

"Speak Arabic!": Arabic Dialect Comparison Videos and the Reconfiguration of the Maghreb-Mashreq Language Ideology

Introduction:

There is a hidden power imbalance in the Arab world. It is not related to warfare, oil, or politics, but language. Twenty-two countries list Arabic as their official language, but each country speaks a unique dialect. Since most Pan-Arab media has historically been produced in Egypt and Lebanon, Eastern dialects have become the most represented across country lines, often to the detriment of Western dialects like Moroccan Arabic (*al-darija al-maghribiyya*) (Hachimi 2013). With the proliferation of mass media arose a Western (Maghrebi) vs. Eastern (Mashreqi) dialect hierarchy. Many Arabic speakers consider Eastern dialects of Arabic, such as those spoken in Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, superior to Western dialects, such as those in Morocco and Algeria. Scholars have recently described this biased perception of Arabic dialects as "The Maghreb-Mashreq language ideology" (Hachimi 2013, 270).

In recent years, satellite television and social media development have increased linguistic exchange across the Arab world (McNeil, 2022). It is increasingly common for Arabic speakers across the Middle East and North Africa to be exposed to each other's dialects. This exposure disrupts past trends that only amplified the dialects of media production centers like Egypt and Lebanon. Given this new, potentially more democratized, media environment, my project seeks to investigate the extent to which *social media platforms recreate or challenge the Maghreb-Mashreq language hierarchy*.

Background:

Arabic and its dialects, regardless of where they are spoken, have a unique hierarchical relationship known as diglossia. The concept of diglossia is the foundation upon which scholars understand modern debates about Arabic dialects. Diglossia, as defined by C.A. Ferguson, is

A relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language...there is a very divergent, highly codified superimposed variety...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, 245).

Diglossia occurs within a society for a variety of reasons such as: a preexisting literary tradition that is either a source of or reinforces the fundamental values of a community and the limiting of literacy to a small elite (Ferguson 1959, 247). High varieties of languages are often firmly rooted in a community's history and tradition and widely revered as superior to the lower dialects in terms of aesthetics, expression, logic, and religious importance (Ferguson 1959, 248). Within diglossia, each variety of a language has its specific place. The high variety is typically used in political speeches, religious sermons, academic circles, and news broadcasts. In contrast, the low variety is used for daily conversations, soap operas, talking to service workers, and folk literature¹(Ferguson 1959, 236). Diglossia is essential to keep in mind when studying language communities, as shared notions regarding the existence, usage, and justification of a higher form of a language reflect a community's values and traditions.

Arabic perfectly embodies diglossia and its impacts since it has both a historically and religiously sacrosanct 'high' variety, known as Fusha ('Fus-ha'), and a plethora of 'low' colloquial varieties such as Egyptian Arabic, Moroccan Arabic (Darija), Lebanese Arabic, and Khaliji (Arabian Peninsula) Arabic. According to Hachimi, "Arabic provides a pristine example of

¹ It is important to emphasize that nobody uses the high variety in daily life, nor is it anyone's native language. Using a high variety in a casual situation would lead to mockery and vice-versa if a low variety was used in a formal context.

'standard language ideology' because Fusha...is written and not commonly spoken in everyday life, a distance and authority symbolized by its association with the holy book of Islam, the Qur'an, as well as other elite establishments" (Hachimi 2013, 4).

The pan-Arab movement, which peaked in the 1960s, encouraged the establishment of Fusha as the national language of all Arabic-speaking countries to unite them as a ethnically and linguistically homogeneous nation (Hachimi et al. 2022, 3). The pan-Arab movement failed to create a unified Arab nation-state, but all the countries influenced by the movement have Fusha as their national language. With the Arab Spring, the power of Fusha was challenged by nationalist sentiments primarily based on national dialect loyalty (McNeil 2022). For example, in Tunisia, post-revolution national identity was constructed "through the use and promotion of their vernacular" (McNeil 2022, 57). Similar ideas promoting the valorization of regional vernaculars created tension between promoters of Fusha superiority and dialect supremacy.

In addition to the tension between Fusha and dialects, there is tension between dialects themselves—particularly between Eastern (Mashreq) and Western (Maghreb) dialects of Arabic. Maghrebi Arabic is often seen as inferior to Eastern dialects for three main reasons: linguistic purism, foreign language influence, and relative incomprehensibility. Because of geographical proximity to the Arabian Peninsula, many Eastern varieties of Arabic are seen as linguistically close to Standardized or Quranic Arabic (Fusha) and, therefore, more "pure" (Hachimi 2013, 273). Additionally, due to French colonial influence, Moroccan Darija has many French loan words and is often viewed as more French than Arabic. In fact, Schulthies (2014) found that many Mashreqis “claimed the North African Arabics were unintelligible, adulterated by Berber² and French” (4).

² The term 'Berber' refers to the Amazigh language group of the indigenous nomadic tribes of North Africa.

In addition to ideologies that framed Maghrebi Arabic as impure, it has also been largely absent from media circulating across the Arabic-speaking world. This absence is because North African countries (excluding Egypt) were late to develop media production industries, in contrast to the Middle East (Miller 2017, 92). Egypt, being "the most influential geographic and social center of Arab media productions" from the early 1900s through the late 1980s greatly impacted the type of language used in Arabic media production (Hachimi 2013, 275). Satellite television media, therefore, was not conducted in Fusha but in what came to be known as Mashreqi Media Arabic, a slightly higher register of colloquial Eastern Arabic mixed with Fusha. Despite increased media production in the Maghreb region, the long-time proliferation of Mashreqi Media Arabic makes it difficult for Maghrebi speakers to relate to audiences or succeed in the field without switching to Mashreqi Arabic (Miller 2017, 92). Not to mention, Maghrebi speakers' exposure to Mashreqi media familiarized them with Mashreqi Arabic and enabled them to switch dialects more easily than their Mashreqi counterparts, who had little exposure to Maghrebi Arabic (Hachimi 2013, 287).

Literature Review:

Recent literature has argued for more research into hierarchies between colloquial Arabic varieties, as well as how social media can be a site of reinforcement of the Maghreb-Mashreq hierarchy (Hachimi 2013). Schulthies (2014) studied accommodation processes for non-Mashreqi speakers in Pan-Arab talent programs. In her study, she argues that pan-Arab talent programs have gradually shifted from only including Mashreqi speakers, or those who could switch to a Mashreqi variety, to including both Maghrebi speakers and non-Arabic speakers by providing subtitles in Fusha. Despite growing accommodations, however, Maghrebi Arabic

speakers overwhelmingly had to code-switch and speak Mashreqi media Arabic and faced ridicule from their peers (Schulthies 2014, 7).

Hachimi (2013) came to a similar conclusion when studying YouTube clip compilations from pan-Arab talent shows. She summarizes what she sees as recreations of the Maghreb-Mashreq hierarchy in mass media in the following three points: "a. Maghreb speakers bear the communicative burden; b. Maghreb varieties are objects of mockery; c. Mashreq varieties are objects of adulation" (Hachimi 2013, 270). This hierarchy, she says, revolves around ideas of linguistic purity, mutual intelligibility, and authenticity, or who counts as a 'real' Arabic speaker (Hachimi 2013, 271). She chose pan-Arab talent shows because they bring together Maghreb and Mashreq speakers in unique ways, allowing her to study their interactions while recognizing they are performing for audience approval. These elements arise in the mockery of Moroccan and Tunisian contestants during conversations with Mashreqi Arabic speakers.

Though these studies are valuable and important, they tend to focus on older forms of media, such as television and music.

However, researchers have recommended that social media be used to investigate changing hierarchical relationships between dialects. Social media democratizes access to different dialects by facilitating the spread of information and interaction between Arabic speakers (McNeil, 2022). Today, more people use vernacular in online communication than ever (McNeil 2022; Hachimi et al. 2022). Democratization allows for the proliferation of Arabic vernacular use in written contexts previously reserved for Fusha. Therefore, social media has the ability to "reproduce and contest the Maghreb-mashreq language ideology in important new ways" (Hachimi 2013, 270). For that, social media serves as an important source of investigation for changing hierarchical relationships.

On the one hand, mass media can reproduce and further the Maghreb-Mashreq language ideology. In Hachimi's (2013) study of YouTube clips from a pan-Arab talent show, she found that in various interactions, Maghrebi speakers were mocked by their Mashreqi constituents on a public stage. The best philosophical lens to understand unadulterated mockery of Maghrebi Arabic in a mediatized environment is Fairclough's (2001) idea of ideological common sense. He describes this as inherent, unconscious rationalization in common ideology "in the service of sustaining unequal relations of power" (Fairclough 2001, 85). By mocking Maghrebi Arabic, the Mashreqi contestants de-authenticated Maghrebis' (in this case Moroccans) linguistic Arabness and "positioned their varieties as normative" (Hachimi 2013, 282). Such normalization of Eastern vernacular over Western is also shown in Schulthies (2014) work analyzing pan-Arab talent shows was evident in how participants unable to switch to Eastern dialects "were not accepted in pan-Arab talent contests" (2). Additionally, when some shows started accommodating Maghrebi-speaking participants, they were frequently subtitled in Fusha, but their Mashreqi counterparts were not (Schulthies 2014, 3). All of these examples represent how mass and social media can reproduce the ideologies present in the Maghreb-Mashreq hierarchy.

On the other hand, the Maghreb-Mashreq ideology's place on the world stage facilitates its exposure to new criticisms. Ideologies, according to Fairclough (2001), "are most effective when their workings are least visible" (71). Therefore, one can conjecture that by putting the Maghreb-Mashreq ideology on the world stage, social media has made it vulnerable to change. In the past, the domination of Mashreqi pan-Arab media meant that Maghrebi speakers had few to no opportunities to participate in mediatized discourse. However, the democratization of public discourse vis a vis social media makes it a key platform for the reconfiguration of the long-standing Maghreb-Mashreq ideology.

My paper explores these two poles: social media's ability to reinforce the language hierarchy and challenge it. As previously stated, social media can reproduce and strengthen language ideologies by further normalizing the usage of Eastern dialects and mocking Western dialects. However, it can also be argued that social media can weaken the dialect hierarchy because it raises awareness of said hierarchy and democratizes participation in public discourse. These are some of the many reasons why social media is vital to understanding the progression of language and ideologies as the digital age connects people in unprecedented ways.

Dialect Comparison Challenge Background:

For this study, I will analyze Arabic 'dialect comparison challenge' videos on YouTube and their corresponding comment sections. The standard format of dialect comparison videos consists of Arabic speakers saying the same word, such as 'spoon,' in their native dialects and discussing the differences. A secondary format for these comparison videos is when one Arabic speaker will say a word unique to their dialect, and the other participants have to guess the meaning of the word in either their dialect or in a 'neutral' language such as Fusha or English.

The origins of the dialect comparison challenge lie with the 'accent tag' or 'accent challenge,' which first arose around 2011. These challenges involved the creation of videos by everyday people, most often vloggers, reading a list of set words how they would typically say them. These videos became popular as it allowed people to explore the differences in pronunciation and accents in the English language. Interestingly enough, this style of accent survey is the mainstream and simplified version of linguist Bert Vaux's Harvard Dialect Survey, which ran from 2002 until 2003 (Rymes and Pizzighella 2017, 6).

Over thirty thousand people took this dialect survey. The survey consisted of a list of words to read aloud and a variety of questions about what you call certain things, for example: "What

word(s) do you use to address a group of two or more people?"³ or, "What do you call the kind of spider that has an oval-shaped body and extremely long legs?"⁴ (Vaux 2003). After this research was completed, there was little public interest in such a topic for the next decade.

That changed in 2011 when people started posting videos of themselves reading the aforementioned list of words on YouTube and Tumblr. This list and the public interest in accents came to a head in 2013 when the *New York Times* (NYT) made its own survey called "How Y'all, Youse, and You Guys Talk" (Rymes and Pizzighella 2017, 6). This article went viral and became the most-viewed article of 2013 for the NYT (Rymes and Pizzighella 2017, 6). I actually remember doing this quiz with my family and friends, and we compared how we spoke and how our accents differed.

However, this article's topic begins in 2020, when the accent challenge experienced a resurgence in popularity during COVID-19 quarantine. The earliest Arabic dialect comparison video I found on YouTube was in February 2020. It is unclear which video was the first to start the trend or if it was a combination of people who saw a growing trend in accent challenges and decided to participate. Here lies one of the main challenges of tracking this trend's development: though we know that the idea came from Vaux's 2002 study, it is difficult to track where the Arabic dialect challenge or the accent challenge had a secondary surge in popularity during quarantine because of the sheer volume of information exchanged across social media platforms.

There are many reasons why these dialect comparison videos and their accompanying comment sections make a lucrative source of material. The first reason is because of YouTube, the social media app I plan on analyzing. As of 2022, YouTube was the second most popular social media platform, with over 2.2 billion monthly active users (Walsh, 2022). This number is

³ Such as: Y'all, yous, yous guys, or you all.

⁴ Such as: Daddy long legs, Harvestman, or Cellar Spider

based on the number of active users who have accounts. However, since an account is not required to access content, considering the number of users who do not have accounts makes the actual number of users much higher. YouTube's massive international reach makes it an ideal platform to use as it provides a larger slice of social media users than more generation-specific platforms such as TikTok.

Secondly, combining written and audiovisual content helps me get a broader perspective on how people recreate or challenge the Maghreb-Mashreq language ideology. Since these are viral videos often made by content creators, the desire for performativity and drama may influence the participants' behavior since performativity and drama are precisely what garner views. Comment sections, on the other hand, consist of regular social media users who are not subject to the same scrutiny or expectations as content creators. Therefore, comment sections complement popular videos by providing the average Arabic-speaking user's perspective and representing how these users interact. Not to mention, depending on the nature of the content in the video, the comment section may significantly disagree with perspectives on or treatments of Arabic dialects in the videos. Videos are vital to understanding the perceptions of dialects and corresponding opinions since they "capture the entirety of behavior and processes, including language use, paralinguistic cues, gestures, mimics, and other verbal and nonverbal cues" (Szito 2020, 2). These non-verbal cues offer more nuanced understandings of participant's personal opinions regarding dialect variations.

Methodology:

I plan on analyzing two videos: one is part of a BBC segment where four participants (an Egyptian man, a Jordanian woman, a Moroccan man, and a Libyan woman) are questioned about their opinions regarding their dialects and what makes them unique, then they each say a unique

word in their dialect and the others guess its meaning in Fusha. I will analyze a second video from The Daily Q, "an online student publication produced and run by students at Northwestern University in Qatar" (Daily Q site). The main dialogue in this video is in English, but each participant says words in their respective dialects, and the others try to guess the meaning. By studying the participants' language use, spoken interactions, and non-verbal cues, I will gain insight into the participants' opinions of various dialects and learn whether the Maghreb-Mashreq hierarchy holds any power in that situation.

Additionally, I will use qualitative analysis to understand the significance and content of the comment sections in these videos. While it is easy to assume that the views presented in the videos are the opinions of most viewers, comment sections allow me to understand the reactions towards the opinions or behaviors of the participants in the videos. These reactions help me understand the power or vulnerability of the Maghreb-Mashreq language hierarchy within social media and potential opportunities for change.

Conclusion:

This research will contribute to a better understanding of the impacts of social media on language ideologies. Undoubtedly, the internet has been a democratizing force over the last two decades, and the increased interaction between Arabic speakers of different dialects presents the perfect opportunity to either reinforce or deconstruct prevalent language ideologies.

Understanding how these ideologies are represented in social media helps Arabic speakers and scholars be cognizant of their behaviors and motives by making them aware of implicit biases that impact how they perceive those who speak other dialects and even how they perceive their dialects. Ideologies never exist in a vacuum. They represent the accumulation of various social, linguistic, and cultural factors rooted so deeply in society that people are often unaware of their

existence. Therefore, it is vital to understand the importance of social media in their recreation or jeopardization of the Maghreb-Mashreq hierarchy to understand how language ideologies change and maintain power over time.

Outline:

- Introduction - I will discuss my topic in general and present my question
- Background - detailed history of the Maghreb-Mashreq hierarchy and its development/impacts
- Literature review - Covers works such as those by Hachimi, Schulthies, and McNeil
- Theoretical framework - using Fairclough's 'ideological common sense' to understand my topic
- Methods - discusses how and why I'm choosing the dialect challenge videos + goes into the origins of these videos and their importance
- Chapter 1: BBC Video - analysis of both video and comment section – I'm gonna use this video for showing the class and doing a short analysis
 - Depending on how much analysis I have of the video content itself I may make the comment section into a second chapter
- Chapter 2: Daily Q video - analysis of both video and comment section
 - This video is much longer and the extensive analysis required will likely lead me to make the comment section another chapter OR I may lump both comment sections together and make them a third chapter
- Conclusion - determining if or how these videos reinforce/challenge the Maghreb-Mashreq hierarchy and its implications for future research, emphasizing the importance of social media as a realm of study moving forward.

Bibliography:

- Achour, Myriam. 2022. "La diglossie traversée: La littérature en tunisien et le tunisien dans la littérature." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 278: 23–50.
- Bassiouney, Reem. 2009. *Arabic Sociolinguistics: Topics in Diglossia*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bassiouney, Reem. 2014. *Language and Identity in Modern Egypt*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bousofara-Omar, Naima. 2006. "Neither Third Language nor Middle Varieties but Diglossia." *Zeitschrift Für Arabische Linguistik* 2006 (45): 55–80.
- Caubet, Dominique. 1999. "Arabe maghrébin: passage à l'écrit et institutions." *Faits de langues* 13 (1): 235–44.
- Caubet, Dominique. 2007. "Génération Darija!" *Estudios de dialoçtología norteafricana y andalusí* 2005 (9): 233–43.
- Chun, Elaine. 2004. "Ideologies of Legitimate Mockery: Margaret Cho's Revoicings of Mock Asian." *International Pragmatics Association* 14 (2): 263–89.
- Davies, Eirlys. 2018. "Colloquial Moroccan Arabic: Shifts in Usage and Attitudes in the Era of Computer-Mediated Communication." In *Language, Politics and Society in the Middle East: Essays in Honour of Yasir Suleiman*, edited by Yonatan Mendel and Abeer Al-Najjar, 69–89. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Ruiter, Jan Jaap de. 2013. "L'arabe dialectal, qu'est-ce qu'en pensent les jeunes Marocains?" *Evolution des pratiques et représentations langagières dans le Maroc du vingt-et-unième siècle 2*: 77–92.
- Ferguson, Charles A. 1959. "Diglossia." *Word* 15: 325-340.
- Fairclough, Norman. 2001. *Language and Power*. 2nd ed. London: Longman.

- Hachimi, Atiqa. 2013. "The Maghreb-Mashreq Language Ideology and the Politics of Identity in a Globalized Arab World." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 17 (3): 269–96.
- Hachimi, Atiqa. 2015. "'Good Arabic, Bad Arabic' Mapping Language Ideologies in the Arabic-Speaking World." *Zeitschrift Für Arabische Linguistik* 61: 35–70.
- Hachimi, Atiqa. 2017. "Moralizing Stances: Discursive Play and Ideologies of Language and Gender in Moroccan Digital Discourse." In *The Politics of Written Language in the Arab World: Writing Change*, edited by Jacob Høigilt and Gunvor Mejdell, 239–65. Leiden: Brill.
- Hachimi, Atiqa. 2022. "In the Middle East, It's Cool to 'Sing Moroccan': Ideologies of Slang and Contested Meanings of Arabic Popular Music on Social Media." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2022 (278): 107–31.
- Hachimi, Atiqa, Jacopo Falchetta, and Montserrat Benítez Fernández. 2022. "Contextualizing the Rise of Vernacular Arabic in Globalized North Africa." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2022 (278): 1–22.
- McNeil, Karen. 2022. "'We Don't Speak the Same Language:' Language Choice and Identity on a Tunisian Internet Forum." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 278: 51–80.
- Miller, Catherine. 2017. "Contemporary Dārija Writings in Morocco Ideology and Practices." In *The Politics of Written Language in the Arab World: Writing Change*, 90–115. Brill.
- Rymes, Betsy, and Andrea Leone-Pizzighella. 2018. "YouTube-Based Accent Challenge Narratives: Web 2.0 as a Context for Studying the Social Value of Accent." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, no. 250: 137–63.
- Schulthies, Becky. 2014. "Do You Speak Arabic? Managing Axes of Adequation and Difference in Pan-Arab Talent Programs." *Language & Communication* 44: 59–71.
- Soulaimani, Dris. 2019. "They Don't Speak Arabic." *Al-'Arabiyya* 52: 73–100.

- Strand, Thea. 2012. "Winning the Dialect Popularity Contest: Mass-Mediated Language Ideologies and Local Responses in Rural Valdres, Norway." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 22 (1): 23–43.
- Szító, Judit. 2020. "'American vs. English': US American and British English Speakers' Attitudes toward Phonological and Lexical Features in Accent Tag Videos." *Freeside Europe Online Academic Journal* 2 (9): 1–20.
- Taine-Cheikh, Catherine. 2022. "Le hassāniyya et la variation diglossique à travers WhatsApp: le Mauritanie à l'heure du Covid-19." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 278.
- Telep, Suzie. 2021. "'Speaking like a White Person': Ideologies about Accent among Cameroonian Immigrants in Paris." *Osnabrücker Beiträge Zur Sprachtheorie* 98: 81–106.
- Theodoropoulou, Irene, and Joseph Tyler. 2014. "Perceptual Dialectology of the Arab World: A Principal Analysis." *Al-'Arabiyya* 47: 21–39.
- Vicente, Ángeles. 2022. "From Stigmatization to Predilection: Fold Metalinguistic Discourse on Social Media on the Northwestern Moroccan Arabic Variety." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 278: 133–54.
- Walsh, Shelley. 2022. "The Top Ten Social Media Sites and Platforms." *Search Engine Journal*.
- Woolard, Kathryn, Aida Ribot Bencomo, and Josep Soler Carbonell. 2014. "What's So Funny Now? The Strength of Weak Pronouns in Catalonia." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 23 (3): 127–41.