BETWEEN CULTURE AND LINGUISTIC APPROACHES: ENGLISH VERSUS ARABIC

ENTRE LA CULTURE ET LES APPROCHES LINGUISTIQUES: ANGLAIS CONTRE LA LANGUE ARABE

ÎNTRE CULTURA ŞI ABORDĂRI LINGVISTICE: LIMBA ENGLEZĂ VERSUS LIMBA ARABĂ

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Abstract
This paper represents a comparison between the state and importance of the English language and the difficulties the Arabic language entails, as well as the obstacles one may come across when having to learn the written, spoken or grammar patterns of any of the two languages mentioned above. It also provides some background information related to the Arab society and the importance of English in their world. The author highlights the fact that one should never begin to learn a foreign language without having a minimum knowledge about the culture and civilization of that particular nation. The article displays various viewpoints related to how challenging and at the same time accessible Arabic is. It concludes with the indisputable advantages of English speakers, without downsizing the wide benefits speakers of Arabic might have for a deeper mutual understanding and removal of stereotypes.

Résumé
Cet article représente une comparaison entre l'état et l'importance de la langue anglaise et les difficultés qu'entraîne la langue arabe, ainsi que les obstacles que l'on peut rencontrer lorsqu'on doit apprendre à écrire, parler, ou la grammaire de l'une des deux langues mentionnées ci-dessus. Il fournit également des informations générales sur la société arabe et l'importance de l'anglais dans leur monde. L'auteur souligne le fait qu'il ne faut jamais commencer à apprendre une langue étrangère sans avoir une connaissance minimale de la culture et de la civilisation de cette nation particulière. L'article présente divers points de vue liés à la difficulté et à l'accessibilité au même temps de la langue arabe. Il conclut avec les avantages indiscutables des anglophones, sans réduire les avantages appréciables que les locuteurs de la langue arabe pourraient avoir pour une compréhension mutuelle plus profonde et l'élimination des stéréotypes.

Rezumat
Lucrarea reprezintă o comparaţie între situaţia şi importanţa limbii engleze şi dificultăţile pe care la implică limba Arabă dar şi obstacolele ce pot surveni în învăţarea elementelor de redactare, conversaţie sau gramatică în oricare dintre cele două limbi mai sus menţionate. De asemenea furnizează informaţii generale legate de societatea arabă şi de importanta pe care limba engleză o are în mediul lor. Autoarea subliniază faptul că nimeni nu ar trebui să înceapă să înveţe o limba străină fără a avea un minim de cunoştinţe despre cultura şi civilizaţia naţiunii respective. Articolul prezintă câteva puncte de vedere referitoare la cât de provocatoare şi accesibilă este în acelaşi timp limba arabă. Autoarea concluzionează prin menţionarea avantajelor incontestabile pe

care le au vorbitorii de limba engleză fără a minimaliza beneficiile de care se bucura vorbitorii de limba arabă în scopul unei mai bune înţelegeri şi eliminări a stereotipurilor.

Key words: *language, culture, English, Arabic, comparison*

Mots clé: *langue, culture, anglaise, arabe comparaison*

Cuvinte cheie: *limbă, cultură, engleză, arabă, comparaţie*

Introduction

Multilingualism represents the ability of an individual to speak more than two or three languages, to communicate effectively and to convey proper messages. Even though there are around 195 countries in the world, when it comes to languages, researchers could not decide upon a particular number. Some languages represent the mother tongue of the inhabitants of more than one country, while others, that some people regard as different languages are mere distinct dialects. Nowadays, the most spoken languages in the world are considered to be Chinese, Spanish, English, Arabic and Hindi, even if, linguists believe that two speakers of a same language but of a different dialect may come across difficulties in understanding each other. Chinese for example, represents a whole family of languages that covers a huge number of dialects and sub-dialects. Ethnologists claim that Spanish has about 400 million speakers more than English being most widely spread in South and Central America. Even if English comes on the third place it still represents the lingua franca of politics, travel and business. Being easy to pick up it will continue to dominate the world stage for a long time. Arabic on the other hand is more like Chinese: difficult to learn and very different from one Arab country to another. Modern Standard Arabic is very similar to the Classical Arabic used in the Quran, that's why scholars don't have to deal with linguistic barriers when discussing professional issues. But the everyday speakers from, let's say Tunisia and Egypt may encounter serious problems in understanding each other while ordering dinner or discussing personal matters.

Arabic represents the official language of approximately 19 countries (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, Qatar, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Yemen, Jordan, Bahrain, Palestine, Mauritania) and the co-official language of 7 others. It is one of the six official languages of the United Nations and it has more than 350 million speakers around the world. Although sharing the same language, Arabic speaking countries are very different in terms of dialects, culture and traditions or industry. Many of the Arabic countries economies' depend on the petroleum and energy production.

Cultural issues

A major issue many professors tend to disregard is the importance of teaching culture alongside with the language; especially when we are discussing about two languages belonging to diametrically opposite lifestyles, like the European versus the Middle East points of view.
As the author mentions in the article entitled *Culture and English Language Teaching in the Arab World*, "for nearly two decades, scholars from the fields of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics have discussed the question of teaching culture along with English, resulting in three main views: (a) teaching target language culture with English, (b) teaching English without target culture, and (c) interpretive approach to teaching culture."[1] According to the first idea, some linguists claim that one may know a language perfectly and still use inappropriate vocabulary in certain situations

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[1] Montasser Mohamed AbdelWahab Mahmoud, Culture and English Language Teaching in the Arab World, published in Adult Learning, Vol. 26, no. 2, May 2015, downloaded from alx.sagepub.com, last accessed on March 14, 2018, p. 66-72

because of a misunderstanding of the social context. Others say that teaching culture together with grammar might be confusing. A third point of view is focusing on intercultural communication, on drawing comparisons and contrasts between the culture of the source and that of the target language. I personally agree with the fact that learning a language without knowing anything about the people who are speaking it seems useless. As Kramsch pointed out in 1993, there are actually five linguistic skills to be considered: reading, writing, listening, speaking and culture.

Arabic values are very different from the ones promoted in Western countries and they are mostly influenced by Islam, the majority religion of the Arab people. They allow themselves to be guided in life by the text of the Quran which was revealed to Prophet Mohammed (as all Muslims believe). It represents a foundation of the Islamic Law known as Sharia (meaning *the way* in Arabic). In some countries there are extreme interpretations of this law (e.g. capital punishment, cutting off the arms of thieves, stoning etc.) and that is why people worldwide tend to misinterpret the culture of the Arabic countries and wrongly assume that these exceptions are the rule. Another misconception would be the one referring to women. In some parts of the Arabic world they are considered to be oppressed and unequal to men, deprived of the right to work or to study. But it would be a mistake to create stereotypes around this issue. Many housewives are involved in business and some have even reached high positions in the government. However, there are the more traditional and conventional families for whom, a woman's only job and ability is to raise children, to cook and to supervise their education. Most of the Arabic families follow a patriarchal pattern where the father is the main breadwinner and has the final word when having to take important decisions. Children are raised and taught from an early age to behave according to their gender: girls have to be beautiful and delicate while boys have to be real men, to work, take care and provide for the family. They usually live together in multi-storeyed houses and the son remains to live with his family (and the new wife) after marriage. When coming into contact with this culture there are also many differences in etiquette. Men are not supposed to speak to Arab women before being introduced; nor should they shake hands with them unless they give them the hand. It is impolite to refuse snacks or a drink or to eat with the left hand. Education is very important for the Arab people; they often boast about their children's university degrees and go to great lengths to pay for their study tuitions or fees. Due to the advanced technological, political and entertainment power of the USA, English has become the lingua franca for all the people around the world. Moreover, Islam urges its adepts to learn foreign languages for security reasons and it also represents one of the teachings of Profet Mohammad. As Yacoub Aljaffery mentions in his essay entitled *The Influence of English Language in the Arab World*, after the second Gulf war in 2003, more and more Arab people showed their interest in learning English and it became a target language in these countries. Because of the wars and of the presence of American soldiers on Arab territories, many English words have been coined and introduced into the everyday spoken Arabic. Yacoub Aljaffery explains: "After this last war on Iraq in 2003, many English words have been used by Iraqis that blended into their mother tongue, Arabic. […] Some of the most common words that are used today, especially among the young generation are *cool* and *top*. Hence, they pronounce the word *top* like [tob]"[2]. In English, *top* has the meaning of *high, superior*; therefore if they say *hay al seiara al tob* they actually mean *this car is the best*. As there is no letter "p" in the Arabic alphabet and hence no such words, native speakers of Arabic often misuse it and instead of uttering "p" they say "b" (e.g. barents, bolite, bresent).

Language and grammar

Depending on the context in which it is used, there are three forms of Arabic: Modern Standard Arabic, Quranic Arabic (Classical Arabic-Fusha) and Colloquial Arabic. The first one is usually taught in schools and universities and also used in the government, workplaces, the media.

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[2] Yacoub Aljaffery, 2010, The Influence of English Language in the Arab World, Munich, GRIN Verlag, https://www.grin.com/document/288945

However, many people tend to speak the dialect of their own region which is considerably different from MSA. There have been identified 8 major dialects: Egyptian, Iraqi, Yemeni, Levantine, Maghrebi, Hassaniya, Sudanese and Gulf. Being a Central Semitic Language, Arabic is very similar to Hebrew.

There are fundamental differences between writing and speaking in English respectively Arabic. If in the Arabic alphabet we identify 28 letters, in the English one there are only 26. We may say there are only three short vowels (wāw, alif, ya') in Arabic which are generally not written. Unlike English, where the same letter may be pronounced in different ways, varying from word to word, (e.g. *ch*air, *Ch*ristian, tou*gh*, *gh*ost) in Arabic, letters are always pronounced in the same way; but their written form changes according to the position they have in the word (e.g. سحر, مرح). In the previous example we should pay attention to letter ح. In the first word (which means *fun*) it has one form at the end, but in the second word (which means *magic*) its form changes due to its middle position. The Arabic grammatical rules are very different. First of all, the words in a sentence are written from right to left. In English it is absolutely necessary to use the verb *to be* when forming simple sentences but in Arabic it is omitted in the present tense, being used only in the past. For example, in English, we say *The car is small*; while in Arabic the same idea will be *Al seiara sagheere* (السيارة صغيرة) (al seiara = the car; sagheere = small) without using the verb *to be*. However, it is necessary in the past, so *The dog was big*, will be *Kan al kaleb kbir*. (kan = was; al kaleb = the dog; kbir = big). (كان الكلب كبير).

In what concerns the verbs, the conjugations are easy in English because few elements change (for example the –s/-es in the 3rd person sg, Present Simple, affirmative). But the Arabic conjugations are more similar to Romanian because the form of the verb is usually different for every person. Moreover, for the 2nd person singular, present tense, they have a masculine and a feminine verb. If in English it is necessary to use the pronoun together with the verb, in Arabic the verbal form in itself is enough to point towards the adequate person. The verb actually represents the most important element in the grammar of any language, it is like the engine that triggers communication. But the way in which we express time varies from one language to another and therefore, problems arise when having to translate certain texts. Due to the fact that the Arabic language does not put so much emphasis on the importance of tenses, the Arab speakers of English finds it difficult to distinguish between and to properly use the English tenses. There is not always a perfect correspondence between tenses: neither in Arabic-English nor in Romanian-English translations. If there have been identified more than ten tenses in English, in Arabic there are only two aspectual tense forms. Therefore, a good translator or interpreter of Arabic-English texts should, first of all, understand very well the context and the other details related to the source text, in terms of both semantic and syntactic comprehension. In order to provide an interpretation as accurate as possible, the individual must have some knowledge about the communication situation but also about the cultural context and the topic of the discussion. "Tense is a language-specific category by which we make linguistic reference to the extra-linguistic realities of time- relations. "[3] As Hassan Gadalla observes, Quirk et al. (1972, 84) claim that English has present tense and past tense. Nevertheless, he quotes again the paper published in 1972, belonging to Quirk et. al, by saying that aspect refers to the way in which the action of the verb action is perceived or experienced. According to Quirk et. al, in English, there is the perfective/ non-perfective and progressive/ non-progressive aspect. "In Arabic, the fundamental differences between verbs are based on aspect rather than tense. Thus, one of the major problems that face translators from English into Arabic is to identify the Arabic verb form and the verbs or particles that can combine with it in order to convey a particular English tense."[4]

There are also rules related to the negation of sentences. In English, the word *not* is always used, irrespective of time or aspect. In Arabic, on the other hand, it is necessary to insert the word

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[3] Hassan Abdel-Shafik Hassan Gadalla, *Translating Tenses in Arabic-English and English-Arabic Contexts*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK, 2017, p. 29
[4] Ibidem, p. 30

msh, between the subject and the predicate (there are cases when the subject is omitted but the reader can deduce it from the context). For example, we will say *You have to go to sleep early. / Lazeem tnam badri.* (لازم تنام بدري) or Yjab'an tnam mbakir. (يجب ان تنام مبكر) and *You do **not** have to go to sleep early. / **Msh** lazeem tnam badri.* (مش لازم تنام بدري). Therefore, as in any other language, Arabic consists of words. The key to understanding the Arabic language system is to know that there are three types of Arabic words: nouns, verbs and particles. Another very important thing is the fact that there are three tenses: past tense (which refers to actions that happened and finished in the past); present tense (which refers to actions happening now, in the present); imperative (giving present orders and commands).

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, there is a particular order for the adjectives in English: the speaker will first mention the adjectives expressing opinions and attitudes and only after that, the factual ones. Therefore, a proper sequence of adjectives would be: opinion, size, physical qualities, shape, age, colour, origin, material, type, purpose. (e.g. He was a *handsome, tall, slim, young, blue-eyed, Italian* man.) In Arabic, things are different because the adjective is situated after the noun. The order of the adjectives is not taken into consideration, so the speaker may express himself/herself freely, irrespective of the size, colour, origin of the noun. (e.g. دار جديده = dar jdede = new house). Another difference to be mentioned between the English and the Arabic language is the use of the conjunction ***and***. When listing a series of events, names or objects in English, ***and*** is generally situated before the last word of the enumeration (e.g. I bought bread, meat, milk, cheese ***and*** butter). In Arabic, the letter/word corresponding to ***and*** is و. And, unlike English, it is used before every word of the enumeration.

e.g. انا اشتريت خبز و لحمه و حليب و جبنه و زبده

To sum up, Arabic is becoming an increasingly popular language to learn. Even if at a first look it might seem difficult because of the so-called *hieroglyphic* sign system, in reality the 28 letters are very easy to write, read and understand. There are, indeed, some special sounds that we do not find in English or in Romanian or in other languages and these might pose some problems; but once the speaker's ear gets used to them, they can be easily identified. The verbs conjugations are more like the Romanian ones. The verb form changes from person to person (not like in English where they have to be learnt by heart) and they follow a certain pattern. Arabic relies very much on the derivation system. Therefore, from a single root (usually a three-word combination) one can derive an entire series of related meanings which leads to significant vocabulary acquisition. In what concerns the word order, it is very flexible; whether one uses the verb-subject-object order (which is the standard one) or the typically English sequence, i.e. subject-verb-object, the message is still clearly and accurately understood. Along the years, Modern Standard Arabic has been very much influenced by European words (especially from English) becoming thus more accessible. The ever-expanding oil markets on the other hand, have provided for many, a great economic incentive for studying and speaking this language.

Conclusions

To conclude, learning a foreign language depends, to a great extent, on the individual's personal skills, talent and motivation. Some languages may be picked up easily just by watching TV or travelling to that specific country for a couple of times, spending time with the natives; while others require long hours of study, sustained and consistent practice. According to scientists, some people's brains are cognitively better equipped for language learning. Adults often make the mistake of focusing too much on vocabulary and grammar structures, disregarding in this way the subtle nuances of the respective language. So, when learning a foreign language one should take advantage of all the opportunities and perks the language has to offer: similarities between words, social media, movies, music.

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