

The ideology and sociology of language change in the Arab world

A joint research project between Fafo, the University of Oslo, the University of Texas at Austin, Georgetown University, City University New York and Cairo University.

Project manager: Dr. Jacob Høigilt, Fafo.

1. Relevance relative to the call for proposals

This research project aims at mapping and explaining the use of and attitude to the Arabic language among Arab youths by analyzing popular writing practices in three Arab countries, Egypt, Morocco and Kuwait, and conducting surveys in Egypt and Morocco. By connecting language practices and attitudes to social and political change in the Arab world in a research project that combines qualitative and quantitative methods, the project will contribute to Arabic sociolinguistics in three ways. In relation to the central issue of diglossia, it promises to offer a description of how writing practices in existing and new genres of Arabic uphold or change positions on the dialect-classical Arabic continuum. However, it goes beyond such description and analyzes the language ideologies that are propagated and challenged by specific writing practices. Finally, it connects the results from these two investigations to the issue of social change and power, drawing on recent literacy studies and Bourdieu's theory on language and power.

The sociolinguistic study of written Arabic is a very promising field, not least at present, when social and political turmoil rocks the Arab world. A new political order is already imposing itself in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, and the written word will play an immensely important role in this process: during the Egyptian revolution, the total circulation of daily newspapers was doubled in the course of a couple of weeks. The study of writing practices as opposed to spoken Arabic is a relatively little studied field, however, and this project promises to contribute ground-breaking insights and open new paths for research on language and power in the Arab world.

2. Aspects relating to the research project

2.1. Background: The changing nature of written Arabic

The Arabic language is vital to the development of culture, society and politics in the Arab world. The UNDP-sponsored Arab human development report *Building a Knowledge Society* stated that “if the knowledge society (...) is the source of hope for Arab human development, the Arabic language system is one of the decisive underpinnings for building that society and shaping its success.” (UNDP 2003, p.122).

However, like the political systems in the Arab world, the Arabic "language system" is showing signs of tension and strain. This tension is largely caused by the gap between official, dominant language ideologies and actual language practices, and it is closely connected to the concept of diglossia.

Following Ferguson's classic model, diglossia is a "socio-politically regulated linguistic situation, where one linguistic variety has a higher status than another (or others), and in which linguistic functions are partitioned between the two in complementary fashion" (Owens 2001, p.423). In Arabic, the "high" variety (al-fusha) is often referred to as Classical Arabic (CA), or literary Arabic (LA), since its stylistic ideals and current usage is found most frequently in writing. In its spoken form it is typically used in formal situations. In its contemporary form it is generally referred to as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). The "low" variety (al-'ammiyya) is represented by the numerous local, regional, and social Arabic dialects which are typically used in all informal situations and which are rarely employed in writing.

While attention in Arabic sociolinguistics has focused mostly on variation in the spoken language, we increasingly witness variation and change also in *written* Arabic. This is especially interesting given that variation in the written language can be assumed to be intentional rather than spontaneous. It is particularly interesting that the practice of code-switching is becoming more widespread in the written language. Moreover, written Arabic is a highly interesting object of research with regard to the relationship of language to culture, ideology and policy planning, which are central issues in Arabic sociolinguistics (Haeri 2006, Haeri 2003; Walters 2007; Bassiouney 2009, pp.198-273).

As a result of the "information revolution", the written language has never been presented to speakers of Arabic on such a grand scale and in such variety as it is nowadays, and at the same time, it has never been less monopolized by traditional linguistic authorities in the religious and political establishment (Kouloughli 2010, pp.213-214). The result is a "Modern Written Arabic" that embodies ongoing changes and whose status is currently "volatile" (Badawi et al. 2004, p.3).

More and more, colloquial Arabic is being written and mixed with MSA, both in fiction, newspaper columns and social media on the Internet (Doss 2006). This is evident especially in the new, electronic and social media: young people freely use mixed language in SMS messages and in Internet chat forums (Mejdell 2008, pp.115, 119). But change is also visible in the more traditional media. Two best-selling books in the Arab world recently combined writing in dialect with focus on themes and issues that engage the youth (al-Khamisi 2006; Abd al-'Al 2008); newspaper columnists and journalists frequently insert *'ammiyya* words and whole sentences in their articles for rhetorical effect. In addition, daily writing practices (like memos and household notes) are often written in a mix of MSA and *'ammiyya*. Yet sociolinguistic research on Arabic is predominantly focused on the spoken language. It is symptomatic that the lemma on 'language attitudes' in the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics* is full of references to speakers and speech communities, while there is almost no mention of attitudes to written language (Walters 2007).

The proposed project aims at contributing to Arabic sociolinguistics in three ways. In relation to the issue of diglossia, it promises to offer a description of how new genres of written Arabic uphold or change positions on the dialect-MSA continuum. However, it goes beyond such description to analyse the language ideologies that are propagated and challenged by specific writing practices. Finally, it seeks to connect the results from these two investigations to the issue of social change and power.

2.2. Approaches, hypotheses and choice of method

The primary objective of the project is to explain the connection between writing practices and the social construct of language ideology in the Arab world. By connecting linguistic

features to social conditions and ideology in the Arab world, the project will illuminate the relation between linguistic, social and political change. This relation will be explained by way of answering the following research questions.

- Are norms for writing Arabic changing, and in what ways and through which genres and writing practices?
- What does it mean to write in *'ammiyya* rather than MSA within a given genre? What motivates some text producers to write in dialectal Arabic rather than CA/MSA and vice versa?
- To what extent are new forms of writing connected to specific genres and/or social practices?
- What language attitudes and ideologies are dominant among educated Arab youth today?
- How do these attitudes and ideologies relate to official language policies in the Arab countries?
- How is Modern Written Arabic structurally affected by the tension between different writing practices?

In order to answer these questions, the project relies on a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative component describes and analyzes contemporary writing practices across a range of genres. These practices are compared to norms promoted by official language ideology in three Arab countries, Egypt, Morocco and Kuwait. In addition to linguistic text analysis, a central part of the qualitative component is ethnographic field work. In the fruitful vein of linguistic anthropology (Haeri 2003), the project collects and analyzes data in the form of interviews with text producers to illuminate the ideological dimensions of their writing practices; interviews with cultural-political elites about their attitudes to current writing practices; and primary data about language debates taken from Arabic news sources and social media. This component of the project includes field research in Morocco, Egypt and on the Internet.

The quantitative component is composed of a survey to be conducted among youth in Egypt and Morocco to measure popular attitudes to the Arabic language and contemporary written Arabic. The survey will also include questions that enable social and political profiling of the respondents, so that language attitudes can be compared with socio-political variables.

This two-pronged approach ensures that the central issue of the connection between changing writing practices and language ideology in the Arab world is treated comprehensively. Arabic is heavily imbued with ideology because of the link to Islam (Haeri 2003) and Arab nationalism (Suleiman 2003). Despite radical reform suggestions by some Arab nationalist thinkers, a highly conservative attitude to Arabic has prevailed into the present. This may be connected to the "crashlanding" of Nasserism, with its encouragement of popular culture (Mejdell 2006, p.210). After this period, conservative authoritarianism prevailed in many Arab countries until the events in 2011, and conservatism has also marked language policies (Shaaban 2007, p.701). John Eisele has identified what he calls a "dominant regime of authority" in discourse about language in the Arab world, characterized by four central themes: unity, purity, continuity and competition (Eisele 2003). According to this regime, Arabic unites all Arabs and should therefore be a single language for a single culture; it is in competition with foreign cultures and languages and needs to be protected from contamination by them and also by Arabic dialects, which represent corruptions of the norm;

and for unity and purity to be achieved, it is necessary to preserve the classical linguistic system.

A body of secular and religious specialists, supported by the state, has nurtured this vision and created a language ideology with norms and conventions. The sanctioned use of Arabic is thus a source of considerable symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991), while agents in the cultural, religious and political fields who depart from these norms can be dismissed solely on account of their lack of linguistic capital. This fact has much to do with the role of the state in language policy. As Pierre Bourdieu observes about official language, it benefits from the 'institutional conditions necessary for its generalized codification and imposition' (Bourdieu 1991, p.45). Recognized 'throughout the whole jurisdiction of a certain political authority', this state language 'becomes the theoretical norm against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured'. (Bourdieu 1991, p.45)

Bourdieu's insight can fruitfully be coupled to the concept of literacy, understood as a social practice involving a facility with written language (Hull & Hernandez 2008, p.329), and to the issue of language, power and the social order. The tension evident in written Arabic can be interpreted as a tension between an official, formal notion of literacy, based on the dominant regime of authority, and a popular, unofficial notion that is seemingly gaining a foothold in popular culture and beyond. As Brian Street has argued, the official, "school-based literacy is simply one type of literacy practice, often a very limited and circumscribed one." (Street 1993) In contrast, the popular kind of literacy practices we will study can be thought of as grassroots literacy (Blommaert 2008). This is a kind of literacy that, among other things, defies orthographic norms; uses vernacular language varieties in writing; and draws on locally available knowledge resources. The hypothesis of the present project is that grassroots literacy in the Arab context may function as an *empowering* practice because it widens the access to written language to more people, and it remains meaningful and valuable in the national contexts within which it is used.

In relation to the discipline of Arabic sociolinguistics, the project aims to contribute conceptual clarification based on solid empirical data. As noted by Parkinson, Arabs themselves find it hard to agree on a clear-cut definition of modern *fusha* amid the wealth of stylistic and grammatical variation that characterizes contemporary Arabic (Parkinson 1991). The difficulties extend into academia, where there is a sense of vagueness about the very name of the object of study (*fusha*, classical Arabic, modern standard Arabic) and what it is intended to mean when reading articles on issues like diglossia, language planning and language attitudes. An interesting historical parallel to the current situation may be found in Middle Arabic, a well documented, mixed written language that for centuries functioned as an alternative register available for those who wanted to use it for less formal communication, but which largely disappeared - or was stigmatized - with the advent of the modern Arabic *nahda* (Lentin 2008). The project will contribute to the exploration of mechanisms and processes of vernacular interference on the high variety, in similar sociolinguistic contexts in pre-modern and contemporary Arabic texts (Mejdell 2008a).

2.3. The project plan, project management, organisation and cooperation

The project will be managed by Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies. Considering the scale of international cooperation and the planned output of the project, the budget includes a 25 % position for a research assistant to be employed by Fafo for the duration of the project. The research assistant will be engaged in both the administration of the project and the work on the survey.

The quantitative component of the project (the survey) is planned and implemented by Tewodros Aragie Kebede and Jacob Høigilt (both at Fafo), with input from all the project partners. The planning of the survey starts when the project starts, but implementation will not be until halfway through the project. This is to ensure that all partners may prepare and provide valuable input to the survey and to train and prepare local staff in Egypt and Morocco to implement it. Data collection in Egypt and Morocco will be conducted using statistical survey among the youth (18-30 years old). Based on the qualitative assessments of the study, a structured questionnaire will be used to obtain information on attitudes to the Arabic language and contemporary written Arabic as well as social, economic and political characteristics (including perceptions and youth aspirations). The questionnaire will be administered to a non-replaceable random sample of 1200 youth in each country (e.g. meaning that a non-response from a sampled individual should be noted as a non-response and not replaced by another non-sampled individual willing to respond). These samples will in each location be drawn randomly from the best available sample frames. Fafo will be responsible for this part of the research, and also for planning (design, translation and printing of the questionnaire and field material), implementation of the surveys (executed and supervised by Fafo researchers in collaboration with local partners), and the data cleaning and analysis.

The qualitative component of the research is realized as a number of individual, but integrated research components at Fafo, the University of Oslo, Cairo University, the University of Texas at Austin, and Georgetown University. It consists of the following projects:

"Mixed styles" in written journalism in Egypt: Strategies and perceptions (Dr. Gunvor Mejdell, University of Oslo). Parting from my work on "mixed styles" in oral discourse in Egypt, I shall investigate such practices in written journalism. Based on linguistic analysis of written texts, I shall interview text producers about their strategies. The main research question is whether, or to what extent, they think in terms of two (diglossic) codes/variety, or rather in one (variable) mixed variety. There have been a few attempts at "bridging the gap" or "erasing boundaries" in the recent history of Arabic writing, although the dominant trend has been gate keeping and boundary preservation. What do the mixed literacy practices we increasingly observe in written media represent in this perspective? (My first case study will be the political commentaries of Ibrahim Eissa of al-Dustur newspaper.) Secondly, I wish to explore how young readers perceive this kind of writing. By recording, analyzing and discussing oral realizations (=reading aloud) of carefully selected samples of "mixed texts", read by several young Egyptians, I will address the following questions: to what extent do they perceive the written forms as belonging to either variety, and what clues trigger that perception; do they go for a more even style or are they aware of code-switching for purposes of humour, irony or other social, pragmatic functions? *Output: One journal article, one article in the edited volume that is planned as part of the project.*

The Ideological Struggle over Arabic (Dr. Kristen Brustad, the University of Texas). Arabic culture is a textbook case of what James Milroy calls Standard Language Ideology culture: the belief that language exists in a standard or ideal form (Milroy 2001). This analysis implies that the existence of the ideal, and the ideology that promotes its status, is actually more important than language practice on the ground, as long as practice does not challenge ideology in a direct way. We can thus say that Arabic is "ideologically diglossic," meaning that it is diglossic at the ideological level. Milroy's theory of the maintenance of standard ideology focuses on what he calls "the complaint tradition." Recently, this "complaint tradition" has evolved into a genre I identify as "Arabic in Danger," which has been the topic

of a large number of articles and television programs over the past ten years. This has happened more or less simultaneously to the emergence for the first time ever of a true public discourse through new media, satellite television and the internet. The mixing of language register in this discourse has, I argue, given rise to an intense reaction indicating that the maintenance of this ideology of diglossia is seen by many as crucial to the maintenance of the public order. This project analyzes the “Arabic in Danger” genre as a marker of ideological shift from Standard Language Ideology to one more inclusive of variant forms. I will further explore how these discussions about language—which, as sociolinguistics teaches us, are always about something else other than language—are discussions about what it means to be a modern Arab citizen. The ideological challenge that Classical Arabic faces suggests that the constraints that Standard Language Ideology has long placed on public discourse are weakening—a phenomenon that has important implications for the future of civil society in the Arab world. *The outcome of this project will be part of a monograph on Language Ideology in the History of Arabic, and an article published in the proceedings of this project focusing on the socio-political implications.*

The Politics of Language and Writing in Contemporary Morocco (Dr. Alexander Elinson, City University of New York). This project aims to investigate Morocco’s particular position(s) on the issue of national language and the (im)permissibility of utilizing languages other than Standard Arabic in writing, particularly *darija*. The use of Moroccan colloquial Arabic is an assertion and celebration of local Moroccan identity within the larger Arab world, while at the same time, possibly an act of isolation as well, as the local dialect is not necessarily understood beyond Moroccan borders, thus I will examine the parameters of Moroccan literary (literate) culture, how flexible they are, and how they position Morocco in the Arab world. This research will examine the history of the pro-*darija* movement in Morocco, how this movement fits into larger definitions of the Arab world, as well as some of the dimensions of the debates surrounding the issue of language, literacy, and public participation in Moroccan cultural and political life. My research will focus on three categories of writing: print media, fiction writing, and translation. *Output: One article for the edited volume, one journal article.*

The language of the Egyptian revolution (Dr. Reem Bassiouney, Georgetown University). This project will discuss how language ideology has been employed in Egypt during the 2011 Egyptian revolution and whether the revolution will lead to language change, especially in relation to writing systems and computer mediated communication. *Output: One article for the edited volume, one journal article.*

Language and power in Egypt's online newspaper editions (Dr. Emad Abdul-Latif, Cairo University). Many daily Egyptian newspapers issue online versions which allow for readers' comments. These comments reflect different language attitudes and practices. I would like to investigate how these comments negotiate power with the main article or news story and how language choices work within this power negotiation. I will focus on features such as style variation and intertextuality. I will do some ethnographic work to highlight the editorial policies towards the language and content of these comments. Particularly, I will conduct interviews with members of the newspapers' editorial board and apply a questionnaire that aims to shed light on the procedures used by each newspaper to control, modify or evaluate its reader's comments. I am going to work on a million word corpora of comments by Egyptians on the first page news stories and the op-eds during the next parliamentary and presidential elections (2011-2012) from all the daily newspapers in Egypt. *Output: One article for the edited volume, one journal article.*

The language of the new print media for youth (Dr. Jacob Høigilt, Fafo). By analyzing two new forms of print media aimed at young people, comics and popular periodicals, this project will shed light on the use of language in such publications and the language ideologies implicit in them. Cases are taken from Egypt, Lebanon and Kuwait and include the publications of *Samandal*, *Ihna*, the graphic novel *Metro* and the popular superhero comics series *The 99*. Lexical, syntactic and stylistic features of various writing practices will be mapped and analyzed and compared to descriptions and instances of Modern Written Arabic, as found in contemporary grammars and corpora of Modern Written Arabic. The project also relies on interviews with text producers to illuminate the social and ideological dimensions of their writing practices. Field work will take place in Egypt and on the Internet. *Output: One monograph, one article for the edited volume.*

The Language of Online Activism – a case from Kuwait, (Jon Nordenson, University of Oslo (Nordenson has submitted a PhD proposal to the University of Oslo. His participation depends on the success of this proposal)). Over the past few years, various platforms on the web have become important arenas – and tools - for political activists seeking to reform the political system in Kuwait. Through Blogs, forums, Facebook and Twitter, activists have debated issues, planned demonstrations and published videos. While the activists are predominantly young, two different movements have crystallized during online mobilization in 2006 and 2010/11: liberals and religious-political activists. Through a comparative study of the online activities of these two movements, the project seeks to answer the following questions: What are the characteristics of the language used online by young activists in Kuwait? And are there any differences to be identified in the language practices of liberal and religious activists? *Output: one article for the edited volume.*

As part of the project, we apply for a PhD position to be hosted by the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages at the University of Oslo. The PhD project will treat features of contemporary writing practices in the Arab world and is to be defined in sociolinguistic terms. *Output: one PhD thesis, one article for the edited volume.*

Gathering these individual components under the same umbrella gives conceptual and theoretical coherence and enables the researchers to draw extensively on each others' empirical results and research perspectives. The project provides physical arenas for cross-fertilizing and exchange of ideas in the form of annual workshops for the participants, as well as in the plans for joint dissemination. PhD and master students working with relevant projects at the institutions involved, may be invited to attend and present papers at our workshops.

Moreover, all participants will contribute to and benefit from the surveys of language attitudes among youth that Fafo will implement in Egypt and Morocco. By implementing the surveys in the middle of the research period, we ensure that the questions asked will be relevant to all the research partners and that there will be time to incorporate their results in the publications from the project.

The international cooperation is of special importance to this project, considering that the field is relatively small and that institutionalized networks exist only to a limited degree. The partners in Norway, Egypt and the USA will all contribute regularly and substantially to the project by participation in annual workshops, an edited volume of articles and continuous personal contact throughout the project period. Such close international collaboration is vital

to the project's success in a field where expertise is spread thinly over several continents. At the level of networking, the project promises to strengthen existing ties between research environments in different parts of the world by gathering senior researchers from Egypt, the USA and Norway.

On the national level, the project contributes to strengthening the field of Arabic and Middle East studies in Norway as a result of the cooperation between two leading institutions in the field, Fafo and the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages at the University of Oslo. Fafo has a thriving Middle East program that has expanded from an initial focus on living conditions among refugee populations to include the political economy of elites, political conflict and Islamism. With this project, Fafo expands its Middle East portfolio to include the study of language and society in the Arab world. The Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages is home to Norway's leading research environment in Arabic and Middle East studies, and brings to this project internationally renowned expertise on Arabic sociolinguistics. Moreover, in June 2011 the Department establishes a Center for Islamic and Middle East Studies, and the current project fits well with this initiative. As an educational institution, the University provides recruitment to the field in Norway, and the project plans to contribute to this recruitment through its two master scholarships and the one PhD position included in the budget.

Fafo is well equipped to undertake this project. Its lean and flexible administration has a long track record of handling large-scale international projects, and its experience with bureaucracy and state regulations in Middle Eastern countries is extensive – an aspect that is especially important with regard to the survey component. The project leader has considerable research experience in Arabic linguistics and rhetoric (Høigilt 2011; Høigilt 2008a; Høigilt 2008b). As for the survey design and implementation, this has been one of Fafo's core areas of activity for a number of years, and Fafo brings considerable know-how, technological facilities and analytic expertise to this part of the project (e.g., Tiltnes et al. 2011; Øvensen and Sletten 2007). Fafo has an array of meeting rooms, offices and an auditorium for hosting network meetings, workshops and conferences, centrally located in downtown Oslo.

3. Key perspectives and compliance with strategic documents

3.2. Relevance and benefit to society

The Arabic language is seen to be in a state of crisis. By analyzing actual writing practices and how they relate to official language policy and ideology, the project will provide language planners in the Arab world with useful background knowledge and tools in designing policies to improve literacy.

3.3. Environmental impact

The project will not impact on the environment beyond the travel activity that it entails.

3.4. Ethical perspectives

The question of ethics is most relevant in relation to the survey conducted by Fafo and to the interviews that make up part of the qualitative component.

Fafo is subjected to the strict ethical standards of the Norwegian “National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities” (NESH). An English version of these guidelines can be found at <http://www.etikkom.no/English/NESH/guidelines/>

Fafo researchers and contracted staff follow the strict guidelines including obtaining informed consents from participants, informing them about their rights to withdraw from the study at any time they may wish themselves and assuring full anonymity. Our research conforms to any relevant definitions incorporated in the National Code of Conduct and the national legislation in countries where our studies are conducted.

As for the qualitative interviews, all interviewees will be given the option of full anonymity. The project is not expected to raise any other ethical issues.

3.5. Gender issues (Recruitment of women, gender balance and gender perspectives)

The gender balance in the project is good: three of the main researchers are women, and three are men.

Gender is expected to be a relevant sociolinguistic category, especially in the survey component, and gender differences in language practices and attitudes will be dealt with in the analysis of the survey results.

4. Dissemination and communication of results

4.1 Dissemination plan

The project is planned to result in

- one monograph (Jacob Høigilt);
- a chapter of an already running book project (Kristen Brustad);
- one edited volume of nine articles (edited by Mejdell and Høigilt);
- four articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals
- one PhD thesis

(Please see section 2.3 for details).

For the monographs and the edited volume, we will approach a publisher that specializes in Arabic linguistics (e.g. Brill, Routledge, and John Benjamins). The articles are to be submitted to leading relevant journals in the field of Arabic linguistics and sociolinguistics: *Arabica*, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *Text and Talk*.

Finally, all participants will contribute with papers at the annual workshops, and are encouraged to present papers at relevant international conferences during the project period. The research results, including data from the survey, will also be disseminated in courses and lectures given by the participants.

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