

Vernacularism and the Liberation of Arab Thought: Dismantling Linguistic Hegemony

المحلية وتحرير الفكر العربي: تفكيك الهيمنة اللغوية

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intricate relationship between language and freedom in the Arabic-speaking world through the prism of Vernacularism, drawing on Nasser Hajjaj's pioneering work Arab Vernacularism (2024). The enforcement of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as the sole legitimate form of Arabic not only marginalizes local dialects but also imposes a form of linguistic subjugation that deprives individuals of their natural mode of expression. This linguistic hegemony—long criticized by Mostafa Safouan in *Why Are Arabs Not Free?* and by E. Shouby in *The Influence of the Arabic Language on the Psychology of the Arabs*—extends beyond academia into the publishing industry, education, and digital communication. Millions of Arabs are not free to write in their own language; they are coerced into using a grammaticalized, artificial version of Arabic that erases their vernacular heritage and suppresses critical thought. By analyzing how linguistic hierarchies reinforce psychological and social repression, this study argues that Vernacularism is the path toward decolonizing Arabic linguistic thought. It proposes that the formal recognition and academic incorporation of vernaculars will dismantle entrenched diglossia, liberating Arab intellectual life and aligning it with global linguistic realities. Moreover, by integrating vernacular Arabic into digital technology—particularly Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Artificial Intelligence (AI)—Arab societies can reclaim linguistic agency and participate fully in the digital age without the constraints imposed by MSA's prescriptive structures.

الخلاصة

تتناول هذه الدراسة العلاقة المعقدة بين اللغة والحرية في بلدان العالم العربي من خلال منظور المحلية، Vernacularism مستندة إلى العمل الرائد لناصر الحاجج في كتابه المحلية العربية (2024) إن فرض اللغة العربية الفصحى (أو ما يسمى في الاصطلاح الغربي العربية القياسية الحديثة (MSA) باعتبارها الشكل الوحيد المشروع والمعتز به من بين سائر لغات العرب. لا يؤدي إلى تهيمش اللهجات المحلية، وحسب، بل إنه يفرض أيضا نوعا من الخضوع اللغوي الذي يحرم الأفراد من نمط التعبير الطبيعي لديهم (لغتهم الأم)، هذه الهيمنة اللغوية التي انتقدها المحلل النفسي العالمي مصطفى صفوان في كتابه "ماذا العرب ليسوا أحرار؟ وأشار إليها كذلك إ. شويبي. E. Shouby في دراسته "تأثير اللغة العربية على سيكولوجية العرب"، هيمنة تمتد إلى ما هو أبعد من الأكاديمية، لتشمل صناعة النشر، والتعليم، والاتصال الرقمي. فالملايين من العرب غير أحرار في الكتابة بلغتهم الخاصة؛ إذ يتم إجبارهم على استخدام شكل مصطنع مقنن من العربية يمحو تراثهم المحلي ويقمع التفكير النقدي. من خلال تحليل كيفية تعزيز التراتيبات اللغوية للقمع النفسي والاجتماعي، تجادل هذه الدراسة بأن المحلية هي الطريق نحو تفكيك الاستعمار اللغوي العربي، ونحو تحرير العرب من العبودية اللسانية، وتقترح أن الاعتراف الرسمي بلغات العرب المحلية، ودراستها، ودمجها أكاديميا سيساهم في تفكيك الازدواجية اللغوية المتجذرة، مما يحرر الحياة الفكرية العربية ويجعلها متماشية مع الحقائق اللغوية العالمية. علاوة على ذلك، فإن دمج العربيات المحلية في التكنولوجيا الرقمية. وخاصة معالجة اللغات الطبيعية (NLP) والذكاء الاصطناعي (AI) سيتمكن الشعوب العربية من استعادة سيادتها اللغوية والمشاركة الكاملة في كيان "اللسان العربي" في العصر الرقمي دون القيود التي تفرضها البنية النحوية الصارمة لقواعد الفصحى التوجيهية.

Keywords**الكلمات المفتاحية**

المحلية، القمع اللغوي، الازدواج اللغوي، التوطين اللغوي، العنف الرمزي، تفكيك الاستعمار اللغوي، اللسانيات السيكلولوجية، اللسانيات الاجتماعية، التحليل النفسي، اللسان العربي (العربي)، لغات العرب

Vernacularism, Linguistic Suppression, Arabic Diglossia, Psychological Enslavement, Linguistic Decolonization, Psycholinguistics, Sociolinguistics, Psychoanalysis, Arab Vernacular Languages, Arabi (Contemporary Standard Spoken Arabic).

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is more than a communicative tool; it is a marker of identity, power, and autonomy. In the Arab world, the rigid enforcement of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as the official medium of literature, education, and publication has led to an insidious form of linguistic oppression. Arabs do not possess the freedom to write, speak, or express themselves in the organic forms of their native tongues - vernaculars are dismissed as corrupt, inferior, and illegitimate. Scholars are prohibited from researching vernacular languages, publishers reject texts that deviate from prescriptive grammar, and newspapers refuse to print any article unless it conforms to rigid linguistic rules. This environment fosters a profound psychological alienation, as individuals are compelled to navigate an artificial linguistic reality that strips them of their true voices.

Nasser Hajjaj's *Arab Vernacularism* (2024) stands as a revolutionary work that challenges this imposed linguistic order. By advocating for the formal academic and cultural integration of Arabic vernaculars, Hajjaj dismantles the long-standing belief that MSA is the only valid form of Arabic. This paper builds on his insights by exploring the impact of linguistic oppression on Arab intellectual and cultural life, arguing that *Vernacularism* is the key to linguistic and cognitive liberation.

2. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL COST OF DIGLOSSIA**A. Linguistic Enslavement Through MSA**

- The Fallacy of Standardization: MSA is not a naturally spoken language, but an artificial construct imposed through education and state institutions. Its complexity alienates speakers from their own linguistic instincts, forcing them to code-switch constantly between their native dialects and the grammaticalized, rigid written forms of Arabic.
- Internalized Linguistic Shame: For generations, Arab speakers have been conditioned to perceive their vernaculars as inferior. The educational system teaches them that their native tongue is "incorrect," embedding a sense of linguistic inadequacy that manifests as self-censorship and intellectual hesitancy.
- Prescriptive Grammar as Control: The enforcement of case endings (*i'rāb* نحو) and other classical grammatical structures in publishing and academia functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that excludes vernacular voices. This process is not merely linguistic but deeply ideological - it silences alternative perspectives and restricts creative thought.

B. The Exclusion of Vernacular Culture from Academia and Publishing

- Censorship of Vernacular Writing: No Arab newspaper, literary journal, or academic publisher accepts work written in vernacular Arabic. This systemic rejection of native linguistic expression suppresses entire literary traditions, denying Arabs the right to document their realities in their own language.
- Erasure of Vernacular Literature: The term "Arabic literature" is exclusively associated with MSA-based writing. Folk poetry, oral traditions, and contemporary dialect literature are dismissed as sub-literary or excluded from literary discourse altogether. This exclusion reinforces a monolithic and unrealistic representation of Arab cultural expression.

3. THE PROMISE OF VERNACULARISM: A PATH TO LINGUISTIC LIBERATION

A. Reclaiming Linguistic Freedom

- Breaking the MSA Monopoly: *Vernacularism* asserts that Arabic is not a singular entity but a constellation of living, evolving dialects. The inclusion of these dialects in education, literature, and media is essential for dismantling linguistic hegemony.
- Restoring the Oral Tradition: Historically, Arab intellectual and poetic traditions thrived in vernacular forms. By reintegrating these traditions into academia, we reconnect with authentic linguistic and cultural expressions that have been forcibly erased.

B. Technological Empowerment Through Vernacular Integration

- NLP and AI Limitations: Current NLP models are overwhelmingly trained on MSA, making them ineffective for real-world applications. Digital assistants, machine translation, and automated speech recognition fail to accommodate the linguistic realities of Arab speakers.
- The Need for Vernacular NLP Corpora: To bridge this technological gap, Arabic AI systems must be trained on diverse vernacular datasets. Incorporating dialects into computational linguistics will enhance digital literacy and create more functional technological tools for Arabic speakers.
- Decolonizing Digital Language: The expansion of vernacular-based NLP models liberates Arab users from the constraints of an archaic linguistic framework, allowing them to engage with technology in their natural linguistic forms.

4. THE FUTURE OF VERNACULAR SCHOLARSHIP AND POLICY REFORM

A. Educational and Institutional Reform

- Vernacular Curricula in Schools: The artificial separation between home language and school language must be eliminated. Incorporating vernacular literacy alongside MSA will foster a more inclusive and effective learning environment.
- Academic Legitimization of Dialect Studies: Universities must establish dedicated departments for Arabic dialectology, (Vernacularism Studies Department) validating the study of spoken Arabic as a legitimate scholarly pursuit rather than a peripheral interest.

B. Reforming Publishing and Cultural Production

- Abolishing Vernacular Censorship in Publishing: Writers must have the freedom to publish in their natural dialects. Establishing vernacular literature as a recognized literary field will break the monopoly of MSA in the literary and academic spheres.
- Creating Vernacular Digital Archives: Building online repositories for dialect poetry, folklore, and oral history will preserve endangered linguistic traditions and provide resources for linguistic and cultural research.

5. CONCLUSION

- *The Urgency of Vernacular Liberation*
The suppression of Arabic vernaculars is not merely a linguistic issue but a profound cultural and intellectual crisis. The monopoly of MSA, enforced through education, publishing, and public discourse, has systematically alienated Arabs from their own linguistic reality. As Mostafa Safouan and E. Shouby have demonstrated, this suppression is a form of psychological control that stifles individual expression and creativity.
Vernacularism, as championed by Nasser Hajjaj, offers a revolutionary alternative. By dismantling the ideological barriers that have excluded dialects from intellectual life, we can restore linguistic freedom, revitalize Arab cultural production, and enable full technological participation in the digital age. The recognition of vernaculars is not a regression - it is a necessary step toward reclaiming the authenticity of Arabic expression and ensuring a more democratic linguistic future.
- *Vernacularism is not just a linguistic reform; it is the key to Arab intellectual liberation.*

Conflicts Of Interest

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