# Aspects of Structural and Lexical Ambiguity in: (English / Arabic and Arabic / English Translation)

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In his «First Dictionary of Linguistics & Phonetics» Crystal defined the general sense of ambiguity, as referring to a word or sentence which expresses more than one meaning. In his discussion of the term Crystal distinguishes between two types of ambiguity : the structural or grammatical one, and the lexical one. He differentiates between vagueness and ambiguity defining the latter as applicable to a sentence that has more than one distinct structure, while the former as applicable to a sentence which permits an unspecified range of possible interpretations.

Keeping in mind Crystals' definition, we notice that ambiguity allows much room for logical analysis that we may in about ninety nine percent of ambiguous statements come out with a biradical «either - or». But while this biradical «either - or» criterion is useful in interpretation problems concerning a single language system, it is only of little help in solving the problems of ambiguity involving two language systems i.e. Arabic and English.

During my work as a translator and interpreter I come to distinguish three main types of ambiguity that lay down a stumbling block for students of translation. But due to the vastness and complexity of the topic and its metalinguistic open - endedness, it is suitable for an introductory sort of study, as is the case with the present paper, to limit the scope of the topic so that only the problematic types of ambiguity are discussed.

Leaving out Figurative Ambiguity which is more of a literary character, we shall have the following types :

1 - Structural Ambiguity
2 - Lexical Ambiguity.

## 1 - Structural Ambiguity :

This type of ambiguity is very much common in both Arabic and English. It is also considered as an inherent type especially in certain grammatical operations such as modification, conjunction, relativization, and - ingending. In other cases it is considered casual such as in the case of arrangement i.e. word order, headlines, capitalization, and punctuation in general. Some examples of this sort are :

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Al-Toma (1970, p. 692) refers to the conflicting policies of teaching Arabic in the Arab World and how the student's exposure to, and practice in Classical Arabic within the school are inadequate for attaining the desired objectives. The reason lies in the fact that 'pupils have to unlearn or suppress most of their linguistic habits while trying to acquire new ones based on CA' (p. 690).

Psycholinguistic studies in this area are non-existent. Research is badly needed as far as the following are concerned :

(a) The nature of code-switching from al-ᶜāmiyya to al-fushā and ways of bridging the gap, not only for Arabic native speakers learning Arabic but also for the illiterate learning how to read and write.

(b) Teaching both varieties of Arabic to non-native speakers of Arabic.

(c) The source and nature of interference that occurs in the process of translating from foreign languages into Arabic and from Arabic into foreign languages.

(d) Learning of foreign languages and the kind of interference that obtains as a result of the dual linguistic system the Arab learner aquires before starting a foreign language.

2. Diglossia has its implications for monolingual and bilingual lexicography. Lexicographic studies based on a good understanding of the diglossic situation in Arabic are badly needed. Different types of dictionaries are required.

1) General monolingual dictionaries of contemporary Arabic.

2) General monolingual dictionaries of al-ᶜāmiyya Arabic in the different Arab countries.

3) Segmental dictionaries of contemporary Arabic in its different registers.

4) Bilingual dictionaries of al-ᶜāmiyya (English-Arabic, Arabic-English) for translation purposes.

5) Bilingual dictionaries of contemporary Arabic (English-Arabic, Arabic-English, French-Arabic, Arabic-French) for non-native speakers of Arabic.

6) Bilingual dictionaries of al-ᶜāmiyya (English-Arabic, Arabic-English, French-Arabic, Arabic-French) for non-native speakers of Arabic*.

Before setting a plan for such dictionaries and collecting material for them, studying Arabic in its social setting, not only in Egypt but also in the Arab World as a whole, is necessary.

The source language and the target language in such bilingual dictionaries have to be compared with respect to the usage levels observed (cf.Harrell 1962, pp. 55 - 61 and Al-bakkush 1973).

It is hoped that future research in Arabic will be based not only on the explication of the formal characteristics of the system, the internal units and processes but also on its various functions, i.e., the relationships between the linguistic forms of a language and the fonctions which the language must perform. A study of the functional uses would certainly complement the formal properties.

(*) Through personal contact I have been informed that a new dictionary of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic edited by Al-Said M. Badawi is in the press.

is unique among all other languages.

With Islamic conquests the language of the Quran together with its dialects found its way to other peoples and cultures. In turn it mixed with different languages and dialects such as Aramaic, Syriac, Persian, Coptic, Berber and Latin which were already there in the conquered countries. These languages were the substrata with which Arabic with its different dialects mixed. With this adaptation, a new Arabic language and new dialects emerged and developed along the centuries (see Saïd 1964, p. 607, Badawī 1973, pp. 20 - 47, Al-Tawwāb 1977, pp. 62 - 97, Bakr 1969, pp.17 - 25, Ferguson 1959-a pp. 616 - 630, Samarra'i 1966, pp. 62 - 97, Bateson 1967, Khalafallah et al. 1957). In Egypt, for example, classical Arabic replaced Greek which had been since Ptolemaic times the language of culture, politics and administration, and later the church, and Coptic, which was the language for daily intercourse. Classical Arabic was adopted as a state language and the colloquial variety as a conversational medium. This process took a century after the Islamic conquest to be accomplished (Khalafallah 1957 p. 568). According to Khalafallah (1957 p. 567) :

> The Arabic language has been standardized since the 3rd / 9th and 4th / 10th centuries. With extensive linguistic researches, the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of al-fushā, were defined. Since that time it has had continuous, and uninterrupted existence. Although every Arabic speaking country has developed its own colloquial for every day life, they have all continued to use the standard literary language for purposes of writing.

As far as English is concerned «the standard language developed out of the English dialects used in and around London and these were modified through the centuries by speakers at the court, by scholars from the universities and other writers, and later on by the public schools», says Trudgill (1974, p. 17), «as time passed, the English used in the upper classes of society in the capital city came to be regarded as the model for all those who wished to speak and write well».

What basically distinguishes English from diglossic languages like Arabic is the fact that there is in English one variety which is usually used in print, which is taught at school and which is usually spoken by educated people. Though there is a «certain amount of regional variation, perhaps not very much in standard English » as Abercrombie states (1965 p. 10), «it is spoken and even more written, with remarkable uniformity considering the area which it covers».

These differences between the two languages have implications for teaching English to native speakers of Arabic, and Arabic to native speakers of English in terms of teaching material construction and dictionary compilation.

**The Diglossic situation and its implications :**

1. Diglossia has problems on the educational level in all the Arab countries. Al-fushā is not a 'native' variety like 'āmiyya which is mainly spoken and occasionally written and is acquired in the normal way of learning a 'mother tongue language'. The Arab learns al-fusha at school in the most artificial environment (see Garmadi 1968).

As far back as 1886 Ḥifnī Nāṣif (1961) referred to the intellectual competence wasted as a result of this linguistic dichotomy :

«We see that the child learns al-āmiyya in less than five years». The reason, according to him, is that «in the early stages of language acquisition, the child hears and speaks nothing but al-āmiyya which helps it be established in his mind as is the case with English and French children. This is by no means the case in learning the written form of the language».

Khalafallah has repeatedly referred to the problem and proposed solutions (1939, 1945, 1955, 1969). According to him :

> Such duality impairs the progressive movement of thought and expression. It is not practical that people should have a natural language used in their daily life and various requirements, and when they come to writing oratory, literature and science, begin to effectuate another language with rules and regulations taught to them in school without the opportunity to use it in conversation, as has been the case with the foreign languages they have learned.

finds in icons and artistic expressions which have become part of the Christian Church».

(b) Arabic, the language of the Qur'ān, hadith and Islamic thought, the source of sharīa (Islamic law) binds the Arab world and the Muslim non-Arab World together. The need for learning Arabic fusha is pressing not only for muslims in Europe and the United States but also in heavily populated Muslim countries in Asia and Africa. More than 600 million muslims, who belong to different nationalities and speak different languages perform their prayers in Arabic. Thus Arabic is a unifying language for all muslims in Asian countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and African countries such as Guinea, the Niger, Chad, Senegal and Cameroon. Hodgkin (1966 p. 14) asserts this bond ; «although there are many different sorts of Arabs between the Bedu and the Cultivator, and between the cultivator and the townsman, between the inhabitants of one country and another, two tremendously strong ties bind them all together. These are language and religion. They are the cement of the Arab World».

(6) Arabic as a symbol of national identity and unity with its profound implications, is another factor that helped preserve al-fusha. Al-fusha is a unifying force for all the Arabs (see Khalafallah 1949, Al-Husry 1957). The written language is the same everywhere in the Arab World and the broadcast written word is understood by all the Arabs. Educated Arabs understand each other wherever they meet and from whichever place they come.

(7) From (5) and (6), we conclude that Ferguson's expectations for the future of Arabic, i.e., the «slow development toward several languages, each based on an L variety, with heavy admixture of H vocabulary» are unfounded. Perhaps

the development of Latin and its descendants has been at the back of his mind. However, Latin and Classical Arabic developed in different ways. Latin never entertained the same sacred status which Arabic as the language of Islam did. Since language as a social phenomenon is closely tied up with the value systems of society, religious, political an cutural facts should have been taken into account. Hence Wehr's (1957 p.573) expectations are closer to reality :

The fact that there exists a basically uniform written language in all Arab countries from Iraq to Morocco is of great value, ideal and practical, to the Arabic peoples. It is the symbol of their old cultural unity and their political union in the present day. Thus we can conclude that there is no reason to anticipate that the written language will anywhere be replaced by a local dialect and forced out of practical use.

**'Diglossia' and 'standard languages with dialects'**

To have a better understanding of the diglossic situation in Arabic and why it differs from standard languages with dialects such as 'English' one has to trace the evolution of Arabic from pre-Islamic times to the present. Such a study will go beyond the limitations of this paper. It will be sufficient to follow the main trends.

Linguistic duality has always been there throughout the history of the Arabic language (alᶜarabiyya). Before the emergence of Islam, Arabic was spoken by different tribes, then one tribal dialect predominated and became the language of literature which united all tribes. This was the dialect of the Kuraysh tribe of Mecca which had economic and political power. Such was the situation before the descent of the Quran, the existence side by side of a standard language and dialects but the difference between the two was not as wide as it is today between our fushā andᶜāmiyya. (Saïd 1964 p.4).

With the emergence of Islam, this standard language established itself as the language of literature and writing. The centuries, a case which

37

### Badawī's and Ferguson's analyses

(1) Badawi's analysis has given us more insight into the diglossic stuation in Egypt than Ferguson's in a way which would help us review the established terms :
Classical, colloquial and literary arabic

(2) The value of the concept of 'diglossia' introduced by Ferguson, lies in the fact that it can be used in sociolinguistic typology (cf. Hudson 1980 p. 55) with refinement gained from Badawi's analysis or better still be replaced by 'social dialectia' the term suggested by Hudson (1980, p. 55). This will help us distinguish between these communities where the diglossic situation prevails and others like the USA and Britain where we have a 'standard-with-dialects situations' (cf.Ferguson, 1959 - b)

(3) Ferguson's description masks an important phenomenon which is revealed by Badawi, i.e., the distinction between what has been known in the literature as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Classical. 'MSA' is not only phonetically, syntactically and lexically different from the 'classical' but is now taking over its functions (cf. Badawi, pp. 127 - 148).

(4) Ferguson's definition is not linguistic one but a sociolinguistic one in the main. The varieties of Arabic are defined in terms of their communicative funtion. His analysis of the phonological, syntactic and lexical structures is rather tentative and limited. Moreover, the examples he gives (see below) of the situations where either variety, the high or the low is used need to be reconsidered.

Ferguson's examples of H : Sermon in mosque, personal letters, speech in perliament, political speech, university lecture, newsbroadcast, radio, newspaper editorial, news story, caption on picture, poetry.

Ferguson's examples of L : Instructions to servants, waiters, clerks, conversation with family, friends, colleagues, radio 'soap-opera', caption on political cartoon, folk literature.

Badawī's approach offers a good model. He studied certain samples of each variety and drew the broad lines. The linguistic analysis offered fully justifies his classification but is rather limited in scope. It opens vistas for further research. At present, there is a pressing need for more extensive descriptions of each variety modelled on Badawī's approach.

(5) Though Ferguson referred to the fact that the prestige assigned to the H variety is conncted with religion in diglossic languages like Creek and Arabic, it remains to be said that :

(a) It was the Quran which among other things, helped preserve al-fuṣḥā for more than 1400 years. According to Ābidīn 1951, p. 102) :

Religion has always been linked with language throughout the Islamic era. It prompted Arab linguists to collect illustrative quotations and codify the language. Since the early Islamic period education programmes have been based on combining linguistic knowledge with theological knowledge in mosques, and Quranic schools and this is why the linguist has always been a student of Islamic theology.*

Shaban (1983, p.IV) explains the Arab's «jealousy over Arabic» thus : «the Moslem Arab finds in the language an expression of his beliefs in fact of himself. His religious beliefs have been transmitted to him down the centuries in words, and no other means of expression is recognized by Islam such as one

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(*) This is a translation of the Arabic text.

(c) Diglossia is highly stable. It persists at least several centuries. The communication tensions which arise in the diglossia situation may be resolved by the use of relatively uncodified intermediate forms of the language, i.e., al-lugha al-Wusṭā.

(d) Expectations : Arabic 'slow development toward several standard languages, each based on an L variety with heavy admixture of H vocabulary. The Egyptian (based on Cairo), Maghrebi based on Rabat or Tunis ?), Eastern (based on Baghdad). The paper concludes with a plea for further studies of Arabic and similar languages in a sociocultural setting and an apology, that more profound studies would modify the impressionistic remarks of the paper and that perhaps then, the paper would have had virtue of stimulating investigation.

Badawī's study (1973) broke new ground. For him, 'varieties of fushā and varieties of ʿāmiyya are, above all else, 'cultural patterns' (p. 15). Badawi draws a realistic picture of the linguistic structure of the Egyptian society. He starts from a social situation then describes the language required. Hence, the significance of his classification of the varieties into :

(1) Fushā al-turāth (Classical Arabic) : The Arabic language described by old Arab grammarians as far as Quran readings, morphological, semantic studies and uictionaries are concerned. It is the language used by Azharite scholars of today in religious radio programmes for example. (For distinctive linguistic features see pp. 122 - 127).

(2) Fushā al-ʿaṣr (Modern or Contemporary Arabic). This is the written record of today's scientific and general knowledge. It may be read aloud. Few people would manage to speak it without preparation. It is the written form for our knowledge in different fields : medicine, engineering, che-

mistry, agriculture, arts, music, architecture, economics and the one used in newspapers and broadcasting. (For distinctive features see pp. 135 - 148).

(3) ʿāmiyyat-al-muthaqqafīn (The Cultured Colloquial). If today's culture is expressed in modern fusha in the written form it is in the cultured colloquial that it is expressed in the spoken from. It is the language used by those who attain a high standard of education and culture - in the discussion of matters of abstract nature and in the explanation of topics related to their education and culture, politics, science, literature, music ... etc.

(For distinctive linguistic features see pp. (155 - 175)

(4) ʿāmiyyat al-mutanawwirīn

(The Enlightened Colloquial) This is the variety usually referred to in the Arabic and in the English literature as colloquial or ʿāmiyya or dārija. It is used by the literate in practical matters of everydaylife, in buying and selling, with the familly and friends and in various kinds of social interaction. It is the mother tongue of all the Egyptians who, on the social ladder, entertain a status higher than that of the illiterate class. It is mastered by the age of six. (cf. classical). (For distinctive linguistic features see pp.178 - 189).

(5) ʿāmiyyat al-ummiyyīn (the illiterate colloquial)

This closely related to the illiteracy of those who use it. It is the variety acquired by birth in a family speaking it (illiterate parents). It is characterized by be the excessive use of ready-made phrases and clichés especially by women. By the age of six the child will master it and if he does not go to school or learn a trade, he will continue to speak it the rest of his life. With education, he will move up to the level of using the 'enlightened' or 'cultured' variety.

were not taken into account.

3. Judgements passed for āmiyya as againts fuṣḥä or vice-versa were not based on linguistic contrastive studies, where all levels of the two varieties are examined in depth, i.e, the phonological, syntactic and lexical levels.

4. Studying the spoken dialects of Arabic or compiling dictionaries of them was discouraged by the Arab thinkers since the call for replacing al-fuṣḥä by al-āmiyya came from the West, from colonialists or from Arab Chiristians who did not take the Islamic religious factor into account. Saïd's (1964, P. 467) words are a good example :

> Europeans, especially the imperialists, are those who made of this phenomenon in our language a problem, for solving which they proposed using al-āmiyya as the only spoken and written medium. Their objective in raising the problem and in finding solutions was to undermine Arab unity, through the elimination of one of its most important formative elements, the fuṣḥä Arabic language.*

5. Few contrastive linguistic studies between the two varieties were carried out. Examples are the studies by Becker (1964) Selim (1967) and Al-Toma (1957 ; 1969). Al-Toma (1969) made an attempt to describe the major differences between classical Arabic and one of the spoken Arabic varieties, Iraqi Arabic. The study took the high school curriculum of Arabic grammar as a base of comparison and showed differences in phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon. Becker's (1964) is a contrastive study of MSA «(Modern Standard Arabic)» and Lebanese colloquial Arabic verb structures with an attempt to formulate rules of transfer from one to the other. Selim's work (1967) is a contrastive study of the phonological systems of modern Standard Arabic and Egyptian Arabic.

To study speech without reference to the society which uses it is to exclude the possibility of finding social explanations for the structures that are used.

6. The first study of Arabic in its social context was Ferguson's (1959 - b). The term 'diglos-sia' was introduced, actually borrowed from French, to describe the situation found in places like Greece, the Arabic-speaking world, German-speaking Switzerland and the island of Haiti. 'Diglossia', according to Ferguson, is a particular situation of language standardization where two varieties of language exist side by side throughout the speech community and where each of the two vatieties is assigned to definite social functions. Later, the term was extended by sociolinguists like Gumperz (1968) and Fishman (1972) to encompass societies which employ any variety where variety-switching takes place.

The term defined by Ferguson suffices our immediate needs but perhaps in the case of Arabic, needs more refinement, as important factors have been grossly neglected. Ferguson defines diglossia as :

> ...A relatively stable language situation which in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes and is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.

According to Ferguson :

(a) The most important feature of diglossia is the specialization of function for H (high variety = al-fuṣḥà) and L (low variety = al- āmiyya). In one set of situations only H is appropriate and in another only L, with the two sets overlapping only very slightly. He gives examples of situations where each is used.

(b) He refers to the superiority and prestige assigned to the H variety. In some cases, he says, the superiority is connected with religion. For Arabic, it is the language of the Quran and as such is widely believed to constitute the actual words of God.

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(*) This is a translation of the Arabic text