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**9**

**Representation of Language in Arab Media for Children**

*Atef Alshaer[[1]](#endnote-1)*

The Arabic language has far-reaching socio-political significance with existential implications for its Arab speakers. The nuanced reality of Arabic, namely that it includes different levels[[2]](#endnote-2) used in various contexts and occasions, affects its cultural projection in the public sphere, most manifestly in contemporary Arab media. What adds to the complexity of Arabic is its impressive longevity and its geographical scope. Its textual, cultural and political legacies have resonated in the everyday lives of Arabs up to the present day. The result is a complex linguistic palimpsest that cannot be explained in terms of prescriptive linguistic rules alone, as linguists often try to do. Instead, interpretive efforts are needed to unearth the embedded, culturally-loaded structure of the Arabic language with all its uses and changes. Arab children grow up absorbing these varied linguistic realities alongside ideological understandings of the language projected through the media. Thus children’s programmes in Arabic, or programmes involving children, offer fertile ground for the study of both the ideological and natural aspects of the language.

This chapter sets out to show that our understanding of the linguistic situation in the Arab world reflects a certain understanding of language itself and is subject to ideological forces. It highlights the various historical and contemporary levels and dimensions of Arabic and how these simultaneously differ from, and complement, each other. It then draws on examples from various media outlets to shed light on the ways in which media outlets present Arabic to children and how this presentation or representation is often governed by ideological factors. The conclusion reflects on the culture of Arabic, not only as a language, but as an epistemological system encompassed by what I refer to as a culture of communication.

**Linguistic Realities, Language Acquisition and Intelligibility**

Arabic is clearly divided into three well-known levels.[[3]](#endnote-3) These include Classical Arabic (CLA), which constitutes pre-Islamic, Islamic and Medieval Arabic extending all the way back from the fourth century to the fourteenth century. Then there is Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is embedded in the writings and discourses of the nineteenth-century reform movements in the Arab world and carries the legacies of the earlier periods of Arabic. Last but not least, there is Colloquial Arabic (CA) with its several varieties, which are spoken on a daily basis in the Arab world and are connected with ordinary social interactions, mundane functions and intimacies. The varieties of Arabic differ between the 22 Arab countries in accordance with regional variation, class difference and geographic locations. All of them, alongside MSA, are encompassed within what Mustafa Shah describes as ‘a continuum of affinity’ that ‘defines their Arabic status.’[[4]](#endnote-4)

However, because these linguistic levels are separate enough from each other, particularly as between MSA and CA, there is a tendency among some scholars to treat them as if they are different languages, or as if one level is more significant and standardized than another. Historically speaking, Arabic has been known to project such various levels, the most clear of which are those that distinguish spoken Arabic in its colloquial sense and Modern Standard Arabic in its official, written and formal sense. As a result there has been a wide consensus among linguists on the validity and relevance to Arabic of the notion of diglossia as defined by Charles Ferguson, where he highlighted the two familiar sides of the same language, its classical and standard side and its colloquial one, as follows.

A relatively stable language situation in 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 but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Because of the noticeable gap in Arabic between its formal standard side and its informal colloquial one, various Arab media forums have tended to try to bridge it by incorporating elements from the various levels in their discourses. Clive Holes refers to this phenomenon as hybridization. He notes that, in addition to mixing the vernacular and ‘Standard Arabic (SA)’, ‘more educated speakers’ styles’ often display ‘a great deal of hybridization, whereby elements from the dialect are combined with elements from SA’.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Meanwhile, there are media that accentuate the linguistic gap in favour of CLA and MSA or CA, depending on their ideological and class orientations. But the relatively new tendency is for the merging of levels in media in ways that emphasize the content and purpose of communication rather than its form. Therefore, even among the Arabs themselves, there are common outcries voiced by conservative or language purists over the blurring of lines between MSA and CA. Some view such mixing as cultural corruption and treason of the highest order.[[7]](#endnote-7) Many Arabs see Arabic in its high form as the undeclared ambassador of the Arab-Islamic civilization. Islam affected Arabic and helped its spread among many communities that spoke different Semitic languages before the spread of Arabic from the seventh century onwards. As Edward Said put it in his erudite essay, ‘Living in Arabic’, ‘Arabic is Islam and Islam Arabic at some very profound level’.[[8]](#endnote-8)

As the political conditions of the Arab world worsen, and its cultural standing suffers, people increasingly view mixing between the various Arabic levels as a sign of inauthenticity, if not outright corruption. Such views are born of a certain, often dogmatic, understanding of the past that rejects the adaptability and dynamism that the very notion of language should embody. The cultural output of the past is presumed to have been expressed in CLA; when the medium of the past is no longer perceived as pervasive in the present, then Arabic is seen as deficient and even unfit for civilizational articulation and pride. Some Islamist dogmatists champion views to this effect and practice formalism in the use of language, even in songs and poetic renditions intended to be popular enough to seduce people to Islamist ideologies. They encapsulate their understanding of Arabic in past glories that can only be repeated through the use of that classical medium, which is viewed in reductive and manipulative terms that do not represent the complexity of the linguistic situation of either the past or the present. Linguistically, the situation has always been diverse and varied, with different levels of Arabic used for different purposes and contexts. Edward Said aptly characterizes the levels in terms of a relationship between CLA and CA: ‘The two languages are porous and the user flows in and out of one into another as an essential aspect of what living in Arabic means.’ [[9]](#endnote-9)

However, the fact that many Arabs perceive CLA as the epitome of existential authenticity tends to make them see any deviation or promotion of colloquial forms as a sign of corruption and weakness rather than fluidity, naturalness and adaptability. In this respect, the linguistic landscape of Arabic is rife with ideological constructs that are related to people’s understanding of the language in its historical and present states. Confusion regarding the difference between MSA and CA has been so marked that some even regard these two levels as two languages.[[10]](#endnote-10) Arabic-speaking children acquire them at different stages of their lives; accordingly, Arab children are natives of CA and not MSA, to which they are exposed later. Some scholars, however, misinterpret the process of exposure. For example, Judith Rosenhouse concludes her study of the language of Arab children in Palestine-Israel, ‘From a Child’s Colloquial and Literary Arabic’, with the following observation:

‘Children who are native speakers of Arabic encounter a serious problem when they start formal school education. The acquisition of reading and writing skills involves the study of a different language from the one they have been using for daily communication.’ [[11]](#endnote-11)

Several points in that statement reflect serious flaws in understanding the linguistic situation of Arabic at the structural, sociolinguistic and epistemological levels. The main problem lies in seeing Arabic through rigid lenses, bypassing the fluidity of Arabic with which Arabs, including Arab children, are familiar from the early stages of their linguistic acquisition. In fact, this misunderstanding is not uncommon, even among Arabs. Arabs tend to ascribe high values to CLA and MSA in ways that overlook the historical construction of the various levels of Arabic as well as the fluidity in language consumption and use. In addition, language acquisition normally takes place at an early age, during a child’s first few years of life, these being relatively divided into stages from years one to five and five to ten, each stage marking further acquisition, learning and expansion of the linguistic and cognitive capacities.[[12]](#endnote-12) During this period, Arab children would have inevitably been exposed to the various levels of Arabic at home, school and sites of formal articulation, such as mosques or churches, classical songs, media reports and other formal forums. Clearly, therefore, Arab children are not deprived of CLA or MSA, nor do they acquire it as a second language. Edward Said’s observation about the Arab children he grew up with is more accurate and representative in terms of their language practices than that of Rosenhouse:

‘I remember very clearly that young people my age in Lebanon or Palestine could sing the ditties and mimic the patter of Egyptian comedians with considerable panache, even though of course they never sounded quite as fast and as funny as the originals.’[[13]](#endnote-13)

The fact that children are mimicking the language of adults means that they are gearing themselves up to be like them: active language users with influences and agency of their own. Many Arab children, sometimes as young as five years old, appear on Arab television stations, speaking with elevated styles that echo their immersion in a diverse linguistic environment. Thus their language is not static, neither in its acquisition nor its learning; these processes, acquisition and learning, while different at some level, are substantively interlinked to a very important degree.

Children’s acquisition of a language and the learning of writing, reading and other skills related to that language are two different things. Reading and writing are always acquired skills that maturate or deteriorate in accordance with exposure and practice. The difficulty in acquiring them does not suggest that children are dealing with another language, simply that they are learning another level of the same language. If researchers assume that Arab children should not make obvious grammatical mistakes at an early age, and that their knowledge of the formal language should be higher than it is, this assumption shows they are confusing culture and pedagogy with language acquisition. The latter is subject to natural processes of exposure that vary in depth and degree from one environment to another. The notion that Arab children should be fluent or literate in all the forms of Arabic ignores the point that acquisition is gradual and that children become versed in their language and its culture as they grow up and become accustomed to their cultural surroundings and its linguistic habits. How could we explain the fluency of so many Arabs, who attach precious importance to eloquence in their culture and who switch seamlessly between the various forms of Arabic, had it not been for an acquaintance with all levels of the language in their early years? It cannot all be due to learning; it is also to do with an environment populated with a continuum of linguistic practices that children acquire and learn as they grow up.

Thus knowledge of language in the pedagogical sense is different from language acquisition. The latter is natural and gradual, the former constructed and often laborious. Overall, however, the point remains that there is no pure acquisition or pure learning for any language; there is a mix of both and this applies to Arabic as much as it applies to any other language. While it is true that Arab children are exposed to different levels of their language, these levels are not mutually exclusive or produced in environments that are different enough for the levels to be classified as different languages. There are syntactic and semantic similarities between all the levels of the language that defy such a narrow logic of categorization. This renders problematic Restö’s characterization of Arabic, which states:

From a purely linguistic viewpoint the Arabic complex is dissolved into a large variety of languages that in varying degrees have elements in common with each other as well as with other Semitic languages…[[14]](#endnote-14)

The idea that there is ‘a purely linguistic viewpoint’ divorced from the reality of language use and practice seems fictional or unhelpful at best. In addition, whereas Arabs can resort to other levels to communicate with each other, they cannot communicate with speakers of other Semitic languages. Between an Arabic-speaker and a speaker of Hebrew or Tigrinya there is no mutual intelligibility, which is the essential test of a single language. Algerian and Palestinian speakers of Arabic may encounter difficulties in understanding each other, largely because of pronunciation. Yet there are ways in which they can modulate their speech in order to communicate. In addition, the wide spread of pan-Arab media and the popular culture of songs, television serials and talk-shows associated with these media have made people aware of each other’s dialects in very important ways that have helped and are helping what is known as ‘educated Arabic’ to provide a way of communicating through gaps between the diverse levels of Arabic. Again, Said has a more representative description of the Arabic language as lived:

‘Thus, if I were to try to understand an Algerian I would get more or less nowhere, so different and widely varied are the colloquials from each other once one gets away from the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean. The same would be true for me with an Iraqi, Moroccan, or even a deep Gulf dialect. And yet paradoxically, all Arabic news broadcasts, discussion programs, as well as documentaries, to say nothing of meetings, seminars, and oratorical occasions from mosque sermons to nationalist rallies, as well as daily encounters between citizens with hugely varying spoken languages, are conducted in the modified and modernised version of the classical language, or an approximation of it which can be understood all across the Arab world, from the Gulf to Morocco.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The currency in Said’s description lies in not considering the two forms, classical and colloquial, as two different languages. Said’s view of the sociolinguistic landscape of the Arab world is informative, based more on personal experience and powerful insight than sustained encounter with all these local dialects. The common view among Arabs, including this writer, seems to be that they can largely understand the various colloquials, including Iraqi and Gulf dialects. With a sense of linguistic approximation and open attitudes to linguistic mutuality, North African Arabic dialects, including Moroccan and Algerian dialects, do not seem as distant to other mutually intelligible Arabic dialects, as they are made of — thanks in no small part to media for facilitating linguistic familiarity across the Arab world. I attest to this as a Palestinian Arabic speaker who travelled to Morocco and Tunisia before and held many conversations in approximated Arabic with enough ease. The sociolinguistic base of Arabic, including its structure and its bulk of vocabulary, remain accessible, even if unfamiliar at first to Arabs from varied geographical regions.[[16]](#endnote-16) Yet the view held by Restö, quoted above, does not seem uncommon among scholars. Nor is it uncommon among Arabs who subject the uses of Arabic to categorical demarcations rather than seeing the fluidity in the uses of Arabic as evident in media programs and media in general or seeing how they can make use of this fluidity in productive ways rather than leaving it unacknowledged.

These demarcations help to explain why curriculum materials are often designed with a particular understanding of the language and its manifestations in mind, resulting in narrow judgments and contradictory outcomes, as will be further explained. Even Abdullah Mustafa al-Danan, author of a ‘Guide on Arabic for Children’ compiled for Al-Jazeera’s two children’s channels in 2012, opines in the Guide that

“there is not one single Arab society whose members use Classical Arabic (*Fuṣḥa*) in the common oral conversations. In other words, we say, the Arabs have two languages, a language for scholarship and knowledge and a language for daily conversations and interaction. Those two languages differ to a great extent in vocabularies, structures and styles.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

Al-Danan lists notable differences between classical Arabic and various colloquials and includes aims for introducing programs in classical Arabic for children. Yet, suffice to say here that Al-Jazeera programmes often include an amalgam of linguistic practices and that such a prescriptive and normative view of language offers just one way, among many, of exposing Arab children to language. They could be familiarized more with the variety of linguistic levels that demonstrate the diversity of language practices and avoid potential ideological homogeneity and rigidity of the type such a linguistic education produces.

What amounts to fetishisation of CLA has even driven some misinformed Arab parents to expose their children to CLA only, resulting in children being unable to communicate in the local dialect. This is rather than allowing children to acquire their mother tongue alongside their native language gradually within a process of acquisition and formal and informal learning. Erem News, a local channel, reported the story of a Palestinian child, named Abdul-Rahman, from Jenin, whose mother imposed *fus-ha*/CLA and exposed him only to television programs in the formal language. This stunted his ability to interact with his classmates and others in CA at school. Whereas education is offered largely in the standard language, it is not offered in colloquial Arabic. Hence, Abdul-Rahman and others like him have been made deficient in their mother tongue at the hands of adults who deliberately limited their linguistic range.[[18]](#endnote-18) The ideological narrowness is clear in this case.

The fact that there is a populist — even, in some respects, fastidiously romantic — understanding of Arabic and its cultural associations of the past makes educators and others agitate about its present state, as if the current moment can never catch up. Hence they are tempted to impose forms of learning that do not substantiate communication and interaction in the present as much as they serve ideological constructs within which language operates as a proxy. In what follows, I highlight the representation of Arabic in Arab culture for children and consider the broader consequences of this representation.

**Classical Arabic and perceptions of ‘existential authenticity’**

More than anything else, language reminds Arabs of their identity. Hourani explained the link succinctly:

‘More conscious of their language than any people in the world, seeing it not only as the greatest of their arts but also as their common good, most Arabs, if asked to define what they meant by “the Arab nation”, would begin by saying that it included all those who spoke the Arabic language.’[[19]](#endnote-19)

The various levels and diverse functions of Arabic are heard in the Arab world every day. Conversations take place in streets, homes and public places in the colloquial language, and specifically in the local variety. But these conversations are paralleled, interrupted or complemented by the call for prayer, Qur’anic recitations, formal speeches, occasions, gatherings and media coverage and by formal sayings and constructions. All the latter are handled in Arabic that differs from the intimate CA. There is thus no single Arab sphere for either CA or MSA; one level might dominate at one point but the public sphere at large is populated with several levels of Arabic. That is to say: Arabs use their language to fulfil communication needs of various kinds; it is these needs and their nature and contexts that determine the form of the communication. Here, the naturalness of language is not only innate, as formalist linguists contend, but also historical. It is born of practices and intersubjective interactions and familiarities that reinforce themselves to the point that they often become unconscious linguistic forms. These forms serve diverse functions and uses that fluctuate in accordance with socio-political changes and variations. To this end, language serves as the first point of reference if one wants conceptually to unearth intellectual and social changes in the society, alongside it being a distinguishing factor for the human species from other species.

Arab children, as indeed all children, are born into a multidimensional linguistic reality, which they grasp in doses and gradations until their language maturates and they become conscious of the wide scope of their linguistic — implicitly cultural — surroundings. They adapt and evolve from being largely consumers of language into producers and reproducers of it in accordance with their individual as well as collective experiences. To this end, one cannot study the language of Arab children in isolation from the language of Arab adults, who pass their own language acquisition and experiences onto children. Adults working in media often have a particular understanding of Arabic, in light of which they devise ways to expose children to the language through stories and shows. Such media-driven attempts often emanate from within an ideological understanding of the language and its variations as outlined above, resulting in inflexible linguistic forms being presented to the children as the ‘only’ or the ‘perfect’ norms of communication that they should adopt. In this respect, media ‘educators’ do not take into account the full range and levels of Arabic that could be used for the benefit of the intended message and could thus lessen the focus on the linguistic form and its alleged perfection in favour of forms and messages that convey plurality within Arabic itself. Those who attempt to force one form of Arabic to the exclusion of others often fail to understand that the dynamism of language depends on its users, as does its potential to be an engine of improving people’s lives.

However, if one strand of Arab media reflects linguistic purism of some sort, where CLA and MSA are rigidly maintained, others show linguistic variation. Arab media are a space within the public sphere in the Habermasian sense, where different social, political and psychological rationalities are projected. Thus the form of the language tends to adapt to the intended message, creating a linguistic fusion that serves the purpose of rational and interactional communication. In this light it can be seen that even the most ardent Islamist channels and forums, which indulge in purist linguistic practices thinking that they are the bearers of the message of Islam as originally delivered in classical Arabic, end up using a medley of linguistic forms as dictated by the nature of the message in question and its context. Children are therefore exposed to multiple linguistic public spheres where Arabic is interwoven within ideologies and social space.

For example, the widely watched Jordan-based satellite channel for children, Ṭuyur al-Jannah, founded in 2008, seems on the face of it to adhere to formal classical or standard Arabic in its programmes, especially that it appears to uphold and instil Islamic values in children through educational and entertainment programmes that derive their content and inspiration from an Islamic culture.[[20]](#endnote-20) The channel’s choice of name is interesting, as it derives its very nature and identity from an Islamic reference, where children are regarded as *tuyūr al-jannah* (birds of paradise), being beyond the rules and frameworks of reward and punishment applied to adults within the Islamic faith. Here, ‘birds’ are a metaphor for innocence and exoneration from wrong-doing, which can be corrected through subtle teachings and good examples and practices on the part of the adults responsible for children. Therefore, the name is chosen with an Islamic culture in mind — one which entertains, teaches and facilitates a childhood unburdened with the heavy and conscious responsibilities of adulthood. Just as children are seen to be free like ‘birds in paradise’, children’s language and the language that is used to appeal and educate them is one that denotes freedom, ease and informality, albeit one that foregrounds its understanding and pedagogy in a modernized and adaptable Islamic culture. To this end, the channel uses what is practically a medley of linguistic forms to convey its values in a way that emphasizes the content of the message rather than its form. In this way, it modernizes Islamism or Islamic values more broadly in a novel and intimate way, as it uses everyday language and mannerisms.

Tuyur al-Jannah promotes Islamic norms, which are often associated with CLA. Yet it communicates these in a fluid and free style in songs and programmes that mix not only form of Arabic but also use English concepts and expressions derived from western cultures. The song for Eid al-Fīṭr (festival marking the end of Ramadan) in 2015 was delivered in colloquial Arabic and even interspersed with English. It started with the words, ‘Happy, Happy, Happy Eid’, and continued in a mixed style, ‘*Kull ‘ām wintū bikhayr, ‘asākū min ‘uwāduh* (and many happy Eid returns)*…*This Eid is happiness, for every Muslim in the world/happy, happy Eid*, ‘eidkum mabrūk (*may your Eid be blessed)’. Whereas some high profile personalities, such as Muslim Brotherhood icon Yousef al-Qaradawi writing in an article entitled ‘Our beautiful language and the media’,[[21]](#endnote-21) believe the media should safeguard Arabic from colloquialism and western influences as allegedly corrupting practices, the spontaneous and intimate style of the Eid song cited here suggests that media are pragmatic, commercial and indeed entertaining to a degree that diversifies Islamic-oriented channels and makes them wide-ranging in terms of the ways in which they speak and interact with the Arab society.

In the same vein, other famous programmes on Tuyur al-Jannah use the same style of mixing concepts from Arab and western cultures, but still retain the spirit of popularized sayings and resonant discourses from the Islamic tradition, such as *Mughamarāt Camping’* (Camping Adventures).[[22]](#endnote-22) This programme is specifically devoted to sports such as horse riding, jumping and climbing in order to instil in children the value of activity and movement, as opposed to moods of inactivity and laziness. Here the children, girls and boys, are involved in activities that strengthen them physically and encourage them to cooperate, as the activities require team effort. The channel’s discourse seems driven by socio-cultural values and interests, yet its conservatism is apparent through the absence of women guiding and training the children alongside the men. Even so the example shows that some channels with Islamic backgrounds and agendas are able to adapt and use mixed linguistic forms, thus undermining potentially more purist tendencies that are prevalent in other extreme and often austere channels, whose programmes and messages are delivered in CLA and MSA in a way that reflects the rigidity of the pedagogical ideology in question.

The Saudi channel, Iqra, is a case in point. Founded by Saudi investors in 1998 and purportedly aiming to reinforce the Islamic creed and values, Iqra’s use of the Arabic language appears as the outward tool through which these orientations are maintained. The name Iqra means ‘read’, in the imperative form of the verb, which was the first word in the Islamic revelation dictated to the Prophet Muhammad as attested in the Islamic tradition. As the first word of the Qur’an, ‘iqra’ is a word charged with seriousness and formality. Thus, all the programmes, including the traditional songs *(anāshīd),* which in Tuyur al-Jannah are delivered in free styles including colloquial Arabic and sometimes English expressions, are here delivered in the classical and standard Arabic language. Songs on Iqra are heavily inflected with the past and its aura, recalling the glories of what is known in Islamic culture as the golden age of Islam, which represents the early years of Islam and its spread.[[23]](#endnote-23) For example, one song eulogizing Prophet Muhammad runs as follows:

*Lā taqul māta al-ḥabīb al-musṭafā*

*Lā taqul anna al-ḍiyā’ qadd inṭafā*

(Do not say that the beloved chosen Prophet had passed away

Do not say that the light had been extinguished)

The song is a eulogy for the Prophet, which reinforces his message and affirms his eternal presence in the life of the Muslims. It focuses on theological aspects of the Islamic faith and represents them in the classical language. Certainly, the tradition and its presence today is the driving force behind the channel; it plays on the resonant effects of the past and its associated glories rather than the present with its modernist imperatives that are facilitated through a discourse of practicality and ease of communication. Modernity uses language to address its concerns and attitudes, and does not allow the prior rules of language to restrict or frame its articulation, as has been most readily demonstrated by poets such as Syria’s Adonis,[[24]](#endnote-24) Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish and others. In other words, modernity has no past except that which serves its present; in that sense, it is bound not so much by rules as by attitudes.

Iqra, on the other hand, is set in its subscription to rules and norms: rules of thought as well as rules of language. Its programme intended to teach Arabic language to children outside the Arab world is rigidly observant of the rules and constructions of classical and standard Arabic[[25]](#endnote-25) and thus devoid of any colloquial or entertaining aspects that would accord with the potentialities and flexibility of children’s general social environments. Children are introduced to language in a rule-based manner that restricts their appreciation of the wide spectrum pertaining to the flexible sociolinguistic conditions of Arabic.

To this end, language serves as a mirror, through which facets of social life like ideologies can be explored and explained. Looking at the way children’s language is represented in Arab media, one cannot sidestep the fact that practices of representation extend far beyond the media themselves, forming part of the cultural and political, not to say linguistic, fabric of the world, including the ideological and existential spheres where language is situated. Thus, while media play a role in reflecting linguistic practices and orientations as well as in shaping them, the media are also subject to preceding ideologies that shape their form and content. In this sense, media represent different aspects of the Arab world, one that is entrenched in particular perceptions of the past and its rules and modes, and another that subjects the past to present sensibilities and attitudes. Linguistically, this means that the Arabic language appears as dichotomous between its ‘high’ and ‘low’ levels as well as fluid, interactive and adaptable when all levels at hand are used to articulate the intended message. These diverse aspects are liable to cause confusion as to how to describe the sociolinguistic conditions of Arabic and its representation in Arab media. The eminent sociolinguist Yasir Suleiman describes disagreement among linguists over the nature and number of levels in use between MSA and CA in terms that define the dynamic composition of Arabic and the various uses to which it could lend itself. He writes:

…The fact that Arabic sociolinguists have not been able to agree on the number of Arabic levels or categories on the diglossic continuum, or on their ontology (whether they are levels/registers/ styles or categories of self-contained classification) reflects the semi-liquidity or viscosity of the Arabic language situation at its outer ends and its liquidity in the middle. This further reminds us of the difficulties Ferguson had in drawing up his definition of diglossia.”[[26]](#endnote-26)

What Suleiman refers to as the ‘semi-liquidity’ or ‘viscosity of the Arabic language situation’ exposes the reductive selectivity of those Arab media programmes that target children through one chosen form of language to the exclusion of others, thereby elevating the chosen form to the detriment of other forms and the potential dynamism embedded in Arabic itself. Producers’ choice of certain forms for children reflects their ideology about language acquisition. Those who resort to *fus-ha*/CLA do so because they feel that is how children will acquire the ‘accurate’, if not ‘pure’, language. Producers who use CA are often condemned for doing so, as if they are corrupting the language. But they are also not immune from particular ideological motivations, often related to class issues. The champions of CA tend to come from secular and high-class backgrounds. They reason that the structure of CLA is archaic, that it somehow prevents the present reality from evolving and that it manipulates reality rather than expressing it. The Egyptian thinker Salama Musa espoused such a view in the 1940s, as did Palestinian scholar Hisham Sharabi in the latter part of the twentieth century, advocating use of local colloquial Arabic as an immediate form of communication. Sharabi, as quoted by Suleiman, expressed his position as follows:

Classical Arabic produces a sort of discourse that mediates reality through a double ideology: the ideology inherent in the ‘trance of language’ — produced and reproduced by the magic of catchwords, incantations, verbal stereotypes and internal referents — and the ideology supplied by the ‘encractic’ language –produced and disseminated under the protection of political or religious orthodoxy.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Many enlightened Arab thinkers came to condemn conditions in the Arab world through language, conflating and indeed mistaking ideology for linguistic realities, given that language can bend to almost any chosen use. Ultimately, discourse about the use of Arabic seems inevitably to revert to the relationship between language and the past, including the rise of Arab nationalism. It seems it would take a revolution, or at least a mammoth effort, involving the sensibilities of individuals and society as a whole, to let go of the past, even at the risk of loss, to end the situation where attitudes to Arabic language are so closely aligned with ideologies built on historical examples and aspirations.

**Cultures of Communication and Intimations of Political Legitimacy**

The fact that Islamist and traditionalist Arabs rely heavily on the past in their ideologies, viewing the past as a site of perfection of some sort, reinforces Arabic in its past tense rather than its present contexts. There is what I called a culture of communication, which exists in every culture, whereby diverse verbal, written and visual forms of communication relate to each other in intricate ways and require orderly discursive interpretation.[[28]](#endnote-28) The culture of communication has peculiar aspects in the Arab world, being heavily associated with a distant past, particularly the early days of Islam. Such invocations of the past are often unrelated to current events and their needs and responses, serving ideological consolidation and cohesion, not fulfilment of tangible and practical purposes. To this end, some strands of this culture, mainly Islamist or dictatorial, have been materially effective in manipulating realities and concealing them through communication which lacks practical and immediate values of societal currency, but is rather engrossed in metaphysical references and justifications that often stultify the present rather than enliven and reveal it. Indeed, it is worthwhile highlighting cultures of communication as a way to emphasize the materiality of language within human life as well as to explain some of the ways in which Arabic language is taught and represented for Arab children in media. As I wrote elsewhere:

What defines a culture of communication is the process of enactment that stems from the historical-anthropological rootedness of action in language and culture. In other words, a culture of communication is a communicated compendium of religious, historical, literary and mythological references used by a community as valid tropes for all time which, as such, are acted upon and treated as having authenticity. ‘Authenticity’ in a culture of communication serves to manipulate language as a locus of resonant power embodied in culture as an anthropological, historical and literary space, in which the powerful, the spiritual and the pertinent (to the moment) are drawn upon, selectively reproduced, idolized, talked of and visualized. Essentially, the resonant power of language, which a culture of communication acts upon, serves to highlight the historical and spiritual dimensions that culture embodies.[[29]](#endnote-29)

As far as Arabic is concerned, the glories of the past are perceived to have been constructed and articulated through CLA. It is that form of the language that is emphasized as the legitimate one for the public sphere and all aspects that have collective bearings on the Arab world. In this context, CLA is associated with authenticity, virtue and eloquence and is a source of cultural and political legitimacy. When children appear on Arab media speaking in the high register of MSA, this garners attention and, most often, admiration. For example, a Palestinian child who spoke on Al-Jazeera about the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2008-09 drew wide Arab media attention because he did so in a language similar to that of educated adults. His language largely characterized what has come to be known as educated Arabic, which amalgamates features from MSA and CA in a way that mitigates the severity of the perceived diglossic situation of Arabic, as described above. It was specifically played by Arab media because of the linguistic maturity the child expressed, as well as the emotional effects his message had on the Arab world. At one point, the Al-Jazeera anchor was moved to exclaim to the child: ‘You speak classical Arabic better than me!’ Indeed, the eight year old child in question, Ahmad ‘Awad Zayed, used a highly charged formal (classical/standard) language with expressions such as: ‘we (the Palestinians) tasted the depth of bitterness [*dhuqnā al-amrayn]’; ‘* I will not forget the children of Palestine [*Lan ansa aṭfāl filisṭīn*]’; ‘I found everything being turned upside down [*wajadtu kull shay maqlūban ra’san ‘alā ‘aqib*](referring to the Israeli destruction of Palestinian houses); and ‘that which does not kill us makes us stronger [*aḍ-ḍarbah al-latī lā tumītanā tazīdunā quwah*] — referring pointedly to a famous saying repeatedly uttered by the former Palestinian president, Yasir Arafat, who made Nietzsche’s statement part of his rather random and limited rhetorical repertoire*.*[[30]](#endnote-30)

While the linguistic abilities of this particular child are notable, they are not so uncommon among Arab children. Several Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi children have been brought to the public eye through the media because of their eloquent, albeit innocent, linguistic rendering of their miserable conditions. In this context, the children echo their environment and its dense verbal associations without being necessarily conscious of the meanings and implications of what they say. It is this verbal imitation, sometimes masquerading as bravery and eloquence, which strikes roots in their character in a way that makes them subject to others’ ideology-driven life, which they in return inherit and perpetuate. The learning of language, and its most important function, namely communication, becomes descriptive, imitative and rhetorical rather than analytical, deductive and innovative.

The above characterization can be explained by reference to the fact that, while several regional networks such as Al-Jazeera have programmes for children in CLA, they also have others in CA that amalgamate expressions from the various dialects, often depending on the national origins of the speakers in these programmes. Children’s programmes conducted in CLA, such as the rendition of the Arabian Nights on Jeem TV, the Al-Jazeera channel for children aged 7-12, are highly accomplished in the classical language with visual effects.[[31]](#endnote-31) Yet, by reproducing the language in set forms, they take away from the vitality embedded in the story itself, which in origin is peppered with vernacular elements and expressions. In contrast, when children are interviewed on screen they are addressed in CA. This situation results in contradictions, which, albeit confusing, are productive in reflecting the reality of the language ideologies at hand.

Similarly national channels and partisan media, such as Al-Aqsa channel of Hamas in Gaza, produce local shows for children in CLA while also featuring children in shows where CA is employed. The same applies to Hizbullah’s channel, Al-Manar. Thus the projection of these Islamist movements as ideological and rigid in their use and consumption of the language is true to some extent. Yet they have also been accommodated within nation-state structures and consequently use phrases and expressions from CA where this suits their political interests. This use shows openness to CA, particularly in producing songs and writing effective slogans.[[32]](#endnote-32) At the same time, each country produces programmes for children in a variety of levels, equipping them as they grow with Arabic as a multidimensional language, along the lines described above. In light of this, it can be seen that Al-Danan, who wrote the Al-Jazeera Guide on language for children mentioned earlier, conflated between language and ideology when he enumerated a list of aims that the channel wished to realize. He reflected a particular linguistic understanding that does not address the reforms required and the pedagogical needs of Arab children, which are more than linguistic reforms. Of six aims that Al-Danan highlighted as important and to be achieved through Al-Jazeera channels Baraem and Jeem TV, Aims 1, 5 and 6 were:

* To provide the children with knowledge and skills which they require in their forthcoming school life in order to help them in their practical life in the future.
* To teach children how to think in a sound manner and solve problems.
* To realize the objectives of the programmes in an atmosphere of happiness and entertainment.[[33]](#endnote-33)

These aims are not all related. They require different processes and techniques and do not all contribute to linguistic novelty as much as to useful media programmes that can attract children and enhance their conceptual and linguistic capacities. Learning about language and its intricacies can enrich the culture and eloquence, traits that are rooted in Arabic culture. However, as for linguistic reforms, which are usually invoked from various standpoints, secular or Islamist, these cannot be separated from cultural reforms and a better understanding of the role of language in culture. The pervasive problem seems to lie in the rigid manipulation of the past within a culture that stultifies language in its attempt to restore the past without consideration to the present and its imperatives. Modern Arab poets and writers, particularly the secular ones among them, have been able to demonstrate the vitality of Arabic by injecting it with modern dimensions of narrative and uses that confirm both its dynamism and the view that language is subject to people’s uses.[[34]](#endnote-34) Likewise some media for children have shown the impressive range of Arabic through programmes that demonstrate the language’s multidimensional reality and its potential vitality once freed from narrow ideological considerations.

**Conclusion**

Nobody can claim that Arabic has not changed since its beginnings. The various levels of Arabic are a testament to an environment that adapted to socio-political and technological advances. Yet, more often than not, language change is slow. Since Islam and Arabic are interlinked and the former has always affected Arabs’ life, its idioms and meanings remained relevant as Arabic carries its spirits and the heritage associated with it. Many television shows for children aim to instil in them a particular linguistic ethos. Embedded in that ethos is a constant discourse of crisis and fear that Arab children will not be able to use classical Arabic in the future and that this will rob the Arabs of the future of a significant heritage that once made them a great nation. This discourse of crisis goes back centuries, having had particular traction in the nineteenth century, and is laden with ideological undertones and short-sighted assumptions. Had Arabic really been threatened to such an extent, CLA and MSA would not have been in use today.

These days, Islamist movements and other ideologies, which idolize the Arabic language and its association with Islam, have through their access to media attempted to indoctrinate Arab children in the virtues of Arabic and its past associations through inflexible forms of the language. It is this image of the past and its various meanings that need to be properly understood and situated within their contexts so that the present can be freed from irrelevant indoctrinations. When that happens, language can be made to echo the present and its imperatives and needs rather than the past and uses of it that are limited and unproductively ideological.

1. All the translations in the text are the author’s, unless indicated otherwise. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The term ‘level’ is chosen here in recognition of disagreement among sociolinguists as to the number and nature of different forms of Arabic, as discussed later in the chapter. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The notion of linguistic levels in Arabic is mostly associated with El-Said Badawi, who, considering its use in Egyptian media, divided Arabic into five levels. Starting from the most to the least formal, he called these: ‘heritage classical’, ‘contemporary classical’, ‘colloquial of the cultured’, ‘colloquial of the basically educated’ and ‘colloquial of the illiterates’. See Reem Bassiouney, *Arabic Sociolinguistics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) pp. 14-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Mustafa Shah, 'The Arabic language', in A. Rippin (ed), The Islamic World (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008) pp. 261-77. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Charles Ferguson, ‘Diglossia’, *Word*, 15 (1959) pp. 34-35. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Clive Holes, ‘Orality, culture and language’ in J. Owens (ed) The *Oxford Handbook of Arabic Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) pp. 281-300. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Yasir Suleiman, *Arabic in the Fray: Language, Ideology and Cultural Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Yasir Suleiman, *The Arabic Language and National Identity* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Edward Said, ‘Living in Arabic’, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, issue no. 677, 12 February 2004, accessed on 25th February 2015: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/677/cu15.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Said: ‘Living in Arabic’. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Jan Restö, ‘What is Arabic?’, in J. Owens (ed) The *Oxford Handbook of Arabic Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) pp. 433-51. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Judith Rosenhouse, ‘Colloquial and literary Arabic in Israel: An analysis of a child’s texts in colloquial Arabic’, in M. Piamenta, J. Rosenhouse and A. Elad (eds) *Linguistic and Cultural Studies on Arabic and Hebrew* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2001) p.109. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Karin Christina Ryding, ‘Second-Language acquisition’, in J. Owens (ed) The *Oxford Handbook of Arabic Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 393. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Said: ‘Living in Arabic’. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Restö: ‘What is Arabic?’, p. 446. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Said: ‘Living in Arabic’. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For reference to colloquial Arabic and its relationship to standard and classical Arabic, see Muhīn Hājī Zādeh and Farīdah Shahrstānī, *ṣilat al-lahjāt al-muʻāṣirah bil-fuṣha wa-atharahā fīhā,* in *faṣliyat dirasāt al-Adab al-muʻāṣir*, vol.11, 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Abdullah Mustafa al-Danān, *ad-dalīl fī al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyyah al-muyassara lil-‘amilīn fī barāmij al-aṭfāl at-tilfaziyyah* (Unpublished internal document, Damascus*,* 2012) p. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BLfGgxr5L0>, (accessed 28 February 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) p.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For example, several programmes are devoted to sports mentioned as noteworthy in the tradition of the Prophet Mohammad, such as swimming and horse-riding. It also broadcasts songs by children in the style of *anāshīd* (rhymed poems/songs with resonant effects). These are often entertaining and value-laden, aiming to inspire children to be virtuous, interactive and modest in accordance with mannerisms having Islamic appeal. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. See Atef Alshaer, ['Language as culture: The question of Arabic’, in T.](http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/14317/) Sabry (ed) *Arab Cultural Studies: Mapping the Field* (London: I.B Tauris, 2011) pp. 275-97. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnL5IJi7mq0> (accessed 26 July 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. For example, see: <http://iqraa.com/ar/videos.aspx?VideoID=50A103A103B117C53&SubSectionID=5> (accessed 26 July 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics* (London: Saqi Books, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. See: <http://lettergarden.com/fullflash/LetterGarden.htm> (accessed 26 July 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Yasir Suleiman, ‘Arabic folk linguistics’, in J. Owens (ed) The *Oxford Handbook of Arabic Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 265. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Quoted in Suleiman: *Arabic in the Fray,* p. 235. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Atef Alshaer, ‘Towards a theory of a culture of communication: The fixed and the dynamic in Hamas’ communicated discourse’, *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 1/2, 2008, pp. 101-121. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Alshaer: ‘Towards a theory of a culture of communication, p. 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BE8kpbm0c9s>, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLNG4G7WOUM> (accessed 25 February 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. <http://www.jeemtv.net/en/shows/1001-nights/2> (accessed on 25 July 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. <http://aqsatv.ps/ar/index.php>, see the link here for the expressions used in supposedly formal media. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Al-Danān: *ad-dalīl fī al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyyah*, p 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. See Atef Alshaer, *Poetry and Politics in the Modern Arab World*. London: Hurst and Company, London, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)