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Dialects and Their Impact on Classical Arabic in the Arab Geographical Environment

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Abstract

Language constitutes a fundamental pillar of human communication and social interaction, and its forms vary according to geographical, social, historical, and cultural environments. The Arabic language, with its rich classical heritage and diverse regional dialects, has long attracted the attention of linguists, both ancient and modern. Scholars have sought to document Arabic in its most authentic forms while simultaneously explaining the causes of dialectal diversity and its influence on Classical Arabic. This diversity has produced a complex linguistic reality in which dialects coexist with Classical Arabic, leading to phenomena such as diglossia and bilingualism. This study aims to examine the relationship between dialects and Classical Arabic within the Arab geographical environment, highlighting the causes of dialectal multiplicity and assessing their positive and negative impacts on the classical language. The paper also explores how dialectal interaction has contributed to the enrichment, renewal, and vitality of Classical Arabic over time. Language is one of the most essential means of communication among individuals and communities, and it evolves under the influence of multiple external and internal factors, most notably the geographical environment in which it develops. One of the most prominent linguistic phenomena observed in societies is dialectal diversity, which reflects differences in geography, social structure, lifestyle, and historical experience.

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1. Introduction

Arab linguists—both classical and contemporary—have devoted considerable attention to the study of dialectal variation and its geographical distribution, recognizing it as a central issue in Arabic linguistic studies. This interest stems from the ongoing linguistic tension between local dialects and Classical Arabic, as well as from broader processes of linguistic change driven by globalization, modernization, and technological development (Wafi, 2004; Omar, 1988). In this context, the present study seeks to identify the main factors leading to dialectal multiplicity in

the Arab geographical environment and to analyze how these dialects have influenced Classical Arabic. To achieve this objective, the study addresses the following research questions:

- What is meant by Classical Arabic, dialects, and geographical environment?
- To what extent do dialects affect Classical Arabic, and what is the nature of their relationship?
- What are the main reasons for dialectal diversity in the Arab geographical environment?
- How has dialectal multiplicity contributed to the enrichment and development of Classical Arabic?

2. Geographical Linguistics and the Arabic Linguistic Environment: Dimensions, Concerns, and Sources of Language Formation

2.1. Geographical Linguistics

Geographical linguistics—also referred to as linguistic geography or geolinguistics—is a branch of linguistics that studies the spatial distribution of languages and dialects and examines linguistic variation across different geographical regions. It focuses on how language usage differs among individuals and communities according to their geographical location and environmental context (Bay, 1998). This field is concerned with mapping dialectal boundaries, analyzing patterns of linguistic variation, and exploring the interaction between language and external factors such as population distribution, migration, and modes of living. Although some scholars equate geographical linguistics with dialectology, the former is broader in scope, as it encompasses social, economic, political, and historical dimensions in addition to purely linguistic variation (Al-Hamid, 2013).

2.2. Interests of Geographical Linguistics

According to Bay (1998), geographical linguistics examines the global status of languages by comparing them based on objective criteria such as the number of speakers, geographical spread, functional domains of use, and cultural, political, and economic significance. In this sense, it seeks to identify where languages are spoken, how widely they are used, and the extent to which they influence or are influenced by other languages and dialects. Moreover, geographical linguistics addresses issues of language contact, bilingualism, and multilingualism, analyzing how languages and dialects interact, compete, or coexist within shared geographical spaces (Omar, 1988). These interactions often lead to linguistic borrowing, structural change, and semantic expansion.

2.3. Dimensions of Geographical Linguistics

Geographical linguistics is based on several interrelated dimensions, including:

1. Spatial Dimension:

This dimension emphasizes the relationship between linguistic phenomena and geographical space, highlighting the close connection between linguistics and geography.

2. Social Dimension:

As a social science, geolinguistics examines language within its social context, relying on demographic data and population studies to explain linguistic distribution and variation.

3. Economic Dimension:

This dimension links language use to economic activity, media, and cultural production, affecting language vitality, survival, or decline (Khassara, 2017).

4. Temporal Dimension:

Language is influenced by historical processes over time, including transmission across generations, semantic change, and linguistic evolution.

5. Political Dimension:

Language policies implemented by state institutions—through education, media, legislation, and cultural planning—play a decisive role in shaping linguistic practices.

6. Linguistic Dimension:

This core dimension focuses on language structure, development, branching, and vitality, viewing languages as dynamic systems shaped by their environments.

The Linguistic Environment and Its Impact on Arabic

Language functions as a mirror of a nation's history, culture, and social organization. It is deeply influenced by civilization, traditions, political systems, and especially the geographical environment. For this reason, languages constitute one of the most accurate records of human history (Wafi, 2004). The Arabic language, one of the world's oldest living languages, has undergone significant transformation across time and space. The environment in which a language exists provides it with vocabulary, imagery, and expressive structures, shaping both linguistic form and cultural meaning. Consequently, much of a language's metaphorical and imaginative content is derived from its natural surroundings. Classical Arabic vocabulary reflects its origins in a harsh desert environment, as evidenced by the strength and roughness of phonetic patterns found in early Arabic poetry and speech. This demonstrates the

crucial role of time and place in linguistic development, as dialects spoken in urban or industrial environments differ markedly from those used in desert regions, despite belonging to the same language system (Wafi, 2004). Wafi (2004) notes that the transition of societies from nomadism to urban civilization leads to linguistic refinement, stylistic elevation, and greater expressive flexibility. A well-known anecdote illustrates this phenomenon: a Bedouin poet, whose harsh expressions reflected his desert upbringing, gradually adopted refined poetic imagery after prolonged exposure to urban life and intellectual circles. This transformation underscores the profound influence of environment and time on linguistic expression and semantic development.

The First Signs of the Codification of the Arabic Language

With the spread of Islam and the territorial expansion of the Arab-Islamic state, large numbers of non-Arabs embraced Islam. This historical transformation led to linguistic contact between Arabs and non-Arabs, which in turn resulted in phonetic and grammatical deviations (*lahñ*) in speech. These deviations raised serious concerns among early Muslim scholars regarding the preservation of the integrity of Classical Arabic, particularly as it is the language of the Holy Qur'an.

In response, Arab scholars initiated systematic efforts to collect, document, and codify Arabic as spoken by linguistically "pure" Arab tribes who had remained relatively isolated from non-Arab influences. The primary objective of these efforts was to safeguard the correctness of Qur'anic recitation and interpretation and to preserve the linguistic norms of Classical Arabic (Omar, 1988; Wafi, 2004).

A frequently cited anecdote illustrates the gravity of this concern. A Bedouin reportedly heard a Qur'anic verse recited incorrectly, altering its grammatical structure in a way that changed its meaning. Upon hearing the phrase "*Allah is innocent of the polytheists and His Messenger*" (by incorrect declension), the Bedouin concluded—incorrectly—that God disavowed His Messenger. When the matter was brought before Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, he clarified the correct reading, demonstrating how grammatical accuracy directly affects theological meaning. This incident highlights the early awareness of the dangers of linguistic deviation and the necessity of codifying correct Arabic usage.

These linguistic preservation efforts intensified during the second century of the Hijra, particularly in regions such as Basra and Kufa. Scholars collected Arabic vocabulary directly from Bedouins renowned for their eloquence, recorded rare expressions, and explained obscure Qur'anic words to facilitate understanding among both Arabs and non-Arabs. Among the earliest works in this field was *Gharīb al-Qur'ān*, attributed to Ibn 'Abbās, followed by specialized lexical works dealing with rare words, animals, human anatomy, and environmental terminology. As these efforts matured, scholars developed systematic methodologies for classification, organizing linguistic material by semantic fields and thematic categories. This intellectual trajectory culminated in the emergence of the first comprehensive Arabic dictionary, *Mu'jam al-'Ayn*, compiled by al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farāhīdī, which marked a turning point in Arabic lexicography.

2.2. Sources for the Collection of the Arabic Language

The sources upon which early linguists relied for collecting and authenticating Arabic vocabulary were carefully selected and limited to texts and forms of speech considered linguistically authoritative. These sources include:

2.2.1. The Holy Qur'an

The Holy Qur'an occupies the highest rank of eloquence and linguistic perfection in Arabic. It encompasses the most refined vocabulary and stylistic structures, making it a primary reference for linguists. Al-Rāghib al-Asfahānī described Qur'anic language as "the essence and purest form of Arabic speech," upon which jurists, scholars, poets, and rhetoricians relied (as cited in Omar, 1988). The Qur'an was revealed in the language of Quraysh and neighboring tribes, whose speech was considered free from excessive dialectal distortion, thereby providing a stable linguistic model for Classical Arabic.

2.2.2. Prophetic Hadith

Scholars have differed regarding the use of Prophetic Hadith as linguistic evidence. While many early linguists were cautious about citing Hadith due to issues of transmission and narration, others argued that authenticated Hadith texts are linguistically reliable and, in some cases, more trustworthy than certain poetic sources. Notable linguists such as al-Khalil ibn Ahmad, Sībawayh, al-Kisā'ī, and Ibn Fāris cited Hadith selectively, acknowledging its value when linguistic authenticity was ensured (Wafi, 2004).

2.2.3. Poetry

Poetry constituted one of the most significant sources of linguistic evidence in Arabic culture. It was regarded as the most eloquent form of expression and a faithful reflection of authentic Arabic usage. Linguists categorized poets into four groups according to the reliability of their language:

1. Pre-Islamic poets
2. Mukhaḍramūn (those who lived during the transition to Islam)
3. Early Islamic poets

4. Post-Islamic

Priority was given to the poetry of the first two categories due to their linguistic purity and proximity to the original Arabic environment.

2.2.4. Prose

Although used more cautiously, prose also served as a linguistic source under strict conditions. Acceptable prose included proverbs, wills, sermons, and selected Bedouin speech. Linguists imposed temporal and geographical criteria to ensure that such material reflected authentic Classical Arabic usage rather than later linguistic corruption.

2.3. Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Geographical Environment

Pre-Islamic poetry vividly reflects the intimate relationship between language and geographical environment. Poets expressed their emotions, experiences, and worldview through imagery drawn directly from their surroundings. Desert landscapes shaped their vocabulary, imagery, and metaphors, resulting in frequent references to sand, stars, lightning, rain, animals, plants, travel, and nomadic life. Animals such as camels, horses, wild cattle, and birds occupied a central place in poetic imagery, symbolizing endurance, strength, and survival. *Imru' al-Qays*, for instance, provided detailed descriptions of his camel and horse, portraying their physical features and movements with remarkable precision—an indication of the poet's deep engagement with his environment. Similarly, poets such as *Tarafa ibn al-'Abd* and *Aws ibn Hajar* incorporated desert fauna and birds of prey into their verses, using them as metaphors for cunning, resilience, and power. Natural phenomena—lightning, rain, mirages, night, and stars—were also recurrent motifs, often symbolizing patience, longing, or existential struggle. Furthermore, pre-Islamic poets demonstrated strong emotional attachment to their homelands, frequently opening their poems with elegiac reflections on abandoned dwellings (*al-ṭalal*). These descriptions reveal how language preserves not only physical landscapes but also collective memory and identity.

3. The Arabic Language in the Context of Development: From Media to Economy and Sustainability

3.1. Linguistic Development

According to the *Arabic Encyclopaedia*, linguistic development refers to “planned processes aimed at improvement and advancement in various fields.” When applied to language, development involves deliberate efforts to expand vocabulary, modernize structures, and enhance expressive capacity in response to societal needs. Language is inseparable from development in all its forms—economic, social, scientific, and cultural—because it serves as the primary medium through which knowledge is produced, transmitted, and applied. Al-Masdi emphasizes that language is a fundamental prerequisite for any developmental achievement, as no progress can occur without an effective linguistic vehicle.

Linguistic development seeks to:

1. Increase lexical richness in accordance with Arabic morphological and semantic rules.
2. Enhance methods of expression and communication to meet contemporary needs.

Historical experience confirms the strong correlation between linguistic vitality and societal advancement. Societies that invest in their language—through education, standardization, translation, and technological adaptation—are better positioned to achieve intellectual and economic progress (Khassara, 2017).

One of the most important mechanisms of linguistic development is translation and Arabisation, which enable Arabic to absorb modern scientific and technical terminology. Without these processes, Arab societies would have remained isolated from global scientific and cultural advancements. Translation facilitates cultural exchange, democratizes knowledge, and allows Arabic to function effectively in modern domains such as economics, medicine, media, and technology.

For this reason, intellectual elites bear responsibility for translating key scientific works and adapting terminology into Arabic, ensuring that the benefits of development reach all social classes within a given geographical environment.

3.2. Linguistic Development as Lexical Enrichment

Linguistic development contributes directly to enriching Arabic by (a) expanding its lexicon, (b) renewing stylistic and syntactic patterns, and (c) improving functional performance across modern domains. In practical terms, development work increases vocabulary through derivation, Arabisation, and translation, and it modernises discourse structures so Arabic can efficiently serve education, science, administration, media, and the economy (Khassara, 2017). This modernization is not merely “adding words,” but a systematic effort to ensure that Arabic remains capable of producing precise meanings within contemporary communicative contexts.

3.3. The Role of Journalism and Broadcasting in Linguistic Development

Modern journalism—print, radio, television, and digital platforms—plays a decisive role in shaping public language competence and patterns of usage. Mass media functions as an informal educational institution: it exposes audiences to vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntactic models through repeated listening and reading, thereby strengthening linguistic awareness over time.

A key argument in Arabic media-language scholarship is that broadcasting can increase the public's linguistic repertoire, promote more unified pronunciation, and reduce dialectal distance. 'Abd al-'Azīz Sharaf, for example, argues that radio and modern media contribute to broadening popular linguistic capital and may facilitate a gradual shift from dominant colloquial usage toward a simplified, accessible form of Standard Arabic in public communication.

Beyond vocabulary diffusion, journalism accelerates the circulation of modern terms and civilizational expressions, especially in politics, technology, and economics—fields where rapid innovation continuously produces new concepts. Media language can also support linguistic reform through educational and cultural programs that rely on sustained exposure to Standard Arabic; continuous hearing often leads to spontaneous adoption in speech, particularly among younger audiences.

An especially influential domain is children's programming. When children's drama, educational cartoons, and storytelling are produced in Standard Arabic, children grow up acquiring a stable "high variety" input early, which helps reinforce linguistic identity and improves later literacy and academic writing.

3.4. Language and Economic Development

Economic development is commonly understood as a sustained increase in per-capita productivity and output over a defined period, achieved by improving resource use and raising productivity. In this framework, language is not a neutral tool but an infrastructural component of development: it enables education, skills transfer, administration, market coordination, and the circulation of scientific and technical knowledge.

A recurring empirical observation in sociolinguistics and development studies is that languages with broader domains of use—especially in science, commerce, and global communication—tend to gain "symbolic" and "instrumental" value. This can create unequal linguistic markets, where some languages expand while others remain geographically confined. In the Arab context, the relationship between language and economy has been described as mutually reinforcing: when economic power rises, linguistic prestige increases; when linguistic competence and institutional use expand, economic participation and competitiveness improve.

This view appears explicitly in discussions led by Jordanian economic figures. In a public seminar reported by *Al-Ra'i*, Jawād al-Anānī emphasizes that language and economy are closely linked, particularly in marketing and opening new markets. The same discussion highlights a contemporary challenge: the dominance of English in many economic and technological sectors can marginalize the native language in professional life, especially in multilingual cities and globalized labor markets.

Historically, Arabic maintained a strong connection with trade and public marketplaces (e.g., poetry and cultural exchange in commercial fairs), but the contemporary situation requires conscious policy and institutional choices to ensure Arabic remains productive in modern economic fields (e.g., business education, investment discourse, and digital entrepreneurship).

3.5. Linguistic Sustainability and the Survival of Arabic

Linguistic sustainability refers to maintaining a language's vitality across generations and ensuring its functionality in modern life without loss of identity. Arabic's sustainability is reinforced by its religious, cultural, and historical centrality, particularly its connection to Qur'anic revelation (Qur'an, 26:192–195). The linkage between sacred text and linguistic form has historically strengthened Arabic's continuity, encouraging learning, standardization, and scholarly investment in grammar, lexicography, and interpretation.

Arabic intellectual discourse also frequently emphasizes Arabic's exceptional lexical richness and structural capacity. Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad, for instance, argues for Arabic's distinctiveness and expressive power, highlighting its breadth and continuity across centuries (al-Aqqad, n.d.). From a sustainability perspective, these claims support the argument that Arabic is capable of modernization without losing intelligibility and continuity—provided it is institutionally supported in education, media, science, and public administration.

4. Arabic in the International Arena: Globalization, Internationalism, and Intercultural Dialogue

4.1. Arabic as an International Language in Global Institutions

International recognition of Arabic increased significantly when the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 3190 (XXVIII) on 18 December 1973, which included Arabic among the official and working languages of the General Assembly and its Main Committees. This decision expanded Arabic's role in international forums, documentation, and diplomatic communication, and it also encouraged the establishment and expansion of translation services in international organizations.

However, formal recognition does not automatically ensure strong practical usage. The effectiveness of Arabic in international spaces depends on consistent institutional implementation: Arabic in official documents, websites, translation policies, interpretation capacity, and the actual linguistic practices of delegates and staff.

4.2. Globalization of Arabic: Risks and Opportunities

Globalization is often defined as “the act or process of globalizing,” especially in relation to the integration of the world economy. Linguistically, globalization may produce unequal outcomes: it can support dissemination and technological integration, but it can also intensify the dominance of a single language and marginalize others—affecting identity, education, and cultural sovereignty.

For Arabic, globalization has two contrasting effects:

- **Risks:** linguistic displacement in higher education and the labor market when English becomes the default in science, business, and technology; increased code-switching; and weakening of Standard Arabic in some public spheres.
- **Opportunities:** digitization of Arabic heritage and modern content, Arabic computational processing, growth in Arabic online publishing, and the expansion of translation and Arabisation centers that enrich terminology and improve modern usability.

4.3. Universality vs. Globalization

Several Arab thinkers distinguish between globalization as cultural penetration and universality as open exchange that preserves difference. This distinction is often associated with the writings of Muhammad Abed al-Jabri, who separates “openness with difference” from “erasure of the other” in cultural relations. Applied to Arabic, the argument supports a strategic approach: participate globally through translation, science, and digital production while protecting linguistic identity through education and policy.

4.4. Arabic and Intercultural Dialogue

Intercultural dialogue has become a vital channel for improving global understanding and correcting stereotypes. Translation and dialogue initiatives introduce Arabic language and culture to wider audiences and facilitate mutual knowledge exchange. International translation associations and networks also create professional platforms for collaboration, training, and the circulation of cultural products. One example discussed in professional media is ATIDA, described as aiming to create a space for dialogue among translators and linguists and to promote intercultural engagement.

From a language-development perspective, such networks support Arabic by increasing translation volume, strengthening terminological modernization, and expanding Arabic’s presence in global cultural and scientific circulation.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based on qualitative linguistic analysis and documentary research drawing on published texts, classical and contemporary linguistic sources, and publicly available materials. It does not involve human participants, personal data, surveys, interviews, or experimental procedures. Therefore, ethical approval from an institutional review board was not required.

The authors have adhered to recognized academic and ethical standards by ensuring accuracy in citation, respecting intellectual property rights, and avoiding plagiarism. All sources used in the study are properly acknowledged in accordance with APA 7 guidelines.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or personal interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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