

Special Report



Hayat Al-Yaqout



Dr Abdulaziz Abal

# ARABIC VS ENGLISH: MOTHER TONGUE THREATENED BY LANGUAGE GLOBALIZATION

By Athoob Al-Shuaibi

**KUWAIT:** A rapid wave of change is necrotizing the Arabic language, as its rich and beautiful vocabulary is under the threat of the influence of English. Although there are no statistics about the number of people who have abandoned their mother tongue, there certainly is a global trend towards the adoption of English in everyday conversations, education and business. This abandonment of the mother language in favor of English is not limited to Arabic speakers. It is happening globally in almost all countries of the world.

### Bringing people together

Language was invented by our ancestors millions of years ago to support them in transmitting ideas between each other. With about 8,000 languages around the world, it helps bring people together, and is considered a type of protection from ideas from those who speak different languages.

As a cultural tool, language helped develop the first human inventions. Therefore, it has been improved to accommodate more conceptions. It is a changing tool to keep up with man's present needs. The power of language is linked to the prosperity a person can provide to mankind. Therefore, weaker languages diminish with time, while the language of industry, luxury and science becomes the prevailing one. The changing process of speech has been a continuous one. Thus, it is a misnomer to call it a problem, and maybe the right thing is to face it with an open mind.

"Once upon a time, specifically during the reign of the Abbasids and Umayyads, classical Arabic was the most powerful language in the world," said Hayat Al-Yaqout, Founder and Editor-in-Chief of Nashiri, a non-profit e-publishing house. "People who converted to Islam at that time needed to learn the language not only to understand the religion, but because the Islamic state was the exporter of inventions, scientists and philosophers. It was the cool language that everyone desired to learn."

### Endangered generation

So why call to safeguard language if change and development are mainstream? How bizarre is the thought of robbing the identity of a whole community simply by speaking in a different language? Yaqout believes future Arab generations are endangered if they grow up not knowing classical Arabic. They need it because, from her point of view, dialect is poor of powerful vocabulary. "Language is a thinking tool; without a strong Arabic language, they won't be able to keep and live with the values that come with it. Every language brings its own values. Therefore, the future generations will forget their origins and their Arab identity," Yaqout told Kuwait Times.

But roaming in shopping centers, one might overhear parents speaking most of the time in English with their children. Also, English has become a requirement to hiring a domestic worker or nanny. Generally, using this language in daily conversations between youths and children is no longer limited to private school goers.

It is clear and obvious that English is taking over Arabic at all levels. In Kuwait, for example, after being a subject taught in middle school, English was introduced in the elementary stages in the late '90s. "We became a generation that fears the ignorance of English and are obsessed with the importance of learning the language," said Dr Abdulaziz Abal, an assistant professor at the American University of Kuwait. "I was only 15 years old in the United States with my family when the Iraqi regime invaded Kuwait. A lot of Kuwaitis like me did not understand what was going on. We were set to survival mode, and in order to get through this, we had to learn proper English. I think it's still somewhere in our subconscious that we might lose our country again, and therefore we must prepare our children to study and work abroad," he told Kuwait Times.

English is the most powerful language in the world. The media in general is a propagation tool, as movies, TV shows, Internet and social media are making it cool to speak English. Abal said the world is unanimous that English is the global language of business and academia. Plus, education and public life have become dependent on English sources because Arabic data on the Internet lacks of credibility. "Everything is in English," he said.

"When we try to see it from the child's perspective, we find that he chooses to speak in the language used in daily life and not his mother tongue, because he doesn't need it," said Abal. "We shouldn't fear colloquial language. It's close to the heart, and therefore will be absorbed and understood quicker than the classical language. Dialect is useful when we use it with Arab children who were raised in circumstances that led to weakness in their Arabic spoken or written skills," he added.

When Abal asks students which subjects they detest the most, the immediate response is Arabic and Islamic studies. He said the majority of Arabic and Islamic teachers are bitter or harsh with their students, and their teaching style is primitive. "They teach them how to receive it, not how to use it. I don't blame them for choosing English. The child in his subconscious doesn't want to speak the language of killers, as the media is trying to paint this image of Arab Muslims. He wants to speak like his favorite Disney character, or his favored YouTube celebrity," he said.

Yaqout said classical Arabic won't add any cognitive value to those who spent their first years listening and speaking the slang used in their country. Yaqout agrees with Abal that it's not the children or their parents' fault. "Arabic language teaching curricula is stupid and not suitable for everyday use. Arabic dealt with as a written language although it's primarily spoken. As a matter of fact, all languages in the world began by being spoken. Writing is a kind of abstraction because there are no reasons for writing letters in certain ways. On the other hand, children learn English by singing, making presentations and holding conversations with their peers in class," Yaqout explained. "If the next generations are raised not knowing how to understand or use classical Arabic language and depend on local dialects, the gap will get bigger, and it's more likely that religious people will appear to protect their monopoly on the Holy Quran and its interpretations. This is exactly what happened to the Bible when Latin became extinct. History repeats itself," warned Yaqout.



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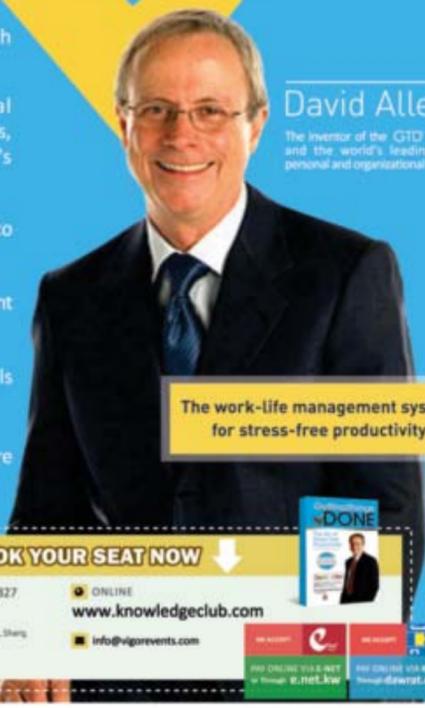
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