Introduction

The earth speaks Arabic.

Egyptian catchphrase

This Egyptian catchphrase has always intrigued me. Of course it shows the amount of pride Egyptians and perhaps all Arabs take in their language. But what I find fascinating is the word ‘Arabic’. What does ‘Arabic’ here refer to? Is it the Standard Arabic used in newspapers? The Classical Arabic of the Qur’an? The colloquial Arabic of Egypt? Or is it the Gulf Arabic of Saudi Arabia? For the layperson, there is only one language called ‘Arabic’. For the linguist, there are at least three different varieties of Arabic in each Arab country, and some linguists even claim that there are at least five different levels of Arabic in each country, not counting the different dialects of each country.

This is the first problem that one encounters in analysing this catchphrase. The other problem that one encounters is why, if ‘Arabic’ is the inherent language of the earth, are Arabs so keen on teaching their children foreign languages. Why is it that in North Africa French is still a crucial instrumental language? And why is it that at the time that all Arabs are defending their language as the main source of pride and identity they are also mastering English and French? The answers to all these questions are not clear cut. Language’s symbolic nature has always been important in any community and/or nation. Before proceeding with what this book discusses, I would like to refer to specific incidents that the reader may find interesting and that in general terms show the importance of Arabic socio-linguistics and the relationship between language and society.

Years ago, when I was still working in the UK, I was asked by an organisation to become a simultaneous translator in a forum that discusses security issues in Iraq. The forum had Iraqis from different sects and factions. There were Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds and Christians, as well as British politicians. I started translating from Arabic to English. The Iraqis would usually express themselves in Arabic,
whether Standard, Iraqi or both, and I would simultaneously translate what had been said into English. While I was interpreting, a female politician started speaking in a language that I did not recognise. I was then at a loss, thinking that perhaps she was speaking a dialect of Iraqi that I was not familiar with. I stopped translating and waited until she finished. Once she had finished, a colleague of hers started translating what she had said into Iraqi Arabic. After he did that, I then translated his Iraqi Arabic into English. It took me minutes to realise that she was a female Kurdish politician and her colleague who was translating for her was also Kurdish. During the break, which I was very glad to have, the female Kurdish politician approached me in a friendly manner and started addressing me in Iraqi Arabic. For an outsider it may seem impractical and a waste of time that she should speak Kurdish first to an audience that was mostly not Kurd, and then her colleague should have to translate, and then I have to translate. For a sociolinguist, this is perhaps expected. I asked her why she had not spoken ‘Arabic’ since she was so fluent, and she said confidently that she was Kurdish and by speaking Kurdish, she was making a political statement.

Her statement was indeed appealing, and it alludes to the power and symbolic significance of language choice. The relations between language and politics, and language and identity, are worth investigating. This is exactly what I do in Chapters 2 and 5 of this book.

Later, while I was working in the UK, I came across a young Moroccan woman working in the Foreign Office. She was a second-generation Moroccan, and I was happy to discover that her parents were keen on teaching her ‘Arabic’ and that she spoke ‘Arabic’ fluently. And indeed she did – except that she spoke Moroccan Arabic. We decided to meet for lunch, and she started complaining to me in Moroccan Arabic about her Moroccan husband, who did not understand her. Apart from knowing the general topic of discussion, I did not understand much of what she said, nor did she understand my Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA), nor even my attempts at speaking Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). We basically, after five minutes, reached a deadlock. It was clear that we both had to switch to English to understand each other. It was also clear that the Moroccan woman was exposed to neither ECA nor MSA. She was fluent only in Moroccan Arabic. Had the woman been exposed to ECA or any other dialect and not specifically MSA via the media, TV and satellite channels, our communication would have been much easier. The dialects are sometimes mutually unintelligible, and while educated speakers have developed sets of strategies for communicating across dialect boundaries that include using resources from MSA, someone who knows only a dialect of spoken Arabic will be likely not to understand an educated speaker of another dialect or be able to make herself or himself understood, especially if one of the speakers comes from North Africa and the other does not. Speakers of ECA have an advantage, but only if their interlocutor has watched a lot of television in a country that broadcasts programmes from Egypt. Thus, after this incident...
I could understand the fear that Arabs have of losing their grip on MSA and thus losing their concept of the nation. This will again be discussed in detail in Chapters 1 and 5, although there are many implications of this story that merit more investigation, especially the role of vernaculars in inter-dialectal communication and not just that of MSA.

A third event that left its impact on me was when I was invited to give a lecture at Cairo University about language choice and code-switching. Egypt, like any other country in the world, has more than one dialect spoken within it, the most prestigious one being the Cairene dialect for Egyptians. After I finished the lecture, a male student came to me to congratulate me on giving a very good lecture. He was speaking to me in perfect Cairene Arabic. We started a conversation, and he then told me that he comes from upper Egypt (al-ṣaḥiḥ), which has a distinct dialect/dialects characteristically different from Cairene Arabic phonologically, semantically and even morphosyntactically. I then asked him how he spoke Cairene Arabic so fluently, and he seemed a bit embarrassed and said to me ‘I speak Cairene Arabic to you. I can never speak it to my mother. If I speak Cairene Arabic to my mother, she will call me a sissy and possibly kill me!’ Knowing how powerful upper-Egyptian women are reputed to be, I feared he might be right. Note that speakers of non-standard language varieties are expected or even compelled to master prestige varieties. In Egypt, for a person from upper Egypt this would be Cairene. However, the survival of an upper-Egyptian dialect amidst all the pressure from a highly centralised Egypt for all Egyptians to speak Cairene Arabic is indeed worth investigating. The survival of a dialect which may be less prestigious but which carries its own ‘covert prestige’ (cf. Trudgill 1974) will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3 of this book.

I recall that throughout my childhood in Egypt I was fascinated and confused by the way women were addressed. We were living in the second floor of an eight-storey building. Our first-floor female neighbour, who was a middle-aged woman with a husband and four children, was always addressed by the caretaker as ‘ḥagga laila’, ‘Laila who had made the pilgrimage’, thus her first name was always used with the title ‘ḥagga’. Our third-floor neighbour, on the other hand, was always referred to as ‘īmmi sa:mih’, ‘mother of sa:mih’, and never by her first name. The reason why one neighbour maintained her first name although she still had sons and another lost it is still beyond me. But it also shows that the linguistic situation of the Arab world, especially that pertaining to women, is complicated, as will be made clear in Chapter 4.

**ARABIC SOCIOLINGUISTICS**

My book is called *Arabic Sociolinguistics*. Therefore, in this section I will explain what sociolinguistics is and why Arabic is important. I will start with the latter.
Arabic is the sole or joint official or national language of twenty-three countries, ranging from Morocco in the north to Sudan in the south and from Mauritania to Yemen. Native speakers of Arabic total about 300 million. Arabic has always been important to western linguists. However, Arabic variationist sociolinguistics flourished after Ferguson’s article about diglossia in 1959. In this article, he drew the distinction between the standard language and the different vernaculars of each Arab country. In subsequent years, Arabic variationist sociolinguistics research has tended to concentrate on relating variation in language use to demographic factors like education, age and sex/gender, and more recently on issues related to language and identity and its ethnic and nationalistic manifestations (cf. Suleiman 2003: 1).

In addition, Holes (2004: 8) states that ‘the earliest definite textual evidence we have for the existence of a distinct language identifiable as Arabic is an inscription on a tombstone found at Nemara in the Syrian desert. This has been dated to AD 328 – recent by the standards of Semitic languages.’ He also suggests that a spoken language may have existed before that.

In the next paragraphs I will define the term sociolinguistics and the main themes that sociolinguists are concerned with as well as the tasks of sociolinguists. I will briefly touch on the problems of terminology in the field. After that I will highlight the contents of this book as well as the limitations of this work. The last section is devoted to the organisation of the book.

There are two kinds of linguistic analysts: those concerned with universals and what languages have in common, and those who look for differences between individuals in relation to a community of speakers. The former are theoretical linguists and the latter are sociolinguists (Shuy 2003). According to Gumperz and Hymes (1972) theoretical linguists analyse linguistic competence while sociolinguists analyse communicative competence. Communicative competence is defined by Gumperz as the ability of the individual to ‘select from the totality of grammatically correct expressions available to him, forms which appropriately reflect the social norms governing behaviour in specific encounters’ (1972: 205).

Sociolinguistics, according to Crystal (1987: 412), is ‘the study of the interaction between language and the structures and functioning of society’. The field of sociolinguistics has developed vastly within the last fifty years (cf. Paulston and Tucker 2003). Now the field ‘examines in depth more minute aspects of language in social context’ (Shuy 2003: 5).

According to Hymes (2003: 30), ‘diversity of speech has been singled out as the hallmark of sociolinguistics’. Sociolinguistics entails relations other than social and grammatical structures that can be studied qualitatively. Sociolinguists all agree that no normal person and no normal community is limited to a single way of speaking, nor to unchanging monotony that would preclude indication of respect, insolence, mock seriousness, humour, role distance etc.
In studying language in society and the ways in which linguistic resources and access to them are unequally distributed, sociolinguists give evidence of how patterns of linguistic variation reflect and contrast social differences. In studying responses language users have to instances of language use, they demonstrate the reality and power of affective, cognitive and behavioural language attitudes. In analysing how language users create links between language varieties and users, institutions, or contexts, they uncover language ideologies that create social realities. These are only some of the things that sociolinguists are concerned with. The list is indeed very long.

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS AS A FIELD OF STUDY**

Sociolinguistics is in fact a recent field of study, as was said earlier. This may be because, as Labov puts it, it is a field that depended to a large extent on the development of technology. According to Labov nothing could be achieved until the field developed a clearer way of presenting phonological structure, which required the development of tape recorders, spectrograms, sampling procedures, and computers to process large quantities of data (in Shuy 2003: 5). However, such a claim is only true for variationist sociolinguists, not the many who have studied language policy, code-switching and language ideology. The interest in the differences in ways people speak is very old, and Arabic linguistics as a field may be traced back to Khalīl ibn Aḥmad (d. between 776 and 791), if not before (cf. Bohas et al. 2006). Khalīl ibn Ahmad was an Arab philologist who compiled the first Arabic dictionary and is credited with the formulation of the rules of Arabic prosody.

In fact, at the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a great interest in dialectology (see Chapter 5). Linguists of the colonising powers started becoming interested in the dialects and the linguistic situations of the colonised countries. Because of the existence of colonies for countries like France, the UK, the Netherlands and Portugal, linguists started describing multilingual situations, language contact and creolisation (cf. Whiteley 1969; Houis 1971). However, until 1961, the term ‘sociolinguistics’ was not listed in the *Webster new international dictionary* (Shuy 2003).

Issues of terminology are not entirely resolved even now (cf. Shuy 2003). How do we define a community? What is a social class? What is the difference between code-switching and borrowing? Or even questions related purely to Arabic, like: what is educated spoken Arabic? Is there a pure Standard Arabic? These are not easy questions to answer.

To give an example of such problems of defining terms, the variationist linguist Labov objected to the term ‘sociolinguistics’ as early as 1965. Until 1965 there was no name agreed upon to define the field; should it be called...
linguistics, since this is indeed a way of examining language? Or should it be called language and culture, sociology of language, or language and behaviour?\(^3\)

In spite of the imprecision of sociolinguistic terms in general, as a field of study it has yielded insights into the way people use language that are unprecedented in their significance, as will become clear in this book. It is sociolinguistics that has helped us understand each other more as well as acknowledge differences and similarities between us and others – whoever this ‘us’ is and ‘others’ are.

AIMS OF THE BOOK

This book provides an up-to-date account of major themes in Arabic sociolinguistics. It discusses trends in research on diglossia, code-switching, gendered discourse, language variation and change, and language policies in relation to Arabic. In doing so, it introduces and evaluates the various theoretical approaches, and illustrates the usefulness and the limitations of these approaches with empirical data. Note that a significant number of the theoretical approaches introduced are based on or inspired by western, especially Anglo-American work, on sociolinguistics. The reasons for this will be discussed in detail in the next section. The book aims to show how sociolinguistic theories can be applied to Arabic, and conversely, what the study of Arabic can contribute to our understanding of the function of language in society.

This book addresses both students and researchers of Arabic and linguistics. The book will not require any knowledge of Arabic, nor will it focus narrowly on a single Arabic dialect, or a single group of Arabic dialects; instead, it summarises the present state of research on Arabic in its various forms. The book, also, does not require knowledge of sociolinguistics or linguistics, though knowledge of both is of course an asset in reading this work.

There are inevitably crucial topics that cannot be covered in this book but that definitely need to be addressed. Thus, pidginisation and creolisation, though mentioned in passing in this book, deserve a book by themselves, although studies in the topic are still developing (cf. Versteegh 2001). Also, with the large number of Arab immigrants in different parts of the Arab world, one has to acknowledge the unique and interesting status of Arabic in the diaspora (cf. Rouchdy 1992). Finally, Arabic as a minority language in different parts of the world is again a topic of interest and has been discussed by Versteegh (2001) and Owens (2007).

One problem that I encountered in writing this book is dividing it into chapters. This has sometimes been done forcibly, since language variation and change are related to gender, and gender is related to politics, while politics is related to diglossia, and diglossia is related to code-switching. Since there
has to be a division somewhere, I have had to divide the book into different chapters.

**ORGANISATION OF THE BOOK**

The framing of the book is crucial though not symbolic in itself. Each chapter starts with a discussion of classic work conducted on the west and then moves on to the Arab world. This is not because I believe that work conducted on the Arab world is subordinate to work conducted on the west but because of other reasons. First, a great number of works published in the western world about the Arab world adopt the classic theories that I discuss, even though these theories were applied first in the west. This is not wrong in any way as long as theories are modified and adjusted to explain the situation in the Arab world. Second, the aim of the book is to help scholars and students to begin thinking about how and why matters of language in the Arab world are not always like matters of language in the west. This cannot be done unless I shed light on the essential theories of western linguists. Lastly, as a matter of practicality, since the book does not assume prior knowledge of linguistics or Arabic, as was said earlier, although knowledge of both is an asset, it is necessary to familiarise the reader with the groundbreaking research in the west before discussing the Arab world.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter presents a bird’s-eye view of the linguistic status quo of the Arab world. This is achieved by introducing the reader first to the diglossic situation in the Arab world and its implications, then to the different approaches to the grouping of dialects in the Arab world.

The second chapter examines diglossic switching and code-switching as a single phenomenon. In this chapter I give an overview of theories of code-switching that concentrate on assigning structural constraints on switching, thus answering the question of how switching occurs, and theories that examine the motivations for switching – why people switch. The chapter refers to studies done by a number of linguists as well as two studies conducted by myself.

In Chapter 3, I highlight three crucial theories in examining variation: the social class theory, the social networks theory and the third wave approach to variation studies. I first shed light on methods used in quantitative variation research and problems related to them. Then I concentrate on specific variables that trigger language variation and change, and finally I discuss diglossia and levelling.

In Chapter 4, I concentrate on gender, starting with different theories that examine the relation between gender and language, as well as gender universals and postulates about gender in general and gender in the Arab world.
in particular. I also examine the speech of educated women in Egypt in this chapter and how they at times challenge the gender universals.

The final chapter deals with the relation between language policies and politics in the Arab world. I examine some case studies and the political/historical factors that influence language policy, as well as the relation between language policies and language ideologies. The status of Arabic and foreign languages in the education system of countries in the Arab world is highlighted. Linguistic rights are also discussed.

What I try to do throughout is to provide empirical data from my own research, in addition to data from other studies, to help explain the phenomena discussed. Thus there is in most chapters a section on data analysis.

When discussing Arabic sociolinguistics, Owens mentions that studies may still lack the feel of a coherent entity, and his explanation for this is as follows: ‘Arabic covers sociolinguistic landscapes whose only coherency at times appears to be the almost accidental fact that the language used in each part happens to be Arabic’ (Owens 2001: 463).

Indeed, writing a book about Arabic sociolinguistics is a challenging task. Arabic sociolinguistics has proven to be a vast field and one that has not yet been completely discovered. It is therefore unavoidable that there has to be a selection and focus on particular issues, topics and studies and not others.

NOTES

1. The phrase is spoken in colloquial Egyptian Arabic. Still, it is not clear Egyptians mean colloquial Egyptian by ‘Arabic’.
2. It is worth mentioning that there is still a large amount of work done on issues of language policy and planning, descriptions of linguistic situations in various countries, Arabisation, debates about the proper role of second or foreign languages, and corpus planning, especially technical vocabulary. These issues will be discussed in Chapter 5.
3. It is noteworthy, however, that Labov’s objections to the term at the time were of a different nature. He did not want a hyphenated label for what he did; in other words, he did not want to be marginalised by a label in just the way that sociolinguists has been for some time, especially in the USA.