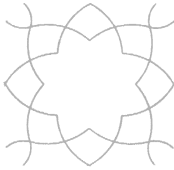


# *Introduction*



## **0.1 Where is Arabic spoken?**

Arabic is the sole or joint official language in twenty independent Middle Eastern and African states: Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. It is the native language of Israel's Arab citizens and of the Palestinians who live in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. Since the end of the nineteenth century, there have been large communities of Arabic speakers outside the Middle East, particularly in the United States, and more recently in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Arabic is also the language of Islam's holy book, the Koran, and as such is the religious and liturgical language of all Muslims, regardless of origin. On the contemporary international stage, Arabic has been an official language of the United Nations alongside English, French, Spanish, Russian, and Chinese since 1 January 1971.

Recent estimates put the total number of native speakers of Arabic at about 250 million. In some of the countries listed above, however, Arabic is by no means the only, or even in some cases the first, language of some sections of the population. In the countries of North Africa—mainly Morocco and Algeria, and to a lesser extent Tunisia and Libya—there are scattered but large minorities, several million strong, whose mother tongue is one of a large

number of Berber dialects that are only distantly related to Arabic. Virtually all these Berber speakers, however, have at least a rudimentary knowledge of local spoken Arabic, and most are bilingual. As a result of more than a century of French colonization, some are trilingual in Arabic, Berber, and French. Further east, in the mountains of northern Iraq, there are several hundred thousand native speakers of Kurdish, an Indo-European language related to Persian. In southern Sudan, the southernmost country whose official language is Arabic, the indigenous population speaks a variety of mainly Bantu languages, quite unrelated to Arabic. In the “heartland” Arab areas of the Arabian Peninsula and the Near East, small pockets of speakers of other Semitic languages still exist here and there within the borders of the Arabic-speaking countries, although they have now all but disappeared: Aramaic in a few villages in Syria and northern Iraq, and a group of South Arabian languages (Mehri, Ḥarsūsi, Jibālī) in the deserts and mountains of Oman. These linguistic minorities, large and small, are a vestige of the situation that existed in the Middle East and North Africa before the great expansion in the influence of Arabic, which began with the rise of Islam in the middle of the seventh century A.D.

In adjacent areas once but no longer under Arab hegemony, a linguistic flotsam was left by the receding imperial tide. Here, Arabic is still spoken as the first language by some of the population, although it has no official status. In Asia, the southern Iranian province of Khuzistan (or Arabistan) is demographically, and politically perhaps, the most important of these regions, but there are also Arabic-speaking minorities in Afghanistan (Balkh), parts of the former Soviet Union (Uzbekistan), northeastern Iran, and quite widely in southern Turkey. In Africa, there are mother-tongue speakers of Arabic on the fringes of the southern Sahara in northern Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and Chad. In the Mediterranean, a recognizably Arabic-based vernacular was still spoken until 1974 alongside Greek in the village of Kormakiti in northern Cyprus, and Maltese is undoubtedly structurally an Arabic dialect, though it has been heavily influenced by centuries of contact with Romance languages and, more recently, English.

But what exactly do we mean when we say that the inhabitants of such geographically separated, ethnically diverse areas “speak Arabic”? In what sense does an Arabic-speaking villager from Uzbekistan speak the “same” language as a northern Nigerian townsman from Maiduguri, a Waheibi tribesman from the sands of southern Oman, or a professor of Islamic law at the al-Azhar University in Cairo? An objective comparison of the varieties of Arabic found at the edges of the Arabic-speaking area might well lead one to the conclusion that they were historically related, but synchronically distinct and mutually unintelligible languages like English and Dutch.<sup>2</sup> But it is unlikely that this view would

be shared by ordinary speakers of these different varieties of Arabic themselves. Each would certainly aver that he or she personally “spoke Arabic” and would probably agree that the others did so too even though their normal vernacular might be very difficult to understand. How can we explain this apparent paradox?

It is well known that speakers’ perceptions of closeness or distance between languages and dialects sometimes have as much to do with attitudinal, historical, and even political factors as with objective linguistic differences or similarities. The standard varieties of Hindi and Urdu, for example, although written in different scripts and differing from each other in literary writing in the quantity of Sanskrit-derived forms employed in the former and of Persian-derived ones in the latter, differ objectively only slightly from each other in the grammar and vocabulary of their nonliterary spoken forms. A foreigner who learns to speak the standard variety of either one of them will get virtually 100 percent comprehension from speakers of the standard variety of the other. Nonetheless, it is sometimes claimed by native speakers of these languages, despite their obvious structural similarity, that they are different to the point of mutual unintelligibility. In the Arabic-speaking world, we have the opposite phenomenon: considerable objective linguistic diversity<sup>3</sup> that can on occasion definitely hamper effective communication, allied to the homespun view that *kulluh ‘arabiyy*—“It’s all Arabic.” As with the Hindi and Urdu speakers who claim they cannot understand each other when observation suggests they can, this is more of a political and cultural than a linguistic statement.

## 0.2 Varieties of Arabic

The spoken Arabic dialects are the varieties of the language that all native speakers learn as their mother tongue before they begin formal education. Geographically, these dialects may be thought of as being distributed along innumerable sets of intersecting continua, from Morocco in the west to Oman in the east, and from the borders of southern Turkey in the north to Sudan in the south.<sup>4</sup> Within this vast area, the inhabitants of any given village or town will experience no difficulty in understanding the ordinary vernacular speech of the inhabitants of the next village or town in any direction. The greater the distance between any two points of comparison, by and large, the greater will be the differences between the ordinary vernaculars spoken in them. It is not then surprising to find that the varieties of Arabic spoken at the extreme peripheries of the area differ from each other considerably, and certainly to the point of mutual unintelligibility if we were to compare what might be called the plain uneducated vernaculars—say, that of an Omani nomad with that of a Moroccan

townsman from Marrakesh.<sup>5</sup> In practice, in the modern world, a number of factors work to reduce the effect of such geographical differences.

For decades, although less so today, expatriate teachers, technicians, and professionals of all kinds from Egypt and the Levant formed the backbone of education and technical services in less developed areas within the region, such as the Gulf states. Conversely, students from all over the Arab world, but especially from those countries that until recently lacked a system of tertiary education, have long studied in the universities of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. Mecca, as the epicenter of the Islamic world, has for thirteen centuries been the goal of Muslim pilgrims from all over the Arabic-speaking lands. So interdialectal contact between different Arab populations is not new. But with the massive increase in inter-Arab contact occasioned by recent economic developments in particular, the scale and variety of types of interdialectal contact has become much greater. Nowadays, dialect contact occurs not just at the level of the well-educated business executive, flitting from country to country, or the expatriate teacher or technician on long-term contract, or the scholarship student. In Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the modern city states of the Gulf that have developed in the last two decades, armies of semiliterate economic migrants—Egyptian, Sudanese, and Yemeni laborers, porters, doormen, and waiters, mostly from rural backgrounds and with modest educational attainments—have become a semi-permanent, highly visible feature of the landscape. Perhaps it is still unlikely that our Omani nomad and Marrakeshi townsman would bump into each other in a Kuwaiti supermarket and still less need to discuss the spiraling price of rice. But this is no longer because the opportunity could never arise. Large numbers of very ordinary Arabs, expatriate and host, are indeed nowadays faced with having to cope with the speech of others from very different geographical and educational backgrounds. How do they do this? As we shall see, they have a number of linguistic resources and “coping” strategies at their disposal.

From an early age, Muslim Arabs (that is, more than 90 percent of all Arabs) have some degree of exposure to the language of the Islamic scriptures: that is, so-called Classical Arabic (CLA). As the language of revealed scripture—in Muslim eyes the literal words of God—the Classical Arabic of the Koran is viewed as an immutable linguistic phenomenon fixed for all time. For most Arab children, it is the first kind of Arabic different from their mother tongue dialect to which they are exposed, and it leaves an indelible impression, reinforced throughout later life in the constant ritual of prayers and attendance at the mosque. This early exposure consists of the rote learning of verses or even whole chapters of the Koran and the rituals of communal prayer, and is traditionally begun at the age of five or six in special Koranic schools. Until recently,

this was the only kind of education that many Muslims got; and while Classical Arabic is no more a functional linguistic idiom for Arabs than liturgical Latin is a living language for Roman Catholics, its rhythms and cadences are part of all Muslim Arab children's earliest conscious experience of language. Classical Arabic is revered by rich, poor, educated, and illiterate alike as the linguistic jewel in the Islamic cultural patrimony. It is regarded as the inimitable apogee of perfection, unsurpassable in beauty, an ethereal ideal of eloquence, perfect symmetry, and succinctness—however imperfectly, in practice, many Arabs understand it.<sup>6</sup> And although the syntax, vocabulary, and phraseology of Arabic have undergone considerable changes in the fourteen centuries since the Revelation, the common origins of Classical Arabic and all other contemporary varieties of the language are still plain for all to see. It is this fact, allied to the strong sense of shared cultural values that derives from the Islamic religion and its culture, that goes much of the way to explaining the claim made by speakers of apparently mutually unintelligible Arabic dialects that they all speak the same language.

Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), or Modern Literary Arabic (MLA), is the modern descendant of Classical Arabic, unchanged in the essentials of its syntax but very much changed, and still changing, in its vocabulary and phraseology. This unified, codified pan-Arab variety of Arabic is used for virtually all writing in the Arab world and nowadays, in its spoken form, also dominates the airwaves and the television channels of every Arab country. As the normal medium for formal discourse, it is used for all news broadcasts, political speeches, official announcements, and—most crucially—education in every Arab country. Ordinary Arabs themselves do not make a systematic terminological differentiation between CLA and MSA. Both are termed *ʔalʔarabi:ya tu lfuṣḥa:* “pure/eloquent Arabic” or simply *ʔalʔarabi:ya* or *ʔalfuṣḥa:* for short, in opposition to *ʔalʔa:mmi:ya* ‘the vernacular’, which exists in innumerable varieties and is popularly thought to be a grammarless corruption of “real” Arabic (*ʔalfuṣḥa:*). Some purists maintain that the terms *ʔarabi:ya* and *fuṣḥa:* should be reserved for the sixth- and seventh-century language of pre-Islamic poetry and the Koran—that is, the language as it was supposedly spoken in Arabia before the Islamic conquests brought the Arabs into contact with non-Arabs who eventually (or so it is believed) corrupted it. In practice, however, there is no chronological point at which CLA turned into MSA, still less any agreed set of linguistic criteria that could differentiate the two. MSA is merely a handy label used in western scholarship to denote the written language from about the middle of the nineteenth century, when concerted efforts began to modernize it lexically and phraseologically. Most western scholars refer to the formal written language before that

date, and par excellence before the eclipse of Arab political power in the fifteenth century, as “Classical Arabic.”

In symbolic terms, MSA is the language of power and control, as opposed to the language of intimacy and domesticity (the dialect), and it impinges in multifarious and sometimes subliminal ways on the daily life of Arabs of all generations, backgrounds, and educational levels. Metaphorically, and often literally, given the amount of television viewing in the average household, MSA is the backdrop against which the business of everyday life—itsself invariably in one form or other of the vernacular—is conducted. However imperfectly ordinary Arabs may have mastered its rules, and however out of place they may feel it sounds in nonformal, everyday, face-to-face conversational contexts, they know that MSA is always there as a kind of communally owned linguistic reservoir that they can dip into when they need to—a word here, a borrowed phrase there—in order to ensure that they make themselves understood to Arabs from distant countries or outsiders such as Arabic-speaking foreigners. In normal face-to-face conversation, as opposed to writing, however, a blanket switch from dialect to “pure” MSA is rare indeed, even if it were within the ability of most Arabic speakers, and is a strategy that is resorted to only when all else fails.

In practice, of course, it is rare for all else to fail. Some dialects—usually those of large metropolises such as Cairo or Damascus—are more widely understood than others and have acquired the status of “prestige” national or even international spoken standards that can be resorted to in cases of cross-dialectal conversation. When speakers from distant parts of the same country talk to each other—Egyptians from Lower and Upper Egypt, for instance—saliently “local” features not shared by the speakers may be neutralized in favor of “prestige dialect” features, in this case Cairene, that do not form part of the native dialect of either.<sup>7</sup> In cases of dialectal contact of speakers from more widely separated areas, the matter is a complex one but depends basically on what the participants perceive as the minimum degree of switching to “neutral” dialectal, MSA, or even “hybridized” forms, which is necessary to ensure smooth communication in an appropriate style. This is a question to which we will return in chapter 9.

### **0.3 Aims of this book**

My first aim in writing this book is to give in outline a linguistic description of the structure of modern Arabic as it is used by Arabs today. It will be clear from what has been said already that this will involve describing two types of Arabic: Modern Standard Arabic—the language of writing and formal speak-

ing—and dialectal Arabic, the language of normal conversation. Because, as has been pointed out, the latter exists in innumerable varieties, an attempt will be made to describe the structural characteristics that the majority of dialects share in general distinction to the structure of MSA. This book is not, therefore, a reference grammar of MSA or any dialect, still less a pedagogical manual, but rather a snapshot of a language undergoing rapid change.<sup>8</sup>

My second main aim is to illustrate, through the discussion of actual examples of language behavior, how these two types of Arabic are used by native speakers for different kinds of communicative purpose. In doing this, we will, I hope, be able to breathe life into the somewhat idealized and static picture of the language that will inevitably, and for the purposes of clear exposition quite properly, have appeared in our snapshot. What kinds of Arabic do Arabs choose to use on a range of social occasions, and why? How consistent is their behavior? Are MSA and dialectal Arabic really as self-contained and discrete entities as many available descriptions would lead us to believe? If they are not, and some kind of hybridization of the two types occurs, what is the nature of the mechanism that governs it? As well as describing the outline of language form, this book addresses the question of the complex and evolving relationship between structure and communicative function in the Arabic-speaking world of today (and tomorrow).

I hope that this book will prove to be of interest to two different types of reader: advanced students of Arabic who have a good practical knowledge of the standard language and perhaps one dialect, and who wish to gain a more principled understanding of the dynamics of the evolution of Arabic and the detail of its contemporary use; and general linguists who have little or no knowledge of it, but who are interested in how it compares structurally and sociolinguistically with other languages. The technique of statement throughout is therefore conservative, because my aim is not polemical but descriptive; the book aims not to support or refute claims advanced in favor of any particular linguistic theory, but rather to describe and explain the status quo, and how it came to be so, in what, it is hoped, is an insightful but as far as possible theoretically neutral manner. Whether the book succeeds in these aims is left to the reader to judge.

## Notes

1. See the essays collected in Rouchdy 1992, 83–204, and Rouchdy 2002, 133–48, for data-based observations on the status and evolution of Arabic in the speech of immigrants to the United States. Between 1988 and 1990, some 60,000 Arab immigrants arrived in the

Detroit area alone, most of them seeking refuge from the Lebanese civil war (Rouchdy 1992, 173). Abu Haidar 2002 describes the types of interference from English on the Arabic of the large London-based community of expatriate Iraqis and the generational language shift that is taking place from Arabic to English. Boumans and de Ruiter 2002 give an overview of the language profile of the Moroccan Arabic-speaking diaspora in Western Europe, which began to arrive in the 1960s.

2. This is the position espoused in Kaye 1994.
3. According to Cadora (1979, 32), Syro-Lebanese and Casablancon Arabic share only 68 percent of their base vocabulary—less than the 70 percent that Swadesh's work indicates is roughly the point at which two dialects can be considered forms of the same language.
4. Fischer and Jastrow 1980 provide a useful overview of the modern-day Arabic dialects classified from a geographical perspective, with twenty sample texts, including one from Malta.
5. A particular and pervasive feature of the linguistic situation in the Arab world is that dialectal distinctions are by no means exclusively related to geography. Lifestyle—that is, whether a community was in its recent history nomadic, village based, or urban—and even religious or sectarian affiliation are additional important factors in the dialectal structure of many states in the region, and the linguistic fault lines that run between one region, community, or even neighborhood and another can be quite sharp. A good example is provided by Baghdad, where Muslim and Christian dialects of Arabic are still sharply differentiated. Until the early 1950s, and the mass emigration of Jews, there was a three-way dialectal split along confessional lines (see Blanc 1964).
6. The only indigenous attempt—and a schematic one at that—at simplifying the complex rules of CLA was Anis Furayḥa's *Naḥwa Arabīya Muyassara* [*Towards a Simplified Arabic*], published in 1955. There is a presumably apocryphal story that when some of Furayḥa's academic colleagues who earned their living teaching CLA saw the title of his book, they protested: *ya: ḡusta:z, xalli:na: n'ī:s!* (liberally translated: "Oh, Professor, please don't take away our livelihood!").
7. Holes 1995b shows how, in Amman (Jordanian v. Palestinian), Baghdad (Muslim v. Christian v. Jewish) and Bahrain (Sunni v. Shi'i), dialects associated with different national, religious, and sectarian communities, and originally spoken side by side in the same city, have assumed a pecking order over the last few decades as a result of one of the dialects in each case assuming the status of a national "nonstandard standard": the East Bank Jordanian dialect in Amman, the Muslim dialect in Baghdad, the Sunni dialect in Bahrain. A major factor in this has been increasing urbanization and the consequently enhanced importance of the city in national and political life. This has led to the marginalization of the other dialects in public spaces and their relegation to a mode of in-group speech.
8. As this book was going to press, a new data-based reference grammar of modern written Arabic, *Modern Arabic: A Comprehensive Grammar*, by Elsaid Badawi, Michael Carter, and Adrian Gully appeared, unfortunately too late for me to be able to consult it thoroughly.