

Assignment 3 Areej M.

When I was thinking of this assignment I thought once again about the example Dr. Nishant Shah discussed on languages as an informational life form. I would like to build on this example to present an artifact on the diversity of Arabic language accents and dialects as an invitation to consider such diversity within technologies. The Arabic language is rich, it is one of the most spoken languages in the world. However, the unified version of it, Academic Arabic, has a different form than its spoken version across varied Arab societies around the world, even at small geographic scale dialects and accents can be different. Following an example I noticed through my work with children: world (Aalam in Arabic) could also mean people (Nas) in some accents, and in others it means both. To understand the meaning of it, context matters. Such context not always could be processed by text-based or voice-based technologies and algorithms. Diversity of the spoken Arabic language, which is also the major type of language spoken in the digital world, can have consequences of lack of understanding of sarcasm or jokes, and as a result “flag” certain types of usage of language. In a digital world where Academic Arabic is less used, can also be an opportunity for local accents and dialects to thrive. For instance, one can imagine culturally sensitive interactive tools to language that can contextualize varied mediums like “memes” from one context to another through modifying accents or dialects. In all cases, such issues are subjected to classism too, some accents and dialects are more popular than others or used more than others in the cultural scene. At the same time, being open to embrace non-Academic Arabic, even within mediums that often used Academic Arabic (like novel), can be expansive to the adoption of new literacies.

Considering the example of the word cat. Cat in Academic Arabic is “Qitta” or “Qit”. However, looking across multiple Arab accents and dialects, I found multiple usage in local contexts:

قط قطة بس بسينة بسة إطة أطة قطوس كديسة مشة

Now this is a very simple example, however, imagine software like Microsoft Word, having red lines under all other forms of the word, simply because they are not Academic Arabic? In this way, what counts as “language” or valid usage of a term is constituted through certain rules and not being open to adapt these varieties of usages as legitimate ways of expression. Adding to that, introducing an emoji medium to these variations as a representation creates a new means for communication which make the variations of accents and dialects possibly less relevant. Another example is thinking about binary representation of these variations, a very different mean of representation too. These varied mediums of representations and of accents and dialects make me think about how we might in a digital world create tools that are culturally sensitive and at the same time open possibilities for communication beyond one specific type of communication.

