
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Language and Identity in Kuwait: Examining Arabic Diglossia amongst Generation X and Generation Z

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| ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between language and identity in Kuwait, focusing on the implications of diglossia amongst generations X and Z (those born between 1960-1980 and 1997-2012). The use of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Kuwaiti Arabic in different settings is a prevalent feature of Kuwait's linguistic landscape. Some voices call for the standardization of Arabic dialects to obtain national independent identities, disassociating from Arabs and the Arabic language. This research explores whether this linguistic duality creates an identity dilemma for Kuwaitis within the aforementioned generations. An anonymous survey was conducted to gather data on attitudes, perceptions, stereotypes, and emotional responses. The findings suggest that diglossia in Kuwait is not creating an identity crisis or disconnect for either generation. Despite the generational differences, both groups exhibited more similarities than anticipated across the four studied themes. The study aims to contribute to understanding language and identity in a diglossic context.

| KEYWORDS

Diglossia, Identity, Kuwaiti, Arabic

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

1.1 Diglossia Definition and Characteristics

The word *Diglossia* is derived from the Greek word *diglōssos* (διγλωσσος), which means "bilingual". The concept and term were familiarized and added to sociolinguistics by Charles Ferguson in the late 1950s, and it describes the coexistence of two languages or varieties of a single language in a community (Ferguson, 2015). Predominantly, one of these varieties is perceived or considered more prestigious or formal (high variety), and the other is informal or colloquial (low variety). Furthermore, Charles Ferguson presented nine features of a diglossia, including:

Function: Each language variety is used or occupies a certain function depending on the situation. e.g., a wide variety is used in political speeches, sermons, and newspaper editorials. Low variety, on the other hand, is used in conversations with friends, family, and colleagues, as well as folk literature.

Prestige: The high variety is considered superior and more appealing compared to the low variety.

Literary heritage: Abundance of written literature using the High variety and is admired within communities.

Acquisition: The high variety is learned in formal or educational settings, whereas the low variety is acquired by socializing with others, or as stated by Ferguson, "the normal way of learning one's tongue" (2015)

Standardization: The wide variety is standardized via dictionaries, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation guidebooks. Low variety, on the other hand, is not.

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Stability: Diglossia has been proven to remain in societies for thousands of years, with borrowing from the high variety into the low variety being widespread.

Grammar: Word order and grammatical categories are the two main distinctions between the high and low varieties.

Lexicon: Many lexical items are shared between the two varieties with differences in form and meaning and sometimes with no equivalent words or pairs between the two.

Phonology: Phonology between the two varieties is similar, with more varieties in the low variety (Ferguson, 2015).

Examples of diglossia in which these features occur include Haiti (Haitian Creole: Low variety – French: High variety), Switzerland (Swiss German: Low variety – Standard German: High variety), and the most well-known diglossia example is in Arabic-speaking countries (dialects: Low variety – Classical / Modern Standard Arabic: High variety). This shows that diglossia is not associated with a specific ethnic group, language family, or geographic region (Connor-Linton & Fasold, 2006).

1.2 Dialect vs. Language

As can be observed in the above examples, some speech societies include regional varieties of a single language. Others include two languages. This is because of the interrelated concepts of diglossia and the language-dialect distinction. Basically, whether to consider a language a language or a dialect is merely a subjective socio-political issue rather than a purely linguistic one. This is due to the absence of an agreed-upon set of criteria to differentiate between the two. For example, mutual intelligibility is sometimes perceived as a defining factor. However, it is not definitive. For instance, speakers of Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish can often understand each other, yet they are considered separate languages. Correspondingly, Urdu and Hindi share a high degree of mutual intelligibility, but political and historical factors lead to their distinct classification. This can also be observed in Serbian, Montenegrin, Croatian, and Bosnian, in addition to Mandarin and Cantonese. Despite being mutually intelligible, they are all considered languages instead of dialects of each other (Pereltsvaig, 2012, Chapter 1).

Standardization or official recognition also plays a role. A language variety that is primarily spoken and does not hold a standardized form is more likely to be considered a dialect, while a codified and officially recognized variety is more likely to be considered a language (Connor-Linton & Fasold, 2006).

This highlights the complexity of the debate and, as sociolinguist Max Weinreich famously quipped, “A language is a dialect with an army and navy” (Pereltsvaig, 2012, Chapter 1).

1.3 Diglossia in the Arab World

Diglossia focuses on the function of each language or language variety within a society rather than the contrast between the two. Further, in the case of Arabic, mutual intelligibility, standardization, and politics play a crucial role in supporting the difference between a language and a dialect, resulting in diglossia. To illustrate, Modern Standard Arabic is the formal, standardized, and written form used in education, media, and official settings. It is not acquired naturally as a native tongue and is developed from Quranic or Classical Arabic. Dialects of Arabic, on the other hand, are acquired natively and are deemed the informal, spoken, and unwritten form used in everyday communication. It varies across regions in terms of pronunciation, lexicon, and grammar.

Nonetheless, with the aim of having distinct national identities, some propose standardizing Arabic dialects.

2. Background

2.1 History and Development of Arabic

2.1.1 Pre-Islam and Creation of Quraysh Dialect

Our understanding of pre-Islamic Arabia continues to evolve, and countless questions remain. Nonetheless, what is known is that prior to the emergence of Islam, the vast deserts of the Arabian Peninsula were home to numerous Arab or Bedouin tribes. These tribes lived in isolated groups, fostering the development of distinct dialects, and pre-Islamic poetry serves as a testament to this linguistic diversity. Remarkably, these historical varieties and distinctions resonate in spoken Arabic today. For instance, the Egyptian dialect demonstrates a shift in the sound /z/ into a /g/ sound, also called a Yemini /g/. On the other hand, the Emirati, Qatari, Bahraini, Omani, and Kuwaiti dialects exhibit a phenomenon known as the *Aja'aja* of *Quda'a*, which involves the interchangeability of the /j/ and the /z/ sounds, a feature historically associated with the *Quda'a* tribe. Additionally, some dialects spoken in Saudi Arabia and Jordan display a phenomenon called *Kaskasa*, replacing the feminine /k/ sound at the end of words with a /s/, or *Kashkasha*, replacing the /k/ sound with /j/. This feature finds its roots among the *Rubia'a*, *Asad*, and *Tamim* tribes. Finally, the dialects of Iraq and Syria exhibit a phenomenon called *Istinta'a*, which involves the transformation of the /ʕ/ sound into

a /n/ sound. These linguistic variations highlight some of the many fascinating linguistic characteristics that contribute to the richness of the Arabic language and its dialects (Anis, 1955).

Furthermore, before the rise of Islam, *Mecca* thrived as a trade center. Caravans laden with goods from India and Yemen would converge on the city, where their wares were then sold to Egypt and the Levant. The security of Mecca's trade routes stemmed from the reverence accorded to the *Kaaba*, a holy site that commanded and still commands great respect. The Quraysh tribe was a powerful group with extensive connections across the region and held sway over the *Ukath* marketplace, the Kaaba, and pilgrimages. Amongst the major tribes visiting Ukath were *Hawazin*, *Ghatafan*, and *Tamim*. Also, the Quraysh tribe traveled twice a year, in winter to Yemen and summer to Huran, which brought them into contact with people from Persia, Rome, and Abyssinia (Barboura, 2011).

According to (Anis, 1955), this contact with diverse groups that inevitably required communication influenced the development of the unique dialect of Quraysh, which over time became widely understood. It was used as a common language for trading, regulations, boasting about lineage, and poetry.

2.1.2 With the Rise of Islam and Views on Dialects

It is well-known that the rise of Islam had and still has a great influence on the Arabic language. There is a widely believed notion that the Quran was revealed in the Quraysh tongue. This is mainly due to two main reasons. First, Prophet Mohammed *PBUH* belonged to the Quraysh tribe, and it would make sense that the Quran be revealed in a language he understands (1955).

The second reason is that the Quraysh dialect was thought to be the most eloquent. This is because it was believed that people living on the edges of the Arabian Peninsula spoke less eloquently than those in the center. They attributed this to the influence of neighboring civilizations. For instance, they believed that the dialect of the tribe of Quda'a, living near Rome, Syria, and Palestine, was influenced by the Roman language. Similarly, they thought that dialects of *Tghlab*, *Nimer*, *Baker*, *Laham*, *Jutham*, and Yemen were influenced by their proximity to Persians, Greeks, Egyptians (Coptic), Nabataeans, and Abyssinians respectively. Therefore, they believed Quraysh was fluent as they were in the center of the Arabian Peninsula. (1955).

However, according to (Awn, 1952), the Quraysh tongue was influenced by many dialects due to its significance in terms of trade, religion, politics, and literature. It contacted many tribes from different regions and borrowed many words that contributed to their dialect, and it was used as a common language. In other words, it was functioning as a lingua franca for Arabs and visitors of the region prior to Islam. The dialect of Quraysh was considered for the elites, and it was used to communicate with people from different origins in the Ukath marketplace. On the other hand, people utilized their tribes' dialects amongst themselves. Because of this, there is scarce documentation on dialect belittling or defamation in pre-Islamic history (1955).

Therefore, even though the Quraish dialect is the cradle of the Quran, it includes other dialects as well, and the different varieties in Quran recitation might have stemmed from these dialectal differences. Nonetheless, the existence of several dialects in the Quran is an ongoing debated topic (Shafi al-Din, 2007).

2.1.3 Creation of Modern Standard Arabic

The Quran played a significant role in developing Quranic Arabic or Classical Arabic (a refined or sophisticated form of Arabic based on the Quran). With the spread of Islam in the 9th century, it replaced other languages such as South Arabic, Aramaic, Coptic, and Berber (Amazigh). Making it the language of literature and science in many civilizations, including Aleppo, Cairo, Kairouan, Cordoba, and Andalusia (Barboura, 2011).

Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), on the other hand, is the language used today in Arabic speaking countries. It is the language of media, news, literature, print, academia, science, law, and politics. MSA also incorporates a modern lexicon used in technology, amongst other fields (Mohamed, 2022).

Regardless, in linguistics, the difference between the two is emphasized. However, there is no clear history of when the transition from CA to MSA occurred, nor is there an agreed-upon criteria to distinguish the two. It is important to note, then, that MSA and CA are not two distinct languages, and most Arabic speakers do not draw a distinction between the two. In other words, Arabic speakers can recognize the difference in register between a religious text and a newspaper article, but they do not see MSA and CA as fundamentally separate languages. This is reflected in Arabic courses, which utilize texts from the Quran as well as pre-Islamic poetry for teaching the language and its literature. Moreover, all Arabic dialects originate from MSA or CA with some phonological and lexical traces of the languages spoken prior to the arrival of Islam and Arabic in each region. These include Coptic, Aramaic, Assyrian, Berber (Amazigh), and Farsi (Alsaidan, 1981).

Therefore, increasing the gap between MSA and dialects by claiming that no one speaks Arabic today is an exaggeration. The Arabic language encompasses a spectrum where MSA serves as the formal language, while everyday communication relies on colloquial dialects.

2.2 Kuwaiti Arabic: History, Languages, and Dialects

There are limited historical records of the Kuwaiti dialect. Mainly due to the heavy reliance on oral communication, as well as other reasons such as illiteracy, focus on Modern Standard Arabic and urban dialects. Further, even though recent documents on the topic exist, a comprehensive review of these documents resulted in their being omitted in this paper due to their lack of depth, objectivity, and inclusivity of the Kuwaiti dialects. Instead, the Kuwaiti dialect will be seen from the macroscopic or major point of view of its speakers. That is *Bedoui* Kuwaiti, which includes distinct dialects of different tribes, and *Urban* Kuwaiti, or as called in Kuwait, */ħad'ari/*, and it is the dialect popularized by media. Both dialects differ in their phonetics and phonology as well as some lexical items; nonetheless, there is a high degree of mutual intelligibility between the two.

An agreed-upon aspect of the Kuwaiti dialect is that it is derived from MSA alongside all Arabic dialects. Further, it was influenced in terms of lexicon and slight verb items by other languages and dialects. Namely, Hindi, Hindustani, Urdu, Persian, Turkish, and English (Alsaidan, 1981). This is because Kuwait played an essential role in the trade routes with India, Oman, Baghdad, Persia, and other neighboring Arab regions. Also, some Kuwaitis are descendants of Persia, others are descendants of Najd and Hijaz, and they have kept their mother tongue since migrating to Kuwait, which contributed to the Kuwaiti dialect. In addition, in the early history of Kuwait, intermarriages were common due to the 1831 plague in Kuwait that resulted in the death of 60 percent of the population, mainly women and children ("Today in Kuwait's history," 2023).

2.2.1 Kuwaiti Sign Language

Kuwaiti sign language (KSL) is a visual-spatial language that thrives within the deaf and hard of hearing community in Kuwait. Despite lacking official recognition, it developed naturally through generations of deaf Kuwaitis creating and sharing signs, enriching its vocabulary. Considered an independent language with its own grammar and syntax, KSL is remarkably non-gendered and has no relation with modern standard Arabic or spoken Kuwaiti.

Furthermore, distinct dialects exist within KSL due to regional variations and even gender. This is due to limited engagement with others from different regions and the other gender. Also, KSL exhibits a high degree of mutual intelligibility with other sign languages used in the Gulf region, reflecting some shared linguistic elements (B. Aldukhi, personal communication, January 1st, 2024).

2.2.2 Pidgin Kuwaiti

Kuwait is a country with many expatriates, accounting for 70 percent of the population. They include Indians (825,000), Egyptians (517,973), Bangladeshis (181,265), Syrians (140,000), Pakistanis (126,000), and Filipinos (185,788) (*Kuwait population 2024 (live)* 2024). This high number of expats in Kuwait resulted in the utilization of English as a lingua franca amongst those who know some English. Others with less language proficiency and/or accuracy in English communicate via *Pidgin Kuwaiti* (simplified form of Kuwaiti Arabic used for communication between people who do not share a common language). Moreover, the influence of expatriates on the Kuwaiti dialect is to be expected as all languages and dialects undergo change due to contact with each other.

2.2.3 Diglossia in Kuwait

In Kuwait, like most Arab countries where diglossia exists, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) serves as the language of literature, news broadcasting, education, law, and politics. Kuwaiti Arabic, on the other hand, dominates everyday communication as well as popular media like TV shows, theater, and songs.

2.2.4 Who are "Kuwaitis" in This Study?

The research is conducted on Kuwaitis. However, it is noted that the representatives of Kuwait may cause controversy. The term "Kuwaiti" encompasses a diverse population, as many Kuwaitis originate from different countries. Mainly Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Also, there are mixed heritage Kuwaitis and *Bedoons* (literally, without, meaning: without citizenship). And the legal and social acceptance of those distinctions can vary within Kuwaiti society.

Therefore, Kuwaitis, as defined in this paper, are anyone who identifies as Kuwaiti, regardless of citizenship, heritage, or birthplace. Nonetheless, since the paper's focus is on the Kuwaiti dialect, only those who speak and comprehend Kuwaiti Arabic will be considered. *Even if it is not considered "correct" or "proper Kuwaiti" according to those who attempt to gate-keep the dialect.*

In essence, this research explores the experience of Kuwaitis while acknowledging the rich linguistic diversity within the population. Fluency variations are not a central concern of this study.

3. Literature Review

3.1 What is Identity?

The concept of identity is philosophical and has a multifaced nature. This is because it requires constituting the “self” to be able to define and express it. This results in the inclusion of various dimensions like self-perception, cultural background, social interaction, and personal experience. Further, this multifaced nature arises from the dynamic interplay of several factors such as hobbies, lineages, careers, degrees, talents, and religion. These factors may change with time as some of them are assigned at birth (inherited), and others are self-selected.

In simpler terms, the construct of identity encompasses the way we perceive ourselves as individuals and as part of groups. It includes our characteristics, such as morals, values, and beliefs, and self-perception, such as thoughts, feelings, experiences, and attitudes. It also includes social roles such as being a child, parent, and friend and social membership such as religion, political opinions, interests, or ethnicity. These aspects of identity can evolve and shift throughout peoples’ lives. For instance, a dedicated athlete might initially define themselves by their physical prowess. However, as they travel the world for competition, their identity as a global citizen could develop, influencing their training and potentially leading them to advocate for sportsmanship across cultures.

3.1.1 Arab Identity and Kuwaiti Identity

Arab identity is a controversial topic due to the ambiguousness of the term “Arab”. The origins of the word “Arab” is arcane, as there is no definitive answer to why Arabs are called Arabs. Some theories point to an ancestral link, suggesting the term originates from *Ya’rub Bin Qahtan*, who was considered the first speaker of Arabic. Another theory suggests a geographical connection, with the word being derived from *Alarabaat*, the name of their homeland (Alasma’l, 1963).

Historians have also looked for clues in ancient languages. Orientalists have traced the word back to Assyrian texts, where it referred to the desert-dwelling sheikhs bordering their territory. Babylonian records mention *MatoArabi*, meaning “Arab Land”. Additionally, the Hebrew word “Arab” translates to “Bedouin” and appears in the Torah, Talmud, Book of Jeremiah, and Book of Isaiah. This also suggests that the term existed before Islam, as is also evident in the Quran, which distinguishes between “Arab” and “Ajam” (meaning; non-Arabs) (1963).

Historians further categorized Arabs based on their ancestry. Proto – Arabs (*ba’ida*) are considered the earliest Arabs, descendants from ancient nations like *Aad and Thamud*. Original Arabs (*aribah*) refers to those from the *Qahtan* tribe from Yemen. Finally, Neo – Arabs (*musta’ribah*), which are descendants of Abraham from Isamil, with the premise that Isamil did not speak Arabic as a first or native language; instead, his native language was Hebrew. Other historians only divided them into Original Arabs and Neo – Arabs, where Arabic was transmitted to original Arabs by God. Neo – Arabs, on the other hand, learnt Arabic and adopted it instead of their mother tongues. Regardless of the specific origin of the word “Arab”, most historians agree that all Arabs are descended from either Adnan and Ismail or the Qahtan tribe of Yemen (1963).

Nonetheless, today, many people incorrectly view the term “Arab” as referring to a homogenous group. In reality, Arab identity is a complex tapestry composed of diverse ethnicities, religions, and political systems. Nowadays, it generally refers to people who are residents of the 22 countries or people originating from them who are living in the diaspora. Nonetheless, Arabs differ in their ethnicity, religion, politics, and language. To clarify:

Ethnically: Mixed heritage is common amongst Arabs due to millennia of interaction, trade, conquests, and the presence of numerous civilizations in the region. These ethnicities include Berber, Nubians, Coptic, ancient Egyptians (Pharaohs; according to some), Assyrians, Phoenicians, Kurds, etc., with identifications of these ethnicities by Arabs may vary.

Religiously: While Islam is the religion of most Arabs, it is not the only religion. Christianity, Judaism, Druze, and Bahai, with their respective branches and sects, are some of the most common religions followed by Arabs.

Politically: There are multiple political systems associated with Arab countries. Those include monarchy (constitutional and absolute), republic, emirate, and sultanate.

Linguistically: A variety of heritage languages such as Kurdish, Coptic, Amazigh, Assyrian, and Nubian are spoken by minorities within the Arab world.

Regardless of these differences, the Arabic language serves as the unifying thread. This shared language connects Arabs across the vast region, fostering a sense of common history, heritage, literature, and culture. Thus, contrary to what some might argue, being Arab can correlate with various ethnicities, languages, and religions. One can be Arab (linguistic identity) and Berber or Coptic (ethnic identity), for example.

Cultural heritage is another strong thread that unites Arabs. This is mainly due to the contribution of various civilizations and kingdoms that have ruled the region. Islam, alongside other religions, plays a significant role in shaping values, ethics, and daily life. Core values such as hospitality and respect for elders are deeply ingrained in the Arab social structure, which is family-oriented. Art and architecture are also equally expressive, featuring elements like calligraphy, arches, domes, and geometric designs.

Arabic literature has a long and rich history. Poetry is the most esteemed form, especially during the pre-Islamic era. An example of pre-Islamic literary work is The *Muallaqat*, which is a collection of prestigious poems that offer vivid imagery. These poems often included themes of love, travel, the beauty of the desert, and the importance of family and tribe. Further, with the rise of the Islamic Golden Age, prose flourished, and a unique genre emerged during this period called the *Maqamat*, characterized by rhymed and structured stories featuring a chaotic and comedic exchange between two strangers in an urban setting. The influence of neighboring cultures on Arabic literature, like Indian, Persian, and Egyptian, is evident in the *One Thousand and One Nights* collection of stories (Arabic Literature, n.d.).

After the Second World War, poetry became more political, particularly in Iraq and Egypt, leading to resistance poetry in Palestine. Moreover, Arabic novels were also inspired by Western authors like Sir Walter Scott and Alexandre Dumas. This resulted in the exploration of social realism, feminism, and existentialism, with Nagib Mahfuz being one of the greatest novelists. By the early 1960s, Arabic novels achieved international recognition while retaining a distinct cultural identity (n.d.).

Music is also deeply intertwined with Arabic culture, prevailing throughout the region, from Egypt and Lebanon to Syria and Iraq. Classical, Andalusian, Gulf, Sufi, Shaabi, and Bedouin musical styles all utilize the *maqamat*, a system of scale based on modes like *Rast*, *Hijaz*, *Nahawand*, and *Kurd*. These melodies are brought to life by instruments such as the oud, qanun, nay, and riq (Piza, 2023).

Overall, Arab culture extends beyond literature and music, also encompassing vibrant dance traditions, unique styles of dress, cuisine, and cinema. Enriching the vibrant cultural identity of Arabs. Therefore, it should be noted that identifying as Kuwaiti, with its traditions and history, means being part of the wider Arab world and its culture, as Arab identity is an umbrella term for all Arab nations.

3.2.1 Why is Identity Important?

American psychologist Erickson proposed that the main challenge of adolescence is developing an identity (Hoose, 2020). This can make peoples' sense of identity a complex puzzle, made up of inherited traits and the experiences they accumulate. These pieces hold varying importance for each person, shaping their answer to the question, "Who are you?" One person might prioritize their ethnicity, while another identifies most with their career or hobbies.

Reciprocally, this identity shapes our behavior. Believing in honesty motivates us to be truthful, while repeatedly expressing anger can reinforce it as a trait. The way we see ourselves also influences how we act. For instance, identifying as an actor might lead one to prioritize empathy and strong emotional expression. A digital artist, on the other hand, might focus on creativity and technological expertise. Similarly, a dancer values discipline and physical control, while a swimmer could prioritize perseverance and goal setting. Research by behavioral economist M. Keith Chen suggests that the structure of languages themselves can shape how we think about the future, potentially influencing aspects of identity like financial planning or risk-taking. (Chen, 2013).

Likewise, our identity is closely linked to emotions. The challenges we overcome can shape our emotional repertoire, and different identities, like musicians, students, or CEOs, are often accompanied by specific emotions. Further, it is possible for someone to identify with certain emotions such as optimism, independence, or humor. Emotions can also be shaped by context; in the workplace, for example, engaging in emotional labor can influence how someone sees themselves within their professional role. A customer service employee might cultivate a helpful demeanor, even when frustrated, as this behavior aligns with company expectations. Over time, fostering a service-oriented sense of identity. Similarly, shared emotional experiences within an organization's team can cultivate a collective identity, where members see themselves as part of a unit with shared values and goals (Zerbe, 2017). In short, our identities are not just labels; they are strong forces that shape who we are and how we behave.

3.2.2 Language, Culture, and Identity

Having explored the various dimensions of identity, it is important to note that language is also a crucial part of identity. Language, culture, and identity are deeply intertwined, as one cannot fully understand a language without having a good grasp of the cultural context in which it thrives. Cultures transmit their traditions, values, and beliefs through language, specifically via stories, proverbs, and sayings passed down through generations. Further, new words and phrases emerge to describe new concepts and experiences within a culture and provide different ways of expression. Also, language can shape identity as it connects people to their heritage, whether it be lineage, religion, or history.

Language choices can *reflect identity*. For example, speaking in a particular dialect, like Jerusalemite Arabic (Palestinian), can reflect geographic origins. Similarly, using teenage slang or incorporating foreign languages can hint at the age group, social circle, or educational background.

Greetings also offer clues about identity. Saying *As-salamu- alaikum* (peace be upon you) reflects the Islamic faith. Even humor can be culturally specific. For example, Arabic humor often draws on political irony, wordplay, and social commentary, while American humor themes include relationships, social awkwardness, and everyday situations and may bring up topics such as religion, sex, and race.

Moreover, language exposure plays a vital role in *shaping identity*. By being exposed to certain lexicons and ways of speaking, individuals internalize cultural norms and values. For example, African-American English (AAE), also known as Black English Vernacular, features distinct features such as using double negatives “they don’t know nothing about it” or including habitual “be” as in “he be looking good”. These linguistic features are not only discerning for AAE but also foster a sense of community amongst its speakers (Lauture, 2020).

In addition, Arabic includes a self–reciprocal kinship in which a mother would call her son or daughter “mama”, highlighting the distinctive social structure or family dynamic amongst Arab families. These linguistic features associated with culture impact an individual’s sense of identity by providing insights into unique cultures and fostering connections within a community. Examples like these can be found across languages, and they reveal how language exposure shapes a sense of identity.

Furthermore, language can provide a powerful *medium* for people with similar backgrounds or interests to connect and communicate. Immigrants speaking their native language in a new country can find comfort and solidarity in shared experiences. Lawyers using inside jokes create a sense of camaraderie and shared understanding. Because of these connections via language, peoples’ sense of belonging is strengthened, which makes them feel understood and accepted.

In addition, language can be used in various ways to *express identity*. To clarify, incorporating technical or domain-specific rhetoric from a specific field or ideology can indicate that one is identifying with a career or like-minded group. Though stereotypical, words like “patriarchy”, “mansplaining”, and “gaslighting” are known to be used mainly by feminists. Also, the level of politeness in speech can show how people identify themselves in relation to others. Formal language is often used with superiors or strangers, while informal language might be used primarily with family or close friends. Even the way we tell stories or anecdotes can serve as a window into identity. For example, focusing on actions to solve a challenging situation can suggest a belief in one’s resilience and positive outlook.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

A quantitative approach was employed to investigate the potential identity dilemma arising amongst Generation X and Generation Z Kuwaitis from the diglossic situation of Arabic. A survey was conducted to gain initial insights into generational differences. Participants’ age was recorded, but gender and level or type of education were excluded. While these factors can offer valuable findings, including them could complicate the analysis and lead the paper’s focus to be on gender or education instead of generational differences.

4.2 Data Collection

An online survey was the primary data collection method due to its efficiency and anonymity. The survey was designed using an online tool, QuestionPro, and piloted with a small group of people for clarity and comprehension. The survey consisted of 8 questions (multiple choice, Likert scale, true and false) designed to explore four key themes related to language, identity, and the diglossic situation in Kuwait:

Emotional Response: This theme is aimed at understanding how participants’ emotions towards MSA and KA influence their sense of identity.

Stereotypes: This theme explores how prevalent stereotypes linked to MSA speakers shape identity perceptions.

Attitude: This theme examines how the use of MSA and KA contributes to identity formation and expression.

Perception: This theme shows how participants perceive both language varieties and their effect on identity.

Data collection resulted in over 70 responses. After filtering for incomplete surveys, participation from deaf or hard-of-hearing, and participants who did not identify as Kuwaiti, a final sample size of 58 participants was obtained.

4.3 Target Population

Following the Pew Research Center’s generational cohorts (Dimock, 2019),

- Kuwaiti citizens born between [1965] and [1980] (Generation X)
- Kuwaiti citizens born between [1997] and [2012] (Generation Z)

Focusing on these generations allows us to examine how political events (e.g. Arab spring), educational changes like emphasis on English, and technological shift and advancements (social media) may influence their experience with diglossia and consequently affect their identity.

4.4 Data Analysis

A combination of DATAtab and Microsoft Excel was used for data analysis.

Inferential statistics were used to test statistically significant differences between the two generations.

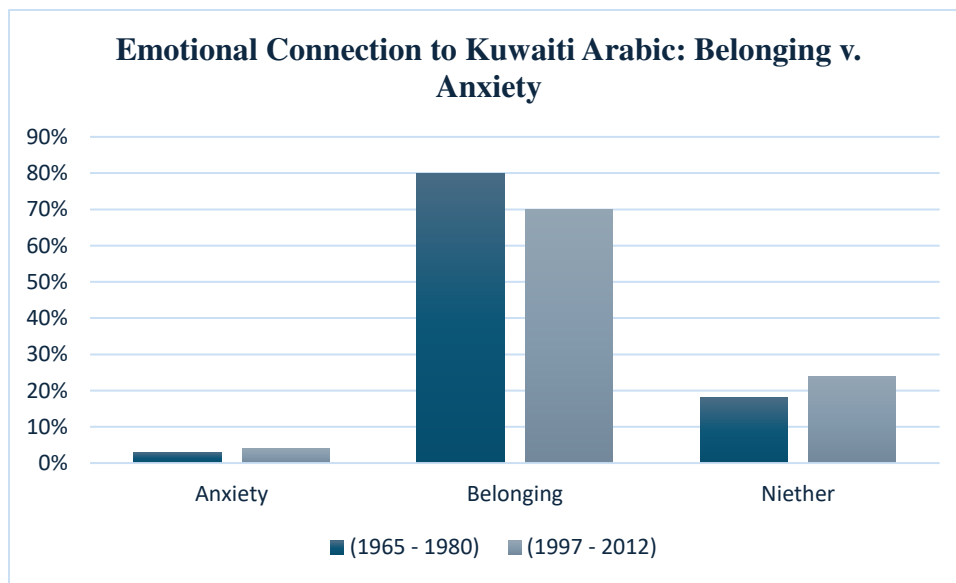
5. Results

5.1 Emotional Responses: Q1

Responses revealed a contrasting experience for Gen X and Gen Z regarding feelings when speaking MSA. While a majority from both generations report feeling a sense of belonging (72% within Gen X and 60% within Gen Z), Gen Z participants were more likely to experience anxiety (16%) compared to Gen X (3%).

5.2 Emotional Responses: Q2

Figure 1



The graph shows the responses from both generations to the question, “When speaking in Kuwaiti Arabic, do you feel A: Belonging, B: Anxiety, C: Neither.” Both generations felt a strong sense of belonging when speaking Kuwaiti Arabic, with 80% for Gen X and 70% for Gen Z. Interestingly, both generations showed relatively close percentages in feeling anxiety when speaking Kuwaiti Arabic, with 3% within Gen X and 4% within Gen Z.

5.3 Stereotypes: Q1

Figure 2

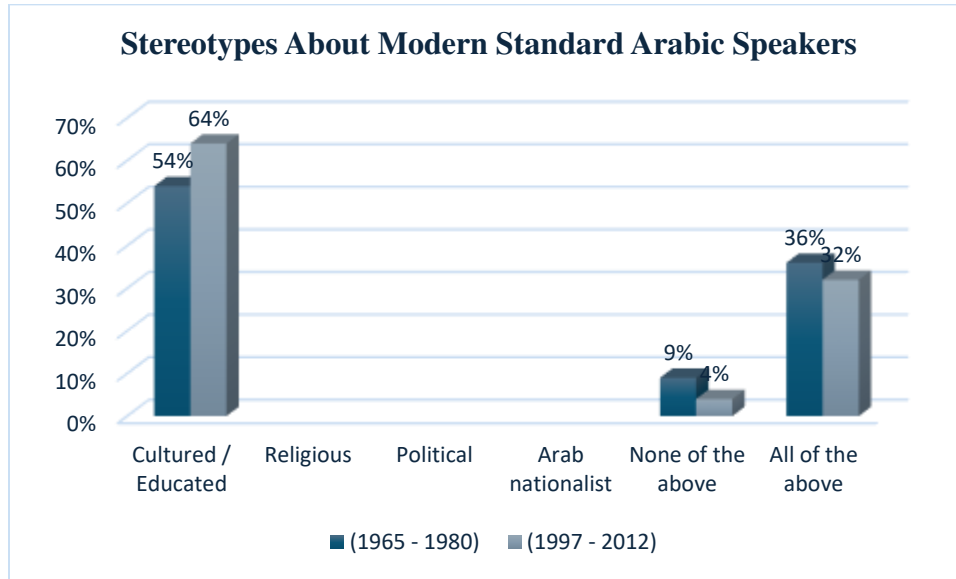


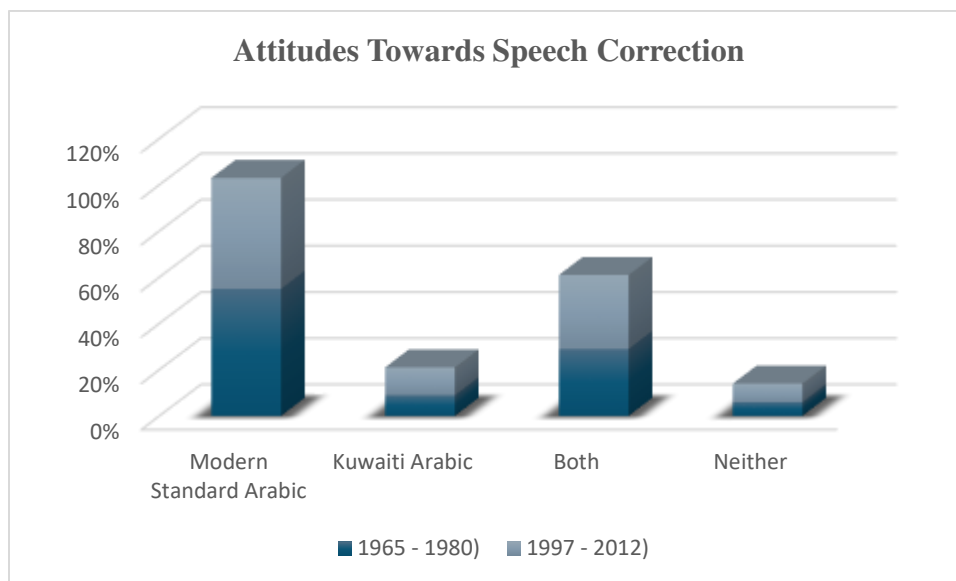
Figure 2 analyzes responses to the question, “Do you regard speakers of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as: A: Cultured / Educated, B: Religious, C: Political, D: Arab nationalist, E: None of the above, F: All of the above?” It demonstrates that the most popular view of MSA speakers is that they are intellectual / Educated, with 54% for Gen X and 64% for Gen Z. Interestingly, both generations had a reasonably similar number of responses for option F: All of the above (36% for Gen X and 32% for Gen Z). However, Gen X was more likely to choose option E: Non – of the above with 9% compared to 4% for Gen Z.

5.4 Attitude: Q1

Responses to the Likert scale question “How important is it for you to master MSA?” across the two generations revealed that both generations valued mastering MSA, with similar percentages of (42%) in Gen X choosing “somewhat important” or “extremely important”. Gen Z leaned more towards “somewhat important” (45%), and (37%) selected “extremely important”. The data also demonstrates a difference in the “somewhat not important” category, with 9% of Gen X choosing it compared to only 4% of Gen Z.

5.5 Attitude: Q2

Figure 3



This stacked bar chart (Figure 3) investigates how Kuwaitis from different generations view correcting their speech. The majority, across Gen X with 55% and Gen Z with 48%, were open to corrections in Modern Standard Arabic. Followed by “both” in popularity, with 29% of Gen X and 32% of Gen Z. Kuwaiti Arabic was chosen by 9% of Gen X and 12% of Gen Z. Finally, a small percentage opted for no speech corrections in either MSA or Kuwaiti Arabic (6% for Gen X and 8% for Gen Z).

5.6 Perception: Q1

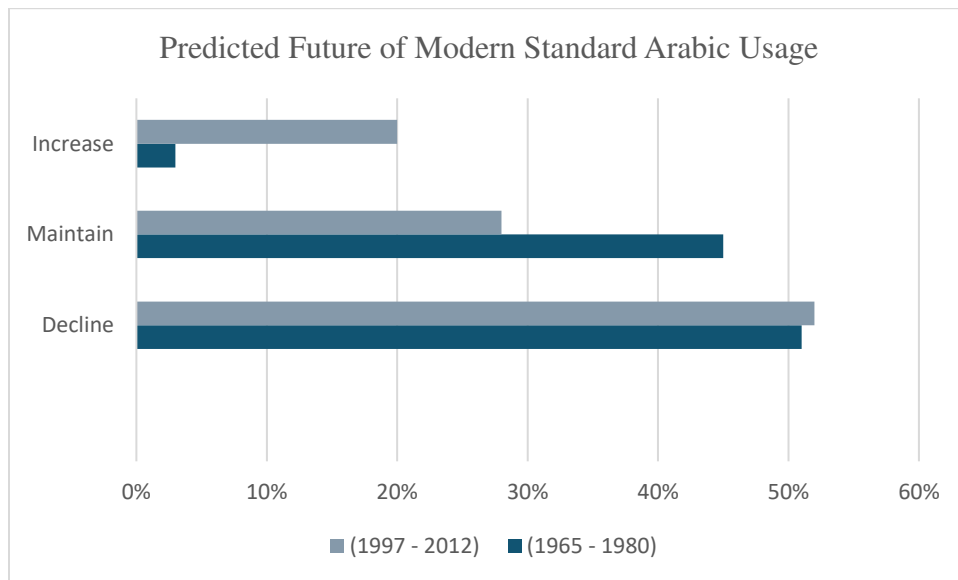
Survey questions on the way Kuwaitis from the two generations perceive Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Kuwaiti Arabic bring to light that both generations agreed that MSA is more prestigious than KA (66% for Gen X and 80% for Gen Z).

5.7 Perception: Q2

The question “Do you think that schools should focus more on teaching A: MSA, C: Kuwaiti Arabic, C: Both?” reveals preferences for focusing more on teaching MSA in schools across generations. Both Gen X and Gen Z favored Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) at 69% and 60%, respectively. Interestingly, 30% of Gen X and 40% of Gen Z preferred teaching both language varieties. Notably, no respondents from either generation chose Kuwaiti Arabic as the sole language in academia.

5.8 Perception: Q3

Figure 4



This bar chart shows Kuwaitis’ opinions across generations on the future of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) usage. Both Gen X (51%) and Gen Z (52%) believe MSA usage will decline. However, a large portion of Gen Z (20%) expects an increase compared to only (3%) of Gen X.

6. Discussion

6.1 Limitations of the Study

This study employed a sample size of (58). This limits the generalizability of the findings to the wider population. However, the focus of this research was to generate initial insights into potential relationships between variables, for which a smaller sample size is more appropriate. Additionally, since the study explores experience with spoken languages, deaf or hard-of-hearing Kuwaitis are not directly relevant to the research goals. Their experience would not directly reflect the perception of spoken Arabic or the Kuwaiti dialect. Including them might skew the data and hinder a clear understanding of the research objectives. Therefore, the Kuwaiti deaf and hard-of-hearing community is excluded from this study.

Despite the limitations, the study reveals interesting findings within the four themes.

6.2 Emotional Response

A significant disparity exists in anxiety levels when speaking MSA, with Gen Z reporting a considerably higher percentage (16%) compared to Gen X (3%). This shift in experience with MSA amongst younger generations could be attributed to several factors, including the decreased exposure to MSA, which was replaced by English in schools, homes, and media content, causing the language to feel distant. Furthermore, the perception of English as “trendy” compared to Arabic, coupled with peer pressure, might lead younger generations to engage less with MSA, consequently feeling more anxious speaking it. Another possible reason that is impacting Gen Z’s experience with MSA is the way Arabic is taught in schools, where instructions might focus more on grammar,

followed by reading, writing, and vocabulary, leaving little room for conversational skills or practice. In other words, focusing on accuracy over fluency.

However, despite the anxiety, a majority in both generations (72% Gen X, 60% Gen Z) still experience a sense of belonging when speaking MSA. This is likely due to the cultural identity associated with the language.

Moreover, an overwhelming majority of both generations reported a sense of belonging when speaking Kuwaiti Arabic (60% Gen X, 70% Gen Z). This reflects a shared experience with the dialect across generations. Nonetheless, a small percentage (3% Gen X, 4% Gen Z) of Kuwaitis feel anxious speaking Kuwaiti Arabic. This could be due to factors like their heritage background influencing their vocabulary and speech patterns, early bilingualism where exposure to English is more dominant in their upbringing (especially Gen Z), or the ongoing debate about what constitutes “proper” Kuwaiti. This trend might contribute to a rise in anxiety and a heightened sense of self – consciousness among Kuwaitis.

6.3 Stereotypes

Generational differences emerge when examining stereotypes associated with MSA speakers. Both generations largely view them as cultured and well-educated (54% Gen X, 64% Gen Z). This aligns with MSA’s status as the higher variety of Arabic diglossia. A significant portion of both groups (36% Gen X, 32% Gen Z) also agreed with the “All of the above” option, highlighting the multifaced stereotypes surrounding MSA speakers, which includes carrying associations with religion, politics, and pan-Arab identity.

Interestingly, Gen X choosing the option “None of the above” at a higher rate compared to Gen Z (9% vs. 4%) conveys that older generations of Kuwaitis hold a more nuanced view of MSA speakers. This generational gap might be due to how media portrays MSA speakers, with formal media programs like religious and political broadcasts with their associated scholars and figures and news broadcasts that typically require high levels of fluency in Modern Standard Arabic. All these factors emphasizing the language’s prestige might lead Gen Z to associate it with religion, politics, intellect, and pan-Arab nationalism.

6.4 Attitude

Both generations display a strong inclination towards mastering Modern Standard Arabic (42% Gen X, 45% Gen Z), reflecting a shared belief in its importance. Notably, over 40% of both generations are open to having their speech corrected in both MSA and Kuwaiti Arabic. This openness suggests a general concern with proper language use, regardless of dialect. While MSA correction is more popular, a significant portion (around 10%) across generations is also receptive to correction in Kuwaiti Arabic. This widespread acceptance of correction in both Arabic forms could signify a positive attitude with regard to diglossia, and both forms aid in expressing identity.

6.5 Perception

As expected in a diglossic situation, the high variety, Modern Standard Arabic, holds a higher position and is perceived as more prestigious across generations. Interestingly, Gen Z participants showed a stronger association between MSA and prestige (66% for Gen X and 80% for Gen Z). Additionally, valuing MSA in education across both generations further indicates its perceived prestige. This could also reflect a desire to connect with Arab heritage and the wider Arab world and its speakers.

Surprisingly, a high number of participants (30% Gen X, 40% Gen Z) favor including both language varieties in the educational system. This may reflect a growing awareness towards preserving Kuwaiti Arabic alongside MSA. Nonetheless, incorporating the diverse forms of Kuwaiti Arabic (Bedouin and Hadari dialects) presents practical challenges. While geographically dispersed stereotypes exist, these communities are not entirely isolated from each other. Implementing a curriculum encompassing every dialect form in public and private schools might not be feasible. Similarly, standardizing Kuwaiti Arabic is a complex task that requires a political decision. This approach could lead to the omission of certain dialects, diminishing the rich linguistic diversity of Kuwait and the cultural heritage associated with each variety.

Even if a way is found to integrate all these variations, further questions arise: which dialects and to what extent? This also expands to national considerations: how will legal documents function, and which dialect will diplomacy utilize, ensuring international intelligibility? Additionally, who will be qualified to teach or interpret these diverse linguistic forms? These complexities could potentially lead to social tensions and identity-oriented conflicts among Kuwaitis. This is certainly to be avoided, as the goal of examining languages should never be to divide people.

A more promising approach might be to identify commonalities between Kuwaiti dialects in vocabulary, grammar, or cultural references. While emphasizing their value, the curriculum can acknowledge the richness of Kuwaiti Arabic through poems, songs, stories, and proverbs. Furthermore, without romanticizing Modern Standard Arabic, it is undeniable that terms in technology, medicine, science, and literature will likely be borrowed directly from MSA as there are no equivalent terms in Kuwaiti Arabic.

Standardization can also mean advocating the complete exclusion of MSA, which is not only unrealistic but potentially detrimental. Modern Standard Arabic serves as a bridge between the wider Arab world, allowing access to religious, political, historical, and literary texts. Its loss could weaken Arab identity and cultural unity over time. Further, the push for standardization in Kuwait and other Arab nations will often lead to substitution and dominance of English or French as they play an essential role in many Arab countries, especially with younger generations. This raises concerns about linguistic imperialism. While this might seem parallel to Radical Arab Nationalism, language is undeniably a core aspect of identity. Thus, promoting and valuing both MSA and Kuwaiti Arabic is a worthwhile objective.

The complete absence of a preference for solely teaching Kuwaiti Arabic in school is striking. This indicates that a number of Kuwaitis from both generations do not perceive Kuwaiti Arabic, a spoken dialect, as *formal* enough or suitable for education and academic settings. Highlighting a disconnect; despite the potential importance of Kuwaiti Arabic, there is a perception that it lacks formality.

Reports on the future of Modern Standard Arabic usage reveal a fascinating generational divide. While both Gen X (51%) and Gen Z (52%) anticipate a decline in overall MSA use, a surprisingly larger portion of Gen Z Kuwaitis (20%) expects an increase compared to only 3% of Gen X. This optimism amongst the younger generation is particularly unexpected considering their lower engagement with Modern Standard Arabic, likely due to the global dominance of English in social media and online content.

This difference in perception might be linked to how each generation views Arabic in relation to their identity. To illustrate, the expectation of a decline in the usage of MSA amongst Gen X could indicate that they no longer perceive the language as a marker of their identity. Instead, they may draw a stronger emphasis on Kuwaiti Arabic as a stronger identifier. Another possible explanation of Gen X's expectations of a decline in MSA usage could be due to their observation of younger generations who are exposed to a wider range of languages, dominantly English.

Gen Z, on the other hand, might have a greater optimism for the future of MSA because of broader cultural trends. The global popularity of various media like Turkish soap operas, Japanese manga, and K-POP exposes them to different languages and cultures. This high exposure and awareness of languages, in general, might lead them to believe that Arabic will also experience a similar rise in terms of popularity amongst youth in the future. It also shows that they do not perceive MSA as outdated or unfit for modern society.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, despite generational differences, Kuwaitis largely share more similarities than differences in terms of the four examined themes: emotional responses, stereotypes, attitudes, and perceptions towards diglossia. This suggests a lack of identity dilemma stemming from diglossia. Nonetheless, Diglossia does raise concerns about language proficiency amongst Arabs, but this is not because of diglossia or Modern Standard Arabic. Rather, it is due to the way the diglossic situation and the language are handled. After all, the disparity between English and Arabic and its dialects is more significant than the difference between Modern Standard Arabic and Kuwaiti Arabic. Therefore, Kuwaitis who demonstrate success in acquiring English can achieve similar success in MSA.

In addition, it is crucial to recognize that no language is inherently flawed due to its features. Diglossia is a unique and enriching feature of Arabic, and while it might challenge some existing theories, it does not make the language *“problematic”*. Linguistic theories must adapt to languages, not the other way around. Also, standardization is not the best solution, as the beauty of dialects lies in their flexibility. Therefore, supporting effective strategies to manage diglossia is highly encouraged, as there is no superior alternative.

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