

Birzeit signs MoU with ALESCO to digitize and integrate Arabic lexicons

🕒 23 Dec 2017

Birzeit University, represented by its President Dr. Abdullatif Abuhiljeh, and the Arab League Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization (ALESCO), represented by its General Director Dr. Saud Hilal Al-Harbi, signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on cooperation in computational linguistics and language engineering.

Per the MoU, the Department of Computer Science at the University will digitize the lexicons issued by ALESCO and publish them in a specialized search engine that the university will be launching soon. This is in addition to using the Arabic Ontology in linking and integrating the Arabic lexicons. The MoU also entails the exchange of technologies, methodologies, and ideas in the fields of Arabization and language engineering, in cooperation with the Arabization Coordination Bureau in Rabat.

The Department of Computer Science has carried out numerous research projects and studies in lexicon engineering and computational linguistics and has built the biggest database of Arabic lexical resources, in which it has digitized over 150 multilingual Arabic lexicons which would be soon available through a search engine. The Department has also developed an Arabic ontology, a corpus for the Palestinian Arabic, and many other related technologies and algorithms.

Recognized as the main organization responsible for coordinating the efforts of Arabic countries and following-up on the Arabization and coinage research of scientific and language academies, the Arabization Coordination Bureau in Rabat has published more than 50 unified trilingual lexicons (Arabic, English, and French) in various literary, scientific, and engineering fields. In addition to that, the Bureau has also created and released the ARABTERM technical interactive lexicon in four languages (Arabic, English, French, and German), as well as a terminology database to facilitate the exchange of information and terms with the relevant, specialized data banks.

The signing ceremony was attended by the ALESCO representative Murad Sudani, the Vice President for Academic Affairs at Birzeit University Dr. Faisal Awadallah, Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and Technology Dr. Khaled Abaza, Chairperson of the Department of Computer Science Dr. Mamoun Nawahdah, and the Project Manager Dr. Mustafa Jarrar.

Dr. Abuhijleh said, “This agreement reinforces the University’s message and approach toward serving the community and the Arabic language, as it encourages meaningful and effective scientific research. Moreover, it facilitates the growth of quality Arabic content online.”

Dr. Jarrar explained that the lack of language sources online, coupled with its inaccessibility to researchers and developers, have limited the digitizing of Arabic and the development of IT

applications that can process and utilize the language aspects. “Lexicon engineering and linguistic sources,” he added, “require a joint effort that allows us to keep pace with the technological advancement in recent years. All lexicon entries must be linguistically and semantically linked and integrated towards building a large linguistic graph. The classical methods of lexicography and Arabization, given the revolution and globalization of information, is in dire need of an update.”

Sudani remarked that the agreement coincides with the UN Arabic Language Day, a testament to the Palestinian people’s care toward education and culture. He said, “Electronic lexicons are one of the most significant multimedia mediums in preserving the linguistic heritage of a nation, and they should be developed and updated to keep abreast with the vast amount of information available.”

“Despite its importance for the Arabic language, efforts to create electronic Arabic lexicons have been slow and limited. The existing implementations, while significant, still need more calibration, development, and reconstruction; the creation of electronic lexicons has yet to thrive in the modern Arabic linguistic context,” added Sudani.

The Director of the Arabization Coordination Bureau Dr. Abdelfattah Lahjomri noted the increased scientific cooperation that the MoU would entail, “This agreement reinforces the cooperation between Birzeit University and ALESCO in the field of language engineering and digitizing the lexicons released by ALESCO.”

“The memorandum,” further said Dr. Lahjomri, “also aligns with the General Director’s directives to focus on modern Arabic linguistic research through providing and digitizing lexicons for the benefit of researchers, translators, and linguists. It would also broaden the horizons of the Arabic linguistic future and raise awareness of the importance of linguistic development, in addition to supporting the translation movement and stepping up to the challenges of developing modern informatics.”