It is widely accepted that the Arabicization of Iraq, the Levant, Egypt and North Africa was a process of informal second language acquisition (Holes 1995: 24). The distinction here is that the differences between the resulting Modern Arabic dialects and pre-Islamic Arabic dialects are a function not only of the informal acquisition process, but also of the modification of input by native speakers in this learning process. Both the learning process and the input modification are triggered and conditioned by non-linguistic factors. In this chapter, I introduce the socio-demographic circumstances of the conquests, which caused the acquisition of Arabic and triggered the input type used for the process. The critical role of non-linguistic factors in language change and language shift is stressed by several authors (Thomason and Kaufmann 1988; Fuck 1950; Versteegh 1984). The case of the Arabicization of the Middle East is, however, unique. The novelty in the case of Arabic is that, not only did the circumstances surrounding the conquests affect the process of language acquisition, but the sociolinguistic circumstances before the conquests were also conducive, if not decisive, to the rapid language shift to Arabic.

In order to confirm the role of informal acquisition in the development of Arabic, the relevant non-linguistic factors that affected the manner of language acquisition in the now Arab Middle East, and the modification of the learnable input used in this process, must be explained. The post-conquest socio-demographic circumstances were somewhat uniform in all the provinces of the Arab Middle East, with the exception of North Africa. Therefore, the relevant factors are presented in general terms, without any special attention to one particular province. When examining the socio-demographic factors in the provinces before the Arab conquests, there are major discrepancies in the quantity of data and studies concerning social and economic life. Egypt will be a case study here for the period before the conquests for several reasons. First, there are many new studies on numerous aspect of the Egyptian social history in late antiquity. Second, there are numerous documents from the period at our disposal and available
for analysis, including the third reason, important in its own right, numerous Middle Arabic texts originating from Egypt.

The underlying assumption in this chapter is that not only were the socio-demographic circumstances after the conquests conducive to the spread of Arabic, but before the conquests as well. Three relevant points concerning Greco-Roman Egypt are vital to our purpose here: the socio-demographic situation; the linguistic situation and functional distribution of the language before the conquest; and the position of Greek in non-Greek urban Egypt. It is also claimed here that the non-linguistic ecology of the Arabic language after the conquests was decisive in this respect. The non-linguistic factors enhanced the Arabicization process after the Arab conquests, and prevented Arabs from being absorbed linguistically into the surrounding majority population. Three main factors motivating this conclusion are the numbers of Arab soldiers and migrants in the conquered territories in the first half century of the conquests; the establishment of garrison towns in Iraq, the Levant and Egypt; and development of intercommunication between Arabs and non-Arabs in the conquered territories.

Dealing with these aspects is necessary because it is assumed that there is a positive correlation between the concentration of Arabs in a certain region or area, and the choice of Arabic as a language of communication in and around that particular region. There is also another causative relationship between the manner in which Arabic was acquired, as well as the input used in acquiring Arabic, and the demographic distribution of the Arabs in the conquered territories. The validity of these assumptions is emphasized by the opposite case of Arabic in Persia, where Arabic-speaking tribes were unable to maintain their language as the spoken vernacular in the region after its initial spread in the first two centuries. As a result, they were linguistically incorporated into the Persian speaking population. In Persia, Arabs did not establish garrison towns or urban centres to receive the constant, large incoming waves of Arab migrants. Instead, the Arab migrations were disbursed, and Arabs never established majority groups to impose their own language as a language of communication. Arabs lived on the fringes of existing Persian cities in small numbers, where they had to communicate with the Persian-speaking people for commercial purposes.

The intent of this chapter will be to show that the socio-demographic and ecological factors of the Arab conquests and the manner of Arab