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# The Role of Language in the Assimilation of Lebanese Immigrants in Australia

By A. W. Ata  
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## Introduction

The following Article forms part of a thesis entitled, 'The Lebanese Community in Melbourne' which was submitted recently with the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne.

The research is based on a survey of ninety Lebanese households in the Melbourne metropolitan area between May and August, 1977.

The Lebanese community in Australia has not been the subject of any systematic study and thus the author attempted to investigate as many facets as possible of the lifestyle of Melbourne's Lebanese community.

Most research surveys in recent years have revealed that problems of language permeate every aspect of life of migrant communities; the ability of the host culture to speak the migrant's language is of great importance in facilitating interaction and eventual acculturation. Acquisition of the new language on the part of the migrant does not imply complete assimilation, nor even a willingness to assimilate. One can, however, safely state that those migrants who have attained a reasonable command of English are likely to be better adjusted and therefore more easily accepted by the host society and less vulnerable to exploitation than are other members of their community; circumstances which obviously make for easier assimilation. (Jenks and Lank, 1912; Zubrzycki, 1961; Reynolds 1935 et al).

In view of the above, the author set up a methodological study to investigate degrees in acquiring the varying standards of knowledge of English among Lebanese migrants, attempts made to learn English after immigration, the language spoken at home, the insistence of parents that their children learn English, and several other measurements. Specifically designed questions and a brief multidimensional test were employed to assist in the overall analysis.

## Language Knowledge before Migration

Because educational experience prior to immigration seemed to be a likely influence on ability to acquire a new language, it was obviously necessary to take this into account. Our assumption was that since a large proportion of the sample (42%) had less than 5 years of schooling before immigration, their competence in English would also be poor. (Table I). A second factor which could contribute to ease of acquisition of English could be their residence in countries other than Australia prior to migration. This proposition however was also proved inaccurate as the majority of the 21% of those who qualified for this category had lived in non-English-speaking countries such as Kuwait, Ghana, Egypt and Brazil. In fact it was observed that a large number of this group had a sound knowledge of either French or Spanish. This is understandable if one takes into account the fact that most State schools in Lebanon give instruction in both French and Arabic, but rarely in English. Another important factor is dependent on

the aptitude and intelligence of the individual; however, in view of the lack of adequate time and resources no attempt was made to explore these factors.

TABLE I  
Level of Education (58 couples of married respondents).

Educational Qualifications	Wives	Husbands
None	10.3%	12.1%
(All or Part) Primary	37.9%	36.2%
(All or Part) Secondary	46.5%	41.4%
(All or Part) Tertiary	5.2%	10.3%

t = 100%

TABLE II  
Self-rating on the ability to speak English prior to migration (90 cases)

	Very Well	Fair	Poor	None	Born in Australia	Total
Ability to speak English prior to migration	2%	6%	7%	23%	60%	100%

The results revealed in Table II are in every respect consistent with the researcher's anticipations. As many as 60% of the respondents had absolutely no knowledge of English before migration to Australia, and only 6% of this group had even a rudimentary knowledge of English.

## Attempts made to learn English after Migration

TABLE III  
Self rating on the attempts made in Australia to learn English (90 cases)

Considerable effort	A good deal	Some effort	Little effort	No effort	Born in Australia
16%	16%	17%	26%	24%	2%

A number of observations could be made in regard to the high proportion of those who made 'little effort' (26%) or 'no effort' (24%) to learn English after migration to Australia. One reason for their lack of enthusiasm may be that many of those interviewed had occupations such as factory work, milk-bar ownership or taxi driving. These types of employment require only minimal communication, so that the incentive to obtain formal instruction in English is very small. Informal learning is preferred; comments such as "every time we speak with Australians, we learn it a little bit

more—in the streets, in the supermarkets, on trams, everywhere” were typical (Interview 64). Other respondents however, indicated that they were unaware of, or unable to locate any government-sponsored classes for ‘migrant English’.

An equally important factor is the traditional attitude prevailing among middle-aged Lebanese, that wisdom and experience come with age and not education. Inherent in the Middle Eastern culture, too, is the attitude that education at a formal institution when one is an adult is not something to be taken seriously.

It is noteworthy that as long as there are Lebanese restaurants, newspapers, broadcasts, even movies available in Australia, the first generation will feel no urgent need to learn English as these cultural factors lessen the immediate need to abandon the native language.

Yet, in spite of the overall lack of effort exerted to learn the English language, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (80%) expressed a desire to improve their English (Table IV).

TABLE IV

Response to the question:  
(90 cases)

“Why would you like to improve your English?”

Responses	Percentage
1. “to get a better job”	4%
2. “not to be laughed at”	2%
3. “to know what goes on around me”	33%
4. “to become like other Australians”	3%
5. both No.1 and 3	9%
6. both No.3 and 4	8%
7. all of the following No.2,3,4	3%
8. all of the above	17%
9. Not applicable (No desire/perfect English)	20%
	1 = 100%

It must be mentioned at the outset of our analysis that the 20% of respondents in the ‘not applicable’ category were found to be almost equally divided between those who ‘lacked desire’ and those who had reached a high level of competence in English. (See Table V)

Initially the respondents were instructed to confine their responses to the first four items as indicated in Table IV; nevertheless a few elected to combine a number of responses. While only 4% gave as a reason ‘to get a better job’, the responses of the remainder reflected a tendency which is associated with a desire and feeling that proficiency in learning English aids in the assimilation process.

There was a small number of responses other than those specified examples; these include the following:—“to avoid trouble”, “to be able to write in newspapers”, to get the message across nice and clear”.

Ratings on Language ‘Test’

The test itself, which was administered systematically, was primarily devised in order to evaluate three areas of competence: verbal usage, reading ability and comprehension. Each respondent was given a card with three sentences in English which he/she had to read, paraphrase and then translate into Arabic.

TABLE V

Chart I Interviewer’s ratings on Proficiency in English.

Ratings	Percentage distribution of sample		
	Verbal* Usage	Reading ability	Comprehension
Perfect English—Excellent	11%	13%	16%
Fluent but with marked accent— very good	16%	11%	20%
Good but not fascile-good	32%	14%	12%
Little and with difficulty—fair	39%	28%	33%
None at all—poor	2%	34%	19%

t(n=90)

\*Verbal usage is judged from paraphrase ability, whereas comprehension is tested by translation into Arabic.

CHART I

Interviewer’s Ratings on Proficiency in English.

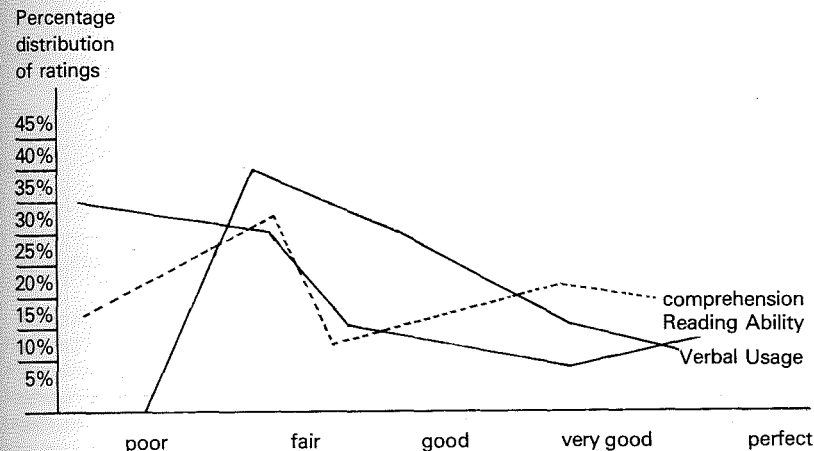


TABLE VII  
Level of education; by age.

Educational background	18-30 years	31-68 years
None	2.3%	15.2%
Primary	25%	41.3%
Secondary	54.5%	34.8%
Tertiary	18.2%	8.7%
	n = 44	n = 46

$$\chi^2 = 9.52693 \text{ df} = 3 \text{ sig.} = .02 \text{ Cramers' V} = .32535$$

With respect to the 'fair' and 'poor' ratings on reading ability, the results in Table VI suggest a marked difference between young and old respondents. Approximately twice as many younger respondents (36.4%) rated fairly on the reading scale as did their older counterparts (19.6%), and almost twice as many older respondents (43.5%) rated very poorly on the same scale compared to younger Leganese (22.7%).

Differences in ratings on the 'verbal' scale between the two groups were, however, quite marginal, so that the results seem to be inconsistent with the researcher's earlier assumption.

*Language Spoken at Home*

TABLE VIII  
Choice of Language at home and choice of Language outside home.

	Language spoken at home	Language spoken outside home
Only English	7%	11%
More English than Arabic	3%	46%
Half and Half	19%	28%
More Arabic than English	20%	13%
Only Arabic	49%	2%
(Not applicable-respondent is the only resident at home)	2%	—
	t(n = 90)	10% 57%

Table VIII introduces another variable: the ratio between English and Arabic spoken both at home and outside. It should be emphasized that while the language of parents at home is crucial in developing or hindering an assimilative environment for children, one should be cautious in using these statistics as conclusive evidence as regards trends of assimilation. In this regard other aspects of cultural and structural assimilation, viz, social contact, attitudes and beliefs, must also be examined.

The results in Table V suggest that differences between the "excellent" and "very good" groups in the three different areas being tested were only marginal; thus, while both groups rated 27% on Verbal Usage, they rated 24% and 36% on Reading Ability and on Comprehension respectively.

At the same time, the groups which rated reasonably high on the scale of competence are relatively small. The majority of respondents were rated as having 'fair' or 'poor' ratings: that is, they had very little or absolutely no knowledge of English. These two ratings constituted as many as 41% on Verbal Usage, 62% on Reading Ability and 52% on Comprehension.

One of the most obvious patterns in Chart I is that the proportion of those who had 'good' ratings on Verbal Ability (32%) is substantially higher than that of those who had good ratings on Reading Ability (14%) and Comprehension (12%). Similarly those who were rated 'poor' on Verbal Usage (2%) were substantially smaller in number than those who had 'poor' ratings on Reading Ability (34%). The above figures suggest that, thanks to frequent contact and communication with the host society, the respondents' standards of English have improved to a reasonable extent.

*Reading/Verbal Knowledge as related to Age*

TABLE VI  
Proficiency in English; by age.

Rating	Reading Ability		Speaking Ability	
	'Young' 18-30 yrs	'Old' 31-68 yrs	'Young' 18-30 yrs	'Old' 31-68 yrs
Excellent	15.9%	10.9%	—	4.3%
Very good	11.4%	10.9%	43.2%	34.8%
Good	13.6%	15.2%	29.5%	34.8%
Fair	36.4%	19.6%	15.9%	15.2%
Poor	22.7%	43.5%	11.4%	10.9%
	n = 44	n = 46	n = 44	n = 46

The rationale behind testing for possible differences between young and old respondents in both Reading and Verbal Abilities is that because 'young' respondents are significantly (sig. = .02) more educated than 'old' respondents (see table VII), the former were expected to rate higher on the reading scale. Conversely, older respondents were expected to speak more fluently because of duration of residence and frequency of contact with host culture.

The fact that only 10% speak "Only English" and "More English than Arabic" at home, as opposed to 57% outside home, suggests that only a very small minority have voluntarily come to favour assimilative attitudes as reflected by use of language, at least with regard to their children. Even though the latter group may seem to learn to communicate in English in their transactions at home, they have also resolved to encourage an ethnic environment there. Indeed as many as 49% speak 'Only Arabic', and another 20% speak 'More Arabic than English' at home.

Those who speak both languages at home in equal proportions (19%) could be perceived as displaying tendencies toward divided loyalty between Lebanon and Australia. Such non-assimilative tendencies however could be seen in the light of the reasons which they provided for encouraging children to learn both languages (see Table XI).

**TABLE VII**  
Level of education; by age.

Educational background	18-30 years	31-68 years
None	2.3%	15.2%
Primary	25%	41.3%
Secondary	54.5%	34.8%
Tertiary	18.2%	8.7%
	n = 44	n = 46

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More Arabic than English	20%	13%
Only Arabic	49%	2%
(Not applicable—respondent is the only resident at home)	2%	—
<i>t</i> (n=90)		10% 57%

**TABLE IX**  
Language spoken by children at home; parents preference of language spoken by children (90 cases)

	Language spoken by children at home	Language of children as preferred by parents
Only English	6%	6%
More English than Arabic	24%	2%
Half and Half	17%	17%
More Arabic than English	10%	24%
Only Arabic	4%	20%
(Not applicable—don't have young children/children too young, etc).	39%	31%
<i>t</i> (n=90)		
30%	14%	44%

The results in Table IX suggest a marked difference between the language children prefer to speak at home and their parents' reaction to it.

Interestingly, with respect to the linguistic "assimilation" of the children, the results show that the proportion of children who speak "Only English" and "More English than Arabic" (30%) is twice as great as those who are in the reverse situation (14%). The latter group is apparently under some form of pressure from their parents of whom as many as 44% indicated that they prefer their children to speak "More Arabic than English" or "only Arabic" at home.

These parents' attitudes of anxiety and uncertainty were typified by statements such as:

"When we go back to Lebanon, how are they (children) going to speak with others? And, who is going to understand them? If they speak Arabic, they will get a good job and a good family".

As to those who speak English and Arabic at home in equal proportions and those who prefer English in both situations, the results show no variation in the percentages of children's preferences and parents' preferences for their children.

As one parent explains, "they have all the opportunities in the world to speak English outside home. If they don't speak Arabic at home they will gradually forget it and they will forget us too". (Interview 18)

Such remarks not only reflect the parents' desire that their children master both languages but are also an indication of the parents' self assertion, vis-a-vis their children. Says another: "It is a matter of the bond between us. He (the son) speaks to us in English but we answer in Arabic. This way we are all happy".

TABLE X  
Ability of children to speak both English and Arabic

	Yes	No	Not applicable*	Too young
Ability to speak both English and Arabic	51%	12%	26%	11%

\*respondents are either not married or married but have no children.

It may be noted that children who are unable to speak both languages (12%) are equally divided between 'assimilates' and 'non-assimilates'; that is, between those who speak only English (6%) and those who speak only Arabic (6%). While the latter group is still of pre-school age, their parents are well aware that their children will gradually forget their language once they enter school. Comments one parent: "Greeks and Italians can matriculate with Greek and Italian subjects, but there is no Arabic to study at schools . . ."

Frustrated by the non-availability of training in Arabic at schools, the Lebanese migrants vent their frustrations by insisting that their children speak Arabic at home. A few of the parents have even become more disappointed because the two Arabic language schools on Saturdays are affiliated with the Maronite Church and the Syrian Nationalist Party, respectively, both of these groups being identified with minority sections of a factionalised society. In the prevailing situation it is not surprising that figures show that only a minority of parents (16%) 'do not insist' that their children speak some Arabic (table XI).

TABLE XI

Reasons for Parents' insistence that their children speak Arabic at home (90 cases)

Reasons	Percentage
1. "So that we can understand them better"	—
2. "So that they can maintain the Arabic language"	30%
3. "Because we are Lebanese, and we want our children to remain Lebanese"	12%
4. All of the above	4%
5. Do not insist	16%
6. No. (1) and (3)	1%
7. No. (2) and (3)	2%
8. Not applicable	34%

As many as 30% indicated that the reason behind their insistence was to 'maintain their children's Arabic language'. It must be stated that such a desire is closely associated with feelings of Arab racial pride. Emphasizes one parent, "It is in our blood, our looks, our manners; no one can deny our heritage. . .". Language is naturally seen as an essential part of a culture that must be retained as a means of asserting identity in an alien culture.

Because of the multi-response nature of the question the third response was introduced as an alternative to the second response. It was observed that respondents who preferred the third response (12%) were devoid of any affinity with the Pan-Arab identity, preferring to maintain an autonomous sense of "Lebaneseness". Likewise, those who opted for a combined answer between the second and third responses (2%), as well as those who indicated "all of the above" (4%) tended to emphasize that Lebanon is an inseparable part of the Arab world, and that consequently it is superfluous to consider the Lebanese dialect distinct from the Arabic language. Presumably these groups divide along Moslem/Christian religious lines.

There appears to be a gradual heterogeneity developing as regards the language used at home by first and second generation Lebanese; while the Lebanese parents continue to speak in Arabic, their children seem to respond in English. Because educational backgrounds acquired before immigration can influence both the ease and comprehensiveness with which one acquires a new language, it is obvious that only a few parents are able to speak both languages, and thus have come to accept their children's linguistic assimilative tendencies. On their part, the children are able as a result to enjoy the privileges and rights of both cultures. On the other hand, a number of children not only see English as the easier of the two languages in which to express themselves but consider it to be the one which will obviously aid their adaptation to the host society.

The linguistic and educational differences between the two generations will probably become wider in time. While the host culture is constantly reinforcing the values the children have adopted, the Lebanese tradition is gradually disintegrating. The dissolution of the traditional family structure manifests itself in a variety of different ways, ranging simultaneously from dress to modes of thinking.

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# Physical Attractiveness— A Source of Teacher Bias?

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## INTRODUCTION

A person's physical appearance is his personal characteristic most obvious and most accessible to others in social interaction. Despite some social psychologists apparent disinterest in investigating physical attractiveness as an antecedent of liking (Aronson, 1969) there has been a developing body of research which suggests that physical attractiveness *is* an important social cue used by others as a basis for social evaluation.

A number of studies, e.g. Brislin and Lewis (1968), Kleck and Rubenstein (1974) and Walsten, Aronson, Abrahams and Rottman (1966) have found that, within the normal ranges of physical appearance, highly attractive young adults are better liked and more preferred as dating partners than are their less physically attractive peers.

Dion, Berscheid and Walster (1972) report a study that goes a step further. Not only were physically attractive persons assumed to possess more socially desirable personalities than those of lesser attractiveness, it was also presumed that their lives would be happier and more successful. Their results suggested that a physical attractiveness stereotype exists with a content compatible with a "what is beautiful is good" thesis.

There is also evidence of the existence of a physical attractiveness stereotype among children. Dion and Berscheid (1971) found that a preschooler's level of physical attractiveness, as judged by adults, bears a relationship to the extent to which he is popular with his peers and to which he is perceived to exhibit certain types of behaviour in interactions with them. Dion (1973) found that preschoolers have consistent stereotypes associated with appearance; both boys and girls preferring pictures of attractive peers as potential friends and rejecting unattractive children. Kleck, Richardson and Ronald (1974) report a study which provides data suggesting that for a group of 9-14 year old boys high sociometric status measured subsequent to two weeks of intense social interaction and also judged on the basis of photographs alone was associated with physical attractiveness. Langlois and Stephan (1977) found preschool and fourth grade children to prefer attractive children and to perceive them as being smarter and friendlier and to show less antisocial behaviours.

## Adults and Children

If, as there appears, there is a physical attractiveness stereotype, it seems plausible to suggest that a child's personal characteristics may influence the way in which an adult evaluates his behaviour.

Dion (1972) suggests that people may interpret an individual's actions consistent with their expectations about his personal dispositions. Consequently, it could be argued that if adults believe children differing in physical attractiveness typically display different personal characteristics this may affect their evaluation of attractive versus