

Pan Arab Satellite Television: Between the Language Ideology and Factual Polyglossia

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The present work is focused on the study of impact of pan-Arab satellite TV on the linguistic situation in Arab countries, where the phenomenon of polyglossia reflects the ideological and factual transformation of the ethnically and culturally heterogeneous societies in Middle Eastern and North African countries. The main focus is on the contribution Pan Arab Satellite Television (PAST) is making to the preservation and creation of linguistic norms and strengthening of inter-dialectal communication (IDC). Objects of the study were the audiovisual content of MBC Group and Al-Jazeera Media Network, two major media corporations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

The term “the Arabic language” remains controversial. In Arabic diglossia [Ferguson], we see a clear functional difference between the use of everyday language (dialect) referred to as the “low language” and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) termed the “high language”. The latter is used only in limited communication contexts. Since some dialects can deviate from MSA practically in all linguistic parameters (e.g., in Morocco), some scholars insist on treating MSA and the dialect as two separate linguistic systems. Others, on the other hand, consider only MSA to be Arabic, equating dialects to a distorted version of MSA. Still others believe that the Arabic language is a combination of MSA and a dialect. In the modern Arab world, various dialects and languages of other ethnic groups (e.g. Hebrew) and European languages are widely used along with the Arabic language; therefore, it is fair to say that we are dealing with the phenomenon of polyglossy [Kaplan, Baldauf].

In this study, we use the term “the Arabic language” to mean MSA, which flourished at the beginning of the 19th century and which is associated with the national liberation movement in the Arab world against Ottoman Empire and later with the European occupation, as well as with the activities of Arab thinkers, intellectuals, and writers who called for the revival of the Arab world and the Arab self-awareness.

A sociolinguistic analysis of the PAST’s entertainment content demonstrates its tendency to increase IDC. The format of the television product implies certain language strategies. For example, entertainment talk shows on PAST always include hosts and guests from various Arab states to attract a larger audience and in a certain communicative situation they have to search for a common language and the choice is not in favor of MSA, because live broadcasting and entertainment require maximum realism and naturalness in speech behavior. Often, we observed that communicants from related linguistic - geographical areas understood each other “without switching” to the language / dialect of the interlocutor. And in this case, PAST’s content contributes to the development of both IDC and a kind of inter-Arabic spoken language different from the general Arab MSA.

On the other hand the language policy of the Al-Jazeera news channel, a pioneer in the Pan-Arab television news broadcasting, was originally designed in the spirit of pan-Arabism. Promoting MSA was seen as one of the channel’s main objectives. The scale of the broadcast

network, the quality of access, striving for world standards of journalism, the use of global clichés and the multiple replication of MSA testify to the fact that PAST promotes unification of language standards in news genres.

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