

Annual Conference for Social Sciences and Humanities

March 24-26, 2012

Topic Two: Identity and Language in the Arab Homeland

Preface

The issue of language and identity occupies a central point dissimilar from an intellectual theory of philosophical and anthropological dimensions; it is rather a practical issue related to executive, educational, and other policies. It has become an existential issue for the future of Arab culture and even Arab societies, where the utility of language has been questioned in the educational process, with the focus now placed on colloquial rather than classical language in the different media outlets and vice versa both contributing to identity formation.

It would be reasonable to argue that, as a general rule, rejuvenating and modernizing language is one of the main components of a renaissance – and this could be done through the practical use of language in the media and other forums, as well as in education and scientific research.

Several problematics are currently being suggested regarding this topic, especially in terms of the challenges facing the Arabic language as one for scientific research relies on concepts and theories developed by other cultures and in other languages. In addition, recent calls for the use of languages other than Arabic in the educational process have been suggested in many private and even governmental schools and universities, with some falling back on the issue of cultural colonialism.

In parallel, one witnesses the use of mother tongues in scientific, educational, and societal modernization processes in many developed countries in both the East and the West, as in Scandinavia, Brazil, Korea, Japan, and many others. These countries present models that not only feature a lack of opposition to use of the mother tongue in development and modernization, but also an assertion that it is in fact a condition for this process, as proven by the experiences of these countries.

An ongoing debate about social science literature places language as a primary ingredient for establishing a national identity, but it barely acknowledges it as the main component of the identity of culture and civilization. This is almost self-evident, since language is, in fact, culture and civilization and not just a tool for communication: it is not simply a tool for thought - it is thought. Hence, language is regarded as such because it generates one of the most important identities of the modern individual, who also carries a variety of other identities, all of which are formulated by means of language.

The specificity of the Arabic language stems from its close association with Arab civilization and its history, as opposed to its significance as the language of the Quran, which was one of the main reasons for its widespread distribution. It is the language of hundreds of millions of human beings who think and dream in Arabic. Arabic is, without a doubt, the native language of many ethnic minorities who are attempting to reinstitute their former languages within the framework of producing a new national identity in Arab countries. Regardless of the motives of this attempt or the chances of its success, the Arabic language, in tandem with equality among citizens, will remain the primary tool of integration for these minorities in their countries, on the condition that these countries and their various socio-political sectors continue to maintain the importance of language.

On the other hand, the current disintegration occurring at the sovereign level, the political dependence of developing countries, and the distribution of consumerist culture have all contributed to the pervasiveness of a superficial culture which believes that the use of the language of developed countries, whether in daily life or in teaching, will make them into more developed people. There have been many attempts to transform the current gaps between social classes into cultural gaps by introducing the use of different languages in the daily lives of the more fortunate classes. Despite their seriousness, these are still marginal attempts, especially in prominent Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. But it is a real problem in Morocco, for example, since it ties in with colonial inheritance, making the choice between Arabic and French one of political and ideological stance, thus adding to the severity of the problem.

In light of the aforementioned issues, language and identity will be one of two topics focused on at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies' first Annual Conference for Social Sciences and Humanities. The goal is to study the problem of interaction between Arab societies and language from an educational, social, philosophical, political, and language-based viewpoint. . Consideration of this topic is expected to focus on the following areas:

Under this topic, the Center is inviting academics, researchers and other intellectuals to participate in an intellectual exchange to be organized along the following themes:

Theme One: Language and identity: Manifestations of interaction

- The concepts of language and identity
- Language and identity from an educational viewpoint
- Language and identity from a philosophical and social viewpoint

Theme Two: The issue of the Arabic language in Arab history

- The contributions of early Arab linguists in developing the Arabic language as one of philosophy, reason, science, and linguistics
- The Arabic language during the Ottoman era
- Reviving the Arabic language and its literature in the modern age
- Colonialism in the Arab region and colonialist strategies towards the Arabic language
- Arab renaissance men – and women – and the renewal of the Arabic language
- Nationalist and patriotic viewpoints on the centrality of language in the making of collective identity

Theme Three: Language and identity from a political viewpoint

- Language, identity, and development
- Arabicization policies in Arab countries post-independence

Theme Four: The language of education: Creation and reproduction of identity

- Educational policies and their role in enhancing identity
- The language of education and its effect on the creation of the identity of a child
- The language of education and creativity
- The role of Arabic language curriculum in enhancing identity; possibilities for the unification of all Arabic language curricula in all Arab countries

Theme Five: The language of education in the Arab World and the identity problematic: Experiences and challenges

- The language of education in public education institutions
- The language of education in higher education institutions
- The language of education in the field of scientific research
- Challenges facing the Arabic language as a language of education

Theme Six: the language of education and identity: Current challenges and future expectations

-Internal and external challenges (linguistic weakness, spoken dialects, foreign languages, media outlets, the problem of Arabicizing science, computerizing language, academic requirements)

-International experiences in teaching sciences using native languages

-Media and the Arabic language, the effect of media outlets and communication networks on language

-The diversification of Arabic language communities

-Predictions for the future