

Cúcara Mácara! Arabic influence in the Spanish language

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This article was prompted by a conversation in English between an Arabic speaker and a Spanish speaker. “Say that again!” cried the Arabic-speaker. She recognized the Arabic words in a Spanish rhyme as those she used as a child in the United Arab Emirates. The traditional rhyme: “Tin marín, dedó pingüé, cúcara mácara, títiri fue!” (عكر بكر كار كركر دين دلوه...) is used by both Spanish and Arabic speaking children when choosing a leader or assigning a role during play.

This event led both of us to learn more about the Arabic influence in Spanish. Although it is a fairly well known fact that the Spanish language has a distinctive Arabic root and that many words used in daily speech are derived from Arabic, it is less known what implications this fact could have for contemporary Arabic speakers. We asked what could be the importance of learning about the Arabic contributions to other languages, for an eight year old Emirati child or for a university student, for example. This article suggests some ideas regarding this question.

THE HISTORY OF ARABIC INFLUENCE ON SPANISH

The conquest of over three fourths of the Iberian Peninsula by the Muslim Moors in the year 711 signified a struggle of conquest and re-conquest of the territory of what is now Spain until 1492. The introduction of Arabic words into Spanish began in earnest during the eighth century and had a lasting contribution mostly into the Spanish vocabulary. For example, words that start with “al” such as álgebra, alcoba (bedroom), and others like jefe (boss) from the Arabic word khalifa (chief), and fulano (somebody) from the Arabic fulan (someone) are an enduring testament to the influence of Arabic (Erichsen, 2006; Kaye, 2005). To a lesser extent, Arabic also influenced expressions and phrases like si Dios quiere (God willing), and Dios le guarde (may God keep you) derived from the Arabic Insh’allah, which means God willing in English (Huffman, 1977; Penny, 2002); and the construction of sentences like ojalá que llueva (may God will that it will rain). The table below illustrate some of the vocabulary connection between Arabic and Spanish (Saint Ignatius High School, 2004).

ARABIC TO ENGLISH		SPANISH TO ENGLISH	
الزيت	Oil	Aceite	Oil
الزيتون	Olive	Aceituna	Olive
المناخ	Climate	Almanaque	Almanac
الشطرنج	Chess	Ajedrez	Chess
واحد	One	Uno	One
اثنين	Two	Dos	Two
انا	I	Yo	I
هو	He	Él	He
أستاذ	You	Usted	You
الخمرة	Rug	Alfombra	Rug
بِزَا	District; Neighborhood	Barrio	District; Neighborhood
الضبيعة	Village	Aldea	Village
العقرب	Scorpion	Alacrán	Scorpion
القنطرة	Bridge or Street Drain	La alcantarilla	Street Drain
الديوان	Customs office	La aduana	Customs office
حُرٌّ	Free, Available money	Ahorrar	To save
المخزن	Store	El almacén	Store
التعريفية	Tariff	La tarifa	Tariff
الكُنْيَة	Surname	La alcurnia	Surname
النقل	Transport	El anaquel	Transport
بِزَا	Overland	El barrio	Neighborhood, Outside
السَطِيحَة	Flat roof	La azotea	Flat roof
حَتَّى	Until	Hasta	Until
مسكين	Poor, Wretched	Mezquino	Poor, Wretched
إِنْ شَاءَ اللّٰه	God willing	Ojala	God willing

These Arabic words are phonetically similar to the Spanish words.

During this period, Castilian speech was on its way to displacing its competitors Arabic and Mozarabic, the latter term indicating the varieties of Hispano-Romance languages derived from Latin and widely spoken in Islamic Spain (Penny, 2002). Arabic vocabulary in Spanish is estimated at 8%. Other than Latin and Greek, Arabic is probably the biggest contributor of words into

the Spanish language, and a large portion of English-Spanish cognates that do not derive from Latin, also come from Arabic. "Besides Spanish, Arabic contributed to the vocabularies of all the European idioms and saturated many of the languages in the Muslim countries, e.g. 57% Pushto, 42% in Urdu, and 30% of Persian are made up of Arabic words and terms." (Salloum, 2004).

THREE IDEAS ON THE RELEVANCE OF THIS TOPIC FOR ARABIC STUDENTS

1. Identity

The development of personal and cultural identity is always tied to the past. "Language is inextricably linked to culture. It is a primary means by which people express their cultural values and the lens which they view the world" (Nieto, 1992, p. 153). Arabic is the native tongue of more than 200 million people worldwide and it ranks sixth among the major languages of the world. For Arabic students, such as an eight-year old child, or a college student, learning the importance of Arabic and Arab culture in a global context can only strengthen their sense of identity and worth. Recognizing that the Arabic language has been a generator of other languages will lead to students' appreciation of its value. This discovery can also motivate them to study and research history; learn about other peoples and languages; understand how languages evolve and remain alive; and most importantly, develop their awareness of how language functions.

2. Metalinguistic Awareness

Many Arabic countries are multilingual societies and present-day Arabic speakers are exposed to many languages, although Arabic and English function as "lingua franca", the language for wider communication between speakers of other languages. For example, the national goal for Emiratis citizens is to achieve Arabic-English bilingualism. The implications of this goal for the educational system are numerous and the advantages evident. There is increasing evidence of the advantage that bilinguals have over monolinguals in terms of their

metalinguistic awareness (Byalystock & Hakuta, 1988) This awareness is described by Malakoff in 1992 which is cited in (Herdina & Jessner, 2002, p. 62) as

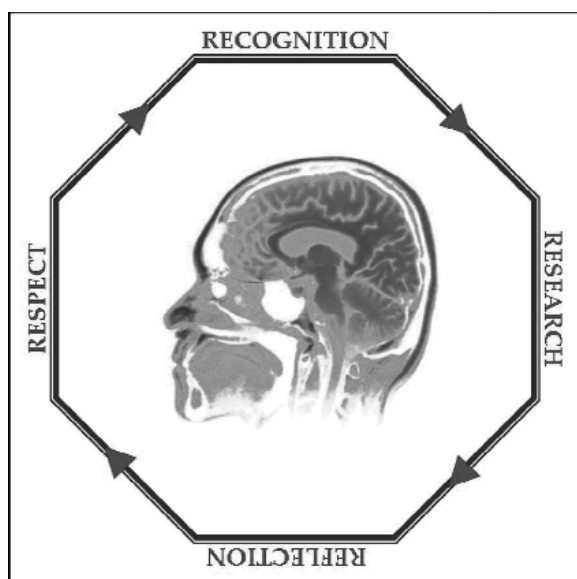
The ability to think flexibly and abstractly about language; it refers to an awareness of the formal linguistic features of language and the ability to reflect thereupon. Metalinguistic awareness allows the individual to step back from the comprehension or production of an utterance in order to consider the linguistic form and structure underlying the meaning of the utterance. To be metalinguistically aware is to know how to approach and solve certain types of problems which themselves demand certain cognitive and linguistic skills.

3. Strategies to learn a language

For Arabic students, it is important to be aware of the connection between Arabic and other languages. This awareness could greatly enhance their language learning. There are different models of gaining awareness of the language. Teachers can follow the model of Recognition, Reflection, Research, and Respect to motivate students to learn another language. This is not a fixed model, but instead is a dynamic process which can begin at any stage.

The recognition process helps teachers to guide their students to an awareness that connections between languages exist. Once the students have been hooked into this idea, they can become curious and motivated to enrich their knowledge about the connection between the given language and other languages. Ideally, students will then engage in researching the language connections, formally in schools or informally in their homes and communities. Then, teachers can

motivate students to reflect on what they find and that will help them build a connection between their language and others. Through this process the power of words, language and the culture they represent will enable students to appreciate the language learning process. Finally, in an indirect way, teachers and students will reach the stage in the process that will lead them to respect their identity and value the Arab contributions. The figure below illustrate this model.



Model of Recognition, Reflection, Research, and Respect

In practice, this means that bilingualism gives individuals the advantage of being able to compare and contrast their own realizations about “language” as a system with the new input of languages they may want to learn. Research on learning a third language renders intriguing possibilities for bilinguals because metalinguistic awareness appears to support the learning of a third language (Jessner, 1999; Jorda, 2005). Although many questions remain to be investigated, the possibilities for Emirati students to use their awareness in the learning of a third language such as Spanish are not far-fetched.

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