

Linguistic diversity and plurality in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract:

The Middle East and North Africa covers an immense geographic region and includes within its boundaries a great deal of social, cultural, political, and linguistic diversity. Although a number of majority languages are spoken throughout the region, with Arabic being the largest, the region as a whole shows substantial language diversity, with the region's languages cutting across a number of different language groups and families. The broader geopolitics of the region have also played a meaningful role in shaping the trajectory of these languages and their future vitality. This entry provides a broad overview of a selection of the many languages spoken in the Middle East and North Africa while noting how many of these languages fit into the region's broader social and political life.

Keywords: Middle East; North Africa; Language Diversity; Migration; Afroasiatic; Indo-European; Arabic; Hebrew; Persian; Semitic

Geographically, what constitutes the Middle East and North Africa (henceforth MENA) region is somewhat fluid. However, most scholars would consider the region to include nation-states and territories extending from roughly the Islamic Republic of Iran in the East to the Kingdom of Morocco in the West. This definition may be extended in some cases to include areas to the south of those states that buttress the Mediterranean Sea on the northern coast of Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt), as well as states such as Afghanistan which are often considered part of Central Asia. The extension or contraction of this definition of the MENA region often depends on which aspects of the region are being discussed, with social, cultural, or political similarities extending across nation-state borders, resulting in a somewhat fluid regional definition.

Depending on how the region is geographically defined, the MENA is home to roughly four hundred million people, representing a broad range of ethnic, social, cultural, and religious backgrounds. The MENA region also contains the holy sites of the three major monotheistic faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, and historically, indigenous members of these three major faiths have lived in diverse communities located throughout the area. However, substantial religious migration has taken place as a result of economic pressure and political unrest. For example, in recent years substantial numbers of Christians have fled fighting in Iraq, with similar cases of migration taking place in countries like Syria. After the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, substantial refugee migration of both Muslim and Christian Palestinians took place, with

many fleeing from the areas of historic Palestine that became Israel, becoming refugees in what is today the West Bank, Gaza Strip, as well as in surrounding countries like Jordan and Lebanon. In addition, in the period leading up to and after the creation of Israel, European Jewish immigrants emigrated to Israel, while many other immigrants emigrated from Jewish communities throughout the MENA region including communities from Iraq, Tunisia, Iran and elsewhere. These cases reflect a major reality of the MENA, that it has experienced and continues to experience profound levels of migration into and throughout the region.

The sociocultural and political diversity of the MENA region also mirrors a great deal of linguistic diversity. From a linguistic standpoint, the MENA region shows substantial linguistic variation both across and within a number of the world's major language families. Although a full discussion of every language spoken throughout the MENA region is outside of the scope of this entry, the region is home to speakers of a number of different languages from within the Afroasiatic family, including many spoken varieties of Arabic, as well as Hebrew, Aramaic/Syriac, and Amazigh, among others. The MENA region is also home to speakers of a number of Indo-Iranian languages, itself a branch of the much broader Indo-European language group. Among the Indo-Iranian family of languages, substantial populations of speakers of Persian (including Dari and Tajik), Balochi, and Kurdish live in a number of different states throughout the area. More expanded definitions of the MENA region would further include populations of Turkic language speakers including Turkish, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Azeri. Within each of these larger language families, numerous additional smaller language groups exist, and within a given language a multitude of spoken varieties often exist that can be delimited based on geographic, religious, or other lines.

Within the Afroasiatic family, one of the most prominent language groups within the MENA region, the most widely spoken language with around 290 million speakers is Arabic (Owens 2006; see Versteegh 2009 for a comprehensive reference). Arabic is within the Central Semitic branch of the Afroasiatic family, and a multitude of Arabic varieties are spoken as the major or primary language of communication from the Atlantic/Mediterranean coast on the Western edge of Africa to Mesopotamia and the Arabian Peninsula in the East. Additional smaller Arabic speaking communities exist in Turkey, Iran, and in more isolated cases in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan in Central Asia.

Substantial regional variation also exists across spoken Arabic varieties. On a more supra-local level, a major isogloss, or linguistic division runs through Egypt that divides Arabic into what are commonly referred to as Eastern and Western varieties. On more regional or localized levels, variation within Arabic varieties is often stratified across urban/rural divides, with city and rural varieties often being markedly different, as well as differences that manifest across Bedouin and sedentary communities. Substantial scholarship has also investigated sociolinguistic variation within and across Arabic speaking communities (Al-Wer 2013).

Although Arabic is the largest Semitic language spoken throughout the MENA region, numerous other members of the Semitic family are also spoken. Notably, Hebrew is spoken by roughly nine million people, including being spoken natively by around five million people in Israel. Modern Hebrew as it is spoken in Israel today was revived based on input from Yiddish and other European languages that were spoken by migrants to what would become the state of Israel following its creation in 1948 (see Khan et al 2013 for a comprehensive reference). Within Israel, Hebrew exists alongside Arabic as the state's official languages, although Hebrew remains dominant in most official contexts within Israel.

In addition to the prominence of Arabic throughout North Africa, numerous languages from the Amazigh family are spoken from the Siwa Oasis of Egypt in the East to Morocco in the West. Amazigh varieties represent the indigenous languages of North Africa, with Arabic arriving comparatively later as a result of major waves of military conquest spreading West from the Arabian Peninsula (Kossmann 2013). Despite the extent of Arab conquests across North Africa and into the Iberian Peninsula, Amazigh languages have endured, with many Amazigh speaking communities remaining throughout the region. However, a number of these communities have experienced substantial language shift towards Arabic (Hoffman 2008).

Today Amazigh is spoken by large populations within Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Algeria, as well as the far western reaches of Egypt. Outside of areas often included in the MENA region, Amazigh varieties are also spoken throughout Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. The term Amazigh represents an umbrella label for multiple different varieties within this group including Kabyle, Shilha, and Tamazight. Amazigh language and cultural activists have been vocal proponents of seeking recognition for Amazigh languages alongside Arabic in a number of states. In recent years Amazigh has been recognized as one of the official languages of Morocco and Algeria.

Also, within the Semitic branch of the Afroasiatic family, Neo-Aramaic (Khan and Napiorkowska 2015), also referred to as Modern Aramaic, is still spoken throughout parts of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. Although not categorically the case, many speakers of Neo-Aramaic are ethnically Assyrian and identify with a number of religious communities including the Chaldean Catholics and Syriac Orthodox. Estimating the current number of fluent Neo-Aramaic speakers is quite challenging, however it is likely that there are at least 500,000 fluent speakers, with some estimates suggesting the number of speakers may be closer to one million. In addition to communities of speakers throughout the Middle East, sizeable diaspora populations of Aramaic speakers also exist, scattered elsewhere throughout the world including in a number of European states.

While Semitic languages make up a substantial portion of the linguistic diversity within the MENA region, other major language families are also well represented. In this respect, speakers of a variety of Indo-Iranian languages form robust communities throughout the region. Within this broader group, and specifically Northwest Iranian languages, Kurdish is spoken by large communities throughout the Middle East. Major Kurdish speaking populations exist in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Kurdish can be delineated into three primary varieties: Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji), Central Kurdish (Sorani), and Southern Kurdish (Pehlewani). However, these varieties are largely not mutually intelligible, and substantial linguistic differences exist across these communities.

Although the number of Kurdish speakers throughout the Middle East is quite robust, especially in comparison to other smaller languages spoken throughout the region, Kurdish varieties have faced varying levels of support or discrimination throughout the states in which they are spoken. Kurdish is recognized as an official language in Iraq, and the linguistic prominence of the language also coincides with the continued cultural and political vitality of the Kurdish community in Northern Iraq, which has formed a major semi-autonomous region in the country. In Syria, ethnic Kurds have historically faced substantial discrimination, while in Turkey discrimination against both the Kurdish language and ethnic Kurds themselves has been quite profound. This repression and discrimination has included prohibitions on the use of the language in public spaces and restrictions on the teaching of Kurdish in schools. However, throughout the 2000s, some of these restrictions have eased.

In addition to Kurdish, Persian, also within the Indo-Iranian branch of the much larger Indo-European language family is spoken by over 100 million people throughout the MENA region. A large portion of the region's Persian speaking population are residents of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In addition to being a primary language in Iran, varieties of Persian are spoken through Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and numerous other countries within the region. Although in many cases these Persian varieties are given distinct linguistic labels, for example Tajik in Tajikistan, this more accurately reflects dialectal variation, with these nation-state-based labels being ascribed to what are ultimately different varieties of Persian. Another Iranian language, Balochi, is spoken in Oman on the Arabian Peninsula, in addition to substantial communities of speakers in Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The language is spoken by over 7 million people throughout the region. Within the language, two primary spoken varieties exist and are delimited to at least some extent based on the tribal communities that comprise the speaker base.

Finally, Turkish, the largest of the Turkic languages, is spoken by over 65 million people throughout modern day Turkey. The language is a member of the larger family of roughly 35 Turkic languages spoken not only in Turkey, but throughout areas of Europe and Asia. Turkish as it is spoken throughout Turkey today can be distinguished from Ottoman Turkish, spoken throughout the history of the Ottoman Empire. Although some obvious Arabic or Persian loanwords remain today in Modern Turkish, Ottoman Turkish drew heavily not only on loanwords from Arabic or Persian but also utilized forms across linguistic domains from these other languages.

This entry has offered a broad overview of some of the immense linguistic diversity that exists within the MENA region. Beyond the linguistic communities discussed here, many more languages are also spoken throughout the states and territories that are today part of this large geographic area. The diversity that exists from the standpoint of language is reflective of a long history of diversity across social, cultural, political, ethnic, and religious lines throughout the MENA region. As part of this history, the MENA region has and continues to see great periods of migration, which have resulted in the spread of many languages across and throughout these areas. At the same time, these periods of migration have resulted in the change or diminishing vitality of many languages that have historically been spoken throughout the MENA, although many minority language communities continue to exist throughout the region.

See Also:

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