Language and Society in the Middle East and North Africa
Studies in Variation and Identity

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CHAPTER TWELVE

LANGUAGE AND DIASPORA: ARABS, TURKS AND GREEKS

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Introduction

Several years ago, a Jewish refugee named Hans Heinz Altmann, who had left Germany just before the Second World War to live in Bolivia and Argentina, published a book with the moving title Muttersprache: Heimat der Heimatslosen (Altmann 1992). Translated into English, the title means approximately Mother Tongue: the Home of the Homeless. For Altmann, this refers to German, the language which is the quintessence of patriotism for German emigrants.

There is, of course, a substantial body of literature in various languages dealing with migration and diasporas. In recent years, new periodicals have started to appear on the subject of immigrants and their problems, such as Migration (Berlin), The International Migration Review (New York), or Immigrants and Minorities (London). More recently, in 1991, yet another, entitled Diaspora, began to appear in New York. However, studies on the subject under consideration here, whether in book or article form, important and useful as they are, have devoted only limited attention to language as a socio-political issue among immigrants originating in the Middle East and North Africa. With the growth in the number of these immigrants in recent years and increasing tendency to become settled rather than transient, linguistic nationalism has gained in significance both among the majorities in the host countries and among the immigrant communities. A linguistic culture has increasingly become the chief bond between human beings, binding them together into nations. Within the diasporas, one perceives a continuing struggle between those desiring to adopt policies of cultural assimilation in their host country and those tending to maintain close cultural ties with their
home country. This is reflected in language instruction, literary output and cultural activities, among other things. Assimilatory pressures in the host countries have varied, as has the involvement of the home countries in helping to strengthen the immigrants' original culture. Language rights have been a frequent issue of dispute (Kloss 1971). It is however the varied response in the realm of language within the immigrant communities themselves which will be our major concern in this paper, where we shall attempt to assess it, its factors and results. The main cases discussed will be the Arab, Turkish and Greek diasporas, concluding with some comparative remarks between these and other immigrant groups from the Middle East within a more general framework.

Some General Observations

Among the general patterns of diaspora creation in our days, several features seem to stand out. First, the tempo of growth of immigrant communities, worldwide, usually directed towards finding jobs in countries which are more economically and industrially developed than their own. Over time, not a few labour migrations crystallise into incipient diasporas. Second, the fact that a part of this immigration is made up of illegal workers sometimes adversely affects their claims for language rights, as well as other matters. Third, immigrants seem to constitute more compact communities in or near urban centres; this has been the traditional European pattern, while the American one, formerly characterised by relatively swift dispersal throughout the United States, is coming to resemble it (due to the massive Hispanic immigration into certain states). Fourth, there has been a speedy increase in the number of 'small' languages employed by diverse immigrant groups. And fifth, some immigrant groups contain speakers of more than one language; thus, the Turks include a large component of Kurds, the Moroccans and Algerians numerous Berbers. These factors, in a changing situation, have posed serious problems for planners of language policies in many countries and to opinion shapers within the immigrant communities themselves. Their dilemma is between language maintenance, on the one hand, and a cushioning of language transition, chiefly for the children of the immigrants, on the other (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1984:17-44). Nonetheless, this has complicated the work of officials in many countries, who have tended
to show limited interest in adult language instruction and have
concentrated on the children. These and other processes have had
varying results in different countries, characteristically affected by
several of the above variables.

Quite probably, in the context of our discussion, language
nationalism (Wood 1981; Rogers 1981) is the main factor influencing
cultural attitudes within diaspora groups, host countries and home
countries. The seeds of language conflicts are there (Nelde 1989:277-
287). To put it bluntly, certain groups within the majority in
multilingual states believe that linguistic borders ought to conform to
political ones; in other words, that modern nations are denoted by
language boundaries, hence that the state must be homogeneous in
language, that is, monolingual. This rather extreme view in several host
countries is countered by sharply different perceptions in certain of the
diasporas' home countries, viz., that language rights are basic to
pluralistic democratic societies, indeed that they are part and parcel of
radical elements in both host and home countries argue that language
has always been a component of traditional culture and of collective
memory. Both sides are prone to appeal to imagined myths and, not
surprisingly, to reach diametrically opposed conclusions. The home
country, in particular, has frequently used myths of homeland and

As for the diasporas themselves, their language nationalism has
often been an initial response to the cultural and language pressures of
the new environment, in their respective host countries. Thus, they
were sometimes perceived as a diverse element by the majorities in
those lands, especially in new states suspicious of separatist trends.
Large-scale immigration fuelled inter-community conflicts. Some
historians have considered ethno-nationalism the preserve of
intellectuals, although this applies only partially to the language
attitudes of immigrant communities, whose cultural ties to their home
countries seem to be championed by various social elements. Those
supporting linguistic rapprochement with, or even assimilation into, the
host countries, are equally heterogeneous. Lastly, it seems that the
shared memories of the diaspora are based on religion and customs and
on language (together with other, apparently lesser commonalities,
such as forms of literature, arts, crafts, architecture, music and dance).
With the hold of religion waning amongst certain sections of the
population in some home countries and, consequently, among many
emigrants as well, the main tie between home country and diaspora appears to focus on culture, with an emphasis on language, as concepts of authenticity (Smith 1996:449-455). Perhaps one can learn a little more about this by considering a few selected cases, not all of which have received adequate attention as yet (see Chiswick 1992 for more widely discussed cases). We will focus primarily on diasporas created by voluntary migration (not exile or annexation). Such migrations, whether politically or economically motivated, frequently tend to consider language as a crucial factor in their choice of host country (for instance, in the case of many Arabs).

**Arab Diasporas**

Arab voluntary migration in the modern period has been expressed, barring a few isolated cases, in two main waves of emigration, about a century apart. The first wave, which began in the 1880s and went on until soon after the end of the First World War (Karpat 1985:175-209; Naff 1986), was chiefly made up of Syrians and Lebanese, largely Christian, who voted with their feet to express their dissatisfaction with what they regarded as harsh Ottoman rule and pressure from their Muslim neighbours and competitors. In other words, this migration was mainly motivated by political and religious factors and was directed towards Western Europe and the Americas (Safa 1960; Kayal and Kayal 1975; Naff 1986; Hourani and Shehadi 1992). The second wave started in the years following the end of the Second World War, has been more marked since the 1970s, and is still going on. It was largely conditioned by the desire of individuals and families in poorer societies to improve their financial lot. Thus, it has been chiefly dictated by economic reasons and was directed towards the richer, oil-producing Arab states, on the one hand, and to Western Europe (mainly France, but the United Kingdom and Germany as well), the United States and Canada, on the other (Naff 1992:144-164).

Characteristically, the first generation of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants to the West wrote literary works (important ones, too) and published newspapers and periodicals in Arabic. There was no doubt about their commitment to the culture of their original home. Their children and more so their grandchildren were less committed and considerably less certain about their own identity. This was due in no small part to assimilatory pressures in the Americas and Western
Europe than to language shift. In a perceptive article, published in 1985, Professor Mohammed Sawaie, of the University of Virginia, examined the use of Arabic in the periodical press, places of worship, ethnic schools using Arabic, and organisational societies of the Arab communities, chiefly in the United States (Sawaie 1985:324-332). He correctly points out how the functional use of Arabic has decreased in all four categories, together with the dispersal of the Syrians and Lebanese and the competition of the local majority language within the younger generation. The process was from monolingualism in the pre-emigration language to bilingualism to monolingualism in the majority language. I would argue that, among Sawaie's four categories, learning Arabic at school (or, rather, its neglect there) was perhaps the crucial factor for the second and third generations in their process of Americanisation. These conclusions would also seem to apply to later Arab immigrants to the United States (Sawaie 1986; Sawaie and Fishman 1985). It seems to me that not only the paucity of opportunities for using Arabic but also the intermittent way of studying it at school or church and mosque were conducive to its non-retention. Also, considering the diglossic character of Arabic, it seems safe to assume that, barring a minimal amount of education in the written language, what language maintenance there was, was in the colloquial. Aware of the size and importance of its diaspora and of its receding cultural ties with its home country, in 1963 the Lebanese government established a World Lebanese Cultural Union, with branches in various parts of the United States and Canada. The Union's main goals were to strengthen Lebanon's cultural, economic and touristic exchanges with its diaspora in the Americas (Suleiman 1992). However, little was done in practice to foster Arabic culture and language. Assimilationist trends, despite signs of a revival of interest in the study of Arabic, won in this case; the ethnic relationship, although still extant, seems somewhat downgraded in the identity awareness of these immigrants and their children.

In the 1970s, there was a revival in the particularist identity of Arab Americans, partly bolstered by the arrival of new immigrants from various Arabic countries (Labaki 1992). Several new clubs and organisations have been set up. However, these are political, economic and social rather than cultural (even when calling themselves 'cultural') and so in the main are their connections with their home countries. Again, the language factor seems rather peripheral, in patterns which repeat those of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is
not however the entire story of Arab migration in our own generation. The migration to the oil-producing Arab countries, chiefly to find more remunerative employment (Maaouia 1992), is (for obvious reasons) a clear case of language maintenance, both for the guest workers who stayed and for those who returned home. But the other Arab migrations, in relatively smaller numbers, to the Americas and proportionately larger ones to Western Europe, provide us with a somewhat different picture.

Let us take some examples from the Arab diaspora in France (for the United Kingdom, Wernberg-Møller 1992:40-55 and this volume. For Germany, Abboud 1991; Freund 1991). Overall immigration to France was always heavy and, by 1972, the government instituted a series of measures to restrict it, formally halting all immigration by 1974. Nevertheless, immigrants continued to arrive. Thanks to a high degree of bilingual fluency in Arabic and French, Arab migration from Lebanon and North Africa to France has visibly augmented the Arab community there, which is estimated to have reached at least three million. The Lebanese community, estimated at about 100,000, has changed in social and cultural terms, due to the influx of those leaving Lebanon during the civil war. Not exclusively middle and upper class, as before, they include a lower class whose knowledge of French is mediocre or less than mediocre (Abou 1962; Kemp 1992:689). Many newcomers from Lebanon return there and then go back again to France, torn between emotional and other ties in both host and home country. Those from the Maghreb, chiefly from Algeria, are much more numerous in the south of France and in the main towns there. The issue of integrating their children in France is complicated by the diversity of their backgrounds; their parents, of Moroccan, Algerian or Tunisian origins, display differing cultural levels and immigration situations (Begag 1990:2-8). Taken as a whole, however, many are poor and jobless, of limited education and closely linked to their home countries by religious sentiment and cultural background. Since Arabicisation at school has had much success in both Algeria and Morocco, many of them do not know French and, according to one survey, 20% of their children who complete school are not able to read and write French (Bergheaud 1983). The situation is hardly better for the school-leavers. Educational failure, despite frequent official intervention (Rosenbaum 1981:435-448), is due to a number of causes, one of the main ones being the insistence on instruction in French, a constant dimension of language policy in France. That this could - and did - lead to strained
relations between schoolchildren and their parents was hardly considered relevant. Elementary school courses in the native language are organised by non-governmental means and often remain peripheral. Since 1973, however, due to grassroot pressure from immigrant groups, the government has allowed pupils in secondary schools to present their native tongue in fulfilment of language instruction requirement. Later, pupils could select their mother tongue as part of the baccalaureat examinations, and many now take Arabic. Although government directives explicitly refer to the appreciation of the diaspora’s national heritage and originality, assimilation via Frenchification is encouraged, in order to prepare pupils for better employment opportunities. Results have varied; surveys have found that many young people, long exposed to French language and life, feel little attachment to their native culture, while others express a profound sense of cultural and linguistic identity with their home country (Rosenbaum 1981:457-458). Perhaps because French commitment to native language preservation is rather ambivalent, there has been a growing drive within the North African diaspora in France to emphasise the commitment to the Arabic language, or to Islam and its customs, such as the clothes worn by female pupils at school, which caused a row in France during the early 1990s. The educational authorities had to give way. It seems that in this case at least, extra-linguistic variables have influenced language preservation and language shift and that Arabic is still maintained due to the strong Islamic component of the North African diaspora in France, reinforced by the recent addition of many traditionally-minded immigrants and the proximity to the lands of origin (Dweik 1985:3).

*Turkish Diasporas*

Large scale Turkish migration started considerably later than the Arab. Beginning in the early 1960s, it was mostly due to intensive demographic pressures and endemic unemployment. Movement was mostly directed towards Western Europe, chiefly Germany, to respond to an urgent demand for low-wage unskilled or semi-skilled labour. Although Turkish immigration has now slowed to a trickle, because of restrictive laws, the number of Turkish Gastarbeiter in Germany, together with their families, stands at about three million, the largest community of foreign workers in the Federal Republic. The numbers of
Turkish schoolchildren there run into hundreds of thousands (for the figures, Gözaydin 1997:7-8). Among its characteristics (Abadan-Unat 1976:1-44) one notices an apparently deeper cultural gap between the Turkish Gastarbeiter and their German hosts than in the case of Arab immigrants in France, due to cultural and linguistic divergence. Very few Turks knew German or much about German culture before their arrival. While the Federal Constitution declares that nobody is to be discriminated against because of language or religion, the country's official language is German and the majority of the population remains monolingual (Menk 1986:25). Not unexpectedly, this situation has created social and other tensions for Turkish adults and their children, as German law allows the workers to bring their families after two years' residence. Although typical language courses for adults are spread over sixty to eighty lessons, many Turks have remained alienated in the host country and linguistically oriented towards their home. They listen regularly to radio and television broadcasts from Turkey and read Turkish newspapers which are flown daily into Germany (and also the Netherlands) and printed there from matrixes. Children vary between fully acculturated to totally unintegrated, with numerous Turkish youths only partly ready for cross-ethnic friendships. There are differences, linguistic and otherwise, between those who were born to Turkish workers in Germany or arrived there very young, and those who joined their families later; also, naturally, between those educated in German or in Turkish at their neighbourhood schools. Since each Land in Germany determines its own educational policies, procedures of instruction in Turkish vary. In several Länder instruction in German is compulsory, to assist integration, while in others, such as Bavaria, the largest Land, parents are asked to decide whether their children will be taught in German or Turkish: in schools with at least 25 Turkish pupils, instruction may be offered, on request, in Turkish. A complicating factor is some parents' wish for exclusive Qur'an schools for their children. All in all, the children have serious problems. Generally, a one to two-years' class is supposed to prepare them for joining regular grades. In it they are instructed in both Turkish and German, but the latter often proves inadequate. Moreover, even those who join regular classes afterwards obtain little help to correct their shortcomings in German. Consequently, those who graduate from these schools do not, as a rule, continue their education, and remain at the level of unskilled or semi-skilled work (Mehrländer 1986). In some schools, mainly in Bavaria, full class instruction in Turkish is offered to
those choosing this medium, with German taught as a second language, in which, however, a satisfactory level of proficiency is seldom reached. In this case, Turkish school children are segregated not only from their German peers, but also from those coming from other guest workers' families. The reverse effect is that, while less integrated in Germany, they are better prepared, linguistically, to return to Turkey. The Turkish children who return to their homeland notice immediately, however, that they differ from their peers there both in language and in general culture, just as was the case in Germany. Hence many feel alienated in both countries (Bilmen 1976:235-252), and there is very little assimilation on their part in either. This has occurred despite determined German efforts to prepare well-thought out curricula for studying German aimed at these school-children (Barkowski, Harnisch and Kumm 1980) and to prepare many textbooks for the teaching of both German and Turkish (Kreiser and Pingel, eds., 1987:159-168); and despite the training of Germans to teach Turkish (to supplement the Turkish teachers) and then to teach German in Turkey itself to young returnees to Turkey whose mother tongue was German (Kieler Nachrichten, 6 January 1987; Die Welt, 1 July 1995).

There are Turkish immigrant communities outside Germany as well, with similar or even more acute difficulties. According to a recent study, it seems that in the United Kingdom Turkish schoolchildren are the lowest achievers, largely due to their poor linguistic performance (Nuri 1997:11). These general trends are corroborated by methodical research undertaken in France among several communities; in the second half of the 1980s, then again in 1992, published in 1995 (Tribalat 1995). The data were later re-examined more specifically for the Turks in France (Pelle-Guetta and Doğrusöz 1995:407-431). The general study concludes that the Turks have been the least assimilated and the least assimilatable of all immigrant communities in France. The more limited study, focusing on the Turks in France, examines this conclusion by referring to their acquisition of the French language. A major finding of both studies was the erosion and loss of the home country language of immigrants in France, over several generations - with the exception of the Turks. A correlation should be pointed out between the language erosion and the increase in mixed marriages, the change in religious practice, and social mobility. In all these aspects, the Turks in France are the least assimilated, and in language matters, French is only exceptionally employed within the family, even by those who came to France as children. The statistics indicate that the Turks
know French more rarely than most other immigrant groups. Moreover, even among the Turks, men knew more French than women and acquired it faster, probably because they had arrived earlier in France, had more schooling there and, at work, more contacts with the French-speaking population (the same is true, in different ratios, of other groups of immigrants, such as Algerians and Moroccans). One may wonder, however, whether the fact that the Turkish group is being the least Francophone is really a result of their resistance to integration, as the general study concludes, or, rather, is largely a result of the very brief time of their French exposure, much shorter than that of the Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians and some sub-Saharan groups.

**Greek Diasporas**

The Greek diasporas are much more ancient than either the Arab or Turkish. In age they parallel the Jewish and Armenian (for the Armenian, Pattie 1994; Sanasarian 1995). The fact that 'diaspora' is a Greek word is no accident. The Greek dispersal is a wide one, over space and time. In our context, it is enough to say that, particularly after the fall of Constantinople, Greeks migrated to many European cities, carrying with them their language and civilisation, but soon becoming polyglot and adaptable (Smith 1995:10-11). From the late eighteenth century onwards, this diaspora was largely responsible for fostering the national movement which brought about the creation of the Greek kingdom in the 1820s, the first nation state carved out of the Ottoman Empire. Its success was due, to a significant extent, to the persuasive linking of modern Greece to classical Greece through mythology. Culture and language have had a crucial share in the development of Greek nationalism. However, in some cases, this competed with another linguistic nationalism, e.g. with Arabic in Alexandria, where the Greek community lost importance due to this rivalry and to economic competition (Kitroeff 1983a:5-16). In any event, the debate about Greek identity goes on both in Greece and in the new diasporas created during the twentieth century in the United States (Moskos 1989) and in Europe. Since ethnicity has become legitimate and respectable in the United States, the Greeks there and elsewhere project their identity as members of a modern, classically inspired, Greek civilisation. Indeed, they emphasise their ethnicity within multi-cultural states and societies. As in other diasporas, these
trends are opposed by others favouring acculturation in the countries of residence. Language is, again, of vital importance in this conflict of attitudes. In the United States, community churches and public organisations have voluntarily maintained day schools in which not only are Greek language studies emphasised, but instruction in history and religion is generally carried out in Greek. In addition, hundreds of afternoon schools offer instruction in Greek history and religion, in Greek. However, a basic controversy has prevailed, since the 1920s, between the Greek-American Progressive Association, striving for the preservation of Hellenic civilisation and language amongst Greek immigrants and their children, via the above schools and by other means; and the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association which, although claiming to be interested in maintaining the ethnic ties, has campaigned actively for smoother and speedier Americanisation. Significantly, the latter organisation is the larger one (Vlachos 1968:90-98; Landau 1986:90-92). A similar debate about the status of modern Greek goes on in some parts of Western Europe, where Greek workers have arrived in sizable numbers, as a result of free movement of workers in the European Union. In Germany, in particular, open to Greek immigration since the 1960 treaty, the issue has at times affected relations between the government and that of Greece. In the Rhine/Main region, for example, two groups of parents have been carrying on a new version of the Greek quarrels in the United States in a new version. The integration-oriented Association of Greek Parents in Frankfurt argues that, since many schoolchildren will remain in Germany and settle there, they ought to reach proficiency in German; another organisation, Athena, maintains that numerous children may well wish to return to Greece some day, hence a good knowledge of Greek is essential for them. The groups do not just argue, but compete with one another to promote their respective objectives, all the while putting pressure on the education authorities in the German Länder. In any event, Greek national schools in Germany have obtained a special status, with the right to present their students to the Abitur (the secondary school qualifying examinations). The Greek government and its consular offices abroad have maintained, since the early 1970s, that they want all Greeks to return to their home country (Fietkau 1972:66-67). But the arguments go on (Zeiss 1982:33).
Concluding remarks

Language issues in diasporas will most probably endure, at least partly because of the fact that only in rare cases do individuals belonging to the majority learn the languages of the immigrants living among them. Indeed, linguistic diasporas have remained peripheral second societies, certainly in unitary states, such as France, and somewhat less so in federal ones, such as Germany or the United States. Here, if grouped in large numbers, immigrants may increase their influence in respective Länder or states. They almost always have less influence than diasporas based on a religion, since the latter may make common cause with their coreligionists in the host country, as is perhaps the case of Greek and Jewish immigrants. This seems true even when the immigrants are essentially secular-minded. Linguistic diasporas are generally well aware of their peripherality in the political, social, and economic life of their host country and, even more so, in its cultural life. Hence their efforts, enthusiastic or lukewarm, as the case may be, to reach some degree of acculturation; hence, also, the response of those sections of the immigrant community which feel more committed to their home country. Such trends appear to be characteristic not only of the Arab, Turkish and Greek diasporas discussed here but of many others as well. The degree of language loss, shift and maintenance depends largely on the general political, economic and cultural situation in the home and in the host countries, the size of the diaspora and its concentration, the distance from the home country, the duration of its existence in the host country, its own educational level and occupational preferences; as well as, of course, the determination of the dominant group in the host country to absorb or reject it. Such factors and prejudices on all sides (Woll and Miller 1987:180) determine the linguistic acculturation of the diaspora within a host country majority, in tandem with economic pressures or inducements. Obviously, each diaspora has its own tempo of acculturation. The evidence of its newspapers is instructive. Multilingual columns in the local press (e.g., in Germany) has failed to attract immigrant readers. In many diasporas, it has been the press in their native languages which has helped to maintain links to the home countries and among the members of the diaspora, and to preserve the knowledge and use of language and traditions among those living in a linguistically and culturally different environment (Kanarakis 1992:113). However, there are certain variations. The early Syro-Lebanese emigration in the United States
published important periodicals which dwindled almost to one, al-
Hudā, offering social and economic information to the veterans of the
diaspora. Although some new Arabic newspapers have appeared
recently, their impact is not yet clear. Important Turkish periodicals
were published abroad under the late Ottoman Empire, but there are
very few today. The diaspora Turks are now reading Turkish
newspapers published in Turkey, although some, like Hürriyet, are re-
edited locally, for instance in Germany. Since 1892, when Neas
Kosmos, "he New World', the first Greek-American newspaper,
circulated in Boston for several months, over one hundred other Greek
periodicals have appeared in 29 U.S. Cities (Papacosma 1978:46). It is
however symptomatic that such an important quarterly as the Journal
of the Hellenic Diaspora, founded in 1973, is published in English.

Linguistic processes within the diaspora are difficult to assess
precisely, due to the fact that they usually stretch over several
generations and are not always fully articulated or recorded without
bias. Yet another difficulty in analysing such processes lies in their not
being unidirectional. I refer to the cultural revival of ethnicity among
several diasporas, sometimes expressed in a renewal of interest in the
communities original language within the second or third generation.
Hence this paper is offered merely as a preliminary consideration, in
the hope that others will continue the study, using all possible sources
and all available methodologies of research.

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NOTES

1 In the extensive literature in Arabic and other languages on Arab migration there is fairly little solid information about Arabic education in the United States and elsewhere in the West during this period.