



Is Arabic Under Threat in the Arabian Gulf?

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Is Arabic under threat in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, and the UAE where the number of non-nationals exceeds the nationals? Do non-Arabs living in the GCC pose a threat to the Arabic language and Arab identity? These questions have been the subject of debates not only in the media but also academic conferences and seminars. In this article, we examine this critical issue objectively.

Demographic changes after the Discovery of Oil in GCC

The GCC countries have experienced an influx of migrant workers over the past decades following the discovery of oil and gas. The massive economic and social projects undertaken by the GCC governments have further created labor needs that the local population cannot fulfill leading to reliance on foreign workers. In the GCC, non-nationals outnumber the nationals making up 52% of the total population. In Qatar, the percentage of non-nationals is even more pronounced reaching

up to 95% of the workforce. While migration into the GCC has brought many benefits to the region, it has also raised concerns that the Arabic language and Arab identity are in danger.

Fear of Decline of Arabic

In popular discussions, the decline of the Arabic language is generally attributed to two factors. First, it is argued that the presence of a non-Arab migrant population not only poses a threat to the structure of the Arabic language but also endangers the Arab identity of the youth. Al-Farajani, a scholar and a columnist, argued, in an article published on Aljazeera in 2008, that the presence of Asians had negative consequences, the most important of which is *ifsād al-lughah al-'Arabīyyah*, 'corruption of the Arabic language.'

In 2013, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Center for Language Planning and Policies, based in Saudi Arabia, organized a conference to develop strategies to strengthen the Arabic language and identity. Dr. Lateefah Al-Najjar, professor of Arabic language in the UAE University, presented

a paper on the effects of Asian labor on the Arabic language in which she argued that maids and drivers affect the language of children. She recommended that the Asian labor be replaced with Arabs and that being fluent in Arabic must be a condition of employment in the GCC.

A second source of anxiety comes from the presence of English-medium schools and colleges in the region. In a report published in 2019 on the UN Arabic Language Day celebrated on December 18, it was argued that the English language was a threat to Arabic in the GCC in the same way as French endangers Arabic in North Africa. According to a report published in the Economist, in 2022, the youth in the GCC use English more than Arabic. Some scholarly studies have also argued that English-medium schools in the GCC are a threat to Arabic. A similar fear of the decline of Arabic in the entire Arab World was the theme of a Pan-Arab conference entitled “The Arabic language is in danger: We are all partners in protecting it” held in the UAE in 2013 indicating that the purported decline of Arabic is not limited to the GCC.

Language Policy Changes in the GCC

The presence of a large non-Arab population has also created challenges for communication between Arabs and non-Arabs. The governments of Qatar and UAE have started to use migrant languages in dealing with issues related to the workforce. At the same time, the concerns about the decline of the Arabic language have led the countries in the region, especially Qatar and UAE, to take measures to protect it. In the UAE, the Cabinet passed Resolution Number 21/2 in 2008 whereby all government departments were required to use the Arabic language in all their official communications. In 2015, the Department of Economic Development of Dubai in the UAE issued violation tickets to restaurants for not having their menus in Arabic. Similarly, in 2019, Qatar passed the Law on Protection of the Arabic Language which strengthens the use of Arabic.

Language Decline as Proxy for Social and Political Crisis

A major shortcoming of the aforementioned reports, studies, and conferences is that no empirical evidence was provided to support the purported decline of Arabic. There is no evidence that the Arabic language spoken by the young people in the GCC shows the linguistic influences of their maids and drivers. They may have acquired some words, phrases, and sentences to communicate with them, which only suggests that

their linguistic repertoire has become enriched. Many maids and drivers learn to communicate in broken pidgin Arabic. There is a need for systematic research to understand the linguistic effects of maids and drivers on the language of the host society.

Moreover, the discourse of the decline of Arabic is not limited to the GCC but it covers the entire Arab World as was the theme of the 2013 conference in the UAE. Yasir Suleiman, a sociolinguist who has researched Arabic language and identity, describes the situation as language anxiety, meaning that it is less about the language and more about the social tensions besetting the Arabs as a nation. One major external factor that contributes to anxiety is the presence of English in educational institutions. Another is the demographic changes that the GCC countries have witnessed whereby non-nationals form a significant part of the Gulf population. Suleiman contends that discussions about the decline of Arabic serve as a stand-in for broader social tensions, where defending the Arabic language equates to defending the Arab social and moral order.

Despite concerns about linguistic anxiety, a significant shift has emerged in the linguistic landscape of the GCC: for the first time in history, Arabs are becoming bilingual in both their dialect and English. Before the advent of international schools and universities, Arabs from the region would seek higher education in other Arab countries such as Egypt and Syria, where Arabic was the medium of instruction. Their level of education would be displayed in their knowledge and use of Standard Arabic. By contrast, many GCC students today graduate from English-medium schools and international universities within GCC or abroad with a better command of English than Standard Arabic, especially in discussing professional issues. This may give rise to the anxiety that English is encroaching upon the Arabic space. However, research shows that bilingual people can command two languages equally proficiently and use each in its appropriate context.

More research is needed to understand the pattern of usage at home and professional places. Census data, similar to the bilingual Quebec in Canada, could shed light on what language(s) people use in different social domains such as home, workplace, social gatherings, etc. before we can conclusively conclude anything about the status of Arabic in the GCC.

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