Celebrating the Arabic language in the digital age

One of Arabic's long-term problems has been font, especially in digital formats.

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New dynamics. Saudi entrepreneur Manar Alomayri poses at the Digital Media Services tent as a part of the Step 2017 Conference and Music in Dubai. (AP)

The world celebrates the Arabic language, which has 6 million root words and a more than 20 million-word vocabulary, on December 18.

Perhaps "celebrate" is an overly strong term to describe the mixed feelings of non-Arabic speakers towards a language that signifies a unified Arab culture. From 2002-09, the study of Arabic among US

university students rose 231% but that had more to do with studying a perceived adversary than admiration for the language.

At least Arabs seem increasingly sold on Arabic. With the rise of the Arabic internet and an Arab digital millennial generation, Arabic has proven its resilience. It has adapted to changing social norms and technological innovations. The Arab Development Portal, a database on the Arab world, said content on the Arabic internet has grown more than 7,000% in seven years.

"Thanks to the many young members of our collaborative community, the Arabic Wikipedia has been growing six-fold in terms of new pages in the past seven years," said Samir Elsharbaty of the Wikimedia Arabic Foundation.

The involvement of young people in the quality and quantity of content, as well as its reach to the online masses, has made Arabic reconsider its grammar rules to reflect all social identities.

Farah Barqawi, a member of the feminist initiative Wiki Gender Arabic, agreed that Arabic is changing. "We have made an active decision to take the initiative to discuss, try and practise new words and gender-neutral pronouns each day to reach a more representative, inclusive and smoother open Arabic language that is not afraid of trial, error and change," Barqawi said.

Much of the Arabic language's lexical development has revolved around attempts to catch up with internet and technical terminologies such as "social

plug-ins," "embeds" and other geeky terms.

Social Media Exchange, a Beirut-based NGO that speaks for digital rights in the region, recently released its Arabic language technical glossary. It did so in collaboration with the Arab Digital Expression Foundation, an NGO in Cairo that has called for Arabic internet stakeholders to come together.

Unity is all very good but to what end?

Mohamad Najem, co-founder of Social Media Exchange, said the aims are obvious. "One of the main issues in the Arabic language is that we are yet to have clear terminologies for [information and communication technologies] ICT, new technology disciplines and terms to reflect our digital rights and our culture," Najem said. Arabic-speakers then must take charge of a language that is grappling with change.

The Social Media Exchange focuses on digital storytelling so it's not surprising Najem is passionate about the idea of community-led language maintenance that "starts and initiates the lexicology and lets it grow in order to catch up with whatever gap we need to fill."

While new and repurposed Arabic vocabulary may be fine for conversational purposes, what of written content?

One of Arabic's long-term problems has been font, especially in digital formats.

Nour Chamoun, a graphic designer, has come up with Tarkeeb, an initiative to design and promote Arabic fonts for the web. Chamoun is creative director of Scopio, which works with social media. She said Tarkeeb makes sense because "writing technologies starting with the typewriter to the computer were initially developed to only accommodate the Latin writing system, ignoring other scripts like Arabic."

Chamoun added: "Arabic letters have three to four forms, unlike Latin, so these technologies had to evolve and it wasn't until the development of OpenType in 1996 that the computer was able to accommodate the behaviour of the Arabic script with the connectedness of the letters."

That has not, however, meant easy digital use of Arabic.

Add to that the slow incorporation of Arabic-language data and efficient search mechanisms in accessible internet sources. Today, Arabic Wikipedia is embedded within Google Search and used by Apple's assistant Siri. What is needed now is to merge Arabic data with search.

After eight years of research at Birzeit University in the Palestinian territories, Associate Professor Mustafa Jarrar revealed an Arabic Ontology, the most comprehensive dictionary of Arabic. Jarrar's system would enable the creation of Arabic-language software, better machine translation and other key usages.

Internationally, too, Arabic-language technology is in the making. Major universities such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Columbia have departments to study the field. In the private sector, Microsoft's Advanced Technology Lab is engaged in experimentation and incubating applied research in software engineering, data science, natural language processing and speech processing for Arabic.

The Arabic language is in the throes of change, like never before.

Written By

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