

16-18 year-old
Babel competition
winner

«Hi, kifa

Lebanon's
language
dilemma

Jonathan Lahdo analyses a sociolinguistic evolution in Lebanon, and how its impact on the country's national identity could potentially have dire consequences.

«Hi, kifak, ça va?»

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-fuṣḥā*), 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 (*Kifak*) 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 الانترنت (*Al-internet*) rather than the awkwardly long الشبكة العنكبوتية العالمية (*Ash-shabaka al-'ankabutiya al-'ālamīya*), which literally translates to 'the global spider web'.

Diglossia:

A situation in which two languages (or language varieties) are used in very different domains in a society. Often there is a Higher (H) variety used in official and formal domains and a Lower (L) variety that is more informal. In diglossic Beirut, Modern Standard Arabic is the H variety while the urban dialect of Arabic is the L variety.

number 2. The letters ح and خ (*Ha, Kha*) are represented by the numbers 7 and 5 respectively. The letter ط (*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 المتنبّي (*Al-mutanabbī*) and the modern نزار قباني (*Nizar Qabbānī*).

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 وديع

الصفافي (*Wadī' Aṣ-ṣāfī*) and فيروز (*Feirūz*) 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. ¶

Jonathan Lahdo, aged 17, is of Lebanese-Syrian descent and currently lives in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. He is pursuing Mathematics, French, Spanish, and Arabic at A-level, and hopes to read Middle Eastern Studies at university.
