



# A Strategy for Expressing Arabic Diglossic Elements in English

*By Carmen Cross*

**As any Arabic** linguist or translator can attest, there is no one “Arabic” language. I am not referring here to the dialects per se, whose regional variations have been the subject of many master’s theses and doctoral dissertations.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I am referring to the linguistic phenomenon of diglossia, in which divergent formal and informal forms of Arabic are used depending on a given social situation (e.g., university lecture or family conversation), and which can vary within the dialects themselves.<sup>2</sup>

## What Is Diglossia?

The late scholar Charles Ferguson was the first linguist to study diglossia in depth and to provide a scientific and comprehensive definition. In his seminal paper “Diglossia,” Ferguson offered this explanation:

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

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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 section of the community for ordinary conversation.<sup>3</sup>

Ferguson’s definition is based on the identification of nine features characterizing diglossic languages through an analysis of Arabic, Modern Greek, Swiss German, and Haitian Creole. These features are:

**1) Function:** In diglossic languages, there is an everyday or vernacular language variety (labelled “L,” or “low” variety), as well as a second, highly formal variety (labelled “H,”

or “high”). Each of these varieties has a specialized function. The use of either (or a combination of the two) depends on the social situation. For our purposes, we will use H to refer to Classical Arabic and L to refer to the various Arabic dialects. For example, formal situations, such as a news broadcast or university lecture, would typically require the use of Classical Arabic, while the dialects would be used in informal situations, such as conversations with friends. It is important to note here, as Ferguson does in his later article, “Diglossia Revisited,” that this linguistic situation is not static but dynamic.<sup>4</sup> This means that a speaker or writer may use dialectal elements in a formal situation or use Classical Arabic in an informal situation. We will see ➔

an example of the former situation in this article.

- 2) **Prestige:** Native speakers tend to regard H as superior to L. Of course, from a linguistic viewpoint, the “high” variety of Arabic (or any other language) is not better than the “low” variety.
- 3) **Literary Heritage:** H is the standard variety of the language. It has a large body of written literature that may have been produced long ago or is currently being produced.
- 4) **Acquisition:** L is acquired at home as a “mother tongue,” while H is learned in formal settings (e.g., schools).
- 5) **Standardization:** H has become standardized and is accompanied by strong grammatical scholarship.
- 6) **Stability:** As Ferguson mentions in the definition on page 19, the diglossic linguistic situation involving H and L is highly stable, having existed for at least several centuries. This is the case with Arabic.
- 7) **Grammar:** H possesses grammatical categories that L does not. For example, in addition to singular and plural, Classical Arabic has a dual case for nouns, which indicates two of something: e.g., *kitāb* (“book”), *kutub* (“books”), and *kitabān* (“two books”). The dual noun case has virtually disappeared in the Arabic dialects. In addition, H has an inflectional system of nouns that is either reduced or nonexistent in L.
- 8) **Lexicon:** Both H and L have paired lexical items that are used frequently in both varieties and mean roughly the same thing. The use of one or the other identifies the written or spoken text as H or L. An often-quoted example in Arabic is the verb “to see,” which is *ra’aa* in H and *shaaf* in L.

9) **Phonology:** Phonology is a branch of linguistics concerned with the systematic organization of sounds in languages. It has traditionally focused largely on the study of the systems of phonemes in particular languages. A phoneme is the basic unit of spoken language (a speech sound), and is combined with other phonemes to form meaningful units such as words. The actual sound produced is called a phone. (According to the International Phonetic Alphabet, phones are designated by brackets and phonemes by slashes.) According to Ferguson, the phonologies of H and L may be similar (Greek), moderately similar (Arabic), or very different (Swiss German). For example, Classical Arabic has the phoneme /θ/ [th], but this is often expressed in Syrian as /t/ for words not thought to be borrowed from Classical Arabic. A good example of this is the word, /θaani/ (“second”), which is usually expressed as /taani/.<sup>5</sup>

### Using Diglossia to Develop a Translation Strategy

From a translator’s perspective, Ferguson’s definition of diglossia highlights two very important points to keep in mind about the Arabic linguistic situation as we develop our translation strategy:

- 1) Classical Arabic is a highly codified variety of Arabic that is grammatically more complex than its dialects.
- 2) Classical Arabic is mainly used for formal written and spoken purposes, but not for everyday conversation.

So, what does this mean for translators, who, like myself, translate from Arabic into English, a language that does not exhibit diglossia?

First, it is important to remember that the “difference between most Western speech communities and the Arabic-speaking world is the much larger linguistic distance that exists between colloquial Arabic and the

standard language, which forces the speakers to make decisions much more frequently than in Western speech communities.”<sup>6</sup> For instance, regardless of the level of formality involved, we use Standard English when speaking to our friends or to, say, a government official. Of course, we would most likely use an informal register with our friends and a more formal register when speaking to someone in authority. So, the linguistic distance between the informal and formal registers in English is small; both are Standard English, but the formal register tends to be a little more structured.

However, Arabic speakers would most likely use their native dialect when speaking to friends and Classical Arabic when addressing a public official. The dialects and Modern Standard Arabic are not the same language, and the use of one or the other depends largely on the social situation. The linguistic distance between an Arabic dialect and Modern Standard Arabic is much larger than in English. Such languages tend to exhibit a greater degree of variability in terms of the situational use of varieties than non-diglossic languages such as English. This means that translators and interpreters must pay extra attention to the situational use of the language, as well as to the communicative function of the document (i.e., why was it written/spoken, and for whom was it written/spoken?).

### Speaker-Related Information

For diglossic languages, speaker-related information is very important because it adds more variables that we need to consider when translating or interpreting. This information includes both what the speaker (or author of the text) wishes to convey (such as tone and audience impact), as well what they may not wish to convey intentionally (e.g., educational background).

The first step in the translation process is to identify these characteristics, as well as any pertinent linguistic features about the text that will

assist us in our task. To get a better idea of how to identify the important linguistic features in a text, the box below provides an excerpt from a speech given by the late Egyptian President, Gamal Abdel Nasser, at Port Said on December 23, 1957.<sup>8</sup>

After reading this speech, we can identify the following information:

- **Communicative Function:** A speech given on a national occasion (Victory Day) to celebrate the withdrawal of the last British troops from the Suez Canal.
- **Target Audience:** Egyptians of all classes.
- **Specific Points:** The fact that the Egyptian dialect was used is very important and must be expressed in English where linguistically appropriate. Nasser gave this speech on a national occasion where he would have been expected to use the Egyptian dialect.

After we have identified the communicative function of the text and the characteristics of the target audience, the second step in the translation process is to identify specific dialectal features. These have been underlined in the box below in both the original Arabic and the English translation.

The third step involves an analysis of the function of the dialectal features identified in the second step. Here, we should consider if these dialectal elements should be expressed in the target language. Since the example in the box below is a political speech, one might expect it to have been

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given in Modern Standard Arabic, especially if the target audience was Arabic speakers of all classes. However, this speech is different in that it has elements of Egyptian Arabic, so we must consider if the dialect itself is important. For instance, if this exact same speech had been given in Gulf Arabic, would it have had the same effect? Clearly not. If Nasser had used the Gulf dialect when addressing the Egyptian people on a national occasion, he would have immediately lost his solidarity connection with them. So, as translators, we must try and capture the “Egyptianness” of the dialect in the translation.

In the fourth and final step, we must determine why the dialect was used. We have to decide if what the speaker is actually saying is more important than the dialect used to say it. For example, if someone is giving a police report, she or he will almost always do so in his or her native dialect because it is more natural to do so. In this case, the dialect itself may be less important. That is, the police report could be translated into Moroccan and Jordanian Arabic, and the effect would still be the same—to report a crime to the police. So, in this instance, the information provided is more important than the dialect. In such cases, we could opt

to use the semi-formal register when translating this type of report into English. Although context and communicative function must always be taken into account, dialectal elements may not need to be preserved in formal situations where information is being reported (e.g., court testimony), or when the speaker is using the dialect for ordinary conversation between friends and family members.

For example, Nasser could have easily chosen to give his speech in Classical Arabic. However, his conscious inclusion of the Egyptian dialect was done to show solidarity with the Egyptian people in celebration of Victory Day on December 23, 1957. One possible translation of this speech excerpt could be:

Egypt, my fellow Egyptians, despite what we have suffered, we are pursuing the policy of non-alignment ... Today, my brothers, we look to the past with its victories ... We look to the past with its battles ... We look to our past with its martyrs.

This translation captures the “Egyptianness” of the dialect. The underlined words above (i.e., the Egyptian words for “today,” “we look,” and “our”) help to

### Speech excerpt from the late Egyptian President, Gamal Abdel Nasser

إن مصر الإخوة رغم ما قاسيناه، إن إحنا بنتبع سياسة عدم الانحياز ... النهاردا يا اخواني نبص للماضي بانتصاراته ... نبص للماضي بمعاركه ... نبص للماضي بتاعنا بشهادة ...

Egypt, my fellow Egyptians, despite what we have suffered, we are pursuing the policy of non-alignment ... Today, my brothers, we look to the past with its victories ... We look to the past with its battles ... We look to this past of ours with its martyrs ...

differentiate this dialect from any other dialect. The words themselves, taken together, identify the Egyptian dialect and Nasser as an Egyptian. The underlined words could have easily been replaced with Syrian equivalents, but would not have had the same impact on the audience.

### Do Not Overlook Dialectal Elements

When translating from a language that exhibits diglossia, such as Arabic, into one that does not, such as English, it is important to analyze each dialectal element individually and to decide if it should be expressed in the target language and, if so, how best to express it. As can be seen in the excerpt of Nasser's speech, dialectal elements are often lexical items that may not need to be expressed in order to achieve a faithful translation in the target language. However, knowing the communicative function of the speech and the target audience is very important in determining if the extra-linguistic features (i.e., tone and social register) should be captured in the English translation. ■

We have to decide if what the speaker is actually saying is more important than the dialect used to say it.

### Notes

1. Diem, Werner. *Hochsprache und Dialekt im Arabischen: Untersuchungen zur heutigen arabischen Zweisprachigkeit [Standard Arabic and the Dialects: Studies on Contemporary Arabic Diglossia]* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1974).
2. Badawi, El-Said. *Mustawayaat al-'arabiyyah al-mu'aasira fii misr: bahth fii 'alaqaat al-lughah fi-al-hadarah [Levels of Contemporary Arabic in Egypt: A Study of the Relationship Between Language and Society]* (Cairo: Dar al-Maarif, 1973).
3. Ferguson, Charles. "Diglossia," *Word* (Volume 15, 1959), 336.
4. Ferguson, Charles. "Epilogue: Diglossia Revisited," in *Understanding Arabic: Essays in Contemporary Arabic Linguistics in Honor of El-Said Badawi*. Edited by A. Elgibali (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1996), 49-67.
5. For more information on phonology, please see the website of the International Phonetic Association ([www.langsci.ucl.ac.uk/ipa](http://www.langsci.ucl.ac.uk/ipa)).
6. Ferguson, 336.
7. Versteegh, Kees. *Pidginization and Creolization: The Case of Arabic* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984).
8. The linguistics analysis of this speech is based in part on: Dickins, James, Hervey Sándor, and Ian Higgins. *Thinking Arabic Translation* (London: Routledge, 2002), page 170.



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