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# Proficiency Despite Diglossia: A New Approach for Arabic

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THE LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN THE ARAB world is strongly characterized by diglossia.<sup>1</sup> The literary language, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) contrasts with the (non-written) vernacular geographic variants known collectively as colloquial Arabic. The implications of diglossia for language learning have severely affected the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language, since instead of one language variant, students have to learn at least two if they wish both to be literate and to be able to converse about everyday topics. This problem, compounded by the inherent difficulties of a non-Indoeuropean language with a nonroman script, has discouraged and frustrated generations of students and potential students, who start out enthusiastically, but after one or two years of study often give up, finding that despite great effort, they are still extraordinarily limited in terms of communicative competence.

Attempts to deal with the diglossia problem, such as the decision at the Middlebury Summer Arabic School to use MSA for all speaking and listening purposes as well as for reading and writing, have resulted in improved levels of proficiency, but in a variety of language which is not a form of spontaneous speech in the everyday world of Arabic speakers.<sup>2</sup>

A new form of widely intelligible spoken Arabic seems to be emerging in the Arab world, however, used for inter-dialectal conversation by educated native speakers, for semiformal discussions, and on other social occasions when the colloquial is deemed too informal, and the literary, too stilted. Sociolinguistic research has begun to investigate and define the characteristics of this language variant, and for a number

of reasons it has become the language of choice for most spoken Arabic training at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the US State Department. According to FSI's experience and increasing scholarly documentation, this new Arabic may now represent a viable option for spoken proficiency development in Arabic academic programs as well. At FSI, it is normally taught concurrently with MSA, so that students develop their ability to converse along with their ability to read.<sup>3</sup>

## FORMAL SPOKEN ARABIC

Formal Spoken Arabic (FSA), a label in use for many years at FSI, is the name of this variety of spoken Arabic which has evolved as a medium of instruction and communication for foreign service officers and other US government employees assigned to posts in the Arab world. It is not the vernacular of a circumscribed geographical region, but nonetheless represents a real segment of the continuum of spoken Arabic variants—a supra-regional, prestige form of spoken Arabic practical as a means of communication throughout the Arabic-speaking world. It is also referred to as Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA) in much of the research literature. In this paper I shall use "FSA" as a term which includes ESA.

Three primary issues are at stake in the discussion of FSA: 1) its definition and status; 2) its effectiveness for teaching communicative competence to nonnative speakers; and 3) its characteristics.

This paper seeks 1) to describe the research literature; 2) to present the practicality of FSA from the training point of view; and 3) to give a brief overview of features of FSA as taught at FSI that have made it an emerging medium of choice for teaching spoken proficiency skills to students of Arabic as a foreign language.

## THE ARABIC CONTINUUM: CURRENT LINGUISTIC RESEARCH

Variation theory posits heterogeneity in language as the norm and asserts that "variation . . . should be seen as central" (25: p. 185) to linguistic description and analysis. Therefore, the situation in Arabic can be viewed not as exceptional, but as one extreme on the spectrum of natural language development. It exhibits widely divergent regional varieties linked by history and culture to a common written standard but at the same time diffused by the centrifugal forces of great geographical distance and the influence of substratum languages.

The varieties of spoken Arabic, just as the varieties of other languages, exist in a linguistic continuum which varies according to linguistic and extralinguistic factors such as the background of the speakers, the formality of the topic, and the situation. However, that the social as well as the geographic variants are rule-governed, functional linguistic realities is not widely recognized outside academic circles.<sup>4</sup> Except for efforts at the University of Leeds, sponsored by the Social Science Research Council of Great Britain, not a great deal of empirical investigation has been undertaken to analyze spontaneous inter-dialectal, adjusted, or formalized discourse of educated native speakers as they accommodate each other's linguistic backgrounds and deal with a wide range of topics under varying circumstances.

A growing body of sociolinguistic research dealing with this Arabic language phenomenon is now emerging, however, and FSA has been the focus of attention in recent years for a number of researchers who refer to it, for the most part, as Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA) (8; 18; 21; 22-24; 28).<sup>5</sup> Other terms that have been coined include "urban cultivated Arabic" (2), "middle Arabic" (6; 16; 17; 20), "pan-Arabic" (1; 23), the "inter-regional standard" (14), "supra-dialectal L" (SDL) (14), "inter-Arabic" (3; 29), the "inter-Arabic *koiné*" (24), "the koineized colloquial" and "the elevated colloquial" (4), and the "international *koiné*" (15).<sup>6</sup> The most frequent Arabic term applied to this variety is *al-lughā l-wusṭā*, "the middle language," although I have also heard *lughat al-muthaqqafīn*, "language of the cultured," and *al-lughā l-muthaqqafa*, "the cultured language."

As Ibrahim writes (p. 121), "the belief in the existence of [FSA] is founded on three facts: a) there are shared prestige features . . . ; b) there

is mutual intelligibility (i.e., inter-dialectal intelligibility) . . . ; c) it is spreading."<sup>7</sup>

According to Mitchell (24: p. 13), this variety of Arabic is not "one of a series of separate varieties, on a par with MSA and the vernaculars, but rather is created and maintained by the constant interplay of written and vernacular Arabic." Also, "although it draws heavily upon both MSA and the vernacular, it is nevertheless its own variety of Arabic" (23: p. 56).

## PRACTICALITY OF FSA FOR PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

For training purposes, feedback from the field of the (admittedly few) foreign service officers with high-level Arabic proficiency indicates that no matter where they are posted, they need to communicate with Arab officials from various regional backgrounds in international fora of both formal and informal nature. They need the flexibility of a dialect-neutral, but spontaneous, form of spoken language which they can use and develop as they perform their jobs abroad.<sup>8</sup> A basilect regional vernacular is often inappropriate for their professional contexts of use, and the literary language is equally inappropriate for their conversational, interviewing, or briefing needs.<sup>9</sup> FSA, however, has served their purposes well, providing a linguistic option that is flexible and informal enough not to sound pedantic, and yet formal enough not to be stigmatized as vulgar.

FSI has had great success using this highly functional variant of Arabic as a medium of instruction for developing communicative competence. Moreover, recent years have witnessed the development and publication of FSA textbooks as well as a pan-Arabic sample lexicon.<sup>10</sup> There may therefore be a potential for FSA as an option in academic programs which are increasingly committed to communicative approaches with specific spoken proficiency goals.<sup>11</sup>

FSA by no means replaces MSA, which is, of course, indispensable for literacy in Arabic. However, FSA can be used to supplement the traditional focus on literary Arabic, particularly at the beginning and intermediate levels, exposing learners to a widely acceptable form of spoken Arabic. Because it is extensively understood, FSA has substantial pragmatic communication value.

For learners of Arabic (or any foreign language) whose future contexts of use are

neither limited nor clearly predictable (such as foreign service officers or university students), "they need to learn a language of wider communication, a language of maximal generality or projection value" (30: p. 7).

#### DIGLOSSIA AND COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Age-old and ceaseless debate goes on in the Arabic teaching profession about the advantages and disadvantages of teaching MSA versus teaching a particular vernacular. Each Arabic instructional program has had to come to terms with the legacy of diglossia in its own way, but few programs have been able confidently to bridge the difficult gap between written and spoken skills—especially at the beginning and intermediate levels. This long-standing paradigm of dichotomy or sharp cleavage between literary and colloquial Arabic has both weakened the effectiveness of Arabic language teaching and undermined the appeal of Arabic as a learnable and useful foreign language, thus leaving the field in crisis for many years.<sup>12</sup>

As early as 1959, as recorded in Georgetown University's *Report of the Tenth Annual Round Table* (26), the discussion after a presentation of papers about Arabic centered around what kind of Arabic to teach. Charles Ferguson characterized "middle language" as "intermediate forms of Arabic." "These forms of Arabic are important," he went on (26: pp. 103–04), "but there is no agreement as to the characteristics of these intermediate forms. No one has ever described them. Furthermore, how would we go about teaching them even if we knew what they were?"<sup>13</sup>

Thus, thirty years ago the concept of using a "middle language" for Arabic teaching existed, but this variety of Arabic had not yet been formally studied or codified. In the past decade, not only has FSA been the focus of research, it is actually increasing in frequency in the Arab world. It may therefore now be possible that use of this widely intelligible variety of Arabic by students of Arabic as a foreign language will be able to solve some of the problems that led the old paradigm to crisis.

Recent linguistic developments, as documented by Ibrahim (p. 121), indicate that the use of this form of Arabic is spreading rapidly, "the younger generation showing a much wider use of FSA features than their parents." Ibrahim also claims (p. 122) that FSA is "the most understood L variety" and even "considered

prestigious in countries where it is not spoken" (i.e., non-Levantine areas).

#### DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF FSA

The corpus upon which this description is based is the discourse used in spoken Arabic teaching at FSI. The elements of this variety of Arabic therefore result from the insights and intuitions of the educated native speakers who form the staff of instructors at FSI, both in the US and abroad.<sup>14</sup> Their efforts and the distillation of years of experience in language training provide the corpus, which I will not attempt to describe in detail but will try to characterize in terms of its general structure.<sup>15</sup>

*In General.* FSA can be described as essentially solid at the core, surrounded by fuzzy areas of fluctuating language behavior.<sup>16</sup> This ambiguity is one of the reasons that has thus far discouraged concerted attempts at linguistic analysis and description; the fuzzy edge acts as a barrier, presenting a set of language features that vary on a regional and/or stylistic basis and which therefore defy generalizations, such as internal vowelization of verb forms, and lexical items, such as the range of expressions used for "now" or "what."<sup>17</sup>

Along these same lines, Mitchell has very accurately described it as a "fluid" rather than an "institutionalized" norm characterized by "general intelligibility among great regional diversity" (23: pp. 43–44).

*Major Features.* A large, fairly stable inner core of shared features constitutes the essence of FSA, and these can not only be described, they also can be taught, because their behavior is rule-governed. The original motivation for specification of these features lay in FSI's need to teach them and consequently to develop pedagogical materials. But the fuzzy areas were a problem. For pedagogical purposes, the fuzziness had to be ironed out, and arbitrary, context-based decisions had to be made about feature specification. Other programs or teachers could re-specify these variable features according to their own philosophies, resources, and needs.

*Formal and Spoken.* The terms "formal" and "spoken" sound contradictory when applied to Arabic, but elements of both exist in this mixed variety of language. I prefer the term "Formal Spoken Arabic" to "Educated Spoken Arabic," because the word "educated" actually refers to the speakers of this language, whereas the term "formal" refers to the language itself. Its fea-

tures will be discussed in the following order: lexicon, phonology, morphology, and syntax.

**Lexicon.** The FSA lexicon not only provides a good indication of the core features of this variant, but it also has implications for the other linguistic features.<sup>18</sup> For high-frequency words such as “to go” and “to see” and for function words such as “not” or “which” FSA has widely shared spoken Arabic conventions. For example: *shaaf* (to see); *jaab* (to bring); *raaH* (to go); *ijaa* (to come); *mish* (to negate nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and participles); *maa* (negator for both tenses of the verb as well as for *fiih* and *9ind*); *raH* (future marker); *illii* (relative pronoun); *fiih* (there is, there are); *9ind* (to have); *ma9* (to have with); *laazim* (it is necessary that); *mumkin* (it is possible that; maybe); *bukra* (tomorrow); *kamaan* (also); *miin* (who); *lissa* (still; not yet); *leesh/leeh* (why); *ween/feen* (where); *ba9deen* (afterward); *heek* (thus); *mish heek?* (right?; tag question).<sup>19</sup>

Aside from these very high frequency items and a number of routine expressions (such as *basiiTa*, “don’t worry”; *mish baTTaal*, “not bad”), the lexicon of FSA is largely that of MSA. These few items, however, cover a great deal of common discourse ground and make life much easier for the speaker/hearer.

**Phonology: Consonants.** The FSA used by native speakers among each other seems primarily to use the phonology of socially prestigious urban speech, where interdentalals change either to stops or fricatives with the same point of articulation (th—s,t; dh—z,d; DH—Z,D), the voiceless uvular plosive is realized as a glottal stop (q—’), and the glottal stop is often elided or deleted.<sup>20</sup>

The FSI brand of FSA, however, uses classical pronunciation features, i.e., preservation of the interdentalals *thaa’*, *dhaal*, and *DHaa’*, of the voiceless uvular stop (*qaaf*), and of the intervocalic glottal stop (*hamza*), thus such words as *thaqaafa*, *xudh*, *qaa’ima*, *thaqiil*, *DHann*, *Hadaa’iq*.

This decision was made for several different pedagogical reasons. First, it eliminated the problem of teaching two different pronunciation systems to students at the same time (one for MSA and one for FSA). Second, MSA pronunciation corresponds much more closely with the written word (FSA materials are printed in Arabic script, contrary to most texts for spoken Arabic, which are done in transcription). Third, these MSA pronunciation features are free of any particular regional imprint. Finally, it slightly elevates the language. Other pro-

grams might or might not want to maintain this practice.

**Internal Vowels.** Internal vowelization of words in the FSI brand of FSA is for the most part in keeping with MSA: e.g., *yuHaawil*, *nufaDDil*, *asta9mil*, *yutarjim*, *rajul*, *rijaal*, *araad*, *yuriid*, *uktub*, *iftaH*.

Once again, this decision was made to provide learners with consistency in a very complicated system. The internal vowelization of verb forms in particular is a complex linguistic phenomenon in the Arab world, and it was felt that in view of the fact that little research had been done on this aspect of FSA, the most pragmatic pedagogical approach would be to use vowelizing consistent with MSA.

These examples illustrate areas where arbitrary but essential decisions had to be made about linguistic form. In these instances, MSA forms were deliberately chosen since they are solidly rooted in the written language and have a wide degree of intelligibility, applicability, and acceptability. A problem area was assimilated verbs, since a considerable gap exists between their formal and colloquial realizations, e.g., *yaSil* or *yuuSal*; *yaqa9* or *yuuqa9*. In this case, both options are given in the texts; most FSI teachers seemed to feel more comfortable using the colloquial forms.

**Stress.** Stress in FSA is predictable and the rules are applied for the most part in keeping with the rules for MSA pause form. Spoken Arabic rules apply to the non-stress of the final *yaa’* of *nisba* and to verb phrases incorporating indirect objects. For example: *9arabi*, *inkliizi*, *ra’smi*, *qaal-uu-lu*, *jiib-i-li*.

**Pronunciation of *taa’ marbuuTa*.** In construct phrases, if the first term ends with *taa’ marbuuTa* the *taa’* is pronounced, e.g., *madiinat 9amman*, *9aaSimat lubnaan*.

**Morphology.** Essentially, word-internal structure is consistent with MSA, except for certain specific lexical items, such as *ba9deen* for *ba9da idhan*, and where *sandhi*, or phonological adjustment at boundaries, occurs. Major distinctions between MSA and FSA occur primarily in the area of inflectional morphology.

**Derivational Morphology.** Derivational morphology remains essentially like MSA, with all ten forms of the verb represented, although very few form IX, VI, or IV verbs occur. At FSI, it was decided to use form IV verb inflection whenever there is an existing form IV verbal noun, e.g., *adaar*, *yudiir*, *idaara*; *a9Taa*, *yu9Tii*, *i9Taa’*. For *Habb*, however, the verb is

considered form I, since the verbal noun is from form I: *Habb, yaHibb, Hubb*.

*Inflectional Morphology.* Inflectional morphology is where the influence of vernacular Arabic prevails, in keeping with Ferguson's observation that this variety of Arabic has a "fundamentally colloquial base in morphology and syntax" (11: p. 11). It includes:

- 1) omission of desinential inflection, i.e., final short vowels or *i9raab* on all parts of speech;
- 2) consequent metathesis of vowels on pronoun suffixes: *-ak, -ik, -uh*;
- 3) reduction of inflectional endings in dual and sound masculine plural to the oblique or non-nominative form, e.g., *-ayn* or *-een* and *-iin*;
- 4) elimination of the separate feminine plural categories in verbs and pronouns and reduction to one non-gender-specific plural;
- 5) elimination of the dual category in verbs and pronouns, both second and third person, and merging of this category with the plural;
- 6) omission of final *nuun* on inflectional suffixes for second person feminine singular and second and third person plural in the imperfect, e.g., *tuHaawil-ii, tasta9mil-uu, yatakallam-uu*;
- 7) generalization of the defective *-ay/-ee-* suffixable stem to geminate verbs in the past tense, e.g., *Habb-ee-t, HaTT-ee-naa*;
- 8) reduction of the definite relative pronoun to one form: *illii*;
- 9) conversion of final nunation on indefinite defective nouns to a long vowel, e.g., *karaasii, layaalii*;
- 10) creation of a category of verbs with embedded indirect object, using the preposition *li-* as an affix to the verb: *qaal-uu-luh, uqaddim-lak, talfan-lik*.

*Syntax: Verb Strings.* One of the most distinctive aspects of FSA syntax is the use of verb strings without the use of subordinating particles (which would be necessary in MSA), e.g., *aHibb aruuH ashuuf-uh* (I'd like to go see him); *heek taqdar tuqarrir eesh tashtirii* (That way you can decide what to buy); *xallii-nii ashuuf eesh mumkin a9mal* (Let me see what I can do).

*Modals.* Another salient feature is the use of these strings with two widely used spoken Arabic function words that indicate possibility and necessity, *mumkin* and *laazim*, again,

without the use of periphrastic phrases and subordinating particles: *mumkin taruuHii ma9-ii?* (Could you go with me?); *laazim atakallam ma9 il-mudiir* (I have to talk to the manager).

*Agreement.* This area is one of considerable variation, especially in terms of dual and plural concord relations.<sup>21</sup> For FSI's purposes, the following guidelines were used. Nonhuman agreement is essentially feminine singular, in keeping with MSA (a conscious choice). Agreement for feminine plural human nouns can be either feminine plural or masculine plural, Agreement for dual nouns is either dual, plural, or a combination thereof (i.e., it is very fuzzy). Documentation and analysis are particularly necessary in this area.

## CONCLUSION

The foregoing description represents only a summary of some of the salient features of FSA that distinguish it both from MSA and from the regional vernaculars. Those familiar with Ferguson's *koine* theory (10) will doubtless recognize that many of the features of FSA are features of the *koine*. And indeed, FSA (or ESA) has been referred to by some as a "*koineized*" variety of Arabic. Precisely this *koineization* makes it widely intelligible and gives it a particular niche in the functional hierarchy of Arabic language variants.

The use of FSA for accelerating the growth of spoken communication skills for learners of Arabic as a foreign language does not mean that it is a panacea for all Arabic language acquisition problems. It is primarily a bridge enabling nonnative speakers to cross the ravine separating the literary language from the multifarious world of colloquial Arabic dialects. To achieve full "Functionally Native Proficiency" (in FSI terms), a learner of Arabic as a foreign language must ultimately master at least the three Arabic language variants used by educated Arabs: MSA, FSA, and a regional vernacular.

Much more research and documentation of FSA is needed, however, not only for establishing the parameters of FSA functions and further defining the nature of its linguistic rules, but also for further assessing its effectiveness as an accessible and practical form of Arabic for developing proficiency skills in nonnative speakers.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This paper is a revised version of one originally presented at a panel sponsored by the American Association of Teachers of Arabic at the Middle East Studies Association meeting, Toronto, November 1989.

<sup>2</sup>The term "proficiency" is used in this paper to refer to the process of advancement to a high level of skill, not to the state of having achieved that level. It denotes a progression of skill level attainment rather than the endpoint of the spectrum.

<sup>3</sup>For example, a normal day might consist of three to four classroom hours of FSA in the morning and two hours of MSA in the afternoon.

<sup>4</sup>Meiseles (p. 118): "the polarized attitude towards the linguistic situation of the Arabic world today (viz. acknowledging only a discrete existence of Modern Standard Arabic alongside a great number of regional vernaculars usually referred to globally as Colloquial Arabic) is unsuitable."

<sup>5</sup>For an excellent overview of Arabic sociolinguistic publications, see 7.

<sup>6</sup>L here stands for "Low dialect" as opposed to "High dialect" (H) of the language, as defined by Ferguson (10) and as discussed by Fasold (pp. 35–39). Blanc (p. 85) makes a distinction between two registers using the terms "koinéized colloquial" and "elevated colloquial," but I see them as both relating to FSA.

<sup>7</sup>According to Ibrahim (p. 121), it is the second feature (b) "which qualifies it more than anything else for being labelled supra-dialectal."

<sup>8</sup>Foreign service officers and other government personnel may find themselves posted, during their careers, to a number of different Arab countries.

<sup>9</sup>"A member of the speech community who uses H in a purely conversational situation or in an informal activity like shopping is . . . an object of ridicule" (10: p. 6). The term "H" refers here to the "high" form of the language; in this context, MSA.

<sup>10</sup>See 1; 12; 27.

<sup>11</sup>No matter what kind of Arabic is used for teaching communicative skills, students have to be alerted to the fact that once they reach the Arab world, they will *hear* entire ranges of variation in pronunciation, lexicon, and other aspects of spoken language behavior, especially when exposed to less educated native speakers. This range of language behavior need not be encompassed in the learners' performance except in terms of (intermediate or advanced) comprehension and recognition skills; active conversation management and spoken interaction can be efficiently practiced and acquired in FSA.

<sup>12</sup>One needs to think of appropriateness here not in terms of *relevance* to the learning goal (which is frequently unspecified) but in terms of *motivation* for the learning pro-

cess" (30: p. 7). According to Mahmoud, "for non-native students learning Arabic at home or in universities, [FSA] is the kind of language that could bring an end to the recurrent, frustrating feeling of learning a language that nobody speaks" (17: p. 7). Abdelmassih writes: "For non-native students attending Arab universities or studying Arabic and related fields at their home universities, Pan-Arabic [his term for FSA] is the kind of language which can put an end to recurring language frustrations. Time and again, we have discovered our students' painful disappointment at discovering their inability to communicate with Arabs whose dialects they have not studied" (p. xi).

<sup>13</sup>Ferguson later characterizes this variety as "a kind of spoken Arabic much used in certain semi-formal and cross-dialectal situations [which] has a highly classical vocabulary with few or no inflectional endings, with certain features of classical syntax, but with a fundamentally colloquial base in morphology and syntax, and a generous admixture of colloquial vocabulary" (11: pp. 10–11). Also, Mitchell describes ESA as a "form of Arabic in which the written and vernacular manifestations of the language are closely interwoven."

<sup>14</sup>FSI maintains an Arabic Field School in Tunisia which is primarily responsible for Arabic training at the advanced level.

<sup>15</sup>It is noteworthy that although arrived at separately, the elements that emerged from analysis of FSI Formal Spoken Arabic and the conclusions of Ferguson (note 13, above) essentially agree with that of Abdulaziz: "This is a 'compromise,' mixed usage incorporating [*sic*] the grammatical structure of the colloquial and the lexicon and phraseology of MSA" (p. 22). See also 23: p. 53.

<sup>16</sup>"The continuum between MSA and vernacular wherein ESA lies is mostly rule- or at least, like all language, *tendency*-governed, notwithstanding the fact of some random idiosyncrasy" (24: p. 19). Mitchell refers to the core features as "lexico-grammatical regularities" (23: p. 46).

<sup>17</sup>"Grammarians have long been defeated by stylistic differences, regarding them, for their own convenience, as either irrelevant to grammar or as revealing a degree of variation so complex as not to permit systematic description" (23: p. 42). Also: "unavoidable prescriptions must be made, such as that by which the case and mood endings of MSA (the so-called *i9raab*) form no part of ESA" (24: p. 19).

<sup>18</sup>See Petyt (pp. 185–86) for the "implicational relations" of variables within and between specific "lects."

<sup>19</sup>Where it was necessary to make a choice between regional variant forms of a common word, the Levantine form was chosen at FSI simply because most of the teachers are from that region of the Arab world, and many of the students were headed in that direction. For further discussion of interdialectal compatibility, see 5. For an example of FSA where Egyptian variants are chosen, see 1.

<sup>20</sup>See 14: p. 116; 18 for further analysis.

<sup>21</sup>For an excellent analysis of this issue in Educated Spoken Arabic, see 28.

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