

## ***Educated Spoken Arabic: A Flexible Spoken Standard***

*Karin C. Ryding, Georgetown University*

The title of this panel is a frank and challenging one, and addresses a central problem in Arabic teaching: if, how, when, and why to teach authentic varieties of spoken Arabic. This problem is not a simple one; rather, it is one with many dimensions: educational, theoretical, practical, philosophical, and ideological. It has been the “elephant in the room” or the “900 pound gorilla” that continued to be ignored or dismissed until the last few years, when college and university programs have been challenged to produce students who have some degree of proficiency in the Arabic vernaculars as well as MSA. It has also come to the fore as the demand for “advanced” and “superior” level performance in Arabic has increased. Finally, we can acknowledge that not only is it there, but its implications for Arabic teaching methods, materials, and curricula are immense.

It is now widely understood that the various forms of vernacular Arabic are intricate speech systems embedded in a sophisticated socio-cultural matrix. They are not simply degraded or debased forms of Arabic; they are, in fact, complex, constantly evolving forms of interactive discourse. They are not monolithic; they are highly diverse. This diversity, of course, constitutes a core problem in designing materials and curricula. Does one select a regional colloquial? If so, which one? Or does one select what may be termed “regionally flavored varieties” of standard Arabic (that is, less regionally marked and more of an inter-regional koine)? As many of you may know, I have had some experience with what is termed either educated spoken Arabic or formal spoken Arabic, and from my perspective as both a learner and a teacher, these variants of spoken Arabic travel better than individual colloquials, and allow learners flexibility in interacting with Arabs from all parts of the Arab world.

The differences between the vernaculars and Modern Standard Arabic has traditionally been referred to by the term “diglossia,” indicating a binary division between “higher” (literary) and “lower” (colloquial) forms of a language. The Arabic situation, however, is far more complex than mere bifurcation. This linguistic phenomenon has been analyzed by Arabic linguists such as Badawi, Elgibali, Hary, and Mitchell, and a number of different formality levels have been proposed. Educated Arabic speakers calibrate their spoken language naturally and spontaneously to the communicative needs of any situation or any context, be it formal or informal, public or private, friendly or contentious, happy or sad, relaxed or tense.

Where Arabic speakers re-calibrate into a less regionally colloquial and more formal level of speech, some researchers have identified a variant of spoken Arabic, an intermediate level that is termed “cultivated,” “literate,” “formal,” or “educated” spoken Arabic or the inter-regional koine. Thus, the Arabic language situation is not characterized as a sharp separation between written forms and spoken forms, but as a spectrum or continuum of gradations from “high” (very literary or formal) to “low”

(very colloquial), with several levels of variation in between. However, the in-between levels are not well-defined or discrete, nor are they well-studied.

Traditionally, Arabic as a foreign language curricula have centered almost wholly on Modern Standard Arabic with very little attention to either the everyday informal varieties or to the more formalized, elevated prestige spoken varieties. Some applied linguists, in particular Heidi Byrnes, have drawn a distinction between “primary” and “secondary” discourses – a distinction that is particularly relevant to foreign language teaching and its goals. Primary or familiar discourses are used informally among friends and family and are acquired spontaneously as part of the maturation process. Secondary discourses of public life are considerably more formal, and occur in a vast range of settings in formal situations beyond family and friends. It is Byrnes’ thesis that in the teaching of European languages, the primary discourses of family and everyday life are over-privileged in classrooms using communicative approaches, whereas professional, public, and academic discourses are neglected.<sup>1</sup> This is a key point for the Arabic teaching profession because in our field, most college curricula are sequenced **in exactly the opposite direction**. Arabic teaching has traditionally privileged the secondary discourses of literature and scholarship over the primary discourses of everyday living, which take place in colloquial Arabic. This state of affairs I refer to as “reverse privileging.”<sup>2</sup>

The challenges to our field lie in integrating authentic spoken discourse skills and strategies into traditional MSA curricula to the extent that they are necessary for communicative competence at any proficiency level. These challenges include the materials, sequencing, design, and teaching of primary discourse skills. This is a curriculum area where ideological choices have traditionally been made consistent with practice in the Arab world, where no instruction is provided in the mother tongues, the colloquial forms of Arabic – only in the literary variety. Yet the mother tongue, the colloquial language, remains the vehicle for all ordinary daily activity. In the Arabic educational tradition, vernaculars are not **replaced** by literary Arabic: they are used **in tandem with** literary Arabic as a child matures and grows into adulthood. Moreover, the growing child learns how to integrate formal instruction in Arabic to adjust his or her spoken language according to a range of contexts.

What our curricula need is restructured access to both the primary and secondary discourses of Arabic. The new architecture of Arabic as a foreign language – including curricular goals, sequencing, and text-type – needs to be constructed with full respect to issues of discourse type, interactive functional skills, the building of firm foundations, and expanded definitions of linguistic, cultural, and social norms and appropriateness. It includes written Arabic as the cornerstone of literacy, and it includes spoken forms of Arabic, both colloquial and educated, as cornerstones of spoken fluency.

Educated spoken Arabic can play a key role in bridging gaps between colloquial and literary forms of Arabic, and in anchoring the development of interactive communicative skills. I consider ESA to be a refined form of colloquial performance because it is not simply *fushHaa biduun i raab* (literary Arabic without desinential inflections); educated spoken Arabic is based on a colloquial matrix underpinned by key vernac-

ular structures and processes, such as verb inflection that omits dual and feminine plurals; that relies on universally-understood spoken lexical items such as *shaaf lyishuuf* (for the verb to see) and the reduced relative pronoun, *illii* (who/which), to name just a few items.<sup>3</sup>

This is not meant to imply that Arabic programs should not teach individual dialects; but it does mean that, in the real world of Arabic usage, students need more than an acrolect and a basilect. They need to learn how to calibrate the formality of their speech, and how to distinguish and adjust to particular situations and regionalisms. For example, when I lived in Lebanon and “picked up” the Lebanese Arabic I heard from student colleagues, I eventually discovered (to my embarrassment) that I was using the (extremely colloquial) forms I heard inappropriately because I tried to use them in all contexts. This is a serious problem of simply “picking up” a dialect. One learns what one hears, and that isn’t always what one needs or what one should use. Learners need instruction, not just exposure. And part of that instruction incorporates the cultural and linguistic pragmatics of interactive discourse focusing on contextualized uses of language. As a high-context culture, the world of everyday embedded Arab cultural practices, knowledges, norms, institutions, ethics and values is teachable only if one includes analysis of the network of everyday signifying practices in addition to the richly textual culture of the Arab world, its imperial heritage, and its literary legacies.

We therefore need to set significant new dialogues in motion among ourselves as Arabic linguists and as language and culture educators. This involves not only the shedding of prejudices and old ideas, but also willingness to take leadership roles, to brainstorm, to experiment, to engage in long-term planning and research, and to learn from and about each other. We need to draw upon new curricular models that address the following three questions:

1. What are the goals of the students studying Arabic at your institution? Are they aiming to study abroad or work abroad? Are they aiming at translation and interpretation skills, textual analysis and critique? Are they aiming more broadly at learning about Arab society and culture, and becoming informed about the Arab world?
2. What are the departmental and university goals in teaching Arabic? At the university level, the teaching of Arabic language needs to mesh with stated academic policies and goals as to humanistic inquiry, critical thinking, challenging basic assumptions. Encouraging and stretching students to reach for the most conceptually unfamiliar and difficult goals is helping them to prepare for the rewards of intellectual risk-taking; preparing them for critical and flexible thinking in their future lives; it is helping them to prepare for lifelong learning; it is teaching them a widened range of tolerance of difference; it is teaching new variants of logic; it is placing cognitive demands on them as they struggle to think, analyze and perform in new and unfamiliar ways that are crucial to their academic success and to their intellectual development.
3. What kind of models should be used in designing curricula that offer both Modern Standard and spoken Arabic: Sequential? Parallel? Integrated?

Intensive? Immersion? Content-based? Communicative? Task-based? All of the above? Other?

Taking a page from President Obama's well-known use of a quote by Martin Luther King, I would refer to: "the fierce urgency of now." In order to improve our effectiveness and our capacity to teach Arabic in a communicative way, we need to build a new framework for our field, and we need urgently to start right now.

## Notes

- 1 Byrnes, 2002. Toward academic-level foreign language abilities: Reconsidering foundational assumptions, expanding pedagogical options, In Betty Lou Leaver and Boris Shekhtman (eds.) *Developing Professional-Level language Proficiency*, pp. 34-58. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2 For further discussion of reverse privileging, see my 2006 article: "Teaching Arabic in the United States" in *A Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century*, Wahba, Taha, and England, eds. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- 3 For further discussion and references on Educated Spoken Arabic, see my 2005 article "Educated Arabic" in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*. Vol. 1. Leiden: Brill.