DIGLOSSIA IN ARABIC:
THE BEGINNING AND THE END

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I. INTRODUCTION

The mere coexistence of two varieties; standard (formal) and colloquial (informal), of the same language in a linguistic community does not necessarily entail the existence of diglossia in that community. It follows, then, that it is misleading to search for the beginning of the standard, colloquial dichotomy, found in a certain community, in order to determine the beginning of diglossia there. What is, rather, needed is a serious and scientific investigation of the relationships that are found between the two varieties at the socio-linguistic level as well as an examination of some of the linguistic features that characterize each variety.

The above misconception about diglossia has probably led most of the Arab scholars who have dealt with this issue to claim that the pre-Islamic (hence PI) linguistic situation in the Arabian Peninsula was diglossic. Such scholars seem to have ignored the defining features as well as the conditions of the emergence of diglossia as outlined by Ferguson. It seems that their sole criterion for determining the existence of diglossia has been the coexistence of two varieties of Arabic in the community. Accordingly, one might conclude on the basis of their misconception, that the present sociolinguistic situation in the Arab world, which is generally described as diglossic, is similar to that of the PI situation. Sociolinguistically speaking, though the two situations have some common features such as the existence of a standard or common variety (hence CV), they are different in several diglossic respects.

It is the purpose of the present study to advance some evidence in order to disprove the hypothesis which states that the Arabic diglossia had originated in the Arabic community during the PI stage. Alternatively, the study will argue that diglossia emerged in later stages when the Arabic linguistic situation actually drifted to a state of linguistic polarization. Consequently, each of the two varieties of Arabic assumed a distinct function
and the relationships between them took a diglossic nature. The study will also advance some speculations about the myth of the end of standard Arabic which will subsequently result in the end of diglossia.

Two hypotheses concerning the beginning of diglossia in Arabic have been reported in the linguistics literature. The first one, proposed mostly by Arab scholars such as Abdurrahman, Staytiyyah, and Bakalla, states that diglossia came into being during the PI stage when there was a CV in addition to the urban and bedouin dialects. The proponents of such hypothesis hardly advance any scientific arguments in support of their view. They rely heavily, as was pointed out earlier, on general and impressionistic evidence which is, in fact, unconvincing. Surprisingly, Ferguson himself, who has remarkably described the phenomenon of diglossia in the Arabic community, falls into this category. He specifically claims that "Arabic diglossia seems to reach as far back as our knowledge of Arabic goes". This statement includes, of course, the PI stage.

The second hypothesis advocated mostly by Western scholars such as Blau and Fück, suggests that diglossia in Arabic emerged during the post-Islamic stage, specifically when the Arabic language reached, with the Arabs, the newly conquered neighbouring regions such as Iraq, Greater Syria, and Egypt, where it was adopted by the newly-converted Muslims. This hypothesis sounds more plausible and convincing as it will be shown later.

II. DIGLOSSIA

According to Ferguson, diglossia is:

A relatively stable linguistic situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superimposed variety, the vehicle of written literature; either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any section of the community for ordinary conversation.

This definition has laid down a number of important and key features such as "very divergent" "written literature" and "superimposed variety" which characterize a diglossic situation. In such situation, two main varieties of the same language are used in the community. One variety is known as high (H), and the other as low (L). Their domains are not similar.
Ferguson\textsuperscript{11} proposes a set of defining features which are taken to be the basis for distinguishing a diglossic situation from a nondiglossic one. Below is a summary of these features:

1. Each of the two varieties, $H$ and $L$, has a specialized function. For example, the former is used in formal speech, while the other is used at home.
2. $H$ is viewed by the native speakers as superior to its $L$ counterpart which is often recognised as inferior.
3. Whereas the $L$ variety is acquired naturally as one’s native tongue, the $H$ is learned at school or other formal settings.
4. The two grammatical systems of $H$ and $L$ show important differences.
5. $H$ is usually considered as a source of strong tradition of grammatical study.
6. Unlike the $L$ variety which lacks standardization, $H$ has a standardized form manifested in dictionaries and other traditional sources.
7. $H$ and $L$ have a large number of common vocabulary.
8. The phonologies of $H$ and $L$ range from being highly similar to sharply different.
9. Diglossia is a stable situation.

In addition, Ferguson\textsuperscript{12} outlines three conditions which, if they are met in a speech community, produce diglossia in that community. They are:

1. There is a sizeable body of literature in a language closely related to (or even identified with) the natural language of the community, and this literature embodies, whether as a source (e.g. divine revelation) or reinforcement, some of the fundamental values of the community.
2. Literacy in the community is limited to a small elite.
3. A suitable period of time, on the order of several centuries, passes from the establishment of (1) and (2) above.

These conditions are believed to have been met in a number of speech communities where Arabic, Greek, Swiss German and Haitian Creole are spoken. Therefore, such communities are known as diglossic.

Some attempts have been made in order to extend the concept of diglossia to include bilingualism, dialectalism and registers.\textsuperscript{13} By so doing, a new sense of diglossia has been advanced which goes far beyond its original
sense, The new concept of diglossia includes all forms of speech in a community, whether the forms are different languages, dialects, registers and any varieties.

In brief, the extension attempts have produced more controversy and confusion because of a number of reasons. First, the proponents of the new concept of diglossia have failed to maintain conceptual clarity in using certain key terms such as the term “language” in their descriptive studies. This term has been used in an inconsistent and very flexible way when dealing with diglossic or semidiglossic situations. Such tendency led eventually to some kind of confusing results. Secondly, using a diglossia-bilingualism formula as the basis for classifying speech communities, seems to be unconvincing because it results in “occasional contradiction” and “shallowness”. And thirdly, the inadequacy of the new attempts for defining diglossia springs from the fact that they employ one limited criterion to achieve this goal, namely, the domain of complementarity of the two languages at a time when the original attempt uses nine criteria.

If diglossia were a matter of “multiple norms” in a community, one could logically say that all speech communities are diglossic. But, this is of course, an untenable conclusion. The fact of the matter is that the notion of the “broad structural gap” plays an essential role in determining the uniqueness of the diglossic situation. Wexler has correctly addressed this issue when he states:

Proponents of the term diglossia are not certainly blind to the ubiquity of multiple norms. But diglossia is not meant to refer to any condition of multiple norms, but specifically to that condition, where there is a broad structural gap between the standard written norm and the unstandardized (as a rule) spoken dialects.

Criticising the extension attempts of diglossia, Hudson, an influential sociolinguist, says that “This may be a regrettable development as it seems to make every society diglossic, including even English-speaking England, where different so-called “registers” and “dialects” are used under different circumstances”.

Finally, Ferguson, whose characterization of diglossia has occasion-ally been misrendered and misrepresented points out clearly that the notion of “two languages” is not comprised within the range of diglossia because the latter is intended to refer to a different situation. He asserts that “no attempt is made in this paper to examine the analogous situation where two distinct (related or unrelated) languages are used side by side throughout a speech community, each with a clearly defined role.” Furthermore, he
makes an important distinction between a diglossic situation and a “standard-with-dialect” situation which is often confused with the former. As a matter of fact, it is this distinction which motivated Ferguson to discuss this phenomenon in the first place.21 Addressing this crucial issue of distinction, Ferguson22 notes:

No segment of the speech community in diglossia regularly uses $H$ as a medium of ordinary communication, and any attempt to do so is felt to be either pedantic and artificial (Arabic, Greek). In the more usual standard-with-dialect situation the standard is often similar to the variety of a certain region or social group (e.g. Tehran Persian, Calcutta Bengali) which is used in ordinary conversation more or less naturally by members of the group and as a superimposed variety by others.

The above discussion is what justifies the present writer’s inclination to ground this study on the original well-defined diglossia rather than on the new ill-defined diglossia.

III. THE PRE-ISLAMIC (PI) STAGE

The linguistic situation was ambiguous in the Arabian Peninsula during this stage due specially to the lack of concrete evidence. However, two things seem to be certain about that situation. One is the fact that there was a large number of various tribal dialects spreading in the Peninsula. And the other is the fact that there was a CV used by the Arabic tribes; bedouin as well as urban.

Unlike the Greek, Roman and Persian traditions, the Arabic literary tradition of that stage was primarily oral.23 Extremely scanty records which include very limited linguistic information were discovered in the northern part of the Peninsula. Such a situation has motivated many Arab and non-Arab scholars to make some speculations about the PI linguistic situation in general and the CV in particular. How, when, and why did the CV emerge? These questions have generated a great deal of controversy about the CV. No decisive answers have been offered to these questions and others which concern the relationships between this variety and the tribal dialects.24 It is, however, taken for granted that the CV is well-represented in the PI poetry (Jāhili) and orations, and in the Holy Qur’an at a later stage. More emphasis will be laid on CV because it will play a key role in the main argument of this study.

The CV is widely believed to have come into being as a result of what
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is called a dialectal "coalition" or "refinement".\textsuperscript{25} During the PI stage, the Arabic dialects used to interact with one another on literary, religious and commercial seasonal occasions. Eventually, the CV emerged through certain linguistic processes which are hard to identify in specific details. The fact that the CV includes a large number of synonyms as well as inconsistent grammatical and morphological rules clearly supports the "coalition" hypothesis.

One of the most plausible account of the processes by which the CV developed is that which has been advanced by Staytiyyah.\textsuperscript{26} He argues that during the PI stage the stabilized state of the CV, had likely been preceded by at least two main processes: One is pidginization which involved the linguistic interactions of the Arabic tribes, and the other is creolization whose outcome was a new generation of poets and orators.

The CV was, generally speaking, based on a number of so called "pure" dialects which were used, later on, as the sole source for eliciting linguistic data by early grammarians who established the codification of the CV. This is quite true with regard to the Basran grammarians who were very selective. It should be noted that, unlike the Basran grammarians, the Kufis had indiscriminately accepted data from all Arabic tribes irrespective of the consideration whether those tribes were located in the heart or the borders of the Peninsula.\textsuperscript{27} It is noteworthy that the CV includes none of those distinctive tribal linguistic features such as al-fadhalah, the change of $h$ into $c$; al-shanshanah, the change of $k$ into $sh$; and al-ajajah, the change of the stressed $y$ into $dz$.\textsuperscript{28}

Although some Arab grammarians such as Wafi,\textsuperscript{29} al-Janabi,\textsuperscript{30} and Hilal\textsuperscript{31} have tended to identify and associate the CV with the dialect of Quraysh, some evidence seems to weaken this claim. At least three reasons may be advanced in this regard. First, it is known that when it was revealed, the Holy Qur'\text{"an}, which used the perspicuous Arabic tongue, was not directed to a specific tribe. Rather, it was directed to all Arab tribes regardless of their dialects. Some verses from the Holy Qur'\text{"an} support this view.

In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful\textsuperscript{32}

We have sent it down
as an Arabic Qur'\text{"an}
In order that ye may
learn wisdom. (12:2)

A book whereof the verses
Are explained in detail;
A Qur'an in Arabic,
For people who understand. (41:3)

And before this, was
The book of Moses
As a guide and a mercy:
And this Book confirms (it)
In the Arabic tongue;
To admonish the unjust,
And as Glad Tidings
To those who do right. (46:12)

And if ye are in doubt
As to what we have revealed
From time to time to Our Servant
Then produce a Sura[h]
like thereun to
And call your witness or helpers
(If there are any) besides God
If your (doubts) are true. (2:23)

Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373), a top authority on the interpretation of the Holy Qur'an, comments on the last set of verses by saying that they represent a general challenge to all Arabs without exception.

Secondly, the dialect of Quraysh is reported to have been less committed to the observation of glottalization which characterizes the system of CV. This dialect uses, for example, rās, that is "head", instead of ra's.\(^{33}\)

Finally, it is a fact that the early Arab grammarians who were working on the codification of the Arabic grammar in the early centuries of Islam rejected the tribe of Quraysh as a source for their linguistic data. Instead, they based their grammars on the "pure" dialects of Qays, Tamim, Asad, Tay and Hudhayl.\(^{34}\) Accordingly, it is difficult to reconcile the above evidence with the controversial claim that the CV was an elaborate and refined variety based largely on the dialect of Quraysh. Overall, the proponents of this view have failed to advance any convincing linguistic evidence in support of their claim.

It is likely that the system of the inherited proto-Arabic constituted the basic structural systems of the PI old Arabic dialects. In other words, the dialects were derived from that system. It is doubtful, then, that foreign elements played a significant role in formulating those dialects. In course of time, the dialects made some limited linguistic deviations but they retained
the basic elements of the proto-system. This type of relationship differs from that controversial one which exists between the modern Arabic colloquials and the standard variety. Therefore, the CV was probably a recurring or an echo system of the proto-Arabic which is believed to have retained most of the proto-Semitic system. The question that might be raised is: Did the early Arab grammarians succeed in describing or even reconstructing that old system on the basis of the old Arabic dialects? This question has to be scientifically tested through an extensive study of the Arabic linguistic heritage.

We think that, in order to achieve the stated purpose of this study, it is essential to point out briefly and precisely the role and function of the CV in the PI Arabic community, the status it enjoyed in that community, its acquisition, and above all its general relationship with the tribal dialects. We are convinced that this is the only line of investigation which can reveal scientifically whether the PI community was diglossic. The following section will focus on testing some of Ferguson's defining features against the PI linguistic situation which is mistakenly thought as diglossic.

a. Function

It is widely held that the CV was the language of the oral poetry as well as the traditional orations. But this variety was not restricted to that type of function only. It is reported that this variety was to a great extent used in common and ordinary conversations in addition to the tribal dialects. What makes us lean towards this view is the given assumption that the CV is based, in the first place, on the dialects of the Arabic tribes. Furthermore, the CV was acquired as a natural system as it will be pointed out shortly. It is expected, therefore, that, unlike the speakers of modern Arabic colloquials, the speakers, of the old Arabic dialects were certainly able to use the CV in ordinary conversations without encountering any psycholinguistic barriers. It follows then that those speakers had some sort of a relative mastery of the linguistic systems of both their dialects and the CV.

One thing seems to be relevant to this discussion. While propagating the message of Islam, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) had no linguistic difficulty in communicating ordinarily with the Arabs from different tribes dwelling in different places in the Peninsula. This implies that the CV was a part of the daily communication system among the Arabs. It is unlikely that the Prophet (peace be upon him) did use an uncommon linguistic system while conversing with the Arabs. Thus, it is reasonable to say that the CV constituted a fundamental means of communication in daily affairs.
Overall, it is evident that the function of the CV was overlapping with that of the tribal dialect. What is known as the specialized function of each variety was not well-established in the PI stage as it is in the present Arabic diglossic situation. Finally, the fact that the CV was used in ordinary conversations indicates that the PI community was not diglossic according to Feguson's defining features.

b. Acquisition

It is no exaggeration that learning the standard variety, which is considered the H variety in the present Arabic diglossic situation, is not much different from that of learning a foreign language. The Arab learner has to switch from the linguistic system of his natural colloquial variety to a new linguistic system which differs significantly from his own in terms of the grammatical system, lexicon, and to a certain degree, the phonological system. This is done, of course, through fromal education and it usually takes a long time which probably matches that required for learning a foreign language.

This situation can't be viewed as analogous to the PI linguistic situation in which the illiterate Arab used to acquire the CV spontaneously and simultaneously with his local tribal dialect. In other words, his acquired linguistic competence of the CV was based on his natural intuition, known in Arabic as saliqa. This is another strong evidence advanced against the hypothesis of the PI diglossic situation.

c. Grammar

According to Ferguson, striking differences between H and L characterize a diglossic situation. This is, in fact, in accordance with the notion of "broad structural gap" between H and L alluded to earlier. The L grammatical system is usually more simplified than its H counterpart which consists of a sophisticated system. Some H grammatical categories are absent from the L grammatical system. This is quite applicable to the present diglossic situation in which the non-nominal dual and the passive cases, for example, are absent from the Arabic colloquials.

This is not, however, the case in the PI situation in which the aforementioned cases were present in the tribal dialectal systems. Furthermore, the two varieties, the CV and the tribal dialects, are believed to have contained the case endings or i'rāb. Therefore, the CV and the tribal dialects shared a good number of grammatical features which made them very close. It follows, then that the PI linguistic situation was far from reaching a diglossic one.
d. Literary Heritage

It is known that the *PI* Arabic community was illiterate. Its literary scholarship was basically oral. The community had probably received no literary written heritage from previous generations. It is true that the high oral literature at that time enjoyed high esteem, but it is doubtful that the presence of such oral literature only had caused a big difference between the common and the colloquial varieties. Thus, the present diglossic situation which derives partially from the existence of the written literary heritage certainly differs from the *PI* situation.

e. Standardization

No one could claim that the *CV* was standardized during the *PI* stage because it is known that such standardization was initiated in the eighth century and later. That situation was totally different from the contemporary diglossic situation in which the grammar, dictionaries, vocabulary and orthography are well-established for the *H* or standard variety. In fact what is called the *H* variety represented in *CV* in the *PI* stage was ill-defined as it is compared to its new standard form in subsequent times.

On the other hand, the boundaries between the *CV* and the dialects were indistinct and unspecified. That is what actually made the early grammarians confuse the *CV* and the dialects during the process of data collection and language standardization. It may be added that the confusion was not likely due to the unawareness of the grammarians as Abdulttawab claims, but rather to the fact that the grammars of the *CV* and the dialects were sharing common features.

Finally, as far as the conditions of the emergence of diglossia are concerned, it is very doubtful that they were fully met in the *PI* community. A close examination of the conditions especially the third one suggests that diglossia in the Fergusonian sense had failed to develop in that community. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the *PI* linguistic situation was not diglossic, but it was heading towards diglossia in some sense. Put differently, that community may be generally described as one form of a standard/common-with-dialect situation.

IV. THE POST-ISLAMIC STAGE

The most important turning point in the history of Arabic was the revelation of the Holy Qur'ān which has been, among several things, a
linguistic and rhetorical defiance to all Arabs. Its language represents the ideal Arabic language structurally and stylistically. Therefore, the status of the CV was highly raised due to its intimate relationship with the Holy Qur’an.

Following the conquest of the neighbouring countries such as Iraq, Greater Syria and Egypt, Arabic came into contact with the languages which were spoken there such as Coptic, Greek, Syriac, Aramic and Persian. The immigrant Arabs from different Arabic dialectal backgrounds interacted with the newly converted Muslims linguistically and culturally.

It is necessary at this stage of discussion to draw a line of distinction between the new linguistic situation existing outside the Peninsula and its counterpart inside it. Whereas serious linguistic developments were taking place in the former, the latter situation remained somewhat linguistically stable for sometime. In order to trace the development of diglossia, the focus of discussion has to be shifted to the newly conquered places where Arabic, especially the spoken variety, was undergoing serious linguistic changes.

As a result of languages and cultures coming this way in contact, a number of Arabic varieties enriched with foreign elements grew in the military camps in order to serve as a means of communication among the Muslims. Those varieties, which are thought to be based on the migrated tribal dialects, represented the early forms of the Arabic colloquials, or the beginning of colloquialism during the seventh and eighth centuries. The CV, which was one day, and specifically at the beginning of the Islamic conquests, used extensively in social life, started to retreat from the daily affairs in favour of the colloquials which were gradually consolidating their functional role in the speech communities. It is at this stage that the real linguistic dichotomy in Arabic emerged. Chejne has correctly remarked that “the linguistic dichotomy has existed since Arabic became a literary language, following the wide territorial expansion of Islam”.

The ninth and tenth centuries witnessed one of the most important changes in colloquial Arabic, that is the loss of the case ending or i’rāb. The gap between the colloquial variety, known, then, as muwalladah language that is born language, and the CV became too broad. At this stage the systems of the CV and the colloquial became distinct and each assumed a specialized function. The CV which became mostly a written literary variety was restricted to formal occasions, whereas the colloquial variety dominated informal and daily affairs. Furthermore, learning the CV, which was acquired naturally during the PI stage, turned out to be a difficult and long process which could be done only through formal settings such as schools and mosques. This was the actual beginning of diglossia in Arabic.
During the Middle ages, the structural gap between the CV and the colloquials was becoming even broader. In fact, the colloquials were drifting considerably from the CV in terms of structure, lexicon and pronunciation. Such situation made Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) remark that the spoken Arabic variety used in the conquered countries no longer belonged to original Arabic and that it was entirely different from the pure Arabic, known as the language of Muḍar.  

V. THE END OF ARABIC DIGLOSSIA

The final important issue to be discussed here is the hypothetical end of Arabic diglossia, which presumably follows the disappearance of the standard variety in the near future. The question that might be raised in this regard goes as follows: Will the Arabic diglossia come to an end in the future? According to Ferguson, this will happen in about CE 2150 when the standard variety will yield to a number of standard languages based primarily on the colloquials enriched with standard vocabulary. The three predicted standard languages are Maghrebi, Egyptian and Eastern.

This predicted situation seems to be analogous to the Sanskrit and Latin situations. These languages which were dominant in previous centuries as spoken languages ended up in the corner of the history. Latin, for example, had produced the Romance languages such as French, Spanish, Rumanian, Italian and Portuguese. Sanskrit had to Yield to Prakrit. Similary, Arabic, some believe, cannot escape this end.

Our expectation is rather the opposite. The political, social and educational developments in the Arab world suggest that the role of the standard variety will be enhanced in the future. Ferguson and some Arab scholars have certainly underestimated the importance of a crucial factor, namely the intimate and inseparable relationship between the Holy Qur’ān and the standard variety. This type of Arabic, as Fück asserts, “will continue to exist and survive in usage as long as the Islamic culture exists”. It must be emphasised that the Arabic linguistic situation is entirely different from the situations of Latin and Sanskrit. Linguistically, the Bible is not associated with Latin or any other language. A Christian may use any language to perform prayers and he does not have to use the original text of the Bible. The same thing may be said about the Hindu religion. But a Muslim, when praying, must use standard Arabic; the language of the fixed and immutable text of the Holy Qur’ān. Otherwise, his prayers are considered unacceptable. Overall, understanding Islam requires a Muslim to know standard Arabic.

Had it been correct, a similar prediction could have probably come
true in the nineteenth century or at the beginning of this century when the Arabic colloquials were gaining very important grounds at the expense of the standard variety. Many proponents, then, advocated the replacement of the standard variety by the colloquials. As expected, those attempts have failed altogether.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that any human language is susceptible to some kind of linguistic change which runs in accordance with the natural law of linguistic change. Many examples from different languages—Indo-European and Semitic—may be cited in support of this law. It is far from being dogmatic to say, however, that standard Arabic is somehow unique in the sense that it has resisted changes over its long history. This statement may sound, of course, very strong to linguists, but we wonder how they will react when they learn that the grammatical, morphological, and phonological rules used by an early Arab in the sixth century are still used by the twentieth century Arab when he gives a formal speech or writes a letter to a friend of his. We do not deny the fact that the standard variety has borrowed a considerable number of foreign words, but its general structure has escaped linguistic change.

The relative stability of standard Arabic is controlled by two important factors: religious and nationalistic. On the one hand, Arabic is the language of the Holy Qur'an used by Muslim all over the world. On the other hand, standard Arabic is a symbol of Arab identity and unity. Any change in the language is intolerable because it will affect both the nation and the heritage. Thus, unlike Latin and Sanskrit, standard Arabic is deeply rooted in the Islamic-Arabic cultures, an advantage which guarantees it eternal survival.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. I am grateful to Dr Shah Ebadurrahman for reading an earlier version of this work.
3. The terms “standard” and “common” are used synonymously here to refer to the same formal Arabic variety as historically opposed to the modern Arabic colloquials and the old tribal dialects respectively.
11. Ferguson, “Diglossia”.
12. Ibid. 338.


16. Ibid.


20. Ferguson, "Diglossia", 325, n. 2.


22. Ferguson, "Diglossia", 337.


26. See his "al-Izdiwijiyyah fi'l-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah".


41. Salloum, *Dirasat al-Lahajat al-'Arabiyyah*.

42. Staytiyyah, "al-Izdiwājīyāt fi'l-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah".

43. See *Fusul fi-Fiqh al-'Arabiyyah*.

44. Blau, "The Beginning of the Arabic Diglossia: A study of the origins of Neoarabic".


46. Al-Jāhiz, who lived in the ninth century, gave useful and descriptive account of this type of language in *al-Bayān wa'l-Tabyin*. 
47. Fück, *al-'Arabiyyah*.
49. Ferguson, "Diglossia".