

## **The evolution of the Arabic language through online writing: the explosion of 2011**

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### **Abstract**

The role of the internet in the popular protests of 2011 cannot be overestimated. Most importantly, the internet allowed online activists to escape censorship and communicate to thousands if not millions of people in real time. What is interesting about this form of communication is the language of choice particularly in Egypt – for centuries Classical (CA) or Modern Standard (MSA) Arabic have been the accepted forms of writing; however, the form of language being used online leans more towards colloquial Arabic, which has up until now only been accepted as a spoken form.

The relationship between the written and spoken forms of Arabic in Egypt has been detailed by Haeri (2003), but the use of spoken Arabic in online writing is yet to be explored. This paper looks at the relationship between the form of the language used in online writing and the messages being conveyed. The suggestion is that away from the censorship of state media and the press, writers are free to use dialectal forms of the language for a freer, more direct approach to their readers, which has been more effective in communicating their message than the use of CA or MSA would have been.

## **Introduction**

Ferguson (1959) first described Arabic as a 'diglossic' language, meaning it has distinct written and spoken forms. This premise has been generally accepted with Classical Arabic (CA) and later Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) constituting the written form, and the numerous dialects of Arabic as its spoken forms. Badawi (1973) later expanded on Ferguson's description with his five levels of contemporary Arabic in Egypt, ranging from Classical Arabic to Illiterate Spoken Arabic. Like Ferguson, Badawi's model describes written and spoken Arabic as distinct forms, with CA and MSA as the written forms.

Haeri (2003) describes the relationship between the written and spoken forms of Arabic in modern day Egypt, concluding that Egyptians use spoken Egyptian Arabic for almost all their everyday interactions. Their exposure to CA and MSA is limited mainly to the religious realm and news media respectively. Egyptians therefore feel unfamiliar and distant from the written forms of Arabic, describing Egyptian Arabic as more 'direct' and expressing the difficulties they face in mastering CA/MSA (Haeri, 2003: 38, 42). The fact that MSA remains the language of the written press Haeri attributes to state control and censorship, manifested in 'correctors tasked with correcting the language of writers and journalists, and even 'translating' spoken quotes into MSA (Haeri, 2003: 60, 65, 68).

The first known Arab politician to take advantage of the language situation in Egypt was the former Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser. Prior to Nasser, political speeches were delivered in CA. However, Nasser often mixed Egyptian Arabic with CA in his speeches for oratory effect. The result was a highly effective rhetoric that resonated well with ordinary Egyptians. Since then, other Arab leaders such as the former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and the former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, have followed suit and it has become not only acceptable but also desirable for Arab politicians to use local dialects for rhetorical effect in their political speeches (Mazraani (1997).

Against the backdrop of state control and censorship, it is very difficult for ordinary Egyptians to voice their political views in print – on the one hand state censorship hinders free expression of ideas, opinions, thoughts etc, and on the other, state control means that the only acceptable form of writing is one that most Egyptians find unfamiliar and difficult to master. Political dissent has therefore been suppressed in mass print media, paving the way for young political activists, frustrated by the political status quo, to look elsewhere to voice their views. The internet provided a new medium for communication among those young activists away from state censorship and control.

This paper sets out to show that it is not just the medium of the internet that helped the young activists to mobilise thousands to take to the streets in protest, but also the type of language they used was integral. Just as Nasser used Egyptian Arabic for rhetorical effect, the Egyptian Arabic used in online writing conveys a more honest, 'direct' message than the use of MSA would. As the language of everyday communication for all Egyptians, Egyptian Arabic transcends the religious boundaries of CA as well as the educational boundaries of MSA. Nasser's vision of Arab Nationalism is replaced by an Egyptian national message conveyed in Egyptian Arabic.

The reference in this paper to Egyptian Arabic refers to the variety spoken in Cairo, as it is the most recognisable in Egypt and arguably the most prestigious. It is also the variety used in most Egyptian mass entertainment media.

## **History of Arabic linguistics and sociolinguistics**

In order to understand the current state of the Arabic language, it is important to understand the framework of linguistic and sociolinguistic studies relevant to it. In the case of the Arabic language, two main challenges appear on the linguistic and sociolinguistic scene, namely that it is a diglossic language spoken in more than twenty countries, each with their own regional and local varieties; and the prestige of the 'High' varieties, namely Classical Arabic and more recently MSA, which are the standard, formally-taught forms of Arabic. Badawi (2006) highlights the fact that whereas the "Qur'anic" variety of Arabic was previously the model for standard (spoken) Arabic, the language of the media is becoming the model for present-day educated and non-educated native Arabic speakers. Badawi has identified the media as a contemporary language model for MSA so it follows that the language of Arabic media and its influence should be explored. It is worth noting that despite the fact that traditional news media do use MSA, the bulk of Egyptian mass entertainment media uses Egyptian Arabic.

A further challenge is the lack of discourse analysis of Arabic, and the relative paucity of linguistic and sociolinguistic studies of contemporary Arabic language use. Although some work in the field of Arabic sociolinguistics has been carried out and is discussed below, Ryding (2006) and Badawi (2006) both confirm the lack and subsequent need for more discourse analysis. In El-Said Badawi's Foreword to the landmark book *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, he remarks that:

Modern learners face the unenviable task of trying to learn an ill-defined, ill-researched, socially diffused phenomenon whose properties and functions are badly and disparately understood by non-native and native speakers alike. The lack of clearly defined language objectives that the teaching profession is suffering from today is a function of the lack of a clear understanding (or at least appreciation) of the sociolinguistic role it plays in present-day Arab societies. (Badawi, 2006: ix)

Versteegh (1997) echoes this point and believes that the dialects have struggled to gain recognition as a “serious object of study” in the Arab world. He attributes this to the political significance of MSA as the unifying language of the Arabs and by contrast the interest of British orientalists in the various dialects, which came to be “symbols of the fragmentation of the Arab world” (Versteegh, 1997: 132).

In spite of this lack of understanding of Arabic sociolinguistics, the studies and research discussed below have gone some way to describing the contemporary language situation. What these studies have established, however, is that MSA is the accepted form of writing despite its being a relatively unfamiliar variety of Arabic to native speakers, who use their local dialect in most everyday situations albeit for spoken communication only. Writing online in Arabic is a relatively new phenomenon that still needs further research and analysis.

## **Diglossia**

Charles Ferguson first introduced the term ‘diglossia’ in his landmark article *Diglossia* to describe the situation in which “Two varieties of a language exist side by side throughout the community, with each having a definite role to play” (Ferguson, 1959: 325). Ferguson 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) super-imposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either in an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation. (Ferguson, 1959: 336)

Ferguson describes the ‘super-imposed’ variety as the High (H) variety and the dialects as the Low (L) variety. Equating Ferguson’s ‘H’ variety with MSA as the written, formal variety, and his ‘L’ with Egyptian Arabic, we see that MSA enjoys a higher status but that it is also the less familiar variety since it is learned formally and not acquired naturally like Egyptian Arabic.

However, in describing the features of diglossia, Ferguson describes a third variety that falls in between the H and L varieties. He describes it as:

...a kind of spoken Arabic much used in certain semiformal or cross-dialectal situations has a highly classical vocabulary with few or no inflectional endings, with certain features of classical syntax but with a fundamentally colloquial base in morphology and syntax, and a generous admixture of colloquial vocabulary. (Ferguson, 1959: 332)

So although diglossia views the language as having two varieties, each with its own distinct features and uses, we see that this view is rather simplistic and that even a diglossic language has multiple levels and layers with overlapping features and even uses. This is perhaps the first identification of what has come to be known as Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA), which is explored further in the next section. In terms of online political writing, perhaps ESA is the best way of describing the type of language used, since it is not strictly MSA, nor is it purely dialectal, as we will see below.

### **Arabic language levels**

Building on Ferguson's work, several important contributions have been made to the field of Arabic sociolinguistics. Haeri (1996) delineates these as: the 'continuum' concept introduced by Rickford (1987) for usages that "fall in between" Classical Arabic and non-Classical Arabic; the sociolinguistic studies on Cariene, Egyptian and 'spoken' Arabic by Schmidt (1974), Schultz (1981), Mitchell (1978, 1990), and Mitchell and El-Hassan (1994); and the identification of Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA) through the studies of Mitchell (1986), Abd El-Jawad (1981), Haeri (1996) and Badawi (1973).

Another key study by Badawi (1973: 89) described the Arabic languages in terms of five 'levels':

1. Fus-ha t-turath (Classical Arabic)
2. Fus-ha l-asr (Modern Standard Arabic)
3. 'ammiyat al-muthaqqafin ('high' Educated Spoken Arabic)
4. Ammiyat al-mutanawwirin ('low' Educated Spoken Arabic)
5. Ammiyat al-?ummiyyin (illiterate spoken Arabic)

Holes (1995) equates Badawi's levels with Ferguson's:

Levels 1 and 2 [of Badawi's model] correspond to Ferguson's 'H', Levels 4 and 5 to his 'L', with Level 3 representing a bridge between them, and equating to his 'semi-formal' level. Badawi's terminology points to a fault-line in the continuum between Levels 2 and 3: whereas Level 2 is still *fusha*., Level 3 is '*ammi:ya*'. His explanation is that while Level 2 may show dialectal phonological influences, its morphosyntactic base remains grammar-book *fusha*:. Level 3, on the other hand, whilst it may show quite heavy use of *fusha*: vocabulary and phraseology and concomitant phonological and morphological influences, its syntactic systems – in particular word order, expression of mood and aspect, systems of negation and concord – remain non-standard. (Holes, 1995: 281)

So we see a development in Arabic linguistics from the 'simplistic' diglossic model with two levels of language, H and L, towards a more sophisticated model that attempts to explain the multiple and at times overlapping layers of the Arabic language. Out of the five levels identified by Badawi, it is the middle level 3 that has been the subject of many studies and that has come to be known as ESA. A closer analysis of ESA follows in the next section. Although ESA is essentially described as a spoken variety, we will see below that it has in fact been used in writing rather than MSA in online writing.

### **Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA)**

The identification of ESA has been a significant development in the field of Arabic linguistics and sociolinguistics, as the language used by educated native Arabic speakers. Al-Husari (1985: 283) describes ESA as a spoken language that has developed in 'educated environments' in all Arab countries that has acquired many of the characteristics of Standard Arabic (*fus-ha*) while avoiding many of those of colloquial Arabic (*'ammiyah*). Conversely, Wilmsen (2006: 130) describes ESA as essentially colloquial Arabic with some of the more formal and technical lexicon borrowed from Standard Arabic. Wilmsen's view seems to echo that of Ferguson and Holes, mentioned above. Mazraani (1997) believes ESA is the result of the spread of literacy:

The spread of literacy saw the emergence of a new elite that felt unhappy about MSA as an expressive tool, inadequate for many aspects of modern life, while the dialect, suitable for mundane needs, was deemed equally inadequate. ... The urge to develop a modern spoken idiom which could be understood at all levels of the population resulted in the emergence of Educated Spoken Arabic, which has been given different names by different observers. ESA was, moreover, officialized and legitimized in the fifties and sixties through the speeches of politicians such as Gamal Abdul Nasser” (Mazraani, 1997: 12).

Mazraani’s description has particular resonance when viewed from the viewpoint of young political activists today – it makes sense that when writing online, they write in what can be described as ESA, rather than MSA since it is understood ‘at all levels’. In this sense, Nasser paved the way for ESA as the language of political rhetoric. Whereas Nasser used ESA for writing, young activists are using it in online writing. Both have been able to use it to mobilise people for their cause.

In terms of use and function, it is widely accepted that ESA is used in formal contexts such as academia and political speeches. In fact, Holes (1995: 283) describes use of language employed by Nasser, known for the strength of his rhetoric, as switching between Levels 2 and 3 [of Badawi’s model]; using mainly Level 3 [ESA] with a heavily Cairene dialect for rhetorical effect. Holes believes that Nasser was the first “go against the grain of the traditions of formal public speaking which has lasted until as late as the mid 1950s”. In fact, Holes states that since Nasser, both Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein frequently used ESA to deliver their speeches, further highlighting that it was Nasser who “broke this oratorical mould”.

ESA is also used by educated Arabic speakers in informal contexts. Although many of the studies of ESA have focused on its use in Egypt and particularly in Cairo, such as Schmidt (1974), Schultz (1981), Mitchell (1986, 1990), Mitchell and El-Hassan (1994), Haeri (1996) and Badawi (1973); Holes (1995) and Abdel-Jawad (1981) confirm that ESA is also used in Bahrain and Jordan respectively. Holes states that:



in a conversation between a group of educated Bahraini acquaintances, the dialectal base will be Bahraini ... it is unlikely that any group of Bahrainis talking relaxedly among themselves, or indeed any group from any other single speech community, would deviate markedly from the local linguistic common denominator, that is, the dialectal features which they all share. This means that the phonology, morphology and sentence syntax would be dialectal virtually whatever they were talking about; choice of vocabulary however, which depends much more directly on topic, would be more variable ... We are, in other words, talking about a Bahraini incarnation of Badawi's Level 3 'the colloquial of the educated' [ESA]. (Holes, 1995: 287-8)

Holes' view supports the notion that ESA is essentially dialect with some MSA lexicon and that this is true across different Arabic speaking countries, not just in Egypt. Although this paper is concerned with online political writing particularly in social networking media in Egypt, the widespread use of ESA throughout the Arab world makes it plausible that it is used in online writing in other Arab countries.

In fact, the use of ESA is so widespread and more familiar to native speakers than MSA, that some studies have even suggested that the two forms of Arabic (standard and colloquial) are treated as different languages altogether by the brains of native Arabic speakers. Ibrahim (2009) found that native Arabic speakers' brains register their spoken variety as the mother tongue whereas their brains respond to the Standard language in the same way that other speakers respond to a second language. It is plausible that native speakers do register Standard Arabic in much the same way as a foreign language, given its limited use in everyday spontaneous speech and its perceived difficulty by native speakers, and given that some native speakers have described their spoken variety to be more 'direct' than the Standard (Haeri, 2003: 37-43). In fact, "Making it [Classical/Standard Arabic] one's own was and remains a very difficult and complex struggle" (Haeri, 2003: 77). As a native speaker, I often find myself mentally 'translating' what I read in Standard Arabic into my spoken variety, and vice versa when writing Standard Arabic. Haeri confirms that this is literally the case in print media, where interviews are often 'translated' by professional 'correctors' from spoken Arabic into Standard Arabic as part of the process of text

regulation (p. 54, 95, 98). The same can be said for literary works such as novels, where “the writer translates – and I mean translates – how he believes any given character might speak in the classical language” (Imbabi, 1994: 412)<sup>1</sup>. It is therefore unsurprising that native speakers in Egypt have described Egyptian Arabic as more ‘direct’ whereas MSA is seen to be more distant and unfamiliar. Politically speaking, a speaker of Egyptian Arabic can be seen to have more candour, whereas a speaker of MSA is seen to be more distant, formal and less candid. During the Egyptian revolution of 2011, the last speeches former president Mubarak gave were noticeably delivered in MSA, rather in ESA as he usually did. The result was that people saw him as being distant and out of touch with his people, which shows just how important language choice is in the political realm. Conversely, when the new prime minister Essam Sharaf was appointed after Mubarak’s resignation, he chose to address the Egyptian people in Tahrir Square in Egyptian Arabic. His speech was received well by the people and he was perceived to be a genuine person who would try to make a change. Had his speech been delivered in MSA, it would have undoubtedly seemed out of place in Tahrir Square and out of touch with the general mood of the people.

The above studies have established that although MSA is not a spoken language, it is the accepted form of writing in Arabic. The identification of ESA has only been applied to its use as a spoken variety. However, what is yet to be addressed is the form of writing that is used in online writing, particularly given the role that the internet has played in mobilising thousands to take to the streets in protest across the Arab world and particularly in Egypt. The form of Arabic writing used on the internet is looked at below.

### **Written Arabic in print media and literature: historical precedence for using Egyptian Arabic**

The use of ‘colloquial’ or spoken Arabic in writing has been around since the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century when several prominent writers argued for the adoption of ‘colloquial’ Arabic in writing. Most notably poets such as Bayram el-Tunsi, Salah Jaheen and Ahmed Fouad Negm used colloquial Egyptian Arabic in their poems. Other writers also used elements of colloquial Arabic

in their plays, novels and short stories, such as the Egyptian writers Muhammad Husayn Haykal, Tawfiq el-Hakim and Yusuf Idris, and the Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih (Dickins, 2002: 84 and Holes, 1995: 304-9).

Although the trend for using colloquial Arabic in writing did not die out and more modern writers have adopted this approach (Khawalidah, 2010), it has hitherto been mainly limited to poetry and some works of literature. However, the power of the internet means that decisions and choices about language use are not limited to prominent literary writers; instead any literate person can choose to write what they like in the form they so choose and publish what they have written online, and in some cases as we will see below, have their writing published in print as well. In this sense the landscape of literary Arabic is undergoing a democratic change in that it is no longer controlled by an elite group of literary writers, but it is being shaped by the numerous individuals who choose to write online.

### **New media: the new political realm**

In addition to traditional and official or state-run media, the rise of the internet and the popularity of social networking sites in particular, present new forms of media that should be considered, as well as a new medium for Arabic language use that has not yet been considered in traditional discussions surrounding the use of the Arabic language, particularly its written form. Given the important role that the internet, and specifically social networking, has played in mobilising thousands to take to the streets in the protests that spurred the revolution in Egypt, and the spread of protest movements to other countries of the region, the impact of the internet, the frequency of its use and the number of users cannot be underestimated.

Linguistically, the political sphere has traditionally been occupied by Standard Arabic, even when spoken, which is evident from the speeches of politicians and news media reports that have been delivered in the standard, written language. Even the speeches of the former Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser that famously included both Standard and colloquial Egyptian Arabic for rhetorical effect, were never completely delivered in the everyday spoken language and always began with the more formal Standard Arabic (Mazraani, 1997). However, if we look at the new politics in the new

media, we see a different and interesting picture. Young people across the Arab world are becoming politically active online, rather than on television or through newspaper columns: the Egyptian Revolution was started by a group of young people online through the social networking site Facebook, protesters in Tahrir Square used Twitter to update the world on events happening in real time, and readers of Al Jazeera frequently post their comments online on the network's website. In fact, a recent report published by the communications firm Spot On Public Relations claims that:

... there are more subscribers to social media service Facebook in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) than there are copies of newspapers circulated in the region. The report, 'Middle East and Africa Facebook Demographics', shows Facebook has over 15 million users in the region, while the total regional Arabic, English and French newspaper circulation stands at just under 14 million copies. (Spot On Public Relations, 2010: 1)

This shows a clear shift in readership trends in the MENA region, and although newspapers and social media websites are two very different platforms, it is clear that the force that is online social media has swept through the Arabic-speaking Middle East and will certainly continue to play a role in shaping the way news and public opinion are disseminated and shared.

When reading such powerful social networking websites as Facebook and Twitter, it is evident that it is not just the type of political activity that is different, but also the language. Users of these websites are evidently more inclined to use colloquial Arabic than MSA, in cases where they actually use Arabic as the primary language for communication. A case in point is the 6 April Youth Movement Facebook page that first called for protests across Egypt, which is written predominantly in colloquial Arabic. The colloquial used can be described as ESA, or Level 3 'ammiyat al-muthaqqafin ('high' Educated Spoken Arabic) in terms of the language levels suggested by Badawi (1973) discussed previously. After Mubarak's departure, when a coalition of youth groups met the Egyptian Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to convey their demands, the group posted their notes summarising the main points discussed during the meeting on their website. They refer to

the meeting in colloquial Arabic – see snapshot in Figure 1 below. At first it seemed surprising that a meeting at this level, of this magnitude, was reported on in colloquial Arabic, but after further consideration it does seem fitting with the rest of the website and wider cause, and arguably, the expectations of their readership. Had the group reported in a newspaper article, the language used would have undoubtedly been MSA, but given the freedom and speed of use of Facebook, as well its large audience of young people, it makes perfect sense that the group have communicated in colloquial Arabic. Their use of colloquial implies a more open, transparent form of communication that puts them on the same level as their followers and makes their entire cause more accessible. Had they written in MSA, no doubt the impression would have been of a knowledgeable, ‘superior’ group of individuals imparting their thoughts and wisdom to the slightly ‘lesser’ reader. A question to ask is: was the use of colloquial language a conscious decision or not? This may be a point for further research and investigation. Either way, it has proven to be an effective way to communicate their message and more importantly, to affect their readers and mobilise them to take action in the real world in a manner that was not possible before. It is therefore evident that the use of colloquial is much more powerful than use of MSA, and a way of drawing a diving line between a new generation, and new way of thinking and acting, from the politically ineffective ‘empty rhetoric’ of the older generation.



Figure 1. Snapshot of the 6 April Youth Movement Facebook page

A second example from the 6 April Youth Movement Facebook page in Figure 2 below, shows the language they normally use to communicate on their Facebook page. The use of MSA at the beginning of the post marks the 'official' part of the message. It reports a fact: the polls will close in three hours. However, the language is quickly identifiable as colloquial Arabic from the second sentence to the end of the post. The language choice reflects a direct, heartfelt emotive appeal to potential voters.



facebook

Search

6th of April Youth Moveme... Timeline Now Highlights

6th of April Youth Movement - حركة شباب 6 ابريل  
Yesterday

باق من الزمن ما يقرب من الثلاث ساعات علي غلق باب الاقتراع في اول انتخابات رئاسية في مصر بعد الثورة .. بصرف النظر عن اي خلط للاوراق او عك شاب الفترة الانتقالية فيما يخص اجراءات التحول الديمقراطي .. لكن كلنا لازم نكون ايجابيين في اختيار اول رئيس لمصر بعد الثورة .. ممكن يكون لسة مصوتش عشان مش لاقى مرشحك المثالي في اسماء المرشحين ويمكن لسة مصوتش عشان خايف ان قرارك مش هايحترم زي ما العسكر ما احترمش قرارات الشعب في الاستفتاء. من فضلك فكر الان واحسبها صح .. الملايين اللي نزلت من امبارح نزلت عشان تختار لينا كلنا .. ليه متشاركش في اختيار الرئيس؟! اهداف الثورة في حاجة الي صوتك .. لو كنت صوت اتصل بكل اللي تعرفه لسة مصوتش وخليه ينزل يدعم اهداف الثورة .. اما لو كنت انت نفسك لسة ماخترتش، يبقى حكم قلبك وعقلك وضميرك وانزل من بيتك.

See Translation

Like · Comment · Share 63

174 people like this.

View all 45 comments

Write a comment...

See More Recent Stories

Figure 2. 6 April Youth Movement blogpost

The image below shows some of the comments posted in response to the above post. The language used is predominantly colloquial Arabic written in Arabic script. The people writing the posts and their readers are equals, each freely expressing their opinions. This equality is reflected in the language used since MSA would imply superiority of the writer, whether in knowledge or power.



Figure 3. 6 April Youth Movement blogpost comments

It is worth noting at this point the way in which colloquial Arabic is written since it is not a formal written form of the language. One of the first areas to consider is the alphabet used. The original post is in entirely Arabic script

and all of the comments except one are in Arabic script also. Romanisation or Latinisation of Arabic on the internet is common and is discussed further in this paper below, where users phonetically write Arabic in Roman or Latin characters. However, this relies on both the writer and reader's knowledge of those alphabets, whereas any literate speaker of Arabic would be familiar with the Arabic alphabet. Therefore writing in the Arabic alphabet means the writer reinforces the 'Arabness' of their message that may be lost with a non-Arabic script. Secondly, spelling: it is notable that while the letters are Arabic, many of the rules of spelling are relaxed. For example, the use of the 'hamza' when combined with the letter 'alef' is almost entirely absent. For example in the original post: اوراق ، اي ، اول instead of أوراق ، أي ، أول. Even in the comment written in MSA by Hossam Seif Elnesr, the hamza is not used with alef in the word اجل , which is used twice in the same comment. This apparent relaxation of the rules with regards to spelling seems to fit with the perception of colloquial being easier and faster to use than MSA.

It is interesting at this point to draw a comparison between use of the colloquial in this newly carved political sphere, and in an older, equally significant political sphere – that of Gamal Abdul Nasser, and his use of colloquial Arabic in his speeches to communicate and draw popular support from across Egypt. Whereas Nasser used some colloquial language in his speeches, the internet generation have used the colloquial in writing, and this is the innovation.

It is not only social media that has witnessed a growing number of users writing in colloquial Egyptian Arabic; the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, which is available in several languages including 'Arabic', has an 'Egyptian Arabic' page<sup>2</sup>. This is the only dialect of Arabic that has its own section on the website and shows that Egyptian Arabic is being used online as an alternative to the traditional use of MSA for writing. Wikipedia is an interesting case as it is not a social networking or individual's website; rather it is an information-based website that relies on its users updating the content for free. It is therefore in line with the idea that Egyptian Arabic is being used by Egyptians to communicate more easily and that its use is spreading into areas traditionally reserved for MSA use.

The use of written colloquial Arabic on the internet has gained such ground that in 2008, after the immense popularity of an online blog, the content of the blog was published in print, as a book, entirely in Egyptian



colloquial Arabic. The book `Āyzah atjawwiz (“I want to get married”) has been hugely successful and is a bestseller that has been through seven reprints since its publication<sup>3</sup>. It has also been adapted to a television series. The publication of this book shows a shift in the trend from publishing only works written in MSA (particularly when it comes to writing prose) towards publishing in colloquial Arabic. This may prove over time that colloquial Arabic is gaining acceptability as a language of writing, which further shows the dominance of colloquial Egyptian Arabic over Standard Arabic in Egypt itself. It is also important in the context of the future of written Arabic, since we may see a shift in future towards Arabic writing in colloquial, rather than MSA, since as we have seen this is already starting to happen organically without any formal prompting. This contrasts with the heavily controlled, state imposed use of MSA in printed press and literature, which has been shown to be ineffective for making MSA seem a natural choice for writing.

### **Studies of Arabic language use on the internet**

Due in part to the availability (or lack) of Arabic language software until very recently, studies of online activity and language use in the Arab world have focused mainly on the use of ‘Latinised’ or Roman script Arabic as opposed to Arabic letters, as well as the mixing of other languages such as English and French, with Arabic. Latinised or Roman script Arabic is used when users type what they want to say in Arabic using Latin or Roman script and is immensely popular on the internet, especially when Arabic language software or hardware is unavailable.

These studies have found that when using Latinised or Roman script Arabic, users prefer to use the spoken form of Arabic to the traditional written form – MSA. One of those studies (Aboelezz, 2008: 4) states that:

[diglossia] presents a complexity when dealing with LA [Latinised Arabic], as the Latinised form of Arabic is often the spoken form, which essentially reflects the regional variety that the user/speaker is accustomed to (Bianchi, 2006).

This supports the idea that in a diglossic language situation, the form of choice for Arabic language internet users is the spoken form of Arabic, as opposed to the more formal standard form of MSA. This shows that although people are writing on the internet, they are not using the traditionally accepted form of writing; instead they are bringing the traditionally spoken form of the language into the written realm. We have also seen the ensuing print publication from online writing, which shows that this new form of written Arabic is spilling out of the virtual realm and into the 'real' world of print. This phenomenon cannot be overstated as it has a potentially huge impact on the current status of MSA as the language of all formal writing. In fact, this status is so ingrained in the Arab world and the minds of native Arabic speakers that even Younes, who developed an integrated Arabic language teaching programme that includes teaching both MSA and a spoken dialect at Cornell University in the US, states that:

I believe that the main difference between Arabic and other languages resides in the unique status that the written version of the former enjoys for historical and religious reasons. It has not allowed, nor is it likely to allow at any time in the foreseeable future, the development of a writing system for any of the spoken dialects that closely reflects its structure. Any attempt at writing or codifying specific dialects is seen as a serious invasion of the territory of fuṣḥā, which is held in the utmost esteem by the overwhelming majority of Arabs. (Younes, 2006: 165).

The younger generation of internet users seem to have bypassed this convention and organically developed a writing system for the spoken dialect. And although they would likely claim the same esteem and regard for MSA, they have not (whether consciously or otherwise) used it in writing online. Although the overwhelming majority of printed texts continue to be in MSA, we have seen that the popularity of online media is overtaking that of print media, and now that there have been publications originating online being published as physical books, the language of the online media is being adopted in print. If this trend continues, we will see an increase in the number of print publications that are not MSA, since it does not appear that a formal process of 'translating' online content into MSA for print is taking

place in the same way as spoken Arabic is 'translated' into MSA in the state controlled press. In that case, MSA may cease to be the only form of written Arabic in the future, given the popularity of the internet in general, and the preference of young activists to discuss their views online rather than in print. If traditionally Arabic news media were the newspapers and official news broadcasts, they now include online blogs and news posted on social networking media.

The use of Egyptian 'colloquial' Arabic, essentially a spoken variety for writing, particularly online writing but also in print as we have seen above, is a phenomenon that undoubtedly will need further attention and research, and can be considered to be the next pertinent area of study in Arabic linguistics and sociolinguistics.

## **Conclusion**

In the Egyptian revolution, the internet played a huge role in mobilising the masses to take to the streets and topple a president that ruled Egypt for three decades. The language choice of the youth of the revolution for writing online was Egyptian Arabic, rather than MSA, which is traditionally used in written political communication in Egypt and throughout the Arab world. It was former Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser who first used Egyptian Arabic in his political speeches, and later Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein the former powerful leaders of Libya and Iraq respectively both started to use local dialects in their speeches (Mazraani, 1997). Although Nasser was first to capitalise on the emotive power of the local dialect and paved the way for Egyptian Arabic to be used in the political realm thereafter, the Egyptian youth are first to use Egyptian Arabic in writing. The importance of the Egyptian dialect and its growing role in the political realm in Egypt cannot be overlooked. As one of the main media for communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the internet and the type of language used online is a pertinent area of study, particularly in the context of online activism and the Arab revolutions of 2011.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Haeri (2003: 109-110) refers to the postscript to Imbabi's novel on the "Grammar of the Modern Arabic Language" (*nahw lugha 'arabiyya gadida*).

<sup>2</sup> Available from:

[http://arz.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%81%D8%AD%D9%87\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%87](http://arz.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%81%D8%AD%D9%87_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%87).

Accessed 30 June 2011.

<sup>3</sup> The latest edition has '7th reprint' printed on the front cover: 'Abd al-'Al, Ghadah. 2008. 'Ayza atjawwiz. Cairo, Dar al-Shuruq.