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## The Arabic language and political ideology

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### 1. Introduction

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Broadly speaking, language serves two main functions in society. The first is an instrumental function: to serve as an effective means of communication. The second is a symbolic function, which includes the capacity of language to act both as a symbol (especially as an identity marker) and as an index (through the associations it invokes within the speech community). It also includes its role as a ‘proxy’ “to express extra-linguistic views and anxieties, as well as to hint at the political orientations of a group or individual” (Suleiman 2013, p. 16). In other words, at a symbolic level, language serves as a proxy for ideology. The concept of language ideology links the instrumental and symbolic functions of language in that the symbolic can be used to justify the instrumental: Silverstein (1979, p. 193) defines language ideology as “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure and use”. We may also speak of political language ideology: this is when language becomes politicised; when it is used as a proxy to maintain or challenge power relations, group identity and (a particular) social order in society. This chapter is about political language ideologies in the Arab world.

Understanding the complex relationship between language and politics in the Arab world can shed light on some of the deep-seated political ideologies in the region. In this chapter, I aim to provide the reader with an appreciation of the important symbolic role that Arabic has played – and continues to play – politically in the Arab world. The chapter is divided into two main parts: the first focuses on standard language ideology and the second on linguistic nationalism. In the first part, section 2, I address the inherently political nature of language standardisation, drawing on Bourdieu’s ideas, and apply this to Arabic. I also present research evidence from Egypt to demonstrate how standard language ideology is challenged. In the second part, section 3, I focus on the role of Arabic in identity politics, and how it has been deployed – or rejected – in a range of nationalisms in the Arab world. I discuss the cases of Lebanon and Egypt, where language has been notably operationalised in territorial nationalism, in some detail. I also address the role of language ideologies in inter-state relations in the Arab world through a discussion of the Maghreb-Mashreq language ideology. I end the chapter with an overview of other research contributions on language and politics in the Arab world and the prospects for future research in this area.

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## **2. Historical background and perspective: constructing legitimacy**

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The first efforts to standardise the Arabic language date as far back as the 7th and 8th centuries to the works of early Arabic grammarians who sought to shield the language of the Qur’an against the ‘corruption of speech’ that was brought about by mixing with non-Arabs as Islam spread outside the Arabian Peninsula. It has been argued that the work of the early grammarians

was not apolitical; it served as an instrument in controlling Muslim societies (Carter 1983).

However, it is not these early efforts that I will focus on here. Periods of political turbulence and linguistic decline from the 13th century to the 19th century (see Chejne 1969) meant that Arabic had to undergo some degree of ‘re-standardisation’ in the modern era, which is why linguists make a distinction between Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). The 19th century witnessed an Arabic *nahḍa*, a renaissance, with increased cultural production in the language and efforts to modernise it. The establishment of the Arabic language academies in Syria (1918–1919), Egypt (1932) and Iraq (1947) testify to the continuation of these efforts which culminated in the Arabicisation policies of the post-colonial Arab states. To understand how this modernised Standard Arabic (henceforth, SA) serves as a political instrument, we must grapple with the very concept of standardisation.

## **2.1 The politics of standardisation**

Standardisation is the process of producing a ‘legitimate’ language; a ‘theoretical norm’ “against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 45). Typically, the language ‘norm’ is determined and codified by a central group empowered by the state. It is then disseminated in the form of a standard ‘official’ language and policed by state institutions – most notably the educational system which helps to “devalue popular modes of expression” and impose “recognition of the legitimate language” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 49). Standardisation is “a highly political and ideological business, which relies on the imposition of arbitrary norms of usage by authority” (Wright 2004, p. 53). It could therefore be said that standardisation is motivated by, as well as perpetuates, a standard language ideology, “a bias toward an abstracted idealised, homogeneous spoken language which is imposed from above, and which takes as its

model the written language. The most salient feature is the goal of suppression of variation of all kinds” (Lippi-Green 1994, p. 166). This ideology contributes to the propping of a dominant class in society by “concealing the function of division beneath the function of communication” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 167): the same standardised language which serves as a medium of communication (instrumental function), also doubles as a marker of distinction in society (symbolic function). Thus, standardisation is inextricably linked to power.

Governments are the typical locus of power in modern societies, enabling them to establish and enforce language policies. The relationship between language policy and power is mutually reinforcing: “The implementation of language policy requires power” and “a strong centralized language policy enhances the power of the central government” (Spolsky 2004, p. 40). All of this makes language a powerful political issue: “linguistic emotions can be harnessed to divert people’s attention from more fundamental economic and political issues, and administrations are aware of this” (De Silva 1982, p. 113). This is particularly true of diglossic societies where a “declared policy of maintaining and protecting the ‘pure’ language is often politically advantageous” (ibid.).

While it is common for standard languages to have a wider ‘validity domain’ (symbolic function) than their ‘practice domain’ (instrumental function) (Bartsch 1989), in the case of diglossic societies, the practice domain is far narrower. SA may be a prototypical diglossic H variety (see Mejdell, Chapter 17 in this volume), but it is hardly a typical standard variety: “although it shares certain properties and functions with a typical standard, most Arabic language users tend increasingly to shun it for other than written functions” (Mejdell 2006, p. 44). This prompts Walters (2008, p. 655) to comment that “in many regards, we can claim that diglossia of

the sort found in Arabic represents the most complete instantiation of standard language ideology”.

Indeed, Brustad (2011) argues that what was revived during the nahḍa was not Classical Arabic, but the standard language ideology associated with it. Elsewhere she equates this ideology with diglossia itself (which she argues is an ideological construct) (Brustad 2017). She explains that this ideology “helped engender a sociolinguistic process of erasure” which rendered mixed or colloquial texts invisible:

the ideology of diglossia leads us to expect written texts in [SA], and to see them as normative; the texts that do not fit the model are brushed off, or, in the nahḍa and 20th century, physically erased, either through the 'correction' process or exclusion from publishing.

(Brustad 2017, p. 47)

So strong was this standard language ideology in the 20th century that language reform projects “collapsed under its weight” (p. 48). The Arabic language academies, which often initiated these projects, were also the ones to reject them:

The Arabic language academies were institutions whose very existence we can attribute to the attempts to maintain standard language ideology. Their primary goals were to guard the Arabic language from corruption and decay and modernize it. It is their existence, and not their accomplishments, that people point to as important for the preservation of Arabic, and this points to their role in maintaining standard language ideology. Arabic Language Academies are bound by this ideology, and this is why they are all but incapable of taking action.

(ibid.)

Standard language ideology has significant implications for access to education and social and political participation. Brustad (2011) argues that “the MSA that resulted by mid-twentieth century and that is taught in schools across the Arab world is an anti-literacy MSA that serves, whether by design or not, as a form of social control”. That is, promoting the ideology that SA is hopelessly complex effectively serves as a mechanism for limiting public discourse, aiding the political elite to consolidate their own position in power. Haeri (2003) goes a step further to argue that the distance between SA and colloquial Arabic in Egypt contributes to the absence of democracy in the country: because most Egyptians find SA difficult, it is effectively an obstacle to political participation. She therefore contends that the policy to have SA as the sole official language is motivated by “deeply entrenched political interests” (Haeri 2003, p. 251).

Bassiouney (2013) too relates standard language to political access in Egypt. She observes that some Egyptian politicians “use their expertise in SA to legitimize their political system, almost in the same way that priests in ancient Egypt monopolized certain aspects of knowledge to empower themselves” (Bassiouney 2013, p. 90). She analyses an article from 2010 written by the former speaker of parliament, Fathi Surur, who also belonged to the then ruling National Democratic Party, and published in al-Ahram newspaper, the government’s official gazette. Surur’s article, which focused on the language of the Egyptian constitution, is an excellent example of how SA both empowers members of the political elite as well as disempowers those who cannot lay claim to its symbolic capital:

In Surūr’s article, his stance toward both SA and the constitution is that of an expert. He positions himself as powerful because of his knowledge of SA, and he goes so far as to assign himself the role of the guardian of SA and the Egyptian constitution, since, he claims, they go hand in hand . . . By lamenting the dire state

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of SA, he takes the stance of the legislator, politician, Arabist, and protector of Egypt's identity as a Muslim Arab country.

(Bassiouney 2013, p. 91)

However, this does not mean that the hegemony of SA goes unchallenged. In an age of globalisation and digital literacy where writing can take place through a variety of mediums and vernacular writing has unprecedented visibility, policing the writing practices of the public is becoming increasingly difficult for the (language) authorities. After all, globalisation itself is “definable as an erosion of the sovereignty of states and the growth of international organisations” (Wright 2004, p. 160), and one manifestation of this is the erosion of the state's monopoly over legitimate writing practices. Indeed, challenging standard language ideology can take on symbolic political meaning.

## **2.2 Defying the standard: the case of Egypt**

A number of emerging studies are pointing to parallelism between what might be termed political and linguistic ‘deviance’ in Egypt. As in other Arab countries, SA has the official backing of the Egyptian state. However, Egyptians have long had a more tolerant attitude towards their colloquial variety which enjoys local and supra-local prestige as a spoken variety. Still, publishing in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA) is linguistically marked; it is perceived as a deviation from the norm which is publishing in SA.

It is worth juxtaposing the writing in a newspaper like al-Ahram, which is both politically and linguistically conservative, against the writing found in Egyptian opposition newspapers where ECA abounds (Ibrahim 2010). In the same vein, Borg's (2007) study of the Egyptian



youth magazine, *iḥna*, highlights that it wasn't only ECA which was a hallmark feature of the magazine, but also its anti-regime political sympathies. In a recent study, I interviewed a young, leftist political activist who owned a publishing house, *Malāmiḥ*, which openly championed publishing in ECA (Aboelezz 2017). In the interview, the publisher highlighted his role as a 'political instigator', while explaining that his pro-ECA bias was part of his attempt to 'break all imperatives'. Because the publishing house was "deliberately challenging the hegemony of [SA] and violating linguistic norms", it was portrayed by others within the publishing circle as "both (linguistically) daring and deviant" (Aboelezz 2017, p. 230). This, it appeared, went hand in hand with the publisher's own politically daring and 'deviant' stance.

A similar example is the use of ECA in the news bulletins of an Egyptian TV channel, O-TV (which later became ON-TV), established in 2006 (Doss 2010). The news is another domain where SA is the default, unmarked code, but an editorial decision was made upon the establishment of O-TV that ECA would be used in all domains to project the identity of an Egyptian youth channel. Bassiouney (2014, p. 137) argues that ECA was also employed "to reflect political opposition, honesty, freshness and innovation".

In all of these examples, the affinity between using and/or championing ECA on the one hand and anti-regime sympathies on the other is more than just a happy coincidence. Indeed, in a survey of Cairo-based Internet users, Aboelezz (2014) found that participants who voted for leftist, liberal parties in the 2011–2012 parliamentary elections were less likely to view such marked uses of ECA as 'a threat to the Arabic language' than those who voted for parties on the right of the political spectrum.

Bassiouney (2014) explains the connection between ECA and political opposition by appealing to the indexes of SA and ECA in Egyptian society. In its capacity as standard and

official language, SA indexes the hegemony of the state. Hence, the very act of rejecting the linguistic hegemony of the state becomes a symbolic act of political resistance: because the marked use of ECA violates an imposed boundary, it challenges authority at a symbolic level. While the state uses SA to signify authority and legitimacy, those opposed to the state use it to signify authenticity and credibility. SA, which has come to be associated with government bureaucracy and repression, is countered by ECA which is forging an association with resistance and dissent. In rejecting the ideology of the political elite, anti-regime activists are also rejecting the symbols of this ideology (SA) by deploying their own symbols (ECA). That is, such activists represent a counter-elite; they do not recognise the symbolic capital possessed by the political elite and therefore cannot be dominated by it.

Age is also an important component in this formula: pre-2011, the Egyptian regime was often portrayed as an antiquated establishment which was as out of touch with the people as the language it used. Conversely, the political activists were often young people who could claim a fresh relevance to the people through ECA. As Bassiouney (2014, p. 137) explains in reference to O-TV, “if SA is the language of government officials who are older and perceived as corrupt and inflexible, ECA is the language of the youth and portrays a new, different Egypt”. In symbolic terms, ECA functions as a ‘we code’, while SA functions as the ‘they code’ (see Gumperz 1982). The role that the Arabic language plays in identity construction is discussed in more detail in the next section.

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### **3. Critical issues and topics: constructing identity**

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As part of its symbolic function, language can be used to mark identity and signal group membership. Nowhere is this clearer than in nation-building. In this section, I demonstrate how the Standard Arabic which was declared the official language of the newly independent Arab states in the mid 20th century was not only a political instrument, but also the political product of the intellectual engineering of an Arab nation.

### **3.1 An imagined language for an imagined nation**

Suleiman (2006, p. 126) argues that “nation- and state-building in the Arabic-speaking world are two of the most important sociopolitical projects of the modern era”. What is of particular interest here is how these projects “construct language as one of their cornerstones” (ibid.). The process of nation-building involves socially constructing or ‘imagining’ the community (Anderson 2006). Gal extends this to language, stating that “not only communities but also languages must be imagined before their unity can be socially accomplished” (Gal 1998, p. 325). In this section, I will demonstrate how SA serves as an imagined language for an imagined nation.

The ideological concept of a ‘nation’ does not correspond to the political concept of a ‘state’. Whereas the term state entails a structure which exercises sovereign powers over a given territory and legislates laws to regulate interactions between the inhabitants of this territory, the term nation is primarily linked to “the psychological dimension of belonging to a community” (Bassiouney 2009, p. 206). This distinction is important in understanding the ideological significance of SA: “one of the main themes in the Arab nationalist discourse is the separation of the nation and the state, in the sense that the latter is not established as a precondition of the former in ideological terms” (Suleiman 2003, p. 163). Mejdell (2006, p. 19) glosses this

ideological relationship between language and nation, stating that SA is “a transnational standard – or rather a trans-local/regional national variety, which is perceived as a unifying force for the Arab nation” rather than the immediate state, therefore emphasising “the Arab character of the people and state”. Mejdell adds that, because SA is revered by many as the holy language of revelation, “it is additionally a symbol for the even wider Muslim community (umma) of believers” (ibid.).

Umma is the Arabic word for nation. It is commonly used in the two expressions al-umma al-‘arabiyya (the Arab Nation) and al-umma al-islāmiyya (the Islamic Nation). The first term is used to refer collectively to the peoples of al-waṭan al-‘arabī (the Arab fatherland), while the latter is “a universal term rather than particular to a specific community with a shared culture and history” (Bassiouney 2009, p. 207). SA is constructed as a means of symbolic identification for Arab and Islamic nationalists simultaneously. By and large, Islamic and Arab nationalisms are not perceived to be at odds with each other: “In intellectual, if not political terms, Islamic nationalism could imperceptibly fade into pan-Arabism without subscribing to its secularism, thus underpinning the move towards the strongest expression of the [SA]-national identity link that is so characteristic of pan-Arabism” (Suleiman 2008, p. 40). In other words, although language is the unifying force in Arab nationalism and religion is the unifying force in Islamic nationalism, the two nationalisms are reconciled by the fact that SA is valued in both of them. Indeed, the term “Islamic Arab nation” (al-umma al-‘arabiyya al-islāmiyya) is not uncommon in Arab rhetoric.

However, while there is no denying the well-established link between Arabic and Islam, this link is sometimes overemphasised in the literature to the extent that the ‘secularisation’ of SA is either completely overlooked or not emphasised enough. To understand how this

secularisation came about, we must go back to the 19th century, a time when much of the Arab world was under Ottoman rule. The Ottomans shared the majority religion of Arabs, but not their language. This ruled out religion as a mobilising force by the cultural elite who resisted the Ottoman rulers and their Turkification policies, and language became the obvious ‘othering’ tool. However, to achieve this, it was necessary first to undercut the link between religion and language:

Attempts at decoupling, or loosening, the exclusive link between Arabic and Islam in the 19th century served as the foundation for launching the argument that the ties of language between Muslims and Christians, for whom Arabic is a mother tongue, were (or ought to be) more important in group identity terms than the bonds of Islam that linked the Arab Muslims to their Turkish coreligionists in the Ottoman Empire.

(Suleiman 2006, p. 127)

The relationship between language and nation in the Arab world came to the forefront in the 20th century where it received much intellectual attention. This was particularly marked in the post-independence constitutions of the new Arab nation-states. As these states declared their independence, they also declared their adherence to pan-Arab nationalism [qawmiyya] and recognised the Arabic language as the national language of all Arabs. SA was increasingly perceived by Arab intellectuals as “a language of independence, tradition, glorious past, and even the language in which a sound moral system could be explained and maintained” (Bassiouney 2009, p. 210).

The clearest representation of the ‘the Arab nation’ in modern times is the League of Arab States (LAS), which Bassiouney (2009) notes is primarily an ideological entity. LAS

consists of 22 countries<sup>1</sup> which have Arabic as an official language, and in fact describes itself as “an association of countries whose peoples are Arabic speaking” (Bassiouney 2009, p. 209). Walters (2008, pp. 653–654) notes that “because definitions of ‘Arab’ often claim that an Arab is ‘one who speaks Arabic’, the language itself becomes an essential, nondetachable component of group membership – often the single such component”. While “in ancient times the only true ‘Arab’ was the Bedouin Arab”, with kinship and lineage playing a central part (Bassiouney 2009, p. 208), today the term Arab indexes a concept of nationalism which transcends ethnicity.

Although the impetus for pan-Arab nationalism had emerged in previous decades, expressions of pan-Arab sentiments peaked during the Nasserist era in the 1950s and 1960s (Suleiman 2008). This was a period characterised by linguistic optimism. It was common among Arabs to predict a future where all Arabs would speak a single unified language modelled after SA (Ferguson 1997 [1959]), which indeed seemed to be the ultimate goal of the educational systems set up during this period (Eisele 2002). Blanc’s (1960) study which was conducted during the Nasserist period captures this attitude. Blanc (1960, pp. 87–88) notes that the participants in his study believed that the difference in their spoken dialects was a direct result of a lack of contact between the Arabic-speaking regions as a result of political boundaries imposed by foreign powers. They also believed that these boundaries were now being progressively removed,<sup>2</sup> and that with them would come the removal of dialectal differences, ultimately resulting in linguistic unification which will be enhanced by increased education. They estimated that this linguistic unification would come about in the space of 50 years. Fifty years later, we are able to look back at these predictions and judge them as linguistically naïve.

The orthodox position is that the unitary pan-Arabism of the Nasserist era is now a spent force; Arab leaders have “consolidated nation-state identities (waṭāniyya), cynically turning old

Arab nationalism (qawmiyya) into empty rhetoric” (Phillips 2014, p. 141). However, this does not mean that Arabism has lost all relevance. This was particularly clear during the Arab Spring where “the contagious nature of protests illustrated the domestic relevance of Arab identity” (Phillips 2014, p. 142). With the advent of satellite television and its spread in the Arab world over the last two decades, researchers have begun to point to a new type of Arabism: a ‘New Arabism’ which brings Arabs together through reporting on crisis and conflict in the Middle East, but also through the ‘everyday Arabism’ apparent in entertainment shows and sports reporting (Phillips 2012). One linguistic implication of this New Arabism is the development of ‘White Arabic’, “a media compatible, simplified version of Standard Modern Arabic that is becoming the lingua franca for regional public discourse” (Kraidy 2006, p. 11). This is an exciting new area of research which has started to attract academic attention but remains broadly under-researched.

## **3.2 Language and territorial nationalism in the Arab world**

In the same way that language has been operationalised as an instrument of unity in pan-Arab nationalism, it is also employed as an instrument of separation by some territorial nationalists in the Arab world. Territorial nationalisms “differ from Arab nationalism in the conviction that the state is an absolute criterion of the nation” (Suleiman 2003, p. 163). They can be divided into two types: integral territorial nationalism and separatist territorial nationalism (cf. Suleiman 2008). The former conceives of a distinct national identity which is tied to the territorial boundaries of the state, but does not consider this at odds with Arabism. The latter, on the other hand, involves a complete rejection of Arabism. These two types of territorial nationalism exist

on a kind of continuum, and it is not inconceivable (or uncommon) for intellectuals to shift from one to the other during their career. The longest traditions of territorial nationalism in the Arab world come from Egypt and the Levant, dating back to the late 19th century and early 20th century. The language-identity link featured most prominently in the writing of Egyptian and Lebanese nationalists. I will therefore focus here on these two states.

### **3.2.1 The case of Lebanon**

Lebanon presents both an interesting and complex case of linguistic nationalism. This is because Lebanon is not only diglossic, but also multilingual. Due to the work of Christian missionaries, by the end of Ottoman rule in Lebanon, Arabic contended with three other languages in the educational system: French, English, and Russian. French rose to prominence during the years of the French Mandate (1923–1946): it was declared an official language alongside Arabic, with an expanded foothold in education. Even though French was embraced by the affluent classes in Lebanon regardless of their religious background, “for the Maronites and the Catholics, French was invested with national identity meanings that competed with Arabic and its associated group identity” (Suleiman 2006, p. 128).

After independence from France, Arabic was declared the sole official language in Lebanon as in other countries in the region. However, pan-Arabism was not readily accepted by all Lebanese people and brewing national tensions were mirrored in linguistic tensions between Arabic and French. Maronite and Catholic intellectuals forwarded the argument that Lebanon was a bridge between the East and the West, and that attempts to construct it as entirely Arab must therefore be resisted (Suleiman 2003, 2006). The sectarian dimension of this linguistic tension is of course a significant one, and it eventually contributed to the eruption of the



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Lebanese civil war (1975–1989): the Maronites and the Catholics “tended to treat French as the mainstay of a ‘Franco-Christian’ image of Lebanon which they did not want to lose”, while the Muslims “treated Arabic as the locus of identity conceptualizations that embedded Lebanon firmly into its Arab milieu” (Suleiman 2006, p. 129).

Since Lebanon is not only multilingual but also diglossic, Lebanese colloquial Arabic (LCA) is also endowed with nationalist stakes, with the argument going that “the adoption of this variety of Arabic as Lebanon’s national language would give the Lebanese a language that is unquestionably theirs, and theirs alone” (Suleiman 2003, p. 215). One of the most notable Lebanese colloquialists was Said Aql (1912–2014), an influential poet (of the Maronite confession) who famously devised a 37-character Latin alphabet for LCA and composed an entire book of poems in it. The inherent nationalist binary is nevertheless the same:

Whether we talk about Arabic versus French or formal versus Lebanese colloquial Arabic, we are still talking about two constructs in identity terms: an Arab Lebanon versus a Lebanese Lebanon. The former is of the Arab Middle East and the latter is in the Arab Middle East. There is, however, a difference between the French and the LC[A] constructed Lebanons. The former looks outside to a nonindigenous language, and the latter looks inside to an indigenous variant of the standard language. The former looks to a recent “colonial” past, and the latter looks to a much older tradition which, in some nationalist discourse, is made to encompass an ancient past, that of the Phoenicians. The former has an elitist tone; the latter, a populist one. The former is confessionally driven and the latter is of wider ethnic appeal.

(Suleiman 2006, p. 132)

However, the association of Muslims in Lebanon with pan-Arab nationalism and SA on the one hand and of Christians with Lebanese nationalism and French or LCA on the other is not without important exceptions. For example, Abdallah Lahhud (1899–1988) and Kamal Yusuf al-Hajj (1917–1976) were both integral territorial nationalists who championed SA, and significantly, both were Maronite Christians (Suleiman 2003). Lebanese territorial nationalism therefore provides an interesting case where French, Lebanese colloquial Arabic and even SA have been alternately constructed as markers of a distinctive Lebanese national identity.

As noted by Suleiman (2006, p. 130), recent research suggests that “the struggle over language and national identity is no longer endowed with the confessional power it had before the onset of the civil war in 1975”. This view appears to have been replaced by a more utilitarian approach to languages where they are valued first and foremost for their economic value. Nevertheless, vestiges of this language conflict can still be found today where confessional divisions are reflected along political party lines. For example, Al Batal (2002) studied the use of LCA in local news broadcasts on LBCI (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation I), a television channel associated with the Maronite Phalange Party which emphasises ‘Lebanonism’. He argued that this marked use of LCA reflected the political ideology of the channel’s founders. In contrast, Al-Manar TV emphasises the use of SA “in its news broadcasts and moves toward it in other nonscripted programs, reflecting the Islamist ideology of Hizbollah, its sponsor” (Suleiman 2006, p. 132).

### **3.2.2 The case of Egypt**

Compared to Lebanon, the binary between SA and the colloquial vis-à-vis Arab nationalism and territorial nationalism is more straightforward in Egypt. Egyptian territorial nationalism

originated in the latter part of the 19th century, but it was given an enormous boost in the 1920s due to a number of factors, most notably the 1919 revolution against British colonial rule and the historic discovery of Tut-Ank-Amon's tomb in 1923. Suleiman (2008) summarises the ideological positions of Egyptian nationalists into two main attitudes. Firstly, they argued that SA did not have the power to serve as an instrument of national definition for Egypt. To accept SA as a marker of Egyptian identity would be to concede that Egypt is an Arab country. To refute this connection, Egyptian nationalists resorted to an "acute application of the principle of alterity in national self definition: the greater the substantive linguistic similarities between national Self and significant Other, the greater the desire to deny or explain away these similarities as a basis for a shared national identity between this Self and the Other" (Suleiman 2008, p. 38). Secondly, Egyptian nationalists took a strong interest in language reform and modernisation which was linked to modernising the country as a whole. The reforms they proposed ranged from reforming the grammar of SA, Egyptianising SA, to replacing the Arabic script with Latin script.

Egyptian nationalists shunned the link to Arabic-speaking countries and looked elsewhere for self-definition. They felt a direct racial and psychological link to the ancient Egyptians and, as heirs to such an ancient civilisation, they felt superior to and more advanced than Arabs (Suleiman 2003, 2008). Suleiman (2008, p. 33) observes that "some territorial nationalists went so far as to claim that to be true to their history, the Egyptian Copts, as the legitimate heirs of ancient Egypt, must abandon Arabic and revert to Coptic". This claim was usually anchored in projecting "the seventh-century conquest of Egypt as an Arab invasion or occupation" and in painting "Arabic as an imperial language, equating it symbolically with English as the language of the British colonial rule" (ibid.). The Arab component of Egypt's past was treated "as

historical rupture, which Egypt repaired through its ‘historically proven’ assimilatory powers” (ibid.). This view is expressed in the work of two prominent Egyptian nationalists: Salama Musa (1887–1958) and Louis Awad (1915–1990). Significantly, both of them were born to Coptic parents, even though Musa had professed atheist inclinations. This served as grounds for discrediting their ideas by some of their critics who regarded their bias for ECA as a conspiracy on (the language of) Islam.

While Musa and Awad represent Egyptian nationalism in its most separatist forms, there were other Egyptian nationalists with a more integral disposition towards the Arab world. One such example was the Azhar-educated writer, Taha Husayn (1889–1973), who looked to Europe as a model in his quest for educational reform and cultural redefinition of Egypt, but believed that Egypt must not isolate itself from its Arab neighbours. Husayn stressed the importance of SA in education, but also recognised the need for reforming Arabic grammar and script. At no point did Husayn call for elevating ECA because he felt it was “unfit for literary expression, and that its adoption would deprive Egyptians of a link with their literary heritage” (Suleiman 2003, p. 194). The same could be said of an earlier Egyptian nationalist and Arabic language reformer, Ahmad Lutfi Al-Sayyid (1872–1963), who did not support ECA, but rather held it in contempt “as a corrupt form of Arabic” (Suleiman 2003, p. 173).

There is a tendency in the academic literature to treat Egyptian nationalism as a thing of the past; an ideology which was engulfed by pan-Arabism during the Nasserist era. However, the tide of pan-Arab nationalism and heightened sense of Arab identity slowly retreated as the Nasserist era drew to a close (1970), particularly following the signing of the peace treaty with Israel in 1979 during Anwar El-Sadat’s presidency (1970–1981), resulting in Egypt being excommunicated by many Arab states. During this time, feelings that Egyptians were different

from other Arabs began to fester once more, the importance of colloquial Arabic as part of this distinct Egyptian identity surfaced again, and Egyptian nationalists, such as Louis Awad, marginalised for decades, found a fresh voice (Bassiouney 2009).

These conditions have clearly favoured the revival of Egyptian nationalism (Aboelezz forthcoming). One linguistic manifestation of the recent surge in Egyptian nationalism in Egypt is the launch of Wikipedia Masry in 2008 (Panović 2010), which is, to date, the only official version of the online encyclopaedia in a regional variety of Arabic. Articles on Wikipedia Masry are written in ECA with some articles even written in Latin script. The earliest and most detailed pages are those addressing topics and personalities of direct relevance to Egyptian nationalism. A few years ago, I interviewed an Egyptian political party with an Egyptian nationalist ideology and the aim to make ECA the official language of Egypt (Aboelezz 2017). The party describes itself as an extension of the Egyptian nationalist current of the early 20th century; their ideology is consistent with the separatist territorial nationalism of Salama Musa and Louis Awad. Not only does this clearly indicate that Egyptian nationalism is far from dead, but this new wave of nationalism has a significant advantage over its predecessor: the technological means to make a previously disenfranchised ideology accessible to a wider audience.

## **3.2 Hierarchy of regional varieties**

The discussion of identity politics in the Arab world is hardly complete without addressing the hierarchy of regional varieties in the region. While the discussion of territorial nationalism above focused on the construction of intra-state language identities, this section focuses on inter-state language identities. The diglossic nature of the Arab world means that SA is the high prestige variety of Arabic in written communication. However, within the spoken domain, the supra-

national prestige accorded to the different regional varieties of Arabic is commensurate with the degree of political and cultural influence exercised by the country that a variety hails from.

Historically, the Arab Mashreq (the Arabic-speaking countries east of Libya) has enjoyed greater political and cultural influence than the Arab Maghreb (from Libya to the West), resulting in a Mashreq–Maghreb divide. This, Hachimi (2013) explains, is a historical geographical division rooted in the early period of the Islamic empire, sociolinguistic dimensions of which were reinforced under colonisation in the 19th and 20th centuries. Today, the Mashreq–Maghreb divide is an ideological divide born out of socio-historical developments as well as reflecting the present-day realities of political economy in the Arabic-speaking world. This makes the Maghreb–Mashreq language ideology (a term coined by Hachimi) a political language ideology most clearly reflected in the disparity of attitudes of Arabic speakers towards Mashreqi and Maghrebi varieties of Arabic: Maghrebi varieties are often deemed ‘inauthentic’, branded unintelligible, and even openly mocked.

A telling manifestation of this disparity is the fact that foreign films or soaps dubbed in Egyptian, Levantine, or Gulf Arabic (all Mashreqi varieties) are broadcasted on satellite channels intended for a pan-Arab audience, while soaps dubbed in Maghrebi varieties are intended only for local consumption. Maghrebi artists and singers often perform in Mashreqi varieties in order to gain passage into the pan-Arab market. Similarly, in sociolinguistic encounters between Maghrebi and Mashreqi varieties, the communicative burden is carried by the Maghrebi speaker, who is expected to accommodate to the speech of the Mashreqi speaker(s) (Hachimi 2013; S’hiri 2002; Schulthies 2015).

Two recent studies in perceptual dialectology shed light on this Maghreb–Mashreq language ideology as well as the construction of regional language hierarchies. The first study

was conducted in Morocco with Moroccan participants (Hachimi 2015), and the second in Qatar with predominantly Mashreqi participants, half of whom were born in the Gulf (Theodoropoulou and Tyler 2014). In the two studies, participants were given a map of the Arab world and asked to label and describe the varieties of Arabic spoken throughout the region. Hachimi's study was supplemented with a post-mapping discussion and Theodoropoulou and Tyler's study with a short survey. There were some differences in the overall evaluations of the two groups, for example, Gulf varieties were negatively evaluated by the Moroccan participants while the qualitative analysis of the Qatar study suggests that they were positively evaluated. Remarkably however, both the participants in Qatar and Morocco devalued the Maghrebi varieties. They were deemed "difficult to understand" in the Qatar study, and assigned negative labels such as "rough" and "ugly" in the Morocco study. This is a clear indication of the dominance of the Maghreb-Mashreq language ideology and the perceived inadequacy of Maghrebi varieties in a pan-Arab context, even by Maghrebi speakers themselves. In subordinating Maghrebi varieties to Mashreqi varieties, the Moroccan participants appeared to be "policing the boundary around the older centers of dominant political and cultural influence in the Arabic speaking world" (Hachimi 2015, p. 60).

Another interesting finding from the two aforementioned studies is that ECA, long regarded as a prestigious variety reflecting the cultural influence of Egypt, was not always positively evaluated. Indeed, Hachimi found that there was a generational shift in evaluations of ECA: it was more likely to be deemed the 'best Arabic' by older participants, while the labels used by younger participants indicate that they considered it old-fashioned. This change in language ideologies in apparent time "acknowledges the link between recent developments in Arab media production and reception, and points to stiff competition arising between Arabic

varieties” (Hachimi 2015, p. 56). For example, she points elsewhere to “the recent emergence of Dubai as a new cultural center for the performing arts, and the highly lucrative market of the Gulf music industry which has turned Gulf Arabic dialects into valuable commodities” (Hachimi 2013, p. 275). Hence, positions on the regional hierarchy of Arabic varieties are not static; they rise and fall in tandem with power shifts in the region.

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## 4. Current contributions and future research

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In this chapter, I have sought to cover a range of topics which highlight the relationship between language and politics in the Arab world. However, given the prominence of language politics in the region, there are other approaches to this relationship which I have not explored here. One such approach is the study of language in political stance-taking. This is where code choice or language evaluations can be used to convey an ideological, political stance. For example, Bassiouney (2012, 2014) demonstrates how language was used as a resource to reflect political stance during the 2011 Egyptian uprising. She analyses the case of a caller who phoned a state television channel and told the presenter that the protesters in Tahrir Square speak the English language very well. This is used as a premise to exclude the protestors from the group of ‘real Egyptians’ in the ensuing dialogue. This process of stance-taking relies on the associations that language choices invoke in social interactions; i.e. the indexicality of language, which is part of its symbolic function.

Recent geopolitical shifts in the Arab world, not least in the wake of the Arab Spring, offer sociolinguists new sites for the study of language politics in the region. This, combined with rapid globalisation, is likely to yield new avenues for the study of language politics in the



Aboelezz, M. (2018). The Arabic Language and Political Ideology. In E. Benmamoun & R. Bassiouney (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Arabic Linguistics* (pp. 504-517): Routledge.

future, especially in the area of identity politics. For example, sociolinguists can investigate how post–Arab Spring governments align with standard language ideology while simultaneously seeking to distance themselves from the symbols of Islamist ideology. They can shed light on the salience of Arabism as a frame of identification for a 21st-century, globalised, post–Arab Spring generation. They can also enhance our understanding of inter-state language ideologies in an age of pan-Arab media programming, geopolitical power shifts, and increased contact and mobility in the region. The possibilities seem endless, but one thing is clear: the study of Arab media sits at the centre of many possible avenues. I therefore suspect that this is where many future studies on language politics in the Arab world will begin.

## Notes

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## Further reading

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Aboelezz, M. (2018). The Arabic Language and Political Ideology. In E. Benmamoun & R. Bassiouney (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Arabic Linguistics* (pp. 504-517): Routledge.

This is a timely contribution on the role of language in identity construction in Egypt covering its function as an index and its use in political stance-taking.

Suleiman, Y., 2003. *The Arabic language and national identity: a study in ideology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

This is a key resource on the role of the Arabic language in state and nation building in the Arab world with a thorough discussion of pan-Arab nationalism, territorial nationalisms, and the intellectuals associated with these movements.

Suleiman, Y., 2013. *Arabic in the fray: language ideology and cultural politics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

This is a valuable text on the relationship between language ideologies and political conflict in the Arab world premised on the symbolic role of language as proxy in the social world.

Høigilt, J. and Mejdell, G. (eds.), 2017. *The Politics of Written Language in the Arab World: writing change*. Leiden: Brill

This edited volume, which focuses on the language situation in Egypt and Morocco, presents a range of studies which offer insights on the juncture of language and politics in the contemporary Arab world. The studies examine changing writing practices and shifting language attitudes against a backdrop of political transformations in the region.

<sup>1</sup> Normally numbering 22 states, there are only 21 LAS members at the time of writing as the membership of Syria – one of the founding states – was suspended by LAS on 12/11/2011 over the conflict in Syria.

<sup>2</sup> This is likely in reference to the short-lived Egyptian-Syrian union (1958–1961) which was in effect at the time that Blanc's (1960) article was written.