



## A Sociolinguistic Study: Diglossia in Social Media

Mahmoud Qudah<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*In this research paper, the researcher will identify the circumstances under which diglossic behavior appear in different social media tools and its effects on Standard variety of Arabic language. The study of this linguistic phenomenon will determine whether the use of the high variety and the use of the low variety of Arabic language vary when there is a change in the contextual topic. The issues of gender and age will also be investigated as it may have direct effect on the use of diglossia in different social settings. This study also attempts to scrutinize the consequences of social network sites on Jordanian Arabic diglossia among different social contexts as a representative of Arabic speaking communities.*

*This study will also investigate diglossia in two important and widespread social websites namely, Twitter and Facebook. As to the knowledge of the researcher, this study is the first of its kind among researchers who are interested in studying Arabic diglossic features of certain local communities. The study may, to some extent, draw some generalizations about diglossia in Arabic speaking communities especially in Jordan due to the fact that these websites (Twitter and Facebook) present a variety of diglossic behaviors by different users of such important social media tools. The study concludes that the high variety of Arabic is used among users of tweets/posts discussing political issues, news and religion. Whereas the low variety is used among people who discuss issues of fashion, sports, music and personal concerns.*

*Key words: Diglossia, Media, Online, ICT, Social Media, Diglossic Languages*

### 1. Introduction

Sociolinguists have investigated many notions related to sociolinguistics including diglossia which is “the presence of a high and a low style or standard in a language, one for formal use in writing and some speech situations and one for colloquial use” (Harris and Hodges, 1981). In other words, the term diglossia is used when two or more varieties are used by the same speech community in different circumstances for different functions.

In sociolinguistics, a variety may include languages, dialects, registers, or styles. Accordingly, varieties that appear in diglossic behaviors could be of two separate languages, for example, Spanish and Guarani in Paraguay. It could also be varieties of the same language as is the case in Arabic. Furthermore, Arabs use the standard form of the language in certain situations and the colloquial vernaculars in other situations based on different factors such as the topic, the addressee, the settings, etc. That is in Jordan, for instance, the two varieties are Modern Standard Arabic (hereinafter, MSA) and Spoken Jordanian Arabic (hereinafter, SPA).

In addition, each diglossic language has a high (H) and low variety (L) and each variety is employed in certain circumstances. Hence, the high and low varieties are used for different functions. For example, the H variety is mostly used in formal situations such as political speeches, religious sermons, broadcasting news, etc., while the L variety is used in everyday life and casual conversations. Each one has its own characteristics. Saville-Troike (1982) mentioned the major differences between H and L, ‘namely that each variety has a specific function, however, they complement each other, H is more prestigious than L, there is a literary heritage in H, but not in L, children learn H at school, and L at home, the H variety is standardized, with a tradition of grammatical study and established norms and orthography, the grammar of H variety is more complex, and more highly inflected, H and L varieties share the bulk of their vocabularies, but there is some complementary distribution of terms, and finally, the phonology of H and L is a single complex system.

In this paper, the researcher will identify the circumstances under which diglossic behavior appear in social media and its effects on Standard Arabic. The study will determine whether the use of the high variety and low variety varies when there is a change in topic. Gender and age are also worth investigating. This study attempts to scrutinize the consequences of social network sites on Jordanian

---

<sup>1</sup> Princess Sumayya University of Technology (Jordan)

Arabic diglossia. It investigates diglossia in two social websites namely, Twitter and Facebook. As to the knowledge of the researcher, this study is the first of its kind. The study may, to some extent, draw a generalization about diglossia in Arabic especially in Jordan due to the fact that these websites present a variety of diglossic behaviors by different users.

## 2. Literature Review

Diglossia has been introduced by the American linguist Ferguson in his article "Diglossia" (1959). He has defined this term as "the use of two different varieties of the same language by the same speaker in separate socially-determined contexts". Ferguson (1959) also defines diglossia as "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 body of written literature either of an earlier period or in another speech community- that is learned largely by means of formal education and used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversations. The superposed variety is the High (H) variety and the regional dialect is the Low (L) variety". Ferguson insisted that the two varieties must belong to the same language.

According to Ferguson (1959), Arabic is a diglossic language where two varieties are used within the same speech community. For instance, in Jordan, the two varieties are the high variety (standard Arabic) and the low variety (Jordanian Arabic). These two varieties belong to Arabic and each one is used in distinct functions as the way people speak at home or with friends is totally different from that is used in broadcasting the news in a TV station.

As can be expected, the H variety has prestige, which the L variety lacks. The H variety is more complex, beautiful, logical, and expressive than the L variety Alshamrania (2008). However, there are occasions where using the H variety is inappropriate, for instance, when speaking with family members or close friends.

Moreover, the two varieties are learned differently. Whereas children acquire the L variety unconsciously at home the H variety is taught in schools by studying grammar and using dictionaries and textbooks. One important difference between MSA (H variety) and JA (L variety) is that Arab children are exposed to colloquial Arabic since born because no one speaks standard Arabic at home. On the other hand, Arab children are not exposed to Standard Arabic before school and formal education (excluding cartoons and children educational programs that are shown in Standard Arabic).

It is important to point out that Ferguson (1959) defined diglossia in a very specific way that requires the two varieties belong to the same language. On the other hand, according to other sociolinguists, this term could include two varieties of different languages such as Spanish and Guarani in Paraguay. Fishman (1967) has defined the term, as "a diglossic speech community is not characterized by the use of two language varieties only. There may be more than two language varieties used within a diglossic community." According to Fishman (1967) "diglossia refers to all kinds of language varieties which show functional distribution in speech community. Diglossia, as a consequence, describes a number of sociolinguistic situations, from stylistic differences within one language or the use of separate dialects to the use of (related or unrelated) separate languages. To put it more simply, he broadened the term to include any speech community that has two (or more) varieties (high and low varieties) each of which is used for different functions regardless if they belong to the same language or not.

Wardhaugh (1986) also states, "In the Arabic situation the two varieties are classical Arabic (H) and the various regional colloquial varieties (L). In Switzerland there are Standard German (H) and Swiss German (L). In Haiti the varieties are Standard French (H) and Haitian Creole (L). In Greece they are the Katharevousa (H) and Dhimotiki, or Demotic (L), varieties of Greek".

Haeri (2000) described the high variety as "the language of writing, education and administration," whereas the vernaculars are "the media of oral exchanges, non-print media, poetry and plays".

Al-Mamari (2011) describes diglossia as "a sociolinguistic phenomenon that exists when a language has two different varieties that are used in different domains of language use. Arabic is one of the typical examples of this phenomenon in world languages today."

Yet in this paper, the researcher followed Ferguson's (1959) definition of diglossia. This definition applies to Arabic language where the high variety includes Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the low variety includes the colloquial dialects (local vernaculars), in this case, Jordanian Arabic (hereinafter, JA). The former is used essentially in formal and written circumstances and the latter is used in everyday communication. MSA, thus, is learned formally in schools but not spoken in everyday activities. Educated people can easily understand MSA, and to some extent, can

uneducated people. However, if one can understand MSA, it is not necessarily he/she can produce such a language. For instance, many non-educated people attend Friday sermon and they understand the language yet they cannot produce such a speech. That means, people need formal education to master literary Arabic. Therefore, the very first variety that Arab children acquire is the low variety (local vernacular) and after joining school they start learning MSA (High variety).

Actually, in addition to the local vernacular and Modern Standard Arabic, there is also intermediate Arabic, which is the spoken Arabic that is used among educated people in discussions or occasions that the vernacular is deemed to be too informal and the Standard Arabic is too formal. As well as Arabs from different parts of the Arab world since not all local vernaculars are mutually intelligible. For instance, one who speaks Jordanian dialect may not understand the one with Moroccan dialect and they may miscommunicate unless they switch into the middle language (the intermediate Arabic). It is quite common to hear people from the Levant or the Gulf area complaining that they can barely understand Moroccan vernacular. Generally speaking, speakers of Arabic tend to use the middle language as a form between the vernacular and literary Arabic in order to communicate with each other, still, the hearer can tell that the speaker belong to this or that region through the accent. Nevertheless, no significance is made for the intermediate Arabic in this study. Mainly, this paper will focus on the high variety (MSA) and the low variety (JA) in Jordan.

### **3. Research Questions**

In particular, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) Does Jordanian Arabic become written in social media?
- 2) Does the diglossic behavior appear in social media?

### **4. Method**

The data was collected for almost four weeks from two different websites, namely, Facebook and Twitter. Data collected in this study relied mainly on the researcher observation that took four weeks duration. The study analyzed the type of variety (H or L) used and the circumstances under which it took place, through observing tweets and posts by different users. It was analyzed and classified whether the used variety is high or low as well as specifying the context in which it was used. These two websites were chosen because they are the most widely used in social media especially in Jordan. According to statistics of 2013 almost 2.6 million active Facebook users in Jordan whereas a hundred thousand on Twitter. Various topics were investigated including political issues, cooking, sports, religion, fashion, and personal tweets/posts. The researcher examined around 200 tweets/posts and their replies from different Jordanian males and females and different ages. In addition, 20 random tweets in two hashtags one written in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the other in Jordanian Arabic (JA) were chosen to see how people respond to the hashtag written in MSA and the one written in JA.

### **5. Discussion**

There is no doubt that Arabic is a diglossic language and in the few recent years, social media spreads rapidly among the young generations. It becomes an integral part of their lives. People discuss lots of issues through their accounts on social media and since the low variety (JA) is not written how could the social media present diglossic behavior.

Since social media appears in the Arab world people start using the written local dialects to express their feelings, thoughts, opinions and ideas. Actually, social media users type exactly what they pronounce to the extent that you can tell the dialect that he/she uses in everyday life. JA is grammatically and lexically less complex than MSA, and have an oral form rather than written one. It is hardly ever written except in social media but never used in real life functions.

Furthermore, the analysis showed that diglossia extensively exists in Jordanian accounts on both Facebook and Twitter. One chooses the code (H or L) depending on many factors such as the people that he is willing to grasp their attention or the topic itself. If one's intention is to address a well-educated literate enlightened people s/he will most probably use the H variety (MSA) whilst if s/he is addressing family, friends or relatives, the low variety (JA) is used. In addition, if one wants to address Arabs generally from all over the Arab world, s/he tends to use MSA because all Arabs with different vernaculars do not necessarily understand JA. Here the H variety is used to ensure more understanding.

Moreover, as the change in topic in spoken Arabic means a change in code, a change in topic in social media means a change in the used code as well. For instance, the religious, political, poetic,

documentaries, medical, economical or scientific tweets/posts are written in MSA whereas tweets/posts that discuss sports, fashion, games, emotions, or personal activities are written in JA. Additionally, not only the topic and the addressee affect the chosen code but also age and gender. It was noticeable that users whose ages ranging from 15-22 tend to use JA more than MSA. Modern Standard Arabic is used the most by users of 28 years old and above. Interestingly though, it was found that codeswitching between the two varieties is extensively used between all users. For the most part, political and religious issues are mainly discussed in MSA. However, switching to JA is possible.

Males mainly discuss sports and it has been noticed that the L variety has extensively used rather than the H variety. On the contrary, females mainly discuss fashion; the L variety prevails, despite the fact that females tend to use the prestigious variety more than males. Occasionally, females tend to codeswitch between JA and English when they are discussing fashion issues. This may answer why they did not use MSA (the high variety) which is more prestigious. However, emotional and personal tweets/posts were written and discussed in JA as to make the viewer emotionally closer when they use the L variety. Yet, in general, female users were more likely to use MSA than male users.

It is worth mentioning that the used code by Facebook/Twitter user can, to some extent, tell her/his social background, education and social status. For instance, if one of the users frequently uses MSA, it is predictable that s/he is elite and well-educated as well as his viewers. Some users use MSA to show seriousness, importance, and complexity and to be more effective. It was noticed that tweets written in MSA have more replies than those written in JA. This means that Modern Standard Arabic grasp attention more than JA and tweets/posts written in MSA (the high variety) are more valuable than those of JA (the low variety). Tweets/posts written in JA (L variety) are less important and less serious topics.

In terms of repliers, it was noticed that if the tweet/post is written in MSA, the replies are more likely to be in MSA as well. Nevertheless, there are some replies that are not totally in MSA and some are in JA. As a result, we can expect that the repliers tend to use almost the same code that is used in the tweet/post. It seems that the replier is trying to accommodate to the one who posts/ tweets. It is widely acknowledged that in sociolinguistics an addressee usually accommodates to the speech of the addresser in different spoken interaction communication. This is applied to written interactions as well. Generally, there are some situations where one is expected to use the standard variety of a language and other situations where the regional vernacular is expected to be used. It is not ruled out completely though.

After several centuries, the use of classical Arabic has declined as speakers more widely adopt modern standard Arabic. However, the uses of colloquial dialects have further eroded standard Arabic. This development, coupled with the rapid global adoption of communication technologies, have resulted in a divergence from, or what some may consider a "weakening" of, the Arabic language.

## **6. Conclusions**

The study analyzed diglossia in social media and arrived at the conclusion that diglossia exist in Jordanian accounts on social media.

Sociolinguists agreed that Arabic is a diglossic language where the two varieties are Modern Standard Arabic (the high variety) and various regional colloquial varieties (low variety) in this case Jordanian Arabic. Although the high variety (MSA) is superior, there are occasions where it is inappropriate and the speaker should use the low variety (JA) where in many situations formal Arabic is not useful for personal communication. For instance, foreigners who learn Standard Arabic can barely, if any, understand the spoken vernacular. In fact, Standard Arabic may not help them in everyday communication.

This study aimed to see if there are any diglossic behaviors in social media and to encourage people to use more Standard Arabic in social media. As the results showed that social media present diglossic behavior and that Spoken Jordanian Arabic (SJA) becomes written in social media. It also showed that the younger generation tends to use written JA more than MSA to express themselves.

The researcher firmly believes that the topic and age are the most important factors that affect the choice of the code in social media. Clearly, users choose the L variety or the H variety according to topic that is being discussed. In most cases, those who frequently use JA also use MSA regardless of their gender, age, or educational background. While there are some users whose tweets/posts are confined in MSA.

In general, this study indicates that high variety is used in tweets/posts discussing political issues, news, and religion. Instead, the L variety (JA) is used in fashion, sports, and personal issues. It is also

found that MSA is used by elite and educated users to show seriousness and value whilst JA is used to discuss everyday experiences and to reply to one another.

The researcher hopes that the study draws some useful generalization about diglossic behavior in social media employed by different speakers. It is a worrying reality that many Arabic vernaculars are not mutually intelligible so, the researcher highly recommends more usage of Standard Arabic to be a unifying language among Arabs as Al-Husri (1985) stated that "the Arabs need a 'unified and unifying language', rather than a series of dialect-languages which will lead to further fragmentation".

## References

- [1] Alshamrani, H. (2012). "Diglossia in Arabic TV stations". *Journal of King Saud University- Languages and Translation*, vol. 24, pp. 57-69.
- [2] Al-Mamari, H. (2011). *Arabic Diglossia and Arabic as a foreign Language: The Perception of Students in World Learning Oman Center*. MA Dissertation. /Capstone Collection. Paper 2437.
- [3] Bani-Khalid, T. (2014). "Standard Arabic and Diglossia: A Problem for Language Education in the Arab World". *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, vol. 4, pp. 180-189.
- [4] Dashti, A. and Dashti, F. (2015) 'Is Kuwait TV diglossic? A sociolinguistic investigation', *European Scientific Journal*, vol. 11, pp. 123-137.
- [5] Ferguson, C. (1959). "Diglossia". *Word*. Vol. 15, pp. 325-340
- [6] Fishman, J. (1967). "Bilingual with and without Diglossia". *Journal of Social Sciences*. Vol. 23 (2), pp. 29-38.
- [7] Haeri, N. (2000). "Form and Ideology: Arabic Sociolinguistics and Beyond". *Annual Review Of Anthropology*. Vol. 29, pp. 61-87.
- [8] Harris, T. and Hodges, R. (1981) (eds.). *A Dictionary of Reading and Related Terms*. International Reading Association, Newark, DE.
- [9] Horn, C. (2015) "Diglossia in the Arab World". *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, vol. 5, pp. 100-104.
- [10] Saville-Troike, M. (1982). *The Ethnography of Communication*. Blackwell Publishing.
- [11] Wardhaugh, R. (2006). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Blackwell Publishing