



STRIVING TO READ in her Mother Tongue

written by RIHAM SHENDY

AN EGYPTIAN PARENT'S DIGLOSSIA DILEMMA

Arabic" was my simple answer when people would stop to ask what language I was speaking with my baby twins. But actually, the answer is not that simple at all.

Arabic is not one language. It is a collection of very different spoken dialects, separate and distinct from the written language. Nearly all Arabs traditionally write in one very formal version of Arabic called Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). MSA is a version of the language that is closest to the Koran, the Muslim Holy Book. MSA, however, is not understood by young children. It takes several years to develop an acceptable command of the language, and typically, children do not start learning it until they go to school, around the age of five. Yet, all children's books are exclusively written in MSA. This situation, in which two distinct varieties of a language are used for different functions within the same community, is known as diglossia, and it was proving to be a dilemma for my young family.

I am an Egyptian, married to a German, living in New York City. When I was pregnant with my twins, I decided I would read to them in Arabic, starting when they were very young. It was one way I hoped I could share my culture with them. I do not remember exactly how I committed to the idea. Growing up in Egypt, I do not recall being read to regularly as a young child—in fact, only a few people did. It must have been seeing my husbands' nephew and niece being read to from an early age,

or it might have been the images of parents reading to their children I saw while on the subway. Somehow, I knew that it was important. By the last months of my pregnancy, I had collected about 30 Arabic children's books, which sat eagerly on our bookshelf.

During the early months after my twins were born, the language of the book did not matter as I could effortlessly translate simple and short English text into the Egyptian Arabic I spoke to my kids. They were about two years old when I pulled out one of my long-treasured Arabic books. Strangely, I found myself surprised by the language I was reading. I should have known, but somehow, I hadn't realized the extent of the difference between spoken Egyptian and written MSA. Just imagine if you spoke Italian or Spanish but every time you opened a book, it was written in Latin. Or imagine that all English-language books today were written in Shakespearean English.

A big drawback to this language reality was that I could not directly read Arabic children's books to my kids. They couldn't understand it. I ended up constantly translating the written MSA into spoken Egyptian on the spot. Rhymes became lost in translation. My kids, seeking the story's predictability and repetitiveness, would complain when I sometimes skipped or inadvertently altered details. It became increasingly exhausting, as the books included more and more text.

Reading regularly was becoming a chore. And so, one night in 2016, I translated *The Three Little Pigs* into spoken Egyptian and glued the translation onto the pages of the

book. For the first time, I was reading the text just as it was written. It was easy and enjoyable, everything I hoped reading with my kids would be. I wanted more. After the kids went to bed, I would sit at our dining table and translate, first more short stories and soon rhyming books.

One day, I realized that there must be other families facing this challenge, so I created my website Tuta-Tuta to share my translations. Gradually, I came to realize the

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challenge extended even further beyond the Egyptian immigrant community. Children in Arab countries were not being read to either. In Egypt, a country with 24 million kids aged nine years and younger, publishers will print on average only 1,000 to 2,000 copies of an Arabic edition of a children's book, and even when they do, it's only available in MSA. Perhaps not surprisingly, Arab countries score the lowest in international reading literacy assessments. Seventy percent of fourth-graders in Egypt are not proficient in reading. Clearly, I stumbled upon a much bigger problem, and gluing printed translations into English books was not the solution, so I decided to do more.

I pitched an idea for a collection

of international folktales in the Egyptian dialect to several Egyptian publishers, but nobody wanted to take it on. Not willing to give up, I published the book myself. The book includes eight popular folktales illustrated by eight talented female Egyptian artists, with Middle Eastern-looking characters against an Egyptian backdrop. It's a book that mixes East and West with scenes like the iconic Gingerbread Man gobbled up on the banks of the Nile in front of three great Pyramids of Giza.

It is an uphill battle to change entrenched traditional views about the Egyptian language. The Arab children's book industry, as well as many Egyptian parents, do not link low reading rates to the diglossic language challenge. It is deliberately dismissed despite clear scientific evidence that shows that reading to children in their mother tongue sets the foundation for a lifelong love of books and builds emergent literacy skills that will help children learn the formal written language, MSA, later on. My book is a small step toward advocating for Arab children's books in their mother tongue. I hope the publishing industry gets on board with the idea, but in the meantime, I will continue to work toward filling this gap and continue to advocate for our young readers, especially our Egyptian ones. ♦

*Riham Shendy is author of *Kan Yama Kan*, a book of international folk-tales written in Egyptian Arabic and the founder of *Tuta-Tuta.com*—a website that streams audio and video of popular "foreign" children books in colloquial Egyptian Arabic. She lives in Brooklyn, New York with her husband and children.*