

A Contrastive Analysis of Emirati and Modern Standard Arabic

Curtis Cox¹ and Tendai Charles²

Abstract

This qualitative study employs contrastive analysis to explore the linguistic differences between Emirati Arabic (EA) and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Emirati Arabic, a colloquial variant of MSA, is seldom written, complicating the collection of raw data. To address this, we gathered authentic written samples from local Emiratis via their WhatsApp messages, capturing everyday digital communication. These messages were then analyzed to identify common lexical, grammatical, and morphological discrepancies between EA and MSA. By examining these differences, the study aims to illuminate the challenges faced by Emirati speakers in mastering MSA and to predict potential errors when learning English as a Second Language (ESL). This research underscores the significance of understanding diglossia within the UAE's linguistic landscape and suggests that proficiency in EA impacts learning MSA and ESL. The findings advocate for more nuanced language teaching strategies that consider the unique linguistic context of Emirati learners. This pilot study sets the stage for a broader investigation into the implications of diglossia on language acquisition in the UAE.

Keywords: Diglossia, Colloquial Arabic, Contrastive Analysis, TESOL, L1 Interference

INTRODUCTION

Ferguson (1959) coined the term 'diglossia' and laid out 9 different criteria for a language to be labeled diglossic. He defined diglossia as having a formal form of a language and a colloquial or local form. He referred to the formal form as the High and to the local form as the Low. Chomsky (1981) contended that Greek and Arabic were distinct candidates for diglossia due to the evidence that both of these languages and their diglossic counterparts involve morphology and morphological differences. Classical Arabic (CA) and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) are similar in that CA is the older form of the language and MSA is a close direct descendant of CA adopted in the middle east region in the early nineteenth century. As with most languages, they are living, they are constantly changing and evolving. Sotiropoulos (1977) concludes, the real living structure of their own contemporary language or dialect was interfering in their attempts to speak and even to write a linguistic form of the past. This is certainly the case when looking at Emirati Arabic (EA); the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was united and essentially rose from the sand less than fifty years ago, therefore the language has undergone changes based on immigrants who were nationalized as well as influences from marriage partners taken from abroad. Research shows that MSA and Standard English (SE) share many different grammatical concepts. Although when looking at English in Arabic one would not consider them similar at face value. However, when looking closer you can see things such as the definite article, subject verb agreement, and morphological similarities. The conclusion of a contrastive study on MSA and SE conducted by Ibrahim (2010) shows that, both languages have some shared general universals. This is clear in their attitude towards the classification of noun-formation, especially in affixation, compounding, blending, onomatopoeia and borrowing. The problem here is that these similarities are related to MSA, not the Emirati dialect per se.

In the UAE, much research points to the fact that there is a major deficiency among local people when it comes to modern standard Arabic. This can be seen in classrooms across the country. An example that is commonly found in the classrooms is the students do not know when to use the definite article. This may seem insignificant to most, however, for facilitators of English as a second language (ESL) it is very significant. This is due to the fact that the rule for the definite article is exactly the same in Arabic as it is in English as previously mentioned in this paper. So, under the theory of Comparative Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), this is a concept that English Language Learner (ELL)'s should be able to quickly pick up and apply that rule. Unfortunately, this is not what

¹ PhD Student, Faculty of Education, The British University in Dubai. 20196320@student.buid.ac.ae

² Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, The British University in Dubai. tendai.charles@buid.ac.ae

is seen in the classroom students in the intermediate and intermediate advanced levels still display confusion when it comes to using the definite article correctly. It is possible that although the world for the definite article is exactly the same in MSA and standard English, the fact that most locals are not familiar and educated in the rules of MSA, they cannot make that connection. Therefore, you cannot make the possible connections from modern standard Arabic to English rather the connections need to start with Emirati Arabic or students need to be highly proficient in MSA. This sounds logical however research suggests that there is a major problem in the UAE with students' proficiency levels in modern standard Arabic. Therefore, some decisions need to be made on where to begin with addressing this problem.

The UAE is not the only place riddled with this dilemma of diglossia and limited ability of students to make connections to other language is based on grammar from the colloquial variety of the language. Chew (2013) performed a study on students in Singapore. These students first language was Singlish the study incorporated Singlish into Islamic studies as the medium of instruction. The researcher would give lessons in Singlish and the students would perform exercises in Singlish. The researcher concluded that the use of Singlish had many positive effects on student's ability to understand the material and many psychological and social aspects. Chew (2013) continued by stating, Singlish softens the effect of introducing English instead of Malay and Arabic as the medium of instruction, helps the teacher to evoke camaraderie and fellowship, and is a means of scaffolding. It is possible that the results of this study could help practitioners develop mixed language materials to aid ELLs in the rudimentary levels of ESL.

The purpose or rationale for this study is first to elucidate the presence of diglossia by means of contrastive analysis of collected samples of written Emirati Arabic. This process will give definitive evidence of different grammatical, lexical and morphological instances in the High and Low forms of the diglossia (MSA=H and EA=L). Using the evidence obtained in the first part of the analysis, English will be considered as a third language and contrastive analysis will be performed to bring to light some common errors ELL's, whose mother tongue is EA, encounter. This study is meant to be a minor pilot study to prepare for a much larger study in the near future. Ultimately, there are two research questions guiding this study.

RQ1. What are some common lexical, grammatical or morphological errors in Emirati Arabic that can be seen through contrastive analysis with Modern Standard Arabic?

RQ2. What do these errors translate to in Standard English and what predictions can be made?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Watson's behaviorist theory (Charles & Alzamil, 2023) underpins the theoretical framework in this research study. Observing the natural occurrences of local speakers of EA in an unfiltered unrestricted way allows the researcher to capture the valuable written data only available to the locals actually using EA. The participants of the study have all developed poor habits regarding the linguistics and grammar they have mimicked, consciously and unconsciously, their entire lives. These habits may prove difficult to correct and the development of new language habit may in fact be difficult to ascertain due the longevity of the original language habits they have formed. Additionally, structural linguistics are a means of analyzing words and sentences, so ideally written words are needed in order to analyze data. The absence of written text is arguably the biggest problem researchers face when studying colloquial and formal variations of a language. In many cases, the colloquial variety is not written down in traditional forms such as books and newspaper prints. Therefore, it is extremely difficult for researchers to analyze the written forms of the language. They must rely on creative methods for collecting data. Gordon (2011) states, every Arabic speaking community has a spoken, nonliterary vernacular in addition to the standardized register of literary and spoken language, known as Fusha or Modern Standard Arabic. Further, Zaidan and Callison-Burch, (2014) report that the regional dialects, used primarily for day-to-day dealings and spoken communication, are not taught formally in schools, and remain somewhat absent from traditional, and certainly official, written communication.

Habash, Bouamor, and Oflazer (2014) argue that, while MSA is the shared official language of culture, media, and education from Morocco to the Gulf countries, it is not the native language of any speakers of Arabic. The majority of Arabic speakers admittedly lack prolonged automaticity when speaking in MSA. Rather they

generally rely on code-switching between local and MSA Arabic. Research shows that due to the diglossic nature of Arabic language, people rely on an unwritten language (L) that, in most if not all instances, lacks the presence of formal grammar as in the H form of the language. This is not to say that there is no grammar at all, however, the rules often change or in some cases do not exist at all. The Socratic Problem is a good way to look at arguably the biggest problem researchers face when studying colloquial and formal variations of a language (Charles & Alzamil, 2023). In some cases, the colloquial variety is not written down. Therefore, it is extremely difficult for researchers to analyze the written forms of the language, and they must rely on creative methods for collecting data. Gordon (2011) states, every Arabic speaking community has a spoken, nonliterary vernacular in addition to the standardized register of literary and spoken language, known as Fusha or MSA.

Contrastive analysis was used in the field of second language acquisition as a tool to determine the differences in two languages (Charles, AlAleeli & Al Jebawy, 2023). The evidence would then be used to decide if the second language would be difficult to learn or possibly easier than others. Cohen (1981) explained, contrastive analysis is viewed as an interlinguistic, bidirectional phenomenon which is concerned with both the form and function of language. Using contrastive analysis to determine some of the issues there are between EA and MSA will afford this researcher the opportunity to find and label areas of predicted difficulty then use those to potentially aid students by mere knowledge of the difficulties. Salim (2013) elaborates on contrastive analysis by adding, we study the structures of two languages from two different families (i.e., the source language and the target language) in order to determine the points where they differ. These differences are the chief source of difficulty in learning a second language. Therefore, using contrastive analysis to discover the differences in EA and MSA is a logical choice as a researcher and a facilitator.

Although there are numerous studies that have focused on the topics of diglossia, colloquial varieties and even contrastive analysis of diglossic language in Arabic, this study focuses on the specific situations in the UAE and uses WhatsApp as the instrument of data collection. Another aspect of this study which points to its significance is that the nation is quite young and has undergone incredible changes in the past forty-nine years (Charles, AlAleeli & Al Jebawy, 2023). Many of the previous studies involving the aforementioned topics were conducted in countries that were in existence when MSA was first accepted as the official Arabic. Language, much like most of the happenings in the country, is still very young and in an evolving state. This also includes the education system in the UAE, it has only been around for forty-nine years. There are some challenges that, until now, remain unsolved. One such challenge is the high rate of illiteracy in MSA. Although local people feel confident in their MSA proficiency, in many cases it is a myth. Masri (2019) conducted a study on students' perceptions of their proficiency in MSA and SE, the research exposed that while students are aware of their poor proficiency in English, their relative fluency in Spoken Arabic leads them to believe that they are proficient in it. In fact, results indicate that students have poor proficiency in both Arabic and English which has created an identity dilemma as they are unable to identify completely with either of the two languages. Therefore, it is imperative to investigate the roots of the issues involving EA and MSA to better understand the differences and develop new strategies based on any evidence

METHODOLOGY

A total of twenty native Emirati Arabic speakers were asked to select a WhatsApp text message they had written in Emirati Arabic. The only criteria for participation were that the person's mother tongue was Emirati Arabic and the text message selected was written in Emirati Arabic. The participants were all acquaintances or colleagues to some degree or another. They submitted the text messages under the conditions of anonymity; their names and phone numbers would not be used in the article. The participants all use Emirati Arabic as their primary means of communication. They all have jobs or are in school, therefore are subjected to English. When collecting the WhatsApp messages, the participants were asked two questions: (1) 'What is your mother tongue or first language?' and (2) 'What is your second language?'. The overwhelming response was A, Arabic and B, English. While making the arrangements to collect the data and having the short discussion, participants were guaranteed a copy of the article being written and an explanation of the findings. As previously mentioned in this article, in many cases, native speakers of any dialect of Arabic find it difficult to recognize the diglossia that is present in their language. Therefore, the future explanation of this article will be an enlightening experience.

The design of the study centers around contrastive and morphological analysis. The data collected were put into tables which also included MSA equivalents of the EA as well as SE Translations. The Emirati and MSA text were underlined to show some of the different lexical, grammatical, and morphological discrepancies between the languages. Through this process it made clear some the difference is in both prefix and suffix of words. Also, words that were completely different and EA and MSA were highlighted as well as any prefixes and suffixes attached to the allomorph. The participants in this low-risk study agreed to participate by an informed consent form. Participation in the study was voluntary, WhatsApp messages were chosen and sent by the person who did the original texting. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity, their names and numbers would not be shared with anyone. They were promised that only the relevant components of the messages would be analyzed. The participants were assured that no possible harm could come to them due to participating in this study.

FINDINGS

The Preposition ‘to’

Table 1 reveals the lack of the use of the preposition (to). Native speakers of EA naturally omit the use of إلى. Again, this is an instance of the dilemma in the low end of diglossic language. In modern standard Arabic إلى (ela) is the translation of the preposition (to) in English. However, because the students are not proficient in Modern Standard Arabic, they are unable to naturally make the connection through translation of the word.

Table 1 إلى

Standard English	Modern Standard Arabic	Emirati Arabic
Did you go <u>to</u> the mall today?	هل ذهبت <u>إلى</u> المجمع اليوم؟	رحتي المول اليوم؟

Future Tense

Simply put, future time is rendered by the affixing of the future particles (س) and (سوف) (sa and sowfa) in MSA. This indicates that the speaker is speaking about something that has not been completed or will happen in the future. Although these particles are part of very complex grammar and reasons for using them, such as willingness, intention, and promise, for the purpose of this study simply the particles will be used. In Emirati Arabic the particles (ب) and (بساوي) (b and basaowe) are used for the same purposes. These are instances where the writer could possibly use CAH and successfully make the connection to first MSA and subsequently the English equivalents.

In English we use a variety of different words and word combinations to express future time and for different purposes. The example in Table 2 the formula is be+going to+verb. In example A both MSA and EA use a prefix to indicate the future. The examples (س) and (ب) are connected to the verb telling the reader that something will happen in the future. Although it is not part of this particular study, it is worth noting that the same verb prefixed by the future particles are also suffixed with different gender suffixes. This is not to say male and female, but rather different in the same sense of the future particle. They are completely different in MSA and EA.

Table 2 ب and س

Standard English	Modern Standard Arabic	Emirati Arabic
Ok I'm <u>going to wait</u> for you outside. Text me when you are done	حسناً، سأنتظرک في الخارج. أرسلني لي رسالة عند الانتهاء	انزين ينتظر ج برع. طرشيلي مسج يوم تخلصين

Yes – No Questions

In Table 3, there is yet another visible problem. The question word هل (hel) is present in the MSA text but omitted from the EA text. هل is used in this sentence as people would use (are) as the first word of a question.

The question word هل can represent other meanings such as (do you), however, in the particular sentence shown in the table, هل is the equivalent of (are) in a question.

As a facilitator of ESL in the UAE, teaching local students how to write questions is a rather daunting task. This makes a lot of sense based on the fact that they are accustomed to not using هل to begin question that would in MSA require them to do so. Although some of the other question words are often used in EA, there is evidence that suggests that simple yes – no questions using the verb to be or do+subject+verb to communicate a question could be a potential problem.

Table 3 هل

Standard English	Modern Standard Arabic	Emirati Arabic
Did you go to the mall today?	هل ذهبت الى المتجمع اليوم؟	رحتي المول اليوم؟
Are we going out?	هل سنخرج؟	ينطلع؟

Negation

In the example shown in Table 4 the writers used different words to negate the sentence. Although both are commonly used in both EA and MSA, in MSA لا (la) is used in the present tense and ما (ma) is used to negate in the past. This is a rather perplexing find, in EA, لا is used to simply say no, whereas ما is used for everything else. This too may have some sort of negative impact on student's ability to negate words in SE in different tenses.

Table 4 ما and لا

Standard English	Modern Standard Arabic	Emirati Arabic
I don't know	لا أعلم	ما اعرف

Word Substitution

In Table 5 each sentence is stating the same thing. However, the choice of words has everything to do with the differences of MSA and EA. These texts represent the “distinct diglossia” Chomsky referred to in his 1981 discussion on diglossia. The MSA literally translated states, “she has beautiful homes” whereas the EA literal translation to SE states, “it has sweet houses”. The MSA translation refers to “she” based on the gender of the noun “city”. The writer is talking about his city “Al Ain”. In Modern Standard Arabic nouns and adjectives always carry gender, they use مذكر (masculine) or مؤنث (feminine). Names of cities are always مؤنث following the gender of مدينة (city). The EA text below demonstrates that the مذكر (masculine) or مؤنث (feminine) gender rules do not always apply when using EA. SE does not follow gender rules such as these, however, it is possible ELLs will try to carry this over into SE. Therefore, the gender rules could have potential to create an issue.

Table 5 Word Substitution

Standard English	Modern Standard Arabic	Emirati Arabic
It has beautiful houses	لديها منازل جميلة	فيها بيوت حلوة

Past Tense

In Table 6 there is a mix of substitution and correct MSA grammar in the EA sentence. Looking at the root word رح (rah) in EA is the substitution for the root word ذهب in MSA they both mean “go” in SE. Although they are completely different words, they both have two suffixes attached to them making the words first past tense and second feminine. This example shows that although allophones are entirely different and seem to have no connection, they still share morphological similarities in a double suffix. This appears to be an example of what Sotiropoulos (1977) described as trying to fit ancient grammar into modern language. The consistent use of the past tense particle leads the author of this paper to predict that students may be able to use past tense successfully in SE.

Table 6 ت for past tense

Standard English	Modern Standard Arabic	Emirati Arabic
Did you go to the school today?	هل ذهبتِ الى المدرسة اليوم؟	رحتي المدرسة اليوم؟

DISCUSSION

To start with, it is important to discuss the fact that in everyday speech, no one speaks or write perfectly. SE nor MSA should be seen as the only way to speak all of the time. Native speakers of English often speak quickly and conveniently in order to communicate a message or ask a quick question. For example, “you want to go to the beach”? this question obviously lacks the proper structure of a question in SE, however, to native speakers of English, the meaning is easily discerned.

The question is how then practitioners compensate for such diversity in the language especially without knowledge of the diversity to begin with. Western teachers account for the majority of teaching staff in the Middle East. According to the International Schools Consultancy, International schools in the Middle East currently employ the highest percentage of Western teachers in the world at 86% of all full time staff (Charles & Alzamil, 2023). This is an incredible number that should be recognized as a possible area for research. If the teachers in these schools are under the assumption that Arabic is Arabic and that students possess proficient levels of Arabic grammar, in the formal form of MSA, then there a significant number of teachers teaching ignorant to the real situation.

The reality of the enormous grammatical and lexical differences between EA and MSA illuminated by this small study clearly justify further far more in-depth studies. Many of the students of the UAE are at a sort of disadvantage when it comes to having foundational grammar in their mother tongue to make connections with grammars in other languages, which could ultimately ease the intensity of second language acquisition. The current situation in the UAE has the potential to get much worse before it gets better based on the fact that currently in the UAE, students’ proficiency MSA is far below what is expected.

CONCLUSIONS

Emirati Arabic is distinct part of the culture in the UAE. It is spoken with pride and the local people who speak it carry several positive connotations connected with the popularity and success of their nation. Unfortunately, the language has great potential to disrupt and or hinder progress when working to learn both SE and MSA. The research provided and the simple yet effective displays of contrastive analysis of EA and MSA, demonstrate there is great potential for further research into this particular situation. People whose first language is one that has evolved from a formal language, but does not entirely parallel its grammar, leaves its users in a complicated situation. They may not even be aware that the grammar exists, thus when learning either MSA or SE make mistakes by omission. Therefore, it is the opinion of the author of this paper that more research be done and brought to the attention of policy makers so that in the future students will have at least one formal language to base the CAH on. This is not to say that the CAH is entirely correct or that it will solve all of the problems related to this particular diglossic situation, but it appears to be at the minimum a possible place to start.

There is a considerable number of studies on the topic of Arabic diglossia. However, there are none which directly sought to analyze EA. As aforementioned, this small study is the prelude to a much larger and deeper study into the possible negative effects EA could be having on students’ success in the SLA. the future study should include precisely mapping out the grammar used and omitted from EA and then predicting the possible difficulties ELLs could face. Moreover, such a study would give facilitators of SE a better perspective of where the students are coming from and potentially help them in creating curriculum, materials and methods designed specifically for students in the UAE. This is not to say that the current curriculum needs changing, however, as a facilitator of English, it is safe to say much lies in the darkness at this point.

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