Lebanon’s language dilemma

«Hi, kifa»

16–18 year-old Babel competition winner
Lebanon finds itself in a fairly unique position: it is an Arab country, with Arabic as the official national language. At the same time, French has become a prestige language due to a long-lasting period of French rule, and today’s language of modernity, English, is beginning to make its mark on the youth. What effect have all of these factors had on the country? To say the least, it has left Lebanon in a confused state of linguistic limbo.

In order to understand the complexity of this issue, one must first understand the extreme diglossia of the Arabic language. Arabic, like most languages, has a standard form. This standard, known as ‘Modern Standard Arabic’ or العربية الفصحى (Al-‘arabiya al-fuṣḥa), is used in all forms of writing, but is only spoken by news presenters or by heads of state in political addresses or debates. However, since Arabic is spoken in 27 different countries which have their own individual histories of foreign occupation, the vernaculars vary wildly. In the most extreme cases, such as between geographically distant regions like Northern Africa or المغرب العربي (Al-maghreb al-‘arabi) and the Levant or بلاد الشام (Bilād ash-shām), the dialects are not mutually intelligible.

Within Lebanon itself, there are many different dialects, but we will focus on the dialect of the capital, Beirut. The majority of Beirut’s citizens are at the very least bilingual, being fluent in both Arabic and French/English, while many speak all three, and so use them interchangeably. This is most apparent in the common Beirut greeting «Hi, kifak, ça va?», an amalgamation of the English ‘Hi’, Arabic كيفك (Kīfak) meaning ‘how are you?’, and the French ‘ça va’, also meaning ‘how are you?’ or ‘are you well?’

At this point, a distinction between loanwords and excessive borrowing of foreign vocabulary must be made. In the cases of certain developments in technology, the use of loanwords may be more practical to use than a translation. A common example of this is the word ‘internet’, which in Arabic is simply referred to as الإنترنت (Al-internet) rather than the awkwardly long الشبكة العنكبوتية العالمية (Ash-shābaka al-‘ankabutiya al-‘ālamiya), which literally translates to ‘the global spider web’.

Jonathan Lahdo analyses a sociolinguistic evolution in Lebanon, and how its impact on the country’s national identity could potentially have dire consequences.
Likewise, a foreign concept like a shopping mall, which differs from a traditional Arabic marketplace orSouq, is called aمولin the Lebanese dialect as opposed to the overly formal مركز للتسوق or ‘shopping centre’.

Yet in Beirut, even the most basic of words are replaced with French or English loanwords. The Arabic word for ‘thank you’ is شكرا (Shukran) and is one of the few words common to almost all Arabic vernaculars, but the French ‘merci’ is almost always heard in the streets of Beirut. The problem does not lie so much in this choice, but the mindset behind it. In Iran for example, the French ‘merci’ is used instead of traditional Persian ‘thank you’ phrases, like تشکر (Tashakkor) andممنون (Mamnūn), in some contexts because of its casual nature. In Lebanon, there is a prestige complex. Mothers berate their children for saying شكرا (Shukran) in public for fear that they may be judged for not using the socially acceptable ‘merci’. The Arabic language is now associated with an almost ancient, uncivilised past and is not well thought of by the many Lebanese that take pride in speaking foreign languages instead of Arabic.

A major contributor to this prestige complex is the large number of immigrants residing in Lebanon. As it stands, one third of the Lebanese population is comprised of Syrian refugees, with many Palestinians and other Arab nationals also representing a significant proportion of the populace. As is common in many countries across the world, the locals look down upon these immigrants who are often uneducated and viewed as ‘stealing’ Lebanese jobs. Another of their defining characteristics is monolingualism in Arabic, adding to the ‘low class’ image that the Arabic language conjures.

This phenomenon in general has affected not only speech, but also writing. It is common knowledge that the internet was designed with the Latin script in mind, and so it can be difficult to type in Arabic. Unlike English text, which can be easily manipulated, Arabic writing has strict rules: text must be written from right to left and all letters that are supposed to join must be joined. For the Lebanese youth, who are mostly familiar with French or English keyboard layouts, a less than optimal solution has appeared: romanisation of the Arabic language. There are three main problems with this chat alphabet that is sometimes referred to as ‘Arabizi’ or ‘Franco-Arabic’.

Firstly, this form of writing has no standard form, often leading to confusion when talking to somebody with whom you are less familiar. For example, the letter ش (Shīn) would be expressed by Lebanese English speakers as ‘sh’ but by French speakers as ‘ch’. If the English speaker saw the ‘ch’, it might be difficult to discern which of the following common English phonemes it represents: /tʃ/, /k/, or /ʃ/. Likewise, for the French speaker, the ‘sh’ could be interpreted as simply a /s/ sound due to the French not pronouncing the letter ‘H’, like in the word ‘déshydration’ (Dezidʁatas). Secondly, Arabic is a consonant-rich language and many of its letters have no English or French equivalent. In order to solve this problem, combinations of numbers and capitalisation are used to express the desired sounds. The Arabicء (Hamza) is a glottal stop and is represented by the

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number 2. The letters ح (Ha, kha) are represented by the numbers 7 and 5 respectively. The letter ت (Ta) is represented by the number 6 or the capital letter "T". It may seem clever to foreigners that the numbers that correspond to these letters are chosen because of their similar shape to the Arabic letter, but this is not something to admire. For many Lebanese Arabic language activists, this is considered to be a lazy solution to a serious problem.

Finally, the usage of this non-standard romanisation of Arabic has led to a decline in Arabic literacy in Lebanon. Many young people have forgotten how to read and write Arabic either because they were French or English-educated, or because they have never been faced with the need to write in Arabic, be it online or in real life. Despite Arabic having a rich literary heritage, Lebanon's population reads more books in French and English and its creative arts scene is dominated by these languages. In Beirut, gone are the days when Arabic was celebrated for its beautiful poetry and stories written by such greats as the medieval Al-mutanabbi (المتنبي) and the modern Nizar Qabbani (نزار قباني).

On the topic of literature and culture, it is important to note that traditional Lebanese pop culture has changed significantly since English and French became commonly spoken in Lebanon. Listening to modern Lebanese music, one already notices how today's most popular singers use common features of western music, despite the words being sung in Arabic. Although young people are not bothered by this, many of the older generation miss how Lebanon was once famous for champions of traditional Arabic music like Feiruz (فیروز) and Qabbani (الصفاني) (Wadi' Aṣ-sāfi) who are still renowned as some of the greatest Arab singers of all time.

While it may seem trivial to think that the evolution of popular culture is a major factor in a linguistic issue like this, it's a reflection of a larger consequence of this problem: the loss of Lebanon's identity. The link between language and identity is by no means a new school of thought, and it is widely accepted that language forms the basis of culture and a people. So although speech and writing are evolving in Lebanon in a certain way, it's leaving behind its rich history. The countless thousands whose childhood memories took place in times of war or further back in the past cannot translate their emotions and experiences without losing the nuances that Arabic, their mother tongue, provides.

Taking a step back and looking at this phenomenon from an outside perspective, its roots are clearer. Historically, Lebanon has been known to be different to its fellow Arab countries. The main aspect of this difference is, as defines most of the Middle East's social dynamics, a fundamentally distinct religious demographic. What we now know as modern Lebanon was a predominantly Christian region even during the rule of the Ottoman Empire, although the balance now between Christians and Muslims is roughly 50-50.

Despite the fact that nearly all Arab Christians use Arabic as their liturgical language and as their spoken language, Arabic has strong ties to Islam and the two are now almost inextricably linked. It's this, in my opinion, which may have prompted the shift in Lebanon's identity. In antiquity, Lebanon was home to the polytheistic Phoenicians, followed by the Christian Assyrians and then Muslim rule in the Ottoman Empire. The linguistic evolution was standard, in spite of changes in religion, as Phoenician, Assyrian/ Aramaic, and Arabic are all part of the Semitic language family.

The adoption of languages like French and English, commonly associated with secularism or Christianity, is a basis for Lebanon's current linguistic situation. This taking up of other languages helps to shake off the purely Islamic picture that the Arabic language paints in the minds of many, and which belies Lebanon's unique religious diversity. The main problem with this identity shift is that Lebanon is abandoning the smooth evolution, which allowed it to retain its core culture and linguistic heritage, in favour of a complete overhaul.

In conclusion, it is apparent that the unique linguistic situation in Lebanon has many negative aspects, although it should not necessarily be considered entirely new at its core. While my personal take on the issue highlights the adverse symptoms, it's also possible to adopt the glass-half-full perspective and focus on the positives of what can be considered a new identity. ¶

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