



## Is Classical Arabic a Dead Variety?

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### هل العربية الفصحى صيغة ميتة؟

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قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، الجامعة الأسمرية الإسلامية، زليتن، ليبيا.

#### Abstract

This paper presents a literature based review of the current status of Classical Arabic. The death or vitality of Classical Arabic is a controversial topic which raised the interests of many scholars and researches for a long period of time. It shall be argued in this review that Classical Arabic is a living variety and can never vanish for a number of reasons. The researcher begins by revisiting the literature of Classical Arabic. Then, different views and debates concerning the sociolinguistic situation of Classical Arabic are deeply discussed and investigated. Finally, evidences are provided that support the researcher's overview of the liveliness of Classical Arabic.

**Keywords:** *Holy Qur'ān, Classical Arabic (CA), Colloquial dialects, Diglossia, Arab nationalism.*

#### الملخص

تقدم هذه الورقة مراجعة مستندة إلى الأدبيات حول الوضع الحالي للعربية الفصحى. حيث أن مسألة موت أو حيوية العربية الفصحى هو موضوع مثير للجدل وقد أثار اهتمام العديد من العلماء والبحاث لفترة طويلة من الزمن. ستناقش في هذه الورقة الحجج التي تشير إلى أن العربية الفصحى تعتبر صيغة حية ولا يمكن أن تموت لعدة أسباب. تبدأ الباحثة بإعادة النظر في الأدبيات المتعلقة بالعربية الفصحى، ثم تستعرض بعمق الآراء المتنوعة والنقاشات المتعلقة بالوضع الاجتماعي اللغوي للعربية الفصحى. وفي الختام تقدم الدلائل التي تدعم وجهة نظر الكاتبة حول حيوية العربية الفصحى.

الكلمات الدالة: القرآن الكريم، العربية الفصحى، اللهجات العامية، الازدواجية اللغوية، القومية العربية.



## **1. Introduction**

Language is a living entity that only survives in human beings' societies and communities. It was born in a particular environment, started growing and changing in terms of sound system vocabulary, syntax and many other features. Moreover, it gave birth to a number of dialects and even experienced death. Therefore, its existence is correlated with its active usage by native speakers inside the society. Conversely, abandoning the community's original tongue and shifting to another language results in the spread of the new language and the loss or death of the old one (Almurashi, 2017).

What distinguishes the sociolinguistic situation of the Arab world is the coexistence of two varieties; Classical Arabic and national dialects. The former is known in Arabic as al-fusha which means "eloquent speech". It is the Language of the Holy Qur'an and the liturgical language of Muslims. Besides, it serves as the highest form of Arabic used mainly in formal writing, education, media and official affairs (Haeri, 2000). The latter represent the spoken vernaculars known as ammiyyah or darijah which are typically used for everyday speech (Sabah, 2015). In fact, there are many colloquial varieties of Arabic that varies in terms of their mutual intelligibility to Arabic speaker. While some of them are relatively easy to grasp, the highest majority differ quite significantly from country to country or from one region to another in accordance to physical distance (Hetzron, 1997 cited in Haeri, 2003). Consequently, the existence of Classical Arabic alongside colloquial varieties causes the appearance of linguistic phenomena known in literature as diglossia; which means using two varieties of the same language for quite different functions in the society (Holmes, 2013).

Arabic is a Semitic language which is descended from a Proto-Semitic subgroup of Afro-Asiatic languages (Aramouni, 2011). Historically, Classical Arabic is considered well documented and stable throughout a long period of time because of its link to the Holy Qur'an as well as the standardization efforts of grammarians such as; Abu Al-Aswad Ad-Duali and Sibawayh. As a result, Classical Arabic gained official status, high prestige and solid orthography (Albirini, 2016). Classical Arabic has played a prominent role in all fields of epistemology through Arab contributions and scientific books which are translated and taught in myriad of foreign universities such as Al-Khwarizmi's, Ibn Sina's and Al Razi's (Sabah, 2015). In the following lines, this paper aims to identify the Classical variety of Arabic language, analyze the current situation of Classical Arabic and deeply discuss the different arguments concerning the vitality of Classical Arabic.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Classical Arabic (CA)**

Generally, the term classical language has been defined in Sociolinguistics in various ways. According to Ferguson (1966), classical language is a Standard which has no more native speakers. Further, Gruyter (2004), states that classical language is a variety which is used mainly in writing system along in myriads of upper fields of language usage. On the other hand, Stewart (1968), categorizes classical language as a language which has the characteristics of autonomy, standardization, and historicity but lacks vitality.

Turning to the term "Classical Arabic" which refers to the highest and most perfect form of Arabic because it is the language of Qur'an – the holy book of Islam- that was revealed to Prophet Mohammed since more than fourteen centuries ago and is conformed as the supreme normative authority in most Arab countries. Furthermore, Classical Arabic is highly valued by Muslims because the second source of Islamic laws and traditions Hadith and Sunna (*i.e.*; Prophet's sayings and acts) was recorded in this variety (Albirini, 2016). Besides, it is the language of classical literature and poetry which is referred to as al-Fusha that dates back to around two centuries before the Holy Qur'an (Yacoub, 2015). Classical Arabic is defined by Al-Sharkawi (2017) as a term used by western scholars to exclude Bedouin and colloquial dialects and to refer to the product of the standardization process of the Holy Qur'an and pre-Islamic poetry. Similarly, Fischer (2006) points out that it is the variety of the eighth century which medieval Arab grammarians had standardized .

Arabic society in general have a strong attachment to their language particularly classical Arabic which is viewed as a sacred and stemming directly from the language of the Holy Qur'an. Thus, Arabs insisted on protecting its original form and purity from any modifications which in turn may lead to a perilous religious deviation (Maamouri, 1998). Moreover, Haeri (2003) illustrates that changes and reforms in CA have been historically resisted and considered as immoral deeds intended to weaken religion. In this regard, Classical Arabic is distinct and truly unique. In a work cited by Aramouni (2011), Bishop (1999) points out that CA is the most ëSemitici of all modern Semetic languages with respect to how greatly it saved a large amount of Proto-Semetic features. Furthermore, Al-Shubashi (2004, cited in Yacoub, 2015) states that Arabic (*i.e.*; CA) is the only language in the world that preserved its rules and features from any variation for 1500 years.

It is thought by some scholars and linguists, for example, Albirini (2016: 12) and Al-Sharkawi (2017: 204) that CA contains another variety known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), the thing that I disapprove in this paper, because this classification is based merely on divergence in the lexicon which had expanded to meet the daily needs of its users, whereas all other components of language such as:



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morphology, syntax, orthography and pronunciation still preserves its original purity and form. Further, the term MSA is a purely western concept that neither Arab scholars nor native speakers use. Thus, it has no Arabic equivalent (Kamusella, 2017; Al-Sharkawi, 2017; and Bassiouney, 2014). Moreover, Modern Standard Arabic is definitely the same language as CA in that any educated Arabic speaker can still read and comprehend texts and use dictionaries such as Lisan al-Arab or Maqayees Alluga which are written many years ago (Haeri, 2003). For these reasons, guided by the researches of Haeri (2000 & 2003), Alshamarani (2012), Wardhaugh (2010), Holmes (2013) and Yacoub (2015), I use the term Classical Arabic as an equivalent translation of al-Fusha.

#### **2.2. Is Classical Arabic dead?**

There is a debate among linguistics and scholars regarding the liveliness of Classical Arabic. The issue was whether this antique holy language still in use today or it will be replaced by vernaculars and dies out. There are those who claim that it is a strong reminder of Latin. Kamusella (2017), for instance, compares the current sociolinguistics situation of Arabic speakers with the function of Latin as the only written language after it lost its speech community in around the seventh century. At that time, people spoke vernaculars in everyday life which are eventually replaced Latin for written use also. He argues that Standard Arabic (CA) today has neither a speech community nor even a native speaker. Arab children are only fluent in Arabic vernaculars and are learning Standard Arabic as a foreign language at school. Moreover, the gap that exists between Standard Arabic and colloquial varieties inhibits most Arabs from enjoying fiction in the Standard variety. In his view, Arabic society is unique in adopting a written variety as an official language with no speech community.

Similarly, Suleiman (2019) and Musa (1887, cited in Bassiouney, 2014) declares that Classical Arabic is a dead language which words and rules are learned as a foreign language at school in the same way as mathematics and others sciences, whereas the Egyptian variety is their true mother tongue which should become the country's official language. Although they stated their views by means of a very eloquent Classical Arabic.

On the other hand, there are many linguistics and researchers (e.g., Al-Suwaiyan, 2018; Yacoub, 2015; and Al-Husri, 1999, cited in Suleiman, 2019) rejects the view that Classical Arabic and the colloquial varieties will have the same path as Latin and its daughters. They justify that Classical Arabic never lost its linguistic dominance in the Arabic society which is maintained through its strong connection with Islam since it is the language of the Holy Qur'an that is written from more than fourteen centuries ago and continues to be read and memorized by heart by millions of Muslims all over the world .



Additionally, Haeri (2003) describes that Classical Arabic is a sacred and holy language which can never vanish because of its intimate association with the Holy Qur'an that links its basic properties to the non-arbitrary words of God. More, she asserts that in spite of the use of colloquial varieties in day-to-day affairs by all Arabs, Classical Arabic has preserved in four main domains: religion, schooling, bureaucracy and media, of which the first has the supreme role in the survival of CA in people's lives.

One of the main arguments against Suleiman (2019) and Musa (1887, cited in Suleiman, 2019) is that Classical Arabic remains an integral means of communication in the lives of all educated Arabs. As Parkinson (1991: 39) states that "Fusha may or may not have native speakers, but it certainly has native users, people who read it fluently and listen to it with ease and understanding every day, and who occasionally use it in speaking and writing as well".

What is more, Classical Arabic is regarded as the highest and the most perfect form of the language among all Arabic speakers. On the contrary, occurrence of spoken colloquial syntax or lexicon is despised and demonstrates a poor level of education (Maamouri, 1998). Classical Arabic serves as a replacement for Islamic Caliphate in unifying all native tongues of Arabic at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Choueiri, 2005). Likewise, Yorkey (cited in Yacoub, 2015) mentions that Classical Arabic is the greatest unifying force for all Arab countries. On the other hand, vernaculars appear to work against Arab nationalism and dividing Arabs rather than uniting them because of the growing divergence between dialects of Arabic (Amara, 2018).

Adding to this discussion, Gruyter (2004) asserts that the standard variety of Arabic nowadays is not restricted to written purposes only, but it is spoken fluently by millions of educated Arabs. Besides, he anticipates that Classical Arabic may acquire native tongues again if educational standard is increased. Correspondingly, Wagner (1993, cited in Maamouri, 1998) declares that despite the differences between Classical Arabic and Moroccan vernacular, the situation of Moroccan Arabic speakers learning mother language literacy is likened to the way speakers of nonstandard varieties of English (e.g., Scottish-English speakers in Britain) are learning literacy in their native tongue. In addition, Arabs always identify that their mother tongue is Arabic Not Moroccan or Egyptian Arabic when they are asked to indicate their mother tongue. Arabs usually refer to what they speak as a slang inferior to Arabic, whereas they recognize Classical Arabic as the most perfect and proper form of Arabic (Aramouni, 2011).

In the light of the previous discussion, one can safely state that Classical Arabic can never die as long as there is Islam on the earth. The revelation of the Holy Qur'an in Arabic allowed for an eternal relationship and a strong unique bond between Classical Arabic and Islam. Hence, there is neither Classical Arabic without Islam nor Islam without Classical Arabic. Embracing Islam necessitates to have at least some



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knowledge and familiarity with Classical Arabic for reciting the Holy Qur'an, performing five daily prayers and carrying out other rituals and obligations. In fact, Muslims are exposed to Classical Arabic from their early childhood through calls to prayers, Quranic recitations played at home through cassettes and tapes, religious sermons and festivals during Ramadan and other rituals accomplished by means of the Classical variety of Arabic.

Additionally, the high status of Classical Arabic today as a symbol of national unity rejects any movements or claims to modernize a vernacular to be an official language of the state. As far as I am aware, Classical Arabic is a critical component of Arab identity and the unifying language for all Arabic speaking tongues, and hence it is the official language for 26 countries laying from the gulf to the ocean forming a one geographical bond.

Apart from its political use, Classical Arabic is further used in media particularly on television for discussing the news, historical movies, religious programs and even cartoons which can be a good deal of supporting children with authentic representation of Classical Arabic as well as in magazines, newspapers and classical literature. More, it is the language of education and educated Arabs as well who feel very proud and obsessed in using it as Gibran (cited in Sabah, 2015) states that "It is the nations' inventors that keep the prominence for their language".

### **3. Conclusion**

Classical Arabic is no doubt a living variety despite the different arguments and debates against. Classical Arabic is closely associated with the Holy Qur'an that is the bedrock of Islam and upon which all Muslims rely in practicing Islamic rituals and duties. More, Classical Arabic will remain in use since it is the uniting language of all Arabic tongues and highly valued among Arabic society. Furthermore, the presence of this variety in education, literature, media and bureaucracy prevents its existence from deterioration.

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