

# Arabic to Where? Some Problems that Ail the Arabic Teaching Industry

Rajaa Chouairi, Ph.D., United States Military Academy, West Point, NY

## Introduction

No one can deny that communication – orality – is often the goal of language learning. However, in most cases, American academic institutions are teaching a variety of Arabic no one uses in daily communication or in speech communities. Thus, after years of hard work and diligence, students who cannot converse in the street, cannot negotiate in the market, cannot understand 90% of Arab songs or the cultures' folklore, and cannot watch with full appreciation an Arab movie or play, graduate (perhaps even with a Ph.D. in Arabic). Yet the claim is that we are teaching this variety of the language in order to make people "literate."

Curriculum formulators and administrators (many of whom do not know the language) may thus opt for the apparent haven of standardized classical Arabic instruction. If they wish to offer courses in a spoken variety, they often face insufficient opportunity to plan and a dearth of faculty who can bring to the classroom anything other than street dialects. This paper is addressed to the administrator who does not know Arabic and who faces the challenge of formulating an Arabic curriculum, but also to new teachers of Arabic who may wish to further investigate the topics discussed.

I begin by clarifying the notion of diglossia as it relates to the teaching of Arabic and then present four problems that I feel ail the Arabic teaching industry in our institutions. I shall speak about literacy, not in the traditional definition – meaning reading and writing – but as the notion of a world of knowledge that is opened through all forms of language and linguistic expression. In recent years, important thinkers such as Gee, Street, and Taylor have put forth a new and compelling framework, including oral tradition, folklore, and so on, for what they term literacy.

To contextualize my arguments, I would like to state that I am a classicist by formation, educated in the *Collège Oriental Basilien* الكلية الشرقية, one of the pioneer institutions in the renaissance of the Arabic language over the past two centuries. I love classical Arabic and its literature, and I accept the diglossic nature of Arabic both as a given and a luxury that most Arabs take for granted; but this paper is not about the native who has the luxury of choice. This paper is more about the student who discovers after years of study that s/he is linguistically handicapped in Arab speech communities where the language s/he has learned appears not to be used at all. Confronting this problem begins with an understanding of diglossia.

## Diglossia: Definitions and cultural and historical factors

Diglossia, a term borrowed from French and German linguistics and introduced into English by Charles Ferguson (1959), signifies one language with two different varieties that Ferguson called H and L. H is unspoken, written and read, learned at

school. L is the spoken language, the language of everyday, the language of interaction between people and in society. Ferguson gave the following definition:

Diglossia is 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. (1959. 'Diglossia' *WORD* 15: 2.325-40. Repr. in Hymes [1964], pp. 429-39).

Arabic was one of the languages upon which Ferguson based the bulk of his research, the others being Greek, Creole, and Swiss German. Arabic is one of the five official languages in the United Nations; in spoken form, it is a language used by around 300,000,000 people all over the world. It is also the “sanctified” language (H, for Ferguson) of the fastest growing religion in the world. The Koran (the holy book of the Muslims), Muslims believe, was revealed in Arabic; Arabic is thus deemed a God-chosen language, and for many Muslims, literary Arabic should not evolve beyond its traits as found in the Koran.

Arabic in its spoken form *has* of course evolved through use by people in societies. Four major forms exist today and are often called dialects, which gives the – to my mind, misleading – impression that they are variation languages of H (classical Arabic) and thus lacking its power of expression and its intellectual and cultural relevancy. However, these spoken languages are in reality the languages of the societies where they exist: the means of communication of kings and paupers, the language of theatre, the movies, love relations and inter-personal dealings at all levels. No mother talks to her daughter in classical Arabic, no president talks to a king in classical Arabic, no Arab person conducts business verbally with another Arab in classical Arabic.

Nonetheless, in many foreign language programs, we are teaching students classical Arabic, a form of the language that is not evolving as a functional language of everyday life. Thus, the official “literacy” standards in the Arab world and in the world of Arabic-as-a -foreign-language (AFL) education are based on a language no native speaks as a functional day-to-day language.

**Ferguson’s H and L and their functions:**

(Although I find the usage of H for classical Arabic and L for the spoken variety misleading, I have maintained those designations for simplicity’s sake.)

Ferguson (1959) understood the separation of H and L to be based on the functions of H and L. He thought each variety of the language to be functionally specialized where “in one situation only H is appropriate and in another only L” (p. 27), resulting in the following chart:

Sermon in church or mosque	H
Instructions to servants, waiters, workmen, clerks	L
Personal letter	H
Speech in parliament, political speech	H

University lecture	H
Conversation with family, friends and colleagues	L
News broadcast	H
Radio "soap opera"	L
Newspaper editorial, news story, caption on picture	H
Caption on political cartoon	L
Poetry	H
Folk literature	L

Although Ferguson's division of the functions of H and L is clear and helpful (and may have been accurate at the time), his definition falls short of observing the dialectical development within each of these practices. For instance, personal letters to family members and friends in Arabic, although they may start with expressions and idioms belonging to H, will then switch to L after the first few lines. Also the social functions discourse traditionally encountered in personal letters has been replaced for the most part by telephone conversations which are always in L.

### Diglossia is not bilingualism

In what is known as the Fishman Extension (1966) (1967) of the Ferguson definition, Fishman claims that diglossia can also exist between two "genetically unrelated languages" and not just as two varieties of the same language, one code representing the H unspoken variety and another representing the L spoken variety. He gives the diglossic example of Spanish and Guarani in Paraguay (1971: 75) as an example. The concept was further developed by Hymes (1964: 389): "Diglossia is an excellent example of coexistence in the same community of mutually unintelligible codes, correlated with values and situations..." One must, however, distinguish between bilingualism and diglossia. In the latter, the H variety is not a spoken variety, while in bilingualism both varieties could be spoken.

But, diglossia and bilingualism are similar in the linguistic behavior of those who have command of, or need to be communicative in, both varieties within each category (H and L in diglossia, and L1 and L2 in bilingualism). Code-switching and borrowing are two such behaviors.

In code-switching, a variety is used according to situation, as illustrated by Blom & Gumperz (1971) in their research in Hemnesberget, a town in Norway with two varieties of Norwegian, an H variety and a local dialect:

In the course of a morning spent at the community administration office, we noticed that clerks used both standard and dialect phrases, depending on whether they were talking about official affairs or not. Likewise, when residents step up to a clerk's desk, greeting and inquiries about family affairs tend to be exchanged in the dialect, while the business part of the transaction is carried on in the standard (p. 425)

I have not encountered much of this type of code-switching in Arabic except in political and religious programs on television when there was a reference to formal political terms and expressions or to religious quotations from the Bible or the Koran. I have observed *bilingual* metaphorical code-switching in Lebanon between French and Arabic among the upper class and the educated elite.

William Labov (1971) (see also Hudson, 1980) describes a switch of variety in the middle of a sentence, with no change in conversation, topic, or audience. This type of code-switching is possible in Arabic only at the level of individual words that etiquette, protocol, and tradition dictate should be used in their H variety such as: Koraan, al-aquahira. True code-switching in Arabic between H and L is impossible because of the conscious grammatical structure dictated by H which I will clarify later.

In Lebanon, I have observed doctors switching languages between Arabic (L)-French or Arabic (L)-English (according to their schooling). This behavior probably arises from the fact that most research and medical terms accessible in Lebanon are in English or in French. What is interesting to note, however, is that the type of Arabic used is always L and never H, even among those doctors who graduated from medical schools in Egypt and Syria where instruction is provided in the H variety of Arabic.

### Is diglossia a fixed condition?

One point raised by proponents of teaching the H variety as the foundation of L2 instruction is that diglossia is a fixed situation in which the functions of H and the functions of L are predetermined. In this view, an important historical, religious or literary event occurred and was so influential, that it “sanctified” the language. For instance, Arabic scholars traditionally believed that the Koran sanctified the language in the 7th century. In other words, the H form (or some aspects of it) existed at one time as an L form, but a powerful historical event stabilized it in time. Such a position would inject in our modern L2 curriculum a theoretical framework based on language determinism.

### Language determinism and diglossia

To assert the stability of diglossia in any language is to raise a new case for language determinism and to further discussion of whether language determines thought or culture. This is an argument with important implications for the future of any given language and its status as an instructed foreign language. If one accepts the Sapir Whorf hypothesis (1921, 1956), keeping an H variety intact means to a large extent imposing a worldview consistent with that variety. For example, additions to the lexicon of H in Arabic often involve a search for words already belonging to the H variety to describe the modern and social functions of what is to be named. In Damascus, Beirut, Cairo or any other big city, the bus is called al-Bus (or al-Busta, or al auto-bus), yet in the written form, some Arabists insist in calling it *al-hafilah* (meaning a machine filled with people). Not one single soul in the streets of these cities, waiting for a bus would say: “I am waiting for the *hafilah*.” What is interesting is that while the H variety is searching in its past for words to describe the functional present, the L variety continues to evolve through borrowing (Gumperz, 1964: 423 in Hymes) and thus moves further and further away from H.

### Is diglossia a shift?

If we were to adopt a point of view stating that diglossia is a linguistic shift between two different forms of a language that involve code-switching (Blom & Gumperz, 1971; Labov, 1971) and development of new functional syntax and mor-

phology, then we would have to prove *ipso facto* that H was L at one time and it is changing little by little into a new variety of the language. L would have to be considered a dialect. Is L a dialect?

A dialect can be understood as having vernacular status with respect to a spoken, standard mother language. When Wolfram (1980), for example, termed Appalachian English a vernacular dialect, it was in reference to standard spoken American English, not – as would presumably have to be the case for Arabic H and L – to a written, formal variety of the language. I contend that we cannot call Arabic L variety a “dialect” in reference to H simply because H is not spoken anywhere. Labov (1972) states that “when speakers of a subordinate dialect are asked direct questions about their language, their answers will shift in an irregular manner towards [or away from] the superordinate dialect” (p. 111). On the contrary, none of the Arabic speakers I asked about their language shifted in their answers away from or towards the H variety, except through use of static expressions in H. Halliday (1978) argues that dialects are an aspect of register and that more than one dialect could be part of a speaker’s repertoire. Speakers may also adopt new dialects. In Arabic, people do not have the option of switching out of the macro-linguistic genre of L, and H does not constitute what Halliday calls “standard dialect” because H is not spoken. The dialect switch in Arabic happens mostly at the level of pronunciation and lexicon within one standardized spoken language. We have to assert here a point of view that dialects come to life when there are variations on the spoken language, so we can speak of a Loire dialect, a Corsican dialect and a Midi dialect in France, but we cannot (or can no longer) state that French is a dialect of Latin. In the same fashion we can speak of a Beirut dialect, a Damascus dialect and a mountain dialect, but we cannot say that the Levantine language spoken there is a dialect of the H variety of Arabic.

Differentiation between the usage of H and L is mainly caused by a “register” (Halliday) factor where the language is chosen according to use or usage. Thus, assuming with Hudson that standard, dialect spoken language is a full language, then any dialect in a diglossic language is a micro-dialect emanating from L and upon which H has very little effect. Thus, when we speak of languages in the Arab world, we speak of “standard dialects” (see above) that have become “full languages”: Levantine Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, Gulf Arabic, and Moroccan Arabic (all erroneously referred by dialectologists as dialects). From these “Arabics” emanate micro-dialects such as mentioned by Labov (2001: 270): Cairo Arabic, Baghdad Arabic, etc.

### **Some reflections on factors involved in Arabic diglossia in current thinking about AFL instruction**

Aboud (1983), Al-Batal (1992), Alish (1991), and Younes (1990) all indicate that L is an important component of AFL, but opinions vary drastically on whether to teach it.

Alish (1997) classifies AFL pedagogical approaches as located on a continuum from classical Arabic H only (misleadingly called MSA – Modern Standard Arabic – which Alish justly rejects) to an integrated approach where L is introduced along with H. But all of these approaches, as Al-Batal mentions (1992), seek “to cope with diglossic situations in the Arabic classroom” (p. 298). There is a tacit assertion that H is the language of reading and writing and that it should fulfill that function. Both Al-

Batal and Alish have indicated to me that we teach H because “we do not want our students to be illiterate” (Alish). But no one speaks H, and although teaching it as a spoken language may produce students who can themselves be understood in the Arab world, those same students may well not understand what is being said to them in L. L varieties are generally not presented systematically in textbooks, although the new integrated approach of Munther Younes, related on a certain level to the work of McLoughlin and to Ryding’s concept of Educated Spoken Arabic, breaks this mold.

The impressive work of Alish and Al-Batal suggests that L varieties will be introduced in their textbooks. Whether one wants to adopt an integrated approach or teach the L variety as a separate course is the decision of the teacher and his/her curriculum committee, but we cannot ignore the fact that exclusion of the L variety may constitute a major disservice to students of Arabic.

In a general way, there is evidence that “what is learned in school is not what is used in society” (Scribner, 2000: 9-40). And the very nature of the teaching and learning process may lead to a widening of the gap between the two. But a number of historical fortuities have contributed to a tendency to focus on the H variety in AFL, and it is worthwhile to examine the whole issue from many perspectives. The challenges of the future impose this examination, and the thinking of many brilliant and experienced Arabists serves to illuminate it. I propose to classify the various elements of this discussion in terms of four problems.

### **Problem One – No adequate ethnographic research has been conducted on H and its usage**

Arabic language (L2) pedagogues and applied linguists have traditionally observed Arab systems and not Arab communities. Thus, for example, major changes in literary and literacy circles in the Arab world with respect to L are not reflected in most textbooks. Ethnography is virtually absent from research on Arabic language usage in the Arab world.

Malinowski (1923) presents the merits of ethnography as does no one else. We owe to him and to the London school (people like Firth) that linguistics and literacy have moved beyond the Saussurian (later Chomskyan) abstractions of non-situated theorizing. For Malinowski, language can be studied only “against the background of human activities” (1923: 312). But Classical Arabic H is absent from current human activities other than reading and writing.

Previous research on Arabic diglossia has not generally involved ethnographic investigation of the use of language in small communities and in human activities. Instead, writers and pedagogues observed how language was taught in Arab schools and tried to find “functional” adaptations for western classrooms. If on the first day of school, an Arab student starts learning the classical H variety, it may seem to follow that on the first day of an AFL course, an American student would do the same! But the Arab student already speaks the language in an L variety and has significant knowledge of its folklore and oral tradition from home.

Admittedly, Arabic diglossia poses a major problem to textbook authors and to program administrators: at a minimum, there is not enough time to efficiently cover both varieties. But is it a given that students should learn how to read and write

before learning how to speak? Are we perhaps accepting a political and even theocratic definition of how language should function? Have evolving circumstances in the Arab world reached the point where new research could suggest a solution to the problem?

## **Problem Two – H doesn't reflect most literacy practices in the Arab world**

Ferguson's (1959) chart could be misleading. Ethnographic research (Chouairi, 2005) shows that if one were to re-visit and observe the activities mentioned on the chart identified as using Classical Arabic H variety, one would arrive at categorizations opposite those of Ferguson.

Ferguson is correct, for example, that sermons continue to be presented in H, but observing Arabic as used by clerics was a revealing part of my research, however challenging. One afternoon, in the narthex of a church, I observed a Greek Orthodox priest teaching children the meaning of Holy Communion and lessons from the Bible using the L variety. When I asked him why he didn't use the H variety, as he would have in his weekly sermon, he replied: "It is not as expressive and as efficient as when I address them in the spoken language." He was thus "increasing the perspective and detailed character of the transmission of knowledge" (Lave 1977: 32) by adopting a language variety more suitable to situational learning to accommodate children who knew the language from home. Likewise, the Sunni Imam of the town, someone who is known for his eloquence in the H variety, rarely uses it out of the formal sermon on Friday or during an official occasion.

The type of Arabic used in the news hour is generally H variety. But the advent of satellite television stations covering the entire Arab world has revealed the importance of the spoken Arabic L in the Arab discourse. The most popular programs, Super Star (Future TV), Star Academy (LBC), and Khallek bilbeit (Future), are all in spoken variety L. Political programs such as Kalam al-Nas (LBC) and al-Itijah al-Mu'akes (al-Jazeera) are mostly in spoken variety with heavy code-switching in the second one. Sitcoms from Syria and Egypt are all in the spoken variety. Medical awareness, entertainment, and variety programs are also all conducted in L. When asked whether they would like some of the aforementioned shows presented instead in H, people answered uniformly "No." Alish posits a "*paradigm shift*" (1997: 303) in the media from a "*text-based perspective*" using H to a "*communicative perspective*" (Swaffar et al., 1991) using an easier genre of H or some borrowed L. I think the media have gone beyond this point with the introduction of day-long programming which ultimately reflects real language use. L words and expressions are even entering the news discourse.

Can H continue to be used widely in the media? Investigation reveals a trend in local Middle Eastern TV stations to dub Japanese cartoons in classical Arabic H. The language borders on the absurd. I observed children watching these programs: they don't laugh, and they get bored very quickly. While watching a comedy with Syrian actor Dureid Laham written in L, children and adults giggle and laugh.

The media have certainly opened our eyes to political discourse in the Arab world. Negotiations, arguments, discussions and expressions of opinion are all parts of the

political discourse in which heads of state, politicians and citizens engage, just as are the rather less common political speeches, which Ferguson classified as H. All of the former “political” activities are conducted in the spoken L variety.

It is true that the classical Arabic H variety has dominated the history of Arabic poetry. Arabs love their literature and, if I may be subjective, have produced some of the greatest schools in world literature. From the eighth to the fourteenth century, Arabic literary schools were influential throughout the Mediterranean basin and parts of Europe (from Spain to India). In the twentieth century, poetry in L suddenly appeared (especially in Lebanon). These poems entered Arab “mainstream” culture through books, theatre, songs and folklore. Classical Arabic H witnessed a concurrent renaissance with Gibran Kahlil Gibran, Michael Nueima, Taha Hussein, Ahmad Shawqi, Khalil al-Mutran, Girgi Zaidan, the Bustani and the Yazgi families, Iliya abu Madi, Saeed Akl, Saeed Takieddine, Amin Nakhleh, and many others who liberated the classical Arabic H variety from much of its artificiality. But none of them claimed that the H variety would ever replace the spoken variety in its many functions, and many also wrote great poetry in spoken L. Saeed Akl, for example, realized early on that most poetry should be in the L variety because it is the spoken language; and he created in this variety major poetic masterpieces.

### **Problem Three – H is a constructed and not a natural language**

Classical Arabic, al-Fusha (MSA), cannot be spoken as a functional daily conversational language. The argument that the H variety of Arabic was spoken in the great age of Islamic civilization has to be challenged. We have, for example, manuscripts from the `abbassid age (8th to 14th century) showing the Khalifa Harun al-Rashid (Aaron the Wise) using some written-spoken language in Iraqi dialect.

A constructed language is a language built and formulated by “artisan-linguists” from several other discourses and is given fabricated shapes, forms, syntax, morphology, and grammar. For example, classical Arabic (H variety) has a lexicon built from all the languages that bordered Arabia: Syriac, Egyptian, Bedouin Arabic, Greek and Persian, but it has a grammatical structure that is formulated by linguists and writers. The same is the case with classical Greek, Slavonic, and Latin. The reason such an explanation is plausible is that the grammatical variations in Arabic are heavily indicated by phonetic changes mostly not present in the alphabetical representation of the lexicon and by syntactical changes that necessitate a sophisticated conscious knowledge of grammar. Literacy in the H variety is learned only through what the authority (Church, State, Academe) dictates; it cannot be “inherited” since it is learned through schooling and not in the house through “the interplay of individual biographies and educative styles of the parents” (Taylor, 1983: 23).

Both the London school of Firth (1951) and the Swiss school of de Saussure (and Chomsky) agree that grammar is a subconscious mechanism in language. But, as I contend above, the grammar in the H form of a diglossic language is a constructed, conscious grammar that does not lead itself to natural speech.

In classical Arabic, the positions of nouns and verbs within the sentence necessitate phonemic changes in the middle and at the end of the word (not necessarily

alphabetically represented). Incorrect use of short vowels changes the meaning, hence the great difficulty of maintaining awareness of grammatical elements and linguistic functions.

In English we could say, "The boy ate the apple." In H Arabic it would be (transliterated): 'akala al- waladu atuffAhata. The underlined endings in this case are short vowels, 'a' is an ending for a "sound" (no long vowel) verb in the third person masculine past tense, 'u' is an ending for a "sound" subject being the boy, 'a' is the ending of a "sound" direct object. In complicated texts or in fast speech, it is impossible for the vast majority of highly educated people to keep track of word positions within a sentence in order to use the correct endings (I am not talking about case endings here), neither can they refer to their spoken language to know the correct answer (since their spoken language is different). Books and treatises can be written (and have been) about the complications of classical Arabic grammar. When I was a student, we had a grammar course during which we would listen to recordings of famous Arab heads of state or literary figures, and we would be challenged to discover their "major" mistakes in the H language – they were numerous! Thus, I argue that a constructed conscious grammar is simply not a system for a spoken language.

## **Problem Four: Towards a more functional pedagogy based on literate practices**

### **The case of immersion**

The teaching of a spoken language would presumably require the possibility of immersion in that language. H does not meet this criterion as articulated by Cambourne (1988: 48-67), who justly states that immersion is possible in the L1 reading classroom, and it is also possible out of the classroom at home and in society. But we cannot speak of H variety immersion in Arabic L2 instruction. As we have seen throughout this paper, I can immerse students only in the written word, whereas with the spoken variety L, I can immerse them in the written word (see poetry above), but also in theatre, in television and radio variety shows, in folklore tales, in proverbs, in music and in letter writing to other students. With H, they can travel to Arab countries where they may be understood using the language, but they probably will not understand anything except the evening news and few articles in the newspapers. With the spoken variety L, they can travel, sit in cafes, shop, discuss politics, visit people, listen to them, share in their lives, ask the peasants about the crops, the elderly about traditions, those who cannot read and write about their struggles, etc. Thus, they can engage with them in their literacy practice. Linguistics brings the world and its languages to the lab, while literacy takes the language to the world and brings the world to the classroom.

In conclusion, we realize that H limits literacy to reading and writing and neglects orality completely.

### **Where is orality?**

I believe it misleading to call orality *Parole* or *Performance* in the de Saussure – Chomsky tradition. Orality lives in a dialectical state where there is always a struggle between anything perceived by each person and his/her cultural history in which lan-

guage forms a big part; while *Parole* and *Performance* are abstract systems unaffected by the outside world. I do not mean by orality just what is spoken but also what is understood and received through means other than formal writing or reading.

In general, foreign language departments at the tertiary level have been run by linguists and literature professors. Program objectives often give short shrift to orality and may thus fail to develop literacy as fully as could be hoped. Street (1995: 153) refers to a “great divide” between orality and literacy (criticizing Ong). Further, he argues that efforts to establish a continuum anchored by these entities (orality and literacy) is “more rhetorical than real.” Street suggests instead two models of literacy: “autonomous” (purely technical) and “ideological” (cultural), and rejects any dialectical relationship between these two models, claiming that such a relationship (synthesis) would create “polarization.”

As we have seen, in much AFL pedagogy, reading and writing are deemed the main forms of literacy; the unfortunate part is that reading and writing in H cannot even be considered “adequate technicism” (Street 1995: 161) because, as we have seen, reading and writing in H do not necessarily reflect literacy practices in the Arab world, and of course, the social element is absent from H. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the schools of linguistics that came from the West, supported by a traditional theocratic and literary chauvinism in defending the H variety, threatened to keep the literacy of the Arabic people imprisoned in a writing system representing a non-spoken language and far removed from the actual living language. This meaningless and false division continues, unfortunately, to be widely accepted. “Illiterate,” in this perspective, is term describing a native speaker who cannot read and write. Given, however, that such an individual uses the same language as a president or king in conversation, we may wish to explore what Street calls the “stigma of illiteracy” (1995:21-23).

### **Street and the “stigma of illiteracy”:**

It is not only meaningless intellectually to talk of the ‘illiterate’, it is also socially and culturally damaging. In many cases it has been found that people who have come forward to literacy programs because they think of themselves as ‘illiterate’ have considerable literacy skill... (Street, 1995:19)

Street points out how literacy campaigns, especially in the third world, have ignored the local literacies of reading and writing associated with the societies there. People inherit from their ancestors folkloric expressions rich in knowledge of historical events, forms of linguistic behavior, and modes of personal expression. This vast knowledge is not typically sought in the H variety of Arabic. I have learned more about the culture, the folklore, and the traditions of the area from the peasants than from the cultivated elite. Some of the most literate people I have met in the Middle East were people who could barely read or write. Abu Ali al-Zabadani, one example of such an individual, knows more about agriculture – pruning, trimming, planting, harvesting and watering – than the average agronomist (this is the opinion of all the farmers and the agricultural engineers who knew him). The late Youssef Samia (a farmer in KabElias, where I conducted research) knew more about folklore, the his-

tory of Byzantium, and the theology of Christianity and Islam than any professor I met. I read some of the love letters he wrote when he was young (he hardly learned how to write but created for himself a system of constructing sentences that is deep and expressive), and I was stunned by the images and the poetic feeling.

The uniqueness of foreign language teaching is that the subject matter we are teaching is not solely a subject matter but rather a conduit to other subject matters. When I teach German, I want the students to understand a wide spectrum of its usage from Goethe's *Faust* to beer hall culture to political or scientific discourse. When I teach Arabic, I want people to understand all that is related to living and struggling in the societies where the language is spoken. I formulate this objective as a wish to see "German literacy" and "Arabic literacy" supersede what has been proposed by linguistic theory in the L2 classroom. In our academic institutions, when we have fallen short of our mission, it may well be due to self-imposed limits on the varieties of language we teach. Perhaps if we replaced the term "foreign language" with "foreign literacies" or "area studies," we could profitably reassess our priorities and choices.

### **The delimitation of functions in literacy:**

Freire agrees with Street that a local literacy should be the defining element of the general "profile" of literacy in a given society. Spoken words seem to carry in their linguistic nature more "situated meanings" so "crucial to learning" (Gee, 1997). Freire would surely be one of the most powerful voices supporting the teaching of Arabic spoken variety L in AFL classes, especially given that the spoken word should be and is represented in the writing system.

The view of literacy to which I subscribe does not separate language functions; it speaks instead of situated learning where language functions are interwoven in complex ways. This view treats the language process as an existential happening formulated to permit unlimited human functions rather than as a static code conforming to predetermined categories.

Prevailing literacies and discourse should be taken as occasions for study and expression, for the sake of disclosing more materials in lived experiences – the multiplicity of lived experiences that mark our society today (Green, 1995: 111)

Through "lived experiences," literacy has developed and evolved. Linguistics as a field of study has perhaps not adequately dealt with this evolution in helping to propose pedagogical and functional answers to the world of L2 instruction. I would suggest, in the case of Arabic, that linguistics has shown how to teach H as an L2. Current views of literacy will be more likely to show how to teach L as an L2.

I find unfortunate the fact that the field of linguistics in the United States and the West has concentrated on the studying of *Langue*. Teaching approaches for any diglossic foreign language may thus reflect disproportionate concern with the H variety (which, for many, represents *Langue*). If my contention that H in Arabic cannot be or have been the spoken language of a community is persuasive, then concentrating on H will be seen as excluding from the wider concept of literacy its very essence.

## Conclusion

The view of linguistics that has historically influenced the AFL curriculum in the United States is operating under the strictures of what Taylor terms grand theories (2003) that may have assumptions rooted in religious misinterpretations, academic linguistic ossification, and political expediencies in the Arab world. The impact of these assumptions appears to me to be exacerbated by the phenomenon of diglossia in Arabic. The attendant rationale for teaching classical Arabic is that it ensures students do not graduate “illiterate.” In my experience, however, AFL students are now graduating with majors in a language they cannot speak, whose correspondence they cannot read, and whose media they cannot listen to (except for formal news programming). They cannot watch its theatre, listen to its tales, folklore and songs – in short, deal with its society as fully functioning participants.

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