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## HIGH VARIETY VS LOW VARIETY CULTURE IN THE ARABIC LANGUAGE : THE TENSIONS BETWEEN *FUSHĀ* AND *‘ĀMIYYA* IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARAB WORLD

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### *Abstract*

*Arabic language, in its sociological context is divided into two varieties: fushā and ‘āmiyya. Arabic fushā is the official language and perceived as the language of Islam. In contrast to the fushā, ‘āmiyya is the language used by the Arab people in their daily conversations. However, this ‘āmiyya is considered as inferior. The method used in this study was qualitative that stressed the interaction between language and its sociological context. The method assumed that social and political events affected language use in a particular society. The paper tries to re-popularize the two terms used by Ferguson that are "high variety" (H) and "low variety" (L) culture in analyzing the two languages varieties. Besides, the paper explores the tension of the two languages through contemporary social and political events taking place in the Arab World. The Arabic fushā is perceived as a representation of "H" culture because it is a language used in religious literature and official writings, while the ‘āmiyya referred to as a representation of "L" variety culture because it is used only as a medium of regular communication.*

**Keywords:** *high variety culture, low variety culture, fushā, ‘āmiyya, contemporary Arab*

### **Abstrak**

Bahasa Arab dalam konteks sosiologisnya terbagi menjadi dua: *fushā* dan *‘āmiyya*. Bahasa Arab *fushā* merupakan bahasa resmi dan dipersepsikan sebagai bahasa Islam. Berbeda dengan *fushā*, *‘āmiyya* merupakan bahasa yang digunakan sehari-hari oleh masyarakat Arab pada umumnya. Meskipun demikian, bahasa *‘āmiyya* dipandang sebagai bahasa inferior. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif yang menekankan pada interaksi bahasa dan konteks sosiologis. Paper ini mencoba mempopularkan kembali dua istilah yang digunakan oleh Ferguson, yaitu istilah "varietas budaya luhur" (L) dan "varietas budaya rendah" (R). Selain itu, paper ini lebih lanjut berupaya untuk mengeksplorasi tensi di antara dua varietas bahasa tersebut melalui konteks sosial politik kontemporer yang terjadi di Dunia Arab. Bahasa Arab *fushā* dipandang sebagai representasi dari budaya "L" karena ia merupakan bahasa yang digunakan dalam literature Agama dan juga tulisan-tulisan resmi lainnya, sementara bahasa *‘āmiyya* dipandang sebagai "R" karena ia hanya digunakan sebagai medium komunikasi biasa.

**Kata Kunci:** *budaya luhur, budaya rendah, fushā, ‘āmiyya, Arab kontemporer*

## Introduction

In general, Muslim countries are divided into two classifications based on the language used in daily communications. First, those who use the official language of the country that is genealogically has nothing to do with the Arabic language such as Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Senegal, and Nigeria. Second, the Arab countries that speak Arabic dialects that differ from the Arabic *fushā*. However, these two types of Muslim countries are aware that they should master formal Arabic to be able to understand the Qur'an and to carry out daily worships. Therefore, Islam without classical Arabic or *fushā* will never exist (Haeri, 2003).

The significant role of Arabic as the central language for Muslims has attracted the interest of Western scholars. T. Arnold (1864-1930 AD), the author of the Preaching of Islam for example, emphatically stated in his lecture in front of hundreds of Western scholars that the study of the Islamic World or Islamic studies would not be perfect without a good mastery of the Arabic language (Arnold, 1917). Charles Ferguson, another prominent Western scholar, and an American linguist, asserted that the study of the Arabs and the Middle East should be equipped with the necessary competence of the languages used in the Middle East, such as Turkish, Persian, and Arabic (Ferguson, 1964).

However, although Arabic got close attention from Western scholars, the previous studies tended to focus more on cultural issues as well as on Islamic politics such as nationalism and modernism. For example, Clifford Geertz and Ernest Gellner (Haeri, 2000). The previous reviews were lack of any attempts to connect between language and power relations both in the text and in real communication. The study of Arabic came later, mainly during the Renaissance era and afterward. The study of Arabic, with its sociological approaches, only emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The first work was conducted by Charles Ferguson, who published his article on Diglossia in 1959 (Ferguson, 1959). It is the first and the most influential work on Arabic sociolinguistic that classified Arabic language into Arabic formal (*fushā*) and colloquial Arabic (*'āmiyya*) (James Mabry, 2007). In the Diglossia, Ferguson promoted the terms of “high variety” (H) and “low variety” (L) cultures on classifying the use of Arabic language in its formal and informal use (Raddaoui, 2015). In addition, the work of Ferguson, as stated by Owens, marked a shift away from the philological Arabicist tradition-oriented text into the spoken language (Owens, 2001).

Meanwhile, the first Arab author who wrote the study of Arabic in its sociolinguistic perspective was Al-Sa'id Badawi. He was the first Arab writer who classified the modern Arabic language in the Egyptian context (Daher & Daher, 1987). In his study, Badawi, as explained by Kosoff, classified Arabic in the Egyptian context into five linguistic levels: *fushā*, contemporary Arabic *fushā* or Modern Standard Arabic, cultured *'āmiyya*, literate *'āmiyya*, and illiterate *'āmiyya*. These five levels share common linguistic roots and penetrate multiple speech communities (Kosoff, 2014). The same study was conducted by Carl Brockelmann in "*History of the Arabic Written Tradition*." He analyzed the use of non-formal Arabic based on geographical maps with its particular attention to the Arabic phonology and syntax (Rosenhouse, 2011).

Different from previous studies, the paper pays more attention to the tensions between *fushā* and *'āmiyya* in the contemporary Arab context with special events refers to the Arab spring as a starting point. In particular, its special emphasis lies in the use of Arabic in real communication, both it is in social media or daily conversation. The first discussion will elaborate on the “H” status of the *fushā* in the Arab world, including its linguistic features. The next debate will explore the “L” status of the *'āmiyya* and its real use in the Arab world, and it also includes the elaboration on its linguistic features. The last discussion mainly focuses on the tension between *fushā* and *'āmiyya* after the Arab spring by marking some linguistic features that appeared during the revolution.

## Method

The method used in this study was qualitative that stressed the interaction between language and its sociological context, or which is called 'interactional sociolinguistics' (Gumperz, 1999). The method assumed that social and political events affected language use in a particular society (Young, 1999). The primary data of this research are books and journals on the relation between language and society in the Arab context. Meanwhile, current data on linguistic features during the Arab spring collected from any online resources.

## Result and Discussion

### *Fushā* as High Variety Culture

As mentioned early, Arabic *fushā* has a unique place in Islamic studies. Besides, Arabic also occupies its essential place in the Western scholarly tradition. European scholars began to learn Arabic and start to write some books of Arabic grammar based on their grammatical tradition. Besides, Arabic also started to gain in prestigious universities such as at Leiden University in Holland (Yoyo & Mukhlis, 2019). These serious attempts began during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, indicated by the emergence of Arabic grammar in Latin, Germany, and French (Yoyo & Mukhlis, 2019).

On the other hand, the process of modernization of the Arabic language occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This process is triggered by the Arabs' internal consciousness to modernize not only the areas of religious, social, and political thought but Arabic also received its serious attention. They saw that classical Arabic less scientific which enable it compete in the modern world. Therefore, the solutions regarding the process of modernization of Arabic are as follows: (a) the replacement of classical Arabic with a regional Arabic colloquial, (b) the replacement of traditional Arabic writing with a Latin type, and (c) the opening of the door for free and extensive borrowing from western languages (Abu-Absi, 1986).

The first Arab intellectual that attempted to modernize the Arabic language was Rifa'ah Badawi al-Tahtawi (1801-1873 AD), an excellent translator, editor, educator, and reformer of the early modern Arab era. The modernization of the Arabic that at-Tahtawi did when he was in France was to translate European scientific terms into Arabic. It was the first attempt of an Arab scholar on the translation works (Yoyo, 2017a). The concrete attempt on translating scientific terms by al-Tahtawi, for example, is the term "opera," which he turned into *ubira* (Sawaie, 2000). According to at-Tahtawi, translating scientific words from European into Arabic is a challenging job and requires a high art and skill of translation. Therefore, the translation process done by al-Tahtawi was a direct translation in which the translated words do not lose their original meaning (Sawaie, 2000).

Arabic openness to different terms that come from European tradition is inevitable. In the political sphere, for example, almost of the political terms adopted from the growing political conditions of the West. Therefore, Bernard Lewis firmly states that at the level of political practices, Islam and Arabic, in particular, do not have a semantically equivalent and fitting term in the Western sense (Lewis, 1991). It means that the Arabic language should adapt Western terms on the political issues in its both original word and meaning.

Furthermore, concrete efforts to standardize Arabic translation of foreign terms continued until the birth of language centers in various Arab countries such as Arab Academy in Beirut in 1919, and Royal of Academy of Cairo in 1932. The purpose of the language centers intended as an effort to unify and standardize terminologies on Western sciences (Elshakry, 2008).

On the one hand, the contiguity of the Arab World with Europe occurred at Napoleon's arrival in Egypt in 1798 (Yoyo, 2017a). The European presence in the Arab world has awakened the political elite on the vital role of Arabic as part of nation-building. In some cases, European invaders in Algeria, for example, tried to replace Arabic with the French language (Benrabah, 2013). Therefore, at the sociolinguistic level, Arabic *fushā* is seen by the Arab nationalist leaders such as Jurji Zaidan and Ibrahim al-Yajizi as part of the national identity-forming element.

Besides, other Arab thinkers, al-Afghani, and 'Abduh in particular, made Arabic as part of an essential component of Islamic identity (Daher & Daher, 1987).

The spread and the use of Arabic *fushā* in the Arab World, such as Egypt has a long history. Before Islam entered Egypt, the spoken language among the people was Coptic and Greek. However, along with the process of Islamization and Arabization, the use of formal Arabic could not be avoided (Yoyo, 2017b). Since the era of *Nahdah* and the subsequent of the pan-Arabian period under Nasser's leadership, classical Arabic became the official language as well as a symbol of Arabian identity for both Muslim and non-Muslim. Any attempts to replace the classical Arabic with '*amiyya* language has never worked because '*amiyya* considered as a weak language. In addition, during the British colonization in Egypt, they did not remove Arabic *fushā* learning in schools. This language policy was not applied in Morocco. The French invaders withdrew the education of *fushā* in various schools and substituted it with French knowledge (Haeri, 2003).

In particular, *fushā* has essential features as follows: 1) it has a complicated grammatical system written by traditional Arab grammarians in the eleven century, 2) it is a highly inflected variety in which the mood, case, number, gender, and all other grammatical function marked by a system which is called as *i'rāb*, 3) morphologically, *fushā* distinguishes between single, dual, and plural in number, 4) the lexicon of *fushā* is very rich, and 5) the *fushā* is claimed in the literature not to be "natural" as it is not learned natively, rather it is learned formally in school (Rabie, 1992).

The strength of Arab identity awareness also triggered by the Turkish policy that prefers to develop Turkism and replace the Caliphate into a nation-state. The response to what happened in Turkey, the elite of the Arab nationalist leaders, established the Arabic language as the identity of the Arab nation. Not only that, but they also make pan-Arabism as a force to build a new world based on a common language and culture. Besides, Europe also played a significant role in spreading the idea of nationalism through three main channels. First, Arab students studying in Europe then returning to the Arab world with the concept of nationalism. Second, through colonialism, that was the post-French occupation of Egypt era between 1798 and 1801 CE. The last, European missionary schools established in the Middle East and Lebanon in particular (Albirini, 2015). These three channels had stimulated the rise of Arab self-awareness and identity and transformed it into nationalism and pan-Arabism.

The power of the Arabic *fushā* beside its status as the language of religion lies in its importance in political field. Every Arab rulers will always emphasize the importance of *fushā* because of such an attitude seen as proof that he preserves the Arab heritage and traditions. Pan-Arabism, as previously described, is a concrete form of language politics in the Middle East. Therefore, when it is compared to other countries, there will be no Pan-English or Pan-German terms. It is because these languages are not considered as an element of the foundation of religious identity. Therefore, the maintenance of Arabic *fushā* as Arab national identity and religion is supported by the central role of the government. When the symptoms of the decreasing ability of the younger generation in the language acquisition of Arabic *fushā* start to look, then the provisioning effort toward language acquisition is not only merely through educational institutions. They are also mobilizing various trainings and conferences related to the theme (Bassiouny, 2009).

An international organization such as ISESCO (Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) is one of the institutions that pay full attention to the preservation of the Arabic *fushā*. They organize various training for Arabic teachers as well as general participants in Arabic teaching and learning. In conclusion, the "H" status of Arabic *fushā* because it is used in formal situations such as political speeches, religious activities, academic lectures, and other activities of high cultural domains (Rabie, 1992).

***‘Āmiyya as Low Variety Culture***

Arabic, as the official language spoken by almost 22 Arab countries, has a distinct variety between Arabic *fushā* and *‘āmiyya*. Arab grammarians have described this linguistic situation as “linguistic duality” (Rabie, 1992). This difference mainly lies in the syntactic and morphological levels. Arabic *fushā* has nominative, genitive, and accusative cases. Meanwhile, *‘āmiyya*, in particular, is a symbol or national-local identity (self-real) because it attaches to a specific Arab nation. It is an expression of self as well as national pride. Therefore, at the socio-linguistic level, the *‘āmiyya* language occupies a more significant role than the *fushā* itself. However, Arabic *fushā* has a considerable role in printed media both in the form of fiction and non-fiction and also the mass media (Rosenhouse, 2011). In a different perspective, Kaye argued that *‘āmiyya* is the original language because it is well defined in the real spoken by Arab societies (Kaye, 1970).

The debate about the role of Arabic *‘āmiyya* and *fushā* arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century AD. The question at that time was why *‘āmiyya* cannot be a literal language such as the development of the German and Romanian language in Europe, or Turkish language in Anatolia and surrounding areas. The answer to that question is that the language of *fushā* is sacred. Therefore, its modern form in the form of Modern Standard Arabic is supremacy (James Mabry, 2007). The fact that *‘āmiyya* is a marginal language and as a representation of low culture, it is proved by the fact that the language is not taught at the academic level. It is not only in the Arab countries but also in foreign universities that only teach standard Arabic (Yoyo & Mukhlis, 2019).

Nevertheless, *‘āmiyya* or vernacular language is part of socio-linguistic studies and has produced prominent figures in its field, such as Clive Holes, an expert on the Arab dialect of the Gulf regions (James Mabry, 2007). However, as mentioned earlier, *‘āmiyya* is a real spoken language; its significance lies in its sociological context. It is used not only in daily speaking but also in the local media such as radio, TV, and even social media.

*‘Āmiyya*, in particular, has some linguistic features as follows. First, the term *‘āmiyya* means that it is the language of the masses as a language of communication in the market, home, daily life, and in informal situations. Second, *‘āmiyya* is different from *fushā* in syntax and lexicon. The *i’rāb* or inflections are deleted, the dual is rarely used, and the plural form is simple. Third, phonologically, colloquial Arabic, or *‘āmiyya* has almost all the sounds of Arabic *fushā*. Fourth, because it has not been written, *‘āmiyya* reminds limited in its communicative value, and it has been described in the literature as being associated with ignorance and vulgarity (Rabie, 1992). In the negation, for example, colloquial Arabic is different from the negative form in *fushā*. Negation form in *‘āmiyya* uses *mā—sy* and *misy*. *Mā—sy* is the so-called discontinuous particle because its two parts are realized as a proclitic and enclitic on the opposite edge of the verb, such as in *at-thullāb mā—sāfr-uu—sy* (the students did not travel). Meanwhile, *misy* is the non-discontinuous particle because it realizes negation as a morphologically independent marker, such as in *at-thullāb misy fi al-fashl* (the students are not in the class) (Albirini, 2014).

From the external factor, colloquial Arabic or *‘āmiyya* had been used by the British colonial in Egypt on promoting the use of *‘āmiyya* not merely as a daily language but also for formal purposes (Stadlbauer, 2010). As a result of this, Arab thinkers and nationalists joined together to counter this challenge by insisting that the *fushā* is much more superior to the *‘āmiyya* and *fushā* was the backbone of national identity (Rabie, 1992).

***Fushā Versus ‘Āmiyya during the Arab Spring***

According to Raddaoui, the Arabic language ranging from 1959 until 2011, has undergone a very significant transformation period. First, the increase in literacy rates among Arab societies between the 1950s and 1960s. Second, the era of the 1980s as the era of 'technologizing of the word.' It is the process of digitalization and computerization of Arabic writings that appeared in the Arabic Website in the 1990s. Third, the transformation of the Arabic language during the Arab Spring period (Raddaoui, 2015). The third period described by Raddaoui may comprehensively

explain the urgency of the ‘*āmiyya* language that gained its momentum in the Arab Spring era. The slogans of the revolution generally expressed in ‘*āmiyya*. It is because the majority of the Arabs people use non-formal Arabic more frequently rather than formal Arabic. Thus, although the ‘*āmiyya* language considered as the “L” variety culture, it still has the tremendous power shown during the Arab Spring (Raddaoui, 2015).

In the Syrian context, for example, there are new words that appear during the Arab spring and showed that the words initially created by the people to protest the government. For example, the term *as-Shuhyu Assadi* and *Basharun* are the nicknames given to the regime and Bashar. The first nickname, *al-Shuhyu Assadi*, is a word created by the people or the protesters coming from two terms: the adjective of *shuhyu* means Zionist and the name of *Assad*. It means that the people believe that Bashar al-Assad is a Zionist who is serving the interest of Israel rather than his own people (Neggaz, 2013). Another word is *irhal* which means, "go out," which is formal Arabic. However, in its sociolinguistic context, the term has a new meaning that is to throw away the despotic ruling regime. This new meaning will only relevant when it is explained in its socio-political context (Garduno, 2012; Michel, 2013). Other Arabic expressions during the Arab Spring events mostly articulated in Arabic ‘*āmiyya* rather than in *fishā* are *musy ahzāb wa lā ikhwān* (not a party or *ikhwan*). It means that revolution took place in Egypt was not in the struggle for any party or for the Islamic Brotherhood; instead, it was intended for democracy and freedom. Therefore, the power of ‘*āmiyya* language again lies in its socio-political context.

Arabic *fishā*, in particular, has its place during the Arab Spring era in the formal media news only. Local Arab News such as *al-Masry al-Youm*, *al-Jazeera*, etc., frequently publishes any news on the Arab Spring with its language and opinion (Yoyo, Mukhlis, & Thonthowi, 2018). However, this formal media is only accessed by literate group of people. Besides, Arabic *fishā* only covers news on the political events in its official language. In contrast to this, Arabic ‘*āmiyya* because it is rooted in the people, the expressions are more creative and expressive (Bruns, Highfield, & Burgess, 2013). Yemen, on the other side, also experienced linguistic features during the Arab spring. One of them is Yemen revolutionary song which is expressed in the local dialect or ‘*āmiyya* (Raddaoui, 2015).

### Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be mentioned some of the following findings. First, the Arabic *fishā* as the “H” variety culture can still survive because it is the language of the Holy Qur'an. Besides, Arabic modernization continues with the emergence of various modern Arabic institutions. Second, Arabic ‘*āmiyya* as the “L” variety culture has succeeded in showing its power as a standard folk language. ‘*Āmiyya* in the Arab political and social contestation has contributed to play its significant role in overthrowing some of the despotic rulers. The demonstrators used Arabic slogans in ‘*āmiyya* during the revolution.

Consequently, the study of the Arabic ‘*āmiyya* should have more close attention because this language, in its sociological context, is a central part of the cultural elements of Arab societies. However, the study on the relation between language and culture, which is so-called as sociolinguistic, needs an in-depth analysis not only through literature review but also through field study. In the Indonesian context, it will require many efforts due to far distance between Indonesia and the Arab world.[]

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