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Language Tests in the Arabic-speaking World: Between Ideology and Language Policy

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ABSTRACT

A system of language assessment may be used as a mechanism for affecting language policy. Language tests convey messages and ideologies that regard prestige, priorities and hierarchies, and they generally lead to the suppression of diversity (Shohamy 2007). The relationship between tests and language policy, based mainly on the criteria used for judging language quality through rating scales, guidelines and other frameworks, leads to a view of language as standardized and homogenous. From this perspective, language tests can serve as tools that negotiate and mediate between ideology and practice. In the Arabic-speaking world language tests have only recently been introduced, although very few Arab countries have shown an interest in developing the necessary means to evaluate language performance levels. In this paper the language tests developed by the Arab Academy, the UAE National Center for Assessment (*Markaz al-Waṭani li-l-Qiyās*), the Mother Tongue Center (*Markaz al-Lisān al-Umm*), the Jordan al-Nağāḥ National University (*Ġāmi'at al-Nağāḥ al-Waṭaniyya*) and the King Sa'ūd University will be taken into consideration in order to determine any ideological orientation in test objectives, content and rationale. Particular attention will be paid to communicative skills within a general framework of linguistic variation in the Arabic-speaking world.

Keywords: Arabic language policy; language assessment; language test; linguistic identity; teaching Arabic.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between national identity and language policy is an extremely complex issue. Whenever we talk about identity, we need to

differentiate between two types of identities that do not often coincide: the “achieved” or “inhabited” identity – the one that people claim for themselves – and an “attributed” identity – the identity that others bestow on them (Blommaert 2006). The importance a language is given, and how it is promoted, both in and outside an individual state, is central to the process of nation-building (Anderson 1983; Greenfeld 1992) and the historical self-awareness of a linguistic community. Language policy is invariably based on linguistic ideologies, on the belief in desirable forms of language use and on the “ideal” linguistic image of a society. A Nation’s central institutions often seem to be guardians of a monoglot idealization of the “language-people-country” nexus and offer their citizens a specific ethnolinguistic identity. In the present case, language policy is testimony to the ideologization of language in the Arabic-speaking world (Suleiman 2013; Bassiouney 2014): in the Arabic setting, language is not value-neutral, but is always a target of making meaning in accordance with attitudes, position and views. These conceptions of language are ideological, and they constitute the body of insider, indigenous views about Arabs, their language and the world in which they live. In this context, Arabic language academies play an important role: they are part of the apparatus of modern Arab states, with the aim of bringing intellectuals with cultural and political influence under the aegis of the state. This state patronage leads to agendas and ideologies that concern language and its role in politics and society (Lian 2020). This factor often underlies the lack of coordination between the various academies, and the lack of incisive common linguistic planning. Despite the existence of specific agendas and priorities, the discourse of the academies tends towards pan-Arabic, stressing the need to preserve the integrity of Arabic, while attempting to make it compatible with modern civilization. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the academies have failed to transform their discourse into concrete language policies, thus showing that there is a certain disconnect between discourse and implementation as regards language planning. The “short circuit” situation that exists between language views and applying a set of actions aimed at encouraging Arabic to adapt to modernity does much confirm the general idea of immobility on the part of Arabic language academies towards language policy.

A system of language assessment may be used as a mechanism for affecting language policy. The introduction of language tests delivers messages and ideologies about the prestige, priorities and hierarchies that often lead to the suppression of diversity (Shohamy 2007). In her

article Shohamy refers to minor languages that are generally not considered in teaching practice. Likewise, dialects are often ignored in curriculum planning and in the selection of teaching materials. While language testing comes at the final stage of the whole learning process, it typically reflects curriculum planning and teaching procedures. The relationship between tests and language policy, based mainly on the criteria used for judging language quality via rating scales, guidelines and frameworks, leads to a view of language as standardized and homogenous. From this perspective, language tests can serve as tools that negotiate and mediate between ideology and practice. In the Arabic-speaking world the introduction of language tests is very recent and very few Arab countries have shown interest in developing the means to measure and evaluate language performance levels. The present article discusses language testing texts created by the Arab Academy, the UAE National Center for Assessment (*al-Markaz al-Waṭani li-l-Qiyās*), the Mother Tongue Center (*Markaz al-Lisān al-Umm*), the Jordan al-Nağāḥ National University (*Ġāmi'at al-Nağāḥ al-Waṭaniyya*) and the King Sa'ūd University. The ideological orientation behind the tests' objectives, content and rationale will be considered, with particular focus on communicative skills within a more general framework of linguistic variation in the Arabic-speaking world.

2. THE ARABIC LANGUAGE: BETWEEN REALITY AND IDEALIZATION

In recent years the idea of Arabic as a monolithic language has largely been overcome in studies conducted in the west, and the issue of multiglossia has become the basis of any discussion regarding actual proficiency in Arabic. The presence of many varieties, each used in accordance with their own function and regional collocation, conveys an idea of a language that is far from being monolithic. Arabic is a typical example of what Ferguson (1959) stated regarding diglossia: on the one hand, we have the Standard variety, studied and taught in schools, which is considered the sole admissible means of formal Pan-Arab communication, while on the other, there are the vernaculars spoken by Arabs in their daily lives. The status of the Standard form, strongly linked to tradition and to religious identity, is, however, continuously challenged by internal and external influences. These influences, which comprise elements of linguistic adaptation to necessary modernization,

are signs that Arab societies are rapidly becoming westernized, urbanized and industrialized (Chejne 1969), and still far from any linguistic and sociopolitical stability. Despite the Standard being considered the only admissible means of written and, in certain situations, of oral communication, the Arabic-speaking world is witnessing the emergence of various attempts to affirm local varieties, such as in the field of literature (Solimando 2017). Lian (2020, 202) provides an in-depth analysis of the discourse of the Arabic academies, their praise of the beauty of *fushḥā* and their complaints regarding colloquial Arabic in the classroom and in the media. The existence of these internal influences is perceived as an element that can create political fragmentation, cause rifts in social cohesion and endanger pan-Arab solidarity. This resistance has a clearly symbolic importance that has managed to assure the survival of these institutions in that they appear to be the guardians of an ideal linguistic heritage. Nevertheless, these attitudes towards the ‘dangerous’ role of the dialects are not universally shared: Suleiman and Lucas (2012) highlight divergent and convergent debate on the status of the language and its supposed weakness due to the presence of dialects other than Standard Arabic. Their analysis of debates on the al-Jazeera¹ network regarding the status of *fushḥā* provides contrasting views: if, on the one hand, the *‘āmmiyyāt* are an obstacle to the process of Arabization, on the other, it has to be accepted that 300 million Arabs speak a particular dialect, and that *fushḥā* is neither spoken nor always understood by the ordinary person on the street. This opinion leads to the conclusion that the whole process of language modernization should consider dialects with the general aim of integrating the Standard and vernaculars on an institutional level. In addition to this stance, which can be considered more progressive if compared to the widespread defense of the integrity of *fushḥā*, most of the interviewees claim that any weakness of Arabic due to presence of dialects is a clear reflection of political weakness, i.e., the weakness is reflected in linguistic fragmentation. In these debates, the influence of religion is clear, since *fushḥā* is seen as the glue that holds the *umma* together, and knowledge of it is necessary for a deeper understanding of the *Qurʾān* (Suleiman and Lucas 2012, 197-198).

The other element of weakness is to be found in the widespread use of English as a language of globalization. This also implies a discussion of the place of Arabic within the globalizing world, the issue of

¹ Suleiman and Lucas’s paper explores the data from eight programs aired between 1998 and 2010 that specifically dealt with Arabic.

the linguistic identity of Arabs and the role of institutions that should strengthen the language through well-honed language planning. Arabic is perceived as being challenged by an incompatibility between inherited linguistic tradition and imported linguistic modernity. This general feeling extends to the more complex issue of modernity in the Arab world. Modernity has always been tainted with European colonialism and Western imperialism, and it remains a potentially threatening sociopolitical situation imposed on Arab society by Western industrial powers. By associating modernization with the invasive presence of the West, the question of the modernization of the language has significant symbolic consequences: modernizing Arabic is always seen in terms of imported modernity, in stark contrast to the “Golden Age” of the Arabic linguistic tradition. It is therefore perceived as dangerous for the integrity of Arabic. English in the Arab world can be analyzed from two different perspectives: an educational perspective and a more specifically linguistic one. In the first case, Arab countries have until recently witnessed a proliferation of foreign educational institutions, schools and universities, the result of various colonial phases. English, and to a lesser extent French, were the languages of innovation, and the only means of communicating in the sciences. This was the state of affairs in the colonial period, and it undermined the role of Arabic by illustrating its inadequacy in the face of modernity. With the emergence of nationalist movements, the issue of the dignity of Arabic came to the fore, initiating debate and language planning proposals, as we will see in the next section.

3. LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY IN THE ARABIC-SPEAKING CONTEXT

Language policy comprises two main issues: Arabization that involves the process of promoting Arabic as the only language used in the community, and the issue of multilingualism, which signifies diglossia and linguistic minorities posing challenges to local policies. The promotion of Arabic is strongly linked to the traditional opposition to foreign intervention that characterized nationalist movements after colonial occupation. The monolithic linguistic policies of today are inherited mainly from a narrow concept of nationalism where Arabic is the dominant ideological model. Despite the close connection between Arabism and Islamism in the nationalist discourse on language policy, it appears that Islam, as a religion, provided an ideological justification for those

policies, but did not play a decisive role; any linguistic and cultural orientation in favor of Arabization was promoted by the secular state (Miller 2003, 149). As Miller posits (*ibid.*, 155):

Language became a crucial means of identification [...]. In this conflict between Arabism and non-Arab minorities, Islam or Muslim references are sometimes used to justify the hegemony of the Arabic language. The sanctity, the holiness and the superiority of Arabic are evoked to justify the marginalization of non-prestigious languages.

It is, therefore, a combination of secular nationalism and modern political Islamism that motivated linguistic reforms, and that played a crucial role in the creation of a national, and consequently linguistic, identity. In this context, multilingualism is a threat to national unity, both regarding the diglossic status of the Arabic language and the linguistic minorities present in Arab countries. Arabic dialects are viewed as corrupt linguistic forms that should be eliminated through proper education. Colloquial Arabic and non-Arab vernaculars are not accepted by institutions and are not formally recognized. From an ideological viewpoint, while foreign languages, which were/are imposed by colonialism, globalization and a vague sense of modernity, are perceived as extraneous entities, Standard Arabic not only has emotive and cultural roots, but also symbolizes a glorious past and a crucial means of establishing Arab identity.

Some proposals for a simplification of *fushā* structures have been made (Suleiman 2013), but in terms of language ideology, this is seen as a backward step and contrary to the affirmation and revival of an inherited linguistic tradition. Despite the influence exerted by *fushā* in the Arab world, however, recent years have witnessed a more widespread use of the colloquial in informal texts, such as on social networks, in commercials and text messages, as well as in various literary works in which the use of the vernacular is adopted for stylistic reasons. Nevertheless, any sign of a change in the relationship between Standard and colloquial has not led institutions to rethink language policy: the promotion of Standard Arabic remains the linguistic goal in schools in most countries, and even in countries where Arabization is promoted without evident success, as in Lebanon. Here English and French are still perceived as symbols of modernization and high-quality education and, to some extent, of religious identity too (Solimando 2020).

Educational systems, like economic and political systems, were based on British or French models during the colonial period, and became the object of debate and change after independence. Arabization is at the

core of this process of reappropriating a country's history. Each country had its own Arabization experience (Bassiouny 2009), which was not always completely successful. In order to be incisive, language policy needs to respond to the symbolic and instrumental functions of the language: in this respect, if on the one hand Arabic undoubtedly responds to the ideology of national unity and religious identity, on the other it is fighting an unequal battle, not only against foreign languages, particularly English, on a strategic and instrumental level, but also against colloquial and minority languages in terms of actual practice. These practices correspond to a speaker's choice of linguistic code within her/his linguistic repertoire (Spolsky 2004). Language practice is sometimes more important than language policy or, in any case, underpins the chance of achieving the latter, since the community, and its habits, are what makes a policy successful. The Arab community, albeit recognizing the Standard as the symbol of a glorious past, prefers the colloquial as the common means of communication. In this context, widespread illiteracy also plays a significant role: limited access to high-quality education, and the lack of a professional teaching body, leaves compulsory education at a very low level (Or, 4. Akkari 2004) impeding the success of a standardized language policy.

Following independence, Arabization in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa faced several obstacles: among them was the lack of teaching materials, recourses and trained teachers. In Algeria, for instance, the government retained the French educational system (Benrabah 2007), but introduced Arabic, which became the official language in primary and secondary schools and in many university humanities faculties. However, graduates in Arabized degree programs were disadvantaged in the job market (Holt 1994), being unable to compete with graduates educated in bilingual French/Arabic private schools, where students acquired full competence in French. In fact, French remained the language of administration, and was required in order to obtain public or private employment. In the Eighties, the disconnect between language policy and linguistic reality became clear. While Algeria might be a particular case given its 132 years of colonialization, a general discrepancy emerged between the instrumental and the symbolic use of language. Despite a new sense of national identity, accompanied by a post-independence linguistic revival, French remained the language of the élite and of high-quality educational institutions, enjoying social prestige in countries like Morocco and Tunisia. Moreover, the socio-economic environment in North African countries encourages the use of

French, since trade is mainly with France. To varying degrees, these elements have been common to all Arab countries, making the Arabization process difficult to accomplish.

4. LANGUAGE TESTS AS INSTRUMENTS OF LANGUAGE POLICY: A COMPARISON WITH THE EUROPEAN MODEL

As we have seen in previous sections, a discussion of language policy requires consideration of the language practices of a speech community and its linguistic beliefs. These are decisive factors in the varieties that are selected by the community from its linguistic repertoire and give actual form to the ideology associated with a specific dialect. Language policies must consider these aspects whenever there is the intention to modify language habits. Educational reforms involved a debate on the institutionalization of pedagogical concepts and how adequate linguistic competence could be defined. For this reason, education became the domain of a cultural and political struggle in which languages became symbols. At the same time, it provided a testing ground for a thorough rethinking of pedagogical strategies and an opportunity to reconsider a pragmatic approach to language teaching.

Albeit in different ways, every country or geo-linguistic area is moving towards the same goal, that is, promoting the variety that responds to its ideological, historical and practical needs. As pointed out by Barni (2012), three main aspects are involved in linguistic policies found in Europe: migratory mobility linked to the challenges of multiculturalism and multilingualism; the 2001 publication of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages, which has become the most important point of reference in the field of language learning and teaching, and the shifts that have occurred in how the functions, status and role of language tests are perceived. The EU approach aims to encourage multilingualism as a resource that can facilitate social inclusiveness:

Multilingualism may be attained by simply diversifying the languages on offer in a particular school or educational system, or by encouraging pupils to learn more than one foreign language, or reducing the dominant position of English in international communication. Beyond this, the plurilingual approach emphasizes the fact that as an individual person's experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language

of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. (Council of the European Union, CEFR, 4)

Despite this position, no country has included plurilingualism in its language policy: on the contrary, it is seen as a problem, particularly in the case of migrants (Barni 2012). The publication of a common framework of reference for languages was undoubtedly an event that very much influenced language policies and language teaching in European countries by designating the levels defining competence and providing the impetus for producing new teaching materials. The very idea of the language learner has also been affected: the learner is now seen as a social agent whose role is to interact in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular domain of action. This approach focuses on communicative language competence. In fact, the need to develop communicative skills has been strongly felt in recent years. Communicative competence involves various factors, including sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects that are closely related to the knowledge of, and sensitivity towards, social conventions and specific linguistic traits. Sociolinguistic competence requires skills that deal with the sociocultural dimension of language use, and it is the basic requisite for being aware of the linguistic markers of social relations, such as politeness conventions, that are indispensable in speaker interaction.

Regarding the issue of dialects, one of the communicative skills mentioned for the C2 level is the ability to understand and to adjust to non-standard dialects. Specific markers, such as phonological, lexical and syntactic features, make it possible to identify the geographical provenance of a speaker, as well as various sociolinguistic markers such as social class, country of birth and ethnicity. In this sense, every European language community has its own diverse features, as stated in the Council of Europe document:

No European language communities are entirely homogenous. Different regions have their peculiarities in language and culture. These are usually most marked in those who live purely local lives and therefore correlate with social class, occupation and educational level. Recognition of such dialectal features therefore gives significant clues as to the interlocutor's characteristics. Stereotyping plays a large role in this process. It can be reduced by the development of intercultural skills. Learners will in the

course of time also come into contact with speakers of various provenances. Before themselves adopting dialect forms they should be aware of their social connotations and of the need for coherence and consistency.

As highlighted by Facchin (2017, 197), the teaching approach adopted in Europe has also affected TAFL (Teaching Arabic as Foreign Language) in the Arab world in terms of the skills, assessment methods, language levels and descriptors that should be adopted. Indeed, the Threshold Level has influenced perspectives on the teaching of Arabic and has become the subject of much debate. As discussed above, the relationship between the Standard and dialect is different in the Arabic speaking world, and the dialects themselves convey different sociolinguistic features than dialects in the European context. For example, Arab politicians, university professors etc. use dialect in day-to-day communication and this is not perceived as a social marker since it represents their mother tongue. The Standard is used, however, on formal occasions such as for speeches and lectures. This signifies a completely different approach to language testing, especially when aimed at non-native speakers. Indeed, the situation is different for native speakers since the Standard can be required, for instance, for employment in the public sector. Moreover, language tests in this context are instruments that are capable of changing the educational system and its processes. They function as policy instruments, which, in some cases, fill in for the absence of educational reform.

5. LANGUAGE TESTS IN THE ARABIC-SPEAKING WORLD

5.1. *General context: Arabic language tests for Arabic L1*

The attention given to language tests in Arab countries is recent and is not homogeneous, and even the institutions that might promote a common policy of language testing do not exert this role. Although Rušdī Ḥaṭīr successfully introduced Arabic L1 testing in Egypt in the 1950s², Arabic language academies and other organizations such as ALECSO did not establish any authoritative language assessment policy.

² Rušdī Ḥaṭīr introduced a series of Arabic language tests aimed at illiterate Egyptian learners. This venture was “exported” to other Arab countries by the following decade. See Facchin 2017.

In analyzing the language testing solutions adopted in Arabic-speaking countries, we will distinguish between tests designed for native Arabic speakers and those for non-native speakers. Regarding tests for Arabic L1 speakers, the main problem is the absence of a standardized model for language assessment. The educational system is extremely heterogeneous in Arab countries, and schools and teachers follow different guidelines, so the skills implemented can vary considerably from one institution to another. Schools do not have a comprehensive classification of the standards, benchmarks, performance indicators or assessment methods to be used. The general approach remains largely textbook-based and teacher-centered, especially in public schools (Taha-Thomure 2008). This system has obviously affected the entire assessment practice in schools: in fact, final exams lack any standard homogeneity both in content and overall organization. In these exams, grammar is privileged, since syllabuses, and teaching in general, remain grammar oriented. The common practice is to adopt tests that are suited to the specific context in which students learn, and for this reason it is very rare for listening and speaking skills to be assessed (Gebril and Taha-Thomure 2013, 5). Until recently, there were no standardized proficiency tests for native Arabic speakers. Gebril and Taha-Thomure's review of various Arabic language tests evidenced a range of assessment procedures used for different academic purposes, e.g., admission, placement, and exit tests. In the non-academic domain, testing may be for teachers, lawyers and judges or journalists and translators, and in particular it can be used as a criterion for hiring and promoting staff in the public sector. One test for the assessment of Arabic L1 was proposed by the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) in 2012. This test, called the Alain Test of Arabic Proficiency (ATAP)³ and endorsed in particular by the Continuing Education Center (*Markaz al-Ta'lim al-Mustamirr*) at the UAEU, provides a different approach that is unlike the grammar-oriented model. Not being linked to a specific curriculum or teaching context, it is more focused on assessing communicative skills. This feature makes it very flexible to apply since it can be used in different domains in which the assessment of Arabic, and MSA specifically, is needed. The features of the Alain approach are:

- to organize and carry out the Alain Test to measure proficiency in Arabic for Arabic speakers, UAEU students and any others who may require it;

³ <https://cec.uaeu.ac.ae/ar/arabiclanguage.shtml> [22/06/2021].

- to organize courses to develop Arabic language skills for Arabic speakers, featuring, for example, functional writing, effective oral communication and speed reading;
- to provide scientific consultation and workshops, to undertake scientific research into Arabic and related teaching methods, and to design curricula for organizations to meet their specific needs.

As remarked by al-Shatter (2019), the Alain Test aims at measuring the competence of *abnāʾ al-ʿarabiyya* ‘Arabic sons’ in communicating *bi-l-luġa al-faṣīḥa (al-luġa al-umm)* ‘in the pure language (mother tongue)’. The test does not seem to have any particular rivals at the moment, and it boasts various academic and private sponsors⁴. It also appears to be the test that is most likely to encourage other institutions to work on other assessment methods in an L1 context in order to measure general proficiency in Arabic. This could also respond to the needs of specific subjects and fields that require instruments of evaluation.

5.2. Arabic language tests for L2 Arabic

Arab countries appear to be more active with regard to tests designed for non-native speakers: there are now language tests and online courses for non-native Arabic speakers run by private Arab institutions such as the Arab Academy, the Saudi National Center for Assessment (*al-Markaz al-Waṭani li-l-Qiyās*), the Mother Tongue Center (*Markaz al-Lisān al-Umm*) of the UAEU, the Jordan al-Naġāḥ National University (*Ġāmiʿat al-Naġāḥ al-Waṭaniyya*) and the Arabic Linguistics Institute of the King Saʿūd University (KSU). Obviously, the main challenge that needs to be faced is the diglossic situation. In their analysis of the different tasks described in the ACTFL Arabic Proficiency Guidelines, Elgibali and Taha (1995) state the need for the use of a dialect, rather than MSA, for listening and speaking skills at intermediate and advanced levels. From this perspective, ACTFL testing programs have recently come to recognize the specific linguistic context of Arabic⁵:

ACTFL recognizes that the situation for testing Arabic is a special situation and therefore must be dealt with in a special manner. In the ACTFL test protocol, Arabic is considered to be one language represented by a

⁴ <https://cec.uaeu.ac.ae/en/partners.shtml> [22/06/2021].

⁵ <https://www.actfl.org/resources/actfl-proficiency-guidelines-2012/arabic/arabic-consensus-project/speaking> [22/06/2021].

continuum from all colloquial to all MSA, and a combination of mixes along the continuum. During ACTFL OPI testing, testers accommodate to the variety of language that the test taker is producing and accept Arabic language produced anywhere along the continuum. An ACTFL OPI rating recognizes a speaker's overall functional ability in Arabic.

This declaration does not, however, appear to have had an effect on the system of language testing: despite the importance that should be given to linguistic variation, in the language tests analyzed here we rarely find sections devoted to assessing listening or speaking skills in colloquial Arabic. An exception is the KSU Arabic Linguistics Institute, whose website states that:

The language used is neither classic nor colloquial Arabic, it is the simple and clear language used today in education, the press and the electronic media such as Aljazeera and Al-Arabiya. A combination of the project and utilization of contemporary modes of communication has a significant chance of enhancing the participants' communicative skills.

Evidently, the main problem in assessing oral skills (comprehension and production) is the issue of authenticity. Arabic language centers are obviously aware of this, but, as we stated above, the emphasis is less on improving pedagogical strategies in language teaching and more on fostering the correct ideological perspective.

Moreover, if on the one hand academic institutions, such as the al-Nağāḥ National University and the KSU Arabic Linguistics Institute, declare that they follow the language levels established by the CEFR⁶ and the ACTFL Guidelines, on the other hand, level descriptors seem to be ignored. In fact, in the descriptors that define listening and speaking skills at A1 and A2 levels, communication in everyday contexts is supposed to be privileged. As highlighted above, the language used in informal everyday communication is colloquial Arabic and not MSA. Despite this, it is clear to anyone who has experience with Arabic speaking activities that the emphasis of current language tests is on assessing the communicative structures and lexicon of MSA. This is apparent in the transcripts of the following listening extracts produced by the

⁶ In the strategies adopted by the al-Nağāḥ National University, it is explicitly stated that “the exam depends on common European reference framework for languages as a basic to test applicants”, and that “the exam divides language levels into six levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2”, <https://learnarabic.najah.edu/ar/registration/arabic-international-proficiency-exam/> [22/06/2021].

National Center of Assessment⁷ (a) and in the listening exercises of the al-Nağāḥ National University⁸ A2 test (b):

(a)

- مرحباً، أنا مستعجل. أرجو أن تحاسبني بسرعة فلدي دواء أريد أن أخذه في موعده
- لا بأس عليك يا أخي. هل تريد أن تدفع نقداً أم تريد بالبطاقة؟
- بالبطاقة لو سمحت.
- أوووو! للأسف... لقد تعطلت الشبكة قبل قليل.
- أممم! بكن معي مبلغ غير كافٍ وأريد أن أحتفظ به لسيارة الأجرة.

The oral component of the text only emerges in the interjections, while the phraseological structures and the lexis are those of communicative Standard usage. Moreover, the final endings are vocalized. Correspondingly, the exercises for oralized texts are vocalized as in the following extracts:

(b)

كَيْفَ كَانَتْ الرَّحْلَةُ إِلَى الْيُونَانَ؟

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| أ | مُتْعِبَةٌ جِدًّا |
| ب | قَصِيرَةٌ جِدًّا |
| ت | لَا تُنْسَى |

مَاذَا فَعَلُوا فِي الْعَاصِمَةِ؟

- | | |
|---|----------------------------------------------------|
| أ | زَارُوا الْأَكْرُبُولَ وَالْمُطَخَفَ وَالْجَبَلِ |
| ب | زَارُوا الْأَكْرُبُولَ وَالْبَحْرَ وَالْجَبَلِ |
| ت | زَارُوا الْأَكْرُبُولَ وَالْمُتَخَفَ وَالْمَسْرَحَ |

- سَيَصْنَعُ أَشْيَاءَهُ الْخَاصَّةَ فِي وَرَقِيَّةَ.
- سَيَسْتَبْرِي جَدِيحًا.
- سَيَأْخُذُ مِنْ عَمَلِهِ.
- سَيَبْحَثُ عَنْ وَسَائِلٍ الَّتِي سَيَذْهَبُ بِهَا إِلَى عَمَلِهِ.
- سَيُنْفِلُ الْمَاءَ وَالْكَهْرَبَاءَ وَالْهَاتِفِ إِلَى اسْمِهِ

The fact that case endings are marked reflects educational practices in the Arab world. Ibrahim (1983, 511) states that the system of grammat-

⁷ <https://www.etc.gov.sa/ar/About/Centers/Pages/qiyas.aspx> [22/06/2021].

⁸ <https://learnarabic.najah.edu/en/registration/arabic-international-proficiency-exam/> [22/06/2021].

ical inflection is of the greatest importance in the teaching and learning of Arabic. Moreover, Maamouri (1998) underlines that activities involving identifying case endings have become central to classroom activities. The importance given to these practices shows how the idea of linguistic correctness is firmly based on knowledge of the morphology of the language. In the Arabic tradition, case endings are regarded as a sign of the beauty of the language and are seen as indispensable for coherence. There is, however, no strict correlation between linguistic proficiency and knowledge of case endings. In fact, Khaldieh's study (2001) found no correlation between reading comprehension and the ability to add case endings correctly, indicating that one can still be a proficient reader while having scant knowledge of the case system. Wahba (2006) underlines the shift towards oral proficiency in teaching Arabic L2 outside the Arab world, and the lack of such a change in teaching Arabic L1. Indeed, while language tests on the CEFR model emphasize oral skills and propose everyday communicative contexts, the tests of the Arab institutions seem more focused on assessing reading and writing. This is at the expense of oral skills, which are limited to stereotyped conversations.

These elements, which seem connected to a wider educational tradition, reflect the strong ideological attitude towards Arabic and the difficulties in rethinking pedagogical methods. This general approach is apparent in how the tests, and the courses held by the aforementioned institutions and universities, are presented. Here attention is more focused on the topics dealt with (restaurants, hotels, etc.) without any consideration of linguistic varieties. This gives the idea of a monolithic language, as if the Arabic used for conversation is the same as that used for other skills like reading and writing. This approach is confirmed in all the documents that have been analyzed in the present study, including the following, which was published on the Al-Nağāḥ website:

First and foremost, we teach students how to articulate, read, and write Arabic sounds (phonemes) along with the lexicon, grammar, and structure necessary to develop the four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Furthermore, we emphasize cultural competence in our students by introducing them to the Palestinian community, its customs, traditions, geography, and cultural and intellectual formation. These opportunities also provide students with useful information on Arab heritage and its literary, historical, and ethical elements. Our Institute aims to produce students who are able to use their language skills in a variety of personal and professional settings, and as such we equip students with

a strong background in contemporary political, economic, and ecological terminology. In addition, we emphasize the vocabulary necessary to understand Arabic language sciences: *ilm al-nahw* ('the science of syntax'), *ilm al-sarf* ('the science of morphology'), literature, rhetoric, and criticism.

Excluding dialects and choosing to teach only MSA reflects the belief, which is widespread both in and beyond the Arab world, that MSA is the only legitimate language, and that dialects are degenerate and corrupt versions of it. MSA is viewed as the variety that is indispensable for learners who want an insight into the cultural and religious situation in Arab countries, and the only variety that is useful for communication in any Arab country where the use of local dialect might well pose problems (Ryding 1995). As argued by many scholars (Ryding 1995; Alesh 1997; Wahba 2006), this approach has led to students finding there is a gap between their linguistic competence and their ability to integrate into Arab society linguistically and culturally. Such integration, based on the belief that oral ability is the principal means of 'getting into' the Arab world, is not possible if courses and tests identify MS as a means of accessing Arab history and culture. These different approaches are not strictly linguistic, but ideological, and are influenced by the image that Arab institutions want to project. Any tests that do not take the actual dynamics of oral communication into account inevitably lead to teaching programs that ignore the role of dialect in spoken communication.

6. CONCLUSION

In recent years there has been a shift in understanding the functions and the role of language tests in western countries. From instruments used to measure language knowledge, they are now seen as instruments linked to ideological and educational contexts. In line with this, we have reexamined the rationale behind language tests in the Arab world. The first observation to make regards the generally tardy response of Arab academic institutions to the issues involved in assessing linguistic competence. The few tests available seem more concerned with the promotion of language courses provided by individual language centers than with any homogeneous planning in terms of objectives. To have a beneficial effect on an educational level, tests need to provide the impetus for suitable pedagogical strategies, while new materials and methods are needed for the tests themselves. In addition, they must motivate policy

makers. The tests examined in this paper are examples produced by individual institutions working without any common guidelines regarding methods and content. Furthermore, while these tests seem lacking at the planning level, it also clearly emerges that the choice of the language variety tested is based on ideological rather than linguistic factors. Arabic tests contribute to affirming the status of the dominant language through choices that privilege the Standard variety. At the expense of spoken varieties, this is seen as the only legitimate linguistic gateway to Arab civilization. The exclusion of linguistic diversity confirms the common ideological view of Standard Arabic: it is still considered the only variety worthy of being taught, despite any pressure exerted by the CEFR model or the current debate regarding the linguistic competence required of learners. The relationship between language and political influence remains a lively topic in the Arab world, also due to the widespread emphasis on the importance of Standard Arabic in order to understand Arab history and culture. This approach, which sees the Standard as underpinning knowledge of Arab identity, also responds to the need to provide an image of political unity. Non-Standard varieties – mirroring wider political divisions – are regarded as impediments to such a vision.

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