

THE BEGINNING OF THE ARABIC DIGLOSSIA

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I - Introduction :

The mere coexistence of two varieties ; standard [formal] and colloquial [informal], of the same language in a linguistic community does not necessarily entail the existence of diglossia in that community. It follows, then, that it is misleading to search for the beginning of the standard - colloquial dichotomy, found in a certain community, in order to determine the beginning of diglossia there. What is, rather, needed is a serious and scientific investigation of the relationships that are found between the two varieties at the sociolinguistic level as well as an examination of some of the linguistic features that characterize each variety.

The above misconception about diglossia has led most of the Arab scholars who have dealt with this issue to claim that the pre-Islamic [hence PI] linguistic situation in the Arabian peninsula was diglossic. Such scholars seem to have ignored the defining features as well as the conditions of the emergence of diglossia as outlined by Ferguson [1959]. It seems that their sole criterion for determining the existence of diglossia has been the coexistence of two varieties of Arabic in that community. Accordingly, one might conclude on the basis of their misconception, that the present sociolinguistic situation in the Arab world, which is generally described as diglossic, is similar to that of the PI situation. Sociolinguistically speaking, though the two situations have some common features such as the existence of a standard or common⁽¹⁾ variety (hence CV), they are different in several diglossic respects.

It is the purpose of the present study to advance some evidence in order to disprove the hypothesis which states that the Arabic diglossia had originated in the Arabic community during the PI stage. Alternatively, the study will argue that diglossia emerged in later stages when the Arabic linguistic situation actually drifted to a state of linguistic polarization. Consequently, each of the two varieties of Arabic assumed a distinct function and the relationships between them took a diglossic nature.

Two hypotheses concerning the beginning of diglossia in Arabic as defined by Ferguson (1959) have been reported in the linguistics literature. The first one proposed mostly by Arab scholars such as Abdurrahman (1971), Staytiyyah (1988) and Bakalla (1989), states that diglossia came into being during the PI stage when there was a CV in addition to the urban and bedouin dialects. The proponents of such hypothesis hardly advance any scientific arguments in support of their view. They rely heavily, as it was pointed out earlier, on general and impressionistic evidence ; namely the coexistence of two Arabic varieties, which is, in fact, unconvincing. Surprisingly, Ferguson himself who has remarkably described the phenomenon of diglossia in the Arabic community falls into this category. He specifically claims that «Arabic diglossia seems to reach as far back as our knowledge of Arabic goes (1959 :327). This statement includes, of course, the PI stage.

The second hypothesis advocated mostly by western scholars such as Blau (1977) and Fück (1980) suggests that diglossia in Arabic emerged during the post-Islamic stage, specifically when the Arabic

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(1) The terms «standard» and «common» are synonymously here to refer to the same formal Arabic variety as historically opposed to the modern Arabic colloquials and the old tribal dialects respectively.

language migrated with the Arabs to the newly conquered neighboring regions such as Iraq, Greater Syria and Egypt where it was adopted by the newly converted Muslims. This hypothesis sounds more plausible and convincing as it will be shown later.

II - Diglossia

According to Ferguson (1959 : 336) diglossia is :

A relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include standard of 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 but is not used by any section of the community for ordinary conversation.

This definition has laid down a number of important and key features such as «very divergent» «written literature» and «superposed variety» : which characterize a diglossic situation. In such situation, two main varieties of the same language are used in the community. One variety is known as high (H), and the other is low (L). Their domains are not similar.

Ferguson (1959) proposes a set of defining features which are taken to be the basis for distinguishing a diglossic situation from a nondiglossic one. Below is a summary of some of the features which will serve our purpose :

- 1) Each of the two varieties, H and L, has a specialized function. For example, the former is used in formal speech, such as university lectures and religious sermons, while the other is used at home and folk literature.
- 2) Whereas the L variety is acquired naturally as one's native language, the H is learned at school or other formal settings.
- 3) The two grammatical systems of H and L show important differences. Some grammatical categories which are found in the H system are lacking in the L system.

- 4) H is usually considered as a source of strong tradition of grammatical study.
- 5) Unlike the L variety which lacks standardization, H has a standardized form manifested in dictionaries and other traditional sources.

These defining features are certainly applicable to the present linguistic situation in the Arab world.

In addition, Ferguson (1959 : 338) outlines three conditions which, if they are met in a speech community, produce diglossia in that community. They are :

- (1) There is a sizable body of literature in a language closely related to (or even identical with) the natural language of the community, and this literature embodies, whether as source (e.g. divine revelation) or reinforcement, some of the fundamental values of the community.
- (2) Literacy in the community is limited to a small elite.
- (3) A suitable period of time, of the order of several centuries, passes from the establishment of (1) and (2).

There is no question that any violation of these conditions will lead to a nondiglossic situation according to Ferguson.

Ferguson's definition of diglossia, which is now known as old or classical, has been challenged by new attempts to redefine and extend it. In fact a new diglossia which incorporates languages, dialects and registers has been proposed to account for various sociolinguistic situations, (Gumperz, 1966). It is obvious in, in the light of such tendency, that all speech communities may be characterized as being diglossic. In fact, this view is reiterated by Fishman (1972 : 92), one proponent of the new diglossia, who has enthusiastically adopted Gumperz's view regarding the extension of the domain of diglossia.

We have argued elsewhere (Hamad, 1986) that the notion of the new diglossia has generated a serious controversy and confusion because of a number of reasons. First, the proponents of the new diglossia have failed to maintain conceptual clarity

in using certain key terms such as the term «language» in their descriptive studies. This term has been used in an inconsistent and very flexible way when dealing with diglossic or semidiglossic situations. Such tendency led eventually to some kind of confusing results (Dittmar, 1976). Secondly, using a diglossia-bilingualism formula as the basis for classifying speech communities seems to be unconvincing because it results in «occasional contradiction» and «shallowness» (Dittmar, 1976). And thirdly, the inadequacy of the new attempts for defining diglossia springs from the fact that they employ one limited criterion to achieve this goal, namely the domain of complementarity of the two languages at a time when the original attempt uses nine criteria (Timm, 1981). Therefore, the methodology of the original attempt seems to be more reliable.

If diglossia were a matter of «multiple norms» in a community, as it is claimed, one could logically conclude that all speech communities are diglossic. But this is, of course, an untenable conclusion. Criticizing the extension attempts of diglossia, Hudson (1980 : 55), an influential sociolinguist, says that «this is a regrettable development as it seems to make every society diglossic, including even English-Speaking England, where different so-called «registers» and «dialects» are used under different circumstances».

We think that the issue goes beyond those «broad generalizations», advocated by the aforementioned authors, to the notion of the «broad structural gap». It is our contention that the role of such gap which presumably exists between the two varieties of a diglossic situation is essential in determining the uniqueness of that situation. Wexler (1971 : 336) has reminded us of the significance of this variable as he states :

Proponents of the term diglossia are not certainly blind to the ubiquity of multiple norms. But diglossia is not meant to refer to any condition of multiple norms, but specifically to that condition, where there is a broad structural gap between the standard written norm and the unstandardized (as a rule) spoken dialects.

Finally, two issues regarding Ferguson's characterization of a diglossic situation should be made clear. One is the fact that Ferguson (1959 : 325, n.2) asserts that «no attempt is made in this paper to examine the analogous situation where two distinct (related or unrelated) languages are used side by side throughout a speech community, each with a clearly defined role». And the other is the distinction he makes between a diglossic situation and a «standard with dialects» situation which is often confused with the former. As a matter of fact, it is this distinction which motivated Ferguson to discuss this phenomenon in the first place. (Ferguson, 1971). This crucial distinction has clearly been made when Ferguson (1959 : 337) indicates that :

No segment of the speech community in diglossia regularly uses H as a medium of ordinary communication, and any attempt to do so is felt to be either pedantic and artificial (Arabic, Greek) or else in some sense disloyal to the community (Swiss German, Creole). In the more usual standard - with - dialects situation the standard is often similar to the variety of a certain region or social group (e.g. Tehran Persian, Calcutta Bengali) which is used in ordinary conversation more or less naturally by members of the group and as a superposed variety by others.

The above discussion about diglossia was necessary. On one hand, it intended to give the reader a precise identification of the type of diglossia meant in the present study. On the other, it attempted to advance some reasons concerning our reservations about the new diglossia. Overall, it is this discussion which justifies the present writer's inclination to ground this study on the original well-defined diglossia rather than on the new ill-defined diglossia.

III - The Pre-Islamic (PI) stage :

The linguistic situation was ambiguous in the Arabian Peninsula during this stage due specially to the lack of concrete evidence. However, two things seem to be certain about that situation. One is the fact that there was a large number of various tribal dialects spreading in the Peninsula. And the other is the fact there was a CV used by the Arabic tribes ; bedouin as well as urban.

Unlike the Greek, Roman and Persian traditions, the Arabic literary tradition of this stage was primarily oral (Ameen, 1961). Very scanty records which include very limited linguistic information were discovered in the northern part of the Peninsula. Such situation has motivated many Arab and non Arab scholars to make some speculations about the PI linguistic situation in general and the CV in particular. How, when, why did the CV emerge? These questions have generated a great deal of controversy about the CV. No decisive answers have been offered for these questions and others which concern the relationships between this variety and the tribal dialects⁽²⁾. It is however, taken for granted that the CV is well - represented in the PI poetry (Jahili) and orations, and in the Holy Qur'an in a later stage. More emphasis will be laid on CV because it will play a key role in the main argument of this study.

The CV is widely believed to have come into being as a result of what is called a dialectal «coalition» or «refinement» (Anis, 1974, Abdulttawab 1978). During the PI stage, the Arabic dialects used to interact with one another on literary, religious and commercial seasonal occasions. Eventually, the CV emerged through certain linguistic processes which are hard to identify in specific details in the meantime. The fact that the CV includes a large number of synonyms as well as inconsistent grammatical and morphological rules clearly supports the «coalition» hypothesis.

One of the most plausible account of the processes by which the CV developed is that which has been advanced by Staytiyyah (1988). He argues that during the PI stage the stabilized state of the CV, had likely been preceded by at least two main processes: One is pidginization which involved the linguistic interactions of the Arabic tribes and the other is creolization whose outcome was a new generation of poets and orators.

The CV was, generally speaking, based on a number of so called «pure» dialects which were used, or on, as the sole source for eliciting linguistic data

See Spitaler's introductory remarks on this issue in Fück (1980).

These verses have been taken from A. Yusuf Ali (1946), *The Holy Qur'an «Text, Translation and commentary»*.

by the early grammarians who established the codification of the CV. This is quite true with regard to the Basran grammarians who were very selective in their methodology. It should be noted that, unlike the Basran grammarians, the Kufis had indiscriminately accepted data from all Arabic tribes whether those tribes were located in the heart or the borders of the Peninsula (Abdulttawab, 1987). It is noteworthy that the CV includes none of those distinctive tribal linguistic features such as «al-fahfahah», the change of [h] into [ʔ], «al-shanshanah»; the change of (k) into [š], and «al-ajajah»; the change of the stressed [y] into [j] (Anis, 1974).

Although some Arab grammarians such as Wafi (1973), Al-Janabi (1981) and Hilal (1990) have tended to identify and associate the CV with the dialect of Quraysh, some evidence seems to weaken this claim. At least three reasons may be advanced in this regard. First, it is known that when it was revealed, the Holy Qur'an, which used the perspicuous Arabic tongue, was not directed to a specific tribe. Rather, it was directed to all Arabic tribes regardless of their dialects. Some verses⁽³⁾ from the Holy Qur'an support this view.

**We have sent it down
as an Arabic Qur'an
In order that ye may
learn wisdom. (Surah XII : 2)**

**A book whereof the verses
Are explained in detail ;
A Qur'an in Arabic,
For people who understand. (Surah XLI :3)**

Secondly, the dialect of Quraysh is reported to have been less committed to the observation of glottalization which characterizes the system of CV. This dialect uses, for example, (rās), that is «head», instead of (ra's) (Abdo, 1973).

Finally, it is a fact that the early Arab grammarians who were working on the codification of the Arabic grammar in the early centuries of Islam rejected the tribe of Quraysh as a source for their

linguistic data. Instead, they based their grammars on the so called «pure» dialects of Qays, Tamim, Asad, Tay, and Hudhayl (al-Suyuti, 1958). Accordingly, it is difficult to reconcile the above evidence with the controversial claim that the CV was an elaborate and refined variety based largely on the dialect of Quraysh. Overall, the proponents of such view have failed to advance any convincing linguistic evidence in support of their view.

It is likely that the system of the inherited proto-Arabic constituted the basic structural systems of the PI old Arabic dialects. In other words, the dialects were derived from that system. By the course of time, the dialects made some limited linguistic deviations but they retained the basic elements of the proto - system. This type of relationship differs from that controversial one which exists today between the modern Arabic colloquials and the standard variety. Therefore, the CV was probably a recurring or an echo system of the proto - Arabic which is believed to have retained most of the proto - semitic system. The question that might be raised is : Did the early Arab grammarians succeed in describing or reconstructing that old system on the basis of the old Arabic dialects ? This challenging question has to be investigated well through an extensive study of the Arabic linguistic heritage.

We think that, in order to achieve the stated purpose of the present study, it is essential to test the general relationships which exist between the CV and the tribal dialects through focusing on the early outlined defining features outlined earlier. We are convinced that this is the only line of investigation which can scientifically reveal whether the PI community was diglossic.

1. Function :

It is widely held that the CV was the language of the oral poetry as well as the traditional orations. But this variety was not restricted to that type of function only. It is reported that this variety was to a great extent used in common and ordinary conversations in addition to the tribal dialects (Chejne, 1969) (Hijazi, 1973) (Staytiyyah, 1988). What makes us lean towards this view is the given assumption that the CV is based, in the first place,

on the dialects of the Arabic tribes. Furthermore, the CV was acquired as a natural system as it will be pointed out shortly. It is expected, therefore, that unlike the speakers of the modern Arabic colloquials, the speakers, of the old Arabic dialects were certainly able to use the CV in ordinary conversations without encountering any psycholinguistic barriers. It follows then that those speakers had some sort of a relative mastery of the linguistic systems of both their dialects and the CV.

Overall, it is evident that the function of the CV was overlapping with that of the tribal dialect what is known as the specialized function of each variety was not well - established in the PI stage as it is in the present Arabic diglossic situation (al-Mousa, 1988). Finally, the fact that the CV was used in ordinary conversations indicates that the PI community was not diglossic according to Ferguson's defining features.

2. Acquisition :

It is no exaggeration that learning the standard variety, which is considered the H variety in the present Arabic diglossic situation, is not much different from that of learning a foreign language (Frayhah, 1955). The Arab learner has to switch from the linguistic system of his natural colloquial variety to a new linguistic system which differs significantly from his own in terms of the grammatical system, lexicon, and to a certain degree, the phonological system (al-Toma, 1970). This is done, of course through formal education and it usually takes a long time which probably matches that required for learning a foreign language.

This situation can't be viewed as analogous to the PI linguistic situation in which the illiterate Arab used to acquire the CV spontaneously and simultaneously with his local tribal dialect. In other words, his acquired linguistic competence of the CV was based on his natural intuition, known in Arabic as «saliqah» (Hassan, 1982). This is another evidence advanced against the hypothesis of the PI diglossic situation.

3. Grammar :

According to Ferguson, striking differences between H and L characterize a diglossic situation.

This is, in fact, in accordance with the notion of «broad structural gap» between H and L alluded to earlier. The L grammatical system is usually more simplified than its H counterpart which consists of a sophisticated system. Some H grammatical categories are absent from the L grammatical system. This is quite applicable to the present diglossic situation in which the nonnominal dual and the passive cases, for example, are absent from the Arabic colloquials (Abdo, 1973).

This is not, however, the case in the PI situation in which the aforementioned cases were present in the tribal dialectal systems (Salloum, 1986). Furthermore, the two varieties the CV and the tribal dialects, are believed to have contained the case endings or iʿrab (Staytiyyah, 1988). Therefore, the CV and the tribal dialects shared a good number of grammatical features which made them very close. It follows, then that the PI linguistic situation was far from reaching a diglossic one.

4. Literary Heritage :

It is known that the PI Arabic community was massily illiterate. Its literary scholarship was basically oral. The community had probably received no literary written heritage from previous generations. It is true that the high oral literature at that time enjoyed high esteem, but it is doubtful that the presence of such oral literature only had caused a big difference between the common and the colloquial varieties. Thus, the present diglossic situation which derives partially from the existence of the written literary heritage certainly differs from the PI situation.

5. Standardization :

No one could claim that the CV was standardized during the PI stage because it is known that such standardization was initiated in the eighth century and later. That situation was totally different from the contemporary diglossic situation in which the grammar, dictionaries, vocabulary and orthography are well-established for the H or standard variety. In fact what is called the H variety represented in CV in the PI stage was ill-defined as it is compared to its new standard form in subsequent times.

On the other hand, the boundaries between the CV and the dialects were indistinct and unspecified. That is what actually made the early grammarians confuse the CV and the dialects during the process of data collection and language standardization. It may be added that the confusion was not likely due to the unawareness of the grammarians as Abdulttawab (1987) claims, but rather to the fact that the grammars of the CV and the dialects were sharing common features.

VI - The post - Islamic Stage :

The most important turning point in the history of Arabic was the revelation of the **Holy Qur'an** which has been, among several things, a linguistic and rhetorical defiance to all Arabs. Its language represents the ideal Arabic language structurally and stylistically. Therefore, the status of the CV was highly promoted due to its intimate relationship with the **Holy Qur'an**.

Following the conquest of the neighboring countries such as Iraq, Greater Syria and Egypt, Arabic came into contact the languages which were spoken there such as coptic, Greek, Syriac, Aramic and Persian. The migrated Arabs from different Arabic dialectal background interacted with the peoples of those countries linguistically and culturally.

It is necessary at this stage of discussion to draw a distinction line between the new linguistic situation located outside the Peninsula and its counterpart located inside it. Whereas serious linguistic developments were taking place in the former, the latter situation remained somewhat linguistically stable for sometime. In order to trace the development of diglossia, the focus of discussion has to be shifted to the newly conquered places where Arabic, especially the spoken variety, was undergoing serious linguistic changes.

As a result of languages and cultures coming this way in contact, a number of Arabic varieties enriched with foreign elements grew in the military camps in order to serve as a means of communication among the Arabs (Blau, 1977). Those varieties which are thought to be based on the migrated tribal dialects represented the early forms of the Arabic colloquials,

or the beginning of colloquialism during the seventh and eighth centuries. The CV, which was, one day and specifically at the beginning of the Islamic conquests, used extensively in social life started to retreat from the daily affairs in favor of the colloquials which were gradually consolidating their functional role in the speech communities. It is at this stage that the real linguistic dichotomy in Arabic emerged. Chejne (1969 : 165) has correctly remarked that «the linguistic dichotomy has existed since Arabic became a literary language, following the wide territorial expansion of Islam»

The ninth and tenth centuries witnessed one of the most important changes in colloquial Arabic, that is the loss of the case ending or *iʿrab*. The gap between the colloquial variety, known, then, as «muwalladah» language⁽⁴⁾ that is born language, and the CV, became too broad. At this stage the systems of the CV and the colloquials became distinct and each assumed a specialized function. The CV

which became mostly a written literary variety was restricted to formal occasions, whereas the colloquial variety dominated informal and daily affairs. Furthermore learning the CV, which was acquired naturally during the PI stage, turned out to be a difficult and long process which could be done only through formal settings such as schools and mosques (Fück, 1980). This was the actual beginning of diglossia in Arabic.

During the Middle ages, the structural gap between the CV and the colloquials was becoming even broader. In fact, the colloquials were drifting considerably from the CV in terms of structure, lexicon and pronunciation. Such situation made Ibn Khaldoun (d. 1406), a famous historian and a sociologist, remark that the spoken Arabic variety used in the conquered countries was no longer belonging to original Arabic and that it was entirely different from the pure Arabic, known as the language of Muḍar (1984).

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