Toward a functional Arabic

BY YOUSSEF MAHMOUD

One of the sociolinguistic problems that preoccupies the Arab world today is how to make the language a functional, modern instrument of communication and education without jeopardizing its traditional, unifying, pan-Arab role. The major hurdle confronting this ultimate goal has been the absence of a concerted language policy to generalize the use of Arabic in schools, and to deal with such issues as diglossia which, despite obvious signs of change remains rather intractable (al-Hassan, 1978 ; Mahmoud, 1980).

The collective work of the Arabic Language Academies over the past thirty years and the ongoing, coordinating efforts of the Bureau of Arabization in Rabat, important as they may be, have largely remained purely theoretical recommendations. Perhaps one noteworthy contribution of the last decade is the work done by a group of educators and linguists from the Arab Maghreb (essentially Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia) (1). Because of the burdensome colonial legacy, these three countries share, the French language is still a de-facto second language despite a new surge of ethnocentrism and some intensive Arabization efforts at all levels of national life (Maamouri, 1973 ; Brown, 1979).

Aware of the added complexities this situation had engendered, the ministers of education of the three countries appointed in 1969 a committee of researchers whose initial task was to prepare a list of vocabulary items that would extend across dialect boundaries and reflect the linguistic needs of primary school children for the first three grades. (2) A few years later, in 1975, an Arabic/French, French/Arabic lexicon was published under the title **Ar-rasid al-lughawi al-wadhifi** (Basic Functional Arabic).

The purpose of this paper is first to critically evaluate the sociolinguistic criteria the researchers have based their lexical work on ; and second, to discuss the possible impacts such a work may have on the Arabic language now that its relevance is gradually being recognized by educators and language planners throughout the Arab world.

1. The Lexicon of Basic Arabic : Its Compilation

According to the authors, (3) this reference dictionary is composed of Arabic words denoting basic concepts within the grasp of the Maghrebian child of a certain age. It also includes words that the authors have deemed fit or desirable to add in anticipation of the child's actual needs during the three grades of primary

education. In compiling the word list the authors mention the following procedure :

a) An inventory of all the words occuring in primary school textbooks in use in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia was undertaken along with an assessment of their meanings, their context of occurrence and their frequency. (4)

b) A series of linguistic investigations were conducted in different areas in the three countries. During this field work the researchers recorded spontaneous conversations of a number of children between the ages of five and nine. They also recorded interviews and according to well-defined methods of investigation. (5)

c) The collected data was then transcribed, codified and fed into a computer. The final printouts carried lists of alphabetized entries showing the relative frequency of each word, its geographical distribution as well as the degree of its common use by the three countries (p. III).

1.2 Criteria observed in the final selection

As to the final selection of the items that were to appear in the final word list, the following sociolinguistic criteria were observed :

a) In order to ascertain the spread and the vitality (hayawiya) of each word, it was recognized that the criteria of frequency (the word must appear a minimum of 10 times) and geographical distribution (the word must be shared by at least 2 countries) had to be adhered to rather closely.

b) To contain polysemy (a prevalent phenomenon in Arabic) (6) the criteria of «to every meaning one form» was equally observed. When two synonymous terms were both widely used, the least frequent was usually omitted.

c) The next criteria is what the authors called kumun, or availability. This refers to the addition of useful terms the child may need even though their frequency in the collected samples is either low or non existent (7).

d) For each predetermined basic concept that was believed to be within the grasp of the target population and for which the final alphabetized list presented no corresponding word, the authors provided «The most useful term available to them even when used only in one country.» They called this principle «the necessity of intervention» (p. iv) (8).

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2. A «Functional» List

By observing these six criteria : frequency, geographic distribution, «to one meaning, one form,» availability, necessity of intervention, and continuity in time and space, the authors hoped to present a «unified functional list». (p. VI). According to them, this lexicon is «functional» because (a) it contains words that cut across the dialectical confines of the Maghreb, (b) whenever appropriate certain expressions that are common to both the spoken and the written forms of the language were included, and (c) because it is open to the entire Arab World and amenable to modification and change as well as to additional terms which distinguish one Arab country from another, especially in the areas of food, drink, and clothing.

Towards the end of the introduction, the authors express the hope that by the end of the primary cycle, the Maghrebian child would be

using these terms in everyday speech, especially if school programs were unified. (9) They also hope that the use of this lexicon would gradually contribute the unification of the minds (p VI).

3. Unified yes, Functional, maybe

Before discussing the relative merits of this work, I would like to briefly discuss one or two inherent weaknesses. These are not so much attributable to the authors as to the socio-linguistic setting in which they had worked and which, despite some rigor had inexorably affected the outcome of their research.

The work as it stands now seems to have been motivated and constrained at the same time by two conflicting imperatives. The first is that the word list had to reflect primarily the needs of a particular speech community (the Maghreb). The second is that the main source of these words had to be Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), because this speech community is above all Arabic speaking. MSA is the lingua franca of the Arab world and the sole bond that intimately unites an otherwise fragmented entity. The authors were keenly aware that any heavy borrowing from a regional dialect would be looked upon by the educated and the uneducated alike as a separatist, divisive ploy. Thus, a closer look at the alphabetized entries shows that the sixth criterion of unity and continuity dictated by the second imperative seems to have the overriding guiding principle, often at the expense of usefulness and functionality that the first two criteria were meant to safeguard.

In fact, the authors' concern that the list remains open to the rest of the Arab World explains their emphasis on literalizing, Arabizing all the vernacular words in the collected speech samples that were of Berber or French origin. (10) The input of these samples, besides providing the basic concepts and preoccupation of the child, seems to have been confined to items that were common to the written, and shared by other Arab vernaculars (e.g. swaiyya, xammal, sarux (11), 11, bas ; 'a little,' 'to tidy up,' 'a rocket' and 'to kiss,' respectively). This quasi-total reliance on the written mode had forced upon them a prescriptive, normative, attitude which appears in principles and under the guises of availability and the necessity of intervention. This attitude accounts for the special definition they give to functionality and for the incor-poration of words that no Maghrebian child, or for that matter any Arab child, would use in the spoken mode, even though the concepts they denote may be very familiar to him.

On page 13, for example, we find the word **ashab (blond) instead of asqar commonly used in spoken and MSA to denote both 'blond' and 'red-haired.' (12) On page 56**

On page 13, for example, we find the word **ashab (blond) instead of asqar commonly used in spoken and MSA to denote both** 'blond' and 'red-haired.' (12) On page 56 we find the word hasim (bashful) instead of the far more frequent and equally Arabic words xazil or xazul. On page 80 the word 'aruba (tie) instead of the coined compound rabatat unuq whose constituent morphemes are familiar to the child. On page 126 we encounter the word ghasul rumi which literally means a foreign washing agent or detergent instead of Sambwan which every child in the Maghreb uses, even though the term is not Arabic, but just like talifun, film, and sandwis, has been incorporated into the vernaculars of most Arab countries.

Nor would any teacher or parent ever expect a child between the ages of 6 and 9 to use such terms as a'itarasa' to hang onto something (p.14) or was a 'spool' or istahamma 'to take a bath' (p. 10), or any independent or suffix dual pronouns (p. 20 : p. 148). (13)

This emphasis on completeness at the expense of usefulness is not unique to this kind of work (Mahmoud, 1979 a). What is unique is that the authors of this lexicon have tried against all odds to incorporate some typographic and lexicographic innovations hitherto unpracticed in the Arab World. (14) More importantly, they have incorporated· some linguistic changes which educated speakers and the media in particular have forced upon the morphology of MSA. These changes are essentially systematic sim-plifications (omission of case markers, variable deletion of the glottal stop, simplification of the number system, etc.) which made the pronunciation of the listed words rather similar to the vernacular speech the child is so accustomed to hearing (Mahmoud, 1980 ; as-Sayib, 1976).

Perhaps here lies the potential usefulness of this work. It had contributed somewhat to the edification of a list that cuts across regional dialects and, at the same time tried to present it

in a form of Arabic not too far removed from the child's native medium of daily communication. Given the current, massive spread of arabized education at the primary level and the ongoing implementation of this list in the three countries, it would not be an exaggeration to state that the overall content of this lexical work will be within the understanding of the target population even though most of it may not be used in everyday speech (15).

Despite these weaknesses, the word list, as it stands now, constitutes a promising beginning of what many academicians, language planners and teachers have been calling for. In fact, the work was so well received that the Arab League's Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) has started a program designed to prepare a·pan-Arab, unified, lexical list built along the same sociolinguistic guidelines, which would ultimately serve the «functional» needs of primary school children throughout the Arab world (16).

3. Some Educational Implications

Perhaps one of the contributions of such a common lexical endeavor is the answer it may bring to the chronic problem facing specialists in children's literature and television programs, namely, which form of Arabic to use. The team of the new television series **Iftah Ya Simsim** ('Open Sesame'), (17) for example, would have had its task simplified, had such a common list existed. One of the issues the producers of this series had to tackle was how to assess, in the absence of an acceptable pan-Arab dialect, the use of MSA in the informal context of light television entertainment usually carried in the local vernacular. After several linguistic explorations and extensive surveys, they finally decided to use MSA, a bold departure from established communicative norms (18).

Another benefit of this pan-Arab word list is the help it would provide to the teachers of Arabic as a foreign language. It would enable them to present the learner with a basic vocabulary that could be easily supplemented when necessary, with the local expressions in use in the Arab country of his choice or interest. This could bring an end to the recurrent frustrations most learners experience time and again when they discover that they have been learning a language nobody speaks, however prestigious it may be. Last but definitely not least is that the implementation of such a list in the

gradually bridging the diglossic gap thus bringing the Arabic language closer to the communicative needs of the Arab child.

1. Libya and Mauritania participated in this project but withdrew shortly after the work had begun (1969).

2. The project of elaborating a basic list of Arabic words originated in the Section de Linguistique of the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Economiques et Sociales (C.E.R.E.S.) of the University of Tunis. «L'Arabe Fondamental Tunisien,» as the project was initially called was designed to assess the vocabulary Tunisian children actually acquire before school (ages 3-5), during the first three years of school (5-8), and after school (9-15). The preschool list of vernacular vocabulary was of critical importance because it was to help in the selction of the appropriate corresponding Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) items to be included in the first grade books and ensure that these items reflected the preocupations of the Tunisian child and his environment (i. e. home, school, street, etc.) Later on (1969) this project took on a Maghrebian dimension and caught the interest of educators and researchers from the Institut d'Etudes et de Recherches pour l'Arabisation de Rabat and the Institut de Linguistique et de phonétique d'Alger. The members of the appointed committee who were selected from the three institutions adopted the methodology and the goals established by CERES researchers.

3. Ar-rasid al-lughawi al-wadhifi lil-marhala-l- ula min-a ta-lim al-ibtida'i (introduction i-XII). All references and quotations are from the introduction.

4. See the lexical and morphosyntactic studies of the first two Arabic books to be used in Tunisian primary schools by A. M'hairi, A. El Ayed, A. Attia, and S.Garmadi, «Etudes linguistiques des deux premiers livres de l'écriture Arabe en usage en Tunisie, «in Cahiers de **CERES, Série Linguistique, No.1,** 1968. See also Ahmed Lakhdar Ghazal, «fi qadaya al- lugha-al-arabiya wa mastawa-t ta lim al- arabi» Majallet **al-bahth alilmi,** May-December, No.11-12, 1967, Rabat. See also «Bulletin Pédagogique du Primaire,» a publication of l'Office Pédagogique Tunisien, No 66, 1968, May-june.

preparation of textbooks and educational material would constitute a step forward in

5. For a detailed description of the methodology used in sampling subjects, recording and transcribing data, see «L'Arabe fondamental 1er niveau» in **Cahiers de Linguistique,** No. 4, C.E. R.E.S., 1971, Tunis. See also A. Al-Ayed, fonds lexical commun du Maghreb et Enseignement Moderne » paper presented at the 7th Meeting of the AIMAV (Association Internationale pour le Recherche et la Diffusion des Méthodes Audiovisuelles), Sousse, Tunisia, July 14-21, 1974.

6. The word 'horse' for example has at least four synonyms (hisane, faras, jawad, khayl).

7. Gougenheim, et al., 1964, in L'Elaboration du Français Fondamental (1er degré), use the term disponibilité in talking about words whose frequency is low but which are used and useful. Nous les appelons ainsi (i.e. disponibles) parce que quoiqu'ils ne soient pas souvent prononcés ou écrits effectivement, ils sont à notre disposition (p.145).

8. The purpose of the last tow criteria was to ensure, according to the authors, that the final list be as complete as possible, and adaptable to the needs of modern life (p.VI). This explains why the authors have added at the end of the Arabic/ French lexicon an alphabetized list of scientific and technical terms.

9. In Febryary 1975 the list was officially adopted by the Ministries of Education of the three countries and is currently used in the preparation of textbooks for the first three grades (rasid, pp.201-210).

10 . El-Ayed (1974, see above), one of the contributors of this lexicon had this to say : «Grâce a cette langue proche des parlers des enfants dans une certaine proportion, langue établie selon le souci d'assurer la pérennite comme instrument linguistique bas de l'unité culturelle Arabe, donc loin de la «specificité régionale, » mais tendant à l'unité culturelle, langue adaptée ou presque a la vie authentique sans fanatisme, moderne sans aliénation, donnant au fur et à mesure des solutions aux problème de diglossie,... du bilinguisme... et du plurilinguisme, langue en quête d'assumer le pari de la modernité.» (p.4)

11. This word was literalized as srux (p.74)

12: This and subsequent examples are taken from the Arabic/ French section of the lexicon.

13. For further assessment of these lexical weaknesses and their possible impact on the teaching of Arabic to speakers of other languages, see souissi, M.R., 1979, pp. 68-71.

14. For a discussion of the typographic innovations see Mahmoud, 1979b, pp. 76-112. As to the lexicographic ones, see ar-rasid al-lughawi, pp.XI-XII

15. See note 9. This assumption will have to be substantiated by empirical studies which are yet to be made.

16. There are at present within ALECSO 15 commitees representing 15 Arab countries which, since 1975, have started collecting data and culling primary school books in their respective countries following as closely as possible the same methodological procedures.

17. The original Arab version of Sesame Street.

18. One of the concerns of the linguists in the production team was that by adopting MSA, they may be placing a barrier of unacceptable proportions between the viewing child and the subject matter of the series, which includes a variety of educational goals (Palmer, 1979).

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