

Portuguese Language Maintenance and Acquisition in Lebanon

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As a student in 2006 in the Portuguese School, an immersion program at Middlebury College, I was banned from speaking English. It was during this time that I stumbled upon an article written in Portuguese by Robert Khatlab about a village in Lebanon where 99% of the people spoke Portuguese. At first, I could not believe that such a place existed and decided to write to the author to learn more. My inquiries about Sultan Yaaqoub began my contact with the Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC) at Notre Dame University in Louaize, Lebanon some four years ago and led me to this country this summer without looking back.



Figure 1: The airport in Beirut – like a Cedar, strong again

I soon became fascinated about language contact between Arabic and Portuguese and decided that this would be the topic for my dissertation at the University of Texas at Austin which I wrote under the supervision of Dr. Fritz Hensey. Unfortunately, I was not able to go to Lebanon in 2006 because of the political situation so I decided to concentrate my efforts for the moment in Brazil. With the help of the University of São Paulo and a Brazilian family that took me in, I was able to research the contact of Arabic and Portuguese in Sao Paulo. I interviewed over sixty people from different backgrounds and inquired about the circumstances in which Arabic and Portuguese were used.



2. Why choose when you can have both Lebanon and Brazil?

While in Brazil, I met many wonderful Lebanese-Brazilians. They opened their homes to me, taught me the dabke, read my fortune in the coffee grounds, and introduced me to the cuisine and many other things. Through these experiences I learned more about their language and culture. After conducting linguistic interviews, I wanted more than ever to go to Lebanon. It was a dream come true to finally have the opportunity to visit and conduct interviews the first week of June through the help of the LERC.

The interviews were conducted in coffee shops, hotels, places of business and private homes. I learned that several factors affect the maintenance of Portuguese and the acquisition of Arabic, including type of work, neighborhood, whether or not friends or family used either language, and whether the language was used in religious practices.

The research first started in Beirut. The interviews included a spontaneous speech sample in Arabic and Portuguese as well as a reading which served as a control so the pronunciation of certain words could be compared.



3. At the Jurdi home; in the foreground from left to right, Roberto Khatlab, Rosa Koubeissi, Nazira Jurdi and in the background Liana El Jurdi, Soraia Cade Jurdi

The hospitality that I received in Lebanon was overwhelming! As in Brazil, people in Lebanon were eager to welcome me to their country and share their stories. Not only did I have the chance to meet Brazilians who migrated to Lebanon, but also I was able to meet children and grandchildren of Brazilians and analyze their linguistic situations.

In Lebanon, there are all sorts of linguistic phenomena occurring with regards to language maintenance and acquisition. For the most part, Brazilians of Lebanese descent who married a Lebanese and left Brazil retained Portuguese and acquired or maintained Arabic. In these cases, both Arabic and Portuguese were spoken at their home with their children, most of whom were adults and who now had children of their own. In the case of third-generation Lebanese Brazilians, reading and writing in Portuguese proved to be difficult and pronunciation was heavily distorted by Arabic.



4. Interviews in Beirut with Lebanese-Brazilians

As I conducted more interviews, other results of language contact slowly became uncovered. I met with several first-generation Brazilians who proved to have had varying linguistic experiences. I met several Brazilians who had come to Lebanon for study or work but who were not learning Arabic. Many of them lived in neighborhoods in which French or English were spoken. In the work place or school, Arabic was not used.



5. Os três amigos- Brazilians from various regions united in Lebanon



6. Jilda; the queen of Brazilian cuisine in Beirut. She does not speak Arabic and her husband does not speak Portuguese – but they make it work!

In many of the first-generation Lebanese-Brazilian homes, I was greeted by people wearing Brazilian soccer jerseys and was even offered traditional snacks as shown above with my new friend Jilda holding a plate of freshly baked pão de queijo. Many of these people preferred to speak Portuguese with me rather than Arabic and clung to the Brazilian culture.

In addition to the LERC, I also visited the Latin American Cultural Center (CECAL) at the Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik (USEK) and learned that in 2010-2011 a Portuguese language course and a Brazilian literature course will be offered to strengthen the relationship between Brazil and Lebanon.



7. Dar Al Hanan Orphanage – a truly amazing place – with the director Ihsan Hamad and Nagib Barakat

From Beirut I traveled to the Bekaa Valley. Former minister Abdel Rahim Mourad, current President of the Lebanese International University (LIU), arranged for me to be introduced to Zahle's premier institute of higher learning – the Lebanese International University (LIU). There I was given a tour of the facilities, met with students and interviewed some Lebanese-Brazilian students and employees.

A prominent Lebanese-Brazilian businessman Nagib Barakat accompanied me on my visits in Zahle and made sure that I experienced Lebanese hospitality. We visited Dar Al-Hanan, an orphanage on the same immense property of LIU where all children living there are given an opportunity to study from pre-school to university. The director of the home personally took us around the facility. It was evident from the way the children interacted with her that they had a lot of respect and appreciation for the work that she does for them.

In the afternoon, I was able to take a close look at Zahle and Sultan Yaaqoub. I visited Nagib's furniture factory, went on a tour of the beautiful countryside, was taken to a traditional Lebanese restaurant in a beautiful setting and conducted more interviews in Portuguese with Lebanese-Brazilian families.



8. They really do speak Portuguese in Lebanon –this way!

The next day I moved to Baalback and was greeted by Marcela Zein. Like Jilda, Marcela was wearing a Brazilian soccer jersey when I met her. When we walked through the town, this energetic Northeasterner was recognized by all in the community. When she passed groups, especially soccer fans, the word “Ba-ra-zil” resonated. Often she answered to her fans in Arabic and Portuguese. Not only has Marcela brought green and yellow to the land of one of the world's best preserved Roman ruins, but she has brought health and happiness to a town that only a few years before had known bloodshed.



9. Marcela teaching the children in Baalback about health and exercise

Marcela teaches exercise classes to both the young and the old of the town. While the classes she gives are in Arabic, the culture that she imparts is Brazilian. She uses both Portuguese and Arabic while in her home, and with Brazilian friends living in the town uses Portuguese. At the time of this article, no Portuguese classes were being offered in Baalback. Depending on the success of Brazil in the World Cup, perhaps Portuguese language classes will be added to the offerings at the community center where she teaches.



10. One generation teaching Arabic to another through song

In conclusion, I can say that I have barely scratched the surface concerning the contact that exists between Arabic and Portuguese in Lebanon. Much research has yet to be done especially by graduate students looking for topics to explore. Lebanon is such a linguistically rich country and my only regret is that my time there was so short. I look forward to staying in contact with the LERC and hope to have the opportunity to return soon.