

---

# The local flavour of English in the Gulf

BLAIR FUSSELL

In a matter of fifty years, English has attained its own distinctive features in the Gulf

---

## Introduction

No matter where you are in the world, English seems to have its own way of cropping up, and the Gulf is no exception. Drive through the Omani–Emirati border crossing at Mazyad and a sign on the Emirati side announces, ‘Helping support AIDS’. Turn on *KTV2*, a state-run television channel broadcast out of Kuwait, and an English subtitle reads, ‘May God give you long life’; scan the headlines of the *Gulf News* and read, ‘Emiratisation is vital for the country’; eavesdrop on an expatriate Indian family ordering lunch in the food court at the Muscat City Centre mall and hear, ‘Give me the biriyani chicken’, ‘Give me the thali set’; follow a Bahraini Twitter tweeter and read, ‘say the truth don’t fabricate BHR’.

These communicative encounters reveal that in a relatively short period of time English has managed to penetrate a wide variety of domains across the Gulf region. More importantly, though, they are all indicative of the way in which the norms and conventions of standard English are being adapted and transformed in new and interesting ways. Half a century in the making, and English in the Gulf has attained a decidedly local flavour, infusing elements of ‘imported’ varieties of English (e.g. standard UK, standard American and Indian varieties of English) with an Arabic ‘mother-tongue’ substratum. Perhaps now is the time to seriously consider the notion of ‘Gulf English’ (or more tentatively, developing varieties of Gulf English) within the discourse surrounding emergent World English varieties.

In adopting the term ‘Gulf’, I would like to draw on the notion of ‘Al-Khaleej’; a geographical label which in Arabic makes reference to countries such as the Sultanate of Oman, the United Arab

Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait. In local contexts of use, however, it is important to note that this notion does not so much reflect national boundaries, but rather a shared set of linguistic, cultural, historical, and religious attributes.

## Historical and socio-political context

Without a doubt, the discovery of oil in several Gulf states in the mid-twentieth century was the prime impetus for British economic interest in the region (Onley, 2005: 38). Prior to this, the British had maintained an informal colonial presence throughout the region, being initiated with the signing of an anti-piracy treaty, known as the General Treaty of 1820 (Onley, 2005: 30). During this initial period of colonial contact, the British were mainly interested in protecting their trade and



*BLAIR FUSSELL has extensive experience teaching EAP and EFL in the Gulf, specifically in Yemen and the Sultanate of Oman. He received his MA in applied linguistics from the University of New England in Australia, and he is a certified IELTS examiner. He*

*has recently commenced a post lecturing in EFL and linguistics at Sohar University in Oman. His areas of academic interest include World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca, Second Language Acquisition, Cross-cultural Pragmatics, Descriptive Linguistics, and Arabic studies. This is his first published article. Email: blairmfus@hotmail.com*

communications routes with British India, while also excluding the influence of other foreign colonial powers, including Ottoman, German, French and Russian interests (Onley, 2005: 42). Ironically, English failed to gain a stronghold in the Gulf during Britain's informal period of colonial rule, but rather with the granting of 'independence to Kuwait in 1961 and the remaining Gulf states in 1971' (Onley, 2005: 32), oil became Britain's (and America's) prime interest, and the stage was set for English to take its place in the region.

In order to rapidly industrialise on the path to modernisation, a certain discourse was framed around the importance of English following the oil crisis of the 1970s. Karmani (2005: 92) observes, 'English was widely becoming identified as a powerful tool in facilitating the region's course to modernisation', and with this modernisation came the rapid expansion of a western-oriented ELT industry in the education sector, an influx of western technologies, and widespread infiltration of English in public and private institutions. So as to harness a workforce capable of initiating swift development, governments suddenly fat on oil wealth looked abroad for solutions. It was widely accepted that foreign workers, while not completely welcome in the long term, would be needed to help build the newly prosperous Gulf states. Lured by the promise of higher salaries, skilled and unskilled expatriate workers poured into the region, and with them they brought a wide variety of Englishes. Therefore, in a matter of only 40 years, English has managed to displace Arabic in a number of domains to become 'a lingua franca at all levels of society' (Randall & Samimi, 2010: 43) across the Gulf region. Within this specific context of language contact, we can now see the emergence of certain locally-produced linguistic features which can be heard, read or experienced on the streets from Muscat to Kuwait City.

### **Users and domains of use**

Gulf English has primarily emerged in domains that involve some kind of direct or indirect contact between the local L1 (or L2) Arabic-speaking population and various 'guest' expatriate communities who have imported different varieties of English into the region. Some of the more prominent English-speaking expatriate communities include skilled and unskilled workers from South Asia and South-East Asia, along with smaller communities of L1 English speakers from Kachru's 'inner circle'. Moody (2009: 103) identifies a

number of areas – including business, banking, industry and commerce, transportation, tourism, international diplomacy, mass communication, and the Internet – in which 'limited instrumental needs' often dictate that English is used in the Gulf. More specifically, I would like to suggest that there are five important settings in which Gulf English is actively emerging in response to this cross-cultural and cross-linguistic interaction: tertiary education, skilled employment, local forms of English-medium media and entertainment, advertising and signage, and online social networking. In this section, examples of language will primarily be drawn from these settings.

Anyone who speaks English in the Gulf can potentially be a user of Gulf English. This is inclusive of both local nationals as well as expatriate residents. What defines Gulf English is not the nationality of the user, but rather a user's application of a linguistic feature which makes reference in some way to a local concept or local way of constructing meaning. As an expatriate resident in the Sultanate of Oman and a speaker of a 'general' variety of standard Australian English, I routinely find myself using a decidedly local form of English. Being more attuned to my linguistic surroundings in recent days, I have caught myself on several occasions using the continuous form in place of a stative verb form, using lexical items that have been borrowed from Arabic, and sometimes even saying 'Inshallah' (If God wills).

When considering the local Arabic-speaking population, relative education level and occupational status are two key factors in determining who is more likely to enter a domain in which Gulf English is functioning. As most Gulf countries have mandated that English 'become the medium of instruction in many, if not the majority, of their academic institutions' (Ahmed, 2010: 4), students who wish to pursue tertiary level studies are often required to enter a setting in which classroom instruction, at least, is dominated by the use of English. Successful graduates are often then employed in professional settings in which they are expected to communicate in English with both their expatriate colleagues and members of the wider expatriate community. Thus, the domains of tertiary education and skilled employment have both provided fertile environments for the development of Gulf English.

### **Grammatical features and syntax**

In terms of grammar and syntax, many of the distinguishing features of local varieties of English



Figure 1. 'Detour' sign at construction site – Sohar, Oman

can be attributed to first language transfer, whereby Arabic functions as a 'mother-tongue' substratum. This can be observed in the following examples which have primarily been drawn from my current context of English Language Teaching (ELT): instructing male and female students, aged 18–22, in one of Oman's colleges of applied sciences.

The use of the 'dummy object', which is a feature of Modern Standard Arabic, is commonly employed in written and spoken sentences containing a relative clause:

*Khaborah is the city which I live in **it** all my life.*

(Speaking test, Sohar College of Applied Sciences, Oman, 10 May 2011)

A variant use of both subject and object pronouns is also commonly observed in written and spoken forms of English with a preference for the masculine form when the gender of the referent is not explicitly specified:

*As we know a good teacher is active and hard-working, therefore **he** prepares the lesson before **he** comes to class to teach.*

(Student essay, Sohar College of Applied Sciences, Oman, 16 May 2011)

*Firstly, the good teacher is very polite with **his** students, such as if anyone asks **him** any question **he** will answer in a good way.*

(Student essay, Sohar College of Applied Sciences, Oman, 16 May 2011)

Additionally, while standard UK or American English would typically show a preference for the infinitive form (*in order to* + infinitive), there seems to be an alternative preference for the use of the gerund form following 'for' in subordinate purposive clauses:

*Ministerial decree **for deciding** the official dates and exams 2011/2012*

(Internal email communication, Sohar College of Applied Sciences, Oman, 24 May 2011)

*I sometimes go to Muscat **for shopping** with my friends.*

(Speaking test, Sohar College of Applied Sciences, Oman, 10 May 2011)

Again, L1 transfer may be in play here, as Modern Standard Arabic marks such purposive subordinate clauses with the preposition *li*, literally translated as 'for' in English.

The norms of Indian varieties of English have also exerted a strong influence on Gulf English. Drawing on examples from the Sultanate of Oman, Poole (2006: 22–3) identifies a number of distinctive grammatical features which have been imported from Indian varieties of English: the use of 'would' to imply a future aspect (e.g., 'The Minister **would** be arriving at about 3pm'); a preference for the past perfect tense in place of the present perfect tense (e.g., 'The good news is that she **had released** a new album'); the frequent use of the verb 'do' before a main verb (e.g., 'We **do** have more prizes to give away').

Gulf English also shares several salient grammatical features that have been attested in a range of other World Englishes. Accordingly, Schneider (2010: 372) observes:

Linguistically speaking, phenomena like plural uses of noncount nouns, progressive forms of stative verbs, the formation of hybrid compounds, or the occurrence of innovative (but basically similar) verb complementation patterns have also been found to transcend regional and linguistic boundaries.

In terms of noun countability, Gulf English exhibits a shift towards adding the plural morpheme '-s' to 'traditional' non-countable nouns. Some specific examples that I have personally encountered include *furnitures, informations, homeworks, underwears, advices, evidences, staffs, and lucks*. As a result of this plural marking, these nouns are also often used in conjunction with the article 'a' in countable syntactic environments:

*What a bad luck.*

(English subtitle [translation from Arabic]–programme title unknown, airing on KTV2, Kuwait, 25 May 2011)

*Park here. There's a good shade.*

(Informal conversation with Omani friend, Sohar, Oman, 01 June 2011)



Figure 2. Shopfront of general store – Sohar, Oman

Users of Gulf English also show a preference for the continuous form when using certain stative verbs. One salient example is the use of the verb ‘come’ in the stative sense of ‘to originate from’:

*The wadi [seasonal dry river bed] **is coming** from the mountains to my house.*

(Informal conversation with student, Sohar College of Applied Sciences, Oman, 04 May 2011)

*Most of these workers **are coming** from India.*

(Speaking test, Sohar College of Applied Sciences, Oman, 10 May 2011)

## Phonological features

In terms of accent, a speaker of Gulf English may ‘sound’ British, American or Indian, or exhibit L1 phonological transfer from Arabic. Accent in the first three instances is more reflective of the sociolinguistic contact a local user has had with speakers of other varieties of English, while accent in the fourth instance is more indicative of how Arabic can function as a ‘mother-tongue’ substratum. Many users of localised varieties of English have spent time studying abroad in NABA (North America, Britain and Australia) countries, or have had direct classroom contact with NABA teachers in the local tertiary sector, which employs ‘largely white, Western, “native speakers” of English’ (Karmani, 2005: 93). Additionally, there has been an influx of Western (predominantly

American) forms of entertainment such as gaming, music, movies and television programming into the region; each providing further exposure to NABA Englishes and their respective features of phonology. One particularly salient feature of connected speech that has been transferred into Gulf English is the use of ‘gonna’. This spoken form commonly appears in formal as well as casual contexts of communication:

*Yes, I’m **gonna** come tomorrow.*

(Informal telephone conversation with Omani friend, Sohar, Oman, 20 May 2011)

*We’re **gonna** hand over to Anna.*

(Television programme – ‘Twenty Something’ [Episode 32], airing on *Dubai One*, the UAE, 06 May 2011)

*The weather is **gonna** be clear and hot in the night.*

(Television weather report – ‘KTV2 News’, airing on KTV2, Kuwait, 29 May 2011)

Poole (2006) identifies a number of attested phonological features of Indian varieties of English that are routinely exhibited in the speech patterns of Omani users of English. Some of these phonological features include the tendency to place stress on the first syllable of a word; the pronunciation of the word-initial /t/ which is often unaspirated as /d/; the tendency to voice the word-initial /k/ as /g/ (Poole, 2006: 22). Interestingly, Martin (2003: 54), who spent seven months teaching female university students in the UAE, observed that many of her students were ‘unable to free their speech of the intonation and stress patterns they had acquired from their servants’. In this specific context, Martin (2003: 53) suggests that the inability of her students to distinguish vowel length in English was partly the result of the close contact that many Emirati nationals have at an early age with their ‘unschooled house servants and caretakers’ from nations such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka.

Local vernacular varieties of Arabic have also exerted their influence on the phonological features inherent in Gulf English. In a study designed to investigate the pronunciation of English monophthongs amongst L1 Arabic-speaking university graduates in the Sultanate of Oman, Hubais & Pillai (2010: 15) observed a tendency for the subjects to assimilate ‘Arabic vowel qualities into their production of corresponding English vowels’. In particular, this Arabic-accented pronunciation pertained to the standard UK English vowels /i:/,



Figure 3. Direct translation from Arabic to English in commercial sign – Sohar, Oman

/æ/, /ɑ:/ which were respectively pronounced more closely to the Arabic vowels /i/, /a/, /a:/.

Across the Gulf, the absence of the phoneme /dʒ/ in certain vernacular dialects of Arabic also seems to pose a challenge for local speakers of English. Amongst my own Omani students, coming from all over the sultanate, I have noticed that this is particularly problematic when the /dʒ/ sound appears in the medial or final position of an English word. As such, the following words are commonly pronounced with a /g/ sound: college > /kɒlɪg/; language > /læŋwɪg/; manager > /mænɪgə/; village > /vɪlɪg/; original > /ɔrɪgɪnəl/.

### Lexical features

A wide range of lexical items have been directly borrowed from Arabic into Gulf English. Some of these direct borrowings include *wadi* ('seasonal dry river bed'), *jabel* ('mountain'), *souq* ('market area'), *mutaw'a* ('devout follower of Islam'), *eid* ('religious holiday'), *Haj* ('religious pilgrimage to Mecca'); *haram* ('behaviour forbidden by God'), *wasta* ('privilege from connections and influence'), *dishdasha* ('long robe for men'), *abaya* ('black cloak for women'), *niqaab* ('face cover for women'), *halwa* ('local sweets'), *biriyani* ('flavoured rice'), and *shisha* ('water pipe for smoking'). Not surprisingly, most borrowings from Arabic refer to local concepts that fall into the semantic domains of religion, food, geographical features, and clothing.

Gulf English also employs a range of locally-produced lexical items which have exhibited some kind of semantic shift in meaning. For instance, supermarkets are known as *hypermarkets*; road detours are sometimes described as *deviations*; a computer is *opened* and *closed*; young adults are referred to as *boys* and *girls*; commercial establishments that either sell fast food or provide a

public space for smoking shisha are called *coffee shops*. One more interesting example is the *health club* which euphemistically describes a business establishment providing illicit services for men. Additionally, direct translation from Arabic is particularly prevalent in the language employed in business and commercial signage. The following examples were all noted in the Omani city of Sohar: *Food Stuff Sale*, *Scientific Pharmacy*, *Automatic Bakery*, *Manual Bakery*, *Saif Al-Naabi for Omani Halwa Sale*. This last example is a direct translation from Arabic, and would be expressed in standard NABA varieties of English as 'Omani Halwa sold by Saif Al-Naabi'.

Certain localised verb forms have also been coined in Gulf English. As most Gulf countries are actively working towards educating and training their national citizens for skilled employment, verbs such as 'to Omanise', 'to Emiratised', and 'to Kuwaitise' have been creatively coined to reflect this process of change. The following newspaper headlines usefully demonstrate how these verbs can also apply the morphological rules of standard NABA English varieties to form nouns:

*Help Government in Emiratisation*

(Newspaper Headline – Gulf News, 01 May 2011)

*Private sector gets Omanisation targets*

(Newspaper Headline – Maierbrugger, 13

February 2011)

English words that have been abbreviated in Gulf English tend to show a preference for omitting vowels; a convention which is commonly employed in written Modern Standard Arabic. Rather than clipping a single word by retaining its initial segment, as would often be the preferred convention in NABA varieties of English, abbreviated words are regularly formed by marking three consecutive consonants. As such, *Qatar* is commonly shortened to 'QTR', *Kuwait* to 'KWT', *Bahrain* to 'BHR', and *Muscat* to 'MCT'. The same pattern of abbreviation is also a feature of the programming advertisements currently broadcast on Dubai's free-to-air television channel *MBC 4* with *tomorrow* being shortened to 'tmw', *next* to 'nxt', *later* to 'ltr'.

### Sociolinguistic features

Gulf English exhibits a specific set of rules in relation to the use of formal titles. This is particularly prevalent in local media reports when acknowledging the status of someone in a position of power. In the Omani context, newspaper reporting commonly employs several abbreviations, such

as ‘HM’ (His/Her Majesty), ‘HE’ (His/Her Excellency), and ‘HH’ (His/Her Highness), as a mark of respect for those in esteemed positions of power. The following example was reported in the *Oman Tribune*:

MUSCAT HH Sayyid Fahd Bin Mahmood Al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, will take part in the 13<sup>th</sup> GCC Consultative Summit on behalf of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said in Riyadh on Tuesday.

(Newspaper article – *Oman Tribune*, 10 May 2011)

A comprehensive account of the linguistic features of Gulf English would not be complete without consideration of the cultural key word *Allah*. In an attempt to identify with deeply felt religious sentiments, several Islamic expressions in Arabic are routinely code-mixed into localised varieties of English. Some of these expressions include *Inshallah* (If God wills), *Alhamdulillah* (Praise to God), and *Mashallah* (What God wishes). Masliyah (1999: 98) also notes that the expression *Inshallah* is often used in secular contexts to express ‘a statement of future intention’, and that in the United Arab Emirates it is commonly employed ‘when obeying an order, or performing someone’s wish’.

For those who share the faith of Islam, daily communication in English in many instances would not be complete without verbal acknowledgment of the almighty power of *Allah*:

*Alhamdulillah*, we have almost finished the semester [...] Things have been difficult with the strikes [...] *Inshallah*, next semester will be better.

(Spoken communication – meeting of teachers, Sohar College of Applied Sciences, Oman, 25 May 2011)

Tomorrow, *inshallah*, our technician will check your number.

(Spoken communication – service encounter at Omantel [telecommunications provider], Sohar, Oman – 05 May 2011)

It could also be argued that such references serve a very real social function in which a sense of group solidarity is created amongst users of Gulf English.

## Conclusion

Gulf English is truly a ‘new English’ in the sense that it has received very little, if any, serious

attention within academic discourse concerning emergent varieties of world Englishes. While researchers such as Martin (2003), Poole (2006), and Randall & Samimi (2010) have provided some valuable insights into the manner in which English has evolved in the Gulf, there nevertheless remains a significant gap between the literature and the realities on the ground. Of more concern, perhaps, is the apparent lack of awareness or discussion within local populations, both expatriate residents and national citizens, as to the distinctive linguistic features which are routinely employed in daily interaction across the region. As Gulf English has emerged in Kachru’s (1985) ‘norm-dependent’ expanding circle, it is not surprising that local users have tended to look elsewhere for ‘criteria to judge their usage’ (Crystal, 2003: 359). This exonormative approach has meant that particular norms of use have emerged in close contact with established varieties of both NABA and Indian Englishes. In addition, Arabic, functioning as a ‘mother-tongue’ substratum, has given Gulf English a decidedly local flavour in which local identities and symbols are actively being acknowledged.

In terms of standardisation, Gulf English remains in a relatively early stage of development whereby specific language conventions are still in the process of being selected and accepted. At present, socially-approved norms of English language use across the Gulf are generally more reflective of the standards of North American, British and Australian varieties of English. While the codification of locally-produced endonormative norms is unlikely to occur any time soon, the stage has been set for Gulf English to enter the ‘most vibrant and interesting’ (Schneider, 2010: 381) phase of development: ‘nativisation’. In the coming years, with continued cross-cultural exchange and greater involvement of local nationals in determining their own path of national development, new localised varieties of English are likely to be forged across the Gulf. ■

## References

- Ahmed, K. 2010. ‘English in the Arab Gulf.’ *Asian Journal of University Education*, 6(1), 1–12.
- Crystal, D. 2003. *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gulf News*. 2011. ‘Help Government in Emiratization.’ Online at <<http://gulfnews.com/opinions/editorials/help-government-in-emiratization-1.769448>> (Accessed May 26, 2011).

- Hubais, A. & Pillai, S. 2010. 'An instrumental analysis of English vowels produced by Omanis.' *Journal of Modern Languages*, 20, 1–18.
- Kachru, B. B. 1985. 'Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle.' In R. Quirk & H. Widdowson (eds), *English in the World: Teaching and Learning the Language and Literatures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 11–36.
- Karmani, S. 2005. 'Petro-linguistics: The emerging nexus between oil, English, and Islam.' *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 4(2), 87–102.
- Maierbrugger, A. 2011. 'Private sector gets Omanisation targets.' Online at <<http://gulfnews.com/business/economy/private-sector-gets-omanisation-targets-1.761024>> (Accessed May 26, 2011).
- Martin, A. 2003. 'An experience of teaching in the United Arab Emirates.' *English Today*, 19(2), 49–54.
- Masliyah, S. 1999. 'A cross-cultural misunderstanding: The case of the Arabic expression "Inshallah", "If God Wills".' *Dialog on Language Instruction*, 13(1–2), 97–116.
- Moody, J. 2009. 'A neglected aspect of ELT in the Arabian Gulf: Who is communication between?' In L. J. Zhang, R. Rubdy & L. Alsagoff (eds.), *Englishes and Literatures-in-English in a Globalised World: Proceedings of the 13<sup>th</sup> International Conference on English in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: National Institute of Education, pp. 99–119.
- Oman Tribune*. 2011. 'Fahd to attend GCC summit.' May 10, 1.
- Onley, J. 2005. 'Britain's informal empire in the Gulf, 1820–1971.' *Journal of Social Affairs*, 22(87), 29–43.
- Poole, B. 2006. 'Some effects of Indian English on the language as it is used in Oman.' *English Today*, 22(4), 21–4.
- Randall, M. & Samimi, M. A. 2010. 'The status of English in Dubai.' *English Today*, 26(1), 43–50.
- Schneider, E.W. 2010. 'Developmental patterns of English: similar or different?' In A. Kirkpatrick (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of World Englishes*. London/ New York: Routledge, pp. 372–84.

CAMBRIDGE

# Language Contact

Yaron Matras

Most societies in today's world are multilingual. 'Language contact' occurs when speakers of different languages interact and their languages influence each other. This book is an introduction to the subject, covering individual and societal multilingualism, the acquisition of two or more languages from birth, second language acquisition in adulthood, language change, linguistic typology, language processing and the structure of the language faculty. It explains the effects of multilingualism on society and language policy, as well as the consequences that long-term bilingualism within communities can have for the structure of languages. Drawing on the author's own first-hand observations of child and adult bilingualism, the book provides a clear analysis of such phenomena as language convergence, grammatical borrowing, and mixed languages.

Lecturers can request inspection copies of this title.

Series: *Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics*

247 x 174mm | 384 pages

Hardback | **£60.00** | 9780521825351 | Paperback | **£23.99** | 9780521532211

Adobe eBook Reader | **\$36.00 USD** | 9780511629761



[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

 **CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS