

Study on the linguistic situation and language policy in Qatar

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Abstract: *Qatar is a country with a diverse linguistic life and cultural background, and is an important partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative. After independence, Qatar aspired to establish its own nation-state, with a strong emphasis on the role of Arabic language and cultural traditions in the construction of national identity; however, due to the impact of colonialism, globalisation, and the influx of expatriates, the English language was considered the gateway to higher education within and outside of the country, and access to modern science and technology. In the context of the strengthening of country and regional studies in the country, it is necessary to explore the linguistic situation in Qatar and the planning of language policies.*

Keywords: *Qatar; language situation; language policy; impact and challenges; prospects and insights*

1. Introduction

The State of Qatar (Arabic: رطوق ؤلوق, English: The State of Qatar), or Qatar for short, is located on the Qatar Peninsula on the southwestern coast of the Persian Gulf, bordering Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, with Kuwait and Iraq to the north across the Persian Gulf. Qatar formally declared its independence on 3 September 1971, and is the last independent and sovereign state in the Gulf region.

According to the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China (as of May 2023), the population of Qatar is approximately 3 million, of which approximately 15 per cent are citizens of Qatari origin. The expatriate population is about 85 per cent, mainly from India, Pakistan and South-East Asian countries. As a result of the rapid growth of the oil and gas industry, among other things, the number of expatriate labourers in Qatar has grown rapidly, and the share of the native population in the total population has continued to decline, making Qatar's population increasingly international.

In recent years, "big diplomacy in a small country" and the epitome of academic globalisation with strong disciplines from prestigious universities in Europe and the United States have become important labels for Qatar. Under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, Qatar is an important partner for international exchanges and cooperation. Therefore, it is the need of the hour to do a good job of basic research on Qatar's language situation, language policy and planning. This paper introduces the language situation in Qatar, analyses the historical changes, impacts and challenges of the language policy, and discusses the prospects for its development and implications on this basis.[1]

2. Overview of the linguistic situation in Qatar

2.1 National and official languages

The official language of Qatar is Modern Standard Arabic, which became the sixth working language of the United Nations in 1974. The language is based on classical Arabic, which is marked by the language of the Koran. Arabic belongs to the Semitic group of the Semitic language family, of which it is the oldest and most dynamic. In the 8th century AD, Arabic became the national, religious and academic language of the Arabs. As a result of the wide spread of Islamic culture, Arabic was promoted on a wider scale. At the same time, the Arabs paid great attention to the "Arabisation" of foreign words, i.e., the development of vocabulary and terminology drawn from other languages such as Persian, Urdu, Turkish, and so on, with the Arabic language. The modern standard Arabic language is complex in terms of its linguistic system and is used in Qatari formalities, official correspondence

and the written language of newspapers and magazines.[2]

2.2 Dialects

The spoken language used daily by Qataris is Gulf Arabic, which belongs to the Afro-Asian language family. Spoken Gulf Arabic is the prevailing language of civil communication in the Gulf region and originated in the countries of Kuwait, Iraq, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Due to the differences in geographical location, natural conditions, and living customs in Arab countries and regions, people's linguistic habits and ways of expression are also different, which has had a certain impact on the formation and evolution of Arabic dialects. These dialects are spoken languages that are either identical or far from the standard Arabic language in terms of phonology, grammar and vocabulary. (Tang Xuemei, Majid 2018: 104) Gulf Arabic forms subordinate languages in different countries. The Gulf Arabic spoken by Qataris, also known as Qatari, belongs to the family of Arabic languages spoken in West Asia, which is a far cry from the Arabic spoken in North Africa, and is the most widely spoken language in Qatar. Unlike standard Arabic, the Qatari dialect is prevalent in folklore and is used far more often than the standard language in everyday life and informal situations. Gulf Yankee Arabic developed as a means of communication between Asians and the Arabic-speaking community in Qatar.

2.3 General purpose foreign language

The foreign language of Qatar is English, which is the second most common language spoken by Qataris. After becoming a British "protectorate" in 1916, Qatar was subjected to British colonialism for a long time, and English, the language of its sovereign, was gradually accepted and widely spoken. With the rapid development of Qatar's economy and services after the Second World War, there was an influx of expatriate workers, mainly from India, Pakistan and South-East Asian countries, who spoke a number of languages within their own ethnic groups, including Hindi, Persian and Urdu, with English being an important working language and a bridge to maintain smooth communication. This is an important reason for the diverse pattern of language life in Qatar. After Qatar was awarded the right to host the 2022 World Cup football tournament, it recruited a large number of expatriate labourers in South Asia for the construction of infrastructures and sports facilities, which further strengthened the position of English as a lingua franca. In addition, in the context of globalisation, the use of English has become increasingly common due to the need for foreign exchange and international cooperation in various fields. For both Arabs and non-Arabs in Qatar, English is the most active, authoritative and socially functional language for daily communication, business transactions and education.[3]

2.4 Language of instruction

As a result of colonial influences and the influx of expatriates, Qatar has a high degree of linguistic pluralism and a relatively open attitude towards the teaching of foreign languages, with English being taught in a number of primary schools and being a compulsory subject in secondary schools. At the basic and secondary levels, the main language of instruction in public schools is standard Arabic; private schools are mostly bilingual, and many of them teach mainly in English, which has become the de facto language of instruction and maintains its status as the first language of instruction. At the higher education level, English is the language of instruction for courses other than religion and literature. Science and engineering subjects are mostly taught in English. This allows for a better and more direct study of advanced Western science and technology. In Doha International Education City (DIEC), Qatar, which has high-quality western university education resources, international students come from more than 40 countries and are required to provide standardised scores and high school grades when applying for the programme. Compared with the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in the United States, more importance is attached to English language scores such as IELTS and TOEFL, and most of the teaching staff are imported from the top universities in Europe and America, with English as the main medium of instruction. Most of the teachers are imported from top universities in Europe and America, and English is the main medium of instruction.[4]

3. Historical changes in Qatar's language policy

3.1 Language legislation

In 1974, shortly after independence, the Provisional Constitution of Qatar was promulgated, the

first article of which formally stipulated that the official language was Arabic, and on 8 June 2004, the Permanent Constitution was promulgated, the first article of which states that the Qatari people are part of the Arab nation and that Arabic is its official language.

In 2009, the Qatari Ministry of Justice issued Decree No. 54, the Anti-Discrimination Civil Procedure Law, which stipulates in articles 16 and 68 that: "Arabic is the language of the court, and all legal documents written in a language other than Arabic must be translated into Arabic, and the language of the court hearing must be Arabic, and if the parties to the lawsuit or the witnesses do not understand Arabic, they should be relayed through an Arabic interpreter ." (Liao Jing, 2021: 56) However, the complexity of Qatar's demographic structure, the diversity of its linguistic life, the coexistence of Standard Arabic with a variety of dialects, and the encouragement of and attention to English language education at the level of official policy are phenomena that are considered to have affected the popularity of Standard Arabic in Qatar, challenged its status as an official language, and endangered the national and ethnic identity that is based on the Standard Arabic as its cornerstone. In response, Qatar's Supreme Education Council issued a decree in 2012 declaring the reinstatement of Arabic as a language of instruction in Qatar's basic education and in Qatar University's science and technology departments. The Qatari Cabinet adopted the draft Arabic Language Protection Law in 2016, which was officially promulgated in January 2019, making Qatar the first Gulf Arab country to explicitly support, protect and promote the Arabic language in the form of a specialised law. The Protection Law, which totals 15 articles, covers the use of the language in the political sphere, in foreign relations, in commercial and trade activities, in the field of public media, as well as in teaching and research, and specifies penalties. As a result of the revival of the Arabic language, the Protection Law has gained groundbreaking achievements.[5]

3.2 Educational language policy

Until the late 1990s, Qatar's education policy was "aimed at promoting social values and Islamic traditions, as well as preserving local heritage" (Barnawi, 2018: 97). In 2001, the Qatari government reached an agreement with the RAND Corporation to implement a new k-12 education system. In 2002, the Qatar's Supreme Education Council implemented reforms that introduced independent schools focusing on Arabic, English, maths, and science, which are the four courses that are mandatory to obtain a high school diploma. The new independent schools witnessed a shift from Arabic and religion to English and the teaching of science subjects in English (Bashshur, 2010: 157). Students in independent schools experience several shifts between Arabic and English as the medium of instruction during their K-12 education.

In the context of the trend towards internationalization and the emergence of English as the lingua franca for prestige, competitiveness and employability, in 2002 Qatar launched the Education for a New Era Initiative, which offers a range of professional degree programmes using English as the medium of instruction and is aimed at bridging the gap between institutions of higher education and the labour market, particularly in the fields of petroleum engineering, Business administration and health. During this period, English was used as the medium of instruction in almost all programmes at Qatar University. However, a decade after the reforms, educational effectiveness has not progressed at a commensurate rate and, in 2012, the Government of Qatar issued a decree declaring Arabic to be the medium of instruction in public educational institutions. As a result, Qatar University adopted Arabic as the medium of instruction for law, international affairs, business and economics, and journalism and communications programmes to help students maintain their Arab identity and culture, while other scientific and technical programmes considered important continued to be taught in English. On the one hand, this has created problems with regard to the shortage of Arabic language resources, international cooperation and controversy over the academic and employability of Qatar University students; on the other hand, the use of Arabic as the medium of instruction in public secondary schools does not prepare students for science programmes at universities in which English is the medium of instruction.[6]

4. Impact and challenges of Qatar's language policy

Modern Standard Arabic, as the official language of Qatar, is mostly used in official Qatari formal occasions, and its existence is mainly based on the protection of the religious aspect due to the important role of Islam in the life of the society, while it is the Qatari dialect that is prevalent in the folklore. Bonald Sposky (2011: 65) has emphasised that "home language policy ultimately determines

language maintenance and extinction". It can be seen that Qatar still lacks a clear and effective language preservation policy, and its language policy does not show a sensitive awareness of language preservation and transmission at the family level, which, coupled with the impact of foreign languages in the era of globalisation, has made it difficult and unwilling for the younger generation to use the standard language for communication, and they tend to use the dialect or English, which affects the use and promotion of the standard Arabic language.[7]

Many voices in Qatari society, particularly stakeholders, have called for maintaining the language of the former colonisers to play an important role in areas such as administration and education. As a link to modernity, English can help the younger generation learn science, technology, business and other disciplines at the source and be competitive in the globalised marketplace, ensuring that they have access to promising employment opportunities. The New Era Education Initiative (NEI), which was seen as promising, ambitious, detailed and in line with international standards, has had problems in the implementation phase, with public dissatisfaction with the simultaneous top-down implementation at all grades. Due to the low level of proficiency in the language of instruction, learners have had to deal with the stress and mental burden of learning due to language barriers, and may also face general academic problems. The Doha International Education City is more of a transplant of the Western model of education. From basic to elite education in Qatar, there are varying degrees of "anglicisation" of students' language, thoughts and behaviours. The use of English as a medium of instruction has brought to the fore social issues of identity, language preservation and cultural transmission, and the risk of marginalisation of individuals who are unable to use English has increased. The rapid spread of English has also impacted on strong religious ideologies, undermining Islamic values and contributing to the importation of Western cultural values.

Qatar expects its citizens to have a reasonable level of English language proficiency in education, employment, social interaction, travelling, etc., and also to be able to communicate effectively and professionally in the fields of economics and trade, science and technology, and international relations. However, nearly a decade of poor reforms have not resulted in students learning either Arabic or English. Under these circumstances, resuming the use of Arabic as the language of instruction seems to be a reasonable option. The use of Arabic as a medium of instruction allows for better bridge-building with local communities and contributes to the realisation of the National Vision 2030, the preservation of the Arab identity and the reinforcement of Islamic values. However, the resulting shortfall is the shortage of adequate and quality educational resources and the fact that students in public schools do not graduate from secondary school with a language that prepares them for science programmes at university. As a result, the issue of language of instruction continues to haunt education reformers and policymakers.[8]

5. Prospects and Implications for Language Policy in Qatar

Hu Fanzhu (2023) mentioned that language policy is not only about the development of individuals, but also about the development of the community, and more importantly, about the development of all mankind; and the formulation of language policy not only needs to pay attention to the "scene" of the present, but also needs to see the "scenery" of the distant future, and more importantly, needs to pay attention to the "vision" of the future. The formulation of language policy should not only focus on the present scene, but also look at the distant scenery and pay attention to the future vision. Indeed, the study and formulation of language policy should be based on domestic reality and take into account the context of globalisation. Based on the analysis of the historical changes, impacts and challenges of Qatar's language policy, and taking into account the overall environment of its dynamic development at home and abroad, we have the following considerations about the future prospects of Qatar's language policy and the inspiration it brings:

Firstly, consolidating the centrality of the Arabic standard language, paying attention to the popularisation and promotion of the Arabic language, formulating a clear policy on the Arabic language, and restoring the population's linguistic and cultural self-confidence are essential to the construction of a national identity and national recognition. Learning through the mother tongue is in line with the UNESCO Declaration on linguistic rights and its recommendation that States should use the mother tongue as the language of instruction. The use of the mother tongue as the language of instruction is necessary for the cognitive development of learners and for the building of their sense of belonging and national identity. The emphasis on the fundamental and primary position of the standard Arabic language in the field of teaching and the importance of the dominant position of the Arabic language in the linguistic life of the country has a historical and practical, theoretical and pragmatic basis. The

assertion that Arabic is irrelevant to the academic performance or career prospects of students in the sciences is unfounded and out of touch with the reality that all students need the opportunity to improve their proficiency in Arabic through a more compact and intensive programme, and that all disciplines need more opportunities to learn and improve their Arabic language skills. The Standard Arabic language, which is contemporary and innovative in its collision with different languages and has digested and absorbed many new terms and vocabularies in the fields of economics, culture, science and technology and international relations, should be established as a platform for its academic linguistic think-tanks, and research and practice in language policy at the family level should be strengthened.

At the same time, there is an emphasis on improving students' proficiency in English, and any plans to expand the role of the English language should be premised on respecting and guaranteeing the status of the Arabic language, and on establishing, through active negotiation, a healthy system of bilingualism in which the English language plays an important role in helping Qataris to participate fully in world affairs. Similarly, it is unrealistic to view English as unnecessary for the future careers of humanities students. As Qatar endeavours to rebuild its national identity, it has a responsibility to enable a new generation of Qatari citizens to function effectively locally, regionally and globally. Qatar, in the midst of internationalisation trends, is constantly reflecting and balancing between the promotion of English and the preservation of the Arabic language, and between English language education that promotes economic development to the detriment of society. Adequate planning, proper monitoring, continuous evaluation and sound coping mechanisms are all ways of mitigating negative impacts and addressing challenges.

Lastly, the development of a language policy that can meet both the emotional and instrumental needs of students creates a harmonious existence between the local and global languages. It should be integrated with policies related to internationalisation, linked to regulations promoting Arabic as the official language of the country, and provide support for the development of students' linguistic competence. The provision of bilingual support does not duplicate all teaching and learning activities, but rather strengthens the contact and interaction between the two languages, e.g., the provision of teaching and learning resources in both languages, the development of a bilingual policy, and so on. The provision of parallel programmes in Arabic and English meets the different needs of university stakeholders. Parallel linguism can be seen as "a way of raising linguistic awareness and ensuring mutual dialectics between the national language and English" (Phillipson, 2018: 6). Considering that for a language to have social attributes, it has to be used in all domains, including academia, and parallel linguism ensures that the problem of missing domains is avoided. Maintaining the dominance of Arabic on the one hand and introducing English as a medium of instruction in certain specialisations on the other hand, the teaching time allocated to Arabic and English should be flexible at all levels, and significant efforts should be made to improve the language proficiency and teaching standards of teachers.

6. Conclusions

It goes without saying that language policy is formulated with the national interest and rejuvenation of the nation as its primary concern. Qatar's language policy has thus undergone a historical transformation from Arabicisation to Englishisation to Arabicisation. In the midst of globalisation, the Qatari government and people are striving in various ways to develop the best options between the promotion of Modern Standard Arabic, the spread of English and the preservation of the Qatari dialect, and to find a balanced strategy between Western and local cultures, in order to raise the Arab nation's awareness of national security and language preservation, and to create a healthy linguistic and cultural ecosystem.

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