A Sociolinguistic Perspective to Arabic and Arabs Virtual Communities with Special Reference to the Shi’a as a Religious Minority in the Arab World

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ABSTRACT

Arabic, which is the fifth world language with regard to the number of speakers, geographical spread, and socio-literary prestige (Weber, 1997), similar to all other languages whose orthographical system is not based on Latin symbols has been subject to various types of changes resulted from the language contact with English as the default language used in the computer mediated communication supported by the various tools of the modern technology which represent the most prominent hallmark of our new age of globalization. This paper presents a sociolinguistic account to the language contact between English and Arabic on the internet. It discusses the sociocultural and sociopolitical considerations in the Arab world that led to and resulted from this language contact predicting a new phase of Arabic in the forthcoming decades. It investigates, moreover, the sociolinguistic grounds of the social interaction within and between the Arab virtual communities on the internet. The religious minority of the Shi’a in the Arab world has been selected as the specified ethnic and religious group of investigation. The religious, social, and cultural connotation of the interaction occur in their virtual communities have been investigated together with their relation to the other Arab virtual communities.

Keywords, Arabic, Arab Virtual Communities, English, Internet, Language Contact, Shi’a, Social Interaction, Sociolinguistic

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1. A SOCIOLINGUISTIC OUTLOOK TO ARABIC IN THE MODERN AGE

The communication revolution which is the most prominent hallmark of the new age of globalization has made people more homogenized. As far as language is concerned, language distance has been increasingly shrinking as a result of the prevalence of globalization similar to geographical and physical distance.

In the Arab world, there have been two different perspectives towards the outcomes of this revolution. At one extreme, the conservative perspective lead by the advocates of the Arab Nationalism in some Arabic countries as in Syria and Egypt, keep warning the people from the savage attack of English which “hides a destructive agenda against our beautiful Arabic as the language of the Holly Quran”. In an article published in the Syrian Athawra newspaper¹, the author criticizes what he calls the “effeminate performance” of some of the broadcasters in the national TV and Radio channels. He states:

They (the broadcasters) think that this effeminate performance is the marked characteristic of the modern age and the civilization of the 21st century. If we stop a moment, we would see that there is an agenda of tearing the region apart and dismantling its identity. Language is the most prominent characteristics of any nation’s identity; particularly the Arabic nation which was privileged by Allah in using Arabic as the language of the Holly Quran. (My translation)

At the other extreme, there has been a new generation in the Arab world, similar to all over the world, obsessed with all aspects of the new communication technology. Roughly speaking, this generation is of two ranks; the older generation (now 24 to 36-year old) and the younger generation (now up-to-36-year old) (see Warschauer et al., 2003). People belong to these two generations are distinguished by three major characteristics:

1. They are either multilingual or bilinguals (Arabic, English, French) with various degrees of bilingualism/multilingualism (Hakuta & Diaz, 1985);
2. They are less adhered to the Arab Nationalism perspectives and more inclined to the local patriotism, and hence;
3. They are more attached to the use of the various Arabic vernaculars.

A good example, in this reference, is the Egyptian “Ghaly” who proposed an Egyptian Arabic Wikipedia. Ghaly assumes that “Egyptian Arabic is a language recognized and spoken by millions of people, it is written in personal letters between Egyptians, it is used in songs, advertisement and most importantly in day to day life” (Masry Wikipedia²). Giving an Arabic vernacular (henceforth VA) the prestigious status of language has serious linguistic, sociolinguistic, and cultural consequences which might be identified clearly by some of the comments that Ghaly cites in the same site. Ghaly, moreover, ascribes his attempt to establish this site in Egyptian Arabic to the linguistic distance between the Classical Arabic (henceforth CA) as “no one’s Mother tongue” and the Egyptian Arabic which is simply “different” from the Classical Arabic.

The linguistic status in the Arabic countries has always been described in terms of the sociolinguistic phenomena of diglossia (Ferguson, 1972) in which two variants of the same language are used in different contexts; in the case of Arabic, the Classical Arabic with a high prestigious position in comparison to the various Arabic vernaculars with low prestigious status. The clear-cut distinction of contexts identified by Ferguson is no longer valid. The Classical and standard³ (henceforth SA) variants of Arabic are losing more and more context for the interest of the vernaculars. For instance, the long-established attitude towards the use of vernaculars inside schools and university classrooms, inside the mosques, and in TV and Radio channels have passed through radical
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