

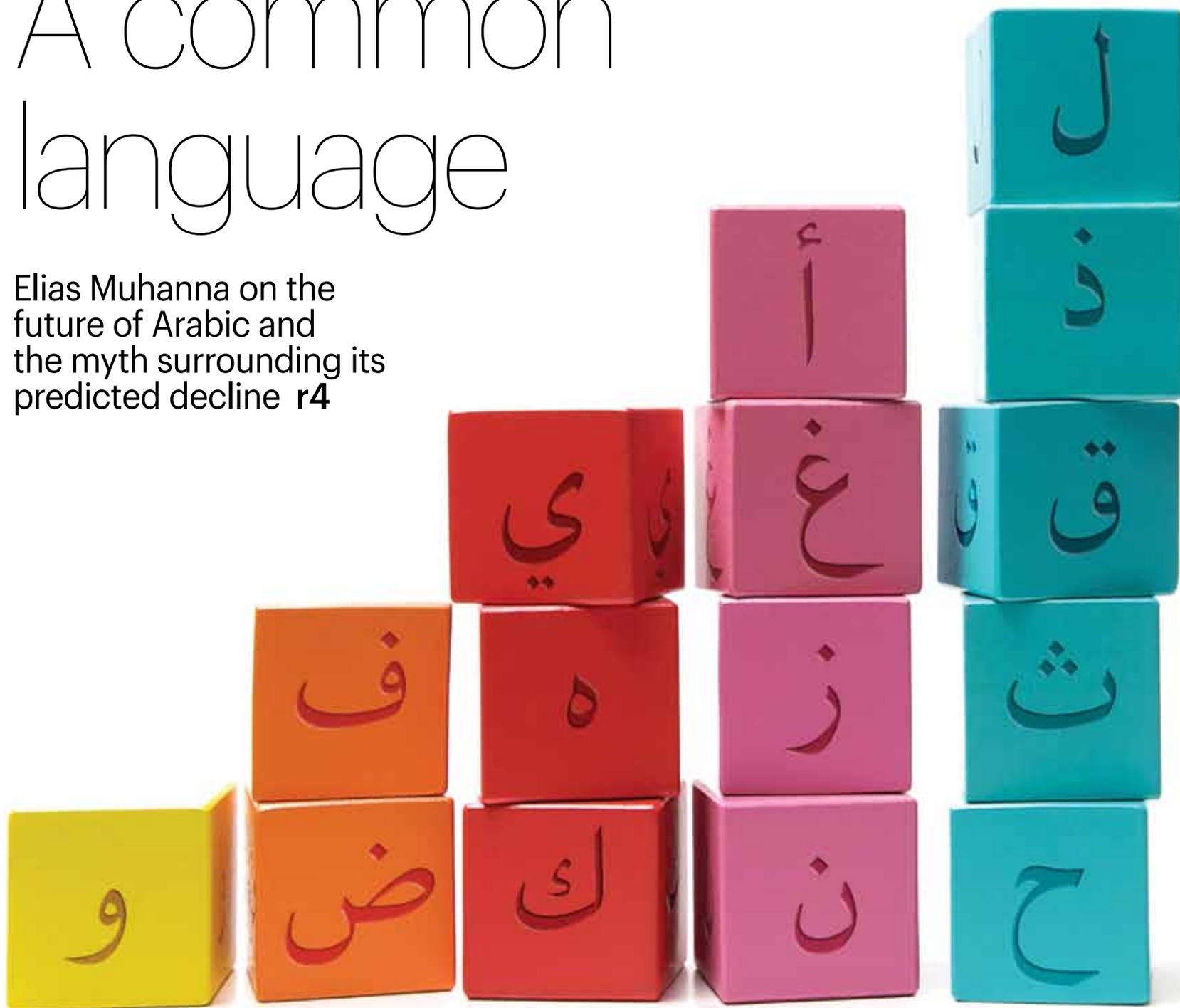
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The words on the street

Some scholars and advocacy groups may believe that the future of the Arabic language hangs in the balance. However, the reality is that, in vernacular form, on television and the internet, it has never looked healthier, writes Elias Muhanna

In the late 13th century, a North African judge and chancery official named Ibn Manzur, who served in the imperial administration of the Mamluk sultanate, was putting the finishing touches to the greatest Arabic dictionary ever compiled. Spanning 20 volumes, *Lisan al-Arab* (*The Arab Tongue*) represented the pinnacle of a centuries-old lexicographical tradition, and would not be surpassed in size and scope by another dictionary for 500 years.

Ibn Manzur was driven by a belief that Arabic's position as the ultimate language of social prestige, literary eloquence, and religious knowledge was under threat. "In our time, speaking Arabic is regarded as a vice," he wrote in his preface. "I have composed the present work in an age in which men take pride in [using] a language other than Arabic, and I have built it like Noah built the ark, enduring the sarcasm of his own people."

If Arabs living at Ibn Manzur's time didn't speak Arabic, then what language did they use? The Mamluk territories of Egypt and Syria lay at a continental crossroads attracting immigrants and invaders from around the world, but this did not change the basic reality that Arabic remained the lingua franca of a vast area stretching from the Iberian penin-

sula to the Indian subcontinent. A preeminent vehicle of culture, the language was studied in places as far afield as medieval Europe, where scholars sought access to the scientific and philosophical patrimony of Ancient Greece through the intermediary of Arabic commentaries.

Why, then, was Ibn Manzur so distressed? Surely Arabic was in no danger of being supplanted by Persian or Turkish or Mongolian, least of all in the great cities of Cairo and Damascus, with their famous institutions of higher learning. Rather, it seems that his deeper concern was that the language was being corrupted by improper speech, grammatical errors, and foreign words, and would, over time, bear little resemblance to what the Prophet Mohammed had spoken 700 years earlier. His dictionary was, in other words, an instrument of linguistic conservatism, a precursor to modern-day language authorities such as the Académie Française – which has railed against importations such as "e-mail" and "shopping" into French – and the *Stiftung Deutsche Sprache*, which recently proposed that Germans stop saying "fast food" and start saying "Ruckizuckifutti".

This legacy of chronic anxiety over the fate of Arabic remains

alive and well in the Middle East today, where calls to forestall the language's demise are accompanied by cautionary tales about parents who encourage their children to learn other "more useful" languages like English and French, only to find that they can scarcely recite the Arabic alphabet when they get to university. Meanwhile, teachers across the region warn about the rise of "Facebook Arabic," a transliterated form of the language based on the Latin script. Exemplifying their concerns are the oratorical fumbles of some of the region's younger political leaders like Saad Hariri, the prime minister of Lebanon, whose shambling inaugural address to the Lebanese parliament provoked much local tittering. Not everyone is amused: Fi'l Amr, a language-advocacy group, has launched a campaign to raise awareness about Arabic's critical condition by staging mock crime scenes around Beirut depicting "murdered" Arabic letters, surrounded by yellow police tape that reads: "Don't kill your language."

Just how dire is the crisis facing Arabic? Is it in danger of becoming merely a language of religious ritual, as some have wondered, or are these the laments of language purists who, like Ibn Manzur in



A mock crime scene in Beirut, constructed by the Arabic-language-advocacy group Fi'l Amr. The fake police tape surrounding an Arabic letter reads: "Don't kill your language." Joseph Eid / AFP

the 13th century, are inclined to see the glass as half-empty? Arabic is, after all, the language of 300 million people, a language of literature and culture, politics and scholarship, not to mention religion. How could it possibly be in danger of extinction?

What is obscured in this debate about the future of Arabic is the question of what it means to say that a language is living or dying, and, more fundamentally, what it

means to be a "speaker of Arabic". In a very basic sense, there is no such thing as Arabic; or, at least, there is no single language that all Arabs speak, read, write, and understand. Instead, Arabic is, like English and many other languages, a constellation of various national dialects, regional vernaculars, and social registers bearing different degrees of resemblance to each another. What sets it apart from a language like English is

its diglossic nature, whereby the language of literature and formal address (newscasts, political speeches, religious sermons, and so forth) is markedly different, on multiple structural levels, from the language of everyday speech.

When educators warn of the decline of Arabic, what they are referring to, by and large, is the written language – known as fusha or Modern Standard Arabic – which derives from the Classical Arabic

of the Qur'an and medieval literature. In almost every respect, Modern Standard Arabic is the same language as Classical Arabic, to the extent that an educated person today would have no trouble comprehending the preface to Ibn Manzur's dictionary.

As it turns out, most young people in the Middle East today are not very interested in reading 13th-century Arabic texts, nor, we are told, are they particularly keen

on 21st-century ones either. Indeed, the problem is said to be far worse in some parts of the region: Suzanne Talhouk, Fi'l Amr's director, believes that most Lebanese students "don't think in Arabic," while the government of Qatar has gone out of its way to sponsor festivals that celebrate Arabic heritage in order to counter the ascendancy of English in its school system.

While the prospect of school-age Arabs feeling more comfortable in

a language other than Arabic may sound like a serious problem, it is worth wondering whether the cases of Qatar and the UAE (where ethnic Arabs are a minority) and Lebanon (where English and French are widespread primarily among the middle and upper-class urban strata) are exceptions to the rule. Most people in the Middle East today, in fact, speak nothing but their native dialect of Arabic, making it hard to imagine that the

various regional vernaculars are in any danger of ceding their place to other languages. However, this is of little consolation to activists, educators, and government bureaucrats for whom a region-wide lack of competence in fusha is the clear and present danger.

Naturally, this debate goes beyond issues of linguistic aptitude to encompass broader questions

The communication revolution is making it possible for us to be connected not only via formal Arabic but through the dialects as well. *Mahmoud al Batal*

this week's essential reading

'Ward by Ward, New Orleans Marches Back' by James Estrin, *The New York Times Lens blog*

The war photographer Mario Tama speaks to the NYT's photojournalism site about a remarkable series of images based around the devastation and later rebuilding of the beloved Louisiana city

'Arabic has never been so alive. It has never been used by so many people in so many different situations'

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of political and cultural identity, a theme that has been explored at length by Arab intellectuals for decades. The anxiety that fuelled Ibn Manzur's ambition is palpable in the concerns underlying the modern debate, which ultimately hinges on the question of what it means to be an Arab if one can't speak Arabic – here construed as the unifying idiom of the literary language. On the face of it, this seems a reasonable enough point, but the trouble with such a formulation of Arab identity is that it leads to the problematic and somewhat technical conclusion that for the past millennium and a half virtually the entire population of the Middle East – with the exception of a tiny religious, political, and literary elite – was composed of non-Arabs, or people with little or no functional competence in formal Arabic.

As recently as 1970, three out of four Arabs over the age of 15 were illiterate, according to Unesco. Two decades earlier, illiteracy among women was close to 90 per cent. Even in a country like contemporary Egypt – which has long prided itself, as the old saying goes, on reading the books that Iraq writes and Lebanon publishes – less than two-thirds of the population can read. To speak, therefore, of helping restore Ara-



The Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri is one of a number of prominent figures to have publicly stumbled in Arabic. Aziz Taher for The National

bic to its former glory, or of helping it to “reemerge as a dynamic and vibrant language” as the government of the UAE has recently committed itself to do, is to ignore the reality that Arabic – both in its classical and modern standard incarnation – has never had as many users as it does today. Even taking into consideration the sway that English holds in the private and

educational sectors of various countries in the region, or the important position that French occupies in France's former colonies, it is impossible to pinpoint another moment in the history of the Arab world when so many people could communicate (with varying degrees of ability) in fusha.

Paradoxically, it is this situation – a burgeoning community of us-

ers – that is producing what many today regard as the symptoms of Arabic's decline.

“Arabic has never been so alive,” says Kristen Brustad, a professor at the University of Texas and the co-author of a widely adopted series of Arabic language textbooks. “It has never been used by so many people in so many different situations,” which include non-traditional communicative milieus like online social networking sites, where a community of new speakers – youths, women, and people of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds – are transforming the language to suit their own purposes.

Across a sprawling landscape of blogs and internet chat rooms, Arabic is appearing in a multitude of forms. For every speaker with the ability to express themselves in grammatically pure fusha, there are a dozen others who communicate in their own dialects or a hybrid of different linguistic registers. To scroll through an online forum is to come face-to-face with a riotous mixture of different scripts, dialects, accents, and localisms, each with its own implicit claim to being a legitimate form of Arabic.

Just as significant a communicative sphere is the medium of satellite television, where one witnesses the growing dominance of a register that falls somewhere between the colloquial dialect of

the speaker and Modern Standard Arabic – what some linguists refer to as Educated Spoken Arabic. Brustad's husband and co-author, Mahmoud al Batal, who directs the Arabic Flagship Program at the University of Texas, believes that popular programmes with a regionwide audience are having a monumental effect on the development of a common idiom, in a way that national curricula have thus far failed to do because of their efforts to keep dialectal Arabic out of the classroom. “People now have the opportunity to encounter dialects that they've never heard before,” al Batal says. “The communication revolution is making it possible for us to be connected not only via formal Arabic but through the dialects as well.”

The communication revolution, alas, has yet to extend to the region's schools, the domain where it is most needed. In Middle Eastern classrooms, the ancien régime of traditional language instruction remains deeply entrenched. “The teaching of Arabic is still in the Middle Ages,” says al-Batal, who believes that certain mainstays of the standard curriculum – such as the dry and technical descriptions of Arabic's largely redundant declension system – are archaic and should be overhauled. Nowhere are the failures of modern Arabic curricula more



Traditionally, the use of fusha (standard Arabic) has been confined to the classroom, but revolutions in communications are leading to a new universal form of the language. Getty Images

evident than in the first few years of school, where children are dropped into a strange linguistic environment where their budding competencies in dialectal Arabic are typically seen, at best, as an obstacle to be circumvented, or, at worst, as a bad habit to be broken.

Mohamed Maamouri, a linguist and literacy expert at the University of Pennsylvania, says that by the time children enter formal schooling, they usually possess a vocabulary of up to 5,000 words and a great deal of grammatical knowledge, which together represent the foundation upon which literacy is based. However, because the words, syntax, and grammatical features of the language they

encounter in primary school are substantially different from their mother tongue, Maamouri argues that young Arab readers “cannot put their inherent native linguistic competence in colloquial Arabic to task.” In such an environment, the prospects of mastering even the most basic principles are often dim, and without the opportunity to use the language regularly, few students ever feel as at home in formal fusha as they do in their own dialect or even in a foreign language like English or French.

“We were never encouraged to make fusha our own,” muses a friend who completed his secondary education in Lebanon. “We didn't use it to discuss things that

we were interested in, like music or movies. All we did in Arabic class was learn grammar and memorise texts.” The solution to this problem, says Maamouri, is to give students the tools to bridge the gap between their native dialects and the formal language by incorporating material from the spoken idioms into language instruction. Kristen Brustad agrees: “This is an educational system that is geared to training people not to think in their native language,” she says. What schools need is “the same kind of linguistic democratisation that is pervading communicative spaces like the internet and satellite television.”

However, wouldn't such democ-

atisation lead precisely to what Ibn Manzur feared and what many language advocates and traditional educators rail against today, a Babel of linguistic diversity that flies in the face of 1,200 years of standardisation? Perhaps, but as potent as the ideology of a single unifying language has been for centuries, there are growing indications that it may finally be falling by the wayside. What is noteworthy today is not that Arabic is used in a multiplicity of forms, from diverse dialects to highly ornate fusha; such multiplicity has long been a feature of the language, perhaps since its origins. Rather, what is unique about the contemporary situation is that the prescriptive view of Arabic as

a single language is being rewired by modern circumstance.

If literacy rates continue to rise as forecast, the fate of Modern Standard Arabic will soon depend less on the protective vigilance of its traditional champions than on the daily demands placed upon it by hundreds of millions of speakers, readers, and writers. It may, over time, begin to look and sound increasingly different from the language preserved in the pages of Ibn Manzur's *Lisan al Arab*. Would it not, though, be more deserving of its title?

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