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Migration and the Development of Arabic in the Middle East

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The arabicization of the Middle East in the 7th and 8th centuries was made possible by migration and urbanization. The talk suggests that establishing garrison towns, the concentration of Arabs in these towns, and the subsequent migration of local populations established the Arabic language as a majority language of prestige. The Arabs' need to communicate for practical reasons allowed them to use simplified registers known in similar modern contexts of language contact as Foreigner Talk registers. Imperial migration policies permitted Arabs to migrate to garrison towns only if they belonged to the same tribes that took part in the initial conquest of the province, which permitted only a limited number of Arabic dialects to mix for a long time in the new urban centers. Eventually, differences among the dialects were leveled and structures regularized. A new urban koine emerged in every garrison town that was both different from the original dialects of Arabic in the peninsula and from each other. I suggest that these linguistic processes of simplification and koinization shaped the input that was learnt by the local populations, and caused the difference between the old dialects of Arabic and the new urban dialects in the Arab world.

Mohamed El-Sharkawi is an assistant professor of Arabic at Wayne State. He is the author of two books and five articles on the history and development of Arabic. He also published seven translations from English into Arabic. He is currently a resident scholar at the Humanities Center and a recipient of a Humanities Center Faculty Fellowship grant for the academic year 2012-2013.