

## Introduction

### A personal incentive

The idea for this paper came from an invitation in early January 2010 to be part of a special Australian episode of *Kalam El Nas*, a talk show, which is produced and presented by Marcel Ghanem (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International). The program focus was to be Lebanese in Australia from the first immigration to the present, and the intention was to have a panel of twenty people of different religious, age and occupational backgrounds. A Lebanese background was essential, and the preference was for the twenty panel members to speak in Arabic. I explained that I would not be able to do this. While I was happy to talk about my PhD topic, the history of Lebanese settlement in Australia from the 1880s to 1947, I would only be able to do this in English. The organiser agreed I could be interviewed in English but persisted in suggesting I try to speak in Arabic. After explaining several times that I would not be able to speak intelligently about my research in Arabic and faced with a repeated insistence that I do so no matter how badly, I suggested I decline to be involved. At the same time, I tried to explain that my limited Arabic was an important part of the Australian Lebanese story. In the end, I was interviewed in English but was left with the feeling of being an outsider not from Anglo or mainstream Australians but from Lebanese and Australian Lebanese Arabic-speakers.

### The global context

Even a cursory look at the literature in the field of language maintenance, shift and loss, reveals both the complexity and the global nature of these issues.<sup>1</sup> In 2003, Garcia noted that:

...there has been an overwhelming amount of new research that not only attempts to explain reasons for maintenance and shift to the language of the dominant society, as defined in terms of prestige, political or economic criteria, but also explores how educational institutions, the media, ethnic language literacy, family relationship networks can be employed to encourage maintenance and language revitalization.<sup>2</sup>

The modern world has been characterised by the development of the nation state and an accompanying centralization of power, as well as by 'an increasing mobility of people, goods, and information', which has driven 'a powerful trend toward cultural uniformity and extinction of local languages'.<sup>3</sup> Arguably, these trends have been accelerated by contemporary globalisation and there is general agreement that 'minority languages all over the world are giving way to more dominant languages such as English, Mandarin, and Spanish'.<sup>4</sup> However, 'in the face of that threat, groups of concerned professionals

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: MaryEllen García, 'Recent Research on Language Maintenance', *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 23 (2003), pp. 22–43.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Garland, 'Can Minority Languages Be Saved? Globalization vs. Culture', *Futurist*, July-August (2006), pp. 31-36.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.

—linguists, educators, policy makers, and the like — are doing what they can to counter language shift'.<sup>5</sup> In 2002, for example, the second national Heritage Languages in America conference was organized by the Center for Applied Linguistics and the National Foreign Language Center. This conference 'brought together language researchers, language teachers, and other language professionals concerned with preserving and maintaining these languages for future generations and as a resource for the nation'.<sup>6</sup> Garland isolates three factors he considers essential for the survival of a language: it must be 'the language of education for the young; the language of commerce and the language of official government'.<sup>7</sup> If he is correct, it is easy to see why minority migrant languages may not survive past the second generation because, generally, they are excluded from all three categories.

According to Abu Laban:

Language has often been referred to as the greatest of social inventions. It facilitates communication and the establishment of common understanding, it serves as a vehicle for the transmission of the cultural heritage of the group and it provides a focus for cultural identity development.<sup>8</sup>

Language preservation is considered important for many reasons including: the relationship of language to ethnic identity; the provision by language of a direct connection with a person's heritage; and the improvement of international communication.<sup>9</sup> Whenever languages come into contact, language maintenance, loss or shift occurs, so language survival has been an issue as long as humans have travelled the Earth. The outcome of this interaction varies and is dependent on the historical conditions of contact. When a people is colonised by another, for example, the occupier generally enforces its language as the dominant language. In settler societies, immigrants are usually expected to forgo their original language and adopt the official language of the host society.

### **The Australian context**

Australia is both a colonial and settler society and with approximately 150 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages still in use and more than 100 languages other than English spoken by its immigrant population is linguistically diverse.<sup>10</sup> However, a process of language shift whereby one or more languages become dominant at the expense of others is certainly the case in Australia where:

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<sup>5</sup> Garcia, 'Recent Research', pp. 22-23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Notes 1, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Garland, 'Can Minority Languages Be Saved?', p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Baha Abu Laban, *An Olive Branch on the Family Tree: the Arabs in Canada* (Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Stewart, the Multiculturalism Directorate, Department of the Secretary of State & the Canadian Government Publishing Centre, Supply and Services, 1980), p. 181

<sup>9</sup> Garcia, 'Recent Research', p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Francesco Cavallaro, 'Language Maintenance Revisited: An Australian Perspective', *Bilingual Research Journal*, Fall 2005, 29, 3, p. 562.

The language spoken by the original inhabitants of this country and those spoken by its immigrants have all lost out to English, and most of these languages are close to becoming extinct (in the case of aboriginal languages) or relegated to the status of foreign languages with no native speakers living in Australia.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of immigrant languages a multiplicity of factors including age, gender, education, position in the family, density of group settlement and length of residence in the new homeland are identified as contributing to language maintenance or attrition in both first and subsequent generations. In this paper, I am concerned with the history of what happened to Arabic when it came into contact with Australia's dominant language, English.

### **Arabic speakers in Australia**

Although records show Arabic speaking immigrants arrived in Australia by the early 1880s, it is only recently that Arabic has been considered a significant community language. Migration has always been an important component of European settlement in Australia, but it was in the years immediately after World War Two that the greatest influx of non-English-speaking migrants arrived.<sup>12</sup> However, according to Clyne and Kipp, significant numbers of Arabic speakers only arrived in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>13</sup> Based on an analysis of language use from the Australian Censuses (1996 and 2001), Clyne and Kipp concluded that the use of European languages has declined while other languages, in particular those from Asia, have increased in importance; furthermore, languages 'such as Vietnamese, Arabic, Cantonese, and Mandarin are becoming the growth languages in the younger generation'.<sup>14</sup> These observations confirmed their 1997 prediction that without major immigration from 'Australia's traditional European source countries, Arabic, Cantonese, and Vietnamese will gradually displace Italian and Greek as the most widely used community languages'.<sup>15</sup> In contemporary Australia, Arabic is not only a significant community language, it is also as a language with an 'exceptional' history of maintenance.<sup>16</sup>

In twenty-first century Australia, the status of Arabic as a noteworthy community language characterised by low shift contrasts sharply with its fate in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Australia.<sup>17</sup> In his study of three generations of Lebanese Christians in Australia, Jim McKay, found 'fluency and use of Arabic' was 'almost totally confined to first generation migrants', and while 'a few second generation individuals reported they could speak Arabic, hardly any of them used it regularly'.<sup>18</sup> While 2% of third generation respondents in McKay's research sample were able to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 561.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Clyne and Sandra Kipp, 'Trends and Changes in Home Language Use and Shift in Australia, 1986-1996', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 18, 6 (1997) pp. 451-473.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 452.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 471.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Clyne and Sandra Kipp, 'Australia's Community Languages', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 180 (2006), pp. 7-21.

<sup>16</sup> Clyne and Kipp, 'Trends and Changes', p. 472.

<sup>17</sup> In Australia, language shift refers to the replacement of a first language by English.

<sup>18</sup> Jim McKay, *Phoenician Farewell: Three Generations of Lebanese Christians in Australia* (Melbourne: Ashwood House, 1989), p. 99.

speak Arabic fluently, only ‘very few showed any interest in learning it’.<sup>19</sup> Although they generally agreed the loss of Arabic was unfortunate, according to McKay, the majority of respondents were ‘resigned...to the fact that Arabic had been irretrievably lost’.<sup>20</sup> In a case study of the descendants of early Lebanese immigrants (1880 to 1947) to Queensland, I found isolation from other Lebanese as a result of dispersed settlement patterns; the need to speak English to survive economically and socially and also to achieve citizenship; and an observed intolerance towards the use of any language other than English significantly contributed to the loss of Arabic as a viable language for the second and third generations.<sup>21</sup> Taking into account the effectiveness of the *Immigration Restriction Act* (1901) which ended free immigration of Lebanese to Australia ensuring the number of Lebanese settlers was always small, and the characteristically dispersed settlement pattern of the early Lebanese immigrants in all the colonies/states, it is not surprising Arabic has only recently been considered a significant community language in Australia.

### **Broadening the research**

While, as discussed above, I considered the issue of language maintenance and loss in research for my PhD thesis via a second and third generation questionnaire and also in oral history interviews, my sample was based on Lebanese immigrants and their descendants who had settled in Queensland. In order to broaden this research a questionnaire focusing on language maintenance and loss was distributed via the Australian Lebanese Historical Society network.

### **The Sample**

Forty-four people responded to the questionnaire. As well as answering the questions, many added quite detailed comments. A forty-fifth response was in prose form and is therefore not included in the quantitative data.

**Table 1: Birth year of respondents**

<b>Decade of birth</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
1920-1929	2	4.5
1930 -1939	14	32.0
1940-1049	13	29.5
1950-1959	7	16.0
1960-1969	3	7.0
1970-1979	5	11.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: Language maintenance and loss survey, 2010.*

As table 1 shows, twenty-nine or 66% of respondents were born before 1950, an era of aggressive assimilationism; ten of the respondents(23%) were born in the 1950s and 1960s, a period marked by the massive, post World War Two immigration intake; and five (11%) were born in the 1970s. Respondents born in the 1970s grew up and attended school in a period of significant change in Australian society including the end of the

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 100.

<sup>21</sup> Anne Monsour, *Not Quite White: Lebanese and the White Australia Policy 1880 to 1947* (Brisbane: Post Pressed, 2010), p. 134.

White Australia Policy, the development of the policy of multiculturalism, and an increasing tolerance of languages other than English. Although only a small percentage of the sample, it will be interesting to see whether there is any major difference in the experiences of this cohort and those born in earlier periods.

**Table 2: Birthplace of grandparents**

Number of grandparents born in Lebanon and Syria	Number	%
Four	27	61
Three	4	9
Two	6	14
One	6	14
No Answer	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source: Language maintenance and loss survey, 2010.*

As indicated in table two, 98% of the sample had one or more grandparent/s born in Lebanon or Syria. The majority, 61%, had four grandparents born in Lebanon or Syria and another 9% had three grandparents born in this region. Both parents of just over half the sample were born in Lebanon; and 73% (32) had at least one parent who was born in Lebanon or Syria (table three).

**Table 3: Birthplace of parents**

	Number	%
Both parents born in Lebanon or Syria	23	52.3
Both parents born in Australia	8	18.0
Both parents born overseas but only one in Lebanon	1	2.3
One parent born in Australia and birthplace of other parent not included	2	4.5
One parent born in Lebanon or Syria and the other in Australia	7	16.0
One parent born in Australia and other born in a country other than Lebanon or Syria	1	2.3
One parent born in Lebanon and birthplace of other not included	1	2.3
Birthplace of parents not included	1	2.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: Language maintenance and loss survey, 2010.*

## Results

### Contact with Arabic speakers

Most respondents reported having had some contact with a grandparent although in some cases only for a short time or intermittently. While eight had no contact with an Arabic-speaking grandparent, thirty-six (82%) had some contact with at least one Arabic-speaking grandparent (table 4). Twenty-five (57%) reported that their grandparent/s had spoken to their parent/s in Arabic; two said the grandparent/s spoke in both English and

Arabic; and one that their grandparent/s sometimes spoke in Arabic (table 5). The sixteen negative responses were due either to having had no contact with grandparents or because their grandparent/s spoke only in English. These responses suggest more than half the sample (28) had a parent who could understand some Arabic. Similarly, the figures in table 5 show that while fourteen reported they were not spoken to in Arabic; twenty-three said they were, and seven said their grandparent/s or parents sometimes spoke to them in Arabic. However, while these answers allow quantification, they do not indicate the degree of exposure to the Arabic language and more detailed research would be required to gauge this. Nevertheless, the written comments made by respondents shed some light on the extent of their exposure to Arabic (table 6). The year of birth of the respondent is recorded so it is possible to discern whether there are any significant variations based on the different historical periods.

**Table 4: Contact with Arabic-speaking grandparent/s**

	<b>Number</b>
<b>Yes</b>	36
<b>No</b>	8
<b>Total</b>	44

*Source: Language maintenance and loss survey, 2010.*

**Table 5: Contact with an Arabic speaker.**

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes and No Sometimes</b>	<b>Total</b>
Grandparent/s spoke to parent/s in Arabic	25	16	3	44
Grandparent/s or parent/s spoke to respondent in Arabic	23	14	7	44

*Source: Language maintenance and loss survey, 2010.*

The comments in table 6 show that whatever the decade of birth, the degree of exposure to Arabic depended on having family members in Australia who communicated in Arabic, particularly in the home; time spent in Lebanon; and the presence of other, non- family, Arabic speakers. A respondent born in 1930, for example, heard ‘much Arabic’ spoken when his grandmother had ‘other elderly Lebanese people’ visiting, but language shift had already occurred as his father ‘had long since given up speaking Arabic to his mother’. Obviously, exposure to Arabic is greater when there is a settlement of Arabic speakers within a geographic locality. When this occurs, it is possible for the first generation to maintain their first language sometimes as their only language. This was true for a respondent born in 1977 whose maternal grandparents only spoke Arabic and had limited English despite having lived in Australia for many years. This was possible because they lived in a part of Sydney that had a large Arabic-speaking community. However, as these results and comments show, it should not be assumed that in Australia, Arabic-speaking grandparents, or indeed parents, necessarily spoke to grandchildren/children in Arabic.

**Table 6: Exposure to Arabic**

<b>Year of birth</b>	<b>Comments</b>
1930	Grandmother spoke Arabic to other elderly Lebanese people who visited our hotel in Atherton. I heard therefore much Arabic spoken among them but my father had long since given up speaking Arabic to his mother.
1932	Rarely. Mostly in shop to avoid customers understanding.
1933	I was born in Australia after my parents migrated. They never spoke English but my siblings and I responded in English and Arabic.
1933	Minimal to my parents but little to me as my parents spoke English fluently by the time I was born. Because of their business first as hawkers and then in the hotel business even though they spoke English poorly it was considered bad for business if they spoke in Arabic in the presence of customers.
1940	Yes. My paternal grandmother migrated to Australia with us in 1946; I was 6 years old when my family came to Australia. My father first migrated in 1927.
1941	The only time they spoke in Arabic was when they didn't want their children to understand.
1941	On my father's side my grandmother only spoke Arabic, very limited English. My mother's family lived in America and my grandmother spoke Arabic and English to my mother. My grandmother and aunts in Australia did; my American grandmother spoke to us in English.
1942	Yes, only had paternal grandmother in Australia and she died when I was only 7 years old. Grandmother spoke little or no English. I had little time with her.
1942	Yes, maternal grandmother spoke only Arabic; maternal grandmother spoke good English.
1945	No, one of them was born here and they all worked hard to be fluent in written and spoken English.
1947	Granny I. spoke in Arabic but Sittee S. spoke mainly in English with a spattering of Arabic words. I suspect dad's father spoke Arabic as dad had more than a spattering of Arabic. Granny I. did but she also spoke in broken English and as we lived with her I could often understand what she was saying but couldn't answer her in Arabic. Sittee S. didn't except for the odd word especially when she was excited or wanted to make a point. We didn't see Sittee S. as much as she lived in Sydney so I am not sure how much Arabic she spoke but I don't recall her speaking it fluently.
1947	Occasionally in presence of Lebanese or relating to Lebanese people.

1949	Yes, maternal grandmother came to Australia at around 80 years of age with the family but lived in Bathurst, NSW, whilst we lived in Dubbo, NSW. We saw her about six times a year during school holidays and special events.
1951	<p>Yes. Both my giddes were dead by the time I was old enough to have such memories. My maternal grandmother lived with us... I only ever recall her speaking in Lebanese (my parents referred to the language as Arabic) but she must have spoken or understood some English because we kids spoke to her in English and she seemed to understand. Mum and dad always spoke to her in Lebanese as I recall. My paternal grandmother lived in Sydney and we did not see much of her but from my visits (usually with dad) I remember her speaking both English (to me) and Lebanese (to dad and others).</p> <p>No. Never. Mum would not even tell me what a word meant when I asked, although, when I got older she taught me the words for things like milk and bread and olives. My recollection is that mum, in particular, wanted us to fit in. She made sure that we did all the things the other kids did and seemed particularly concerned that we participated in any event that the nuns, brothers and priests were involved in (things like working bees at school, sports days, being an altar boy, school plays, religious events etc). I really don't believe that it was all about religion – she was much smarter than that – we all (well at least I did) had teachers and priests who were racist and she would not have wanted to give them any reason to come down on us or treat us any different from the other kids. As I got older and talked to mum about things, she would tell me, effectively, 'to keep wise but let them think you are stupid'. She also did this with other Lebanese who did not want to mix with the family and I still use this trick to this very day. She was a really smart woman and no one ever put one over her unless she had good reason to let them.</p>
1952	Yes. Grandmother could not speak English; Yes. Mother could not speak English until later.
1955	Sometimes, not often. As my grandparents were born in Lebanon they were more likely to speak sometimes in Arabic...Not often, only a few words here and there.
1956	Yes, paternal grandfather and maternal grandmother; yes, my Arabic was good when my grandfather was alive.
1963	Yes. Grandparents spoke to parents in Arabic but maternal grandmother spoke to me in English. They lived in the country. I believe they learnt so they could operate their family business; paternal grandparents had older children who spoke English for them, in the city.
1966	Parents spoke Arabic only.
1968	Yes, my grandparents had no English only Arabic and French; yes, I was only in Lebanon for one year from age 3-4.
1971	Yes, communicated with grandmother in Arabic.

1972	Yes to both.
1973	Yes to both.
1977	Yes, only in Arabic; Yes, only in Arabic. I had limited contact with my paternal grandparents because they lived in Lebanon. My grandfather came to Australia in his 90s after my grandmother passed away and he lived here for a year before he passed away. They could only speak Arabic. My maternal grandparents have lived in Sydney for many years; however their English is limited due to the large Arabic speaking communities in their area. They only speak Arabic and their expectation has always been that I should adapt to improve our communication.
1977	No. I only knew my maternal grandmother. She spoke to my mother in English but would occasionally use Arabic for some things. My mother's grandparents only spoke to her in Arabic that is how she is fluent in Arabic now. They did not speak to me in Arabic; only used some Arabic words.

Source: *Language maintenance and loss survey, 2010.*

## Arabic skills

### Speaking

Only 7% of respondents described themselves as fluent Arabic speakers. One third said they spoke no Arabic, while 57% spoke 'a little'. A higher proportion of the sample reported an ability to understand Arabic: 20% could understand 'a lot', and just over 50%, 'a little'. Most of the respondents who said they could speak Arabic were born in the 1970s. One respondent born in 1940 reported being a fluent Arabic speaker but she had married in Lebanon in 1967 and lived there until 1980. It is also possible some of the respondents who reported a limited ability to speak Arabic may have been able to speak it as children. This ability is often lost once they leave the family home unless they marry an Arabic speaker or live in an Arabic-speaking community. So when older respondents say they speak only a little Arabic, it may be that unlike the younger respondents they no longer have parents and extended family with whom to communicate in Arabic. It is also worth noting that respondents who said they could speak Arabic made it clear they were not literate in Arabic as they were unable to read and write in the Arabic language. In my earlier research (table 7.2), a similar proportion of respondents (7%) were able to speak Arabic fluently; a higher proportion (44%) said they spoke no Arabic; 11 % could only speak a few words; and 36% could speak a little.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, a higher percentage of the current sample could speak a little Arabic (57%) and an additional 4% reported being fluent even though they considered themselves only able to speak 'a little'.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, pp. 134 & 135.

**Table 7: Ability to speak Arabic**

	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
Fluently	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>
A little but fluently	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>
A little	<b>25</b>	<b>57</b>
None	<b>14</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source: Language maintenance and loss survey, 2010.*

**Table 7a: Ability to speak Arabic**

	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
Fluently	7	7
A little	37	36
Very little	11	11
None	45	44
No answer	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source: 2nd/3rd Generation Questionnaires, 2004*

Respondents specified many of the factors identified in language studies as contributing to language shift and/or loss. Several cited lack of practice and limited or no contact with Arabic speakers:

Growing up in a small country town, the closest Lebanese were 40 miles away. Though my contemporaries in Sydney do not speak anymore [Arabic] than me.

My fluency has diminished from lack of practice.

After leaving home for tertiary studies in Sydney, I spoke less Arabic and then married an Australian and moved to Deniliquin, NSW, and spoke very little Arabic.

Less and Less as the years have gone on and I have not mixed a lot with my extended family since I had my own family.

Others noted the lack of opportunity to formally learn the language; the pressure to assimilate, and language shift within the family:

Privately they conversed in Arabic but by the time I was a toddler and learning to speak, my parents and the large extended family (Dad was one of 11 children) all spoke English well.

Both parents spoke Arabic but were keen to assimilate and did not encourage children to speak Arabic.

The following comment highlights the impact of a person’s position in the family on the acquisition of their parent’s first language:

An elderly nun who taught my father and his older siblings in primary school said she remembered the oldest child starting school being unable to speak English although she was born in Australia. My father, the youngest was unable to speak Arabic.

This observation which reflects the experience within many families and suggests significant variations within the same generation highlights the complicities involved in understanding language maintenance and shift. Stevens and Ishizawa have found for example that ‘the oldest child in the household is significantly more likely to use a minority language than his or her younger siblings’; and also that ‘language shift can occur over time within one household’.<sup>23</sup> They argue the “three-generation” model of mother-tongue shift whereby the first generation speaks a non-English first language, the second is bilingual, and the third learns only English, is too simplistic to fully account for variations in the life experiences of the individuals within immigrant families.<sup>24</sup> The ability to speak Arabic was attributed to visits to Lebanon, marriage to an Arabic speaker, and living with someone who only spoke and understood Arabic. The distance between being a fluent speaker of Arabic and being literate was noted. Because spoken Arabic is different to written Arabic, learning to read and write is a huge challenge for the second generation and one which is rarely fulfilled.

### Understanding

**Table 9: Ability to understand Arabic**

	Number	%
<b>A lot</b>	9	20.4
<b>A little</b>	23	52.3
<b>None</b>	12	27.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source: Language maintenance and loss survey, 2010.*

In my original case study, 44% of respondents could not speak Arabic at all, but only 27% said they did not understand any Arabic.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, while only 7% could speak Arabic fluently, almost four times as many (25%) said they understood the language. Similarly, in the current study, a higher proportion of the sample reported an ability to understand rather than to speak Arabic: 20% could understand ‘a lot’, and just over 50%, ‘a little’. This discrepancy is possible because even if the first generation speak Arabic to their children and grandchildren, over time, the immigrants learn some English and knowing their parents/grandparents can understand, children who are spoken to in Arabic respond in English. As a result, later generations develop the ability to understand but not speak their parent’s first language. A additional difficulty in relation to understanding Arabic is that formal spoken Arabic is different to colloquial Arabic. So a person who

<sup>23</sup> Gillian Stevens and Hiromi Ishizawa, ‘Variations among Siblings in the Use of a Non-English Language’, *Journal of Family Issues*, 28, 8 (2007), pp. 1008-1025.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1022.

<sup>25</sup> Monsour, *Not Quite White*, pp. 134 -135.

understands conversational Arabic will not necessarily understand the Arabic news or a speech in formal Arabic.

### Learning Arabic

Approximately 48% of respondents had made an attempt to learn Arabic While some respondents who had not tried to learn Arabic explained there was just not enough time in busy lives or nowhere to learn, others believed it was irrelevant because there was ‘nobody to talk it to’ or inappropriate in Australia:

Preferred to speak “Australian” in Australia, which I believe all migrants should do.’

No. There are far more significant and more important languages for Australians, Indonesian, Mandarin and Japanese for example.

Respondents who attempted to learn Arabic did so in a variety of ways depending on what was available and to varying degrees of satisfaction. However, their efforts illustrate a conscious desire to maintain some knowledge of their parents/grandparents first language.

**Table 10: Attempts to learn Arabic**

Year of birth	Comments
1930	Yes. Tried “Teach Yourself” books but no one to demonstrate pronunciation.
1933	Yes. At university, the local Catholic priest in Brisbane tried to teach me but I was too old at the time and of course could not read or write Arabic at the time so could not study in between lessons as I had done in Latin and French at Senior level.
1936	Attended a summer school at university but not for long.
1941	Yes, WEA in Sydney found it very difficult as it was not the same dialect as we spoke and I was always being corrected with my pronunciation. Learnt to read and write alphabet but once again if you don’t use it, you forget.
1942	Yes. I attempted to learn to write it in London in 1976 –had little success.
1942	Yes. Working in Kuwait for 3 years, took lessons and I could just about get around with my Arabic at that time, 1975-1978.
1947	I went to TAFE about 15 years ago to a 6 week course taught by a woman from Sudan who spoke Arabic and many other languages fluently. I found many of the phrases she taught us different to the ones mum and dad spoke when we were younger.
1947	Yes. Unfortunately the community teacher was Egyptian and taught too quickly (particularly the writing).I did not find it a help. The words were often different from what I grew up to understand.
1947	Yes. At St George Cathedral with Fr N. Mansour.
1949	Yes. Studied Arabic for 6 months @ Sydney University in 1975 but found it too difficult with working full time. My sister and I started together. She lasted a little longer than I.

1949	Yes. Fr Malouf at St Clement's Church, South Brisbane started classes for children (I was 10-11 yrs) on the weekends, but they fizzled out due to kids' lack of interest and other competing interests.
1951	Yes. I purchased a cassette Arabic language program but found it too hard, particularly as I had no one around that spoke the language. I would still like to learn as it would help in my communications with my relatives in Syria.
1952	Yes. Tried a few different courses and also self teach courses. When I was really keen to learn it was difficult to find competent teachers and courses which were appropriate. Not too academic and the relevant dialect. Now a bit too lazy.
1954	Yes. I enrolled in a course in Arabic in Damascus and did 4 weeks, 1 day a week for 1 hour a day. I did not complete the course.
1968	Yes. Did a 9 week course recently but lacked the time to study and so made little progress. Formal written Arabic does not compare with spoken Arabic as it does in the English language.
1972	Yes. Saturday morning private classes.
1973	Yes. I attended classes at church as a child.
1977	Yes. I took a continuing education course at the University of Sydney in Modern Standard Arabic – Beginners and Level One. Then I did an additional course there for conversational Arabic.
1977	<p>Yes. My parents sent me to what we called 'Lebanese school' on Saturdays for 9 years. I began at the age of 4 at my own insistence because my older brother attended and I thought I was missing out on something. I wasn't impressed with their teaching method. The teachers were nuns who had recently arrived from Lebanon and could not speak English. I'm sure they did the best they could in their circumstances, however they had very little understanding of Australian life and an inability to connect with their Australian Lebanese students. The students that did well in their school already knew Arabic because they spoke it at home.</p> <p>Lebanon has many problems but it also has some marvellous sites and a thriving arts and cultural sector that I believe language teachers should embrace and incorporate into their teaching method. If you fall in love with a place or culture then you are inspired to learn the language. The Arabic teachers only spoke of religious sites in Lebanon. As most of them joined their religious order from an early age they may not have had much exposure to the diversity of Lebanon and perhaps were unable to share such experiences.</p> <p>Also I think vocabulary needs to be taught. I remember showing my Italian books to my Arabic teacher and explaining the success of having an evolving vocabulary list that is tested each week. The teacher followed through for one week and then reverted to her previous teaching method.</p>

Source: *Language maintenance and loss survey, 2010.*

It is obviously not enough for parents to want to transmit their first language to the next generation or for the children to want to learn. Being literate in a language does not mean a person can teach that language; parental interest and support, exposure to the language,

and well trained language teachers are essential ingredients in the transmission of language skills:

Have noticed with other language backgrounds where one parent wants to maintain first language with their children that it requires a strong and consistent commitment to formal as well as informal teaching of the language and a lot of immersion experiences are often incorporated. This is much easier now than it was when I was a child. Multimedia is also very useful.

My experience of Arabic education was terrible. I was taught by nuns with an inability to engage with their students and inspire the learning of Arabic or develop a curiosity in Lebanon. I studied Italian throughout my primary and secondary school education (as well as French and German for a few years) and excelled. Various teachers had the ability to capture my imagination and not only taught language but inspired a deep rooted desire to travel to Italy and Europe.

### **Attitudes to Arabic**

Exactly half of the current respondents thought their parents did want them to speak and understand Arabic, while a significant proportion, 34%, believed their parents did not want them to do so (table 11). In previous research using Queensland as a case study, I found that approximately 40% felt their parents would have liked them to learn Arabic, and 55%, much higher than the results from the current sample, believed their parents did not. Perhaps the variation in these findings reflects changing attitudes resulting from the policy of multiculturalism whereby second languages were, to some extent at least, actually encouraged.<sup>26</sup>

**Table 11: Parents' attitude to Arabic**

<b>Parents wanted you to speak and understand Arabic</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Yes</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Yes and No</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>No Answer</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source: Language maintenance and loss survey, 2010.*

In general, the parents who encouraged the use of Arabic did so to ensure their children would be able to communicate with relatives. In both samples, parents who were adamant that their children did not learn Arabic were concerned that their children fit in and do well in Australia, the country they had adopted as home:

<sup>26</sup> Jerry J. Smolicz and Margaret J. Secombe, 'Assimilation or Pluralism? Changing Policies for Minority Languages Education in Australia', *Language Policy*, 2 (2003), pp. 3–25.

Our father has a drapery business in Innisfail (North Qld) and was regarded as a foreigner and to build up his business we were only to have English in our household.

No. Mainly because at the time, the 1940s, in a very small country town; they felt it better that we spoke without an accent, not like the Greek kids.

They understood the importance of Australia being one nation. Their family came here to be Australians and to embrace this country not to be Lebanese foreigners living in Australia.

No. Mum never called us Lebanese – it was always Australian born Lebanese. That says it all.

My father told me that my grandfather was insistent that his children would only speak English and often chastised my Grandmother for speaking Greek or Arabic to the children.

They were...keen for good results in school so encouraged English competency.

They were proud of their heritage but I think they were concerned we might not 'fit in' if we spoke Arabic.

**Table 12: First language maintenance**

<b>It is important to maintain first language</b>	<b>Number</b>
<b>Yes</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Maybe</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>No answer</b>	<b>1</b>

*Source: Language maintenance and loss survey, 2010.*

As table 12 shows, a significant percentage of the sample (77%) thought it was important to maintain a person's first language, while only 11% thought it was not. As this is significantly higher than the percentage who had tried to learn Arabic, it illustrates a discrepancy between belief and practice. However rather than dismiss the belief in first language maintenance as mere sentimentality, it can also be understood as the recognition of the importance of language in relation to identity, culture and belonging.<sup>27</sup> The complexity of this issue is demonstrated in the written responses in table 13.

**Table 13: First language maintenance.**

<b>Year of birth</b>	<b>Comments</b>
1930	Yes. I appreciate that the pressure was on my grandparents to learn English as quickly as possible in order to survive economically. They were certainly successful in this, and, given that this was their life's priority, they were apparently not all that aggrieved to have let their Arabic go.
1933	Yes. It is my line of contact with loved ones in Lebanon who speak no English.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

1933	Yes. It is important as the language is the part that defines our culture.
1933	Many of my cousins from Lebanon are fluently trilingual (English, Arabic and French) and by comparison I feel very limited despite my professional qualification compared to theirs.
1936	Yes. It would have aided communication with my grandparents and would have assisted in my research.
1939	Yes. To allow one to understand one's roots and culture.
1940	Definitely. It's an asset to have another language but if unable to read and write your skill is limited.
1941	Especially if you have strong family still speaking Arabic in the house. If there is no-one around to speak with you it becomes very difficult.
1942	Yes. It is my heritage.
1942	Yes. Important though there are so many other priorities these days. My parents who came to Australia in the 1920s spoke less and less Arabic as the years went by.
1945	No. I believe in an unconstrained worldview that embraces all cultures. Language is not the force that drive's one's understanding of heritage - knowledge, family, tradition and history are those forces.
1947	As Lebanese we maintain everything else about our culture except the language. The time to learn is when one is young and able to pick it up.
1947	Yes. I am quite passionate about my background and the history of my family, therefore regard myself as Lebanese. It is important to me that I can understand and appreciate the life and experiences of my parents. Not everyone feels this way. My sister's children (one is married to a Lebanese, the other was married to an Australian of Dutch background) cannot understand Arabic and do not wish to acknowledge their Lebanese background. My daughter is half Lebanese/Greek yet is passionate about the Arabic way of life, sings in the Orthodox Church and has been to Lebanon many times with me.
1949	It would be nice but you choose priorities in life dependent on the course you take.
1949	Not particularly – I think it is a personal thing in families. In ours, they believed Australia (& English language) was good to them.
1951	I think that language is like a tool and it is not so much the language that is important as is the history (with all that entails) that is lost when a language is lost; and when we lose history we lose something of the understanding of how we got to be where we are and we lose the ability to place our social and political structures, our mores, beliefs, relationships and world view into a context that allows us to challenge those things and build on (change) what we have and know in order to get at the truth of how things are.
1951	Yes. Their language was part of who they were and part of their world view so without access to their language we are unable to really know them

1951	I guess it would not be putting too fine a point on it to say that I am dispossessed of my heritage due to the need for my parents to ‘assimilate’, not so much for their own sake but to ensure that their children had the best possible chance in a new country. Having said that, I do not feel particularly angry or upset by the fact because that was just the way it was and life is never fair – it is just life – and mine has been pretty good by any standard. If anything, I feel sorry for my parents who must have had to make some hard choices and to repress their own needs, desires, and wants, in favour of their children.
1952	I think it’s important for establishing cultural identity, being able to communicate with the nuances of the language is also important and if parents or grandparents do not have a fluent grasp of English it makes clear and respectful communication more difficult.
1954	Yes. I think language is an important part of culture. As a result it enables a better level of understanding. To be able to only speak one language makes a person one-sided. Also language enables a better communication with family who have this as their first language.
1955	Yes. It helps to keep communication between each generation.
1955	Yes but once again the reality is that there is less and less opportunity as we become more assimilated into Australian culture.
1966	No. Only because there are so many dialects, it is not in my interest to learn something that is not universal. For example, formal Arabic would perhaps be more commonly used and therefore more useful in your travels.
1968	Yes. In Europe and South America most people speak two languages. As an island nation we, in Australia, don’t appear to have the same need.
1971	Yes. I think it is very important to maintain one’s parents/grandparents first language. As it is part of one’s culture, history and heritage. Language maintenance is crucial for its survival and to retain one’s heritage
1977	Yes. Absolutely! I regret with great sadness not having my language now. It is not something to be lost, rather a precious jewel that should take the centre of family values.
1977	I think the maintenance of Arabic is important because it’s a connection to my ancestry and cultural history, but I’m not sure how it will be passed down. It’s all very well to learn a language but you need to practice regularly. Once my parents pass away there will be no one I can practice with. My husband and I speak English at home, so if we have children in the future English will be their first language

Source: *Language maintenance and loss survey, 2010.*

### **Consequences of limited Arabic skills**

The majority of the sample had not experienced negative reactions due to their level of Arabic; however, about 43% had had some negative experiences. These experiences may also explain why first language maintenance is considered important. As the selected comments in table 15 show, even the Arabic skills of younger respondents who are relatively fluent in Arabic are still at times found to be lacking.

**Table 14: Attitudes to limited Arabic**

<b>Experienced negative reactions because of inadequate Arabic</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Yes</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Yes and No</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Sometimes/a little</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>No answer</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source: Language maintenance and loss survey, 2010*

Respondents who were fluent in Arabic were positive about the benefits this had had in their lives both personally and professionally:

I did not realise the importance of my Arabic language skills until I started working full-time in the public service and it was at that point I wished I could also read and write the language... While working I used my Arabic skills for translating during various work situations, not only to Lebanese but to other Arabic speaking clients...I felt lucky and fortunate that I was able to understand and speak the language, to me it was another invaluable skill that I had and a skill I was able to use when I visited Lebanon for the first time in 2001. Being able to speak and understand Arabic helped me also to understand my Lebanese culture and traditions, as so many phrases and quotes are used during weddings, baptisms, funerals etc that being able to understand Arabic brought me closer to my culture and those of my relatives who are in my parents era who might understand English, but feel more comfortable to speak Arabic.

While some were resigned or indifferent to the loss of Arabic, many expressed regret, sadness and frustration in regards to their limited Arabic skills.

It makes me sad as it really limits the depth of communication possible with my relatives still living in Syria and Lebanon as well as depriving me from getting a deeper insight into Lebanese Middle Eastern Culture.

Would like to be more fluent and at times it would have been very useful in my work to be able to communicate more effectively.

Not being able to speak Arabic fluently is like a paralysis. I am greatly saddened by my inability to speak freely. Sometimes I feel that I am so full of fear from negative (racist) experiences growing up that my tongue gets paralysed and I cannot make the sounds. I would like to get over that fear someday. Not having my language feels like I am missing a limb. I am also frustrated by feelings of not being a real Arab or authentic – usually by other Arabs because I cannot speak the language. It is very alienating at times when I disclose my ethnicity to another Arab and they ask me to speak to “prove it” to them and I can’t. That doesn’t happen as much anymore as my confidence has grown.

**Table 15: Negative experiences due to level of Arabic**

Year of birth	Comments
1933	Often. Even when I tried to say a few words in Arabic they couldn't understand me and they commented my accent was "from the bush".
1933	Yes. I have toured extensively in Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco & turkey. Generally my inability to speak and understand Arabic has been met with scorn by the locals– because I look like an Arab!
1941	Yes, especially by older members of the community and those who have come later but obviously are from households here that primarily speak Arabic at home.
1947	Yes. 'not quite Lebanese' –at church functions (some newer Lebanese ignore you and they can be quite rude).However, many of the Lebanese born people can see that I understand much of what is said and I will ask them the meaning of certain unfamiliar words.
1951	In the past have been made to feel a bit on the outer as unable to participate in conversations with other Lebanese and Syrians.
1952	The first time I went to Lebanon some of my more sophisticated cousins on my father's side were a bit patronising. The second time a lot of people could speak English so it was a bit different.
1954	Yes (unintelligent/not quite Lebanese). I find that Lebanese/Arabic speakers in Australia other than family cannot understand the distinction between a person who can understand but can't translate this into spoken form.
1973	In Lebanon – yes and no. they love how I speak but tease that I don't speak better especially as their English is great.
1977	. I am also frustrated by feelings of not being a real Arab or authentic – usually by other Arabs because I cannot speak the language. It is very alienating at times when I disclose my ethnicity to another Arab and they ask me to speak to "prove it" to them and I can't. That doesn't happen as much anymore as my confidence has grown. . I am often made to feel inferior with my "village accent" too. I also say some words as I learnt and heard them as a child, this can be embarrassing at times too
1977	Amongst our relatives in Sydney my brothers and I were always made to feel that we were at fault for not having better Arabic skills. We were often thought of as the 'Aussies'. Our parents were often told that they did the wrong thing for not ensuring we spoke Arabic at home.

Source: *Language maintenance and loss survey, 2010.*

### **Understanding limited Arabic skills.**

When asked to explain why so many of the second and third generation have limited Arabic skills respondents provided considered and quite detailed responses. Many highlighted the need for proficiency in English for the first and subsequent generations to succeed economically and educationally and to fit into Australian society; and this is identified as an important priority in all periods. Several pointed to the pressure to assimilate and the fear of being different:

Living in a country like Australia that is founded on racism, I think fear plays a large part in people's inability to speak Arabic. My father arrived in Australia during the assimilation years; he was made to feel ashamed of who he was. Of course he was proud, but I also inherently learnt to hide certain things – including language – from non-Arab friends, especially “Aussies” (Anglo-Celtic etc).

Others suggested there was simply no need to develop Arabic language skills and often there was no opportunity because there were not enough Arabic speakers in the vicinity. Arabic was described a difficult language to learn particularly because of the need to learn classical Arabic in order to learn to read and write. Furthermore, the dispersed nature of Lebanese settlement meant many did not have access to formal classes and even when classes were provided the standard of teaching was poor. Marrying out was also identified as a reason for limited Arabic skills; and so too was the changing cycle of life:

As our parents and grandparents died and our lifestyles changed; our children grew up in a predominately English speaking community and the Arabic language was lost.

Several respondents noted that the loss of their first language was not fully realized until it was too late:

Many do not see the need to speak the language as they mix mainly with Australian people. Unfortunately they realize the loss of not practising their own Arabic too late – thus losing the background of who they really are and where they came from!

I think it is because children like to feel the ‘same’ as everyone else growing up, and are likely to have no interest in their parents’ first language – may be even embarrassed, until they are older.

Country Lebanese are usually minorities in their district and children crave to be one of the crowd. They don't want to be different so they reject the mother tongue which makes them different. By the time they mature enough to be interested and appreciate the language and heritage it is too hard (too late) to pick up the language and most, if not all, of older imported family are gone.

The following piece is one person's story but it is also representative of the collective story of early Lebanese immigrants and their children, particularly those who settled in rural Australia. As well as providing insights into the impact of assimilationist pressures, it also illustrates the determination on the part of the immigrants to settle and to become part of their Australian community.

I was born in Lockhart a tiny town in the Riverina district of NSW – 40 miles from Wagga Wagga in 1939. At the time, being foreign in a small Australian town could be difficult – although the people were friendly, they were very suspicious of our food and culture etc – and because of this, my parents, my Mother in particular, was very conscious of “fitting in” and being accepted. The two other foreign families in Lockhart were from Greece, and Mum could see the children starting school, barely able to speak English, and speaking with a distinct Greek accent – so she determined that we three children would not speak Arabic at all.

Over the years that they lived in Lockhart my parents made many, many wonderful friends, that they kept up even after moving to Sydney, and Mum was homesick for her friends when she first moved to Sydney. All our Lockhart neighbours waited for mum to deliver cabbage rolls and kibbee whenever she made them and loved our food, and she in turn learned to make a great sponge, cream puffs, etc – a great exchange of cultures.

During our teens and early twenties none of us were bothered by the fact that we couldn't speak or understand Arabic – but I know myself, after visiting Beirut in 1963, I felt very sad and bereft that I did not speak the language of my parents. As for learning it as an adult, the language, especially the written language, always presented as much too difficult to learn – so instead I turned to learning Italian, which I love. Although I do understand a little bit of Arabic – I cannot actually follow any conversation, and as I no longer hear Arabic every day I have a terrible accent when I say any word, and I mix things up a lot. Whenever I watch a movie in Arabic, I can often understand a little, before I read the subtitles, but could not understand in total.

My sister,...is married to...who was born and raised in Kousba and because of this she speaks and understands a lot of Arabic, but my brother and I do not. To say I regret this is an understatement, a language learned a child is a precious gift, and one you have forever.

### **Australia is not unique**

Noting that in European countries, and indeed in Lebanon, many people are bilingual or indeed trilingual, several respondents alluded to the question of why this is not the case in Australia. Australia, however, has more in common with Canada and the United States of America and in these countries the fate of Arabic was very similar. Most studies of early Lebanese immigrants in the United States and Canada agree the immigrants worked very hard to become fluent in the dominant language of the country and there was significant and rapid language shift.<sup>28</sup> According to Abu-Laban, the early Arab immigrants to Canada 'went about learning English with amazing zeal'.<sup>29</sup> Observing that 'extensive research' has shown 'the continued use of the mother tongue, especially the ability to read, declines with the second and subsequent generations of ethnic Canadians and the amount of time spent in Canada', Ibrahim Hayani, noted that in a sample of Canadian-respondents, 'just over one-half can speak Arabic, and no more than one in six can read it'.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Michael Suleiman observed that the children of first-generation Arabs in the United States 'were thoroughly immersed in American society and culture - and their

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<sup>28</sup> See for example: Abu-Laban, *An Olive Branch on the Family Tree*; Barbara C. Aswad, ed., *Arabic Speaking Communities in American Cities*, (New York: Centre for Migration Studies of New York, & Association of Arab-American University Graduates, 1974); Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985); Elizabeth Boosahda, *Arab-American Faces and Voices: the Origins of an Immigrant Community* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003); Michael Suleiman, ed., *Arabs in America: Building a New Future* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Abu Labnan, *An Olive Branch on the Family Tree*, p. 182.

<sup>30</sup> Ibrahim Hayani, 'Arabs in Canada: Assimilation or Integration?', in Suleiman, ed. *Arabs in America*, p. 295.

first and only language was English'.<sup>31</sup> Faced with the dominance of English, 'the key to becoming American', Alixa Naff noted that '[A]ttempts by concerned leaders and parents to teach Arabic at home, churches, mosques, private schools, and clubs were, more often than not, defeated'.<sup>32</sup> Suleiman's description of the response to assimilation pressures resonates with the Australian experience:

...in the heyday of the melting pot approach to assimilation, the Arabs in America strove to remove any differences, except perhaps food and music, that separated them from the general American population. They also neglected or chose not to teach their children Arabic or to instill into them much pride of heritage.<sup>33</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The detailed responses to this survey indicate the significance of these issues for people of Lebanese descent in Australia. There is evidence of the impact of a more positive attitude to maintaining a second language as a result of the policy of multiculturalism in the 1970s and 1980s; but what is most evident is the complexity of the issues surrounding language maintenance, shift and loss, and the need for more thorough research in relation to Arabic in Australia. A respondent born in 1920 made the following observation:

...speaking a language other than English in the earlier Australia in which I grew up indicated that that person was not mainstream Australian and if there were a pecking order then the person speaking it was regarded as being of somewhat lesser status, because they were not Anglo.

In the past becoming "Australian" also meant becoming monolingual, and while immigrants need and generally want to become proficient in English, perhaps in twenty-first century Australia we have moved closer to a position where speaking another language is not considered "un-Australian".

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Suleiman, 'Introduction', in Suleiman, ed., *Arabs in America*, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Naff, *Becoming American*, p. 324.

<sup>33</sup> Suleiman, 'Introduction', pp. 8 - 9.

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