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A linguistic perspective of the effect of English on MSA: Manifestations and ramifications

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Abstract   Most studies on cross-linguistic influence have so far focused on the effect of the first language on the second or foreign language for pedagogical purposes. However, cross-linguistic influence is bidirectional, also allowing for 'reverse' transfer. This article sheds light on the influence of English on modern standard Arabic (MSA). It discusses the most common linguistic manifestations of this reverse interlingual transfer together with some of the possible consequences. Data were collected from books, articles, manuals, reports and recommendations. Adopting a descriptive linguistic approach, the paper lists some of the manifestations of this reverse transfer such as transliteration, substitution, re-ordering, overproduction, omission, poor translation, calquing, borrowing, and code mixing. It also enumerates some of the detrimental effects of reverse cross-linguistic transfer from EFL to MSA: linguistic invasion, 'foreignness', alienation of the audience and the speaker/writer, incomprehensibility, misunderstanding, and exposing readers to poor and incorrect MSA. The paper concludes with a recommendation for further studies to give more insight into the negative effects of this reverse transfer, to investigate the other factors leading to the deterioration of the standard of MSA, and to propose some solutions. Further studies are needed to investigate this and other factors and propose practical solutions to the problem.

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1. Introduction

When a person is a bilingual, trilingual or multilingual, it is possible to postulate three possibilities regarding the relationship between these languages: they are either kept as separate systems, integrated as one system, or kept separate but influence and interact with each other (see also Cook, 2003). Since

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the two extremes of complete separation and complete integration are not possible, the third possibility where the two separate systems interact and affect each other is plausible and in line with the reality. A wealth of research in the field of language learning and teaching is directed toward the effect of the two or more languages on each other (e.g. Cook, 2003; Grosjean, 2001; Mahmoud, 2005; Ringbom, 2007).

2. Literature Review

Most of the studies in the area of cross-linguistic influence (i.e. interlingual transfer) have so far focused on the effect of the first language on the second or foreign language for pedagogical purposes (see e.g. Mahmoud, 2005 for more information).

It goes without saying, when the aim is the teaching and learning of a language other than the first language, there is no worry about the influence of that other language on the first. Hence, this reverse influence – whether positive or negative – has not been given much attention (see also Laufer, 2003; Pavlenko and Jarvis, 2002). The term 'language transfer' would always mean the effect of the first language on the other and teachers and language teaching and learning experts have always been interested in the negative effects of such transfer, traditionally called 'first language interference'.

When there are two or more languages in the mind, there is a possibility of interlingual transfer, which entails any kind of effect at any linguistic level in either direction between the languages involved. Thus, this cross-linguistic influence is bidirectional, allowing for what Cook (2003) refers to as 'reverse' or 'backward' transfer. Weinreich's (1953, p. 1) definition of bidirectional influence implies that the concept is not new: "instances of deviation from the norms of either language in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language." However, it is only in the 1980s that researchers began to investigate this phenomenon of reverse transfer, (Major, 1992; Waas, 1996; Pavlenko, 2000). The purpose of this article is to shed some light on the influence of English as a foreign language (EFL) on modern standard Arabic (MSA) from a purely linguistic perspective. We intend to discuss the most common linguistic manifestations of this reverse interlingual transfer together with some of its ramifications.

The situation in the Arab world is one of diglossia, where MSA is the high variety of Arabic and non-standard Arabic (NSA) is the low one used in everyday communication (for more information see Holmes, 2001). MSA is learned in a formal classroom context whereas NSA is the first language that an Arab child acquires. MSA is used in formal oral and written communication whereas NSA is confined to everyday communication. In view of the existence of three linguistic systems in the mind of an educated Arab, we can speak of tri-directional cross-linguistic influence, where each of the three systems (MSA, NSA and English) may influence the other two. Thus, MSA may exhibit signs of interlingual transfer from both NSA and English. The influence of English on MSA could be direct (i.e. from English to MSA) or indirect (i.e. from English to NSA, then to MSA). The influence of both MSA and NSA on English has been investigated by Mahmoud (2000).

An important factor that determines the magnitude of cross-linguistic influence is the speaker's level of proficiency in the languages involved. Research on communication strategies (e.g. Oxford and Crookall, 1989; Si-Qing, 1990) shows that, by way of compensation, speakers tend to transfer from the languages they master to the languages in which they are less proficient. Those who are proficient in MSA do not rely on NSA or English as a compensatory strategy either because they do not need it or, in case of English, because they do not know it. Nevertheless, MSA exhibits traces of transfer from NSA and/or English but for completely different reasons such as code switching for social and literary purposes. Thus, from a psycholinguistic perspective, MSA may be influenced by both NSA and English.

The deterioration of the standard of MSA in the Arab world has become the concern of teachers, Arabic specialists, Arab language academies, parents and anyone who sees its importance as an official and national language. A group of

Arabic professors from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and inspectors from the Ministry of Education in Oman discussed the problem of MSA in Al-Masar (2004), a bulletin published at SQU. Although the bulletin was titled ''MSA is in Danger'', the Arabic experts were divided. Some believed that MSA is at a crisis point. Some others thought that such a belief in itself could pose a threat to the language and it is a psychological war waged against it. Yet others maintained that it is not a problem of crisis or threat; it is a process of natural change in keeping with the social and cultural change and the technological development that society is witnessing. These Arabic specialists enumerated some of the factors leading to the 'crisis' or 'change' of MSA. Following is a summary of these factors:

1. Culture
   a. Embracing the culture of the native speakers of English
   b. Viewing knowledge of English as an indication of modernity
2. Media
   a. Extensive use of NSA on television and radio
   b. Exposing the audience to errors in MSA
   c. The spread of English media: satellite channels, Internet, CDs, etc.
3. Education
   a. Traditional methods of teaching MSA
   b. Using NSA in teaching school subjects, even in teaching MSA
   c. School environment is not conducive to learning MSA (e.g. no activities in MSA)
4. Beliefs
   a. MSA is difficult to learn (i.e. complicated rules)
   b. MSA experts do not know Science and scientists do not know MSA
   c. MSA cannot keep pace with technological developments
   d. MSA is mainly for comprehension, not for production
5. English
   a. Teaching English at an early stage
   b. The spread of English-medium schools
   c. Better job opportunities in case of competence in English
   d. Preference for English in teaching and research in science and technology
   e. English is the language of international trade and communication.

The MSA specialists who participated in the above mentioned forum came up with different reasons for the plight of MSA, but all nine of them agreed on the influence of English as an important factor. Warschaur, El-Said and Zohry (2000) have two more factors: (1) the wide-spread illiteracy in many Arab countries and (2) the advent of the Internet. However, the Internet may militate against the domination of English due to the use of many other languages in many websites. The Internet can also have an adverse effect on the form and style of English through the language used in emails, chat-rooms and strange abbreviations and through all kinds of errors herein committed. We can add one more factor: MSA writers do not use vocalization marks, which often leads to comprehension