



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 7

Shaping the Future of the GCC Countries through Language Policy and Planning: Concepts, Challenges and Aspirations

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Abstract

The aim of this workshop is to help establish an evidence base that can be used to develop contextually relevant language policies for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Research on Language Policy and Planning (LP&P) explores ways in which language policies and practices can be channeled to enhance socio-economic development as well as socio-political and socio-cultural harmony. While many GCC countries have adopted Arabization policies in the recent years, there is little research on the impact of these policies. English continues to play an important role in the educational and corporate sectors in the GCC countries while a number of heritage and migrant languages serve identity purposes of the local and migrant populations. At present, the role various languages play in the GCC countries is under-explored; by

encouraging a deep study of these issues within the GCC countries, the presentations (and the ensuing publications) at this workshop will help develop a knowledge base about the distribution, use, and attitudes towards various (spoken and written) languages in the GCC countries that will be critical in shaping forward-looking language policies and plans in the region.

Description and Rationale

Language Policy and Planning (LP&P) is a broad and a complex area of study in which many actors, forces and factors exist and interact. LP&P is motivated by “language goals”, “political goals” and “economic goals” (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). Currently, LP&P in the GCC countries plays only a limited role in the socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political development. This role is typically limited to defining Arabic as the Medium of Instruction (MOI) in public schools and English as the MOI in most institutions of higher education. These policies establish a direct and powerful effect not only on the teaching/learning of languages, but also in how these and other languages are viewed and valued in the countries in the region. In addition to MOI policies, there is some recognition of localization or ‘Arabization’ policies (under conceptual terms such as Emeritization, Omanisation, Saudization policies, etc.; see, e.g., Mashood, Verhoeven & Chansarkar, 2009; Troudi & Al Hafidh, 2017); while these policies appear to strengthen the position of Arabic, they do not currently provide any clear policy directions on the use of Arabic and/or other languages in the development of the region (and the populace). Furthermore, these policies do not consider the role and contribution of heritage and migrant languages that form part of the linguistic ecology of the region.

Research on LP&P can have tremendous potential impact on national and regional development; however, the GCC countries are currently not tapping into this potential resource for socio-economic, cultural or political development. In the absence of such work, the proposed workshop provides a key impetus to generate research and studies on this topic. The workshop will include data-driven studies on the relationship between language (including heritage and migrant languages) and society in the GCC, which can help inform directions that LP&P can take in the region. They can, as the title of the workshop implies, help shape the future of the GCC countries through LP&P.

Language is *inter alia*, the artifact of society, culture and history. Language is both the means and object of history and socialization. Linguistic socialization is a process and a product of the society, and the use of a particular language is determined by the society’s needs for that specific language. These needs can be cultural, political, or economic (Mey, 1985). A broad review of languages in the GCC shows how different languages

play different roles in the region. GCC comprises of countries with a number of local or heritage languages as well as a large number of migrant languages (such as English, French, Hindi, Urdu, Malayalam, Bengali, Tagalog, Indonesian, Swahili, Turkish, Bukhari, and Persian). All of these languages have variable market, capital, value, power, status and position in the GCC. For example, while Arabic is used as the national language in the region, English as a language of higher education (at least in some disciplines) and of business and commerce, other migrant languages are often limited to their use for domestic and identity purposes. This differentiated use and scope of languages found in the region portrays a complex and hierarchical linguistic and discursive landscape, which also reflects the socio-political and socio-cultural hierarchies in the society (Arabic is the language of the rulers; English the language of the educated workforce; and other migrant languages are restricted in their scope and use).

Currently, languages and discourses in the GCC are unequal since not all languages or discourses serve the same purpose and interests. Some languages are considered poor, weak, helpless, backward and subordinate without the requisite political or class support (Hassanpour, 1993). For example, there are several indigenous or heritage languages in a country like the Sultanate of Oman, including Luwati, Baluchi, Swahili, Jibbali, Mehri, Batahari, Harsusi, Shehri, Hobyot, Kumzari and Shihuhi. While these languages have been part of the Omani cultures and their users have played a significant role in the development of a uniquely multilingual country, these languages and their discourses are not put on a par with Arabic and English (Al-Issa, 2002). These languages lack codification and elaboration systems, are not associated with practical and scholarly knowledge, and do not have any visible political status or economic impact on the country's development. While these languages have cultural autonomy and stability and are linked to history, they lack the necessary language planning apparatus to defend and protect these cultures and histories. In fact, some of these languages are under threat of becoming extinct in Oman since the new generation favors Arabic and English, which allow access to the upper socioeconomic class sectors of the labor market.

The two languages, Arabic and English, are the only ones that play a significant official role in the region at the moment. Arabic, which has three versions – Koranic, Classical or Standard, and Colloquial, is the language of the Holy Koran, Islam's sacred scripture and the tongue of Prophet Mohamed (Bani-Khaled, 2014). It has been the language of the Arab ancestors in the Arabian Peninsula for over 15 centuries. It is considered to be a holy tongue and is the language of the intellectuals and the power holders and dominant groups in the region. As such, it is projected as a uniting power and the symbol of Arabness. The choice of Arabic as the language of the state is strongly tied to elements of nationalism (Bitar, 2011; Suleiman, 2003). However, as pointed out earlier, Arabic is also infringing upon the linguistic and cultural rights and heritage of minority communities in

the region. English, on the other hand, despite its power worldwide where one quarter of the world's population now uses it as first, second or foreign language, remains very closely associated with colonialism and imperialism. Alsamadani and Ibnian (2015) hold that this attitude about English is one factor that affects the attainment of learners in public schools in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for example. Therefore, one can view Arabic and English in a situation of competing hegemonies – with traditional domains and practices of power of the former counterpoised to the economic and cultural globalization of the latter.

Arabic and English both share certain domains of discourse in the GCC countries and are a lingua franca to a number of people in the region. While Arabic remains more dominant as the home language of the local communities and the language of everyday interaction between members of these communities, English is tied with higher education, employment, and global interaction. People in the region learn English for multiple important purposes such as inter-lingual communication, travelling to non-Arabic speaking countries, conducting business, acquiring science and technology, pursuing higher education, finding a white-collar job and cultural analysis and understanding. English is also closely linked with the development of GCC military power with American military advisors, as well as trainers and technicians, working within GCC from as early as 1948 (Cordesman2003). Large quantities of American military equipment are still bought on a regular basis, especially since 9/11 (Cordesman2003).

While Arabic and English remain the dominant languages in the regions, there are a number of other languages that play instrumental roles in the region, even if not recognized. The influx of migrants from the Indic subcontinent since the late 1960s, from South East Asia since the late 1980s, and from Eastern European countries more recently, brought in a large range of languages to the region. While largely understudied, these languages contribute to the linguistic landscape and the linguistic ecology of the region; and, in some places have led to a creation of Gulf Pidgin Arabic (Bakir, 2010).The creation of such pidgin languages reflects the significant role that these migrant communities have played and continue to play in shaping the economy (and the socio-cultural fabric) of the region. These migrant populations, who may or may not be fluent in Arabic or English, work across a range of professions – as CEOs of international corporations, as managers, as bankers, as office workers, as teachers, as technicians, as taxi drivers, as domestic workers, as manual labor, and even as sex workers. As such, these migrant populations contribute to a much broader range of jobs in the GCC when compared to Western English-speaking migrant communities (who tend to work in a much narrower range of professions). However, while these non-English speaking migrants may have a longer historical presence in the region and have contributed significantly to the development of GCC, their languages are not recognized within the

GCC. There is little research on these languages or how they contribute to the socio-economic, socio-cultural or socio-political issues in the region. While, there is a general acknowledgement that these migrant languages are used in migrant communities and are sometimes used in private community schools, which underscores the role of families and communities in language maintenance, they lack political and economic support, credibility and legitimacy across the GCC countries. These migrant languages are subordinated and marginalized and are not viewed as a resource that can be used for political, economic, and social development. Their value, power, status and position are confined to their native users. A future-oriented LP&P in the GCC needs to take these languages into consideration.

A broad-brush review of the distribution of languages in the GCC suggests that the governments in the regions have not fully realized the potential benefits of having a multilingual populace (even if a large number of these are migrants) and have not yet tapped into the potential benefits that these can bring to the development of the region. Languages are tools for the construction of societies and an understanding of LP&P can help countries in the region to develop and adopt policies that lead to socio-economic development as well as greater socio-cultural and socio-political harmony.

As this brief proposal has illustrated, currently only two languages, Arabic and English, are recognized in the GCC. English, and to some extent Arabic, has attracted investment and has been given status as the language of schools and/or higher education institutions. However, when it comes to research and development, it appears that research on English and English Language Teaching (ELT) has surpassed that on all other language and has resulted in the writing of new syllabi, expanding instruction time, training teachers on new and more communicative-based ELT, writing communicative-based tests, incorporating sophisticated educational technology into ELT (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2017), and adopting more goal directed approaches to ELT such as English Medium Instruction (EMI), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (Al-Issa, 2016, 2017; Badry & Willoughby, 2016). Arabic, while it is the official and national language of the countries in the GCC, does not attract the same degree of investment and research as English and ELT. And, when it comes to other local, heritage, and migrant languages, we know even still less. Given this state of things, it is imperative that we develop a knowledge base that is grounded in evidence and strong research that can help inform forward looking and innovative language policy initiatives in the region. Without strong research-led or evidence-based LP&P work, the members of the GCC will continue to lose out on the potential benefits that a multilingual society can bring to the social, political, and economic development of a country. It is in this context that we propose this workshop with the primary goal to help generate and

contribute to the evidence-base needed to develop policies that can help shape the future of the GCC countries.

Anticipated Participants

A broad-brush review of the region has shown that countries in the GCC have not fully exploited the potential benefits of developing a cohesive language policy. LP&P is not only relevant to education, but it also impacts broader social, economic, political and cultural possibilities that contribute to nation building. Current research on these issues in the region can be described as limited, fragmented, and underdeveloped and there is an urgent need to pursue further studies that can investigate areas of central and strategic importance to the theory and practice of LP&P in the GCC countries. These include, but are not limited to:

- LP&P and socio-economic development.
- The role of migrant languages in the GCC.
- Directions in the GCC countries' LP&P research.
- LP&P and the political landscape in the GCC countries.
- Hegemonic discourses in the GCC ELT policy and planning.
- The role of families in maintaining and spreading languages.
- The cultural and economic politics of the GCC ELT policy and planning.
- Resources allocated to languages (local and non-indigenous) in the GCC.
- Challenges of adopting EMI, ESP and EAP in higher education in the region.
- The effects of internationalization and globalization on the GCC countries' LP&P.
- Bridging the gap between school and higher education LP&P in the GCC countries.
- The uses and values of migrant languages in the GCC and their implications for effective language policy development.
- The success and/or failure of the GCC countries' LP&P in finding solutions to the region's language, economic and political problems.
- The implicit and explicit goals and roles of LP&P in the GCC countries and their effect on defining and redefining development in the region.
- The relationship between language rights and human rights in the GCC countries and their effect on shaping social, political and economic directions in the region.

Workshop Director Profiles

Dr. Ahmar Mahboob is Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Sydney. Ahmar is keenly interested in the application of language sciences to developmental issues, with a particular focus on education. His primary research interest is on an examination of policies, practices, and implications of language variation in local and global contexts. In pursuing this goal, Ahmar draws from and contributes to a range of linguistics and applied linguistics traditions, theories, and methodologies.

Some recent and relevant publications by Ahmar Mahboob:

Mahboob, A., & Elyas, T., (2017). *Challenges to Education in GCC during the 21st Century*. Cambridge: Gulf Research Center.

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Dr. Ali S.M. Al-Issa is Associate Professor of English Language Education (ELE) at the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman. He has a Ph.D. in Education from University of Queensland in Australia and a Master of Arts in Education (TESOL) from University of London in UK. Dr. Al-Issa has extensive experience in different aspects on ELE. He has published and presented widely about ELE in Oman. He is a recipient of several local and global research and teaching awards and recognitions. Dr. Al-Issa is currently the best

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Some recent and relevant publications by Ali Al-Issa:

Al-Issa, A. (2017). Meeting students' curriculum and teaching expectations in an Omani ICLHE/EMI context: Implications for policy and practice. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 6(1), 209-226.

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Some recent and relevant publications by Tariq Elyas:

Elyas, T. (2017). A Critical 'Positivist' Analysis of Tatweer Policy in Saudi Arabia (Eds.), In A. W. Wiseman, N. H. Alromi, & S. Alshumrani. *Cross-Nationally comparative, evidence-based educational policymaking and reform*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.

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