties. Overall, the study aspires to envision the future of this major global language..

## 2. Statement of the problem

In the light of the background given above, neither has the modern vs. classic Arabic rivalry been settled, nor has it been abandoned. This is simply because it is exactly as the sarcastic characterization says, "the road ahead is just as long as it is backward!" (Abo Danial, 2020). the Standard MSA Arabic Interestingly, this problem was early to be attended The reason is The Arabs are known to literally adulate their language as in the pre-Islam ages they placed theory collection around kaaba side by side with the idols they worshipped. The instances where the Classical Arabic (fus'ha) is likely to remain used at large scale includes The irony here is that, instead of the original, well preserved and pure version of any language should be a factor of unity for the speakers of language and a reference for their multiple dialects, this isn't the case with the speakers of Arabic language. It's why adopting and generalizing that standard MSA (fus'ha) version of Arabic has become a subject of controversy that is hard to predict how or when it will be settled.

In connection with the background given above, and the theories on Language Change by Aitcheson; 2001, and others, therefore, the researcher seeks to examine how and to what extent Arabs may re-adopt the classical form of their mother tongue, than will they ever be able to. Not to mention the fact that, this same goal of ramping up the gap between the Classical Arabic (CA) and today's Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), was preceded by a preemptive action not to let it happen in the first place. That early preemptive action was taken by the 2nd Caliph Omar Ibn Al-Khattab in the 7th century by vetting the entry of the non-native Arabs (aajim) into the Arabian Peninsula (Abdel-Malek, 1981). Aitcheson; 2001, puts it as, "the inevitability of change, and the permanency of prejudices against change," which exactly

can be exemplified by this simple illustrative diagram:



### .Questions of the study

- What distinguishes Arabic language's diglossia from the other diglossic ones?
- Where is Arabic language's diglossia heading in the short-term future?
- Where is Arabic language's diglossia heading in the long-term future?

### 4. Research Method

This is an explorative study based on an investigative review of literature on the sociolinguistics topics relevant to the study. The study cites and employs both types of literature; theoretical and consumed on the case in hand which is diglossia of Arabic language. The examination therefore includes a comparative discussion as well – involving the other diglossic languages, for the purpose of analysis.

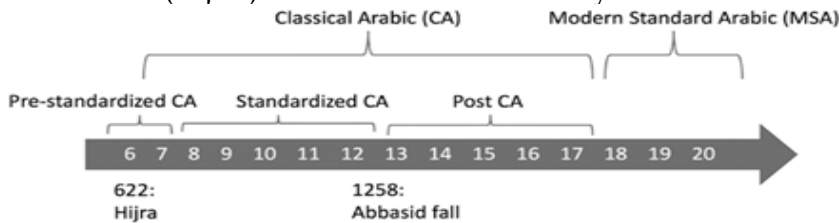
### 5. Literature Review

Diglossia for the sociolinguistics like Fishman's; 1967, in his reformulation theory, is to lie within the social dimensions of language as it is: "the use the coexistence of two varieties of the same language throughout a speech community". Sociolinguists though who theorized on diglossia, pose different definitions of diglossia. For instance one including Ferguson; 1959, disregards the social aspect to be included and just concentrate on the plurality, the different languages for different contexts. Whereas, Alan Hudson; 2002, emphasized the regional factor rather than the social hierarchy of diglossia origin; citing the example of Catalan diglossia of Spanish originating in Barcelona region of the country. The sociolinguists also stress the diglossia characteristics of being popularly spoken languages, but associated to no distinct group. A wider definition of diglossia is proposed by Aitchison; 2001, that it may include social dialects, even if the classic and the modern languages are not completely separate. By this proposition the two remain distinct languages within a diglossic environment even though other socio-linguists disagree, saying that it's not a separate language but just a dialect. Unlike the "low" slang and vernacular, diglossia is the "high" version of a language that: 1) has no native speakers; 2) isn't used for day-to-day conversation (Abdel-Malek & Anouar, 1981).

Based on diglossia's sociolinguistic characteristics above, several other

concepts overlap with it. One of which is distinction, as several linguistics literature sources highlight several sets of differences including diction vs. diglossia, creole & pidgin vs. diglossia, and slang vs. diglossia. Contrasting diction vs. diglossia for example, the later is said to be more mature and grown variety that exceeds switching between levels of diction, slang construct or just code switching (Jürgen, 2000). Other perspectives of analyzing diglossia include diglossia and bilingualism, double-nested diglossia as well as specific exceptional cases of how diglossia originated. For example, Wiggers; 2012, refers to the present diglossic studies to have mainly focused on the L-variety and its speakers and evolution and proposes an analysis based on the H-speakers' perceptions and evaluations of the L-variety over a longer period of time. Diglossia is as well linked to the concept of language change in several socio-linguistics studies. As expected, the Language Change Theory by David Crystal; 1941, that states: "there are two types of gaps in language: phonological and lexical-semantic, and that language changes to fill these gaps". In this seems, Diglossia and the Language Change theory overlap. As a high variety (H) Diglossia is a strain of a language that coexists with their respective roles and thus its development is necessarily across the low variety (L) Ferguson; 1959, as earlier proposed by stage. Consequently, and since both varieties are used for different purposes, this also means diglossia even surpasses a single language to multi languages known as double-diglossia (Simanjuntak, Haidir & Pujiano, 2019).

Arabic language is known to be one of the oldest sematic languages whose recorded history dates back to the pre-Islam era of the 3rd century B.C. and has undergone through significant development on through until the 6th centuries A.C. However, the archaic Arabic version remained preserved and immutable throughout these stages of development throughout (Al-Faisal & Al-Janada, 2019). A key reason for this unmatched preservation of the language purity is that, Prophet Mohammad (PBH) himself directed the followers of his generation to keep it so. Then afterwards and as early as the 2nd Caliph Omar Ibn Al-Khattab in the 7th century kept the then mass flux of non-native Arab (aajim) Muslims out of the vicinity of the Arabian Peninsula.



(a) Sub-division of Classical Arabic (CA) into pre-Standardized CA, Standardized CA, and Post-CA, according to Fischer [2006].

Source: *Language Resources & Evaluation*; <https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Two-possible-accounts-of-the-history-of-the-Arabic-language-accord->

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Nevertheless, Arabic language's stages of development throughout these years, included all the linguistics gestures starting from how the alphabets were written, lexical and styles. The early changes that accompanied the language development, was as it spread through many regions of the world throughout Africa and Central Asia by the 2nd century AD. That was the time not only more non-native Arab (aajim) joined, but also the spree of translation from foreign language into Arabic flourished during the Omayyad and Abbasside regions (Halal, 1990). Unlike other languages, the pre-historic or archaic Arabic of the 3rd century B.C. is not only marinated, but it still has presence in the tongues of the poets, the clergymen, the orators, as well as the Arab grammarians in different fields.

The grammar of Arabic language is characterized with comprehensive inter-agreements among its three components: phonetic, morphologic and syntactic (Oweini & Hazoury, 2010). The inter-agreements is meant by sets such as subject-object, determiner-pronouns, gender-plurality, verb-gender, verb-plurality, plurality-demonstrative pronouns and many more. For example, unlike in most other languages, the rules of morphology do not join as many elements as it does in Arabic where the morphological and phonetic changes that occur throughout the sentence structure (Simanjuntak, Haidir & Pujiano, 2019). Another example, unlike the French language, where there is determiner-gender agreement exists; (le for masculine) and (la for feminine), while this doesn't exist in Arabic yet a more complex rule does. Arabic language exceeds the French in other gender agreements including verb-subject context (Bale, 2010). The differences between Arabic and English grammar are therefore even wider and the two can be barely be compared. Overlooking the other differences such as the phonetic systems and the alphabets, English syntactic order and components of [object, subject, verb] are almost abstract compared to Arabic language extra elements of functional, non-functional, nominal, and verbal sentences and several others (Abdel-Malek, 1981). Observing the morpho-conjugative agreement that is scripted in diacritics / تنوين / is a key difference between fus'ha and the MSA according to Oweini & Hazoury (2010). It is because fus'ha grammar as the highest level of conjugation, the morpho-conjugative rules of agreement is strictly observed by the language of poets, writers, novelists, and men of letters, among others. An explanatory example to give here is when we say: Bakr stood up / قام بكر /, I saw Bakr / رأيت بكر /, and I passed by Bakr / مررت بـبكر /, the last letter's vowel / تنوين / changed when Bakr is subject (s); the object (o); and the prepositional auxiliary. This difference doesn't exist in the MSA version where the

writers and speakers simply disregard the vowels of the letters throughout the sentences. In addition to this major written fus'ha vs. MSA version of Arabic, the spoken Arabic situation which Halal; 1990, terms as the Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA) the morpho-conjugative rules of agreement are disregarded. According to the author, the non-conjugated MSA version as a formal register of Arabic used in educated circles, including educated conversations, presentations, and speeches; the speakers simply end the words with consonants without diacritic vowel.

## 6. Data Analysis and Discussion

Based on the reviewed literature on diglossia and the several diglossic languages in addition to the background on the grammar and diglossia of Arabic language, this discussion is conducted. The discussion in loves addressing diglossia of Arabic language followed with an attempt of infer contexts of its path through.

First, examining three contexts of the world's diglossic languages yielded in this tabulated facts; Table (1) diglossia characteristics:

Table 1.Characteristics of three Diglossic Languages

Standard Spanish .vs Catalan-Spanish	The Catalan-Spanish (diglossia) has” ❶ more extensive and intricate verbal conjugation system; ❷ has neuter gender for nouns; ❸ more vowel sounds, with unchanged pronunciation whether .they are stressed or unstressed
Standard Portuguese .vs Brazilian-Portuguese	The Bra-Portuguese (diglossia): ❶ has 4 main syntactic anomalies, ❷ more complex slang and own vocabulary; ❸ some consonants pronounced differently has a more nasal and less guttural sound
Classical Greek .vs Demotic Greek	The Demo-Greek (diglossia): ❶ has optative mood, infinitive, dual number, dative case, and participles; ❷ has ancient Greek morphology and syntax; ❸ has features of gerund, auxiliary verb .forms for certain verbs, and modal particle

Standard German	The Swiss-German (diglossia) ❶ more flexible sentence structure and syntax; ❷ distinct phonetic characteristics and pronunciation; ❸ unique extra .vocabulary items
.vs Swiss-German	

Based on Table (1) above, the German language grammar shares the syntactic structure complexity with Arabic's difficulty. This complexity of the syntactic structure manifests the Arabic's fus'ha difficulty for both the native Arabs and the foreign learners of Arabic language (Abdel-Malek, 1981). On this regard Arabic is ranked the 2nd most difficult language to learn in the world by several sources including the specialized Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and several others, and the syntactic structure is pointed among few other grammar areas.

## 7. Findings

### First:

It is therefore evident that, Arabic can be set apart from the other diglossic languages in all of three main characteristics of diglossia: 1) the two varieties H (fus'ha) and L (modern) are used in the same language community; 2) both varieties are used for different purposes; 3) and the H variety is not used in daily conversations. It is the future number (2) that says, "both varieties are used for different purposes" since in the case of the Arab 22 populations and as many as 115 different dialects and sub-dialects (Oweini & Hazoury, 2010). So, the now widely consumed MSA variety is the common ground that keeps growing and improving. Growing and improving indicates the right step towards total merger; whether or not this aspiration is going to be achieved.

Secondly, examining how soon or never will Fusha (CA) and the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) for the Arab pollutions may merge, the reviewed literature revealed enough the future of Arabic's diglossia. Taking the challenging "return route" first Table (2) is a snapshot of how far the contemporary Arabs are from their Fusha (CA)

Table 2. Conformity with Fus'ha

① Phonological system	Conforming	Non-conforming
	Except for the 6 Gulf countries' populations plus Yemen, the rest of the Arabic dialects have issues with :this 3 consonant sounds  [ث /θ/thá/ [ذ /ð/dhál/ [ق q/qáf/	Instead, the rest of the Arabic dialects tend to switch the 3 consonants with their nearest sounds  س /سá /sá ث /θ/thá/ ز /زái /zái ذ /dhál/ غ /ghéin ق /:qáf/
② Lexical conformity	Conforming	Non-conforming
	None in most of the vocabulary items	Hardly any Arabic dialect fully observe the proper pronunciation of vocabulary items, or entirely have others
③ Syntactic structure	Conforming	Non-conforming
	Many enough Arabic dialects observe the syntactic order of sentences, tenses and conjugation	Roughly none of the Arabic dialects observe (النحو na'hu) the proper (الصرف sarf) and

Now, with the above Table (2) being the “pessimistic” snapshot of Arabic language diglossia situation, it can as well bear some signs of hope. Even though the major Arabic grammar areas, i.e., phonological, lexical and syntactic structures are still at odd in the two versions of Arabic, but the gap keeps narrowing. The reason is because, unlike it is with the other diglossic languages to which the proposition of Aitcheson; 2001, applies; that, “the inevitability of change, and the permanency of prejudices against change,” less likely to applies to Arabic language.

**Second finding:**

The key finding here is that, Arabic fus’ha has an exceptional impetus of survival as compared to the other diglossic languages. This is because the Arab population’s driver of returning to their root language is not a merely

sentimental or cultural one, but rather a spiritual one. It is for this factor that the Arabs are still clinging on their fus'ha and in touch with it through:

① It is still the language of the religious discourse; since Quran and sunna texts are in the archaic Arabic. Individual Arabs are in touch with fus'ha in daily basis as they pray.

② It is still the language of the court; since the family law is derived from sharia's archaic Arabic in all the Arab societies; both the secular and the orthodox Muslims.

③ It is still active in the academia, the media and literary conventions; where the classic Arabic poetry and literature are widely celebrated and cherished; nay, still the most popular form.

With such deep, proactive and high level contact between the Arab populations and the CL fus'ha language, even though this may not serve as an indicator of full return one day, but a step through indeed.

## 8. Conclusion

First, a pivotal conclusion, then a set of four conclusions can be drawn from the above discussion which maybe cues for previewing Arabic Language's diglossia in the short and long-term future. The pivotal conclusion is that, Arabic Language diglossia case, seems to have split the very two components of the genre; "socio-and-linguistic". To explain, unlike the other diglossic languages, it is the "socio" more than the "linguistic" that drives the nostalgia of the Arabs towards their pure fus'ha. For the populations of the other diglossic languages, the motives are either cultural to revived the CA, or a pragmatic not to.

Furthermore, a set of four conclusions as well can be drawn. First, it is less likely that the multi Arabic world's dialects and sub-dialects will be neutralized in favor of the classic fus'ha; neither in the short, nor in the long-term future. Rather the use of classic fus'ha will be confined to the present domains; the religious discourse, the legal discourse and the literary domain. Secondly, in the long-term though, today's widely condoned and used "deducted" from of classic fus'ha that is described as the "formal Arabic" variety will likely be elevated. In fact as recently as the 1990s and until the early 2000s, an illiterate Arab would not fully understand the radio or TV news mainly for the dialect-fus'ha gap then was wider than it is today. Meaning, the today's recognized semi-fus'ha was promoted by dint of the satellite TV broadcast and most recently the internet of things (IoT) contributing to narrowing the gap. Fourthly, the specific grammar area which the Arab population find challenging in mastering the classic fus'ha is Arabic's complex syntactic structure that conjoins in a syntactic-phonological system rather than the morphological or lexical areas. It is this conjoined syntactic-phonological system that is termed as "nah'u" and "sarf" that many native Arabs still consider them a conundrum.

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