Abstract: This study is an attempt to shed light on the interaction between language and the ethnic, cultural, and religious identities of Arab-Americans. It employs two focus groups consisting of Arab-Americans who share a group dialogue about the aspects of language and identity. The groups differ in terms of two variables: age and generation. Participants shared their experiences, life stories, feelings, and perspectives about the role of Arabic and English in their lives. The older participants emphasized a concern of language and ethnic identity loss among their U.S. born children, while younger participants talked about the importance of Arabic to belong and identify with first-generation parents and other Arabs in the homelands.

1.0 Introduction

This study is particularly interested in exploring the relationship between Arabic as an ethnic minority language in the United States and the ethnic, cultural, and religious composition of the Arab-American identity. In a context of language contact like the United States, minority languages of ethnic groups are prone to change, attrition, and loss. It is important to examine the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of Arab-Americans about their native language and to observe whether Arabic and English have different functions and status from each other in their lives. Therefore, a study drawing on two focus groups of Arab-Americans was constructed to attain a concentrated discussion created by and for the participants about their language attitudes in relation to their cultural, religious, and ethnic identities.

The researcher is familiar with the Muslim Arab-Americans who attend Friday prayers at the mosque, which is a congregational prayer. A noticeable phenomenon the researcher had observed in the mosque is the code-switching between Arabic and English in the Khotbah ‘lecture’ that is given every Friday. Younger Arab-Americans, especially children, demonstrate a
more frequent use of English than Arabic even when they are addressed or spoken to in Arabic. This study seeks to understand the functions each of these two languages offers in order to continue its survival in the life of the Arab-American.

Clearly, English is a mainstream language in American society. However, Arabic has a different position since it does not have the same presence English has in this society. Arabic is an ethnic minority language that functions within limited contexts. In a study using focus groups as a research method, the whole aim is to enable participants to discuss freely what they desire to share about their lives. The researcher does not intend to cultivate a set of fixed and repeated answers in order to be quantified and measured to arrive at statistical data. Alternatively, the goal is to establish a friendly environment where Arab-Americans, as the ethnic minority group the researcher is interested in exploring, can form a discussion group to share information about some features of their lives that they do not necessarily discuss often.

2.0 Literature Review

The studies reviewed provide examples of different Arab-American groups in various regional locations in the United States and different religious orientations in order to illustrate the interaction between ethnicity, cultural identity, religion, and linguistic practices. As an Arab researcher, the destiny of Arabic is a main concern, and studying the relationship between language and identity in minority groups is no doubt a way of exploring the fate of a language whether it is maintenance, attrition, or loss.

2.1 A Definition of a Community

The Arab-American community is comprised of a wide range of nationalities, religious orientations, political affiliations, and social values. In “Culture: Arab-Americans,” Nabeel Abraham and John Beierle define Americans of an Arab ancestry to be a “heterogeneous
amalgam of national and religious subgroups” who are related to each other through a shared cultural and linguistic Arab heritage (2004: 3). Within the diverse spectrum of ethnic and cultural groups in the United States, each single ethnic community consists of various smaller groupings. For instance, among the Arab-Americans, there are Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shi’a Muslims, conservatives, liberals, first generation immigrants, U.S. born generations (second, third, fourth, etc), Lebanese, Egyptians, Iraqis, Palestinians, Yemenis, and more.

Each Arab-American has a unique experience and a different life story to tell. The diverse experiences that Arab-Americans go through effectively shape the way they view themselves and their community. In “Introduction: The Arab Immigrant Experience,” Michael W. Suleiman gives an overall picture of the reactions of Arab-Americans according to the political changes over different historical eras. Sulieman summarizes how the Arab immigrants negotiate their identities in order to survive the changing realities of the world around them (1999). Arab-Americans are both Arab and American, blending a past of Eastern tradition with a present of Western modernity. Being in a democratic society, Arab-Americans can choose to represent themselves the way they deem appropriate or preferable based on their motivations, beliefs, and attitudes.

2.2 Language and Ethnic/Cultural Identity

The Arab-American community is like any other ethnic minority group in the United States when it comes to language change, attrition, or loss. The maintenance of a native ethnic tongue depends on many factors. For example, Fishman (1972) considers domain overlap as an indication of language shift, whereas domain separation is indicative of language maintenance (Boyd 1986: 99). The destiny of an ethnic mother tongue is challenged by the way its speakers perceive it whether they find it uniquely significant to function within certain settings or
replaceable by another language in all circumstances. Losing the native ethnic language is a common phenomenon among many minority groups, but it does not necessarily mean losing ethnic identity and pride.

It is feasible to conceive of a relationship between the way individuals of an ethnic group define themselves ethnically and culturally and the extent to which they use their native minority language. Investigating the connection between language and the ethnic and cultural identity of the Arab-American person extends to observing Arab-Americans’ naming practices such as choosing personal names. May Ahdab-Yehia in her article “The Detroit Maronite Community” finds that 85 percent of her respondents, Maronites: Catholic Christian Lebanese, have changed their Arabic surnames to American sounding names (1974: 145). In “The Lebanese Maronites: Patterns of Continuity and Change,” a later study Ahdab-Yehia conducts on the Maronites group, shows that changing Arabic names to European or American ones is a practice that continues in this community (1983:158). In addition to the Maronites in Detroit, some members of the Lebanese community in Springfield, Massachusetts, both Muslims and Christians, have changed their family names into American names or Anglicized ones as indicated in the article “The Arab-American Community in Springfield, Massachusetts” (Aruri 1969: 62). For example, a Muslim man named Abd Allah, meaning the ‘servant of God,’ may change his name into Abdul, meaning ‘servant of,’ which does not seem to have a complete meaning. Similarly, many Christian Arabs change their Arabic names that are found in the Bible such as Ibrahim or Butrus into Abraham and Peter, their English counterparts.

Language can be an indicator of ethnic pride and solidarity. At the same time, attrition of a native tongue does not automatically mean a weakening or a rejection of the ethnic identity. In other instances however, preferring a dominant language to an ethnic minority one could be a
result of a planned attempt to forget a part of someone’s self that can be greatly marked by language. Charles L. Swan and Leila B. Saba in their article “The Migration of a Minority” state that the language of an ethnic community is an essential element in cultural persistence (1974). Making an extra effort to maintain Arabic in the community can be motivated by various reasons. Ethnic pride is among the reasons for preserving Arabic as an ethnic minority language. In the article “Some Remarks on Ethnic Identity, Language and Education,” Sjaak Kroon (1990) asserts that an ethnic group language is a powerful expression of ethnic identity. He emphasizes the importance of the relationship between language and ethnic identity in migration situations where the minority language becomes open to language shift and loss.

Aleya Rouchdy in her article “Language Conflict and Identity: Arabic in the American Diaspora” argues that Arabic is an ethnic language that will never die regardless of the influence English has on its practice among some Arab-Americans, since it only experiences attrition and can be learned at any time (2002: 143). She emphasizes that Classical/Standard Arabic acts as an ideal force uniting all Arabic speakers. Therefore, this form of Arabic builds ethnic identity among Arab-Americans coming from different countries. It is a source of rapport, solidarity, and bondage creating a sense of ethnic identity (2002: 143-144). Shaping an ethnic identity in a new land includes forming linguistic attitudes and behaviors. An ethnic minority language could be destined to either attrition and loss or maintenance depending on its speakers’ beliefs about its usefulness and significance plus their reactions to the political relations between the host country and the homeland. Social factors also play a part in influencing language attitudes and behaviors. Besides the role of language in shaping ethnic or cultural identity, other scholars focus on the role of religion in language maintenance.
2.3 Language and Religious Identity

There is a dynamic interdependent relationship between language and ethnic/cultural identity in which one influences the other. Interestingly, this relationship extends beyond the ethnic and cultural aspects to the religious dimension of identity at least for some of the ethnic groups in America including the Muslim Arab immigrants. According to Kristine Ajrouch in “Family and Ethnic Identity in an Arab-American Community,” religion is a force that contributes to the development of social identity and in turn ethnicity is a social identity. Subsequently, both ethnicity and social identity have religious undertones (Ajrouch 1999: 134). This study is based on observation and focus groups of Muslim Lebanese families in Dearborn, Michigan. In these focus groups conducted by Ajrouch, even though the moderator did not introduce religion as a topic to discuss, it emerges as a recurring theme by the participants who find it represents a meaningful system to interpret cultural identity (1999: 129-130).

Religion might not be a significant factor to all Arab-Americans in defining their ethnic/cultural identity or in preserving their ethnic language, yet it is important to many Muslim Arabs who believe in the role of Islam in encouraging the maintenance of the Arabic language and the formation of a more interconnected Arab-American community. According to Linda Walbridge in her article “Arabic in the Dearborn Mosques” (1992), religion is the strongest foundation for group identity among the Shi’a Muslim community in Dearborn, Michigan (p. 189). Her study is based on the Shi’a sects of Islam who are not considered orthodox Sunni Muslims or mainstream Muslims. At the same time, both Sunni and Shi’a sects are equally Muslims. According to Walbridge, Arabic is the language of the Islamic religion that is required to capture the beauty of the religious text, the Qur’an, alongside with its central role in performing prayers (1992: 191). She cites Richard Antoun (1989: 103) who demonstrates the
importance of classical Arabic as the medium to deliver the Quranic verses: “Since classical Arabic is to a great extent the language of the Quran—a sacred language—its use confirms the sermon’s meaning and not only legitimizes but also sacralizes its message of salvation. For the Islamic sermon, too, to a large extent the medium is also the message” (1992: 191-192). There is a reciprocal relationship between the native language and values. As Walbridge puts it, “The use of the native language should assist the group in maintaining its traditional values and that at least for some groups, this desire to maintain values will serve as a great motivation in working to keep a language alive” (1992: 193).

Arabic as an ethnic minority language appears to have a religious meaning besides its cultural and ethnic significance. The studies reviewed provide rich data illustrating an interdependent relationship between language and identity. The maintenance of an ethnic minority language plays a role in the maintenance of ethnicity, cultural identification, and religious conventions for many communities and vice versa. For the purpose of reaching a deeper understanding of the formation of the Arab-American identity in relation to language attitudes and practices, the researcher believes that listening to the members of the community will serve as a closer look into their lives. Therefore, the idea of focus groups come into action, since it is a method to listen to what Arab-Americans want to say about their language and identity—whether they are interdependent factors or not.

3.0 Methods: Why Focus Groups?

There are a number of reasons behind choosing focus groups as a qualitative research method for the study. The aim behind the study is neither collecting naturalistic speech samples nor ethnographically observing the whole social reality of the participants including its broad scope of aspects. The goal lies, however, in concentrating on attitudes and experiences that
could answer the inquiries the researcher has regarding the ethnic, cultural, and religious
dimensions of Arabic as an ethnic minority language.

There are many potential purposes of focus groups, yet the researcher here finds five
strong reasons for selecting such methodology. First, focus groups are good for collecting a
concentrated set of interactions in a short time span (Morgan 1988: 17). The length of each
focus group in this project was set to be between an hour and an hour and a half. Despite the
short length of time, this research procedure can elicit a huge amount of data to analyze. Second,
focus groups are good for topics on attitudes and ideologies (Morgan 1988: 17). Thus, focus
groups were chosen for this study, since the researcher aims at exploring what the participants
want to share about their feelings, experiences, and views. This study was specifically interested
in what the participants think, believe, and feel about topics such as language, culture, religion,
and identity. It was an attempt to create a comfortable environment where they could discuss
issues that pertain to their lives, namely language and identity. Third, focus groups have an
ability to produce participant involvement. This involvement and interaction lies in the
participants’ hands rather than the researcher’s, which makes the fourth quality of focus groups
(Morgan, 1988: 18). The researcher aims for the participants to engage themselves in the topics
of discussion, to raise opinions and perspectives, and to share life stories and experiences, so she
can arrive at a rich understanding of their unique experiences as Arab-Americans reconciling two
languages and possibly two identities. Finally, through a focus group, a researcher can create an
environment where participants can have a lively conversation similar to that among friends
(Morgan 1988: 22). The focus groups are meant to enable participants to freely share with each
other creating a group dialogue rather than an interviewing session. It is true that there was a set
of questions prepared for discussion; still there were no rigid time limits when discussing question-by-question or a fixed turn taking routine.

3.1 Informants

Two focus groups were conducted. Each group consisted of Arab-Americans who reside in Arizona. The groups vary in terms of two variables: age and generation. Four members was the size of each group, two males and two females. One group was intended to include first generation Arab immigrants in their thirties and above, while the other group was intended to consist of subsequent generations at the age of eighteen to twenty-five years old. All volunteers met the demographic requirements for the study in terms of age and generation except one female member in the first focus group in her early forties who is second generation instead of first. The participants chose to use their real names. In the following data analysis section, there is background information about the members of the focus groups as given by the consent of the participants.

3.2 The Researcher’s Role

In a qualitative study like this one, it is important to shed light on the researcher and her objectives. Despite the fact that the data was analyzed ethnographically, the voice of the researcher can be heard especially in the selection of the quotes and the way the data was presented. There is always subjectivity in a study despite the attempt to be objective. This study was created for members of the Arab-American community and created by them. At the same time, the presentation of the material and its analysis is the task of the researcher. The researcher is an Arab female, middle class, at her early twenties at the time of the study who was born and raised in Kuwait. The researcher is acquainted with some Arab-Americans in the Phoenix metropolitan area of Arizona. The mosque is the place where Muslims meet and get acquainted,
the place where the researcher became familiar with the community and their activities. For the purpose of recruiting participants, two strategies were employed: flyers and personal contact recruitment.

The researcher took on the role of a moderator in the groups, but not as an active participant in an attempt to avoid influencing the participants’ views and attitudes. The role of the researcher did not exceed that of a moderator who made sure that the discussion did not redirect itself to irrelevant topics. A few questions were raised starting with the general or macro level to more specific micro level inquiries. The focus groups were both audio and video taped, since participants consented to such procedures.

3.3 Research Questions

Originally, there were two key questions the researcher considered to be the most crucial ones, which are inspired by Caroline Seymour-Jorn’s study on Arab-Americans in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (2004). First, “Do you feel that knowledge of Arabic is important to your cultural identity?” Second, “Do you feel that knowledge of Arabic is important to your religious identity?” (p. 115-116). Obviously, the questions posed in her study are dichotomous; hence the researcher rephrased them to be more open-ended questions. Open-ended questions are appropriate in focus groups due to their capacity to evoke an ongoing conversation. In total, there were eight questions starting with the most macro and going to more micro level inquiries. The questions started by inquiring about identity and language in general as exemplified in the first and second questions. First, “How do you define yourself in terms of ethnic, cultural, and social identity?” Second, “What do you think of language as a component/part of your ethnicity and cultural presentation of self?” Next, the third and fourth questions stand for the two main
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questions in the discussion regarding Arabic as a component of ethnic/cultural identity and religious identity. Both questions are divided into two parts as demonstrated below.

3. a. Do you consider Arabic to be an integral part of your ethnic/cultural identity?
   b. Describe how this is manifested both on an everyday basis and in regards to your general sense of identity.

4. a. Do you consider Arabic to be an integral part of your religious identity?
   b. Describe how this is manifested both on an everyday basis and in regards to your general sense of identity.

Similarly, English is an important part of the participants’ lives, hence there was a question regarding English as a part of their ethnic/cultural identity: “How does English fit in your ethnic and cultural identity?” Following that, the researcher raised questions about the role Arabic and English play and in what types of contexts as demonstrated below.

6. What functions does English perform in your life? And in what types of contexts?

7. What functions does Arabic perform in your life? And in what types of contexts?

Finally, there is a concluding question about incorporating all types of linguistic, ethnic/cultural, and religious identities in the identity of an “American”: “Given your perception of your linguistic, cultural/ethnic, and religious identities, how do you think they fit into your identity as an American?” The aim was not in gaining strict answers to each question, but in evoking a lively dynamic discussion in which participants could comfortably share all different dimensions of their identities as Arab-Americans including the linguistic, the ethnic, cultural, and religious.

The first discussion meeting took an hour and 19 minutes, while the second lasted for an hour. It is also worth mentioning that the researcher used English in both focus groups. In addition, participants also used English except in few instances where they used Arabic words,
which happen to be common words among Muslim people such as *MashAllah* and *InshAllah* ‘by God’s willing.’

**4.0 Data Analysis**

There are two feasible ways to report the results of focus groups: content analysis and/or ethnographic approach. According to Morgan, an ethnographic approach entails the use of quotes and a summary of the discussion. On the other hand, a content analysis dictates creating tables that represent key themes or topics the discussion highlights (1988: 70). In the ethnographic manner of reporting the results, there should be a balance between the use of quotes and the summary of the discussion (Morgan 1988: 70). At the same time, in order to use content analysis, it is best to summarize basic information in simple tables in which each table expresses a major topic in the discussion (Morgan 1988: 70). Originally, the data was analyzed in an ethnographic manner with the help of summary content analysis tables acting as visual aids besides the text. The present study is a shorter and a modified version of the original study, which is a Master’s thesis that is relatively longer and more inclusive of the details. The analysis of the data is presented ethnographically here, but the content analysis tables can be found in the original version of this study “Language and The Shaping of Ethnic, Cultural, and Religious Identity among Arab-Americans: A Focus Group Investigation of Older Versus Younger Generations” (Al-Mubayei 2004).

**4.1 Focus Group (1)**

The first focus group is comprised of two males and two females. All the members are first generation Arab immigrants except Ayda who is a second-generation female. Ayda is 42 years old, born in Michigan and raised in New York coming from a Palestinian heritage, married to an Arab-American, a mother of five, has a bachelor’s degree in public relations and
communication, and works as a school administrator. The other female is Hind, 44 years old, born in Palestine and raised in Saudi Arabia who has been in the U.S. for six years, is married to an Arab-American, a mother of five, a teacher, and who has a Master’s in Education. There is also Khalid, 39 years old male, born in Jordan raised in Kuwait, came to U.S. in 1987, a father of three, a chiropractor. Finally, Tamer is 32 year old male, born in Egypt, came to U.S. in 1983 and has been in America for 21 years, self employed, a father of three, and has a bachelor’s degree in business management. All four participants come from the same middle social class as they mentioned in a prior oral questionnaire. The first focus group consisting of the older participants: Ayda, Hind, Khalid, and Tamer started with the researcher introducing the participants to the procedures and nature of the meeting.

4.1.1 The Identity Question

The first question was introduced: “How do you define yourself in terms of ethnic, cultural, and social identity?” The participants shared some stories that relate to this question. Ayda, for instance, brought fourth a story from her job experience as a school administrator’s assistant working in a private Islamic school regarding a parent’s concern about her children’s view of their identity. Working in a private Islamic school, she deals with Muslim parents and children from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds including Arab-Americans. The story was told as follows:

This question is interesting because I was talking to a mother and it was one of our parents here and she said ‘I am getting scared because my children are telling me that’s it. We’re not Egyptians anymore. We’re Americans, we’re here and that’s it’ and she said to me, ‘How do you deal with this? You are born here. How do your children feel?’ and I told her you can’t lose the heritage. It just doesn’t go away. Yes, we’re Americans.
We’re happy to be here, you know. We’re adapted to the lifestyle and the cultures here, but you don’t let go of what’s there. So it’s a matter of incorporating what we believe and our lifestyle with the American or Western way of living, too.

The story Ayda shared evoked discussion in the group in which participants talked about the role of parents in shaping the way children view themselves ethnically and culturally. The discussion revolved around the concerns of the parents towards the identity of U.S. born children. Even though the first question did not inquire about the family’s role in maintaining an ethnic/cultural identity, the discussion revolved around reinforcement versus assimilation.

4.1.2 The Language Question

After discussing identity in general, a question about language followed: “What do you think of language as a component/part of your ethnicity and cultural presentation of self?” The participants introduced the notion of providing the right atmosphere for a language to grow. Khalid finds it difficult to reinforce Arabic with the children regularly, because “kids are hooked to the T.V.” watching Disney channels and cartoons. According to Khalid, total practice at home is necessary to preserve the language. Tamer added that not being able to have the right atmosphere would cause language loss as in the case of his U.S. born cousins whose parents talked to them in English at home and who were not surrounded by Arabs at all. The right atmosphere is the key. Khalid, however, finds English to be an easier language to express his thoughts when talking to his children, a feeling Ayda shares regarding her children. Tamer commented on their remarks by saying that English not only can be an easy communication medium for the parents to use with their children, but also it is an easier language for the children to comprehend.
4.1.3 Arabic and Ethnic/Cultural Identity

The third question is one of the two key topics the researcher is interested in exploring. The question is divided into two parts. Part (a) is: “Do you consider Arabic to be an integral part of your ethnic/cultural identity?” The group as a whole agreed that they will always be Arabs, so Arabic will always be an important part of their identities. Nevertheless, the case of an Arab who is not able to understand or speak Arabic does not indicate a loss of ethnic/cultural pride. Tamer clarified that ethnic identity and pride can exist regardless of knowing the language or not knowing it. Even though the question about religion was not introduced yet, the participants integrated the topic of religion in the discussion along with the subject of ethnic and cultural identity. Hind, for example, reflected that Arabic and the Islamic religion are connected. Moreover, Hind commented that many non-Arab Muslims learn Arabic just to be able to read the Qur’an and understand its message.

The second part of the question expands on the first part: b) “Describe how this is manifested both on an everyday basis and in regards to your general sense of identity.” Interestingly, each member gave a different function for Arabic as part of everyday life. Tamer offered a familial reason for using Arabic everyday at home for the sole reason of reinforcing the language with his children. Khalid, however, gave a religious reason and found Arabic to be of a daily use due to the prayers that are to be performed in Arabic. Salaat ‘prayer’ is a central and obligatory pillar of Islam that Muslims have to perform five times a day. Ayda, on the other hand, explained that Arabic is a medium of socializing with family members. Hind also offered a different use for Arabic on an everyday basis. She is a kindergarten teacher at an Islamic private school in which she teaches children the greetings in Arabic, uses Arabic for the morning assembly at the school, and uses Arabic in the classroom as well. Therefore, Arabic is a
language of familial, religious, social, and academic importance and use to these Arab-American individuals.

Parents sometimes want their children to learn Arabic, yet they do not put forth the effort and time needed to achieve this goal as both Khalid and Tamer highlighted. Seemingly, families emigrating from the Arab world to America who are willing to educate their children about their native tongue need to realize the amount of effort and awareness needed to keep that part of their ethnic and cultural identity constant and alive.

4.1.4 Arabic and Religious Identity

The fourth question is the second key inquiry where the researcher attempts to explore the connection between religion and language as two interdependent elements of identity. The question is divided into two parts as well. First, “Do you consider Arabic to be an integral part of your religious identity?” Second, “Describe how this is manifested both on an everyday basis and in regards to your general sense of identity.”

Participants find Arabic to be fundamental in the performance of prayers and reading the religious text, Qur’an. Hind described the formal language of the Qur’an as a unifying tool that brings together all Muslims from different language backgrounds including Arabs who have diverse dialects that are not necessarily explicable and comprehensible by other Arabs. Hind’s opinion regarding the language of the Qur’an parallels the point expressed by Aleya Rouchdy in “Language conflict and identity: Arabic in the American Diaspora” where she finds Classical/Standard Arabic acting as a force unifying all Arabic speakers (2002: 143-144). Ayda explained that the significance of Arabic in religion makes it more important to reinforce Arabic with the children than the cultural reasons. Arabic represents a cultural, ethnic, and religious
association to the individuals in this group. Likewise, English plays a role in the lives of these individuals who bring together two languages and two identities.

4.1.5 English and Ethnic/Cultural Identity

At this point, the core of the conversation was directed towards the English language and from there the fifth question was raised: “How does English fit in your ethnic and cultural identity?” English is described as worldwide language that is simple enough to acquire and is practical in any part of the world. Its simplicity is the reason why Tamer thinks U.S. born Arab-American children prefer to use it more than Arabic. It is a point of view, but it is hard to be certain about the reasons that motivate many of these children to use English instead of Arabic.

Possibly, English is likely to be present in more contexts in these children’s lives than Arabic is, which is merely used at home by the parents. In “Using the Present to Predict the Future in Language Contact: The Case of Immigrant Minority Languages in Sweden,” Sally Boyd refers to the concept of domain configuration in which domain refers to contexts in which a language is used by a bilingual individual or a community. The author reports that when language domains overlap instead of separate, the minority language might not have the chance for survival (1986). As Boyd indicates, many researchers follow Fishman (1972: 115-116) in considering domain overlap and domain separation as indications of language shift and language maintenance respectively (Boyd 1986: 99).

4.1.6 Functions & Contexts of English vs. Arabic

To discuss the functions English plays in the participants’ lives as Arab-Americans, the sixth question was asked: What functions does English perform in your life? And in what types of contexts? Alongside question (6), participants discussed question (7) simultaneously: What
functions does Arabic perform in your life? And in what types of contexts? Both Arabic and English have their functions and value as presented by Ayda: “You have to combine both. You don’t wanna let go of who you are and your heritage and where you came from or where your parents came from, you know. And then you’re living here and you can’t ignore it. You can’t ignore what’s around you and the people around you and the books and literature. You have to combine both.” Both Arabic and English appear to be valuable and useful in serving diverse functions and applications.

4.1.7 The American Identity

The eighth and last question summarized the ethnic/cultural, linguistic, and religious identities of Arab-Americans and how these different identities coincide with the identity of an American: Given your perception of your linguistic, cultural/ethnic, and religious identities, how do you think they fit into your identity as an American? The discussion revolved around defining what an American is. The following are some of the definitions participants provided. In defining the term American, Ayda explains, “Is there such a thing as a 100% American? I don’t think so. Do I feel like I am an American? Yeah….because we are allowed that feeling. You are allowed to incorporate who you are, what culture you’re from, your language, your religion and you throw all that together in one segment.” Likewise, Tamer adds, “It’s what you think of yourself. There is no reason for classification….How do you think of yourself fitting here?…How do you integrate the Arabic and the English, your ethnic background and your new environment? It’s just a big mixture.”

After speculating about what being an American means and offering some definitions, the discussion shifted towards balancing one’s ethnic background with the new environment in America without losing any aspect of one’s identity like language, religion, or their
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These Arab-Americans took a more integrationist approach in which they appreciate both cultures: the homeland and the American land. Total assimilation or jumping in the melting pot ideology, where ethnic and cultural roots are forgotten and replaced by a single lifestyle that each person adapts, erases diversity—the diversity that this country encourages. Thus, assimilation is not the norm among these Arab-American individuals who are sharing stories of their lives expressing their feelings and ideas about who they are and what being in this country means to them where they manage to reconcile their religious, ethnic/cultural, and linguistic identities in a single harmonious identity.

4.2 Focus Group (2)

The second focus group consists of second generation Arab-Americans except Fatima, a third-generation female who happens to be the daughter of Ayda, who is a member in focus group (1). Fatima is 21 years old, of a Palestinian heritage, born and raised in New York, lived in Florida for four years, has a degree in computer networking, and has been in Arizona for one year. Nour is the second female participant in this group. She is 23 years old, born and raised in Arizona and comes from a Palestinian origin as well. She has a degree in communication and mass communication and is working currently on her Master’s degree. Nour is the only participant in this group and in the study who identifies her social class to be of the upper class. In addition to Fatima and Ayda, Hazim also comes from a Palestinian background. He is half Arab and half Dutch since his mother is originally from Holland. He is 21 years old, born in California and moved to Arizona at the age of six. He lived in Palestine for a year at the age of 13. He is currently working on his bachelor’s degree. Finally, Bara is 21 years old, male, born in Louisiana, but has lived in Arizona for 18 years. He is originally from Iraq. He is a senior at ASU in microbiology. There was a diversity of personalities in this particular group where two
members (Bara and Nour) were more dominant, while the other two (Fatima and Hazim) were less outgoing.

4.2.1 The Identity Question

Starting with the most general question, participants discussed the way they define their identity in response to the question: How do you define yourself in terms of ethnic, cultural, and social identity? Participants agreed on the way they define themselves starting with their homeland country, America, and religious belief.

4.2.2 The Language Question

The second question is a question about language in general as part of identity: “What do you think of language as a component/part of your ethnicity and cultural presentation of self?” To Bara, the capacity to speak Arabic is important for Arab-Americans in order to belong to a group and not feel isolated—especially when being around Arabs—as he indicated: “My Arabic is not like as good as the others….I feel sometimes outside of the group.” Fatima shared the same feeling of inadequacy when it comes to speaking Arabic with Arabs: “That happens with me too because my Arabic is not strong. So I mean I understand what they’re saying but like when I want to contribute back, I don’t feel comfortable.” These young participants make a distinction between Arabs living in the Arab world and Arabs living in the United States or more accurately Arab-Americans.

Seemingly, Arab-Americans have their own community as Arabs with a unique experience and different lifestyle that differs to a large extent from their lives in the Arabian homelands. This is indicated in the participants’ own words. For example, Bara made a distinction, “For the cultural representation, we have our own culture like as Arab-Americans here that speak [Arabic] is different than [Arabs] that speak Arabic and from back home. So we
have our own little culture thing in America.” Moreover, Nour commented on Bara’s statement by emphasizing the uniqueness of the Arabic spoken among Arab-Americans calling it Arabish:
“We have our own language kinda as Arab-Americans. We mix it up and it becomes Arabish. We can socialize with the Arab Arabs but we prefer to socialize with Arab-Americans who don’t feel intimidated when talking to us.” Arab-American youth in this focus group talk about the richness of living in the United States where they identify with other Americans and at the same time identify with their own ethnic/cultural community, which grants them a feeling of distinctiveness.

4.2.3 Arabic and Ethnic/Cultural Identity

In the first part of the third question, participants were inquired about Arabic as part of their ethnic/cultural identity: Do you consider Arabic to be an integral part of your ethnic/cultural identity? Arabic acts as a bridge between two different cultural identifications: that of the first generation Arab immigrants and that of their offspring of subsequent generations. Bara finds Arabic helpful not only to understand the parents, but also to associate with people in the Arab world.

Moreover, Hazim talked about the importance of Arabic in helping in “fitting in” and “getting along,” since he believes that not having knowledge of Arabic will cause other Arabs to “look down on you” and further lead the parents to think of their U.S. born child as “rebellious” for not speaking the native language. Nour and Bara agreed with Hazim that Arabs would think Arab-American children are “stupid” if they fail to speak or know Arabic. Parents remain as a main theme of discussion during the third question about the importance of Arabic as a part of one’s ethnic/cultural identity. In Addition, Nour introduced the argument that it is the parents’ responsibility to teach their U.S. born children to speak Arabic.
The second part of the third question is: “Describe how this is manifested both on an everyday basis and in regards to your general sense of identity.” Participants identified English as their daily language of interaction with parents instead of Arabic except Bara who speaks only Arabic at home because of his parents’ instructions: “Dude! When I go home, I can’t speak to my parents in English. They’ll beat me.” Additionally, the discussion reveals that Arabic operates as a linkage between Arab-Americans that brings them together as a single, unified group.

4.2.4 Arabic and Religious Identity

After exploring the role of Arabic in the ethnic/cultural identity of the younger Arab-Americans, it was time to investigate the function of Arabic in the religious dimension of their identities. The fourth question revolves around Arabic and religious identity and is divided into two parts: First, “Do you consider Arabic to be an integral part of your religious identity?” Second, “Describe how this is manifested both on an everyday basis and in regards to your general sense of identity.”

Having the capacity to read and understand the Qur’an is a core element in being a Muslim as Bara stated. He emphasized that reading a translated version of the Qur’an in either English or any given language does not express the Qur’an fairly since the “Qur’an is written in true Arabic.” Besides the importance of Arabic in the reading and learning of the Qur’an, it is the language necessary to perform the Islamic salaat ‘prayers’. Among the religious practices in which Arabic plays a major role on a daily basis, as participants agreed, are praying, reading the Qur’an, community lectures at the mosque, and the Islamic greeting: al-salaam Alikom ‘peace be upon you’. After investigating the significance of Arabic in the ethnic/cultural and religious
identity formation of Arab-American youth, it was time to explore what role English is playing in their lives.

4.2.5 English and Ethnic/Cultural Identity

In fact, English has a great importance in the lives of these Arab-Americans. At the same time, its importance differs from the importance of Arabic in terms of the functions both of these languages serve and the contexts where they are applied. Fatima explained the importance of knowledge of English when living in America, a predominantly English-speaking country. English in this case, appears to be a survival language and a necessary tool for economic development in this country. Bara saw a different importance for English, a language that contains a part of his ethnic and cultural identity alongside with Arabic: “This is very important because it’s the other half of who we are.” To Bara, English is the language to communicate and associate with peers. Besides, it is the language with which Arab-Americans identify themselves as Americans.

It is true that these Arab-Americans show an appreciation for English; still, there is a concern they raised about a downside to being totally immersed in English. Bara raised a concern about Arab-American families who adapt an indifferent position when it comes to educating their U.S. born children about the native language, the religious beliefs and practices, and the ethnic and cultural background. As a result, Arab-American youth from these types of indifferent families grow up unconcerned and uninterested in the Arabic side of their identity, which in turn leads to language loss, Bara explained. According to Fatima, Arabic is important to learn in order to “appreciate the religion,” while English is essential to “survive in this country.”
Accordingly, there seems to be different purposes for each of these two languages such as a spiritual significance versus a functional one for Arabic versus English respectively. Participants raised some comparisons between English and Arabic. They agreed that English is a more practical language that fits the American culture and people, who are used to shorter words, shorter names, and even shorter greetings. Nour added that Arabic is a language that is valuable, spiritual, and soothing for the distressed heart. Whereas, English is a survival language required for living in America. All participants viewed English as a functional survival language.

4.2.6 Functions & Contexts of English

In the context of talking about the role of English and its qualities, it was time to narrow down the discussion about English to its various functions. Therefore, it was time to raise the sixth question: “What functions does English perform in your life? And in what types of contexts?” Participants talked briefly about the contexts that necessitate English as a communication tool including the school, the workplace, and public places in general.

4.2.7 Functions & Contexts of Arabic

To look at a more complete picture of the participants’ linguistic behaviors and attitudes, it is important to investigate the functions of Arabic in their lives besides the roles of English. Therefore, the seventh question was raised: “What functions does Arabic perform in your life? And in what types of contexts?” These two languages complement each other, creating one of the many unique and culturally rich identities in the United States: that of the Arab-American. According to Nour, “One is a need. One is a want. English is a need. Arabic is a want.” Hazim informed, “English is what gets you through life. Arabic is part of life.”
Participants agreed that knowing English is a necessity when being part of a Western society where English is the main medium of communication. On the other hand, Arabic takes on a more personal meaning for Arab-Americans. Finally, Fatima concluded this question stating that the context is the determining factor that leads speakers to choose English or Arabic, since both languages are tools to utilize. Accordingly, Arabic and English are valuable means serving a wide range of functions whether being religious, familial, social, economical, and academic.

4.2.8 The American Identity

The last question served the purpose of finding about the ways these Arab-American youth view themselves and how they define their identities: “Given your perception of your linguistic, cultural/ethnic, and religious identities, how do you think they fit into your identity as an American?” Participants offered some definitions of what an is American. They talked about the way they fit in the American melting pot while maintaining a distinct and unique identity simultaneously. Finally, the discussion moved to talking about the various directions Arab immigrants adapt while living in America to decipher their identity and make sense of it in a way that does not cause them any perplexities.

Fatima started the discussion offering her own way of looking at the definition of an “American”: “I guess since we’re not 100% American born, our culture kind of singles us out…. like we’re in a minority.” As a result, Bara asked the question of “What is an American?” It is the same question raised in the first focus group by many participants who did not believe in the notion of a “100% American.” Next, participants talked about jumping in the melting pot while maintaining a distinctive identity at the same time. The melting pot in this case did not refer to erasing ethnic/cultural characteristics or shedding loyalties to the homeland; rather, participants were referring to integrating as active citizens in the American society.
Finally, Bara concluded the focus group session by offering an illuminating discussion of the types of directions or options with which Arabs in the United States define themselves. Mainly, Bara mentioned three major directions for solving what the researcher prefers to call *a self-definition dilemma*. It is worth summarizing the routes Arab-Americans take in solving this dilemma of defining one’s self. First, some Arab-American teens try hard to fit in a concept of what is called a *typical* American. The price they pay in this pursuit is losing their Arabic identity. Second, other Arab-Americans cling to a dream of returning to the homeland and the Arab world, so they identify themselves as Arabs only and live their lives that way. The third and last option Arabs living in America pursue is identifying themselves as Arab-Americans who keep both sides of their identity alive.

In summary, describing focus group (2) as the third type of Arab-American groups, Bara explicated, “As Arab-Americans I think we are higher than the people that just forget where they came from and take one identity as being American.” Simply, this description suggests a privilege in being both American and whatever ethnic and cultural background a person is and living in America—a place that grants its citizens the freedom to define their identities the way they deem accurate.

5.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study is an exploration of the relationship between language and all the rich and diverse facets of identity. The identity under examination in this case is the Arab-American identity. This study, using focus groups as a research methodology, attempts to listen to the people themselves and learn from their life experiences, stories, feelings, and perspectives. It is a discovery of how Arab-Americans in the metropolitan area of Phoenix, Arizona perceive
their native tongue, Arabic. The data was analyzed and the results were reported in an ethnographic manner.

Participants in both group discussed the same topics, yet the emphasis of topics varied between the two groups. The older first-generation participants taking part in the first discussion kept bringing forth a concern of language loss and ethnic/cultural identity loss as well. They maintained that U.S. born children are very prone to lose Arabic if they lack reinforcement from the parents. The second group spoke of parents’ responsibility to educate their children in Arabic. Moreover, they talked about their identity as Arab-Americans, defining it and explaining what it means to be a minority. They also talked about the important role of Arabic in Islam as well as its significance in their ethnic/cultural identity. Arabic, to them, is a bridge to surpass the gap between their generation and their first-generation parents and other Arabs in the Arab world.

This study aims at providing an insight into the life of the Arab-American as a minority group in the American society. Focus groups proved to be valuable in studying identity and language attitudes. It proved to be a direct way to somewhat understand how Arab-American speakers feel and think about their language attitudes and behaviors. The study at hand was a way to take a closer look at the identity of the Arab-American and how language plays a significant part in the definition of self. It was an investigation about the role of a minority ethnic language in the community of its speakers. It is a study about Arabic as one of the many immigrant minority languages and its fate in a multilingual situation being in the United States. Its fate depends on the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of its speakers along with the surrounding social or political environmental factors.
This study is designed to create awareness especially in families immigrating to countries where their native language is not widely spoken. Significantly, for individuals who view their native language as a major component of identity, the orientation of children from the native tongue to the language of the new host country may cause discomfort in their parents and create inter-generational tension. In general, there is a dynamic interaction between language and identity this study strives to show. At the same time, it mainly explores the language attitudes of a particular ethnic minority community. It is not a study meant for creating generalizations; rather, it is a way to provide insightful findings about the importance of speakers’ perceptions of their identities and language attitudes and behaviors. Many studies focus on the environmental social, political, or economic factors of an existing social structure to understanding language attitudes and behaviors in immigrant minority groups. However, it is also valuable to consider the significance of the speakers’ perceptions and manifestations of identity being ethnic, social, or religious and how that participates in shaping the speakers’ linguistic attitudes and behaviors.
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References


