Arabic Should Not Be Cast As Heritage: Arabic Lives

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Abstract

Language acquisition research often conceives of language learners in terms of linguistic proficiency and perhaps assigns them a position on a continuum with the native speaker at one end and the *foreign language learner* on the other. The *heritage language learner* falls somewhere between these two extremes and often shares a deep affiliation with the language that can be ethnically, historically, culturally or religiously driven or they may share a multifaceted affiliation with the language. *Arabic heritage language learners* typically include Arabs of any religious or non-religious affiliation and non-Arab Muslims. Research has considered various matters associated with *Arabic heritage language learners* that range from differences in their motivations to language maintenance within communities. However, research on Arabic has not really considered the implications of the term *heritage* itself. This paper will critically examine the term *heritage language learner* and argue that it is problematic due to the inherent implications of the word "heritage" which can contribute to the perpetuation of linguistic hegemony and result in language loss. Consequently, the paper recommends the use of alternative terms.

Keywords*: Heritage language learners, Religious heritage learner, Arabic language research, Muslims, linguistic hegemony, minority language*.

Introduction

This paper critically examines the term *Arabic heritage language learner*, used to refer to Arabs learning Arabic in diaspora or non-Arab Muslim learners of Arabic, and its continued use in spite of the problematisation of the issues that underlie the term *heritage language learner* and the assumptions it is built on (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003). This critical examination is informed by notions of critical consciousness in the field of applied linguistics which according to Pennycook (2010) add "an overt focus on questions of power and inequality to discourse analysis, literacy or applied linguistics more generally" (pg. 16.1). This movement originated in the 1990s and has at its essence according to Pennycook (1990) the notion that intellectual endeavours cannot remain "asocial, apolitical and ahistorical" (pg. 25). In this vein, this critical analysis is presented to allow for reflection on the implications of conceiving of an Arabic learner as one engaged in the learning of *heritage*. Initially, the origin of the term *heritage learner* is provided along with an elaboration of some of its uses in connection with learners of Arabic. This is followed by a discussion of the possible implications the term may have on the positioning of languages and particularly how this may manifest in the case of Arab and Muslim learners. The linguistic hegemony that underpins the term and how this might contribute to eventual language loss are also discussed. In conclusion, it is suggested that a rethinking of the label is a pressing matter, and possible alternative terms are presented.

Arabic heritage language learners

Research on language maintenance among speakers of minority languages has had a long presence in academia (Fishman, 1980; Sawaie & Fishman, 1985; Valdés, 2005) and can attribute its significant development in the Western context to the advent of the *new ethnicity movement* in the 1960s (Fishman, 1980). In this evolving field, the term *heritage language* was conceived with the commencement of the Ontario Heritage Languages Programs in 1977 (Cummins, 2005; Montrul, 2013). The term spread in the USA in the 1990s (Cummins, 2005; Wu & Chang, 2010) and has produced consequent terms, chiefly; *heritage language learner (HLL)*. The terms have since been borrowed into many other contexts, such as Australia (Mu, 2014) and New Zealand (Berardi-Wiltshire, 2012) for instance. Although, all agree that HLL are distinct from *foreign language learners (FLL)* (Valdés, 2005), the terms *heritage language* and *HLL* are difficult to define (Montrul, 2013) and continue to be under contestation (Doerr & Lee, 2013). In recent years, the broadly used term *HLL has* generally referred to learners who are invested in the maintenance, learning and revival of their minority or non-societal languages (Valdés, 2005). These minorities include indigenous minorities, such as Aboriginals in Australia or First Nations peoples in North America, but also immigrants and the descendants of immigrants who speak a language other than the majority language (Valdés, 2005).

Generally, HLL attempt to learn a language to which they have a personal or historical connection and to which they have had some prior exposure (Gass & Selinker, 2008). HLL have typically been defined in ethnolinguistic terms, whereby a learner would belong to the minority cultural group to which the language bears significance (Montrul, 2013). While the *HLL* does not necessarily have to be proficient in the language (Gass & Selinker, 2008), many researchers consider the presence of some linguistic ability to be a defining factor (Montrul, 2013). Defining this measure of proficiency is challenging, as the degrees of proficiency can vary significantly. While some learners will have "native-like ability in the heritage language, others can merely understand it and don't speak it, and a vast majority fall in between these two extremes" (Montrul, 2013: 171). For instance, research on Japanese found that not all Japanese background learners should be placed into the one classroom because their abilities could be very different depending on whether their parents or grandparents were the link to the Japanese language (Kondo-Brown, 2005).

From an ethnolinguistic perspective, Arabic HLL are ethnically Arab and become familiar with Arabic through exposure to the language in their homes or communities. Arab HLL may have or may not have mastered the language through their exposure to it and may have had varying degrees of exposure to it. In this regard, we find that Ibrahim and Allam (2006) identified that distinctions had to be made between learners who had two Arabic-speaking parents and spoke one of the vernaculars at home and learners that had one Arabic speaking parent and spoke no Arabic at home. In Australia, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) website, refers to Arabic HLLs as "Arabic background learners" in the Arabic Curriculum Context Statement and defines them as: "students who have exposure to Arabic language and culture, and who may engage in active but predominantly receptive use of Arabic at home. The range of learners within the Arabic background language learner pathway is diverse, defined for the most part by different waves of migration, and their use of Arabic may extend beyond the home to everyday interactions with Arabic-speaking friends and involvement in community organisations and events. Other learners may have been born in an Arabic-speaking country, where they may have completed some education" (Australian Curriculum, 2019). This sense of the term HLL includes both non-Muslim and Muslim Arabs.

However, in addition to ethnolinguistic parameters, there are also historic, cultural and religious parameters that underpin the Arabic HLL status. Historic and religious affiliations extend the HLL status to include many millions

of people who use Arabic for liturgical purposes while simultaneously using another language at home. These are Muslims who though non-Arab by ethnicity use Arabic for their obligatory prayers, reading the Qur'an and Hadith as well as performing daily supplications to the Almighty Creator, Allah. For instance, a Pakistani woman who uses Urdu at home self-identified as a heritage learner of Arabic because of the religious connection with the language (Lee, 2005). This led Lee (2005: 556) to explain that "definitions of heritage and non-heritage learners describe two bipolar ends of a continuum that provides no guidance for the placement of many language learners whose backgrounds do not completely fit either definition. For example, in which track should we place a Pakistani student who has learned Arabic for the purposes of reading the Koran". Researchers have therefore suggested correctly the inclusion of Muslims under the umbrella of Arabic HLL (Husseinali, 2006; Ibrahim & Allam, 2006).

Research on Arabic HLL has considered various concepts. For instance, the work of Husseinali (2006, 2012) has generally considered motivation, the work of Albirini (2014) looked at the variance of proficiency between different HLL learners and Abuhakema (2012) considered the differences in attitudes between heritage and non-heritage language learners. Additionally, the PhD research of Temples (2013) looked at the construction of Arabic as heritage and learners' investment and identity and the work of Engman (2015) looked at Muslim-American acquisition of religious identity in an Arabic classroom. Engman reflected briefly on the problematic nature of the term heritage, however, otherwise, it would seem that very little thought has been given to the potential problems of using terms such as *heritage* or *background* to describe Arabic and Arabic learners in minority contexts, particularly where English is the dominant language. Therefore, this paper will reflect on the problematic nature of the label heritage, and how applying it to Arabic can threaten the future of Arabic, and then propose the use of alternative terms.

Arabic should not be cast as heritage

A correlation exists between labels and self-reported language use (Villa & Villa, 1998) and more importantly, people "who work with language know that our use of language has the power to change realities" (García, 2005: 605). Therefore, labelling is always problematic, due to its tendency to generalise, simplify and project preconceived notions on the labelled. For instance, inherent in the label Arabic HLL are preconceptions about motivations, whereby we assume that Arab HLL wish to connect with their culture and language and that Muslim HLL are interested in language for religious purposes, while this is not necessarily true. However, the deeper problem relates to the contruction of language as *heritage* or its *backgrounding*, particularly in contexts where English is the dominant language. However, before elaborating on this issue, we should first reflect on the meaning of *heritage.*

According to the Online Merriam-Webster dictionary (2019), the word *heritage* has its origins in the Late Latin word *hereditare* and has at its essence the meaning *to inherit*. A person's heritage includes possessions and qualities that are bequeathed by a predecessor or ancestor. According to that understanding of the word, language is heritage at both the individual and societal levels. In fact, the Online Cambridge Dictionary (2019) defines heritage as; "features belonging to the culture of a particular society, such as traditions, languages, or buildings, that were created in the past and still have historical importance". There is a distinctive sense of nostalgia associated with the word, these are tangible and intangible sites, possessions, qualities, characteristics and events that hold distinct meaning to a group's collective memory. In fact, one of the definitions provided by the Online Harper Collins Dictionary (2019) is that *heritage* is "the evidence of the past". Therefore, while the inheritance may be valued, by positioning language as *heritage* we inadvertently inspire, as Engman (2015) explains, notions of a "fossilized relic from the

past" (pg. 221). In doing this we have both undermined the learning potential from the outset and participated in the potential demise of the minority language. In fact, as García (2005) explains, by referring to language in this way we imply that it is part of "what was left behind in remote lands, what is in one's past. By leaving the languages in the past, the term heritage languages connotes something that one holds onto vaguely as one's remembrances, but certainly not something that is used in the present or that can be projected into the future." (pg. 601). Therefore, when we cast Arabic into the past as heritage and deem it a relic of some distant memory, whether coupled with nostalgia or not, we are excluding Arabic from the present lives of its learners and creating doubt about its future.

The use of this term draws on notions of English supremacy in the public schooling system and deems *languages other than English* as "backward and unimportant" (García, 2005: 605) and influences how learners view their language. An example of this is noted in research with Native American youth, which found that for some youth the tribal language was 'just the past' (McCarty, 2008:204). When learners view their language in a negative light or perceive it to be in a powerless position, or when they conceive of it as a relic from another time it is more likely for learners to feel a certain degree of *ambivalence* to the language vis-à-vis their identity and reality or even question its relevance altogether. Block (2007) explains that this ambivalence "is the uncertainty of feeling a part and feeling apart. It is the mutually conflicting feelings of love and hate. Moreover, it is the simultaneous affirmation and negation of such feelings" (pg. 864). These complicated feelings may lead learners to question the value of Arabic or to conclude that such a language is not relevant to them and thereby create an environment that is conducive to the emergence of redefinitions of the Arab or Islamic identity that exclude Arabic. This would threaten the transmission of Arabic.

Underpinning this concerning reality is an "Anglo-fundamentalism" (Martin, 2005) that fears "that language rights or language-inclusive policies would give unfair advantage to migrants" (Martin, 2005:71) and more importantly the notions of English supremacy alluded to by García (2005). These notions of Anglo-fundamentalism and English supremacy perpetuate English hegemony, in English majority contexts such as the United States, Australia or the United Kingdom, where English presents itself as the means of societal participation. Suarez (2002) explains that "hegemony relies on the development of an ideological structure which the minority group will support, hegemonic forces are predominantly non-coercive and are, therefore, useful markers that may illuminate the process by which the dominant ideas in a society are internalised and thus substantiate political legitimisation" (pg. 514). For instance, some of the factors that challenge intergenerational transmission of languages and the ensuing shift include "national ideology, school policies and curricular goals" (Temples, 2013: 13). This has typically resulted in the creation of a hegemonic system in which the second generation of immigrant families become English dominant and the third generation lose the home language altogether (Temples, 2013).

Linguistic hegemony is affirmed and perpetuated in various ways (Suarez, 2002) and some of these can be very subtle. In Australia, for example, an explicit National Policy on Languages (NPL) was articulated to promote languages, however, the policy articulated the acquisition of English for all as its first guiding principle (Lo Bianco, 1990). Consequently, three principles were included for the support of indigenous languages, the promotion of learning *languages other than English* by all and provision of services in *languages other than English* (Lo Bianco, 1990). Here, we immediately see the centralising of English and the 'othering' of languages that are not English. Nonetheless the NPL was principled in its intention to promote languages. However, the policy was superseded by Australia's Language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP) (Lo Bianco, 2001). Though the ALLP was presented as an extension of the first, its essence "contradicted and sought to undermine the pluralist basis of the NPL and to

disenfranchise the coalition of community-based interests that had brought it about." (Lo Bianco, 2001:28). In reflecting on ALLP, Brock (2001) explains that the main differences between the ALLP and the NPL were that the "latter's ambitious goal about learning a language other than English" was dropped and that there was no mention of language services (pg. 64). Therefore, in effect bilingualism in Australia remains mainly "confined to Aborigines and migrants who have added English to their first language" (Martin, 2005: 54) with many minority languages being considered "endangered species" as participation threatens the viability of provisions made for them (Dunne & Palvyshyn, 2013).

It is quite unclear to what extent such notions have affected the ethnic HLL. Proficiency in Arabic has traditionally been a marker of national identity for Arabs since the time of Prophet Muhammad (Suleiman, 2003) and provides their various communities with a unifying sense of "shared Arabness' (Cruickshank, 2008: 283) that transcends religious differences. However, would this identity marker survive when learners' entire identities are in flux in an environment that causes them to conceive of themselves as 'the other' that needs to assimilate? Some researchers have presented anecdotal generalizations that "Arabic speaking parents often discouraged their children from learning Arabic because it hindered assimilation" (Temples, 2013). In the USA, such notions are exacerbated by further pressures, for instance, Temples (2013) notes that one of the focal interviews she conducted suggested that some Arabic speakers felt nervous about speaking Arabic in public spaces following the events of September 11. However, research in Australia suggests that Arabic language maintenance in the Arab community is high (Cruickshank, 2008) but that this tends to be of vernacular varieties rather than written Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) (Cruickshank, 2008). Nonetheless, it has been suggested that diglossia, the difference between the spoken varieties and MSA, in diasporic contexts, where Arabs are pressured to learn English and maintain their dialect, may lead to the forsaking of MSA

(Campbell, Dyson, Karim, & Rabie, 1993). It was, thus, argued that Arab HLL might view MSA "as a remote code whose usefulness and cultural significance is in question" (Campbell et al., 1993: 67).

For Muslim learners, the affiliation with Arabic is underpinned by religious practice and civilisational history, thus rendering Arabic a "means of binding the *Ummah* under the banner of one nation and one identity; the Muslim identity" (Selim, 2018: 82). Religious affiliations contributed to the outcomes of the maintenance of Arabic literacy in the Australian-Arab community, with Muslim Arabs reporting "higher proficiency" (Cruickshank, 2008: 286). This is understandable, given that Arabic is central to the practice of Islam and when this is coupled with ethnic parameters the affiliation to Arabic is theoretically very strong. For Muslims of non-Arab descent too, the learning of Arabic is akin to an *initiation* or a *rite of passage* endorsed by the family because it permits inclusion in the religious community and facilitates access to the religion (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010). For some Muslims, having a limited ability in Arabic traditionally left them feeling "that their access to Islam is somehow ''tainted'' due to their having access to the translated meaning of the Koran rather than to the Koran itself" (Jaspal and Coyle, 2010: 20). However, this seems to be a changing reality in minority contexts where English is the dominant language.

In the USA, a study on the construction of Arabic as an HLL revealed interesting insights. It was noted that a Tamil-speaking Indian mother and son said that an "additional ability to comprehend the text of the Qur'an would be valuable" but that "they also believed that striving for a higher level of achievement in MSA at school (by moving to the Advanced class) would not justify pulling time and energy away from Hassan's other academic subjects" (Temples, 2013: 207). In an Irish investigation, it was revealed that Muslims parents "viewed Arabic as unimportant when it came to constructing their children's' religious identity" (Sai, 2017: 449). For instance, "a Bengali parent, asserted that his native vernacular was more

important than Arabic and openly rejected Arabic being taught as a compulsory subject" (Sai, 2017: 449). Similarly, another parent of Pakistani origin stated that in their Irish context, "there is no Arabic language and we are from Pakistan and speak Urdu and Arabic is not our language…I think it is too much pressure if I tell [my daughter] you need to learn. [(Arabic as a third language after English and Irish) [Parent 22]" (Sai, 2017: 449-450). Similarly, an "Irish

mother who had converted to Islam felt that there was social pressure to learn Arabic and perhaps a kind of superiority status given to those who could. To be considered a credibly knowledgeable Muslim, one was often expected to be fluent in Arabic, though she was not persuaded as to the need for this herself, seeing it more as an option than a requirement" (Sai, 2017: 450).

Rethinking the labels is crucial

While these new trends are emergent in research, it is doubtless that the hegemony of English in English-speaking countries plays a role in the loss of language. The positioning of languages as *heritage* exacerbates this. Such labels threaten the transmission of language among learners and may detract from the language's status and "larger, global function" (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003:217), rumblings of which seem emergent. This suggests a need for an investigation into the extent of the breakaway from Arabic in the Islamic identity and the extent of abandonment of MSA in favour of spoken varieties among the Arab diaspora. However, more importantly, the evidence of such a potential abandonment is alarming and necessitates that we think differently about how we label Arabic learners and how we project the Arabic language to them. We cannot continue to buy into the theoretical products of a narrative that perpetuates the hegemony of the majority language if we expect

to preserve Arabic for future generations. It is proposed, therefore, that we use the terms Arab learner of Arabic (ALA) and Muslim learner of Arabic (MLA) as possible alternatives. These labels will achieve the recognition of the distinctive nature of the affiliation to Arabic but remediate the negative implications of the term *heritage*. We should be encouraging notions of bilingualism (McCarty, 2008) or even multilingualism rather than inadvertently buying into the abandonment of language. In using these labels, we take the first steps towards reversing the abandonment of Arabic in favour of the more hegemonic English. By changing the words with which we describe Arabic, we affirm that it is alive and well and reposition it as an integral part of the present and future of its community of learners. By foregrounding language to learners rather than backgrounding it, we have a better chance of engaging them in Arabic language learning.

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