

# Where is the Arabic?

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By Ingrid Piller | December 20, 2009 | Language learning, gender & identity, Recent Posts

Finally, today on Day 3 of our conference on Fostering [Multiliteracies Through Education: Middle Eastern Perspectives](#) someone asked “Where is the Arabic?” “How come a conference devoted to multilingualism and taking place in an Arab country is conducted entirely in English?” Good question! As one of the co-chairs of the organizing committee, I can say it wasn’t for lack of trying.

Arabic and English are in a complex relationship in this country. While Arabic is the official language of the UAE, English is the de facto public language. Both of the organizing universities, the [American University of Sharjah](#), a private institution, and [Zayed University](#), a public institution, have English as the medium of instruction. As a matter of fact, none of the colleges nor universities in the UAE have Arabic as the medium of instruction. The situation in the K-12 system is more complex but also favoring English: the majority of private schools use English as the medium of instruction, and there are some public schools that use English as the medium of instruction, either throughout the curriculum or for selected content areas. All non-national students attend private schools (82% of the population of the UAE are made up of non-nationals, [as I pointed out in an earlier post](#)) and 40-50% of the national population also attend private schools. The maths is clear: the education system is obviously steering the UAE’s young towards English. Furthermore, there is the trend to start English education ever earlier with a boom in English-medium nurseries and preschools. Not even home is necessarily a bastion of Arabic as families are likely to include maids and nannies from South-East Asia or East Africa and a least some communication even in the private domain is thus likely to be in English.

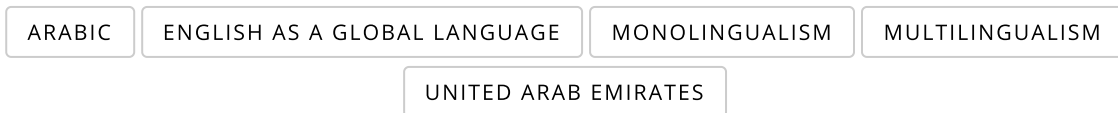
It’s easy to blame English for squeezing out Arabic and the tension between powerful global interests and less powerful local interests is certainly played out on the terrain of language. However, the position of Arabic is further complicated by its famous diglossia. Linguistically speaking, the centers of the Arabic-speaking world are outside the UAE: the main Academies of the Arabic language are based in Algiers, Cairo, Damascus, Khartoum, and Rabat, and the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) the corpus of which they are planning in their offices are not heard anywhere on the streets of the Arab world, and maybe even less so in the UAE. Gulf Arabic, the local vernacular of the UAE is very different from both MSA and any of the other 15 or so vernacular varieties of Arabic.

On top of the fact that Arabs from outside the Gulf find Gulf Arabic, or Khaleeji, difficult to understand, Gulf Arabic is one of those varieties that don’t get much respect: one speaker at this conference, an Arab from the Levant, referred to the local speech of his students as “some sort of broken pidgin language.” Little wonder that such attitudes from their teachers don’t exactly encourage pride in local identities nor do they encourage people to speak Arabic in public: if your choice is between sounding stand-offish and stilted (MSA) or backward and ignorant (Khaleeji), it’s little wonder that many people vote with their mouths and go for

English. Tragically, English is not the liberating haven, either, as which some TESOL practitioners like to present it: the predominant professional discourse about English in the UAE is also one of deficiency.

Ultimately, the challenge for policy makers and educators in the UAE will be less about which languages to teach, which varieties to prescribe as the standard, and how to raise proficiency levels in Arabic and English but how to foster pride in the multilingual, multidialectal, multimodal and fluid communicative practices people in the UAE engage in all the time.

One person on whom Dubai has left an impression was our keynote speaker Suresh Canagarajah from Pennsylvania State University. In his closing panel, Suresh held up the diversity of the UAE as a model for the world. During his three days in the UAE, Suresh has come to the conclusion that the language diversity and transnational community of the UAE could serve as a model for the wider world. He may be on to something: instead of continuous self-flagellation about the low standards of Arabic and English in the UAE, Emiratis might be better off promoting their brand of Language-and-Communication-on-the-Move to the world ...



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