



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy paper offers a preliminary discussion of an ethnographic language policy project based in Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates (UAE). The project focused primarily on the language choices and experiences of the expatriate communities that make up the majority of the population of the city and considered the relationship between those choices and the larger policy goals targeted by the government. The paper draws on narrative data from participants and offers several points of entry for further research and debate, including: the degree to which expatriates are interested in learning Arabic or other languages; the economic and social incentive structures that may impact language decisions; and the connections between work and social life language networks and decisions. The paper argues that these issues are of fundamental importance for policymakers to investigate more closely if they are to move forward with large-scale Arabic language policy initiatives such as *Vision 2021* and *The Arabic Language Charter*, both effectively and ethically.

# Expatriate Experiences with Language Policy in the UAE: Challenges, Contradictions and Opportunities

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## Introduction

In recent years, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has significantly increased its language policy and planning initiatives. The country has become increasingly financially and politically invested in English-language education at all levels of the public education system, while at the same time also citing explicit targets for maintenance of Arabic and extension of its use to domains such as science, education, and research. However, most of this investment has primarily targeted the Emirati population. While such initiatives may be valuable, the Emirati population sits at just 10-15% of the country's total (National Bureau of Statistics, 2010) and as Abu Dhabi's *Economic Vision 2030* (2009, p. 74) document notes, the demographics of the country are "unlikely to change in the foreseeable future" due to the reliance on foreign labour.

This raises questions about how effective, and at the same time how ethical, language policy and planning efforts can be if it neglects the majority of the population. On the one hand, it must be acknowledged that changes in demographics that emerge from increased global mobility such as immigration, migration, and tourism (e.g. Blommaert, 2010; 2012; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015) affect language practices and linguistic hierarchies (see Piller, 2018 for commentary on Dubai). All residents of and visitors to the UAE, citizens or not, contribute to the linguistic diversity, conflicts, and policy environment of the country. As such, in the UAE – something of a "superlative" in terms of mobility and diversity (Pillar, 2018, p. 78) – language policymakers must surely reflect on such phenomena as part of their process. On the other hand, policymakers have an ethical responsibility to better understand how the policies they craft may impact the entirety of the population they affect, regardless of whether or not they are citizens. It was in part such lines of inquiry that inspired the project discussed in this policy paper, which sets out to better understand the lived language policy experiences of some of the expatriate communities of the city of Ras Al Khaimah. It is hoped that this work kickstarts some discussion around the ways that formal language policy initiatives and the language practices of the entirety of the population mutually affect each other.

This paper offers a preliminary discussion of some of the data from an ethnographic language policy project based in Ras Al Khaimah. The project focused primarily on the language choices and experiences of the expatriate communities that make up the majority of the population of the city and considered the relationship between those choices and the larger policy goals targeted by the government. The paper offers several points of entry for further research and debate, while concluding that there needs to

be more engagement with the challenges, contradictions, and opportunities faced by the expatriate population if any language policy goals are to be met.

## Language Policy

This paper adopts an approach to language policy that draws on Spolsky's (2004) and Shohamy's (2006) discussions. Spolsky (2004) asserts that we should consider three elements of language policy: *beliefs, practices and management*. In this framework, *language beliefs* correspond approximately to the language ideologies that underlie language policy. These could include the idea that a single language is important for national unity or that English education is necessary for a strong economy. For example, in the UAE, recent policy initiatives position Arabic as essential for national culture and identity, while English is seen as a driver of development and economic growth (see the following section). *Language practices* refer to language as it is actually used in society, whether or not those practices align with official policy. *Language management* includes actions aimed at managing or influencing language practices. For Spolsky, it is essential that language policy research examines practices as well as official policy documents or statements. He notes that the latter often have very limited connection to actual language practices, making language practices a better indicator of "true" language policy.

Shohamy (2006) expands this model, suggesting that Spolsky's treatment of the tension between beliefs and practices requires a more sophisticated discussion. She develops the concept of *de facto* language policies, which operate through *mechanisms* that exist somewhere between ideologies and practices. One of Shohamy's examples of a mechanism that generates *de facto* policy is standardized language tests. In the UAE for example, although the official policy of the country may express a commitment to Arabic in education and society, if English is the language that is primarily tested (for higher education and job opportunities), this produces *de facto* policy which promotes English as the most important language for individuals to devote their time and energy to, potentially undermining formal policy commitments to Arabic.

Furthermore, the selection of the specific sets of language structures, forms or accents being tested forces prospective citizens to study, practice, and align themselves with these particular linguistic standards. For example, if a test such as IELTS is widely used, it potentially encourages test-takers to linguistically align themselves with features of English considered "standard" by IELTS. Thus, the mechanism of the language test involves particular forms of language management that may not be expressed in official language policy but may actually be much more powerful in shaping language practices (Shohamy, 2006; 2007). The value of this framework is not necessarily in showing that particular formal policies or mechanisms are "good" or "bad", but instead is a way of

exploring the complex factors that shape language policy as it is experienced by individuals in society.

## Recent Official Language Policy in the UAE

Although the population of the UAE is highly multilingual, the two languages that tend to feature in policy documents and debates are Arabic and English. Constitutionally, the official language of the UAE is Arabic; however, the official stance on what this means in practical terms has always been somewhat vague. *Vision 2021* (Prime Minister's Office, 2011) and the *Arabic Language Charter* (Government of UAE, 2012) added some preliminary discussion around the governmental language policy goals for the near future of the UAE. *Vision 2021* called for Arabic to "re-emerge as a dynamic and vibrant language, expressed everywhere in speech and writing" (p. 7) and the *Charter* claims the overarching goal of "affirm[ing] the preeminent position of the Arabic Language in the United Arab Emirates" (p. 1). The *Charter* develops "a policy that supports, fosters, and nurtures Arabic as a language of culture and communication and encourages its constant enrichment to ensure it becomes a language of innovation in science and technology. . .strengthening its position and expansion" (p. 2).

The public education system has also undergone a recent language policy overhaul. Previously called the "New School Model", this Abu Dhabi Education Council initiative has now been expanded to include the other emirates and been renamed to the "Emirati School Model". It involves a "bi-literate bilingual approach" starting in KG1, with greater emphasis on English language education and English medium of instruction for subjects such as science and math (Al Nowais, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2017). One of the long-term linguistic goals of this program is to develop "communicator[s]: biliterate in Arabic and English" (Abu Dhabi Education Council, n.d.a). The plan has also been accompanied by an initiative that aims to ensure public school teachers meet a minimum language requirement. This is part of a larger plan to standardize teaching qualifications but it means that English language teachers and English medium of instruction teachers must provide evidence of English proficiency. The IELTS exam appears to have taken on the role of primary assessor in this regard, with teachers now needing between 5.5 and 6.5 on the test depending on their subject (Pennington, 2017; Government of UAE, 2017). This shift towards English is part of an overarching strategy that aims to prepare students for higher education in English in the UAE and abroad, and ultimately produce individuals who contribute to a "knowledge base to drive and sustain. . .social and economic growth" (Abu Dhabi Education Council, n.d.b).

Other institutions such as the Arabic Language Protection Association (ALPA) and the Federal National Council (FNC) also contribute to official language policy discourse. Based in Sharjah and funded by the Sharjah royal family,

the ALPA speaks out on issues such as children learning English and not speaking Arabic (Habboush, 2009), the need to defend the purity of the Arabic language, the need for stricter legislation around Arabic signage and more emphasis on use of Arabic by foreigners (Shaaban, 2013). The FNC has been largely critical of the increasing dominance of English in the education system and society as a whole, with members questioning the "imposition" of English, especially for science and math education in public schools (Issa, 2013). Recently, the FNC proposed a law to protect Arabic in the UAE, with one member also raising the possibility of mandating Arabic as the language of all workplaces, public or private across the country (Al Khuttabl, 2017; Salama, 2017).

An extended discussion of current official policy is beyond the scope of this paper, but further analyses can be found in Al-Issa and Dahan (2011), Barnawi (2018) and Cook (2016). The stated language policy goals of official documents could perhaps be summarized as "Arabic first; English second", with official goals of English-led globalization often coming into direct conflict with commitments to the "preeminent position" of Arabic in the country. However, it is also important to note that the language policy discussions in both official government policy and academic research have tended to focus narrowly on this English-Arabic dichotomy as it relates to the perceived needs (economic and educational more than social) and experiences of the Emirati population. This leaves two significant gaps: Emirati language experiences with expatriates that may not involve English or Arabic at all and more importantly, expatriate language experiences in general.

While some recent research has begun to investigate Emirati multilingual practices that go beyond the English-Arabic dichotomy (van den Hoven & Carroll, 2016), there is still a lack of research investigating the expatriate population's language practices, contributions to *de facto* language policy, and impact on official language policy initiatives. Without such investigations, it is impossible to meaningfully discuss language policy in the UAE and thus also impossible to achieve meaningful language policy goals for any segment of the population.

## Project Summary and Methodology

The project on which this policy paper is based, takes a step towards filling this gap. It is a doctoral research project that set out to investigate language policy from an ethnographic perspective by focusing on the lived language policy experiences of individuals in Ras Al Khaimah. It shifts the focus away from official discourse and towards Spolsky's (2004) *practice* dimension of language policy and in doing so, avoids presuppositions about Arabic or English as primary languages of day-to-day life for the majority of the country's population. This policy paper begins to explore some of the findings of this project, which illuminate the everyday language policy

experiences of the expatriate population, with specific attention to experiences with Arabic learning and day-to-day use. The project was initially based on the experiences of students, teachers and staff at a school but expanded to include participants from a number of communities in Ras Al Khaimah. This latter group of interviewees were recruited from places in Ras Al Khaimah frequented by the core group of participants, primarily public areas of the city or open private spaces such as malls and shops.

In both groups of participants, the interviews were semi-structured and designed to elicit narrative data, but they varied in their depth and focus. For the core group, I attempt to draw out both "life stories" and "small stories", while for the second group, my main focus was the small story experiences of their everyday life (Georgakopoulou, 2015). In both cases, however, biography was not the goal and I take an analytical approach that draws what Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber (1998) call *categorical-content narrative analysis*. This means that although participant backgrounds and life stories are relevant, they are not treated as the central goal of data collection. Instead, my narrative analysis focuses primarily on stories that highlight how the participants position themselves within policy frameworks or construct the language policy of their environments.

For the remainder of this paper, I will focus on three participants and the experiences that they shared in these interviews, using their stories to reflect on their implications for the broader language policy goals of the UAE. It is important to note that these examples and discussions should not be taken as generalizations about some kind of language policy "truth" about the UAE. Rather, the linguistic opportunities, challenges and contradictions that the participants face in their daily lives should serve as a starting point to better understand the role of the expatriate population in language policy in the country, the effect language policy has on these groups, and the importance of including the expatriate population in future formal policy initiatives.

## Bradley

Bradley is a multilingual, multinational resident of Ras Al Khaimah who works for a small technical support company in the city. When he took the job in the UAE, he told me that he expected that he would have to learn Arabic to communicate with clients and staff and also with most people he met in his daily life. Being somewhat naturally gifted with languages (before coming to the UAE he spoke English, Farsi, Pashto, Russian, and some French) he set out to learn Arabic as quickly as possible, making an effort to join some courses and find people to talk to in Arabic wherever possible. Although he found the courses a bit too slow and "boring", he said his primary obstacle was actually just finding people who could and would speak to him in Arabic:

When I was learning Arabic, I decided to talk with Arab people in the Arabic language. . . When I was in Dubai [in the beginning], you can't find Arab people or local people on the street much. . . And the people who speak Arabic, they are very interested to develop their English, when you talk to them in Arabic. . . They say, "Okay, you talk to me in English."

Bradley also felt some social distance between himself and the Arabic speakers he tried to interact with:

They were not friendly with me, I could not hit it off immediately with them. . . If you are not able to find someone who will talk to you, how are you going to learn that language? I felt like I was doing this one for nonsense. . . That's one of the reasons I forget about Arabic language.

Instead of Arabic, Bradley ultimately learned Urdu, which he found much more useful for communicating with his staff and for interacting with people in his daily life:

Most of my customers, they're Indian. When you are in contact with them, some of them are not very good in English, to understand what we have to explain to them. Some of the labourers, they don't know English very well. . . That's why we learned Urdu. . . [Now] when I'm going to restaurants, when I'm going to shops, when I'm riding a taxi, I'm speaking Urdu.

Even when working on government contracts, Bradley found that most of his interactions with his clients were in English (although Arabic could also have been an option) and most of the labour needed to be done in Urdu. Bradley also explained that he did still use Arabic greetings regularly in his daily life but that it was more important to be multilingual, noting that he used English, Urdu, Farsi, Arabic, and Pashto nearly every day.

## Hope and Malak

Hope and Malak are teachers in the public school system in Ras Al Khaimah. Their first language is Arabic but they teach their subjects in English. Although they came to the UAE knowing that they would be teaching in English, they were still surprised by the pressure put on them to improve their English at work as well as the English demands placed on them in their daily lives in Ras Al Khaimah. They were interviewed separately but have been included here together because they shared almost identical linguistic experiences in the UAE.

Both teachers explained that they struggled with their positions as English policy advocates in their classrooms. Malak explained:

The department told us while training months before starting school that there is an observation [of] each of you, you are not allowed to speak in Arabic. . . Students as

well must speak in English even they don't understand anything, but the teacher must simplify the language to them in different ways. . . in class I used to tell them to speak in English, and encourage them to do that, and keep telling them that Arabic is not allowed. . . Students always ask us to speak in Arabic, they said "teacher you can speak Arabic, why you speak English?" I answered them that this is the vision of your ministry, so you became an economic country. . . I told them that Arabic is our language, we must keep talking in Arabic, but when it comes to learning we must learn English instead. . . It is just something to tell your students about, I don't believe that English is the only way to deliver learning. Arabic language can do that same thing easily.

Both teachers felt the need to justify what to the students appeared an unreasonable school language policy, and appealed to larger policy frameworks (e.g. *Vision 2021*) to support what they had been told to do in their classrooms.

Both were also told that they needed to get either band 6 in academic IELTS or band 6.5 in general IELTS, with the implication that if they could not meet this requirement (within an ambiguous time period), they would not be able to keep their jobs. They told me that this requirement is initially being rolled out for English medium instructors but would also include Arabic medium instructors in subsequent years, perhaps with a lower IELTS band of 5 or 5.5. Referring to *Vision 2021*, Hope explained that the ministry wants "all the staff to speak in two languages and they need evidence". This is understandably causing Hope and Malak a great deal of stress and they have invested a significant amount of time and energy trying to prepare for the exam.

In their daily lives, Hope and Malak also feel the pressure to use English most of the time. Malak in particular voiced significant frustrations with having to use English everywhere – work, shops, cafes – "in an Arabic country". Even at home, Arabic is not always dominant, as Hope also feels pressure to help her daughter learn English when she has time:

Actually at the first time I reach here, I was thinking about registering her in a British school or American school in order to enhance her English and I just want to put her in an environment that everybody is speaking English and she will be forced to speak but it doesn't work because she don't want, she is very afraid and [she says] "I don't want to not understand anyone, the teachers, my friends." So, I put her in another school. There is Arabic but her teacher is I think she is from Australia and she can't speak Arabic at all. And I was struggling with her because she doesn't understand what

is the teacher saying. At writing and reading she is perfect but when it comes to speaking, she is just shy to speak and she said "Mom, I don't want to speak. I'm afraid that my friends are going to laugh on me or the teacher is not going to understand me." So, she keeps silent. Yeah it's very difficult.

## Discussion

Here, I provide a brief overview of three key issues that emerge from the narratives in this paper which could serve as starting points for discussions or further research: linguistic expectations of expatriates before coming to the UAE; a lack of economic incentives for Arabic language learning and use; social obstacles hindering expatriate Arabic language learning and use. The following section identifies some specific recommendations for future research.

### Many expatriates begin their tenures in the UAE expecting to have to learn and/or use Arabic

Bradley's language policy expectations of the UAE did not match the language policy reality that he found himself in, but it is important to note that Bradley was initially prepared to learn Arabic. He invested time in language courses and actively sought out people to practice with. Despite occasional media portraits of expatriates as disinterested in learning Arabic (e.g. Debusmann Jr., 2017; Shams, 2017), many of my participants expressed interest or demonstrated some kind of investment in learning Arabic. They came to the UAE with the expectation that learning Arabic would be necessary and with the intention to make an effort to learn.

Like Bradley, Hope and Malak expected to come to "an Arabic country", where they would continue to be immersed in their first language in their social lives – if not necessarily their working lives. Instead, they describe an isolation of their Arabic use to family and close friends along with a simultaneous, all-consuming drive to improve their English that encroaches deeply on their free time.

### Expatriates are not economically incentivized to learn or use Arabic

The lives of expatriates in the UAE are often very closely tied to their work and in many cases, that work is not in Arabic. Most of my participants did not feel Arabic was essential to their jobs and no one I spoke to told me that Arabic was a requirement to get their job. However, all felt that they needed English or another language for their work – in many cases English was a requirement to be hired in the first place, either explicitly or implicitly (e.g. interviews conducted only in English).

It was clear that Bradley found Arabic to be almost entirely unhelpful in his day-to-day working life. Like

most expatriates, he was busy with the work that determined his legal status in the country, and quickly became unwilling to invest time into learning a language that seemed to have neither social nor economic value for him. In the absence of the Arabic language policy that he expected, the daily language practices of Bradley and his colleagues sedimented into *de facto* English-Urdu language policy at work. English was used to get contracts and Urdu was the primary language on the job.

For Hope and Malak, English language use had strong economic incentives and Arabic had none. The widespread use of the IELTS test, and English language requirements in general, served as a powerful force in many of my participants' lives. Such language requirements are not just for these teachers but also for students hoping to enter college and university programs in the country and abroad, for individuals in other sectors trying to get or keep jobs, and for people hoping to immigrate to other countries.

As Shohamy (2006; 2007) argues, standardized language tests are important mechanisms for generating *de facto* language policy. Language requirements that rely on tests like IELTS send clear messages about which languages and language forms are actually valued in the economy, education, and society, and this can undermine other language policy goals. Hope and Malak needed a certain IELTS score to keep their jobs, but did not require anything to prove their Arabic proficiency. This significantly skewed their investment in linguistic resources towards English, which encroached on their social time.

### Expatriates face a number of social obstacles in using Arabic and often devote time to learning other languages instead

There are currently few social incentives to learn Arabic in the UAE, and even for expatriate Arabic speakers, it can be difficult to use Arabic socially.

In the case of Bradley, even a very gifted language learner struggled to make opportunities for himself to learn and ultimately found little value in Arabic knowledge in his work or daily life in the UAE. This was a fairly common experience for my participants. They often felt it was necessary to actively create opportunities to learn and practice Arabic or else it would be almost completely absent from their daily lives. They found it both difficult to find and connect socially with Arabic speakers who would also be willing to speak to them in Arabic rather than English, and they also had trouble finding language courses that engaged them and were immediately useful in their daily lives. In the end, Bradley's adoption of Urdu at work, extended to his daily life so that Urdu became his primary language of interaction in Ras Al Khaimah.

Hope and Malak, in need of an acceptable IELTS score, devoted time and energy towards using English as much

as possible in their daily lives in Ras Al Khaimah. Rather than contributing to the construction and expansion of Arabic language networks by using Arabic in their everyday lives, they spent a great deal of time studying for the test and seeking out English speakers to practice with. For Hope, this also extended to her family life, where she invested further time and energy into her daughter's English acquisition.

## Recommendations

The three discussion points above highlight some areas that policymakers and researchers can focus on as they continue to investigate and craft language policy in the country.

Firstly, how expatriate attitudes to Arabic shift during their time in the UAE is potentially a valuable avenue for future research. If it is in fact the case that expatriates generally start with a commitment to learning Arabic, which quickly wanes due to a lack of economic, educational and/or social support, that would be central concern for language policymakers to investigate. It would suggest that in the current policy context of the UAE, the majority of the population of the country is actually *disincentivized* from learning and using Arabic at a time of heightened anxiety over the sustained utility of Arabic in a number of domains. It would also suggest that the optimal time for getting expatriates involved in Arabic language learning – should such programs be considered – would be as soon as they enter the country. Better understanding the social and economic pressures expatriates face (while attending to the significant diversity of expatriate experiences) and how these affect their language practices in the country is essential to deciding how to proceed with language policy initiatives.

An important dimension of the above investigation would then be exploring the role of work, both in the public and private sectors, in producing *de facto* language policies and explicit incentives for particular language practices. Because expatriate lives in the country fundamentally depend on their employment status, economic incentives for expatriate language use will be closely tied to language of employment.

To understand the impact of work-related language policies and incentives on day-to-day life, links between the work and social life language use also require further research. Investigations of how work and social networks emerge and intersect, and in turn how those networks shape the language choices made by the expatriate population, should be an important starting point for future researchers. In the case of Arabic, for example, policymakers need to consider whether Arabic can ever be a language of daily life in the UAE if it is rarely a language of working life. It seems likely that the widespread use of standardized English language requirements in the UAE are encroaching on the language use of Arabic speakers in

their free time. The prioritization of English over Arabic in the lives of Arabic speaking expatriates may make Arabic language networks in the country that much more fragile and fragmented. This, in turn, makes it that much more difficult for the Bradleys living in the city to find people willing to speak to them in Arabic. This is likely just one of a number of social disincentives that work against Arabic use among expatriates, and further research into obstacles and opportunities for potential expatriate language learners and users should also be an area of ongoing research.

## Conclusions

The social and economic incentive structures highlighted by these cases come into conflict with some of the UAE's officially stated language policy goals. How can the UAE meet Arabic language goals with a fragmented and disincentivized Arabic speaking expatriate population? If it is in fact the case that Arabic speaking expatriates are struggling to use their first language in the country, let alone non-Arabic speakers, how can Arabic "re-emerge as a dynamic and vibrant language, expressed everywhere in speech and writing"? (Prime Minister's Office, 2011).

As stated from the outset, my intentions here are not to make definitive statements about language policy or practice in the UAE. Nevertheless, I believe this project highlights a number of issues that should be central to future language policy research in the country. Firstly, if indeed the UAE remains committed to making the country a fundamentally Arabic space, these preliminary findings and discussions should be somewhat worrying. It is possible that the lack of economic and social incentives for Arabic use in the expatriate communities of the UAE is having a significant net negative effect on Arabic use in the country, *despite* a not insignificant commitment to Arabic when these individuals first enter the country. Further research, including an extension of my own work, is needed to investigate language attitudes and linguistic shifts in various expatriate communities throughout their time in the country, as well as the various factors that influence their linguistic decisions, if policymakers are to work toward realistic language policy goals for the country.

A second concern is the impact of language policy, formal and *de facto*, on the lives of the expatriate population. While formal policy initiatives move forward with both English and Arabic, the expatriate population continues to adapt and respond to these changes. In addition to the policy implications, it is important to investigate these linguistic struggles, challenges, contradictions and opportunities in their own right. Without a better understanding of both of these core concerns, it will be difficult, if not impossible to craft language policy that is both effective and responsible in the UAE.

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