

Identifying Loan Words in Arabic: A Study Conducted with Native Speakers of Arabic

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Abstract

Languages are connected to one another. This connection appears in the process of lending and borrowing words. Loanwords may become official in a language dictionary yet many speakers may not know about the origin of the words they use in their daily conversations. The author conduct this research to measure the knowledge of native Arabic speakers about the loanwords in their language and whether there are phonological reasons that play a rule in spotting loanwords. This study focuses on native speakers of the Arabic language from Saudi Arabia and on loanwords that are adapted from English. The current study investigates the following questions: How familiar are Saudis with loanwords in their language? For what reasons do Saudis fail to recognize such loanwords? A survey was designed to answer these questions. The outcomes showed that a significant number of the subjects have high-quality knowledge about the loanwords; however, there were a few who did not. One reason for failure to recognize loanwords is certain changes to loanwords that give them phonological properties of the target language such as substitution of sounds. Loanwords with significant phonological properties of the target language make speakers unsure whether the word originated in their native language.

Keywords: loan words, language, arabic, phonology

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Introduction

Languages are sisters; if one needs something, she can borrow it from her sister. In simple words, a loan word is “a word adopted from a foreign language with little or no modification.” (The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English). This process is also known as word borrowing. The foreign language is known as the source or the donor language, whereas the language borrowings the word(s) is referred to as the target language. Loaning and borrowing are actually metaphors since there is neither an actual lending nor a returning process for words. A word is simply adopted in a language, and there is no way that it can be returned to its original language. According to Bynon (1977), this term (loan word) itself is a loaned translation of German (lehnwort).

There are many reasons why one language borrows a word from another, including a need for the word. Translators often struggle with such situations. When a translator wants to translate a word with no equivalent in his or her language, he or she usually tends to borrow this word from the source language and incorporate it into the target language. Another reason why loan words are adopted in a language is the need for communication. People communicate with

speakers of other languages due to business or vacation travels to foreign countries. These communications result an acquisition of certain foreign words. When a foreign word is frequently used in daily conversation by a large population of language speakers, sometimes these foreign words are officially added to the dictionary of the target language.

There are many languages worldwide and each has its special properties and characteristics. Some languages are considered to have rich vocabularies, while other languages may be viewed as having poor ones. The Arabic language is one of the richest and also one of the oldest languages in the world. Arabic is one of the common languages globally, with more than 312 million speakers and twenty-five countries across two continents (Africa and Asia) consider Arabic as their native language. The Arabic speaking countries consist of Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Chad, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. All Arabic-speaking countries use standard Arabic in official business and education contexts. Despite its wide reach and large number of native speakers, Arabic nonetheless borrows words from other languages.

Several well-known words in Arabic are used by a large proportion of Arabic speakers, but may not be known as loan words. Because when a word is commonly used in the target language, sometimes native speakers of the target language do not recognize it as a borrowed word. This research will mainly focus on native speakers of Arabic from Saudi Arabia.

I will investigate the following research questions:

- 1) How familiar are Saudis with loan words in their language?
- 2) For what reason(s) would Saudis fail to recognize loan words?

Literature Review

One important study regarding loan word adaptation was conducted by Vendelin and Peperkamp (2006). Their study focused mainly on the effect of orthography on loan word adaptations. To measure the influence of orthography on loan word adaptations, they prepared online tasks that used 24 words. The researchers reminded the participants that French has borrowed several verbs from English. The task was to borrow new English words and insert them into French sentences that appeared on the screen in front of them. The participants were bilingual (English and French). These tasks revealed an orthographic influence on loan word adaptations. This influence also affected the words that have been adopted based on oral input. This study showed that there are two different types of orthographically influenced adaptations: reading adaptations and adaptations based on between-language grapheme-to-phoneme correspondence.

Usually, when considering loan words from other languages, neighbor languages are the first place to search. However, Juntunen (2019) focused in his study on words borrowed from old Egyptian and incorporated into Classical Arabic. These borrowed words underwent changes in their pronunciation, such as the change of the sound [r] to [l] in *r(i)* and *ir(a)* to *li* and *ila* 'for, to', which are well-known prepositions used in Classical Arabic. The definite article in Classical

Arabic, *ʾal*, was also borrowed from the old Egyptian language, with some significant changes in its sound. Relative adjectives/pronouns as well as words of negation are other examples of old Egyptian words that were inserted into Classical Arabic.

Khabirova and Oudah (2020) focused, in their study, on words that have entered the lexicon of Arabic speakers due to the significant rise of online communication. The researchers also analyzed the extralinguistic reasons for loan words occurrences. They gathered their data through a specific questionnaire that was designed mainly for native Arabic speakers and included a list of 20 popular English loanwords. Their findings showed that the most commonly used English words among Arabs in online communication were: OMG, LOL, email, download, and message. They found several primary reasons for using these English words: a) ease of use; b) filling gaps for new concepts for which there is no equivalent vocabulary in Arabic; c) looking, fashionable; and d) drawing attention to their opinion as well inviting suggestions.

Methodology

Subjects

The present study involved 118 Saudi people, aged 16-42 years old, who were chosen based on their background information. All of them were born in and have spent their whole lives in Saudi Arabia. Their native language is Arabic. Since this study aims to investigate the knowledge of Saudis in general, not only those from a specific province, I have intentionally included different subjects from different regions. Moreover, the subjects, included were both female and male.

Instrument

To come out with clear results, a specific survey was designed to answer the research questions that included, 17 loan words: *bank* (a bank), *diblumasii* (diplomat), *tilifon* (telephone), *dinami:t* (dynamite), *mikrufoon* ('microphone), *?idyulu:jiyah* (ideology), *naylon* (nylon), *kayk* (cake), *bayjar* (pager), *bakti:rya* (bacteria), *kafiti:ri:ya* (cafeteria), *balasti:k* (plastic), *butrol* (petrol), *g'as* (gas), *kang'ar* (kangaroo), *balu:n* (balloon), and *shambu:* (shampoo). The survey included words of Arabic origin as well: *alkohu:l* (alcohol), *k?s* (cup), *g'azal* (deer), *tufah* (apple), *?qel* (mind), *sora* (picture), and *edha?a* (light). The survey thus contained a total of 17 loan words and 7 Arabic-origin words.

Procedure

The survey was administered to a large number of subjects through multiple social media applications, such as WhatsApp, Twitter, KakaoTalk as well as Telegram. The subjects were informed about the purpose of the survey as well as how the collected data would be used and stored. The survey included loan words from the English language as well as words of Arabic origin. Words of Arabic origin were included to produce clear, as well as accurate results, since including only loan words in the survey could influence the subjects to answer based on this fact, even when they are unsure about a word's origin.

Results

The survey asked the following question: Is the word (for example, *tilifon*) of an Arabic origin? The subjects' are illustrated in the following tables.

- 1) Table (1): Respondents' answers about the origin of these loan words, shown in percentages.

Word	Arabic origin	Loan word
<i>bank</i>	18.6%	81.4%
<i>diblumasii</i>	33.1%	66.9%
<i>tilifon</i>	10.2%	89.8%
<i>dinami:t</i>	4.2%	95.8%
<i>mikrufoon</i>	11%	89%
<i>?idyulu:jiyah</i>	15.3%	84.7%
<i>naylon</i>	13.6%	86.4%
<i>kayk</i>	10.2%	89.8%
<i>bayjar</i>	18.6%	81.4%
<i>bakti:rya</i>	26.3%	73.7%
<i>kafiti:ri:ya</i>	5.9%	94.1%
<i>balasti:k</i>	16.9%	83.1%
<i>butrol</i>	26.3%	73.7%
<i>g'as</i>	41.5%	58.5%
<i>kang'ar</i>	47.5%	52.5%
<i>balu:n</i>	16.1%	83.9%
<i>shambu:</i>	6.8%	93.2%

Table 1 shows, in the right column, the percentages of the subjects who thought that investigated words were loan words, and, in the middle column, those who thought they were of Arabic origin.

Table 2 illustrates the outcomes regarding the words of Arabic origin and is formatted in the same way as table 1.

- 2) Table (2):) Respondents' answers about the origin of Arabic origin words.

Word	Arabic origin	Loan word
<i>sora</i>	94.9%	5.1%
<i>?qel</i>	100%	0%
<i>Tufah</i>	95.8%	4.2%
<i>g'azal</i>	98.3% ^o	1.7%
<i>edha?a</i>	93.2%	6.8%
<i>k?s</i>	86.4%	13.6%
<i>alkohu:l</i>	48.3%	51.7%

The Arabic word with the highest percentage of respondents who recognized it as of Arabic origin words was /ʔqel/ 'mind'. One hundred per cent (118 people) of the subjects identified this word correctly. On the other hand, the Arabic speakers who completed this survey did not agree completely on any of the loan words. In other words, no single loan word was recognized correctly as such by all of the subjects who participated in this study. However, more than half of the loan words were correctly identified by the majority of the subjects, who are native speakers of Arabic. The greatest majority of Arabic speakers (111 participants, 94.1%) correctly identified /kafiti:ri:ya/, which is drawn from the English word 'Cafeteria' as a loan word that was not of Arabic origin. Nevertheless, three words were the least likely to be correctly identified by native Arabic speakers: the English loan words /g'as/ 'gas', and /kang'ar/ 'kangaroo' and the Arabic-origin /alkohu:l/ 'Alcohol'.

Discussion

Even though the English loan words in this study share phonological properties with the Arabic language, the Saudi subjects overall performed well in recognizing them. As shown by the results, the majority of native Arabic speakers from Saudi Arabia have a considerable knowledge of their language as well as a high level of recognition of the loan words. More than 80% of subjects recognized 12 of 17 loan words as being words not of Arabic origin. This result shows that Saudis are highly capable of distinguishing the origins of the words in their Arabic language. Not all of the subjects knew how to speak English; nonetheless, most of them correctly answered the survey questions.

Some Saudi subjects were confused about the origin of certain words. A significant number of subjects identified /alkohu:l/ 'alcohol', /g'as/ 'gas' as well as the word /kang'ar/ 'kangaroo' as loan words (51.7%, 58.5%, and 52.5%, respectively). The majority of subjects correctly identified /g'as/ 'gas', and /kang'ar/ 'kangaroo' as loan words, but also incorrectly identified the word /alkohu:l/ 'alcohol' as a loan word. Nonetheless, a similar percentage of subjects identified these words as having an Arabic origin. This similarity has multiple explanations. The author asked a number of the Saudi subjects who identified the word /alkohu:l/ 'alcohol' as a loan word, why they did not believe the word was of Arabic origin. They answered, and the author believe it is a good reason, that they thought it was a loan word because they hear it more often in English movies and TV shows than in their Arabic conversations in daily life. A reason for not hearing this word more often in everyday Arabic conversations is due to certain Islamic laws. Although alcohol is used in chemical compounds, alcoholic beverages are not halal (i.e., are forbidden) in Islam, so it is uncommon to encounter the word in everyday conversation unless one is discussing chemistry. The loan words /g'as/ 'gas' as well as the word /kang'ar/ 'kangaroo' were identified, respectively, by 41.5% and 47.5% of native Arabic speakers from Saudi Arabia as words of Arabic origin because they contain the [g'] sound. Unlike Arabic, this sound does not occur in English language. Thus, the Arabic speakers assumed these words were not loan words because of this particular sound.

Several of the loan words have undergone changes to their original pronunciation as well as their syllable structure that have made them sound similar to words of Arabic origin. For instance, some loan words have undergone sound changes, like the word: /kang'ar/ 'Kangaroo',

in which the [g'] sound replaced the original [g]. Other words experience, an omission or deletion of sound, for example, [u:]; the same principle applies to /*diblumasii*/ 'diplomat' as well as /*?idyulu:jiyah*/ 'ideology', to name a few. Loan words usually do not remain in their original form when they enter a language. Changes to these words may not be particularly significant, such as, the substitution of a sound that does not exist in Arabic to a similar existing sound, as found in the following examples: /*tilifizyu:n*/ 'television', /*fayru:s*/ 'virus' as well as /*fidiyu*/ 'video' to name a few. In these words, the [v] sound in the original word does not exist in Arabic Language, so native Arabic speakers pronounce these words with a similar sound that has the same phonetic properties, place of articulation as well as manner of articulation as the foreign sound [v], which in Arabic is the labiodental voiceless [f]. Similarly, the bilabial [p] sound does not occur in the Arabic language, so native speakers change it to its closest similar sound, the bilabial voiced [b] in Arabic.

Most of the loan words in Arabic are scientific words. This trend is not because Arabic is a poor language that lacks vocabulary; on the contrary, Arabic was the donor language and the leader in science in the Middle Ages. Many languages –including English- borrowed scientific words from the Arabic language at that time. However, in modern Arabic, we find a significant number of borrowed words of English origin. Al-athwary (2003) explained the reason for such borrowings in his study: "In the era of European colonialization and up to date, the Arabs have been confronted with the fascinating advances of culture and science in Europe and America and unfortunately become dependents and consumers instead of developing their own indigenous researches in the parallel fields of knowledge". (p. 13) Arabic speakers, not the Arabic language itself, are the reason why there are so many loan words in such a rich language. In almost all of the universities in the Arabic-speaking world, native Arabic speakers tend to use the English language when teaching and explaining science as well as technology. Some Arabic speakers who support this idea have argued that the Arabic language is not suitable as a language of modern science and technology. They want to separate the language of religion from that of science. Hence, there are many English loan words in the Arabic language, such as /*mi:kruwi:f*/ 'microwave', /*zink*/ 'zinc' as well as /*?uksiji:n*/ 'oxygen' to name a few.

Even though a high percentage of Saudi participants in this study incorrectly identified some loanwords as words of Arabic origin, the majority correctly identified all of the words, except for the word /*alkohu:l*/ 'alcohol', which was identified by 61 Saudis as a loan word and by 57 Saudis as a word of Arabic origin. The responses to this survey, completed by native speakers of Saudi Arabic, indicate that Saudis have a tremendous knowledge of words in Arabic that have been borrowed from other languages.

Conclusion

To sum up everything that has been illustrated, this study focused mainly on measuring the knowledge of native Arabic speakers in Saudi Arabia about the borrowed words in the Arabic language. Their answers were collected through an online survey designed specifically for this study, which included seventeen loan words from the English language, including: /*bank*/ 'bank', /*diblumasii*/ 'diplomat', /*tilifon*/ 'telephone', and /*dinami:t*/ 'dynamite', to name a few. The survey also include words of Arabic origin such as /*k?s*/ 'cup', /*g'azal*/ 'deer', as well as /*tufah*/

‘apple’. The answers to the online survey showed a high level of knowledge regarding the origin of Arabic words. Almost all subjects of this study answered the online survey accurately. They succeeded in distinguishing between words of Arabic origin and those borrowed from other languages. This finding clearly answers the research questions posed. The number of Saudi subjects who performed well in distinguishing loan words from words of Arabic origin shows that Saudis are highly capable of recognizing words that were not originally Arabic. A few words in the survey prompted confusion about their origin in a significant number of the Saudis respondents. One reason for not recognizing a borrowed word was the changes to its original form when the word was added to the target language. Such changes involved the insertion of a sound that does not occur in the donor language, while others involve the deletion of a certain sound or a shift to the nearest sound in the target language (here, Arabic). Another reason for failing to recognize the origin of a specific word was because the respondents encountered more often in other languages than in the language of origin (Arabic).

Further Studies

Understanding the origins of words helps us know more about languages around the world and their historical connections, as well as the history of language itself. Loan words are an interesting worth noting topic for further study. Studying and analyzing the phonological changes of loan words in depth could be a great subject for further research.

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Appendix

The survey was based on yes or no questions. The questions were written in the Arabic language.

هل كلمة بنك عربية الأصل؟

Is the word bank from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة دبلوماسي عربية الأصل؟

Is the word diblumasii (diplomat) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة تليفون عربية الأصل؟

Is the word tilifon (telephone) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة ديناميت عربية الأصل؟

Is the word dinami:t (dynamite) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة مايكروفون عربية الأصل؟

Is the word mikrufoon ('microphone) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة كأس عربية الأصل؟

Is the word k?s (cup) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة كيك عربية الأصل؟

Is the word kayak (cake) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة شامبو عربية الأصل؟

Is the word shambu: (shampoo) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة تفاح عربية الأصل؟

Is the word Tufah (apple) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة غزال عربية الأصل؟

Is the word g'azal (deer) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة كنغر عربية الأصل؟

Is the word kang'r (kangaroo) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة غاز عربية الأصل؟

Is the word g'as (gas) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة بترول عربية الأصل؟

Is the word butrol (petrol) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة عقل عربية الأصل؟

Is the word ?qel (mind) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة بلاستيك عربية الأصل؟

Is the word balasti:k (plastic) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة الكحول عربية الأصل؟

Is the word alkohu:l (alcohol) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة ايدولوجية عربية الأصل؟

Is the word ?idyulu:jiyah (ideology) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة كافيتيريا عربية الأصل؟

Is the word kafiti:ri:ya (cafeteria) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة باكتيريا عربية الأصل؟

Is the word bakti:rya (bacteria) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة بيجر عربية الأصل؟

Is the word bayjar (pager) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة إضاءة عربية الأصل؟

Is the word edha?a (light) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة نايلون عربية الأصل؟

Is the word nylon (nylon) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة صورة عربية الأصل؟

Is the word sora (picture) from an Arabic origin?

هل كلمة بالون عربية الأصل؟

Is the word balu:n (balloon) from an Arabic origin