

Global English and Arabic: Which is the Protagonist in a Globalized Setting?

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Abstract

Globalization, although not a new phenomenon, is certainly spreading at a faster rate than it ever did. Part of this speed at which it transpires is the role of global English as the lingua franca driving the phenomenon. In the Arab world both English and globalization are often frowned upon. Both are seen as importing western cultural values and “Americanization” in addition to interfering with the Arabic language. As many Arabs believe their Arab identity to be wrapped up in Arabic, this has cast further dispersions upon global English and its impacts. The following looks at the interplay between globalization and language, in the context of the United Arab Emirates.

KeyWords: Arabic, Arab identity, global English, globalization

Introduction: Globalization

With the current focus and deliberations regarding the phenomenon of “globalization” we often get the feeling that this is a new term, or at least what it encompasses is new or innovative. However, this is not the case and we have seen throughout history that countries have traded, crossed borders, and interacted with others for centuries (Castells, 2004; Giddens, 2000). Today we live in a world of transformations and although we may not fully understand globalization, we are certainly feeling the effects (Giddens, 2008). Originally the term globalization was about economics and world trade; however, today we are also looking at politics, societies, and cultures. Globalization is not only an economic force; it is also a cultural phenomenon. In recent years globalization has been challenging identities and cultures around the world. With the increase in migration and digital media, the former stable social constructs of culture, identity, nation, and state are all shifting (Pennycook, 2010).

Views on Globalization

Globalization as a phenomenon has its adherents and detractors. There are individuals who see globalization as harmful. Those people look at globalization as something which takes away from those who already do not have much in the world. They see it as having created a world divided between winners and losers. There are many who believe the term is equivalent to westernization, Americanization, or even MacDonalidization of the world (Zughoul, 2003). They view globalization as a rapid culturalization imported from the west through global English bringing western films, music, books, food, and continual media images. On the other side of this debate, however, are those who see globalization as also having an effect on the west (see Appadurai, 2001; Lash, 2007). There are even some who claim that globalization has “both desirable and undesirable consequences for both developed and developing societies” (Parekh, 2008, p. 183).

Najjar (2005) gives an excellent overview of how globalization is understood by Arabs in his article “The Arabs, Islam and Globalization.” Initially he points out that whether Arabs are for or against globalization, both camps are generally in agreement that globalization equals “Americanization.” Those Arabs view globalization as a means to spread American culture around the world (see also Boutaleb, 2003). On the other hand, however, Tomlinson (2003) views cultural identity as more the “product of globalization than its victim” (p. 269). Tomlinson asserts that identity is unlikely to be easily destroyed by globalization because identity is not a “fragile communal-psychic attachment,” but instead an important and concrete part of “institutionalized social life in modernity” (p. 271), and therefore not easily replaced. In fact, he believes that globalization has actually helped proliferate cultural identity.

The rapid spread of globalization and today’s ease of travelling has revealed the fragile nature of people’s languages, and those who feel language ties them to their identity may feel ‘lost.’ Many researchers point to the hybridity of cultures and identities and insist that today what we see are new combinations of languages, cultures, and identities due to the multicultural populations living in modern nation-states (Scholte, 2000; see also Block, 2007; Croucher, 2004; Maalouf, 2000).

English as a Global Language

In today’s globalized world there is one language which has come to the forefront as the lingua franca of our modern day: English. The English language brings with it not only the vocabulary of the technological and business domains, but is further loaded with pop culture and western cultural values as well. In the Arab world it is becoming clear that English is ascending in most areas of life, while Arabic is relegated to a more prosaic role. Rapid globalization in the

Arab world calls for the continued need of English in order to help Arab nations progress on a worldwide scale.

The power of English continues to spread due to its seemingly symbiotic relationship with globalization. In fact, global English can be seen as one of most powerful facets of globalization. The projection of English as the world language has had a substantial effect on the languages of the world through its role as the language of international communication, media, and technology (see Phillipson & Skutnabb Kangas, 1996). In order to understand more fully the place of English's hegemony in the world especially as the language of electronic information systems Crystal's (1997) work, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language*, is an excellent resource.

Today there are consistent debates regarding English as a global language and its perceived threat to other languages. There are discussions about the politics of language and how English is expanding at the expense of other languages. In the Arab world particularly, English and globalization are both often seen as negative factors. English is seen as encroaching upon Arabic, while globalization is viewed as a factor which negatively impacts Arab culture, religion, and identity. These negative feelings are further complicated by the place of Arabic in the Arab world; wherein, many see Arabic as the main marker of an Arab identity. This place of Arabic as an identity indicator results from two issues. First of all, Arabic is the language of the Quran, and therefore holds an important and precious role for Arabic speakers. Additionally, the discourse of Arabic equaling identity came about in the 20th century when Arab nationalism was on the rise and Arabic was chosen as a unifying factor for the geographically diverse Arab populations.

Arabs, Arabic and Identity

Globalization and global English continue to be seen from a negative perspective in the Arab world due to the belief that Arabic is an identity marker of an Arab. It is in large part due to this notion that globalization and global English are so often frowned upon in the Arab world. For those Arabs who maintain and wish to hold onto the place of Arabic as the major symbol of an Arab identity, the continual spread of English in the Arab region is viewed as a "problem" which must be addressed.

In the Arabian Gulf region, for example, English has taken on a major role, often at the expense of Arabic. In the Gulf region and the United Arab Emirates specifically, there is a trend to adopt English both as a language of status and as an academic language (Harrison, Kamphuis, & Barnes, 2007). There are some who believe that the consistent focus on English as the language of technology, modernization, invention, and all that is new will eventually place Arabic in a minority role. Several scholars in the region have written about their concerns that the continual spread of English can result in a lessening of Arabic's role in society and its permanent move to a language of the home, religion, or social studies (Al-Issa, 2012; Al Jabry, 2013; Mejdell, 2008; Troudi & Jendli, 2011). Furthermore, many segments of society in the UAE are concerned with what they see as a possible loss of Arab identity due to the persistent influence of global English; this subject has been covered extensively in the media in recent years (see for example Ahmed, 2010; Al Hinai, 2012; Al Mutawa, 2008; Kakande, 2010; Lepeska, 2010). But despite the continuous calls by governmental officials and concerned citizens to maintain Arabic due to its importance in promoting an Arab identity, English continues to be used as the everyday language of the business world and often the main language of education.

Identity in the Arab world has generally been accepted as based on the Arabic language. And this is despite the fact that it did not become the core as an Arab identity marker until the 1950s with the rise of nationalism. Language is often considered part of an individual's identity

and as May (2001) notes a person's identity, both individual and social, is reconciled through language. He further maintains that the language one speaks is crucial to a person's identity. In the Arab world this connection between language and identity has evolved into an indivisible partnership, which some are unwilling to let go of.

According to some Arab scholars it is language which is the most important part of a nation's identity (Abed, 2007). He insists that Arabic is the "most distinctive and defining feature of Arab culture and society, and arguably, is the only concrete factor that gives Arabs some sense of unity and belonging to one nation" (p. 2). For many in the UAE this seems to be the case and there is concern that Arab identity is under siege due to the increasing reliance on global English as a requirement for everyday needs.

For those who believe incontrovertibly that their language represents their identity, the continual spread of global English is of great concern. The fact that English is needed and used daily in the UAE and is a language of "global dominance [...] constitutes a formidable challenge to all other languages" (Mac Giolla Christ, 2007, p. 29).

The Role of English in the UAE

As the power of English grows in the UAE, there is a resulting decline in the usage of Arabic both educationally and socially. Due to the large numbers of expatriates in the country, English has taken on the language of communication in the UAE at the expense of Arabic. Yet, despite the constant concerns over the growth and spread of English in the UAE, at this point in time each of these languages has definitively staked out a specific position.

Although there continues to be concerns over the place of Arabic in the UAE, as both a language and as an identity marker, the reality is that English has made enormous inroads in the Gulf nation. Particularly in the education sector, except for the public schools, which are only open to Emirati nationals, most of the private schools either teach their entire curriculum in English, or spend hours daily on the subject. Additionally, nearly all higher education institutions are now teaching a vast array, if not the majority of their classes in English.

The UAE is an Arab nation which is looked upon as a leader in the region. Globalization has brought the Emirates and Dubai in particular, worldwide recognition and accolades in many areas, including: infrastructure, architecture, hospitality, and more. All of these factors could not have been as successful and achieved such notoriety without English. Therefore, Arabic takes a secondary role to English when it comes to those factors about the UAE which garner the most attention. In order to maintain its well-known hospitality, infrastructure, and business savvy industries, English is the language that everyone uses. There is no need for visitors or residents in the UAE to learn Arabic as English is used everywhere. Part of this may be due to the fact that the UAE is home to more expatriates than locals with UAE nationals making up less than 20 percent of the total population. In fact, the foreign workforce in the country is "estimated to be as high as 90 percent of the working population" (Al-Khoury, 2010, p. 4). Of that large population, nearly 66% speak a language other than Arabic. It therefore becomes apparent that a lingua franca is needed in order to communicate.

Globalization has set its course in the UAE. English as the global language has become the language of daily usage in the Emirates for business and education. However, despite the influx and influence of English, one cannot say that Arab identity has been lost in the UAE. The UAE is an example of how the Arab world can allow globalization to take root without trepidation. The UAE has shown that culture and identity cannot be erased by another language, or by the phenomenon of globalization. In fact, the UAE carefully maintains its traditions, balancing them with rapid modernization.

Conclusions

Those who fear a loss of Arab identity due to global English and globalization may be surprised at how well and how firmly young Arabs still cling to their identities. Certainly, they speak a lot of English and enjoy the pop culture of the west packaged in English, but for the majority, their Arab identity and roots run quite deep. No language used as a communication tool is going to take away from their own feelings about who they believe themselves to be. In fact, there have been several studies carried out in the UAE regarding young Arabs and their outlooks about their Arab identity (see Badry, 2001; Ronesi, 2011) and one carried out by this author, whose results are not yet published. All of these studies sought to understand how Arab students in the UAE perceive themselves as Arab speakers of English and as young Arabs who are surrounded by global English and all that accompanies it. The findings in these studies revealed that the students felt a strong attachment to their Arab identity and language despite their constant exposure to English, western cultural images, and the phenomenon of globalization. English and Arabic have reached a rapprochement in the UAE. In the context of globalization each language has carved out a niche and seems to know where it belongs and what purpose it serves in the day to day lives of residents of the UAE. And while the educational sphere has been largely co-opted by English, teachers must remain cognizant of that factor. Teachers must also be facilitators who help Arab students, who are surrounded by so much English, remain in touch with and continually celebrate their Arabic language, culture, and identity.

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Laila S. Dahan teaches writing at the American University of Sharjah. She holds MA degrees in politics, TESOL, and educational research. She is currently writing her PhD dissertation on language and identity in the Arab world. Her research interests include: global English, identity, cross cultural communication, and academic writing.

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