Arabic Language in a Globalized World: Observations from the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

This paper has four objectives. First, it explores the effect of globalization on the Arabic language and shows its influence on various domains such as culture and values. Second, the paper examines the importance of languages in sustaining the cultural identity of peoples, and shows how globalization can be a threat to a particular society. Third, the paper discusses the concept of globalization as a new form of colonization, and examines the rise of the English language as lingua franca. Fourth, the paper explores the impact of globalization and English on world languages in general and the Arabic language in particular with specific observations from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The paper concludes by proposing some recommendations to improve the current status of classical Arabic in the UAE. The UAE government's efforts to promote the Arabic Language will also be highlighted.

Keywords: Globalization, Arabic, English, Lingua Franca,

Introduction

Many definitions given to the term 'globalization' vary from one discipline to the other (Riggs, 1998); nevertheless, they mostly describe globalization in economic, political and cultural terms (Waters, 1995). MacBride & Wiseman (2000, p. 9) refer to globalization as "the unfolding resolution of the contradiction between ever expanding capital and its national political and social formations", which is relevant to the theme of this paper due to the effect of such aspects on language.

The technological advancements and the extensive use of the internet in daily life and business transactions have been some of the most prevailing characteristics of globalization. Due to these developments, numerous changes have taken place in various walks of life such as "the nature of learning, work, thought, entertainment, and the interpersonal patterning of social relations" (Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004, p. 17). In this light, globalization has had its greatest influence on human communications which is naturally accompanied by certain effects on language (Ostler, 2008). Moreover, globalization has had major impact on societies all around the globe (Crystal, 2003); consequently, "social change always has a linguistic sequel" (Crystal, 2004, p. 3).

Language as an Identity

Language has long been viewed as a manifestation of a nation's strength. A nation's language is an integral part of that nation's culture (Bassnett, 1998). Often, language is referred to as a 'national treasure' (Crystal, 1997). From another perspective, it is the medium by which culture and knowledge are conveyed to younger generations. In fact, language is one of the important devices by which culture, traditions and norms are communicated to future generations; it is also a reflection of an individual's background and education. In the process of language acquisition, an individual does not only acquire linguistic and scientific knowledge, s/he also tends to be influenced by the culture and traditions this language conveys (Trudgill, 2000).

In other instances, language can be more than just an expression of national and cultural identity; it may have a religious identity such as the case with Arabic language as Arabic is regarded as the language of the Holy Quran and Islamic faith (Morrow & Castleton, 2007). Morrow & Castleton assert that "[i]n the Arab-Islamic world, both Arabic language and the Muslim faith are often viewed as inseparable parts of the same Muslim Identity" (2007, p. 202).

Colonization and Globalization

Due to the importance of language and its strong ties to culture and national identity, it was inevitable that the first victim of any colonization is the language of the colonized. In order to subdue a nation, colonizers throughout history resolved to diminish the identity of the colonized (Shiyab, 2013). In other words, to ensure that the national identity is demolished, the first thing to be destroyed is its language and the frequency with which it is used. There are many cases throughout history that attest to this fact such as the French colonization of Algeria and Nigeria (Hassan, 2011) among many other examples.

Currently, a supreme power need not colonize a weaker country in order to subdue it. Globalization and its political agendas can achieve such a goal without the need to deploy armies and use weapons. Globalization has made the possibility of invading an entire nation possible without the need to occupy its land (Olssen, O'Neill, & Codd, 2004). In other words,

colonization today has taken a more subtle and discreet form; globalization, westernization and secularization have been viewed as synonyms to the new colonization concept. For instance, the effect of mass media and popular culture have targeted the young generations worldwide, altering their views and beliefs, the manner with which they speak and dress, as well as weakening their cultural diversity (Morrow & Castleton, 2007). The technological advancements have made communications among countries much faster regardless of the distance (Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004). Thanks to the internet, correspondence and news about global events are available to everyone at the press of a button (Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard). This factor has facilitated interaction and the reciprocal sharing of views, trends, tastes and interest among the youths all over the world (Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard).

The author thinks that the intellectual occupation of a nation has proven to be much more efficient than the use of force. She does not think that there is a pressing need for a super power to occupy any country if the targeted country buys in to what the superior country is promoting through homogenous education and culture. The author believes that the most critical influence of globalization is that it is targeting the younger generations. The youths are not only more receptive to the globalized acculturation due to their extensive use of technology, but are also the future leaders of their countries' various cultural, economic, political, and social institutions.

In his book, *Globalization and the Nation-State*, Holton (1998, p. 163) argues that globalization is a threat to cultural diversity; globalization is perceived as "cultural dominance and cultural homogenization". In order to achieve such homogenization, the entire process of global communication requires a common ground or a shared medium in order to enable this acculturation to take place (Crystal, 2003). Thus, the promotion of the 'global language' has come as a natural consequence.

English as a Lingua Franca

There are currently several languages which have been employed in global communications such as Chinese, Spanish, and French; however, English is by far more used worldwide (Korpela, 2003). Subsequently, the emergence of English as a lingua franca was an expected outcome. Crystal (2004) argues that the primary reason for a language such as English to become international is the political power possessed by the people of the countries that speak it. Throughout history, English had politically and economically dominated the world.

> In the 17th and 18th centuries, English was the language of the leading colonial nation- Britain. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it was the leader of the industrial Revolution- Also Britain. In the late 19th and the early 120th centuries, it was the leading economic power- the US (Crystal, 1997, p.14).

However, a lingua franca is a language spoken out of convenience in order to communicate with other nations in order to overcome the language barrier which has been a major obstacle in international communications (Ostler, 2008). This entails that a lingua franca (English in this case) is not learned or acquired as a mother tongue; rather, it is used as a means to facilitate communication (Ostler). On the other hand, this fact also implies that the language used as a lingua franca also undergoes a certain amount of alteration. Crystal claims that if your mother tongue is English, "[y]ou may feel pride.., but your pride may be tinged with concern" (2003, p. 7) because people from other countries do not use English similar to you

and they alter "it to suit themselves" (Crystal). Nevertheless, the variations with which English is spoken among different peoples have not undermined the importance of English language. Crystal points out the fact that "[a] conversation over the internet between academic physicists in Sweden, Italy and India is practicable only if a common language is available. Similarly, the technology of air transportation brings together international business contacts" (1997, P. 13).

The author believes that learning a foreign language does not necessarily mean abandoning my mother tongue. According to Islam, learning foreign languages is encouraged since this learning will provide the learner with insights as to how the other party thinks and behaves.

Globalization and World Languages

As mentioned previously, English has currently taken the lead as a global language (Crystal, 2003). This has caused many countries to promote the English language instead of their mother tongues. In Wales, for instance, "less than 20 percent of the population can speak Welsh in addition to English" (Crystal, 1997, p. 40). Crystal believes that languages are endangered due to the overbearing use of global languages by the younger generations instead of using their mother tongue. He also asserts that language death occurs when the last speakers of a language die. "When the last representatives of these peoples die, they take with them their oral history and culture" (Crystal). This has been the case with regards to many languages "in parts of the world where large numbers of languages are concentrated in a few small geographical regions" (Crystal, P. 42). The 1997 article reveals that there are over 6000 languages worldwide, half of which will be extinct in the next century (Crystal).

On the other hand, the English language seems to be immune to such catastrophic ramifications since it is the most used language throughout the globe and throughout history (Crystal, 1997). English has amplified the problem for endangered languages since the younger generations who speak those languages have turned to English as an optimum means of acquiring education and securing a better future career (Crystal).

The author does not agree that globalization is the direct cause for the death of indigenous languages; diseases and other natural catastrophes have played a crucial role in eradicating many peoples. Nevertheless, the overriding spread of English language worldwide has had a huge impact on many nations. The author also shares Crystal's opinion when he states that "if English is... the only language left to be learned, it will have been the greatest intellectual disaster that the planet has ever known" (1997, p. 16) since it will demolish the richness of cultural diversity.

Globalization and Arabic Language

Due to various economic, social and political factors, many countries have opted for a globalized education with hopes of gaining better education and consequently, a more successful career (Smith, 2002). Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard (2004) describe the economy, new technologies and communication, immigration and consumerism as the most significant factors which guide education today.   This move towards a globalized education also includes Arab countries. Globalization has transformed education into a reflection of the changes witnessed in our world today. Consequently, the growing technologies and the unlimited access to online knowledge and global information have become a necessity to most countries (Scholte, 2000).

In the case of Arabic language, the issue of globalization is not only a matter of free trade, economy and technological advancements. There is a more profound dimension to globalization in Arab- Muslim countries. It is almost impossible to separate the Arabic language from Islam since Arabic is the language of the Holy Quran (Morrow & Castleton, 2007). The supreme powers in the past were "aware of the influence of the Arabic language. They fought it and tried to replace it with their own languages" (Morrow & Castleton, P. 203). Therefore, in order to fulfill the colonizer's agenda of weakening the Arabic language, it is only logical to target the Muslim faith as well (Morrow & Castleton). In fact, the first attempt to wipe out Arabic and Islam occurred in 1492 with the fall of Granada (Morrow & Castleton). The Muslims in Spain were coerced to convert to Christianity; "Among the prohibitions and bans on Islamic dress, ritual baths, prayers and fasting…" (Morrow & Castleton, p. 203) and were prohibited from speaking Arabic. People who spoke Arabic were severely punished. Eventually, Arabic language disappeared in Spain and Spanish Muslims know very little about Islam ((Morrow & Castleton).

Other countries like Turkey replaced their alphabet system, which is a derivative of the Arabic alphabet, with the Latin alphabet (Morrow & Castleton, 2007). Another similar but failed attempt to replace the Arabic alphabets with Latin alphabets also took place in Iran during the Shah of Iran's rule; he also tried to rid the "Persian language from Arabic loan-words" (Morrow & Castleton 204), which was perceived as an attempt on Islam. Consequently, this led to overthrowing the Shah during the Islamic Revolution (Morrow & Castleton).

The colonizers have promoted the use of the vernacular and regional dialects to ensure that classical Arabic is not proficiently used by Arabic speakers. For instance, in a lecture delivered by William Wilcox in Cairo in the early 1900s attributing the Egyptian's lack of innovation to the fact that classical Arabic is weak and should be substituted by the strong expressive colloquial Arabic which provides its speakers with a vast range of expressions (Al-Misseddi, 2012, p. 315). Wilcox described classical Arabic as rigid and immune to creativity; it hinders scientific innovation due to Arabic's inability to coin new expressions. Moreover, the flexibility of the colloquial Egyptian allows the adaptation of foreign words and expressions (Al-Misseddi). The author thinks that the previous statement is a direct attack on the traditional teachings which took place during the 1900s. Most children were taught Arabic and Islamic studies by Imams at mosques (Al-Misseddi) which entailed a strong foundation in classical Arabic. After two centuries, the decline of the Arabic language is evident through the domination of the various Arabic dialects which vary from one part of the Arab world to another. The author also believes that colloquial Arabic has replaced classical Arabic in an alarming way; the majority of Arabic programs are presented in colloquial Arabic, except for the news bulletins. Ironically, the majority of news broadcasters and programs presenters are not proficient in standard Arabic. More often than not, these presenters commit grammatical mistakes while reading the news (Interview with Amo Baba, 2009). This shows the current decline of the Arabic language in the Arab countries today.

Observations of Language Endangerment in the UAE

The large number of expatriates who reside and work in the GCC countries in general is one of the many reasons for the deterioration of the Arabic language; the UAE is no exception (Al-Dabbagh & Gargani, 2011). Most of the non-Arabic speaking nationalities use English as a means of communication; consequently, the GCC countries have turned into an

awkward linguistic amalgamation; "the risk to society is more difficult to quantify but might include a loss of culture, values, Islamic norms and the Arabic language" (Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2011, p. 31).

In an exclusive interview with the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research Website, Mr. Najeeb Abdulla Al-Shamsi, the Director of Studies and Research unit at the GCC General Secretariat, stated that

> I am particularly worried about our language, which safeguards national culture. The Arabic language loses its importance and status as the number of expatriates grows. Moreover, the wide use of English in most private education institutions has also weakened the Arabic language. The strong connection between the job market, and technology and foreign languages, is among other reasons that have contributed to the decline of Arabic (Al-Shamsi, 2009, p. 2).

In light of the above, the seclusion of Arabic speakers is quite evident, an attempt to speak proper Arabic is futile since most of the workers who work in the various stores and companies and the domestic workers either speak English or flawed Arabic (Al-Shamsi, 2009). Unfortunately, in order for those workers to understand what is required of them, the Arabs who deal with them use flawed Arabic as well. Morrow and Castleton state that it has become less and less impossible to envision an Arab World without Arabic (2007, p. 210).

Another phenomenon these days is that English has been included in the curricula of private schools from an early age (K.A., 2013). Children are obliged to speak in English as long as they are in the school premises. The author believes that this fact has a negative impact on the degree of Arabic language acquisition they receive at school. The schools are the only outlet where Standard Arabic is introduced to children through Arabic and Islamic Studies classes. However according to some parents, the level of Arabic language taught at schools is unimpressive (Issa, 2013). Moreover, Arab children speak with their families using the colloquial Arabic. In the case where the caretakers of these children are nannies, the situation is even worse since most of the nannies are from non-Arabic speaking countries (Roumani, 2005). Consequently, the children grow up without being fully proficient in their mother tongue.

In 2009, Abu Dhabi Education Council published an online document entitled 'Licensing and Accreditation Guidelines for New Non-Government Schools'. The document is comprised of 37 pages with nothing mentioned about Arabic except one line indicating that the aim of licensing and accreditation is to develop an understanding of UAE history, culture and language (ADEC, 2009).

One of the requirements of accreditation for higher education is that educational institutions conduct their teaching in English (Longden, 2011). The United Arab Emirates Universities and other educational institutions in the country conduct their teaching in English in order to be internationally recognized (Longden). In addition, a number of international educational institutions have established campuses in the United Arab Emirates as well as other Arab countries such as University of Sorbonne, the American University, and New York University. Al-Shamsi, however, objects to the establishment of such educational institutions due to their grave impact on culture:

> I am opposed to some new educational trends in the UAE and the GCC countries that seek to establish foreign universities and schools in their

regions. For one thing, these universities and schools are profit-seeking. Second, the kind of education—especially in the field of social sciences— they introduce to our students may not suit our culture and traditions. Third, these schools alienate nationals; mainly recruit foreigners from their countries of origin (Al-Shamsi, 2009, p. 3).

According to the UAE University website, the Arabic Department

> aims at preserving and enriching Arabic Language as a written text and spoken discourse capable of reflecting the diversity and complexity of the Arabic/Islamic culture and civilization. The Department is also determined to enhance and develop Arabic language teaching and pedagogy in a sophisticated way in order to reinforce the Arabic/Islamic identity of the nation (UAEU Website).

However, the University conducts its teachings in English Language.

Another factor that plays a crucial role in diluting the influence of Arabic language is that the young generations have no interest in studying Arabic Language academically. According to the UAE University Arabic Department report, over the last few years, fewer and fewer students choose Arabic Language as their major (Abbas, 2012-2013), as only five students graduated from the Arabic department in 2012, whereas eighty two students graduated in 2006 (Abbas).

The author thinks that this process of ranking and accreditation are merely other aspects of globalization, aiming to promote a homogeneous education which is designed according to the Western standards. It is ironic to convert an entire education system of the UAE, an Arabic country, into English, especially "that a good many middle-class Emiratis cannot speak English" (Morrow & Castleton, 2007, p. 210). English has not only become the language of education in the UAE, but also the official language of business, tourism and other domains. In the UAE, "English is encroaching on Arabic in the public sector, private schools, and tourism" (Morrow & Castleton, p. 210). One can argue that due to the fact of the multinational communities that reside in the country, English is obviously the most plausible language to communicate with as a 'lingua franca'. This is, again, attributed to the proliferation of English worldwide due to its political and scientific influence (Crystal, 1997).

From the author's personal experience as a conference interpreter based in the UAE, she has rarely interpreted from Arabic into English during high profile conferences since most of the major conventions, seminars, workshops and forums are conducted in English. For instance, in a Seismology Conference held in Abu Dhabi a few years ago, over three hundred participants were present. The majority of those participants were Arabs; only a handful of speakers were foreigners. Still, the entire conference proceedings were conducted in English.

UAE Government Perspective

Fortunately, the UAE government has noticed the alarming status of Arabic language, thus calling for countermeasures and working diligently to reverse the damage that has been done. In this light and in accordance with the directives of Vice President and Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the UAE Cabinet approved establishing the Consultative Council for Arabic Language in 2012. "The decision reflects the vision of the prudent leadership and reflects efforts by the federal government to preserve

the national identity promote Arabic language in the UAE through innovative methods as per the best practices. (UAE Cabinet, 2012).

On the cultural level, the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage launched several projects to uplift the Arabic Language such as Kalima Project which "selects, translates and publishes in Arabic over 100 of the finest books of literature and science from foreign languages" (Kalima Translation, 2014) every year.

Furthermore, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashed Al Maktoum has launched the 'Mohammed bin Rashid Arabic Language Award' in May 2014. This award aims at encouraging "exceptional contributions in serving the Arabic language and to honour its patrons besides highlighting successful and outstanding experiences in disseminating and educating the Arabic language" (Mohammed bin Rashid Arabic Language Award, 2014).

Sheikh Al Maktoum has identified five areas in which Arabic language should be cultivated; these areas are "education, media, Arabisation, technology, preservation and dissemination of the Arab linguistic heritage" (Mohammed bin Rashid Arabic Language Award). The author feels that this award is a crucial step towards promoting and preserving the Arabic language along with its invaluable Islamic and Arabic heritage.

The UAE leadership has been aware of the importance the Arabic language holds. This is evident in the encouragement of non-Arabic speaking expatriates to learn the basics of Arabic language in private schools. In other words, alongside the Arabic subjects which are taught to Arab nationals in schools, non-Arabic speakers receive their Special Arabic Education as an independent school subject (K.A., 2013).

The author believes that the leadership of the UAE aspires to preserve the Arabic heritage, including the Arabic language since it is part of the national identity. However, such efforts will not yield the desired outcomes without full involvement from the concerned parties including private and public sectors as well as parents and students.

Recommendations

The author of this article believes that the key to a successful incorporation of English and the inevitable acculturation that comes with English language acquisition is to maintain a conscious balance between the mother language and English. Accordingly, the author proposes the following:

o Governmental reinforcement in reinstating the Arabic language as the official language of the UAE. For example:
  - All correspondence within the governmental departments should be carried out in Arabic.
  - English is to be utilized in business and tourism.
  - International events which take place in the country should be held in Arabic.
  - Increasing the cultural awareness by celebrating various cultural and religious occasions more prominently. During such occasions, Arabic language oriented activities should be encouraged.
  - While Kalima Project is a promising initiative when it comes to translation, it is very important that the quality of translation is monitored. It is equally important to ensure the quality and value of the content being translated into Arabic.

- Promote the Arabic language as a 'national treasure' among the younger generations, and create a sense of pride in mastering and using it by launching more initiatives and awards for the younger generations.

o Careful planning of language policies in order to utilize the positive gain of English as the language of knowledge, not at a replacement of the mother tongue and native culture.

o Modifying school curricula in both private and public schools in a way that provides the students with adequate linguistic knowledge in both Arabic and English. This entails revising the current Arabic curriculum so as to overcome its weaknesses.

o Including Arabic in extracurricular activities in order to enhance the student's ability to learn the Arabic language properly. For instance, memorizing parts of the Holy Quran and poetic verse from classical Arabic poetry will improve the students' grammatical knowledge.

o Considering Arabic teacher training and utilizing innovative teaching/ learning tools to stimulate the students and increase their interest in learning Arabic. For instance, utilizing the new technologies in the learning methods, exploring other hands-on on approaches to Arabic language acquisition, ensuring that students have more venues to practice their classical Arabic in school activities.

o In investment of parents in such efforts to ensure that the classical Arabic is preserved through encouraging their children to watch Arabic programs and urge the children to read more stories and books in standard Arabic.

Conclusion

Globalization has had a huge impact on various aspects of life such as the economy, education, culture and language. The employment of English language as the global language and as the language of the internet has negatively influenced many world languages, one of which is the Arabic language. This paper has aimed at exploring the effects of globalization and the lingua franca on world languages in general and the Arabic language in particular with particular observations from the UAE. Although Arabic will not vanish as a colloquial language, the classical form of the language is highly endangered due to lack of practice by the Arab communities. Regional dialects have taken over even in multimedia. Arabs should preserve their national and religious treasure. Classical Arabic should not be confined to the brief Quranic verses recited during prayers.

We should not blame globalization or the west for the deterioration of the classical Arabic language. It is our responsibility as native speakers of Arabic to preserve our language and ensure it is passed on from one generation to another; it is our responsibility to encourage the use of classical Arabic among our children and youths. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum's initiatives are exemplary models that should be followed so as to salvage our Arabic language. Still it is imperative that private and public entities work hand in hand to make such endeavors successful and fruitful.

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