WHAT IS WHITE ARABIC?
NEW LABELS IN A CHANGING ARAB WORLD[1]

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Abstract

Arabic has been traditionally described as a canonically diglossic language (Ferguson, 1959), with Standard Arabic (SA) as the high variety and spoken vernaculars as low varieties. Further research has proven that the actual linguistic landscape in Arabic speaking countries does not reflect this dichotomy, but rather a layered continuum where different varieties (and sometimes languages) interact, fulfilling different communicative functions and carrying multiple symbolic values.

In this sea of varieties, the metalinguistic label «White Arabic» has gained prominence in the last decade, coinciding with the emergence of an increasingly interconnected Arab world. Although the notion of WA was treated peripherally in previous scientific studies (Al-Rojaie, 2020; Dufour, 2008; Germanos, 2009; O'Neill, 2017), none of these deal with the term as a main object. There seems to be no clear consensus regarding the definition of White Arabic – data hints at different understandings of the concept in Lebanon, Jordan,

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UAE, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. Thus, this study aims at exploring the speakers' understandings and perceptions of this notion by analyzing metalinguistic comments made by speakers in qualitative interviews, as well as in media (podcasts, newspapers, blogs, etc.) and social media platforms (facebook, youtube, twitter, etc.). The data is complemented by findings from qualitative questionnaires conducted among speakers from five of the abovementioned Arabic speaking countries.

Keywords: White Arabic; standardization; koineization; accommodation; diglossia; Arabic high varieties; Arabic non standard varieties

¿QUÉ ES EL ÁRABE BLANCO?
ETIQUETAS NUEVAS EN UN MUNDO ÁRABE CAMBIANTE

Resumen

El árabe ha sido descrito tradicionalmente como uno de los ejemplos canónicos de lenguas afectadas por el fenómeno de la diglosia (Ferguson, 1959), con el árabe estándar actuando como variedad alta y las variedades vernáculas habladas como bajas. Sin embargo, investigaciones más recientes han demostrado que la situación lingüística actual de los países arabófonos no refleja esta dicotomía, sino, más bien, un continuo estratificado en el que diferentes variedades –y a veces lenguas– interactúan cumpliendo diferentes funciones comunicativas y portando múltiples valores simbólicos.

En este mar de variedades, la etiqueta metalingüística «White Arabic» ('árabe blanco', a partir de ahora WA) ha ganado importancia en la última década, coincidiendo con el aumento de interconexión en el mundo árabe. Aunque la noción de WA ha sido tratada de forma tangencial en investigaciones previas (Al-Rojaie, 2020; Dufour, 2008; Germanos, 2009; ONeill, 2017), ninguna de ellas trata la cuestión como objeto principal de estudio y no parece haber un consenso claro en la definición del término. De hecho, los datos apuntan hacia diferentes formas de entender el concepto en Líbano, Jordania, Emiratos Árabes Unidos, Arabia Saudí, Yemen, Egipto, Túnez, Argelia y Marruecos.

Por tanto, el objetivo de este estudio consiste en explorar cómo entienden y perciben los hablantes esta noción. Para ello, se ha llevado a cabo un análisis metalingüístico de entrevistas, intervenciones y comentarios realizados por hablantes nativos en medios de comunicación tradicional (periódicos y revistas) y en línea (podcasts, blogs, vídeos, etc.) y en plataformas de redes sociales (facebook, youtube, twitter, etc.). Estos datos se han complementado con los resultados obtenidos mediante el análisis de cuestionarios cualitativos distribuidos en línea entre hablantes de cinco de los países árabes mencionados anteriormente.

1. INTRODUCTION

Arabic has been traditionally described as a canonically diglossic language (Ferguson, 1959) with Standard Arabic (SA) as the high variety and spoken vernaculars as low varieties[6]. Further research has proven that the actual linguistic landscape in Arabic speaking countries does not reflect this dichotomy, but rather a layered continuum where different varieties (and sometimes languages) interact, fulfilling different communicative functions and carrying multiple symbolic values (e.g., Badawi, 1973; Brustad, 2017; Mejdell, 2017, etc.).

In this sea of varieties, the metalinguistic label «White Arabic» *(al-luġa al-bayḍāʔ* ['The White Language'] or *al-lahǧa al-bayḍāʔ* ['The White Dialect'])[7] has gained prominence in the last decade, coinciding with the emergence of an increasingly interconnected Arab world that bears witness to the appearance of superdiverse communicative settings. Although White Arabic (WA) is generally identified to be used among speakers of different Arabic dialects, there seems to be no clear consensus regarding its linguistic characterization – data hints at different understandings of the concept in Lebanon, Jordan, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Tunisia and Algeria.

Mentions of the notion of White Arabic appear scarcely and unevenly distributed along the literature across different disciplines dealing directly or indirectly with the Arabic language. However, although WA has been treated peripherally in a number of previous scientific studies (e.g., Al-Rojaie, 2020; Dufour, 2008; Germanos, 2009; O'Neill, 2017, etc.), none of these works discusses the term as a main object of study. Besides relying on a scarce body of literature, the current state–of–the–art on White Arabic can be defined as rather disorienting. This is, partly, because the label of WA does not seem to correlate with a specific fixed set of linguistic

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6. We use «Standard Arabic» (SA) as a wide label which includes «Modern Standard Arabic» (MSA), «Classical Arabic» (CA), and the «Arabic» term *fuṣḥā*. Similarly, we use *ʕāmmiyya* (general term for vernaculars), spoken varieties and dialects interchangeably to refer to Arabic vernaculars.

7. In our data, speakers use both *al-luġa* (lit. language) and *al-lahǧa* (lit. dialect, variety) qualified by the adjective «white». Although the use of these two labels in our data does not consistently correlate to any specific characterization of WA, further study would be necessary to establish a potential difference in the use of these two metalinguistic labels. For the purpose of this article, we use the term «White Arabic», encompassing both terms.

features, at least not uniformly across the Arab world. In fact, its description varies considerably among speakers, who, depending on their context, may even hold different (and even at first sight contradictory) linguistic definitions for the same unique notion. However, all that does not keep some speakers from perceiving WA as a sufficiently identifiable linguistic variety. In fact, as we will see, for many speakers WA is perceived as a linguistic reality, as an Arabic variety distinct from both *fuṣḥā* and *ʕāmmiyya,* and many times, as one of the resources integrating their linguistic repertoire.

The following paragraph, extracted from a newspaper's article entitled «!حتى لا تقتلنا اللغة البيضاء» [*ḥattā lā taqtula-nā l-luġatu l-bayḍāʔ!*] (So that White Arabic does not kill us) (Al-Barrak, 2018) could serve as a good example of both the contradictory nature of the data out there and the speakers' ability to identify and define (even if not linguistically accurately) the notion of WA:

> It is the local popular common language, or it is the language of the media and in an ironic way, it is the language of the people in Riyadh, where the dialect of Riyadh has colored not only all the media, but also people's lives, and this is natural given that it is the language of the capital, so it became like Standard Arabic, and this is where its name «White Arabic» comes from, because it is similar to the language of media in Lebanon, and it is said that it is the Beiruti language, while the Lebanese dialect spoken in the streets is something different.[8]

In this light, by means of a review of the academic literature available and of the analysis of data extracted from social media and media platforms, this study focuses on the existing understandings and perceptions of this notion and aims to draw a preliminary state-of-the-art of this relatively 'unknown' and seemingly emerging metalinguistic label that we hope can be of use for further studies within the field of Arabic sociolinguistics.

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8.   Original Arabic text:

هي لغة محلية شعبية عامة، أو هي لغة الإعلام المحكية، وبطريقة أخرى ساخرة، هي لغة أهل رياض! حيث صبغت لهجة الرياض العامّية كل وسائل الإعلام، بل وحياة الناس كلّهم، وهذا طبيعي فهي لغة العاصمة، فصارت كأنها لغة عربية فصيحة، ومن هنا جاءت تسميتها باللغة البيضاء، وهي تشبه لغة الإعلام المحكي في لبنان وما يقال عنها إنها اللغة البيروتية، بينما اللهجة اللبنانية في الشارع شيء مختلف (Al-Barrak, 2018)

[*hiyya luġatun maḥaliyyatun šaʕbiyyatun ʕāmmatun, ʔaw hiyya luġatu l-ʔiʕlāmi l-maḥki-yyati, wa-bi-ṭarīqatin ʔuxrā sāxiratin, hiyya luġatu ʔahli riyāḍ! ḥaytu ṣabaġat lahǧatu l-riyāḍ l-ʕāmmiyya kulla wasāʔili l-ʔiʕlāmi, bal wa-ḥayāti l-nāsi kulli-him, wa-hāḏā ṭabīʕīyyun fa-hiyya luġatu l-ʕāṣimati fa-ṣārat ka-ʔanna-hā luġatun ʕarabiyyatun faṣīḥatun, wa-min hunā ǧāʔat tasmiyyatu-hā bi-l-luġati al-bayḍāʔ, wa-hiyya tušbihu luġata l-ʔiʕlāmi l-maḥkiyyi fī lubnān wa-mā yuqālu ʕan-hā ʔinna-hā l-luġatu l-bayrūtiyya, baynamā l-lahǧatu l-lubnāniyyatu fī l-šāriʕi šayʔun muxtalifun* (Al-Barrak, 2018)].

1.1. *White Arabic: a new label or a new variety?*

Mentions to WA in the academic literature suggest that WA is considered to be relatively new. In Yemen, Dufour (2008, p.141) estimates that it must have emerged around the beginning of the 21st century, a fact that seems parallel to the situation in Saudi Arabia, where young respondents are reported to be more familiar with the concept (Al-Rojaie 2020, p.42). Wikipedia also affirms that youth expressions (*at-taʿābīr al-šabābiyya*) are part of WA, and that the appearance of this concept is directly related to the emergence of social media and globalization (Wikipedia: لهجة بيضاء [*lahǧa bayḍāʔ*]). However, the literature also hints at that the concept is not exclusively know among young generations. Germanos' work (2009) registered mentions to WA within the qualitative interviews she conducted in Beirut in 2005, some of them made by a 72-year-old informant (Germanos, 2009, p. 104-5), which could suggest that the use of this term would not be so recent, at least not in the Lebanese context.

In fact, the idea of one variety that can be understood by any speaker of Arabic has long been an ideological motif among Arabic speakers. SA was often portrayed to fulfill the function of interdialectal communication among speakers from different Arab countries, and while that could partially be a reality among educated speakers in the written sphere, it surely did not match the reality of interdialectal oral interactions (e.g., Abu-Melhim, 1992; S'hiri, 2002; Chakrani, 2015; Bassiouney, 2015; Attwa, 2019; Soliman, 2015; Schulties, 2015).

The early decades of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of similar meta-linguistic labels such as «the third language» (*al-luġa al-ṯāliṯa*) and «the middle language» (*al-luġa al-wusṭā*), mainly by the hand of writers and intellectuals such as Tawfiq al Hakim, Taha Hussein and Naguib Mahfouz among others. «The intermediate» Arabic they would use was generally understood as «a type of style in written prose which, though adhering to the basic norms of classical Arabic, is easily understood by any speaker of Arabic, and is not far removed from the vocabulary, structure, and rhythm of spoken dialects» (Somekh, 1981, p. 74). In fact, during the second half of the 20th century many labels to refer to «intermediate forms of the language» (Ferguson, 1959, p. 332) appeared. To name a few: *luġa ʕarabiyya mutawassiṭa* or «Intermediary Arabic» (ʕUbayd 1964), *ʕarabiyyat al-muṯaqqafīn* or «Educated Arabic» (Badawi 1973) *fuṣḥāmmiya* or «standardialect» (Rosenbaum 2000), *al-ʕarabiyya al-muyassara* or «simplified Arabic» (Frayha 1953)*, al-fuṣḥā al-muxaffafa* or «lightened *fuṣḥā*» (Farah Antun in Badawi, 1973, p. 69-70), *Arabe Marocain Médian* (Youssi, 1986), *Arabe*

Marocain Moderne (Youssi, 1992), and «Educated Spoken Arabic» (Mitchell, 1986) among others.

Despite not being identical, these labels generally designate, functionally speaking, «a pragmatic, communicative response of educated speakers to a situation where the basic functional distribution of High (H) and Low (L) variety, *fuṣḥā* and *ʕāmmiyya*, Standard Arabic and the vernacular, is challenged, and therefore code choice is diffuse» (Mejdell, 2011). We may then, for the purpose of this article, conclude that a myriad of metalinguistic labels were created to refer to an intermediate point (or range) within the spectrum between the two poles of *fuṣḥā* and *ʕāmmiyya* used by speakers to adapt their registers when facing semi-formal or formal interactions.

«White Arabic» seems to be different from the aforementioned labels in this aspect. Although the label WA may also cover the aforementioned notion of «intermediary stage» between *fuṣḥā* and *ʕāmmiyya* (see section 3.1.), our data indicates that its use is by no means restricted to it. As we will see, WA is a versatile label that is also often used to refer to other codes, practices or varieties resulting from different processes of accommodation taking place within different communicative settings (see sections 3.2. and 3.3.). We find the «new»-and-versatile nature of the WA label a matter not only worthy of research but also indicative of a change of landscape that the Arabic language is currently witnessing.

The goal of this article is therefore twofold. First, we attempt to describe the versatility of WA's label through three working definitions that group the perceptions of WA reported in our data according to well-established and relevant sociolinguistic theories. Secondly, we attempt to understand why, despite the myriad of metalinguistic labels available in the literature, there is still a need among some Arabic speakers for a new label that designates a neutral, simple form of Arabic that any Arab can understand. For this purpose, in the discussion section (see section 4 in this article) we engage in a debate of the plausible explanations and potential implications of the emergence and seemingly fast spread of the metalinguistic label of White Arabic.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The present work is situated on the interface of different sociolinguistic and sociological theories and concepts. As we mentioned in the introduction, WA is a complex linguistic concept, which emerges mainly from Arabic native speakers'

perceptions to describe current developments in their linguistic realities. This study therefore generally draws on perceptual dialectology, also known as folk linguistics – a discipline that investigates speakers' beliefs, feelings and perceptions of a certain language or variety (Albury, 2014, p. 86-87). Analyzing non-linguists' beliefs and views on language is crucial for the understanding of language change, as these beliefs and views highly influence actual linguistic behavior (Preston, 2017). This work also benefits from already well-established definitions of sociolinguistic concepts and processes such as those of koineization (e.g., Miller, 2011), leveling (e.g., Trudgill, 1986), accommodation (e.g., Giles & Ogay, 2007), diglossia (e.g., Ferguson, 1959), etc., which are treated in more detail in the following sections of this article.

Notwithstanding the usefulness of the aforementioned concepts and theories, given the intrinsic complexity and dynamicity of the notion of WA, we found it necessary to complement these with alternative theoretical notions, mainly anchored in sociology and communication theory. An underlying theme and notion that helps capture the complexity of the communicative settings in which WA is reported to be used is that of «superdiversity».[9] The concept of «superdiversity» recognizes the importance of considering multiple variables when addressing the complexity of our modern society, which is heavily influenced by globalization and the resulting migration movements. The notion of superdiversity, along with that of linguistic repertoires, were mainly developed within studies dealing with mobility, multiethnic and multilingual urban districts (Jørgensen *et al.,* 2011; Blommaert & Backus, 2011; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011, 2016) and have been increasingly used in sociolinguistic research investigating the emergence of complex communicative settings resulting from globalization (e.g., Creese & Blackledge, 2018).

As for the data, our study considers several kinds of sources dealing with the notion of WA. On the one hand, we have collected and analyzed characterizations of WA as they appear in academic works in the fields of Arabic (socio)linguistics, media and communication studies. On the other hand, we have analyzed non-academic sources (i.e., articles, essays or posts published on websites, online newspapers, social media and podcasts, personal communications) where the term «White Arabic» is used mostly by non-linguist native speakers, either explaining what it is, and/or how, when, and why it is employed.

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9. This term was coined by Vertovec (2007) in a sociological study on immigrant communities in London. In this study the author pled for the need to avoid focusing exclusively on ethnicity as a variable, given the heterogeneity characterizing the communities under study.

Our data analysis intends to systematically categorize the strongly varying perceptions on the nature of WA. To do so, we grouped these perceptions into three different working definitions of WA, whose purpose is to serve readers as an analytical framework and help them grasp the manifold idiosyncrasies of WA according to the speakers' perceptions.

3. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The current section presents three working definitions that try to synthesize, in an organized manner, speakers' various perceptions on WA: (1) Educated Spoken Arabic – an intermediate form between *fuṣḥā* and *ʕāmmiyya*; (2) Dialectal urban koine – a developing national spoken standard; and (3) a set of dialectal accommodation practices used in pan-Arab communication.

Some remarks about the data are due before we delve into the individual definitions. First, we must keep in mind that speakers' perceptions on WA, when reported, show a high variability and may overlap considerably, even within one single speaker. Identifying and describing WA is neither something all speakers can do – many speakers do not identify WA as a label and seem not to have reflected on its status, nature or properties – nor something those speakers who do may find an easy task. The proof is that, as Germanos (2009, p. 105) noticed, and as we have also observed in our data, speakers tend to define WA by what it is not rather than by what it is.[10] For these reasons, the three working definitions we explain in the following sections should not be treated as rigid categories, but rather as flexible descriptive tendencies of what WA represents in the mind of Arabic speakers.

Secondly, we have noticed that, regardless of the definition they align with, speakers' perceptions on the status of WA are by no means consensual or rigid, but rather, it ranges on a spectrum between «fluid sets of practices» and «a stable variety». That WA is often perceived as a nuanced, dynamic, and continuous process is evident in the description of some speakers of their use of WA through the verb تبيّض [*tabayyaḍ*] 'to grow or become white' – e.g., in affirmations such as: «My language gets whiter the closer I get to Damascus».[11] This indicates that the perceptual status of WA is, thus, similar to that of other perceived varieties,

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10. «It seems to be easier for speakers to notice the absence of specific salient features than to provide a list of features that is actually used while speaking WA» (Germanos 200, p. 105).

11. Arabic original: «*luġti btətbayyaḍ kəll-ma bʔarrəb ʕa-š-šām*». Personal communication from a 26-year-old speaker from Swēda (Syria) who studied and resided in Damascus and later in Beirut.

such as *luġa wusṭā* 'the middle language', which is also treated by some as a separate (though variable) variety, and by others as a dynamic product of constant mixing of elements from different varieties (Mejdell, 2011).

In this light, we provide the reader with the three working definitions of WA that resulted from our analysis. By shedding light on their distinct yet overlapping nature, we hope to contribute, however slightly, to the already vivid debate on these (and other) sociolinguistic concepts.

3.1. *White Arabic as Educated Spoken Arabic*

In the first working definition of WA emerging from our data, WA is seen as a hybrid form of Arabic arising from a diglossic situation. In fact, as we have mentioned above, a number of terms (e.g., *luġa wusṭā, al-luġa al-ṯāliṯa, ʕāmmiyyat al-muṯaqqafīn*) have previously been used by linguists, academics and writers to describe intermediate mixed varieties between SA and Arabic spoken vernaculars. The term «Educated Spoken Arabic» (ESA) (Mitchell, 1986) refers to a higher-register, «mixed» spoken form of speech used by educated Arabic speakers. This section will show how these terms, and more specifically the label of «Educated Spoken Arabic», are homologous to this working definition of WA.

WA is frequently defined in our sources as a mix between *fuṣḥā* and local vernaculars (Wikipedia لهجة بيضاء [*lahǧa bayḍāʔ*], Abdel Nasser, 2017; Abdel Hamid, 2015). In an online article from the UAE newspaper *Al-Bayan* dealing with journalists', writers' and scholars' attitudes towards WA, it is also referred to as «the daughter of *fuṣḥā*» (Abdel Hamid, 2015).[12] Similarly, in an online article of the magazine *Al-Majalla*, WA is defined as *fuṣḥā muxaffafa*, 'lightened' or 'diluted' *fuṣḥā*, fused with colloquial terms known in most colloquial dialects» (Al-Felou, 2020).[13]

A particularly interesting source for the exploration of speakers' perceptions on WA is a video entitled *The Unity of the Arabic Language* by Dr. Alexander Argüelles, professor at the American University in Dubai at the time (henceforth Argüelles 2018). In this video, the professor discusses the topic of Arabic diglossia with two female students from Algeria and Syria, who, despite their different origins, also describe WA

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12. Arabic original: «تُعتبر البيضاء ابنتها» [*tuʕtabar al-bayḍāʔ ibnata-hā*].
13. Arabic original: «المخففة المدموجة بمصطلحات عامية معروفة عند أغلب اللهجات العامية الفصحى» [*al-muxaffatu l-madmūǧa bi-muṣṭalaḥātin ʕāmmiyyatin maʕrūfatin ʕinda ʔaġlabi l-lahǧāti l-ʕāmmiyyati al-fuṣḥā*].

consistently as a «mix of *fuṣḥā* and vernacular Arabic».[14] This understanding of WA has been described in studies dealing with the UAE (Hopkyns *et al.*, 2021, p. 165) and Jordan (Alfaisal & Aljanada, 2019, p. 110).

While previously mentioned metalinguistic labels (i.e., *luġa wusṭā, al-luġa al-ṯāliṯa, ʕāmmiyyat al-muṯaqqafīn*) referred, at least partly, to written language, Educated Spoken Arabic, as its name indicates, refers almost exclusively to the spoken realm. According to our analysis, our sources on WA seem to echo the idea that WA is, also, mainly a spoken form. It is not a surprise, then, that all the above-mentioned articles (Wikipedia لهجة بيضاء [*lahǧa bayḍāʔ*]; Abdel Hamid, 2015; Abdel Nasser, 2017; Al-Felou, 2020) associate WA to speech-related terms such as «كلام» [*kalām*] ('speech'), «يتحدث» [*yataḥaddaṯ*] ('to speak'), «ينطق / يلفظ» [*yalfiẓ / yantiq*] ('to pronounce'), among others. Hopkyns *et al.* (2021, p. 165) explicitly categorize WA as spoken and informal, as does Argüelles in the abovementioned video when he says: «Are there books written in WA? No, all books are written in [standard] Arabic»[15]. As we will see below, the sources that associate WA to the domain of the media also seem to restrict their analysis to spoken media forms.[16]

In fact, the data associating WA with written language is very scarce. Abdel Nasser (2017) briefly mentions the use of WA on online forums and in reactions of media platforms to readers. In Abdel Hamid (2015), an Emirati poet affirms that «despite his love for *fuṣḥā*, in which he wrote 70% of his poems, he devoted the remaining 30% to *Nabaṭi* poetry, which he wrote in WA»[17]. It is thus worth noting WA is only associated with written language either in informal written social media, which is

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14. Arabic original:
Sana: «اللغة البيضاء هي عبارة عن القليل من اللغة الفصحى مع القليل من اللغة العامية المستخدمة يوميًا». [*l-luġa l-bayḍāʔ hiyya ʕibāra ʕan l-qalīl mina l-luġaⁱ l-fuṣḥā maʕa l-qalīl mina l-luġaⁱ l-ʕāmmiyya l-mustaxdama yawmiyyan*].
and Fatīḥa: «هذه هي اللغة البيضاء، يعني هي مزيج لهجة مع العربية الفصحى». [*hāḏihi l-luġa l-bayḍāʔ, yaʕnī hiyya mazīǧ lahǧa maʕa l-ʕarabiyya l-fuṣḥā*].

15. Arabic original: «هل موجود كتب باللغة البيضاء؟ لا. كل كتاب في اللغة العربية. لا يوجد كتب». [*hal mawǧūd kutub bi-l-luġa l-bayḍāʔ? lā. kull kitāb fī l-luġa l-ʕarabiyya. lā yūǧad kutub*].

16. The use of WA in written newspapers is, for example, never mentioned in our data.

17. Arabic original:
الشاعر عبد الله الهدية رغم عشقه للفصحى التي كتب بها 70% من قصائده، إلا أنه خصص الـ30% الباقية للشعر النبطي الذي كتبه باللهجة البيضاء، وأشار إلى أن البيضاء هي لغة السهل الممتنع التي يستعين بها الإعلام المكتوب إذ إنها تبتعد عن المفردات الفصيحة التي قد يعتبرها العامة معقدة وغير مفهومة.

[*l-šāʕiru ʕabd allah l-hadiyya raġma ʕašqi-hi li-l-fuṣḥā allatī kataba bi-hā 70% min qaṣāʔi-di-hi, ʔilla ʔanna-hu xaṣṣaṣ al-30% l-bāqiyya li-l-šiʕri l-nabaṭī allaḏi kataba-hu bi-l-lahǧati l-bayḍāʔ, wa-ʔašāra ʔilā ʔanna al-bayḍāʔ hiyya luġatu l-sahli l-mumtaniʕi allatī yastaʕīn bi-hā l-ʔilāmu l-maktūbu ʔiḏ ʔinna-hā tabtaʕidu ʕan l-mufradāti l-faṣīḥati allatī qad yuʕtabaru-hā l-ʕāmmatu muʕaqqadatan wa-ġayr mafhūma*].

often perceived as a prolongation of spoken communication (online forums), or in poetry, a written genre also intimately related to spoken styles, whose aesthetics relies mainly on auditive features like meter, rhythm and rhyme.

 As for the contexts in which WA as a hybrid standard/vernacular form is perceived to be used, Arabic spoken media – radio and television – (Argüelles, 2018[18]; Abdel Hamid, 2015[19]; Abdel Nasser, 2017[20]) and advertising (Al-Felou, 2020[21]) resonate strongly as the main contexts for the use of WA. Here again, this understanding of WA matches closely with the notion of ESA, which «in recent usage […] refers more and more frequently to unscripted spoken Arabic used in the Arabic broadcast media […] in interviews and in spontaneous commentary situations» (Ryding, 2011). In Germanos (2009), two Lebanese informants also link the use of WA specifically to the Arab broadcast media in Lebanon – in advertisements or used by presenters.[22] This claim is supported by a third informant, a director at a Lebanese television channel who reported to have trained presenters

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18. Sana: «Today, there is the «white language», which is used a lot in the media».
    Arabic original: «يوجد اللغة البيضاء اليوم، نستخدمها كثيرا في الإعلام». [*yūǧadu l-luġa l-bayḍāʔ l-yawm, na-staxdimu-hā kaṯīran fī l-ʔiʕlām*]

19. «I use WA in my daily radio program «live Broadcast», which is broadcasted by Noor Dubai ».
    Arabic original: «أستخدم البيضاء في برنامجي الإذاعي اليومي (البث المباشر) الذي يذاع من قناة نور دبي» [*ʔastaxdim al-bayḍāʔ fī barnāmiǧ-ī l-ʔiḏāʕī l-yawmī (al-baṯṯ al-mubāšir) allaḏī yuḏāʕ min qanāt nūr dubay*] and «I often use WA to ensure that a wider segment of the audience can follow».
    Arabic original: «في كثير من الأحيان أستخدم اللهجة البيضاء لضمان متابعة شريحة أعرض من الجمهور المتابعين». [*fī kaṯīr mina l-ʔaḥyān ʔastaxdimu l-lahǧa l-bayḍāʔ li-ḍamān mutābaʕat šarīḥa ʔaʕraḍ mina l-ǧumhūri l-mutābiʕīn*].

20. «[WA] can be used in many audio(visual) media, such as in television interviews, especially ones with artists, online forums, songs, reactions to readers, press interviews, etcetera».
    Arabic original:
    وقد تستعمل في العديد من وسائل الإعلام والاستماع والاطلاع مثل المقابلات التليفزيونية وخاصة الفنية، المنتديات من خلال
    «الانترنت، الأغاني، الردود على القراء والمقابلات الصحافية وغيرها»
    [*wa-qad tustaʕmal fī l-ʕadīdi min wasāʔli l-ʔiʕlām wa-l-istimāʕ wa-l-iṭṭilāʕ miṯla l-muqābalāt l-tilīfizyūniyya wa-xāṣṣatan al-fanniyya, l-muntadayāt min xilāl al-intirnit, al-ʕaġānī, l-rudūd ʕalā l-qirāʔ wa-l-muqābalāti l-ṣaḥāfiyya wa-ġayri-hā*].

21. «When a company speaks to thousands of people from different regions, which vernacular would they choose? And what would that [choice] make users of other vernaculars feel? The sensible solution that companies resort to is the use of the 'white vernacular'».
    Arabic original:
    وتطرح (...) هنا إشكالية يصطدم بها المحتوى الإعلاني العامي، بالقول: «عندما تتحدث شركة لآلاف الأشخاص من مناطق مختلفة، فأي لهجة عامية ستختار؟ وماذا سيُشعر ذلك مستخدمي اللهجات الأخرى؟»، أما الحل المعقول الذي تلجأ إليه الشركات، فهو: استخدام «اللهجة البيضاء»
    [*Wa-tuṭraḥu (...) hunā ʔiškāliyyatu yaṣṭadimu bi-hā l-muḥtawā l-ʔiʕlānī l-ʕāmmī, bi-l-qawl ʕindamā tataḥaddaṯu šarikatun li-ʔalāfi l-ʔašxāṣ min manāṭiqin muxtalifa, fa-ʔayya lahǧatan ʕāmmiyyatan sa-taxtār? wa-māḏā sa-yušʕiru ḏālika mustaxdimī l-lahǧāti l-ʔuxrā? ʔamma l-ḥallu l-maʕqūlu allaḏī talǧaʔ ʔilay-hi l-šarikāt fa-huwwa stixdāmu l-lahǧati l-baydāʔ*].

22. French original: «Chez deux des informateurs qui parlent de *lähže bayḍa* (F30M et F39S), cette expression est utilisée pour décrire non pas un vernaculaire, mais plutôt une variété dont l'usage est lié

of the channel in using WA, which he defined «as a mixed variety of Arabic (standard/vernacular), devoid of any local dialectal features that creates in the audience a feeling of «distance» between them and the presenter»[23] (Germanos, 2009, p. 103-4, our translation).

An especially relevant development that seems to be related to the 'emergence' of WA is the increasing supra-national orientation of the Arab media industry and the emergence of pan-Arab satellite channels. Kraidy (2006) notes that national and local programs have been challenged by Arab satellite channels tending to produce programs that appeal to viewers from all over the Arab world. It is in this context that the author describes the emergence of «what is now known as «white Arabic», a media compatible, simplified version of Modern Standard Arabic that is becoming a *lingua franca* for regional public discourse» (Kraidy, 2006, p. 11). Schulthies' study (2015), which explores linguistic practices in pan-Arab talent shows, echoes this definition of WA, broadening the scope of its use also to the advertising industry (Schulthies, 2015, p. 61).[24]

As reported by speakers, the emergent use of WA as ESA can be explained on the grounds that (1) WA is perceived to be easily understandable by all speakers of Arabic, (2) WA is perceived to be less «heavy» and therefore more attractive than *fuṣḥā*, whose reportedly «complicated» nature mainly stems from the marking of mood and case endings (Argüelles, 2018, min. 14:18)[25], and that (3) WA, as an intermediary/mixed variety, integrates «the best of both worlds» when it comes

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à un contexte bien spécifique (télévisuel ou radiophonique: utilisation dans la publicité chez F30M, et par les présentateurs, chez F29S)» (Germanos, 2009, pp. 103-4).

23. French original: «une variété d'arabe 'mixte' (arabe standard/arabe dialectal) dénuée de tout trait dialectal local qui engendrait chez l'auditeur ou le téléspectateur un sentiment de 'distance' ou plutôt 'd'étrangeté' vis-à-vis du présentateur» (Germanos, 2009, pp. 103-4).

24. It should be noted that, although in Schulthies (2015) speakers' perceptions may portray MSA or WA as a sort of 'light MSA' to be the norm for interaction within these talent shows, a linguistic analysis of these interactions actually show that accommodation often does not necessarily take place in the direction of MSA, but rather through a variety of strategies such as the subtitling of lesser understood vernacular varieties, or accommodation via Mashreqi media forms. In this point, as well, we observe considerable overlap with our third working definition of WA as a set of accommodative strategies for pan-Arab communication.

25. «When we're sitting with friends, for example, we don't speak *fuṣḥā* because it's heavy. Unfortunately, nowadays a lot of people can't speak *fuṣḥā* because of the mood and case endings, and the grammatical rules, and a lot of grammatical rules are linked to the mood and case endings. That's why it's hard to speak *fuṣḥā*, and that's why WA was created». Arabic original:

عندما نجلس مع الأصدقاء مثلا، لا نتكلم الفصحى لأنها ثقيلة، للأسف في يومنا هذا، نسبة كبيرة من الناس لا يستطيعون التكلم بالفصحى بسبب التشكيل والقواعد، هناك العديد من القواعد المرتبطة بذلك. لذلك يصعب التحدث بها. لذلك قمنا بإيجاد اللغة البيضاء.

[*ʕindamā naǧlisu maʕa l-ʔaṣdiqāʔ maṯalan, lā natakallamu l-fuṣḥā liʔanna-hā ṯaqīla, li-l-ʔasaf fī yawmi-nā hāḏā, nisba kabīra min al-nās lā yastaṭīʕūna l-takallum bi-l-fuṣḥā bi-sababi l-taškīl*

to the tone and symbolic value of code choice, being perceived as a variety that is adequate in register, yet suitable «to approach the audience in a simple language that is closer to theirs»[26] (Al-Felou, 2020). These motivations also explain WA's growing popularity among media and advertisement producers, who, via WA, do not only aim to avoid the reported «slight barrier in the psyche of the viewer» generated by the use of *fuṣḥā* in these contexts,[27] but also score higher ratings and obtain more profit as they cater to a broader audience throughout the Arab world.

3.2. *White Arabic as an urban dialectal koine (and/or a developing national standard)*

A (dialectal) koine is generally defined as the stabilized mixed variety resulting from koineization, i.e., a process of interdialectal contact leading to an amount of linguistic restructuring (Miller, 2011). The process of koineization consists of the mixing and subsequent leveling of features of varieties which are mutually intelligible, such as regional or social dialects (Siegel, 2001, in Kerswill, 2003). One of the main characteristics of leveling is the removal or reduction of marked forms from dialects over a period of time (Trudgill, 1986, p. 98). By «marked» here we, following Trudgill, refer to features that are used by a lesser number of speakers or whose use is restricted regionally.[28]

In our data, WA is often described as a koine (or as a variety under the process of koineization) for it is perceived as a neutral variety which does not show regional or marked features. Sources from Saudi Arabia, for instance, describe WA as being «less affected by tribal or rural vocabulary» (Alfaisal & Aljanada, 2019, pp. 109-110). In the same line, a Saudi female schoolteacher exemplifies this point by

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wa-l-qawāʕid, hunāka l-ʕadīd min al-qawāʕidi l-murtabiṭa bi-ḏalik. Li-ḏalik qumnā bi-ʔīǧād al-luġa al-bayḍāʔ].

26.   Arabic original:

أعتقد أنه من اللطيف أحياناً الدمج بين العامية والفصحى. فالعامية وقع حميم ومؤثر، لكن ليس بإمكانها أن تحل محل الفصحى بشكل كامل(...)
والهدف من وراء اللهجة البيضاء، كما أعتقد، هو التقرب من الجمهور بلغة بس"يطة أقرب للغته.

[*ʔaʕtaqidu ʔanna-hu min al-laṭīfi ʔaḥyānan al-damǧu bayna l-ʕāmmiyyati wa-l-fuṣḥā. fa-li-l-ʕāmiyyati waqiʕun ḥamīmun wa-muʔaṯṯirun, lākin laysa bi-ʔimkāni-hā ʔan taḥilla maḥall al-fuṣḥā bi-šaklin kāmilin wa-l-hadafu min warāʔa l-lahǧati l-bayḍāʔ, ka-mā ʔaʕtaqid, huwwa l-taqarrub min al-ǧumhūri bi-luġatin basīṭatin ʔaqrab li-luġati-hi*]. 27.   Arabic original: «هذا يخلق حاجزًا بسيطًا في نفسية المشاهد، قد لا تحقق من ورائه الوصول لهدف رسالتك» [*hāḏā yaxlaq ḥāǧizan basīṭan fī nafsiyyati l-mušāhidi, qad lā tuḥaqqiq min warāʔi-hi l-wuṣūlu li-hadafin risālati-k*] see Bassiouney 2010 on the use of MSA and vernacular in advertisements.

28.   Here we echo Trudgill's definition of markedness. See Haspelmath (2006) for an overview of the many possible uses of «markedness» as reported in the literature.

saying: «When I use the white dialect, I don't use affricated sounds like *ts* or *dz*[29]»
(Al-Rojaie, 2020, p. 45). It is seemingly due to this «canceling» or leveling of local
features that WA receives the qualifier of «white». El-Hage explains it as follows
in the Lebanese context: «By 'white' we mean 'neutral', this is, the opposite of
regional [...] it is, therefore, a variety understood by all Lebanese, which does not
have a regional color» (El-Hage, 2017, p. 30; our translation).[30]

After mixing and leveling, koineization finishes with the process of
«simplification» (Trudgill, 1986, p. 127), which associates to «either an increase in
regularity or a decrease in markedness» (Siegel, 1985, p. 358, quoting Mühlhäusler,
1980, p. 21). The loss of marked features, and therefore the «simplification» of the
variety, results in a new variety that, in the view of some speakers, is «neutral»
or lacks a specific character. One of Germanos' (2009) Lebanese informants uses
these precise words when identifying the lack of regional character of a linguistic
variety that she labels as «white»: «It is possible, of course, there must be a dialect,
let's say, white, that does not have a precise character» (Germanos, 2009, p. 103).[31]

As we will see below, it is clear that for some, the use of a white variety seems
to bear clear communicative benefits. For others, however, this «simplicity» or
convergence carries with it the lack of a defined identity, a fact that sometimes
triggers negative attitudes in some speakers who perceive WA as the main cause
behind the erasure of local diversity. In an episode of the Lebanese podcast *Sarde*
(henceforth Azouri & Jaber, 2021), the Tripolitan rapper El Rass illustrated the
process of formation of Lebanese WA with a rather critical tone, affirming that
WA was created on the grounds of the unification of sects and regions within
Lebanon[32] (Azouri & Jaber, 2021, min. 92:30), and explains the deliberate creation
of WA as the result of a totalitarian approach, that «attempts to harmonize different
elements by erasing its idiosyncrasies and melting them all in a single pot»[33] (El
Rass, in Azouri & Jaber, 2021, min. 92.35 translation ours).

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29. Typically marked as Bedouin in Saudi Arabia.

30. French original: «par 'blanc' nous voulons dire 'neutre' donc le contraire de 'régional' [...] Il
s'agit donc du parler compris par tous les Libanais, du parler qui n'a pas de couleur régionale» (El-Hage,
2017, p. 30).

31. French original: «F45GO: c'est possible, c'est possible, bien sûr, il doit y avoir un dialecte...
disons, blanc, si tu veux, qui n'a pas un caractère précis».

32. Arabic original (oral statement)*: hayy xturiʕət ʔāl, ḍomən manṭəʔ tawḥīd əṭ-ṭawāyif w-əl
manāṭəʔ* (El Rass, min. 92:30).

33. Arabic original (oral statement): *šuf ha-l-ʕaʔliyye l-tōtālītariyye... kīf bətxalli ʔəšya tətnēǧam
bēn baʕda bi-ʔənnak təlǧe xaṣāʔiṣa w-tdawwəba kəlla bə-xāle waḥde.*

The concept of koineization has also been used to describe the changes that are occurring in many contemporary dialects following movements of population and urbanization. In fact, the most prominent koines we know of in the Arab world are those that emerged during the last century within urban centers, as a result of different urbanization processes (Miller, 2004, 2007). Hence, most contemporary Arabic urban vernaculars can be considered to have emerged from dialect contact, convergence, variation and change (Miller & Falchetta, 2021, p. 724).[34] In these cases, urbanization generally implied a rural/urban migration towards the main urban centers of each Arab country, often capital cities, but also to other urban centers more recently developed. For this reason, it is not surprising that the linguists, bloggers, journalists, etc., who mentioned WA in their works describe it as being either the variety of a main urban center within their countries (often the capital), or as being heavily based on urban vernaculars – i.e. in the latter, WA would be identified as a koine emerging from the main vernacular elements of the cities, while still avoiding the most localized features, therefore not in all cases completely overlapping with the main city vernacular.

In fact, the concept of «centralization» (*markaziyya*) represents a common theme in our data, and often appears connected to the notions of «education» and «open-mindedness» In an article published in the blog *Raseef22* entitled «Beirut, the White Dialect» (Qarout, 2018), the author refers to WA as the new dialect of the Lebanese capital, Beirut. In her opinion, this variety, which emerged from speakers' agreement to use a common variety to ease communication, reflects Beirut´s diverse and multicultural character: «Beirut is an open and multicultural city. It is the capital, and the center of the state, and therefore its residents had to agree among themselves on a language that everyone understands, which we call «the white dialect» (Qarout, 2018; our translation).[35] Worthy of mention is the explicit differentiation the author makes between the old variety of Beirut (also

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34. Despite their shared processes, it is important to point out, however, that degrees of koineization and leveling certainly depend on each city's history and on the rate of rural/urban migration. Therefore, there is neither a single model nor a common linear development (Miller & Falchetta, 2021).

35. Arabic original:

بيروت مدينة منفتحة ومتعددة الثقافات، هي العاصمة ومركز الدولة وبالتالي على القاطنين فيها الاتفاق فيما بينهم على لغة مفهومة من الكل، هي ما نسميه "اللهجة البيضاء".(Qarout, 2018)

[*Bayrūt madīnatun munfatiḥatun wa mutaʕaddidatu l-ṯaqāfāt, hiyya l-ʕāṣimatu wa-markazu l-dawlati wa bi-l-tālī ʕalā l-qāṭinīn fī-hā l-ʔittifāqu fī-mā bayna-hum ʕalā luġatin mafhūmatin mina l-kull, hiyyā mā nusammī-hi "l-lahǧa l-bayḍāʔ*] (Qarout, 2018).

known as *bäyrūte*[36]*)* and the new white variety. In her opinion, the original inhabitants of Beirut became educated and then realized that their «heavy» dialect was not appropriate anymore for their social status, which also kept them from teaching this variety to their kids, hence leading to the disappearance of the old vernacular dialect of Beirut.[37] In a blunt display of linguistic attitudes, the author qualifies the suspected disappearance of old *bäyrūte* as «a good thing», and as a justified and natural development given that «language has a communicative purpose» (Qarout, 2018).

The stigmatization of regional dialects (such as old *bäyrūte*) in the growing urban context of the capital was, in fact, one of the reported reasons that led young speakers living in Beirut to use WA: «when he would speak his dialect (a kid from the mountain who moved to Beirut), we would make fun of him (…) then the next generation started speaking a white dialect, let's call it like this, which is neither popular beiruti nor his village's dialect» (Germanos, 2009, p. 105).[38] Interestingly, the aforementioned two sources hint at the fact that WA as an urban dialectal koine is perceived to have become a nativized variety for some of the speakers from recent generations living in Beirut.[39] The native character of WA in this case seems to be unique to the definition of WA as an urban dialectal koine, given that references to WA aligning with definitions one and three (WA as an Educated Spoken Arabic and WA as a set of accommodative strategies for pan-Arab communication) always

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36. Beirut's population rose from fewer than about ten thousand at the beginning of the nineteenth century to 426,861 by the end of the twentieth century […] One of the consequences of this relatively recent expansion is the most frequently cited distinction in Beiruti social representations between native residents and those considered non-native, even though they may have been born in Beirut and their families may have been living there for several generations (cf. for example Tarazi-Fawaz, 1983, p. 1). This distinction is reflected in the linguistic psyche: the term *bäyrūte* (Beiruti) refers specifically to the dialect of the native residents of the city (Germanos, 2011, p. 45).

37. Arabic original:

أيضاً برأيي أن أهل بيروت تعلموا، لأن الجامعات تأسست فيها قبل المناطق الأخرى، بسبب المركزية، ولم يعد ملائماً لطبقتهم الاجتماعية استعمال اللهجة القديمة، الثقيلة بكل الأحوال. هم لم يستعملوها خلال الحديث مع أولادهم، فلم يورثوهم ياها ومن الطبيعي أن تزول. (Qarout, 2018).

[*ʔayḍan bi-raʔy-ī ʔanna ʔahla bayrūt taʕallamū, liʔanna l-ğāmiʕāti taʔassasat fī-hā qabla l-manāṭiqi l-ʔuxrā, bi-sababi l-markaziyyati, wa-lam yaʕud mulāʔiman li-tabaqati-him al-ʔiğtimāʕiyyati istiʕmālu l-lahğati l-qadīmati, l-ṯaqīlati bi-kulli l-ʔaḥwāl. hum lam yastaʕmilū-hā xilāl l-ḥadīṯi maʕa ʔawlādi-him, fa-lam yūriṯū-hum yā-hā wa-mina l-ṭabīʕī ʔan tazūl*] (Qarout, 2018). Contrary to the perception of the author, the original dialect of Beirut has not completely disappeared but rather is still spoken by some groups, although its use has been increasingly restricted to familiar and close-circle interactions (Germanos, 2009).

38. French original: «lorsqu'il parlait avec son dialecte, [l'enfant originaire de la montagne qui s'installait à Beyrouth], on se moquait de lui (…) alors la génération suivante a commencé à parler un dialecte blanc, appelons-le comme ça, qui n'est ni le beyrouthin populaire, ni le dialecte de son village.» (Germanos, 2009, p. 105).

39. This has been also confirmed by ten years of participant observation in Beirut and several qualitative interviews for a variety of sociolinguistic studies (Iriarte Díez, 2021)

refer to WA as an acquired, even «invented» variety that is decidedly nobody's mother tongue.

The aforementioned data, therefore, indicates that WA is not perceived to be *any* variety of old traditional cities – given that some old traditional varieties (e.g. old Beiruti or Tripoli in Lebanon; old Tetouan or old Fez in new urban centers of Morocco[40]) are, in fact, as stigmatized as other rural or regional dialects, and are therefore regarded as «too marked» to be labeled as or included in WA. Instead, WA seems to be associated and/or highly built upon features from new/contemporary urban varieties resulting from «recent» urbanization processes.

A relatively contemporary notion that played an essential role in the development and the perception of Arabic dialects is the concept of nation-state. As feelings of nationalism grew across the Arab, world the need to agree (even if purposelessly) on a «national dialect» became a sociolinguistic reality in many places of the Arabic speaking world. In fact, various were the sociolinguistic studies that noticed, back in the late 1980s, that many of the urban vernaculars of the capital cities in the Arab world were «de facto functioning as prestigious non-official national standards» (Miller & Falchetta, 2021, p. 726). Features from these varieties were considered «standard urban features», which granted them a high degree of overt prestige. These are precisely the kind of prestigious and dialectal standard features that our data on this definition of WA strongly correlates with.

Along these lines, WA often appears characterized in our sources as a national koine/unofficial national spoken standard which does not reflect regional particularities and therefore serves as a leveled variety between urban-rural speakers or rural-rural speakers from different areas. One of the simplest yet rather telling indicators of the WA-national spoken standard association are the numerous references to the diverse «nationalities» of WA. We find specific mentions to Lebanese WA «*hayy l-lahža l-bayḍa l-ləbnēniyye*» (El Rass, in Azouri & Jaber, 2021, min. 92:26), to Saudi WA «*al-lahǧa al-saʕūdiyya al-bayḍāʔ*» (Al-Barrak, 2018), even to «White Algerian terms», described as «common Algerian dialect words that are used by all Algerians» (Bougrine *et al.*, 2017, p. 143). Along the same lines, in Jordan, Alfaisal and Aljanada consider WA to be «the fifth dialect of the country» (Alfaisal & Aljanada, 2019, pp. 109-110).

The idea of a national variety is intimately connected to the characteristics of a contemporary dialectal koine, namely to its aforementioned «urban» and

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40. See Germanos (2009) on Lebanon. See Hachimi (2007) and Vicente (2021) on Morocco.

«neutral» nature, given that using such a variety would allow any citizen in a specific country to communicate without revealing his/her geographical origins or social and religious background. We cannot but assume that this was, in a historical period marked by massive processes of migration and urbanization, a rather useful tool for some native speakers of less prestigious varieties or from stigmatized communities who moved their lives to the city. Al-Rojaie (2020, pp. 40-42) points out this idea in his study about the emergence of a national koine in Saudi Arabia, which, according to his data, is associated with the Riyadh dialect on the basis of its clarity, simplicity and lack of marked features. So does El-Hage (2017, p. 30) in Lebanon, who defines WA as a neutral non-regional variety used in Great Beirut by newly arrived non-Beirutis.[41]

Deep feelings of pride for the nation are often also transferred to the variety that represents that nation in the speakers' perception. In our data, this correlates with mentions of WA in examples such as the following, illustrated in the words of Al-Rojaie (2020, p. 45): «By speaking the white dialect you get a sense of national feeling, whether inside or outside Saudi Arabia. It truly represents our nation in general». Contrarily, situations of revolt where citizens consider their nation a failed state, naturally render not such positive attitudes towards a national WA. This was the case in Lebanon, where, according to Iriarte Díez (2021), during the October Revolution in 2019, speakers vindicated the role of the revolution in celebrating the cultural production of local varieties and against the dialect leveling behind the formation of Lebanese WA: «Our revolution is [also] for songs in the regional dialects. Down with the insipid white variety!» (Iriarte Díez, 2021, p. 25).[42]

In summary, this section illustrated how some of the mentions of WA in our data fit the main aspects that characterize Arabic contemporary dialectal koines as described in the literature, i.e., being the result of a leveling process; having an urban character; and, in some cases, being used as national spoken standards. Nevertheless, and before moving on, it is important to clarify that the perception

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41. French original : « Le parler arabe libanais blanc est en fait le parler utilisé dans le Grand Beyrouth par les non-Beyrouthins, c'est-à-dire par les gens venus des différentes régions du Liban pour s'installer à Beyrouth et qui ont essayé d'adapter leur parler à celui des Beyrouthins pour qu'ils puissent être compris par ceux-ci » (El-Hage, 2017, p. 30).

42. In this article, the author already pointed at the complex and overlapping perception of WA among Lebanese speakers: «Although 'white variety' or 'ǝl-lahʒe l-bayḍa' commonly refers to the koineized urban variety that I call 'Beirut koine' when I inquired the author of this post about his understanding of the meaning of 'white variety', he provided me with two different definitions that would be equivalent to 'Modern Standard Arabic' and the 'Beirut koine' respectively» (Iriarte Díez, 2021, p. 24).

of WA as an urban dialectal koine in our data remains flexible and therefore some-
times overlaps and coexists with our other two working definitions.

3.3. *White Arabic as a set of dialectal accommodation practices used in pan-Arab communication*

In our data, White Arabic also refers to a set of dialectal accommodation strategies
that aims at facilitating mutual understanding among speakers of different Arabic
varieties across the Arab world.

Communication accommodation, the research object of Communication Accom-
modation Theory (CAT), is defined as the «adjustments individuals make to create,
maintain, or decrease social distance in interaction [...] It explores the different ways in
which we accommodate our communication, our motivations for doing so, and the
consequences» (Giles & Ogay, 2007, p. 16). Communication in globalized superdiverse
settings resulting in complex and fluid communicative networks raised the need for
strategies that enable mutual understanding between speakers coming from different
parts of the Arab world. Research conducted in the framework of CAT distinguishes
between different so-called accommodation strategies, one of these being «conver-
gence» – i.e., the effort to adjust to your interlocutor (Giles & Ogay, 2007, p. 294-5). As
the data shows, the main accommodation strategy behind the use of WA in this third
definition is convergence between speakers from Arabic varieties that are perceived
by them as unintelligible.

In the following extract taken from an online article, the author theorizes about
the creation of WA and the communicative motivations behind it, highlighting its
shared character (Abdel Nasser, 2017; our translation): «It [WA] became necessary due
to the space opened by new communication and social media, for a lot of people found
it difficult to understand some of the local dialects of the Arab world, which made
communication hard. This is why White Arabic was invented, and it was named like
this because it does not carry any specific identity, for it is a dialect that belongs to all»[43].

43.

فأصبحت الحاجة أليها بسبب الانفتاح الكبير توفره وسائل الاتصال الجديدة، فالكثير من الناس وجدوا بعض الصعوبة في اللهجات
المحلية لبعض الدول العربية فأصبح التواصل صعب، فلذلك اخترعوا " اللهجة البيضاء" وقد سميت بهذا الاسم لأنها لا تَحمل أي
هوية معينة فهي لهجة ملك الجميع.

fa-ʔaṣbaḥat al-ḥāǧa ʔilayhā bi-sababi l-infitāḥi l-kabīri tuwaffiruhu wasāʔilu l-ittiṣāli l-ǧa-
dīda , fa-l-kaṯīr mina n-nās waǧadū baʕḍa l-ṣuʕūbati fī l-lahǧāti l-maḥalliyyati li-baʕḍi l-duwali
l-ʕarabiyyati fa-ʔaṣbaḥa l-tawāṣul ṣaʕb, fa-li-ḏālika xtarʕū „al-lahǧa l-baydāʔ" wa qad sammiyat
bi-hāḏa l-ism li-ʔannahā lā taḥmilu ʔayy hawiyya muʕayyana fa-hiyya lahǧa mulk al-ǧamīʕ.

The author specifically mentions the «creation» of WA in the context of superdiverse communication through social media, pointing at the latter as the main trigger for the emergence of new supra-national, pan-Arab communication networks. Communication within these new broader networks prompted new situations of dialect contact that were previously unusual. The emergence of WA in the context of media is also explicit in an article published in *Al-Bayan* newspaper[44], where the author specifically describes WA as a solution to presenters not being widely understood by the audience in their local dialects (Abdel Hamid, 2015).

Many are the mentions of WA in our data that highlight the accommodative function of WA within supra-national settings. For instance, the Wikipedia article on WA (Wikipedia لهجة بيضاء [*lahǧa bayḍāʔ*]) states that it is a mixture between the local dialects of the involved speakers, youth expressions and English words, that, therefore cannot be ascribed to a specific country.[45] The article also provides an example of a pan-Arab communicative setting in which WA would be used: «If you invite three people from Egypt, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, they will have to use common words and terms in order to understand each other».[46]

44.　Arabic original: .
ويواجه الطلبة اشكالية الفهم من المعلمين الذين يتحدثون العامية، وكذلك المشاهدون لا يفهمون كلمات عامية ينطقها مذيعون من أقطار عربية مختلفة.
[*wa-yuwāǧihu l-ṭalabatu iškāliyyata l-fahmi mina l-muʕallimīn allaḏīna yataḥaddaṯūna l-ʕāmmiyya, wa-kaḏālika l-mušāhidūna lā yafhamūna kalimātin ʕāmmiyyatin yanṭiqu-hā muḏīʕūna min ʔaqṭārin ʕarabiyyatin muxtalifa*].

45.　Arabic original:
[*al-lahǧatu al-bayḍāʔu ʔaw l-luġatu l-bayḍāʔu hiyya ṭarīqatun fī l-kalāmi takūn fī-hā l-luġatu*
اللهجة البيضاء أو اللغة البيضاء هي طريقة في الكلام تكون فيها اللغة الأم هي الأساس، كأن تكون العربية ممزوجة بطريقة محلية في الكلام، وغالبا ما تكون عبارة عن خليط من لهجات مختلفة مع وجود كلمات أجنبية وعبارات يستحدثها الشباب؛ لأن الحاجة إليها أصبحت ماسة عند الناطقين بها، بسبب عوامل التفاعل والانفتاح والتواصل العريض: فهي مزيج بين اللغة العربية الفصحى وبين اللهجة المحلية، ولا يمكن أن تصنفها تحت بلد معين وإنما هي خليط وهي واضحة إلى حد ما بحيث يسهل على مختلف الجنسيات العربية فهمه والتحدث بها.

l-ʔummi hiyya l-ʔasās, ka-ʔanna takūn l-ʕarabiyyatu mamzūǧatan bi-ṭarīqatin maḥaliyyatin fī l-kalāmi, wa-ġāliban mā takūn ʕibāratan ʕan xalīṭin min lahǧātin muxtalifatin maʕa wuǧūdin kalimātin ʔaǧnabiyyatin wa-ʕibārātin yastaḥdiṯu-hā l-šabāb; liʔanna l-ḥāǧata ʔilay-hā ʔaṣbaḥat māssatan ʕinda l-nāṭiqīn bi-hā, bi-sababi ʕawāmili l-tafāʕuli wa-l-infitāḥi wa-l-tawāṣuli l-ʕarīḍ: fa-hiyya mazīǧun bayna l-luġati l-ʕarabiyyati l-fuṣḥā wa-bayna l-lahǧati l-maḥliyyati, wa-lā yumkinu ʔan tuṣannifa-hā taḥta baladin muʕayyanin wa-ʔinna-mā hiyya xalīṭun wa-hiyya wāḍiḥa ʔilā ḥaddin mā bi-ḥayṯu yashulu ʕalā muxtalifi l-ǧinsiyyāti l-ʕarabiyyati fahmu-hā wa-t-taḥadduṯ bi-hā].

46.　Arabic original:
وإذا قدمت الدعوة لثلاثة أشخاص , من جمهورية مصر العربية ومن المملكة العربية السعودية ومن تونس , سيكون عليهم التحدث بكلمات ومصطلحات مشتركة بفهم بعضهم البعض.
[*wa-ʔiḏā qaddamta l-daʕwata li-ṯalāṯati ʔašxāṣ, min ǧumhūriyyati miṣra l-ʕarabiyyati wa-mina l-mamlakati l-ʕarabiyyati l-saʕūdiyyati wa-min tūnis, sa-yakūn ʕalay-him at-taḥadduṯ bi-ka-limātin wa-muṣṭalaḥātin muštarakatin bi-fahmi baʕaḍi-him l-baʕḍ*].

In this context, worthy of mention is the situation of WA in the UAE (O'Neill, 2017; Hopkyns *et al.*, 2021; Argüelles, 2018; Abdel Hamid, 2015). As a growing economic hub, the UAE has experienced enormous migration influxes in the recent decades from different Arab countries as well as from multiple non-Arabic speaking countries. The coexistence of immigrants from all over the Arab world has made dialect contact in the UAE a daily reality. Within this socially and linguistically superdiverse context, WA is often described as a form of Arabic resulting from the mix of different dialects, SA and English (Hopkyns *et al.*, 2021, pp. 178-179). This also applies to educational contexts there, often international, where WA is reported to be used both (1) in lectures – in order to overcome the students' difficulties to understand the professors' native dialects (Abdel Hamid, 2015) – [47] and (2) in everyday communication among students of different Arabic nationalities (Argüelles, 2018).[48]

In his article on multilingual diversity in Dubai, O'Neill (2017) sheds light on the influence of linguistic superdiverse settings on individual speakers through the experience of Shaikha, an individual born and raised in the UAE with Emirati-Moroccan origins. Shaikha identifies WA as one of the varieties of Arabic she speaks, and describes it as a form of Arabic that includes «all accents and dialects» (O'Neill, 2017, pp. 225-226). Interestingly, although Shaikha claims to have acquired WA mainly in her working environments – where new dialect contact situations often took place – her use of WA is not restricted to professional settings only, but rather spreads also onto more intimate communication settings involving family and friends (O'Neill, 2017, p. 231).

Although as we previously mentioned, this definition of WA generally relates to supra-national contexts, our data also points at two specific national contexts where the term WA also aligns with the present definition: Jordan and Yemen. WA is listed by Alfaisal & Aljanada (2019) as one of the dialects of Jordan, which is used when speakers of «considerably different» varieties spoken in Jordan communicate with each other (Alfaisal & Aljanada, 2019, p. 110). The same is claimed about Yemen, where Dufour (2008) observed that WA is used when mutual understanding is endangered by the perceived linguistic distance between local Yemeni dialects (Dufour, 2008, p. 141). He also explicitly states that WA in Yemen is neither a

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47.   Arabic original: «ويواجه الطلبة اشكالية الفهم من المعلمين الذين يتحدثون العامية،». [*wa-yuwāǧih al-ṭalaba iškāliyyata l-fahmi mina l-muʕallimīna allaḏīna yataḥaddaṯūna l-ʕāmiyya*].
48.   Here, Prof. Argüelles specifically refers to the students of his university, the American University of Dubai.

fixed variety, nor the variety of the city, and that it is not the mother tongue to any speaker (Dufour, 2008, p. 141).

The fact that WA in Yemen and Jordan is reported to be used to enable communication among speakers from within the national borders of the respective countries may, at first sight, contradict the previous supra-national pan-Arabic understanding of WA described in this section. However, if we consider that Yemen's and Jordan's linguistic landscapes encompass a myriad of distinct varieties that are often perceived by their speakers as mutually unintelligible, then this data would confirm that, regardless of national borders, WA is understood to be used more generally in a variety of contexts – both national and supra-national – that present increasing communication among speakers who deem their varieties as unintelligible to their interlocutors.

The long prevailing assumption that speakers of different Arabic varieties use only SA to enable communication has already been refuted by several studies focusing on accommodation (e.g., S'hiri, 2002; Miller, 2005; Chakrani, 2015, etc.). Due to globalization, the resulting increased mobility and the spread of social media, speakers are currently exposed to a wide range of Arabic varieties. In this context, as our data confirms, Arabic speakers tend to use and mix different varieties that are familiar to them and that they consider widely intelligible in superdiverse communication settings.

It is worth noticing that speakers' linguistic choices in these superdiverse settings highly depend on prevailing language ideologies. Previous research has shown (Hachimi, 2013, p. 278; S'hiri, 2002; Schulthies, 2015, among others) that the accommodative burden in communicative settings between Maghrebi and *Mashreqi*[49] speakers is usually carried by Maghrebi speakers, for the vernaculars of the latter are often regarded as «not pure Arabic» and therefore as unintelligible (Hachimi, 2013, p. 290). In this context, Chakrani (2015, p. 10) observes that the «social capital» that is assigned to certain varieties may influence the speakers' accommodative behavior. In his study on the influence of attitudes on interdialectal communication in a diaspora setting in the US, he shows that the use of features of Egyptian and Levantine dialects is favored in accommodative processes because of the higher social capital of these two varieties – which, in comparison to the

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49. *Mashreqi* means «from the Middle East area» and it is the counterpart of Maghrebi for «North African».

recently arrived Sudanese and Maghrebi communities, are better established in the US (Chakrani, 2015, p. 7).

The influence of language ideologies and attitudes on speaking behaviors that favor the use of Levantine and Egyptian varieties for accommodative purposes is also confirmed in our data on WA. A participant in O'Neill's study (2017, p. 226), for example, mentions that she uses reflexes of the verb *yrūḥ* 'to go' when she speaks with Lebanese speakers – which have been attested to be widely used in Levantine dialects (Behnstedt & Woidich, 2014, map 312a, p.14 – Bewegungsverben) – rather than those of *ysīr* – which she perceives as the usual form in UAE Arabic (O'Neill, 2017, p. 226). When inquired about her motivations, the participant appealed to the broadly shared nature of *yrūḥ* throughout the Arabic-speaking world.

In another relevant study, that investigates accommodation between speakers from Baghdad and Tunis (Laaber, 2021), a 26-year-old Tunisian speaker stated he used WA mainly to facilitate communication with speakers from Baghdad. He defined WA as a variety that was «invented» by Maghrebi speakers for communication with speakers of the Mashreq region and reported that the main strategies involved in the use of WA are (1) the avoidance of typically Tunisian features and (2) the mixing between Egyptian Arabic and Syrian Arabic – as these varieties are widely used in movies, series and social media – and some lexical elements of SA.

In sum, this section showed that WA is also described as a set of accommodation practices often used among Arabic speakers at the supranational level. This phenomenon follows the emergence of increasing superdiverse contexts in which speakers, above all, pursue intelligibility with a wide variety of Arabic speakers. The speakers' choices on the linguistic resources used in this accommodative process rely heavily on prevailing language attitudes and ideologies. Our data shows that the main accommodative practice involved in WA consists of replacing features that are regarded as unintelligible by a mix of features from different dialectal varieties (e.g., Levantine, Egyptian)[50] that are perceived to be widely understood due to prevailing ideologies, along with the occasional adoption of SA and English lexical elements.

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50.   These varieties do not necessarily need to be the native varieties of either of the interlocutors involved in the communicative act.

4. SUMMARY

The analysis of the data provided in this study suggests that White Arabic is a new metalinguistic label that is increasingly used across different countries of the Arab world. Notwithstanding the fact that speakers' perceptions on WA may be oftentimes overlapping and even linguistically contradictory, our data indicates that they may be summarized along three notions: (1) WA as Educated Spoken Arabic, (2) WA as an urban dialectal koine and (3) WA as a set of dialectal accommodation practices used in pan-Arab communication. The diversity found in our results suggests that there is not a fixed consensual definition of WA that all speakers agree with, but rather, that the speakers' perceptual definition of WA is dynamic and context-dependent.

The results of this study also suggest that the relatively recent and increasing spread of the label WA across the Arab world may be linked to its conceptual novelty. We can conclude that, when compared to previous or contemporary labels for analogous concepts, WA stands out for three important characteristics:

(1) WA seems to have emerged from the speakers themselves. Labels such as 'the third language' (*al-luġa al-ṯāliṯa*), 'the middle language' (*al-luġa al-wusṭā*) or Middle Arabic, were created by linguists, writers and experts in Arabic language to designate what they considered interesting linguistic phenomena, while WA, where present, has emerged from speakers themselves. To this point, we only found two written academic sources aiming to describe WA,[51] while the majority of references to WA are rather attestations of the speakers' attempts to elucidate the meaning that the label already carries. This suggests that speakers find WA a useful label to reflect their perceived linguistic reality and their current communicative and ideological needs.

(2) WA seems to have a predominantly (almost exclusively) spoken character. It refers predominantly to spoken varieties and/or communication strategies, contrary to aforementioned previous labels, that emerged mainly through the

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51.   To the best of our knowledge there is only a textbook entitled اللهجة واضحة عربية بلغة التحدث إلى طريقك البيضاء اللهجة [*al-lahǧa l-bayḍā ?. ṭarīqu-ka/ki ?ilā l-taḥadduṯ bi-luġatin ʕarabiyyatin wāḍiḥatin*] 'The White dialect. Your way towards speaking in a clear Arabic language' (Al-Ajami, 2019), whose main aim is to teach Spoken Arabic without any «social» color, and a linguistic study describing the phonetic and phonological features of Lebanese WA, entitled *Etude phonétique-phonologique de parler árabe libanais blanc* 'A phonetic and phonological study of Lebanese White Arabic' (Naboulsi, 2013). The recent publication of these works, together with our data on speakers' perceptions confirm our hypothesis that this label emerged from speakers.

creation and/or the analysis of written texts. In this sense, we believe the spread of WA may have been fueled in the last decade by the emergence of technological advancements that have enabled and facilitated transnational oral communication (e.g., online conference platforms, video calls, voice messages, etc.)

(3) WA is not necessarily «a mix of *fuṣḥā* and *ʕāmmiyya*» and therefore it is not restricted to semi-formal or formal interaction. Although, as the first definition indicates, WA may echo the notion of Educated Spoken Arabic, the other two definitions of WA found in our data suggest that WA, unlike the aforementioned previous labels, is not exclusively an intermediary stage between *fuṣḥā* and *ʕāmmiyya*. Instead, this label also points at different codes, practices or varieties that may be practically «devoid» of MSA elements, since they do not necessarily result from the mix of a regional dialect and MSA, but rather from the mix of different regional dialects. These results suggest that the creation of new metalinguistic labels for Arabic varieties echoes the claim that variation and changes in spoken Arabic involve the interplay between the local dialects and the emerging regional standards independently of Classical Arabic or Modern Standard Arabic (Miller & Falchetta, 2021, p. 724).

5. DISCUSSION: ARE NEW LABELS INDICATIVE OF A NEED FOR CHANGE IN PARADIGM?

Our study confirmed that the existence of White Arabic remains a self-evident, solid reality for some Arabic speakers. The emergent use of the label WA is indicative of a series of current linguistic behaviors, processes, and phenomena that result from the complexity of today's Arab world. However, the relatively «new» metalinguistic label of WA presents a multifaceted, dynamic, and versatile nature that simply cannot be explained within diglossic frameworks, at least not in all its complexity.

Although this traditional diglossic framework has, as we have mentioned, been challenged by several studies changing the binary, dichotomous model to the understanding of diglossia as a continuum – and while Arabic linguistics has witnessed the emergence of many sociolinguistic works analyzing Arabic varieties in other ways, from variationist, interactional and linguistic anthropologist perspectives –, the ideology of a diglossic framework stays pervasive both in non-specialists' views and in the field of Arabic studies. This is evident, for instance, from teaching practices both inside and outside Arabic-speaking countries, where

fuṣḥā and the spoken vernaculars are, very often, still taught as perfectly distinct varieties, each having their own limited set of grammar rules and vocabulary.

In our view, a framework that does not fit the speakers' reality is simply bound to be updated and, ultimately, changed. Considering that many of the notions structuring theoretical frameworks of Arabic linguistics find their origins in the middle of the 20th century, we believe a joint attempt to continue a critical reflection upon some of the already established sociolinguistic notions and/or variables is necessary. In the following paragraphs, we discuss what could be possible leads on our path to a change of paradigm.

EDUCATION

In the (traditional) diglossic framework, the notion of education was associated with the vast or partial knowledge of speakers of SA. This was evident from the fact that the abovementioned labels that situate themselves somewhere on the SA-vernacular continuum and refer to educated speakers, such as «ʕāmmiyyat al-mutaqqafīn» or «Educated Spoken Arabic» always implied a partial use and knowledge of SA. The fact that this variety (SA) is acquired through education and is never a mother tongue reinforces the symbolic linkage of SA with education. Previous research suggests that the educational instruction of *fuṣḥā* to Arabs is actually not increasing the speaker's competency as much as it is reinforcing its ideological status (Brustad, 2017). The «clash of overt and covert norms and expectations» that students face when learning SA (Parkinson, 1993, p. 72), along with the limited communicative contexts covered by SA are rendering the use of this variety less popular among the young generations.

Both SA's loss in popularity among the younger generations and the growing importance and systematic instruction of foreign languages have resulted in knowledge of SA not being anymore a *sine qua non* requirement to consider a speaker as «educated». In this way, SA gradually stopped being the main criterion upon which a speaker's level of education can be measured. Instead, many young Arabs seem to now consider the language of the media as «educated» and tend to reproduce it in formal communicative contexts –irrespective of the myriad of linguistic varieties that may be considered to be «Media Arabic» as well as of how «linguistically close» they may actually be to SA. This fact is especially relevant

since the Arabic used in the media seems to be turning more and more into regional and spoken standards.[52]

In the current superdiverse and hyperconnected Arab world, where institutions are not the exclusive holders of information, the level of education stopped being strictly measurable by number (or level) of degrees. As has been shown in Al-Wer (2002), the notion of education as a variable for analysis in sociolinguistics needs to move away from the idea that higher education equals more use of SA, since it is a *proxy* variable pointing out other significant social patterns: «it is not level of education *per se* which correlates with linguistic usage, rather that level of education is actually an indicator of the nature and extent of the speakers' social contacts» (Al-Wer, 2002, p. 42).

Currently, as Miller & Falchetta (2021) pointed out, educated speakers of Arabic tend to experience greater mobility and have larger networks, which results in these speakers' increased «exposure to different social values and the need to adopt common features shared by a wider number of people and not indexed with localness» (Miller & Falchetta, 2021, p. 726), this is, the type of features involved in the emergence of urban koines and other accommodative practices (see sections 3.2 and 3.3). For this reason, education represents a key concept for the understanding of WA, and, in general, for the study of any form of accom-modation among speakers of Arabic, regardless of its label. Given that «educated speakers appear to be leading the changes, most often in the direction of urban and koineized regional standards» (Al-Wer, 1997, p. 259), now more than ever, accurately understanding, defining and applying education as a sociolinguistic variable is of paramount importance to the field.

For all these reasons, we believe the notion of education as a variable for analysis in sociolinguistics needs to be considered in other terms than number of degrees or proficiency in SA. This means that, on the one hand, we should broaden the notion of education to incorporate/integrate the notions of «exposure» and «speaker's networks» (next section), and on the other hand, complement it with additional (yet independent) variables that study relevant yet often neglected factors such as «speaker's (meta)linguistic awareness».

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52. This could be a reason for our first and second definitions of WA to overlap in speaker's perceptions (see section 3.1. and 3.2. of this article) – both definitions tend to the notion of "Standard» (see subsection «Standardization» of this discussion).

Speech communities have generally been described as rather fixed and stable groups of speakers, and often associated to a specific geographic location, whose ascribed unity relies on one or a few shared linguistic features. In today's Arab world, marked by speakers' increasing mobility and their resulting broadened exposure to different linguistic varieties, the notion of «speech community» bears the danger of (1) neglecting the plurality of resources that are fluidly used to enable communication in various superdiverse communicative settings and (2) being limited to communities cohabitating in a specific territory.

As our results show, WA cannot hardly be ascribed to be spoken by a specific community or group of speakers confined within a specific territory[53] or across an ethnic or religious community. Nevertheless, we believe that the use and emergence of WA could be explained through more flexible notions, such as that of «speakers' networks» (Milroy, 1987). Milroy's network is understood as an «aggregate of relationships contracted with others, a boundless web of ties which reaches out through social geographical space linking many individuals, sometimes remotely» (Milroy & Gordan, 2003, p. 117).

In fact, the diverse and overlapping understandings of WA could be partially analyzed through this notion. In definition 2 (WA as an urban dialectal koine) the speakers' network is geographically tied to a specific location – i.e. cities like Beirut and Riyadh – which leads to the systematic repetition of certain communicative settings that results in a fixation of speaking behaviors. In this case, the high density of the network is both relevant and explanatory of the leveling and koineization processes that take place as these varieties become more stable. Alternatively, definition 3 (WA as a set of accommodation practices for pan-Arab communication) could be the result of a prominently fluid network. Here, in a context where WA is used to describe linguistic behavior in dynamic superdiverse settings that undergo constant change, speakers' networks would be more numerous and dynamic, but probably have a lower constant density and a higher degree of instability.

Aside from WA, we believe that applying the notion of speakers' networks systematically could be beneficial to understand currently emerging shifts in

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53. The only exception to this would be WA when understood as an urban dialectal koine (see section 3.2.)

ideologies and/or linguistic behavior resulting from fluid groups (both at the national and transnational levels) united by shared feelings of social and political unrest.

STANDARDIZATION

Standardization traditionally referred to the institutionalization of a written standard undertaken by language planners, normally representing institutions that are holders of economic, political, religious, intellectual or social authority (Haugen, 1966, p. 933). The result of this standardization process made SA the official written standard along the Arab world. Nevertheless, the institutions that granted the standard with its status failed to address the changing reality of the Arabic language, creating a growing gap between prescriptive norms and linguistic practices.[54] This conflict confirms the idea that standard is «an idea in the mind rather than a reality – a set of abstract norms to which actual use may conform to a greater or lesser extent» (Milroy & Milroy, 2012, p. 19) and that standardization is an ideological process that often results from political, economic and social changes.

The strongly conflicting ideologies associated respectively with SA and spoken varieties of Arabic have left many speakers feeling they lack mastery of their own language. Foreign languages appeared here as attractive alternatives, not only because they allow speakers to be connected to broader networks, but also because they cover a wider range of registers, and hence, have also earned a role in the emergence of current spoken standards.

Rather than fixed and permanent, standardization processes are complex and continuous. In fact, several standardization processes may take place simultaneously within one language. In the Arabic-speaking world, for instance, despite SA being established as the «common official written standard», Arabic language is witnessing many different processes of standardization/destandardization, especially in the spoken realm. As Miller and Falchetta rightly pointed out, the term standardization may be now applied to any process of «unofficial focusing, koineization and conventionalization resulting from 'spontaneous' linguistic choices that operate at the spoken (eventually also at the written) level» (Miller & Falchetta, 2021, p. 716).

In this line, Milroy and Milroy remind us that, beyond institutional prescriptive norms, the main and ultimate function of a standard is communicative efficiency, this is, «that everyone should use and understand the language in the

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54.   A good example is that of institutions of higher education, which generally did not succeed in maintaining SA as a language of instruction and academic production along the Arab world.

same way with a minimum of misunderstanding and the maximum of efficiency» (Milroy & Milroy, 2012, p. 19), and that the status of a standard is mainly subject on speakers' acceptance of a certain variety as such. In this light, the diversity of definitions of WA could be explained via its perception by speakers as a new emerging standard. Not only is WA unanimously perceived to fulfill the purpose of «facilitating communication», but also, as we could see throughout the data, it often awakens the type of attitudes – both positive and negative – usually held towards standard varieties (i.e. it is professional, it belongs to all speakers, it minimizes and/or erases local differences, etc.).

We hereby insist on the necessity to acknowledge that standardization is a complex process that happens simultaneously in a vertical and a horizontal manner (Miller & Falchetta, 2021), for such an understanding of standardization effectively sheds light on the emergence of new standards that, like speakers' networks, may go beyond geographical and social borders.

The question, however, remains: how could we possibly fit these new emerging standards in the traditional diglossic *fuṣḥā* and *ʕāmmiyya* dichotomy?

SHIFTING THE LINGUISTIC MODEL: FROM LANGUAGE-BASED TO SPEAKER-BASED

Before suggesting possible alternatives, it is necessary to establish that the current Arabic linguistic model – heavily influenced by a traditional understanding of diglossia – is a language-based model, meaning it establishes two theoretically perfectly distinguishable linguistic entities – i.e., H and L; SA and spoken dialects – as opposite poles of a continuum. Moreover, this language-based model is reflective of ideological concepts rather than of linguistic behaviors, since it defines «ideal imaginary» monolithic varieties that exist as theoretical constructs, but not as lived realities.

Representation of the current language-based model (SA-spoken vernaculars; H-L variety)

In such a model, the choices of the speakers are significantly limited. The inadequacy of this dichotomy became manifest in the emergence of labels such as *al-luġa al-ṯāliṯa* and *al-luġa al-wusṭā*, which were used to cover various practices of Arabic between the poles of *fuṣḥā* and the spoken vernaculars (Mejdell, 2011). In the Fergusonian extension of the term, they represented primarily a compromise strategy for speech in semi-formal interactions. However, even when we acknowledge the existence

of a continuum with intermediary stages between these two poles, a variety-based continuum typology remains insufficient to account for speakers' complex linguistic choices as well as for the social, interactional and identitarian motivations behind them.

Alternatively, for more than 20 years, sociolinguists had already developed speaker-based models (e.g., Agha, 2006; Coupland, 2007; Garrett, 2010; Busch, 2015, 2021) which have already been used as frameworks for studies on accommodation and convergence in Arabic, e.g. Shi'iri's (2002). Regrettably, these models have not, in our opinion, received the attention they deserve within the field of Arabic sociolinguistics, probably due to the fact that the internal Arabic diversity is not perceived or treated as multilingual by most experts on the field.

In such a communicative speaker-based model, varieties are not regarded as monolithic rigid entities the speaker may reach or approach to – for they are neither references for normativity nor objectives –, but rather available sets of linguistic features and strategies encompassing sets of strategies that can be used partially, according to the speakers' wishes upon evaluation of the different factors relevant to a specific communicative situation (i.e. communicative priorities, communicative actors, communicative settings, etc.). In a communicative speaker-based model, speakers are conceived to be complex actors situated at the receiving ends of communication. Every speaker may belong to a variety of networks, and these different networks are brought together by the speaker themselves in their own set of repertoires, forming their social and linguistic identity. Acknowledging the superdiversity of networks and repertoires a speaker counts on, and how their use may adapt to specific communicative situations, provides us with a more flexible framework for the study of the emergent, context-dependent linguistic realities that speakers witness in today's Arab world.

The metalinguistic label of White Arabic cannot find its place in a rigid language-based model because its dynamic nature springs from speakers and their superdiversity. However, the seemingly contradictory and overlapping definitions on WA would not pose a problem when envisioned in a speaker-oriented framework. For instance, at the receiving ends of WA as Educated Spoken Arabic (definition 1), we could envision presenters, and a pan-Arab audience; at the receiving ends of WA as an urban dialectal koine (definition 2), we could for example envision speakers from different villages/ towns within the same country meeting in an urban context (e.g. a speaker from Tripoli and a speaker from Saida meeting in Beirut); and at the receiving end of WA as a set of accommodative practices in pan-Arab communication (definition 3) we could envision speakers of different regional dialects of the Arab world (e.g. Iraqi and Moroccan) who perceive their varieties as mutually unintelligible.

Representation of the three perceptual definitions of WA in a speaker-based model

The benefits of a speaker-based model are twofold. On the one hand, such a model would allow for the integration of speakers' linguistic ideologies – acknowledging their relevance to linguistic variation – as part of the sophisticated set of the speakers' linguistic resources. This supposes a significant contrast with the traditional diglossic model, where ideology is the basis of the theoretical construct and its categories (Brustad, 2017). On the other hand, a speaker-oriented model would more accurately account for the multi-levelled complexity of speakers' linguistic identities.

All of these theoretical considerations that we propose here would have profound repercussions at the methodological level. Although, unfortunately, such methodological concerns fall out of the scope of this study, we strongly believe that the adoption of a speaker-based framework for the analysis of linguistic data would, unavoidably, entail a prior more careful qualitative analysis of the speakers' social, economic and ideological profiles.

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