

## *Lexical Similarities and Differences between Iraqi & UAE Arabic Dialects*

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### **Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to prove through comparison that Iraqi Arabic (of Basrah in particular) and UAE Arabic have a lot in common at the lexical level, besides the differences, despite being spoken in two Arab countries that are separated by physical barriers and long distance, i.e. they are located at the outer edges of the geographical area (East and North East of Arab Peninsula). The fact that these dialects are Eastern Arabic dialects explains why they have a lot in common and why they behave in the same way concerning, for example, their relation to Standard Arabic and borrowing from the same foreign languages.

### **Introduction**

Language is a living entity that is always in constant change, i.e. it develops, changes, modernises and vanishes. In each language there are items that die out and others develop by using different strategies or devices of word formation, such as derivation, to express the modern needs of nations (Handhal 1998: 20). It is believed that a large number of terms used in the various dialects of Arabic are originally used in Standard (Classical) Arabic. In 1956, Taimur (as cited in Bakir 1984) tried to show his support for linking Classical Arabic with the different dialects used in the Arab World by giving examples (pp. 178-235) to prove that there are terms that are used in the daily spoken varieties of Arabic which have roots in the varieties spoken by old Arabs. However, these terms have changed as far as their pronunciation is concerned.

Taimur's attempt has encouraged other researchers to establish relationships between Standard Arabic and other dialects. Nevertheless, this view is rejected by a number of educated Arabs who think that Standard Arabic is totally different from the dialects.

Anwar Chejne (1969:34) stated that speakers of the various dialects of Arabic face little difficulties in understanding each other as there are a lot of features that these dialects share. This has been made so due to the fact that Standard Arabic is being used in teaching, the mass media, books, etc. With the introduction and use of modern technologies such as the satellite and the internet in the 1990s mutual understanding among Arabs has increased to a great extent. These inventions have decreased the effects of geographical barriers which usually have made it difficult for Arabs, and all other nations, to communicate with each other.

Peter Trudgill (1994:2) refers to dialect as a combination of word pronunciations and grammatical forms that are shared by people of the same area and of the same social background. Each area has different combinations that are different from the other areas and backgrounds.

Dialectologists are more interested in studying the differences rather than the similarities between dialects (Ibid.). The present paper, however, attempts to study the similarities and differences between dialects as used in the UAE and Iraq.

When one travels from one area to another, one would be able to notice regional variations within the same language that include the differences in pronunciation, in the choices and forms of words, and in syntax (Wardhaugh 1993:40).

Peter Trudgill (2000:155) uses **dialect leveling** to refer to: the leveling out of differences between one dialect and another. This process of dialect leveling is a very interesting one for sociolinguists because it seems to play a very important role in ongoing linguistic developments in many countries.

This paper is concerned with a comparison of lexical items in the UAE and Iraqi (Basrah) Arabic. These two varieties are part of what is referred to by Bakalla (1984: 95) as Eastern Arabic Dialects which are spoken in the areas lying at the East and North East of the Arab

Peninsula. These dialects have undergone different changes which have led to establishing phonological, morphological and lexical idiosyncrasies. Yet, they have a lot in common, particularly the coastal dialects, when it comes to borrowing from foreign languages such as Persian, Urdu, Portuguese, and recently English (Ibid: 102).

Over 250 million people living in the Arab World speak Arabic which is the official language of all Arab countries. In addition, over a billion non-Arab Muslims all over the world use Arabic daily in their prayers.

Like Haiti, Greece, and Switzerland, the Arab countries are known for diglossia, the use of local varieties side by side with the standard form of Arabic (Fellman 1973: 24-25). **Diglossia** is a term which was first introduced by Charles Ferguson around 1959. This is a linguistic aspect for which Arabic has been known for the last 14 centuries, i.e. the use of literary and colloquial varieties by the majority of Arabic speakers in general and by the educated in particular (Chejne 1969: 163). The speakers of local varieties have come into contact with speakers of other languages, bringing, therefore, some linguistic and phonological changes to their regional dialects. This reflects the unique characteristics peculiar to the users of each of the regional dialects of the different Arab countries and also differences from one region to another within the same country. Standard Arabic is used in education, most activities of the mass media and official activities of the governments, whereas local dialects are used in all spoken activities, and are rarely written. In each Arab country, e.g. in Iraq, Egypt, Syria, etc., one can find many local dialects, depending on the geographical and social factors. Traveling in a particular direction from one area to another or from one village to another within the same country, one will spot phonological and linguistic differences which characterize one area from another. These differences can be greater the further we get from the starting point, i.e. the closer the dialects the more mutual intelligibility and “the greater the geographical separation the greater the difficulty of comprehension”. This is what is known in dialectology as geographical dialects continuum (Chambers & Trudgill 1993:6).

However, this paper will attempt to prove that the above assumption is not applicable to some dialects of Arabic, like Iraqi Arabic and

Emirati Arabic (variety of Arabic used in the UAE) despite the great distance and geographical barriers that separate these two varieties of the Arabic language. The examples cited in the present paper attempt to prove that these two dialects share a lot of lexical items, although they are located “on the outer edges of the geographical area (and they) may not be mutually intelligible, but (they are) linked by mutual intelligibility” (Ibid). Iraqi and Emirati dialects are subparts of the Arabic language which, like any other language, engulfs a number of dialects that are mutually intelligible. However, each dialect differs from any other dialect “grammatically (and perhaps lexically) as well as phonologically” (Ibid: 5). The present paper will be limited to discovering the points of similarities and differences between the lexical items of Iraqi and Emirati dialects.

In the Arab World, there are hundreds of dialects, each of which is used in a geographically defined community by those people who live in the same area where sometimes there are many sub-dialects that co-exist. However, this does not mean that the Arabs do not understand each other despite the great geographical barriers, such as mountains, seas, and deserts because the dialects, Modern Standard Arabic and Classical Arabic share a lot of linguistic features (Bakalla 1984: 79-81).

### **The Arabic Language of the UAE**

The colloquial in the UAE can be divided into three varieties, i.e. the variety of the Bedouins, the variety of city dwellers, and the variety of Oman. The lexical items used by the Emiratis are derived from these three varieties. The Bedouin variety reflects the dialects of those tribes living in the desert. It is similar in its phonological patterns and even their meaning to the items used by the Bedouins in Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The city dwellers variety is spoken by those living in major urban centers and harbors on the Arab Gulf. This variety is regarded as an extension to the varieties spoken in Basrah (Iraq) and Kuwait and to all harbors on the Gulf. The people of these areas share a lot of items concerned with diving, fishing and all that is related to sea life. In their variety, one can find a large number of items that are of Hindi, Urdu, Farsi, English, etc. origins. This has been the result of the

interaction between the people from different countries with the Arabs of this area. That is why the terms of foreign origins exist in their dialects. The third variety is referred as *Al-Lakhlakhāniyyah* or the variety as spoken in Oman. It is rather different from that local variety common in the UAE, due to its different pronunciation.

However, one cannot deny that there are some phonological differences among these three varieties. Also, one can spot a lot of lexical items that are peculiar to each of them. To sum up, The Arabic language in the UAE is represented by the colloquial (with its three varieties) which has been used side by side with Standard Arabic for a very long time (for more details and examples see Handhal 1998).

### **The Arabic Language of Iraq**

The linguistic scene in Iraq, as far as the Arabic language is concerned, is somewhat different from the one in the UAE. Like in the UAE, there are the varieties of the Bedouins and the city dwellers. In addition, there is the variety spoken by people in the countryside or rural areas' dwellers that live on farming. With modernisation penetrating into every corner of life, contact among people of different social backgrounds has made it easier to exchange lexical items. This contact has had a great impact on the phonological habits of the countryside dwellers in particular.

The huge varieties spoken in the Arab world pour into the same stream, i.e. the Arabic language. The latter is the source of mutual intelligibility among the Arabs from different Arab countries. Yet, this does not mean that all Arabs use Standard Arabic; rather, they understand each other because of the elements shared by the different varieties. In this paper, research will be limited to finding similarities and differences between UAE and Iraq varieties, regarding the lexical items (units of vocabulary) present in each and how they behave. The study can be classified under *lexicostatistics* which Hartman & Stork (1976: 129) define in their dictionary as

The statistical study of the basic vocabulary of two or more languages(or dialects)to determine their mutual intelligibility, to find relationships between them, to classify them into types and groups.

The researcher has been living in the UAE since Sept. 2000 and is a native speaker of an Iraqi variety spoken in Basrah. This fact has made it possible to compare the two varieties of the Arabic language.

### **Dictionary of the Colloquial Terms in the United Arab Emirates:**

In this section the researcher relied on *Mu'jam Al-Alfādh Al-'Ammiyyah Fi Dawlat Al-Imarāt Al-'Arabiyyah* (Dictionary of the Colloquial Terms in the UAE). This dictionary was compiled by Dr Falih Handhal, an Iraqi who has been residing in the UAE for over three decades. The year 1970 witnessed the publication of the first edition. The edition used in this paper is the second, published in 1998. It is alphabetically arranged. It contains over 4000 entries. The analysis carried out by the researcher has revealed that over 700 entries are shared with the Iraqi colloquial. The entries shared constitute 18.39% of the total number contained in the dictionary. This large number of the shared items found in the varieties of both countries is a good proof that the geographical location of a variety of a language is no longer the only factor that determines the linguistic features of any particular variety. Commercial relations between the two countries are a major factor in molding the two varieties. The terms shared can be classified into the following categories:

#### **1. Terms which fully correspond in meaning.**

Among the words that are shared by both varieties, over 600 items correspond in all shades of meaning. The following are some examples:

Item	Meaning
/agūl/	I say
/khādim/	servant
/wakit/	time
/sālfah/	tale
/asa/	stick

## **2. Terms which are partially similar in meaning.**

The analysis has shown that over 100 items in the dictionary may share one meaning and differ in another when compared with the Iraqi equivalents.

UAE Item	Iraqi Equivalent	Meaning
/istiwah/ e.g. /istiwa –l-akil/	/istiwah/ e.g. /istiwa –l-akil/	is used to refer to food when it is ready after being cooked
/istiwah/ e.g. /istiwah hākim/	/sār/ e.g. /sār hākim/	to become, “He became a governor”
/istiwah/ (past) or /yistiwī/ (present) e.g. /dīr bālak gabul māyistiwī shay/	/sār/ /ysīr/ e.g. /dīr bālak gabul māysīr shī/	happen(ed); takes (took) place, “be careful before anything happens”

## **3. Terms used in both varieties but pronounced differently.**

A lexical item found in UAE variety may have its equivalent in one or more of the local dialects of Iraqi Arabic. This can be shown in the following examples where we have the same items used by both UAE and Iraqi varieties but with different pronunciations.

UAE Item	Iraqi Item	Meaning
/bannāy/	/bannah/	builder
/bgarah/	/baqarah/	cow
/bundug/	/bundiḡiyyah/	rifle
/jāthūm/ or /yāthūm/	/jaithūm/	nightmare
/thimān/	/thmānyah/	eight

## **Terms of foreign origins.**

The present study has revealed that about 90 entries in the dictionary are of foreign origins. They are shared by both varieties (Iraqi and UAE). Some of them are pronounced in the same way and others pronounced differently. The majority of the words are borrowed from

Farsi, English and Turkish. The few remaining items are borrowed from Urdu, Hindi, Italian, Russian, French, Latin, and Chinese. Some of the borrowed items can be traced back to more than one language. A large number of these items have started to disappear from both varieties. Some are replaced by other items taken from the Arabic language itself (e.g. the Persian or Farsi word /kār/ “work” is replaced by either /shughul/ or /‘amal/ to refer to the same thing). The following table gives some examples and shows the origin(s) of these words.

Item	Origin											Meaning
	E	F	T	U	H	I	R	Fr	L	Ch		
/lait/	√											light
/kār/		√										work
/dawshag/			√									mattress
/bāldī/				√								bucket
/bankah/					√							fan
/turumba/						√						tap
/samāwar/							√					samovar
/qanafah/ or /ghanafah/								√				sofa
/karantīnah/										√		quarantine
/charikh/		√	√									wheel
/parawānah/		√	√	√								propeller
/bībī mattū/				√	√							parrot
/hafiz/	√			√								office
/nūmī/	√				√							lemon/lime
/bannad/		√		√								closed
/chāy/											√	tea

E=English; F=Farsi; T=Turkish; U=Urdu; H=Hindi; I=Italian; R=Russian; Fr=French; L=Latin; Ch=Chinese

#### **4. Terms that relate to Standard Arabic.**

One should not forget that both varieties draw heavily on Standard Arabic. This explains the existence of a large number of words that are originally found in the standard variety of Arabic, but sometimes



the pronunciation of the words are modulated to suit the phonological patterns of the local variety. The analysis has shown that there are about 170 of the shared items that have their origin in the standard variety of the Arabic language. The following are some examples.

Colloquial Item	Standard Equivalent	Meaning
/mutar/	/matar/	rain
/gūm/	/qum/	get up
/cham/	/kam/	how many, how much
/hamar/	/ahmar/	red
/hijam/	/hajama/	attacked

##### **5. Terms which are replaced by new ones as a result of modernisation or literacy.**

Similar to any other language or dialect, Iraqi and UAE dialects are undergoing language change, particularly in the field of terms used in everyday life. This is shown in the replacement of some terms by new ones. This is happening due to a number of factors such as the dissemination of education and the impact of the mass media on the life of people and the desire of people to modernise their language by moving closer to the standard variety of the Arabic language. The following are some examples that have started to disappear or are less used by people in Iraq and the UAE. The number of words that are shared by both varieties and found in the dictionary is 44. Some of these words are of foreign origins.

Item	Replaced with	Equivalent in Standard Arabic	Meaning
/draiwil/	/sāyiq/	/sā'iq/	driver
/fus glās/	/daraja ūlā/	/daraja ūlā/	first class
/tofah/	/hāyit/	/hā'it/	wall
/uffād/	/galub/ or /galb/	/qalb/	heart
/bakhat/	/hadh/	/hadh/	fortune or luck

### **Conclusion**

The study has shown that, like other Arabic dialects, Iraqi and UAE varieties share a large number of lexical items. These lexical items behave in the same way as to their relation to Standard Arabic, borrowing from other languages, change of pronouncing words that have their roots in Standard Arabic, and also the dying out of a number of lexical items due to internal and external factors. The study has also proved that dialects of the Arab countries that are lying at the Eastern and North Eastern coast of the Arab Gulf have a lot in common as far as the varieties of the Arabic language used, as is the case with those of Basrah (Iraq) and the UAE despite the great distance and physical barriers that separate these two varieties.

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