Arabic Language, Culture, and Communication

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Abstract

One's language strongly participates in forming one's culture and communication patterns. Arabic language itself led the Arab-Islamic culture to be past-oriented, certainty-oriented, and collectivistic. Arabic language also led the Arab-Islamic communication patterns to be high-context and deductive.

Basic Characteristics of the Arab-Islamic Culture

The Arab-Islamic culture has many basic and distinctive characteristics, such as being past-oriented and high-context. Edward T. Hall distinguishes between past-oriented and future-oriented cultures, such that Eastern cultures are past-oriented while Western cultures are future-oriented. From this perspective, the Arab-Islamic culture is past-oriented in the sense that most Arabs and Muslims highly respect their traditions, and aim to preserve their past habits and systems of beliefs. The Arab-Islamic culture is also past-oriented in the sense that most Arabs and Muslims make their decisions in light of the past. For instance, they tend to evaluate behavior in accordance with its past merits rather than its futuristic merits. Moreover, the Arab-Islamic culture is past-oriented such that most Arabs and Muslims perceive time as heading towards the glorious past. This is why they tend to restore their golden past.

Edward T. Hall also distinguishes between high-context and low-context cultures, and considers Eastern cultures as being high-context in contrast to Western cultures which are described as low-context. Now, the Arab-Islamic culture is high-context in many different senses. For example, it is high-context in the sense that each word in the Arab-Islamic culture has high significance and diverse connotations, such that only the context of speech is capable of determining the precise meaning of a given word or proposition. And the Arab-Islamic culture is also high-context in the sense that most Arabs and Muslims presuppose that others know the background information, and hence when they communicate they usually don't elaborate on the background information. This leads most Arabs and Muslims to use general statements and expressions in their communications instead of relying on detailed examples and arguments [1].

In addition, the Arab-Islamic culture is abstract-oriented. For example, the identity of the Arabs resides in Arabic language. However, languages are abstract; whatever we speak and write are just representations of language. Therefore, the identity of the Arabs is abstract. Most of the Arabs are Muslims, but some are Christians. Hence, religion doesn't determine the identity of the Arabs. In addition, Arabs have different skin colors and origins. Therefore, skin color and origin do not define an Arab. All of this shows that the only factor which determines who is an Arab is in fact Arabic language itself, such that an Arab gains his or her identity as being an Arab in virtue of the fact that he or she speaks Arabic. Yet Arabic language is abstract, as all languages are. Thus, the identity of the Arabs is abstract. From the same perspective, all Muslims believe that they belong to a single Islamic nation. However, if we look at the map of the world, we will not see a single Islamic nation but rather different Muslim countries. Therefore, the Islamic nation, which all Muslims believe that they belong to, is just an abstract mental construction in the minds of the Muslims. This reveals that the Arab-Islamic culture is abstract-oriented in this sense also.

Moreover, Geert Hofstede distinguishes between collectivistic and individualistic cultures, such that Eastern cultures are collectivistic while Western cultures are individualistic. Now, the Arab-Islamic culture is collectivistic in the sense that most Arabs and Muslims identify themselves with their social groups, such as their families, and hence their loyalty is to their social groups. Hofstede also describes Eastern cultures as being high power distance. In light of this analysis, the Arab-Islamic culture is high power distance culture in the sense that most Arabs and Muslims tend to accept and respect the unequal distribution of power. In addition, they acknowledge the power of others, and tend not to challenge the hierarchy of power. In addition, according to Hofstede, Eastern cultures are risk avoidance cultures. From this perspective, the Arab-Islamic culture is oriented to risk avoidance in the sense that most Arabs and Muslims avoid taking risks, and they are uncomfortable with uncertainty [2]. All of this implies that Arabs and Muslims are inclined to consider change as being bad and dangerous, and they believe that imitation and improvement are better than innovation, as Richard D. Lewis holds. This is because change and innovation entail uncertainties which are disliked by most Arabs and Muslims [3].

Arabic Language and the Formation of the Arab-Islamic Culture

Arabic language strongly participated in forming the Arab-Islamic culture. For instance, Arabic language played a pivotal role in leading the Arab-Islamic culture to be past-oriented. Arabic language itself is past-oriented. And this is why the Arab-Islamic culture became past-oriented. Arabs obviously use Arabic to communicate. Hence, they are influenced by Arabic language. And Muslims are also influenced by Arabic language due to Islam which was revealed in Arabic. Yet Arabic language is past-oriented. Therefore, it is natural that most Arabs and Muslims are past-oriented. This shows that the Arab-Islamic culture is past-oriented because Arabic language is past-oriented. One example of the fact that Arabic language is past-oriented is the following: in Arabic, "Lasto" means "I am not." But "Lasto" is conjugated in the past tense, exactly as "Darasto", i.e. "I studied", and "Safarto", i.e. "I traveled". Although "Lasto" expresses something about the present, it is conjugated in the past tense. This clearly indicates that Arabic language is oriented to the past. Many other verbs in Arabic function as "Lasto." For instance, "Maazilto" means "I am still", but it is also conjugated in the past. This shows that Arabic language is past-oriented because many Arabic verbs are conjugated in the past although they refer to the present.

Further, in Arabic language, the subject could be erased and implied in the verb. The erasing of the subject usually happens with all of the subjects and all of the verbs in all of the different tenses in Arabic. For example, when we say "Adros" in Arabic, i.e. "I study", the "Ana", which means "I", is erased and implied in the verb "Adros". Now, since the subject, such as "Ana", i.e. "I", is erasable in Arabic language, and given that Arabs are obviously influenced by their native language, namely Arabic, it follows that the subject such as the "Ana" is also erasable in daily life. Hence, the subject, such as the "I", is reducible to something else, such as a certain social group. This shows that Arabic language, and due to the fact that the subject in Arabic language is erasable, led the Arab culture to be collectivistic, such that Arabs tend to identify themselves with and reduce themselves to social groups, such as families. And Muslims are influenced by Arabic language because Islam was revealed in Arabic. This explains why the Islamic culture is also collectivistic, exactly as the Arab culture is.

From the same perspective, since the subject in Arabic language, such as "I", "he" or "she", is erasable, it follows that it is also erasable in daily life. And thus, the subject is abstract otherwise it would not have been erasable. This led the way for the Arab-Islamic culture to be abstract-oriented. Similarly, given that the subject, such as "he" or "she", is erasable in daily life due to the linguistic fact that it is erasable in Arabic language, it follows that the subject will not tend to ask for the possession of power; he or she is not even in existence to demand the possession of power. This paves the way for accepting and respecting the unequal distribution of power, and hence perceiving change as bad and dangerous. All of this reveals how Arabic language participated in leading the Arab-Islamic culture to be high power distance culture.

The Arab-Islamic culture is also certainty-oriented in the sense that most Arabs and Muslims consider their beliefs to be certainties, i.e. their beliefs could not be subjected to critique, doubt, and replacement. This essential aspect of the Arab-Islamic culture is related to Arabic language itself. In Arabic language, after "I know" and "I believe" it is only grammatically correct to put "Ana-a", i.e. "that". Only with the verb to say, such as "I say," it is only grammatically correct to put "Ena-a", which also means "that" yet it indicates emphasis and implies certainty.

Therefore, from the viewpoint of Arabic language, anything we say in Arabic is certain, leading the Arab-Islamic culture to be certainty-oriented. And if we consider our beliefs as being certainties, then we will conceive taking risk as bad and dangerous, given that taking risk is based on uncertainties. Hence, we will avoid taking risks. All of this indicates that Arabic language paved the way for the Arab-Islamic culture to be risk avoidance and / or uncertainty avoidance culture, such that most Arabs and Muslims are uncomfortable with uncertainty and avoid taking risks.

In addition, the Arab-Islamic culture is high-context in many different senses. It is high-context in the following important sense: each word in this culture has high significance and different meanings, and only the context determines the exact meanings of words. Now, Arabic language is high-context in this sense. For example, the Arabic word "Jaa-mi-a" means mosque and gatherer. This is because "Jaa-mi-a" is linguistically derived from "Ja-ma-aa", which means "he gathered". Therefore, "Jaa-mi-a" means both mosque and gatherer because of the strong derivative process of Arabic language. This shows that Arabic language is high-context in the previous sense because of its strong derivative process, such that many Arabic words are linguistically derivable from each other. And thus, Arabic language due to its strong derivative process led the Arab-Islamic culture to be high-context. In other words, since the derivative process of Arabic language is very strong, such that many Arabic words are derived from each other, it follows that each Arabic word could have different meanings and hence only the context could determine the precise meaning of any Arabic word. This reveals how Arabic language participated in leading the Arabic-Islamic culture to be a high-context culture.

Arabic Language and Information

Almost each word in Arabic contains an interesting set of inherited information. For example, the Arabic word "Sadeek," i.e. friend, is linguistically derived from "Sadaka," i.e. "he said the truth and/or he was truthful". Therefore, according to Arabic language, your friend is that who tells you the truth. In this sense, the Arabic word "Sadeek" possesses an interesting inherited information, namely that a friend is that who says the truth. Another example of the fact that Arabic language is an inherited set of information is the following: the Arabic word "Marifa" means knowledge but it is linguistically derived from "Orf," which means tradition. Since "Marifa," i.e. "knowledge", is linguistically derivable from "Orf", i.e. tradition, it follows that, according to Arabic language, knowledge resides in tradition. Here, the word "Marifa" implies the inherited information that knowledge exists in tradition, given that in Arabic language the word "knowledge" is linguistically derivable from the word "tradition."

The examples, which reveal that Arabic language is an inherited set of information, are almost endless due to the strong derivative process of Arabic language. For instance, the Arabic word "Ta-wa-sol", i.e. communication, is derived from "Wa-sa-la", i.e. "he connected". Therefore, from the viewpoint of Arabic language, communication is that mechanism which connects people with each other. This indicates that the Arabic word "Ta-wa-sol" contains the inherited information that communication is the process which connects people. Another example is the following: in Arabic, the word "In-saan", i.e. human being, is derived from "Na-sa", i.e. "he forgot". Thus, according to Arabic language, a human being is that who forgets. Yet those who forget are those who think. Therefore, from the perspective of Arabic language, a human being is that who thinks. Here, the Arabic word "In-saan" possesses the inherited information that human beings are those who think and forget. All of this proves that Arabic language is a set of inherited information, such that almost each word in Arabic contains some interesting information due to the strong derivative process of Arabic language. In other words, Arabic language provides definitions and analyses of many concepts, leading it to be an inherited set of information.

The Arab-Islamic Communication Patterns

The fact that Arabic language is an inherited set of information is related to the basic Arab-Islamic communication patterns. Many scholars, such as Edward T. Hall and Joerg Schmitz, discussed some main properties of the Arab-Islamic communication methods. For example, the Arab-Islamic communication pattern is high-context, implicit, and deductive. The Arab-Islamic communication style is high-context in the sense that most Arabs and Muslims tend to assume that others know the background information. Hence, they don't usually elaborate on the background information when they communicate. The Arab-Islamic communication style is also implicit rather than explicit in the following important sense: most Arabs and Muslims tend to imply what they intend to convey instead of expressing themselves clearly and explicitly. In the Arab-Islamic culture, the hidden and implied messages are the basic messages which one aims to communicate.

The Arab-Islamic communication is also deductive rather than inductive in the sense that most Arabs and Muslims express general statements when they communicate instead of providing details with regard to the topic under discussion [4]. For instance, they might say: "The economy in Dubai is good". But they don't usually convey the details about what kind of economic markets they are talking about, and tend not to mention examples in order to support their claim.

Now, Arabic language played an essential role in forming the Arab-Islamic communication patterns. Since almost each Arabic word contains interesting inherited information, it follows that if someone is using Arabic language to communicate with others, then one does not need to be explicit and elaborate on the information one wants to transmit. In other words, given that Arabic language is a huge set of inherited information, it follows that when we use Arabic to communicate, we are already transmitting a lot of information, implied in Arabic language itself, even without mentioning detailed information. Hence, there is no need to be explicit and elaborative. This is why the Arab-Islamic communication patterns are high-context, implicit and deductive, such that most Arabs and Muslims don't transmit maximum amount of explicit information when they communicate. All of this shows that Arabic language formed the Arab-Islamic communication patterns, and that when one's language possesses a huge amount of inherited information then one's communication patterns are high-context, implicit and deductive.

In conclusion, Arabic language led the Arab-Islamic culture to gain its basic characteristics, such as being past-oriented and collectivistic. And Arabic language also shaped the Arab-Islamic communication patterns. It seems that we are what our language is.

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Short Biography

Hassan Ajami is an author and freelance journalist. He teaches Arabic language and Islamic philosophy at Arizona State University. Ajami published nineteen books in Arabic covering different topics, such as philosophy, culture, literature, and language. He also published three books in English entitled "Arab-Islamic Communication & Arabic language", "A Short Philosophical and Poetic Journey", and "A Lost Sufi: Philosophical Poems".