

A Generation of a Shifting Language Landscape: How adopting another language provides more freedoms to express for the modern Khaleeji generation

By Ali Al Saeed (Bahrain)

One question I repeatedly faced over my past ten years as a young Arab writer has been: why write in English?

Up until the moment I published my first book, I had not given it much thought. It was not a conscious decision. I simply started in English because it felt, oddly enough, natural. But over the years, I came to the realization that it was more than that.

If one were lazy, one could simply dismiss it as an after-effect of colonialism. That may be partially true, but more fundamentally, when observing current generational behavior, it has more to do with freedom of expression.

As sad as it may sound, Arabic has become a language of the oppressed. Too many restrictions applied by the conservative nature of our culture and by the society that views matters related to creative expression, or freedom of expression in general, incidental and even frivolous.

In the Gulf region as a whole, this culture of never questioning things, taking things as they are given by the higher powers – be it your father, your teacher, or your government.

This, as is often the case with Arab issues, can be traced to tribal culture, which was introduced to Bahrain over 200 years ago. As generations, and time, passed, the limitations imposed by local language led a feeling of distance and disenchantment. Younger people, influenced by Western culture, felt the need to find another form of communication to express their thoughts and ideas, one that would allow them to break of the barriers of their mother tongue.

The 70s generation grew up watching American television shows and listening to American pop music. English, as a spoken language, hadn't yet gone 'mainstream', so to speak, and few young people, if any, used English to express themselves.

Then came the 'Chicken Nugget' generation, identified by their very Western influenced lifestyle, and extensive, fluent use of the English language, both privately and publicly. Whereas this used to be viewed as an elitist practice, now it is slowly becoming the norm. My little nephews' conversation always includes English expressions, words, and terms.

Interestingly, young people realized that they could probably get away with saying things that would otherwise be viewed as sensitive or frowned upon when using English rather than Arabic. From everyday curse words to debates on controversial issues, be it religion, sex or politics, young people found a tool which they could utilize to their advantage, avoiding the wrath of hierarchy.

Writing fiction in English allows more freedom to explore such topics, as censorship is more attentive to Arabic texts. Years ago, when I was about to publish my second book, I had to get a publishing permit from the concerned authorities. Upon seeing that my manuscript was in English, the man at the Publications Directorate simply asked me what it was about, then approved it without so much as flipping through it.

Still this could also be viewed as a negative element, as it is reshaping the identity of generations to come. Younger and younger people are finding it easier to express themselves in a language other than their own.

This spread of English usage, though, hasn't translated into anything substantial in terms of literature. There are still no more than a handful of poetry and fiction books written in English by Bahrainis. These include, in addition to my works, novels from two young, female Bahraini writers, Sarah Al Shafie and Nazli Tawfeeqi as well poetry books by Hisham Alawi Al Sakin.

I am not suggesting that English could replace Arabic. The vast majority of the population of Bahrain still speaks Arabic. But English, especially for younger generations, has become an escape from a society they feel limits and constrains them when it comes to self-expression.

This is evident in the fact that many who do use English happen to be involved in the arts-artists, musicians, writers and creatives. Language is simply another tool that reflects freedom of expression, but one that, ultimately, has a significant influence in shaping a generation's identity.

What does that mean for the future of the Arabic language? Unless there is a shift in cultural and social attitude towards it, young people will continue to seek another language that they feel frees them.

Arabic as a language must first release itself from the restrictions imposed by cultural and, at times, religious, connotations. And this will only happen once we begin to challenge the current status of language, in order to be liberated, instead of constricted, by it.