ARABIC ON THE MEDIA: HYBRIDITY AND STYLES*

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1. Introduction

The purpose of media programming is to inform and to entertain. Some programs can be classified as informative, others as entertainment, and others as both. The language used on these programs is expected to reflect these discourse functions. In a diglossic situation, such as that found in the Arabic speech communities, the choice involves two (at times more) relatively distinct varieties, or linguistic codes, of a language: the ‘high’ (standard variety) for information and the ‘low’ (local dialect) for entertainment. In Arabic these correspond to fushâ and ʿammîyya, respectively. Programs classified as being both (information and entertainment) raise a question as to what form of Arabic is, or should be, used. These programs, like the broadcasting media in general, represent ‘hybrid’ contexts that mix, and at times merge, the public and the private, the formal and the informal. They serve as bridges, or ‘in-between’ spaces, where linguistic differences and cultural identities are negotiated in the production of a program or a performance.

The relationship between language and the media is particularly interesting in the Arabic context due to the diglossic nature of its speech communities. Two major forms of Arabic characterize these communities: one is the spoken everyday language of communication (ʿammîyya ‘vernacular/colloquial/dialect’), which is also written in certain contexts,¹ the other a literary variety which is the medium of written communica-

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¹ Personal letters, for example, may be written in dialectal Arabic. In Egypt, certain literary genres are also written in Egyptian Arabic including plays, poetry, and a few biographies (Awad 1965; El Assal 2002–2003). There is also one novel written in Egyptian (Musharrafa n.d.). The practice of including some form of dialect in literature mixed with fushâ is a relatively common practice, particularly when it involves dialogue (Cachia 1990, 59–75, chapter four “The use of colloquial in modern Arabic literature”; Eid 2002).
tion and is also spoken in some formal contexts (fuṣḥā “lit: eloquent, literary”/standard). The two varieties differ in linguistic form, manner of acquisition, function or use, and social meaning/value. The definition of ‘diglossia’ as it was first presented by Ferguson (1959) is given in (1).

1. Diglossia is “a relatively stable language 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) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body 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 sector of the community for ordinary conversation” (Ferguson 1959, Word 15:336).

The definition in (1) presupposes a relationship based on ‘separation,’ both linguistic and cultural, of the two varieties fuṣḥā and dialect. It also reflects the ‘official’ discourse and predominant attitudes toward them. Because of its being the language of divinity and heritage in Islam, the fuṣḥā is considered the language of ‘high culture’ and ‘prestige’ whereas the dialects are local, highly divergent, and often not mutually intelligible, at least at the outset. Fuṣḥā is also considered a unifying force, the pan-Arab ‘national’ language, in the words of Shawqi Daif (2001) luḡat šuʿūb al-ʿumma jamīʿan “the language of all the peoples of the [Arab] nation,” whereas the dialects represent the “daily language of a single people…understood only by its people” hence ‘divisive.’ (Quoted in Boussofara-Omar 2006, 108; see also Haeri 2003 for further discussion.)

Social, political, educational, and technological changes in the 20th century have brought about change in the relationship between the two varieties, particularly in their contexts of use, their market value, and their social meaning. Accessibility to fuṣḥā increased, for example, due to changes in the educational system. In Egypt the availability of free public education through high school and higher education increased the number of people who can use both varieties. Contexts in which fuṣḥā is used increased as well, the broadcasting media as a ‘spoken’ context for fuṣḥā being one. As a result, the media serves as a liberating force: by providing contexts that are not restricted to one variety, the

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2 The media are often criticized for allowing the dialects to creep into domains originally reserved for fuṣḥā. Such intrusions will eventually “dismantle the ties that bond the peoples of the ‘umma [Arab nation]’” (Shawqi Daif 2001, cited in Boussofara-Omar (2006) op. cit.). The broadcasting media, however, are not a domain “originally reserved