

Arabic Language Learning

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In Part I of this article, I will present some of the basic concepts needed when thinking about learning Arabic. Then in Part II (next *Seedbed*), I will present the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and extend it to include ministry goals.

Part I: Basic Concepts

Language learning is a hot subject for many of us. We have learned new languages, we have struggled, and we have formed strong opinions while doing so. This article attempts to bring people up to date with some of the linguistic concepts. It is written to provide the terminology for Arabic speakers and to inform those thinking about learning Arabic.

Diglossia is the situation where a high form and a low form of a language coexist. Those of us living in the Arab world know about this intimately, but it takes a bit of explaining to others. Before I learned Arabic, I had no real grasp of what diglossia was. I was told it was like Classical Greek and the Koine of the New Testament. The comparison is not a very good one because Koine was the *lingua franca*, the Swahili of the Roman Empire, a common variety of Greek widely spoken in many countries, whereas there are many dialects of Arabic.

Another comparison is with Swiss-German dialects that are learned at

home and High German. This is a closer comparison because there are many Swiss-German dialects and High German is taught in Swiss schools as a form of Classical German. The comparison breaks down in that High German is also the native variety of Germany, whereas there are no known native speakers of Classical Arabic. Arab children learn a dialect at home and then learn a Classical form at school.

In the Arab world we have many dialects and multiple varieties of Classical Arabic. Contrary to popular belief, and contrary to what many want to believe, there are several distinct varieties of Classical Arabic. In addition, the terminology is not used consistently. The variety used for newspapers and textbooks – Modern Standard Arabic – is quite distinct from the Classical of the Qur'an and the gap is quite large. This should be obvious when one realises that for a dialect to become accepted as a language, it must usually be written down, and it must expand so that one can write and say anything one wants to about any subject. Languages commonly expand by giving new meanings to old words, by exploiting the grammar and word formation patterns (in English, changing nouns into verbs, using prefixes, etc), by inventing new words and by extensive borrowing from other languages, with or without adaptation. Modern Standard Arabic has its roots in

the Qur'anic Arabic, but it is much bigger and covers a wider range of subjects.

Classical Arabic in North Africa is also quite distinct from Classical Arabic in the Middle East. An easy example is the names of the months, which in North Africa are borrowed from French and in the Middle East are borrowed from English. North Africa is also more likely to mix French with Arabic and there are many 'Classical' words of French origin. The differences even extend to the pronunciation of some of the consonants.

What does all this mean for the Arabic language learner? In English, standard spoken forms are usually close to standard written forms. Some of us grew up with Standard English being spoken at home as well as in school. My grandfather knew two varieties: the local dialect and Standard English with a pleasant non-standard accent; but I was not allowed to learn a dialect. In the Arab world, the gap between the written and the spoken can be huge. Therefore, while for learning French and English you can realistically establish one set of language goals, targeting one variety that includes both written and spoken, in Arabic two sets of language goals need to be established.

Until the 1970s, linguists, mostly British and American, had assumed that to grow up mastering only one language was the norm and bilingualism was the exception. In addition, the goal of learning a foreign language (L2) was to become as fluent in it as in the first language (L1).

It is now recognised that complete bilingualism is rare, and that most of the world speaks at least three varieties of languages and dialects. Many people do NOT have one first language that can serve in every conceivable language situation. Most people use the language variety that suits them under the circumstances. Languages frequently interrelate and interact so that *code switching* (i.e. mixing languages) should not be despised. To distinguish these wider meanings from multilingualism, it was called *plurilingualism*, with the associated word *pluriculturalism*. The terms have not yet caught on, perhaps because they are difficult to pronounce. It is widely agreed that *bilingualism* refers to two or more languages, though sometimes three or more languages are referred to as multilingualism.

The goal of plurilingualism is not mastery of a language but the development of a linguistic repertory, 'a toolbox of skills', according to need. Language learning is also seen as a lifelong task. Skilled plurilingual speakers do not necessarily have a very high standard in all their languages or varieties of language, but are able to call upon the appropriate language for the need and situation, and are also able to develop any area that is weak for current or future needs.

Plurilingualism recognises the reality of code switching

Many frown on mixing languages, conveniently forgetting that languages are a mixture, and any so-called pure form is in fact a mixture with borrowed words from other languages. Others

see it as a form of weakness. It is, however, often a highly skilful and well-controlled mixing that follows rules and is often done by those who are in perfect command of both languages. Admittedly, it can be a crutch for learners, but it can also be a help. Arguably, it should be permitted if that is what the local people do in similar circumstances and if the code switching is acceptable to the people concerned.

Code switching can also be satisfactory when the priority is communication and relationships and it is these that are more important than the exact language level or mixture. Code switching can also be a help in that it enables learners to be adventurous, to explore language beyond their current limits and to sustain a conversation in these circumstances. I have many times seen Arabic speakers in North Africa who do not know French, and so they cannot code switch like the locals do. I have been told that I am easier to communicate with because I understand French even though I do not always understand the Arabic. I buy *vi:sa:t* (screws) from the *quincaillerie* (hardware store) and even uneducated people have no problem with that. Code switching has probably been unfairly despised.

Code switching can also refer to mixing Classical and dialect. I commonly see this when Classical vocabulary is used within the grammar framework of dialect.

Why are all these considerations important? Classical Arabic takes a lot longer to learn than dialect, especially if

the studying covers all five skills and all domains of life. I have also seen people who are learning Classical Arabic try to do the market shopping using that form with the result of being laughed at and ridiculed. It is important to grasp that Classical has its domains of use and dialect has its domains of use. They do sometimes overlap, but they are usually distinct. Very few language schools that I know (with the notable exception of the one in Jordan) take this into account. I have suffered because Classical Arabic was taught as a living, first language covering all domains of life, which, linguistically speaking, clearly it is not. Similarly, when I studied Classical to learn to read the newspaper (finally recognising that this is a legitimate primary domain for Classical) the teacher conducted the class in French, not in dialect. Because few Arabs are able to face up to the linguistic reality described here, it is very difficult to find teachers of dialect and those who will teach Classical through dialect. This makes it harder for the learner.

Practically, plurilingualism also recognises that **language is not stable** – language goes up and down. Also, it sees that the ability level can vary enormously with the language skill needed. The concept of plurilingualism includes the idea that **skills often transfer**. If you are good at finding one key phrase in an article in your own language, you will probably find it easy to do so in another language. This means that it is quite hard to pinpoint ministry skills on a language grid. This point will be discussed further in Part II.

Learning styles and skills

The concepts of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism include the subjects of language skills and language learning skills. The research on learning styles, once the popular material, and the exaggeration that it is seen through, leave us with very few fully authenticated and established ideas. Below is probably the consensus of what research has so far firmly established. Many linguists are very sceptical about the whole idea of learning styles. Even in an article that advocates them, it is clear that motivation is by far the biggest factor affecting success.

It is clear that good learners have a variety of styles and can use the style appropriate to them and the current task. Most language learners begin using styles with which they are most familiar and styles where they feel most at home. It is very helpful for every language learner to admit that these are learned preferences which may or may not be the best. Therefore every language learner should be willing to attempt new methods and new styles.

It can also happen that a language learner begins with his or her own set of priorities, which may not be the priorities set by other people who have also been through the language learning process. For instance, it is incontrovertible that the most important time to work on pronunciation is in the first six months. Contrary to popular belief, it is possible to improve pronunciation and accent after this time, but it requires a

much greater effort to do so. Therefore, reasonable pronunciation is a goal of top priority for all language learners in their first six months, even if this means that other features of the language, such as grammar and vocabulary, are delayed. Now, if the new language learners have a different point of view, they are free to express this, but they are not free to change this goal, to do their own thing and to think they know better than the research and the consensus of most people who have gone before them.

Other people come to language learning convinced that they can get by with just hearing and repeating. Some people learn languages to a high level just by doing this. Certainly, a large element of any language programme must be strenuous active listening – especially at the beginning! But there are those who think that listening is the **only** important task. It is not. Again, research has shown that active production is important, as well as active listening. Research has also shown that most people benefit from explanations of language, and these explanations are most effective when given in a language they know well. Therefore, total immersion with no use of their native language is in fact counter-productive for most people, especially at the beginning. I say ‘for most people’ because again, some people thrive on a total immersion experience and, for the intermediate or advanced learner, the first language should be used very little. The wise learner will listen to the advice and the priorities of others and be willing to try out new or disliked methods.³

ENDNOTES

¹ M. Peacock & B. Ho, 'Student language learning strategies across eight disciplines', *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, Volume 13, Number 2, December 2003, 179-200.

² For critiques of learning styles, simply search the Internet on *critique learning styles*.

One reputable article which sums up a lot of the evidence is:

Steven A. Stahl, 'Different Strokes for Different Folks? A Critique of Learning Styles', American Federation of Teachers, 1999. Available from http://www.aft.org/pubsreports/american_educator/fall99/DiffStrokes.pdf.

Another summary is:

F. Coffield, D. Moseley, E. Hall, K. Ecclestone, 'Learning styles and pedagogy in post-16 learning. A systematic and critical review', (London: Learning and Skills Research Centre, 2004). <http://www.lsda.org.uk/files/PDF/1543.pdf>.

³ A lot of popular language learning advice is based upon the ideas of Krashen. Again, many linguists have major reservations about Krashen, and he is probably more respected by non-experts than by the experts. For a good, balanced, thorough and readable review, see Timothy Mason's lectures at: http://www.timothyjpmason.com/WebPages/LangTeach/Capes/Capes_Jumpoff.htm.
