

## *Language Loyalty Among The Yemenites of Lackawana - New York*

*Bader Dweik  
English Department  
Amman University*

### ملخص

هذا البحث هو دراسة اجتماعية لغوية لعينة من الجالية العربية اليمنية التي تقطن مدينة لاكاوانا الواقعة في غربي ولاية نيويورك. الهدف من هذا البحث هو الكشف عن العوامل التي تعمل على حفظ وصيانة اللغة المهاجرة (العربية) عندما تكون خاضعة لتأثير لغة قوية هي لغة التداول الرسمي والتعامل اليومي في المجتمع الجديد. لقد استندت هذه الدراسة على الخطوط العريضة التي أرساها العالم جاشوا فيشمان من خلال تجربته الواسعة الممتدة لثلاثة عقود. عينة هذا البحث مكونة من خمسين شخصاً يمينياً جميعهم من مواليد الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية - تمت مقابلتهم في لاكاوانا في صيف عام ١٩٩٤ وقاموا بالإجابة على استبيان اجتماعي لغوي يستفسر عن قدراتهم اللغوية، وأنماط استعمالهم اللغوية في مواقع وميادين مختلفة وكذلك اتجاهاتهم وآرائهم حول اللغتين - العربية والانجليزية. النتائج تكشف عن العوامل اللغوية والاجتماعية التي تقوي ولاءهم اللغوي للغة العربية رغم هيمنة اللغة الإنجليزية كونها لغة التداول اليومي في المجتمع الكبير الذي يحيط بهم.

**ABSTRACT:**

This paper describes the Yemenite community with the purpose of identifying social, psychological, historical, religious and linguistic processes that may affect the maintenance of their mother - tongue (Arabic) when it is under the influence of the majority language (English). Fishman's research, over three decades, has laid the theoretical background for this investigation. 50 members from the Yemenite community were interviewed in the summer of 1994, and data were collected on language proficiency, patterns of use in different contexts, and attitudes to their languages. Results are presented and factors that enhance language loyalty whether social or linguistic are identified.

***Introduction***

There is evidence from a number of studies of immigrant communities in the U.S.A that language shift to English occurs to the maximum level of four generations and is sometimes completed in as few as two generations (for example, Fishman 1989). The rate of shift appears to be greater for some groups than for others (i.e. Daher 1988, El-Kholi 1966, Sawaie 1985, Aswad 1974 and Dweik 1992) but the fact of shift seems inevitable. However, research conducted on language loyalty and language maintenance in the United States, for example, Fishman (1966), Kloss (1966) and Weinreich (1974) outlines some of the linguistic and social variables that support and enhance language loyalty. To name few factors, Kloss (1966) suggests some different factors that contribute to language maintenance. These factors vary in

power and effectiveness, depending on the size of the group. Some of these factors are "religio-societal isolation, time of immigration, the existence of language islands and affiliation with denominations fostering parochial schools". Similarly, Weinreich (1974) proposes the following factors: "the emotional involvement with one's mother tongue as one learned it in childhood, the role of language as a symbol of group integrity". Likewise, Dweik (1979, 1980, 1985) and Walbridge (1992) emphasize the role of religion and religious institutions as strong factors in maintaining the Arabic language in Buffalo, New York and Dearborn, Michigan.

### *The Yemenite Community in Lackawanna, New York*

The Yemenite community in Lackawanna is chosen for the study of language loyalty. The choice is made particularly because this Arab-American community has been neglected in the studies of ethnic groups in Buffalo and Western New York and more generally because little work has been done on Arabic speaking communities around the country.

The people of Yemen have experienced immigration for many centuries. Nature drove some of them out in early days. Business and trading caused similar waves of immigration to different parts of the Arabian Peninsula and Africa. The political and social systems had burdened the economy of the country. The country staggered under conditions of poverty, ignorance, lack of education and continuous instability. Health conditions were deteriorating and diseases were killing large numbers of people. Also the high taxation, high unemployment, along with drought, crop failure and heavy immigration from rural to urban areas

caused people to seek living elsewhere in the world. The severe poverty conditions that afflicted Yemen constituted a primary factor in the massive migration of the male population (Bisharat 1975: 203).

### *Time and Pattern of the Yemenite Immigration to Lackawanna*

Records of Saint John Maron Church in Buffalo showed that some Yemenites were drafted into the U.S. Army during World War I. The oldest generation in the Yemenite community arrived in America during World War II. It was reported that not more than ten Yemenites arrived in Lackawanna between 1915 and 1950. Investigations indicated that the first Yemenite pioneers were men who remained and later died, in the United States of America.

The early pioneer immigrants of the second wave had arrived in New York between 1950-1960 and managed to reach the shores of America by ships which carried them from Europe. They were seafarers who sought jobs on ships. In most cases, they settled somewhere else before they chose the United States as their final destination. One immigrant stated that he had spent ten years on the sea before he came to America.

The third wave of immigration occurred after 1960 and took the classical pattern of "chain" migration whereby one person, either a sponsor, covillager, or kinsman, married and brought his spouse to the United States. Immigrants then came directly to the United States and encountered few, if any difficulties, compared to those experienced by their predecessors. This wave of immigration was a massive movement that included large numbers of households and families, mostly composed of young

married couples who were related by either Kinship or regional origin, In general, they shared blood ties and / or had a common rural background.

### *Ethnography of the Yemenites of Lackawanna*

In discussing the ethnography of the Yemenites of Lackawanna, the researcher keeps in mind the demographic, occupational, residential, educational, and organizational aspects of their life.

The estimate number of Lackawanna Yemenites ranges between 1200 to 1500. This figure includes men, women and children. It is less than 5 percent of the total population of Lackawanna. There are about 250 families. Each family is composed of a husband and wife, and their children. There are an estimated 500 children: 200 girls and 300 boys. About 180 boys and girls are registered in the school attached to the mosque: their ages range between 7 and 15 years. The number of people who are over 50 years of age is rather small because most Yemenites return to yemen when they retire or receive their pensions.

### *Occupational Distribution*

The majority of the Yemenite men used to work in the steel mills or the automobile plants (Buffalo Evening News, June 11, 1978). Bethlehem Steel Corporation was the major employer. Others are employed by the Ford Auto Factory and the Chevrolet Auto plant in Tonawanda. A few other people are engaged in such workplaces as the Freezer Queen Factory and some other factories in Buffalo (Chilungo 1974: 97).

Some Yemenites have started their own businesses, which consist mostly of grocery and food stores dispersed throughout Lackawanna and Buffalo. Stores of this type are of utmost importance in the process of change and assimilation. It is observed that some Yemenite women have begun to participate in the workplace. Some of the owners of these stores have managed to have their wives, daughters or other female relatives work in their stores. It is observed that the number of these stores and the women working with them are increasing. With the growth of the stores, plans are made to move to other locations outside Lackawanna where business is more profitable.

### ***Residential Distribution***

The jobs of the Yemenites are the important factor in determining where they live, Although the majority of them live near the Bethlehem Steel Mill in Lackawanna, a very small number of families have moved to Buffalo and, in one case, to Williamsville. Most of them live in the first ward of Lackawanna, in the shadows of the steel mills and under the billowing smokestacks (Buffalo Evening News, June 11, 1978). The First ward is one of the three political divisions which comprise the city of Lackawanna. It is certainly the poorest and the most polluted of the three divisions.

The Yemenites are not the only people living in the First Ward. Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Italians and Poles also reside in this area. However, the majority of these people are immigrants. Because of the many nationalities residing in the first ward, a multitude of languages are spoken, including Arabic, Spanish, Italian and Polish.

### ***Educational Distribution***

In investigatining the educational achievements of the Yemenites o Lackawanna, the researcher finds that generational hierarchy and sex are the most important determinants of their educational level. It is observed that the majority of the women of the fist generation are illiterate in both standard Arabic and English. With the exception of a few, the great majority of women do not speak or understand English. Moreover, the researcher is told by Yemenite informants that the women's competency in Arabic is limited to the dialect of the village of their origin. However, the second generation Yemenite women are educated in English and general subjects at various Lackawanna schools.

### ***Community Institutions***

There are two types of institutions that provide services to the Yemenites in Lackawanna. The first of these institutions or organizations are established, organised, and administered by Yemenites such as the Yemenite Benevolent Association, Inc which has changed its name to the General Union of the Yemenite Immigrants, the Lackawanna mosque and the school. The second type is established and supervised by non-Yemenite - Americans. Examples of such institutions are the International Institute of Buffalo, The Friendship House and the City Hall.

### ***Language Survey:***

The Sociolinguistic part of this paper describes and examines all steps that are employed in the linguistic aspect of the study. The language survey includes a description of the sample

population, and an elaboration on the language questionnaire, a description of the interviewing methods, an analysis of the results and a presentation of the conclusions obtained from the study.

### ***Sample Population:***

50 Yemenites have served as subjects for the study. The sample population shows a wide range over several important demographic variables: age, educational achievement, marital status, sex, occupational distribution, and religious affiliation. All subjects are second generation Yemenites. Some of their parents were born in Yemen. The selection of the subjects is based on the investigation which is recorded in the community profile of the Yemenites. The community profile yields data on generational distance in addition to socio-religious information. The number of the sample population is small due to the fact that the majority of the Yemenite population is first generation. See (Table 1).

### ***The Questionnaire***

The questionnaire is structured to let all subjects have identical situational interviews. It began with language background questions such as: "What language do you consider to be your first language?" "What language(s) did your father speak when he was a child?", "What language(s) did your mother speak when she was a child?". The language background questionnaire dealt with factual questions which were easy and noncontroversial.

**Table (1)**  
**Demographic Characteristics of the Sample Population**

<u>Age</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Educational Attainment</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
10-14	22	44	4-6 grade	12	24
15-19	16	32	7-9 grade	14	28
20-29	6	12	10-12 grade	12	24
30-29	6	12	1-2 years college	6	12
30-39	6	12	2-4 years college	6	12

<u>Occupational Distribution</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
Student	34	68	Male	32	64
Worker	6	12	Female	18	36
Business	10	20			

<u>Marital Status</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Religious Affiliation</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
Single	34	68	Sunni Muslim	50	100
Married	16	32			

The second sub-group of questions explored the subjects' proficiency in both languages: Arabic and English. Subjects were asked to check a suitable answer. Answers were placed in one of three categories: (1) yes (2) a little (3) No. Questions were designed to evaluate all language skills including understanding a conversation, participating in a conversation, reading a newspaper or book, and writing messages or letters.

The third sequence of questions explored daily life language usage. This sequence included twenty-four questions on Arabic

and English usage in a variety of domains, interlocuters, listeners, topics and media. Domains included neighbourhoods, homes, friendships, and places of worship. Questions were also formulated to explore inner speech usage such as dreaming and times when the subjects were angry. Conversations with intimate friends and casual acquaintances were explored at home, in the neighbourhood and places of worship. Distinction was made between neighbours who descended from Arab countries and others.

At home, the focus was on language use with all members of the family such as fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers and spouses. Attention was given also to the language (s) that the people used when conversing with relatives in various channels such as face-to-face or over the telephone. The domain of friendship covered many different locales, such as parties, the marketplace, place of worship, and the neighbourhood. The domain of religion explored both productive and receptive skills of language use; emphasis was placed on the language(s) that the celebrant uses and the language(s) that the subject uses when conversing with the celebrant. The religious domain explored also the language used in prayer and in religious meetings outside the place of worship. Finally, attention was given to the languages(s) in which the newspapers and books they read were printed, the language of radio programs to which they listened, and the language(s) they used when writing personal letters.

Language usage ratings were made on a five-point scale, ranging from only English, mostly English, Arabic and English, mostly Arabic to only Arabic.

The fourth set of questions explored the attitudes of the respondents towards Arabic and English. The subjects were asked

to react to attitudinal questions such as: "Which is a more beautiful language, Arabic or English, and why?", "What language is more useful to you and why?", "What language would you prefer to use for instruction at your school?", "Is it important for you to speak Arabic, English?", "Do you think that the Arabic Language was dying in your home? why? And in your community?", "How do you feel about Arab people who no longer use the Arabic language?". The attitudinal questions consisted partly of open-ended items in order to encourage the subjects to express their individual views about the focal objects with no leads from the questions themselves.

The fifth and final sequence of questions explored the respondents' demographic backgrounds. Data were obtained on the ages of the respondents. The age span was from ten to thirty-nine years. Information was collected on their educational achievement which spanned from the fourth grade through the doctoral level. In addition, data were elicited regarding sex, occupation, and marital status (see Appendix A).

### *The Interviewing Procedure*

The researcher interviewed the Yemenite subjects in two locations: the Yemenite community center and the mosque which included the Arab school. Two teachers in the Yemenite school assisted the researcher in interviewing the students. The teachers read the questions aloud to the subjects who in turn wrote down their responses.

The rest of the Yemenite subjects answered their questionnaires while the researcher was sitting next to them. Two-thirds of the subjects selected the questionnaire written in Arabic. All questions were administered face-to-face with the subjects. It

was found that this method made both the interviewer and interviewee feel more comfortable.

### *Results and Discussion*

The "Language Background" questionnaire indicated that Arabic was the first language of the Yemenite respondents and their parents. The "Language Proficiency" questionnaire demonstrated that the Yemenite subjects possessed a functioning knowledge of Arabic and English on all levels; comprehension, speaking, reading and writing. The "Language use" questionnaire indicated that the Yemenites made considerable use of Arabic in all conversational and interactional situations.

Language usage at home indicated that while Arabic was the dominant language spoken in the Yemenite home, some use of English was nonetheless permissible. The results showed that the Yemenite subjects' choice of language with their parents was dominantly Arabic. The results also indicated that the pattern of sibling communication was different. In conversations with brothers and sisters, the Yemenites indicated a choice of Arabic and English. Furthermore, Arabic was reported to be preferred among married subjects.

The results of the Language usage in religious situations indicated that Arabic was the dominant language among the Yemenites when they pray or converse with the celebrant. Arabic was also reported as the language of communication by the celebrant and the subject at religious meetings.

The results of the language usage with relatives in the United States indicated that the subjects used Arabic and English without any preference and regardless of the channel of communication, whether it was face-to-face or over the telephone. The results of

the language usage in the domain of friendship indicated that the subjects used Arabic and English in most locales except at places of worship where Arabic was reported to be dominant. Results of the language usage in writing personal letters, listening to the radio, and reading books and newspapers indicated that the Yemenites tended to use Arabic and English. The same results were reported when the respondents spoke with neighbours. It was also found that Arabic was associated with dreaming an anger.

The results obtained from the "Language Attitude" questionnaire indicated that the Yemenite subjects expressed positive views and opinions towards Arabic. They perceived Arabic to be more beautiful than English. To them Arabic is an important language because of its ties with their parents' culture, nationality and religion. Arabic is maintained in the Yemenite homes and community because it is spoken there. The Yemenites expressed very negative and emotional views toward Arabs in the United States who no longer use Arabic.

The data showed that "generational distance" has an influence on the outcome of language loyalty when attached to religion. The results indicated that the second generation Yemenites tend to maintain their language. This finding proves that "generational distance" is meaningful when viewed in the framework of the religious affiliation of the subjects.

The finding reported here negated the theory that claims that the first generation tries to retain as much as possible, the second to forget, the third to remember. It was proven in this study that the second generation Yemenites did not forget Arabic.

### *Conclusions*

The data obtained in the overall research indicated that the second generation Yemenite-Americans managed to retain Arabic to a relatively high degree. The data also explored and accordingly pointed out some factors that controlled and stood behind the retention of the Arabic language. These could best be summarized in the following manner:

- (1) Habitual use of Arabic in a variety of situations, locations, occasions, locales and channels allows for its retention. Such habits were nourished by positive attitudes, opinions, and perceptions toward the Arabic language and toward the Arabic culture, heritage and roots.
- (2) Habitual language use and positive opinions toward Arabic are influenced by a variety of ethnic and communal variables. Ethnic variables stem from two sources: Islam and Arab identity. Islam, their religion, has the strongest effect in preserving their homogeneity, unity and closeness.

The Arab identity in which they took pride makes them identify with Arabs all over the world. Arabism identified Arabic with great tradition, with great poets and heroes, with high intellectual pursuit, with national struggle or historical mission. For them, Arabic is something to love, to preserve, to live for, to safeguard, to develop, to enrich and to bring to others.

The communal variables which exerted a high degree of influence on the retention of Arabic could be summarized as follows:

First, efforts, of religious, social, and political leaders in the Yemenite community in supporting the homogeneity and unity of

their group have a great impact on the retention of Arabic. These efforts are materialized by establishing institutions within the community whose sole objectives are the preservation of Islam, Arabic culture, and language. Such institutions are supported and strengthened by the majority of the community members. The community support resulted in establishing a mosque which retains and protects their faith and language, a school which preserves their language, and a social club which maintains their unity, traditions and customs.

A second communal factor which has a bearing on the retention of Arabic is the internal marriage that they adopted. As a matter of fact, they consider mixed marriages to be shameful. The internal marriage system perpetuated internal marriages among the Yemenites only, regardless of their living locations. This attitude has reinforced the ties of the Yemenites with their local communities and has strengthened contacts and relations with the Yemenites in other American communities and with their native homeland. The result of internal marriages reflects itself in the constant use of Arabic among parents and children and in the preservation of familial traditions, culture and religious practices.

A third communal factor that supports the maintenance of Arabic is the social isolation of the Yemenites from the mainstream of American life. This isolation is fed and nourished by living largely in a tightly-knit community in a highly industrialized environment.

## Appendix A

### Language Questionnaire

	O-E	M-E	A&E	M-A	O-A
1. What language do you use when you write personal letters?	—	—	—	—	—
2. What language is used in the radio programs that you listen to?	—	—	—	—	—
3. In what language are the books written that you like to read?	—	—	—	—	—
4. In what language are the newspapers written that you like to read?	—	—	—	—	—
5. What language do you use when you speak with your neighbours?	—	—	—	—	—
6. What language do you use with people from Arab countries?	—	—	—	—	—
7. What language do you use at home with your father?	—	—	—	—	—
8. What language do you use at home with your mother?	—	—	—	—	—
9. What language do you use at home with your sister?	—	—	—	—	—
10. What language do you use at home with your brother?	—	—	—	—	—
11. What language do you use at home with your spouse?	—	—	—	—	—
12. What language do you use with your relatives in the U.S?	—	—	—	—	—
13. What language do you use with your relatives over the phone?	—	—	—	—	—
14. What language do you use when you meet friends at school?	—	—	—	—	—
15. What language do you use with friends at parties?	—	—	—	—	—

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 16. What language do you use when you meet friends in the market?                 | — | — | — | — | — |
| 17. What language do you use with friends at your place of worship?               | — | — | — | — | — |
| 18. What language do you use when you meet friends in the neighbourhood?          | — | — | — | — | — |
| 19. What language does the celebrant use in your place of worship?                | — | — | — | — | — |
| 20. What language do you use when you speak with the celebrant?                   | — | — | — | — | — |
| 21. What language do you use when you pray?                                       | — | — | — | — | — |
| 22. What language do you use at religious meetings outside your place of worship? | — | — | — | — | — |
| 23. What language do you use most commonly when angry?                            | — | — | — | — | — |
| 24. In what language do you dream?  | — | — | — | — | — |

**In the following questions we are interested in your opinion and attitude towards Arabic and English.**

- 25 - What language is more beautiful? (Please check one answer)  
 Arabic     English     Both     No response
- 26 - What language is more useful to you? (Please check one response)  
 Arabic     English     Both     No response
- 27 - What language would you prefer to use for instructions at school?  
 (Please check one answer).  
 Arabic     English     Both     No response
- 28 - Is it important for you to speak Arabic? (Please check one answer)  
 Yes     No     Don't Know
- 29 - Why is it important or why is it not important for you to speak Arabic?  
 (Give full answers)  
 Yes     No     Don't Know

- 30 - Is it important for you to speak English? (Please check one answer).  
 Yes       No       Don't Know
- 31 - Why is it important or why is it not important for you to speak English?  
 (Give full answers).
- 32 - Is Arabic dying at your home? (Please check one answer)  
 Yes       No       Don't Know
- 33 - Why or why not is Arabic dying at your home? (give full answers)
- 34 - Is Arabic dying in your community? (please check one answer)  
 Yes       No       Don't Know
- 35 - Why or why not is Arabic dying in your community? (give full answer).
- 36 - How do you feel about Arabs who no longer use Arabic in the United States? (Give full answer).

### Language Background

- 37 - What language do you consider to be your first language?.....
- 38 - What language(s) did your father speak when he was a child?.....
- 39 - What language(s) did your mother speak when she was a child?.....

### Language Proficiency

In the following questions we would like you to rate your ability in understanding speaking, reading and writing Arabic and English. please check (x) the answer that applies to you.

	Yes	No.	Little
40 - Can you understand a conversation in arabic	—	—	—
41 - Can you understand a conversation in English?	—	—	—
42 - Can you engage in a conversation in Arabic?	—	—	—
43 - Can you engage in a conversation in English?	—	—	—
44 - Can you read Arabic?	—	—	—
45 - Can you read English?	—	—	—
46 - Can you write Arabic?	—	—	—
47 - Can you write English?	—	—	—

**Demographic Data**

48 - What was your age on your last birthday?..... years

49 - What is your highest grade completed?.....

50 - What is your occupation?.....

51 - What is your marital status? (Please check suitable answer)

Single                       Married                       Engaged

Divorced                       Separated                       Other

52 - What is your sex? (Please check suitable answer)

Male                       Female

### ***References:***

- [1] Aswad, B. (1974) **Arabic Speaking Communities in American Cities**, New York: Center for Migration Studies.
- [2] Bisharat, M. (1975) "Yemeni Migrant Workers in California" in **Arabs in America: Myths and Realities**, ed. by Baha Abu-Laban and Faith T. Zeadey.
- [3] Buffalo Evening News Magazine (1978) "The Arabs of Lackawanna: Strangers in a Strange Land", June 11.
- [4] Chilungo, S. (1974) **A Study of Health and Cultural Variants in an Industrial Community**. State University of New York at Buffalo: Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation.
- [5] Daher, N. (1988) "Cleveland, Ohio: Language Attrition in Progress" *Al-'Arabiyya* 21 (1/2): 3-18.
- [6] Dweik, B. (1979) "The Language Situation among the Yemenites of Lackawanna" in: **Proceedings of the University-wide Conference on Communicative Behaviour: Approaches and Research**. Center for Studies in Cultural Transmission, SUNY/Buffalo.
- [7] Dweik, B. (1980) "The Yemenites of Lackawanna, New York. A Community Profile: Council on International Studies - State University of New Yourk at Bufalo, Special Studies: series No. 130.
- [8] Dweik, B. (1985) **Future of the Arabic Language in America: A Sociolinguistic Study**. Sharbain Bookshop, Jerusalem.

- [9] Dweik, B. (1992) "Lebanese Christians in Buffalo: Language Maintenance and Language Shift" in Aleya Rouchdy ed. *The Arabic Language in America*. Wayne State University press, Detroit, Michigan.
- [10] El-Kholy, A (1966) *The Arab Moslems in the United States: Religion and Assimilation*. New Have, Conn.: College and University Press.
- [11] Fishman, J. (1966) *Language Loyalty in the United States*. The Hague, Paris: Mouton and Company.
- [12] Fishman, J. (1989) *Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective*. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.
- [13] Kloss, H. (1966) "German-American Language Maintenance Efforts" In J.A. Fishman (ed.) *Language Loyalty in the United States*. The Hague, Paris: Mouton and Company, 206-252.
- [14] Sawaie, M. (1985) "Language Loyalty and Language Shift among early Arabic-Speaking Immigrants". *The Arab Journal for Humanities* 5 (20): 323-36.
- [15] Walbridge, L. (1992) "Arabic in the Dearborn Mosques" in Aleya Rouchdy ed., *The Arabic Language in America*. Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan.
- [16] Weinreich, U. (1974) *Languages in Contact: Findings and Problems*. The Hague, Paris: Mouton and Company.

