

## Translation and Diglossia: The Case for translating into Ammiyah (Colloquial)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complex sociolinguistic landscape of diglossia in the Arabic language and argues for the strategic incorporation of Ammiyah (colloquial Arabic) in translation practices. In the Arab world, a distinct binary exists between the highly prestigious FusHa (Classical or Modern Standard Arabic)—traditionally reserved for formal writing, religious texts, and institutional speeches—and the various localized vernaculars used in daily communication. While traditionalist views have historically condemned Ammiyah as a corrupted form of the language, modern linguistics recognizes its vital role in authentic human interaction. This study demonstrates that relying exclusively on FusHa in translation can produce artificial and emotionally detached renderings, particularly within contexts demanding realism and emotional resonance. Through a qualitative review of media trends, the study highlights the profound impact of colloquial dubbing in TV dramas, as seen in the sweeping success of Turkish and Latin American soap operas over formal FusHa iterations. Furthermore, a comparative case study evaluates selected English idioms and lexical items (such as "the die is cast," "put the cart before the horse," "disposable," "much ado about nothing," and "gate-crasher") across five major English-Arabic dictionaries. The findings reveal that standard dictionaries often fall back on literal, lengthy, or contrived FusHa definitions that fail to strike a chord with the target audience. Conversely, dynamic colloquial equivalents—particularly from Libyan Ammiyah—offer more lucid, culturally accurate, and succinct translations. Ultimately, the paper presents a complementary framework for Arabic diglossia, advocating that rather than opposing one another, FusHa and Ammiyah should coexist as specialized linguistic tools. Translators are encouraged to balance formal registers with colloquial dialects to enhance the accessibility, humor, and natural flavor of audio-visual, literary, and informal target texts.

**Keywords:** Diglossia, Ammiyah (Colloquial Arabic), FusHa (Modern Standard Arabic), Translation Studies, Dynamic Equivalence, Audiovisual Translation (AVT), Idioms, Libyan Dialect

### Introduction

Language is not a static being, but rather a flexible one. The more the number of speakers with their different environments and the gap widening between them, the more this helps in generating dialects of this language. These dialects have characteristics that distinguish them from their sisters. This is not true of the Arabic language alone, but it applies to English as well; we see, for example, American, British, Australian, Indian, and African English, and in each dialect we find many other forms of dialects. America, for example, which is comprised of fifty states and 325 million people, with an area that represents an entire continent with two other countries, Mexico and Canada, more than one dialect is

spoken there. Some of them you may not be able to understand. German, too, has different dialects. That of the southern Germans is not the same as that of the northerners, for instance.

### **The Case of the Arabic Language:**

Translation from English into colloquial Arabic is a complex task that requires a profound understanding of both languages and their cultural and social contexts. The colloquial Arabic language, also known as spoken Arabic, is used in everyday conversation and has a significant variation from the formal written Arabic language. This type of translation demands a high level of linguistic and cultural competence to accurately convey the meaning of the source text in the target language.

The Economist (2018) describes Arabic as a macrolanguage with a number of different dialects that vary across the Arab World. Sociolinguists distinguish two types of Arabic: FusHa and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) which is used in serious writing and formal public speech, and a bunch of widely diverging vernaculars which people employ for everyday communication purposes, known as colloquial or Ammiyya. According to Al-Wer (2018: 53,54) linguists have a more detailed classification for modern variants of Arabic Ammiyya, which is divided into six major groups: Peninsular, Mesopotamian, Levantine, Egyptian, Sudanese, and Maghrebi. These dialects are so influential that purist linguists fear that they might destroy classical Arabic. Their influence is clearly powerful as they have penetrated all aspects of life. Miller puts it that "Since the early 20th century, the dialects of the main cities are often emerging as national or regional standards in both the Maghreb and the Middle East. In this respect they are competing with Modern Standard Arabic (MSA, Fushā) as prestigious norms in the Middle East". (Miller 2004:180)

There is a diglossic linguistic situation that exists in this language. Kamusella (2015: 122) defines Diglossia as "a situation wherein all or many members of a speech community or this community's elite employ two or more conspicuously different varieties of a language in clearly delineated separate spheres of (social and political) life." The phenomenon called 'diglossia' was first introduced to the anglophone academia by Ferguson. He explains that:

Diglossia in Arabic refers to the phenomenon of co-existence of two distinct language varieties in the same speech community each of which is used for specific linguistic and communicative purposes by its speakers. In the case of Arabic, the standard variety (classical Arabic) is used in formal speeches, university lectures and news media. In contrast, the colloquial variety is used in everyday speech in informal conversational situations by ordinary educated and uneducated Arabs alike. (1959: 325-340)

How is this situation, i.e. diglossia viewed by Arab linguists and language educators? How is FusHa regarded vis-à-vis Ammiyya?

Arabic language is regarded by millions of Arabs and Muslims as a unique and holy language because it is the language of the Holy Quran which is famous for its linguistic inimitability. Not all varieties are regarded with the same respect. FusHa or classical Arabic, for example, is regarded as unique and prestigious, while the other variety, Colloquial or Ammiyah, spoken by the layman is looked at by a

number of grammarians and traditional educators as a bastardized form of the eloquent, beautiful classical Arabic, the language of the Holy Quran.

Dr. Shaheen explains that

The Arabic language ... (according to Al-Jahiz) is a revelation from God to be a miracle and evidence of Ismail's prophecy. It was believed that this amazing strange formation (i.e. language) could not have been made by humans; It is absolutely certain that man at that time was not worthy ... to be conferred upon this honor. This is due to their lack of knowledge of human struggle over the centuries, however ... For them, history from its inception did not exceed a few thousand years, while anthropological research and geology research both confirm that human life on earth is no less than two and a half million years old" (Shaheen 1988, p. 69-70).

Such a noble and prestigious form of the language that is worthy of conveying God's message must be the language of elevated literature and works of art. On the other hand, the other variety, Ammiyya, is not worthy of such honor as Hussein, D. (1956: 111) describes in this account on the writers of literature in Ammiyya. He scathingly describes them as:

...miserable with their art as they lack the means of performance. Their works are like a masterful beauty displayed in shabby, flimsy clothes that spoil its beauty, and the reason for that is their departure from what people have written of the images of eloquence, and the preference for eloquence over inarticulacy, and when they felt helpless, they revolted against the language itself and waged a war against it ... It is not right at all that classical Arabic has died, or is on the verge of death - as some claim ... It is not right that it has been overtaken by weakness ... and a sign of this is that people use it when they express themselves ... They write in it without embarrassment; they write books and translate what other foreigners write... and publish newspapers and magazines, and people read that without finding anything wrong with it. This is not a sign of a language that has died, but rather of a language that is still alive and capable of life. Our young writers are mistakenly developing when they think that classical Arabic cannot be correct unless it takes that ancient form that they were familiar with in ancient poetry and prose during the first three or four centuries of migration (of the prophet from Mecca to Medina to escape persecution).

Ammiyya is mostly confronted with scathing criticism when compared with FusHa. Modern linguistics rejects this normative view, however, and recognizes these two varieties as equal and can be useful in different contexts. While classical Arabic is used in formal situations, colloquial can be used in less formal, more informal situations.

The field of translation has attracted numerous researchers who have attempted to study the challenges and difficulties of translating colloquial Arabic. For instance, "The Translation of Colloquial Arabic: A Study of the Translation of Spoken Arabic into English" by Hala Bassiouny (2009) explored the challenges of translating colloquial Arabic and the importance of understanding the cultural context of the source language. Translating English into colloquial Arabic requires a thorough understanding of both languages and their respective cultural backgrounds because that is crucial for a successful translation.

Therefore, the question that is constantly pressing, however, is what if classical Arabic fails to give us a convincing equivalent word, phrase, idiom, or expression when translating a text from a foreign language, especially when there exists a colloquial equivalent that is capable of conveying the meaning more smoothly and eloquently; a meaning that strikes a chord at a more profound level with the audience?

The main argument of this research paper is that Colloquial Arabic (across the board) sometimes has the ability to convey meaning more lucidly and effectively than Classical Arabic. To prove my point, I have done a case study on a collection of words and expressions which I have looked up in five English Arabic dictionaries, all of which use Classical Arabic, and I have found that these words and phrases are better translated from English into Ammiyya rather than FusHa.

### **Ammiyah is more successful than FusHa:**

There are a few areas where Ammiyah has proven its success over FusHa and one of these areas is TV Drama. There exist a few living examples where Ammiyya achieved a sweeping success over FusHa. In the 1990s, for example, South American telenovelas were incredibly popular in the Arab world and they were unbelievably successful. They were dubbed in FusHa, of course, but when we compare the sweeping success that the Turkish drama has achieved over the last 19 years (since 2007) we immediately realize that Turkish drama has been more successful than its south American counterpart. This success can be attributed to a number of reasons among which the dubbing language is definitely one.

Turkish series have been very successful for such reasons as cultural proximity, geography, etc. However, language, too was a great factor as dubbing those series in the Syrian Ammiyya, inter alia, has made it remarkably easy for the audience to build connections and identify with the characters. I will argue here that if FusHa was chosen for dubbing, it would not have made the same impact as it would have sounded artificial. Ammiyya has made a bigger impact because it complements the whole experience. Now Latin telenovelas are back on Arabic satellite networks, especially MBC, and all the telenovelas are dubbed in Ammiyya not in FusHa. This is not to say that FusHa is not popular, but Ammiyya is definitely more popular as it makes the whole show or experience more vivid.

Mohamed Al-Taleb, an Art critic, believes that the relationship of the Moroccan viewer with dubbed dramas is not a new one. He reports that

History reminds us that the Moroccan viewer is accustomed to Mexican and Brazilian soap operas which are alien to the cultural and social environment of Moroccans ... In addition to their focus on the characters, conflicts and dramatic events, [Moroccan viewers] were also interested in the dubbing language so much so that what was translated into French was better than what was translated into the Arabic language (FusHa).

In the same interview with Hesperess electronic newspaper, the Moroccan critic adds "the success of Turkish drama in Morocco is due to the choice of Moroccan dubbing, which brought the viewer closer to the worlds of this drama and enabled them to follow it easily".

Indeed, Dubbing TV series into colloquial Arabic is done to make the content more accessible and relatable to a wider audience. By using a colloquial dialect, the dubbed version can better capture the nuances and cultural references that are specific to the target audience. This can lead to increased

engagement and a stronger connection to the characters and storylines, making the viewing experience more enjoyable. Additionally, by using colloquial Arabic, the dubbed version may be easier for people to understand, especially those who are not fluent in the standard version of the language.

With the technology that we have today a number of amateur and also professional translators are beginning to use Ammiyya in their translations, especially in movie subtitles. The subtitling is still done in Arabic but with spurts of Ammiyya used here and there namely for the things for which FusHa fails to provide an equivalent that strikes a chord at a profound level with the audience. For example,

I hope they treat you nicely

ربنا يحنن قلوبهم عليك

Would you like beer or coffee?

Beer.

Beer it is.

مشيها بييرة

It is a new car, my foot.

قال سيارة جديدة قال

To further illustrate my point the following is a list of words which I have come across in many FusHa contexts and whose rendering was not useful and rather long sometimes to fill the space it was aimed for. This list was thoroughly researched in 5 major English-Arabic dictionaries some of which are quite popular such as Al-Mawrid. Not only did I critique the FusHa equivalents, but I also suggested equivalents from Ammiyah including the Libyan Ammiyah and others.

#### **The die is cast:**

According to Dictionary.com this idiom refers to “the irrevocable decision [which] has been made; [or the] fate [that] has taken charge”. It speaks of a state of *being too late* to do something about a given situation.

Mazhar (1949: 99) translates it as *رُميت الكعوب* which is but a literal translation of the English idiom. Baalbaki (2008: 343) offers the Dynamic Equivalence of <sup>1</sup>سبق السيف العذل i.e. “The sword has been used so blame is useless now”. Doniach (1972: 328) chose to use the idiomatic expression *فُضِيَ الأمر* i.e. “the matter has been decided (and there is no going back)” which is a commonly used expression in both the Arabic language as well as the Holy Quran. In the same manner Karmi (1991: 220) renders this idiom pictorially as *نفذ السهم* i.e. “the arrow has gone through”.

<sup>1</sup> Dynamic equivalence is a strategy suggested by Nida in translation to instigate the same effect in the TT as the one in the ST. (See Nida and Taber .....).

In an article about the division of the Sudan on Al-Jazeera.net some political figures called for a debate when the country had already started dividing. Observe: “أما جاتكوث فاعتبر أن المناظرة جاءت بعد فوات<sup>2</sup> الأوان فقد سبق السيف العذل

We have a rhyming proverb in Arabic that goes *وقعت الفأس في الرأس*, i.e. “the axe has penetrated the head” so it is *too late* to change anything because everything has been decided. Refer to: [http://www.aleqt.com/2011/03/08/article\\_512308.html](http://www.aleqt.com/2011/03/08/article_512308.html)

### Put the cart before the horse:

According to Dictionary.com this idiom means that “... the proper order of things or events [is reversed]... ” Baalbaki (2008: 194) translates it literally as *يضع العربى قبل الحصان*. Mazhar, on the other hand, (1949: 64) attempts to render it into its broader sense as *يعمل بضمق*, i.e. “to act foolishly”. Doniach (1972: 190) fails in translating it and rather provides an explanation of the meaning of the idiom in *عكس الترتيب الطبيعى*. Karmi (1991: 125) opted for the idiomatic explanation *وضع الأمر فى غير نصابه الصحيح*, i.e. “to put things in the wrong order”.

Upon researching the currency of the above translations, it seemed that the literal translation of this idiom has the highest rate of usage in the media. For example, in an article about the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu’s proposal to travel to Damascus and start negotiations with Syria, Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper (5 March, 2010)<sup>3</sup> uses this idiom to express Bashar Al-Assad’s reply to Netanyahu’s proposal:

“... لا يجب أن نضع العربى قبل الحصان، ويجب على إسرائيل أولاً الإعلان عن الانسحاب من الجولان إلى خط 1967”

I suggest to translate this idiom by using its equivalent from the Libyan culture. Libyans say “*الزيت يقلى و الحوت<sup>4</sup> فى البحر (!)*”. It is used exclamationarily when people disagree with how things are done or sarcastically when they do not agree on how something is done. Observe this dialogue:

#### Person 1:

أنا مسافر الى أمريكا. لم أتحصل على التأشيرة بعد، و لكن سأذهب غداً لشراء تذكرة السفر.

#### Person2:

Colloquial Libyan = شنو<sup>5</sup> .. الزيت يقلى و الحوت فى البحر؟

<sup>2</sup> Please refer to: <http://www.aljazeera.net/nr/exeres/812665d0-0203-4733-ad1f-35051d05ea12.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=11420&article=559816&feature=>

<sup>4</sup> In colloquial Libyan the word *سمك* for fish is not used. We use *حوت*, i.e. whales instead. It is not used in most of North Africa. *سمك* is more used in the Egyptian dialect, the Levantine dialect and in the Gulf.

<sup>5</sup> *شنو* means “what” in the Libyan and the Kuwaiti dialects. It has another variation and that is *ثيني*. In the context above, however, it is better translated into “so”.

**Disposable:**

According to [www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com) this adjective means “intended to be thrown away after use. [For instance,] *disposable nappies [and] ... disposable razors*”

Arabic language, due to morphological reasons and limitations, fails to provide a one-word equivalent for this adjective. Karmi (1991: 230, for example, attempts and provides the one word-phrase للزّمي, i.e. “to be disposed of” here. Doniach (1972: 339) provides the somewhat long phrase يُلقى بعد استعماله which is also the case for Colin (1991: 154) as he renders it as يُطرح بعد الاستعمال. Baalbaki (2008: 356) suggests the word إطراحي which is contrived as it is rarely used and, therefore, not easily understood.

Generally speaking “disposable items” are either called مواد ورقية or بلاستيكية in Arabic. This, however, creates a problem in phrases such as “disposable cameras”. That is, we cannot use the words ورقية and بلاستيكية when talking about cameras. In addition, using the long phrases provided above is not possible because of their length. Therefore, I suggest using the metaphoric two-word Libyan collocation خُط و لَوَح, i.e. Scrape and Throw Away, which symbolizes the action of safety matches and fireworks since they are disposable. Hence,

أكواب خط و لوح , كاميرات خط و لوح , etc.

<https://ar.libyaobserver.ly/article/16278>

**Much ado about nothing:**

According to [www.phrases.org.uk](http://www.phrases.org.uk)<sup>6</sup>, this proverb means “A great deal of fuss over nothing of importance”.

Baalbaki (2008: 34) suggests the canonical translation of Shakespeare’s play into Arabic جعجة ولا (بدون) طحن, and the same was suggested by Karmi (1991: 13). Doniach (1972: 18) and Colin (1991: 10), however, provide explanations of this proverb as follows: ضجة كبيرة على لا شيء and صخب دون سبب.

It seems that جعجة بدون طحن has the highest rate of currency in MSA<sup>7</sup>. For instance, on [Aljazeera.net](http://Aljazeera.net)<sup>8</sup> an article about the Davos Forum was titled منتدى دافوس: جعجة بلا طحين to convey the message that there is a lot of excitement about it when it is not that important due to its poor contribution to solving the world’s problems. There is in the Libyan culture a proverb that literally says “Much shouting and crowds over a hedgehog’s slaughter”, i.e. عبطة و شهود على ذبيحة قنفوذ. The slaughter of any animal is no occasion for tumult and the gathering of a crowd, especially in a country of meat-eaters and much less when the victim is a hedgehog.

**Gate-crasher:**

<sup>6</sup> [www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/251500.html](http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/251500.html)

<sup>7</sup> Modern Standard Arabic

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.net/ebusiness/2011/1/24/%D9%85%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%89-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B3-%D8%AC%D8%B9%D8%AC%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%B7%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%86>

This is an Americanism that according to [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com) means “a person who enters, attends, or participates without a ticket or invitation”

English language again offers a word to which Arabic morphology stands resistant. Baalbaki (2008: 484) provides no translation for the noun but rather for the verb, “gate-crash”, where he suggests يدخل من غير ان يدفع رسماً أو يتلقى دعوة. Karmi (1991: 334) provides واغل which is but a contrived form of the verb وغل, i.e. to intrude/obtrude upon. Doniach (1972: 487) and Colin (1991: 223) provide متطفلاً ... حضر حفلاً and الذهاب بدون دعوة.

Almaany dictionary<sup>9</sup>, however, suggests متطفل, but it is not very accurate as متطفل means “parasitic” and it does not suggest the same concept accurately. Colloquial Arabic provides the answer sometimes as the Libyan culture presents the phrase كلب أعراس as a dynamic equivalent for gate-crasher. It is comprised of two words: كلب, i.e. “dog” and أعراس (plural of عرس), i.e. a wedding party. In Libya dogs are generally conceived of as straying animals and they eat whatever they find in the refuse to which, of course, they need no invitation. Therefore, if a person goes to a (wedding) party without being invited then s/he behaves like a dog and, hence, s/he is a كلب(ة) أعراس.

### Conclusion:

So in sum, my take on this issue is that Classical and Colloquial Arabic (Ammyah) are two types of language which coexist and do not have to be at war with each other. The invention of the car did not mean that all the horses in the world were exterminated. The very practical adoption of Colloquial Arabic by the masses as a medium of communication does not in the least imply that Classical Arabic, or Modern Standard Arabic for that matter, will disappear. The fact of the matter is that each type of Arabic has its own special domain, or fields of application, its own resources, its own audience, and indeed its own effects. Classical, or FusHa Arabic is the medium of formal occasions, of literature, of religion, of tradition and of shared values among Arabs all over the world. Colloquial Arabic, or Ammyah, on the other hand, is the medium of intimate communication between friends and family, of realism, humor, emotion, human interest and everyday human interaction.

In translation between languages, balance is the key. There are some texts which can be translated better into FusHa (Classical Arabic / Modern Standard Arabic) because they are formal; official; written by an academic; religious; legal; etc. However, there are other cases where the translator has to use Ammyah (Colloquial Arabic) in order to better transfer the message. For example: in dialogues; comedies; children’s books; ads; social media; scenes of drama; emotional scenes; etc. In such cases, Ammyah would convey the message in a more natural and effective way than would FusHa. Human speech is not always formal and so it would be wrong to translate everything into FusHa as if everyone were lecturing in a conference.

In conclusion, Ammyah is a legitimate variety of Arabic, and should be used by the translator in appropriate contexts. Since no two situations are alike, there will be instances where Ammyah can be used to better effect than FusHa. For instance, informal dialogue, satire, children’s stories,

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.almaany.com/home.php?word=>

advertisements, social media, drama, and any emotionally charged situation will lose their natural flavor and feel unnatural and forced if they are translated into formal Arabic. Consequently, the translator needs to have a repertoire of situations in which he can opt for Ammiyah. There are many occasions in which Ammiyah will be more adequate to the translator's objectives than a so-called 'pure' variety of Arabic. The translator's object is to produce a translation that is acceptable to the target audience, and thus he or she must attempt to produce the closest possible approximation in the target language, in the appropriate variety of Arabic.

To conclude, the relationship between Classical Arabic (FusHa) and Colloquial Arabic (Ammiyah) is a positive and complementary one. Both have their own fields of application. When used properly, they can increase the accuracy and naturalness of a translation and give it greater power. It is not for the translator to wage war between the two forms of the language, since, in creating cars, for example, man did not kill the horses. Translation into Arabic is in good hands when both forms of Arabic are given the freedom to develop and to be used as needed, to be used for what they are good for.

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