

Does Anyone Speak Arabic?

by Franck Salameh

In August 2010, Associated Press staffer Zeina Karam wrote an article, picked up by *The Washington Post* and other news outlets, that tackled a cultural, and arguably political, issue that had been making headlines for quite some time in the Middle East: the question of multilingualism and the decline of the Arabic language in polyglot, multiethnic Middle Eastern societies.¹ Lebanon was Karam's case study: an Eastern Mediterranean nation that had for the past century been the testing grounds for iconoclastic ideas and libertine tendencies muzzled and curbed elsewhere in the Arab world.² However, by inquiring into what is ailing the Arabic language—the nimbus and supreme symbol of “Arabness”—the author aimed straight at the heart of Arab nationalism and the strict, linguistic orthodoxy that it mandated, putting in question its most basic tenet: Who is an Arab?

ARABIC AND ARABISM

For most of the twentieth century, Arabs, Arab nationalists, and their Western devotees tended to substitute Arab for Middle Eastern history, as if the narratives, storylines, and paradigms of other groups mattered little or were the byproduct of alien sources far removed from the authentic, well-ordered, harmonious universe of the “Arab world.”³ As such, they held most Middle Easterners to be Arab even if only remotely associated with the Arabs and even if alien to the experiences, language, or cultural proclivities of Arabs. In the words of Sati al-Husri (1880-1967), a Syr-

ian writer and the spiritual father of linguistic Arab nationalism:

Every person who speaks Arabic is an Arab. Every individual associated with an Arabic-speaker or with an Arabic-speaking people is an Arab. If he does not recognize [his Arabness] ... we must look for the reasons that have made him take this stand ... But under no circumstances should we say: “As long as he does not wish to be an Arab, and as long as he is disdainful of his Arabness, then he is not an Arab.” He is an Arab regardless of

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1 Zeina Karam, “Lebanon Tries to Retain Arabic in Polyglot Culture,” *The Washington Post*, Aug. 16, 2010. For more on Arabic language decline, see Mahmoud al-Batal, “Identity and Language Tension in Lebanon: The Arabic of Local News at LBCI,” in Aleya Rouchdy, ed., *Language Contact and Language Conflict in Arabic: Variations on a Sociolinguistic Theme* (London: Curzon Arabic Linguistics Series, 2002); *Al-Ittijah al-Mu'akis*, Al-Jazeera TV (Doha), Aug. 1, 2000, Aug. 28, 2001; Zeina Hashem Beck, “Is the Arabic Language ‘Perfect’ or ‘Backwards’?” *The Daily Star* (Beirut), Jan. 7, 2005; Hashem Saleh, “Tajrubat al-Ittihad al-‘Urubby... hal Tanjah ‘Arabiyan?’” *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), June 21, 2005.

2 Fouad Ajami, “The Autumn of the Autocrats,” *Foreign Affairs*, May-June, 2005.

3 Elie Kedourie, “Not So Grand Illusions,” *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 23, 1967.



A rigid and unforgiving understanding of the role of Arabic as a means of developing Arab nationalism appeared frequently in the writings of Baath Party founder Michel Aflaq. He promoted violence against those users of the Arabic language who refused to conform to his prescribed, overarching, Arab identity: "hatred unto death, toward any individuals who embody an idea contrary to Arab nationalism."

his own wishes, whether ignorant, indifferent, recalcitrant, or disloyal; he is an Arab, but an Arab without consciousness or feelings, and perhaps even without conscience.⁴

This ominous admonition to embrace a domineering Arabism is one constructed on an assumed linguistic unity of the Arab peoples; a unity that a priori presumes the Arabic language itself to be a unified, coherent verbal medium, used by all members of Husri's proposed nation. Yet Arabic is not a single, uniform language. It is, on the one hand, a codified, written standard that is never spoken natively and that is accessible only to those who have had rigorous

training in it. On the other hand, Arabic is also a multitude of speech forms, contemptuously referred to as "dialects," differing from each other and from the standard language itself to the same extent that French is different from other Romance languages and from Latin. Still, Husri's dictum, "You're an Arab if I say so!" became an article of faith for Arab nationalists. It also condensed the chilling finality with which its author and his acolytes foisted their blanket Arab label on the mosaic of peoples, ethnicities, and languages that had defined the Middle East for millennia prior to the advent of twentieth-century Arab nationalism.⁵

But if Husri had been intimidating in his advocacy for a forced Arabization, his disciple Michel Aflaq (1910-89), founder of the Baath Party, promoted outright violence and cruelty against those users of the Arabic language who refused to conform to his prescribed, overarching, Arab identity. Arab nationalists must be ruthless with those members of the nation who have gone astray from Arabism, wrote Aflaq,

they must be imbued with a hatred unto death, toward any individuals who embody an idea contrary to Arab nationalism. Arab nationalists must never dismiss opponents of Arabism as mere individuals ... An idea that is opposed to ours does not emerge out of nothing! It is the incarnation of individuals who must be exterminated, so that their idea might in turn be also exterminated. Indeed, the presence in our midst of a living opponent of the Arab national idea vivifies it and stirs the blood within us. And any action we might take [against those who have rejected Arabism] that does not arouse in us living emotions, that does not make us feel the orgasmic shudders of love, that does not spark in us quivers of hate, and that does not send the blood coursing in our veins and make our pulse beat faster is, ultimately, a sterile action.⁶

4 Abu Khaldun Sati Al-Husri, *Abhath Mukhtara fi-l-Qawmiyya al-'Arabiya* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihda al-'Arabiya, 1985), p. 80.

5 Franck Salameh, *Language Memory and Identity in the Middle East: The Case for Lebanon* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2010), pp. 9-10.

6 Michel Aflaq, *Fi Sabil al-Ba'ath* (Beirut: Dar at-Tali'a, 1959), pp. 40-1.

Therein lay the foundational tenets of Arab nationalism and the Arabist narrative of Middle Eastern history as preached by Husri, Aflaq, and their cohorts: hostility, rejection, negation, and brazen calls for the annihilation of the non-Arab “other.” Yet despite the dominance of such disturbing Arabist and Arab nationalist readings, the Middle East in both its modern and ancient incarnations remains a patchwork of varied cultures, ethnicities, and languages that cannot be tailored into a pure and neat Arab essence without distorting and misinforming. Other models of Middle Eastern identities exist, and a spirited Middle Eastern, intellectual tradition that challenges the monistic orthodoxies of Arab nationalism endures and deserves recognition and validation.

THE ARABIC LANGUAGE DEBATE

Take for instance one of the AP article’s interviewees who lamented the waning of the Arabic language in Lebanese society and the rise in the numbers of Francophone and Anglophone Lebanese, suggesting “the absence of a common language between individuals of the same country mean[s] losing [one’s] common identity”—as if places like Switzerland and India, each with respectively four and twenty-three official, national—often mutually incomprehensible—speech forms, were lesser countries or suffered more acute identity crises than ostensibly cohesive, monolingual societies. In fact, the opposite is often true: Monolingualism is no more a precondition or motivation for cultural and ethnic cohesiveness than multilingualism constitutes grounds for national incoherence and loss of a common identity. Irishmen, Scotsmen, Welsh, and Jamaicans are all native English-speakers but not Englishmen. The AP could have acknowledged that glaring reality, which has been a hallmark of the polyglot multiethnic Middle East for millennia. This, of course, is beside the fact that for many Lebanese—albeit mainly Christians—multilingualism and the appeal of Western languages is simply a way of heeding history and adhering to the country’s hybrid

ethnic and linguistic heritage.

Cultural anthropologist Selim Abou argued that notwithstanding Lebanon’s millenarian history and the various and often contradictory interpretations of that history, the country’s endogenous and congenital multilingualism—and by extension that of the entire Levantine littoral—remains indisputable. He wrote:

From the very early dawn of history up to the conquests of Alexander the Great, and from the times of Alexander until the dawning of the first Arab Empire, and finally, from the coming of the Arabs up until modern times, the territory we now call Lebanon—and this is based on the current state of archaeological and historical discoveries—has always practiced some form of bilingualism and polyglossia; one of the finest incarnations of intercultural dialogue and coexistence.⁷

So much, then, for linguistic chauvinism and language protectionism. The Arabic language will survive the onslaught of multilingualism but only if its users will it to survive by speaking it rather than by hallowing it and by refraining from creating conservation societies that build hedges around it to shield it from desuetude. Even avid practitioners of multilingualism in Lebanon, who were never necessarily talented or devoted Arabophones, have traditionally been supportive of the idea of preserving Arabic in the roster of Lebanese languages—albeit not guarding and fixing it by way of mumification, cultural dirigisme, or rigid linguistic planning. Though opposed in principle to Arab nationalism’s calls for the insulation of linguistically libertine Lebanon “in the solitude of a troubled and spiteful nationalism ... [and] linguistic totalitarianism,” Lebanese thinker Michel Chiha (1891-1954) still maintained that:

Modern Standard Arabic is codified and written but never spoken natively.

⁷ Selim Abou, *Le bilinguisme Arabe-Français au Liban* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), pp. 157-8.

Languages or dialects often perfunctorily labeled Arabic might not be Arabic at all.

Arabic is a wonderful language ... the language of millions of men. We wouldn't be who we are today if we, the Lebanese of the twentieth century, were to forgo the prospect of becoming [Arabic's] most accomplished masters to the same extent that we

had been its masters some one hundred years ago ... But how can one not heed the reality that a country such as ours would be literally decapitated if prevented from being bilingual (or even trilingual if possible)? ... [We must] retain this lesson if we are intent on pro-

tecting ourselves from self-inflicted deafness, which would in turn lead us into mutism.⁸

Another fallacy reiterated in the AP article was the claim that "Arabic is believed to be spoken as a first language by more than 280 million people."⁹ Even if relying solely on the field of Arabic linguistics—which seldom bothers with the trivialities of precise cognomens denoting varieties of language, preferring instead the overarching and reductive *lahja* (dialect/accents) and *fusha* (Modern Standard Arabic, MSA) dichotomy to, say, the French classifications of *langue*, *langage*, *parler*, *dialecte*, *langue vernaculaire*, *créole*, *argot*, *patois*, etc.—Zeina Karam's arithmetic still remains in the sphere of folklore and fairy tale, not concrete, objective fact. Indeed, no serious linguist can claim the existence of a real community of "280 million people" who speak Arabic at any level of native proficiency, let alone a community that can speak Arabic "as a first language."

Harvard linguist Wheeler Thackston—and before him Taha Hussein, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyed, Abdelaziz Fehmi Pasha, and many others—have shown that the Middle East's demotic languages are not Arabic at all, and consequently, that one can hardly speak of 280

million native Arabophones—or even of a paltry one million such Arabic speakers—without oversimplifying and perverting an infinitely complex linguistic situation. The languages or dialects often perfunctorily labeled Arabic might indeed not be Arabic at all.

This is hardly a modern aberration devised by modern reformists fancying dissociation from the exclusivity of modern Arabism and its monolithic paradigm. Even Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), the fourteenth-century Muslim jurist and polymath and arguably the father of modern sociology, wrote in his famous 1377 *Prolegomena* that only the language of Quraish—the Prophet Muhammad's tribe—should be deemed true Arabic; that native Arabs learn this speech form naturally and spontaneously; and that this language became corrupt and ceased being Arabic when it came into contact with non-Arabs and assimilated their linguistic habits. Therefore, he argued,

the language of Quraish is the soundest and purest Arabic precisely due to its remoteness from the lands of non-Arabs—Persians, Byzantines, and Abyssinians ... whose languages are used as examples by Arab philologists to demonstrate the dialects' distance from, and perversion of, Arabic.¹⁰

Thackston has identified five dialectal clusters that he classified as follows: "(1) Greater Syria, including Lebanon and Palestine; (2) Mesopotamia, including the Euphrates region of Syria, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf; (3) the Arabian Peninsula, including most of what is Saudi Arabia and much of Jordan; (4) the Nile Valley, including Egypt and the Sudan; and (5) North Africa and [parts of] the ... regions of sub-Saharan Africa."¹¹ He acknowledged that although these five major dialectal regions were speckled with linguistic varieties and differences in accent and sub-dialects, "there is almost complete mutual comprehension [within each of them]—

8 Michel Chiha, *Visage et Présence du Liban* (Beirut: Editions du Trident, 1984), p. 49-52, 164.

9 Karam, "Lebanon Tries to Retain Arabic."

10 Ibn Khaldun, *al-Muqaddimah* (Beirut: Dar al-Qalam, 1977), p. 461.

11 Wheeler M. Thackston, Jr., *The Vernacular Arabic of the Lebanon* (Cambridge, Mass.: Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University, 2003), p. vii.

that is, a Jerusalemite, a Beirut, and an Aleppo may not speak in exactly the same manner, but each understands practically everything the others say.” However, he wrote,

When one crosses one or more major boundaries, as is the case with a Baghdadi and a Damascene for instance, one begins to encounter difficulty in comprehension; and the farther one goes, the less one understands until mutual comprehension disappears entirely. To take an extreme example, a Moroccan and an Iraqi can no more understand each other’s dialects than can a Portuguese and Rumanian.¹²

In 1929, Tawfiq Awan had already begun making similar arguments, maintaining that the demotics of the Middle East—albeit arguably related to Arabic—were languages in their own right, not mere dialects of Arabic:

Egypt has an Egyptian language; Lebanon has a Lebanese language; the Hijaz has a Hijazi language; and so forth—and all of these languages are by no means Arabic languages. Each of our countries has a language, which is its own possession: So why do we not write [our language] as we converse in it? For, the language in which the people speak is the language in which they also write.¹³

12 Ibid.

13 Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationalism, 1900-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 220.



For some Arabs, like these Beirutis enjoying a night out on the town, multilingualism and the appeal of Western languages is a natural corollary to their country’s hybrid ethnic and linguistic heritage. The territory now known as Lebanon has historically practiced some form of polyglossia and was once a shining representative of intercultural coexistence in the Middle East.

Even Taha Hussein (1889-1973), the doyen of modern Arabic *belles lettres*, had come to this very same conclusion by 1938. In his *The Future of Culture in Egypt*,¹⁴ he made a sharp distinction between what he viewed to be Arabic *tout court*—that is, the classical and modern standard form of the language—and the sundry, spoken vernaculars in use in his contemporary native Egypt and elsewhere in the Near East. For Egyptians, Arabic is virtually a foreign language, wrote Hussein:

Nobody speaks it at home, [in] school, [on] the streets, or in clubs; it is not even used in [the] Al-Azhar [Islamic University] itself. People everywhere speak a language that is definitely not Arabic, despite the partial resemblance to it.¹⁵

14 Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (Washington, D.C.: American Council of Learned Societies, 1954).

15 Ibid., pp. 86-7.

To this, Thackston has recently added that when Arabs speak of a bona fide Arabic language, they always mean

Classical [or Modern Standard] Arabic: the language used for all written and official communication; a language that was codified, standardized, and normalized well over a thousand years ago and that has almost a millennium and a half of uninterrupted literary legacy behind it. There is only one problem with [this] Arabic: No one speaks it. What Arabs speak is called *Arabi Darij* (“vernacular Arabic”), *lughā ammiyye* (“the vulgar language”), or *lahje* (“dialect”); only what they write do they refer to as “true [Arabic] language.”¹⁶

Middle Easterners are steering clear of Arabic in alarming numbers but not due to Western influence.

And so, even if Modern Standard Arabic were taken to be the Arabic that the AP was speaking of, it is still patently false to say, as does Karam, that MSA is anybody’s “first,” native “spoken language”—let alone the “spoken . . . first language [of] more than

280 million people.” Even Edward Said, a notoriously supple and sympathetic critic when it comes to things Arab, deemed Arabic, that is MSA, the “equivalent of Latin, a dead and forbidding language” that, to his knowledge, nobody spoke besides “a Palestinian political scientist and politician whom [Said’s] children used to describe as ‘the man who spoke like a book.’”¹⁷

FOREIGN IMPOSITION OR SELF AFFLICTION?

Playing into the hands of keepers of the Arab nationalist canon—as well as Arabists and lobbyists working on behalf of the Arabic language today—the AP article adopted the

cliché that the decline of Arabic—like the failure of Arab nationalism—was the outcome of Western linguistic intrusions and the insidious, colonialist impulses of globalization. “Many Lebanese pride themselves on being fluent in French—a legacy of French colonial rule,” Karam wrote, rendering a mere quarter-century of French mandatory presence in Lebanon (1920–46) into a period of classical-style “French colonial rule” that had allegedly destroyed the foundations of the Arabic language in the country and turned the Lebanese subalterns into imitative Francophones denuded of their putative Arab personality.¹⁸

Alas, this fashionable fad fails to take into account that French colonialism in its Lebanese context differed markedly from France’s colonial experience elsewhere. For one, the founding fathers of modern Lebanon lobbied vigorously for turning their post-Ottoman mountain *Sanjak* into a French protectorate after World War I.¹⁹ And with regard to the Lebanese allegedly privileging the French language, that too, according to Selim Abou, seems to have hardly been a colonialist throwback and an outcome of early twentieth-century French imperialism. In his 1962 *Le binlinguisme Arabe-Français au Liban*, Abou wrote that the French language (or early Latin variants of what later became French) entered Mount-Lebanon and the Eastern Mediterranean littoral at the time of the first Crusades (ca. 1099).²⁰ Centuries later, the establishment of the Maronite College in Rome (1584) and the liberal (pro-Christian) policies of then Mount-Lebanon’s Druze ruler, Fakhreddine II (1572–1635), allowed the Maronites to further strengthen their religious and their religion’s ancillary cultural and linguistic ties to Rome, Europe, and especially France—then, still the “elder daughter” of the Catholic Church. This unleashed a wave of missionary work to Lebanon—and wherever Eastern Christianity dared flaunt its specificity—and eventually led to the found-

18 Karam, “Lebanon Tries to Retain Arabic.”

19 See, for instance, Meir Zamir, *The Formation of Modern Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

20 Abou, *Le binlinguisme Arabe-Français au Liban*, pp. 177–9.

16 Thackston, *The Vernacular Arabic of the Lebanon*, p. vii.

17 Edward Said, “Living in Arabic,” *al-Ahram Weekly* (Cairo), Feb. 12–18, 2004.

ing of schools tending to the educational needs of the Christian—namely Maronite—communities of the region. Although foundational courses in Arabic and Syriac were generally taught at those missionary schools, European languages including French, Italian, and German were also part of the regular curriculum. French, therefore, can be argued to have had an older pedigree in Lebanon than suggested by Karam. And contrary to the classical norms in the expansion and transmission of imperial languages—the spread of Arabic included—which often entailed conquests, massacres, and cultural suppression campaigns, the French language can be said to have been adopted willingly by the Lebanese through “seduction” not “subjection.”²¹

It is true that many Lebanese, and Middle Easterners more generally, are today steering clear of Arabic in alarming numbers, but contrary to AP’s claim, this routing of Arabic is not mainly due to Western influence and cultural encroachments—though the West could share some of the blame; rather, it can be attributed, even if only partially, to MSA’s retrogression, difficulty, and most importantly perhaps, to the fact that this form of Arabic is largely a learned, cultic, ceremonial, and literary language, which is never acquired natively, never spoken natively, and which seems locked in an uphill struggle for relevance against sundry spontaneous, dynamic, natively-spoken, vernacular languages. Taha Hussein ascribed the decay and abnegation of the Arabic language primarily to its “inability of expressing the depths of one’s feelings in this new age.” He wrote in 1956 that MSA is

difficult and grim, and the pupil who goes to school in order to study Arabic acquires only revulsion for his teacher and for the language, and employs his time in pursuit of any other occupations that would divert and soothe his thoughts away from this arduous effort ... Pupils hate nothing more than they hate studying Arabic.²²

21 Ibid., pp. 191-5.

22 Taha Hussein, “Yasiru an-Nahw wa-l-Kitaba,” *al-Adab* (Beirut), 1956, no. 11, pp. 2, 3, 6.

Yet, irreverent as they had been in shunning Arabic linguistic autocracy and fostering a lively debate on MSA and multilingualism, Lebanon and Egypt and their Arabic travails are hardly uncommon in today’s Middle East. From Israel to Qatar and from Abu Dhabi to Kuwait, modern Middle Eastern nations that make use of some form of Arabic have had to come face to face with the challenges hurled at their hermetic MSA and are impelled to respond to the onslaught of impending polyglotism and linguistic humanism borne by the lures of globalization.

In a recent article published in Israel’s liberal daily *Ha’aretz*, acclaimed Druze poet and academic Salman Masalha called on Israel’s Education Ministry to do away with the country’s public school system’s Arabic curricula and demanded its replacement with Hebrew and English course modules. Arabophone Israelis taught Arabic at school, like Arabophones throughout the Middle East, were actually taught a foreign tongue misleadingly termed Arabic, wrote Masalha:

The mother tongue [that people] speak at home is totally different from the ... Arabic [they learn] at school; [a situation] that perpetuates linguistic superficiality [and] leads to intellectual superficiality ... It’s not by chance that not one Arab university is [ranked] among the world’s best 500 universities. This finding has nothing to do with Zionism.²³

Masalha’s is not a lone voice. The abstruseness of Arabic and the stunted achievements of those monolingual Arabophones constrained to acquire modern knowledge by way of Modern Standard Arabic have been indicted in the United Nations’ Arab Human Development reports—a

23 Salman Masalha, “Arabs, Speak Hebrew!” *Ha’aretz* (Tel Aviv), Sept. 27, 2010.

A Druze poet and academic called on Israel to do away with the public school system’s Arabic curricula.

series of reports written by Arabs and for the benefit of Arabs—since the year 2002. To wit, the 2003 report noted that the Arabic language is struggling to meet the challenges of modern times

[and] is facing [a] severe ... and real crisis in theorization, grammar, vocabulary, usage, documentation, creativity, and criticism ... The most apparent aspect of this crisis is the growing neglect of the functional aspects of [Arabic] language use. Arabic language skills in everyday life have deteriorated, and Arabic ... has in effect ceased to be a spoken language. It is only the language of reading and writing; the formal language of intellectuals and academics, often used to display knowledge in lectures ... [It] is not the language of cordial, spontaneous expression, emotions, daily encounters, and ordinary communication. It is not a vehicle for discovering one's inner self or outer surroundings.²⁴

And so, concluded the report, the only Arabophone countries that were able to circumvent this crisis of knowledge were those like Lebanon and Egypt, which had actively promoted a polyglot tradition, deliberately protected

the teaching of foreign languages, and instated math and science curricula in languages other than Arabic.

Translation is another crucial means of transmitting and acquiring knowledge claimed the U.N. report, and given that “English represents around 85 percent of the total world knowledge balance,”

one might guess that “knowledge-hungry countries,” the Arab states included, would take heed of the sway of English, or at the very least, would seek out the English language as a major source

of translation. Yet, from all source-languages combined, the Arab world's 330 million people translated a meager 330 books per year; that is, “one fifth of the number [of books] translated in Greece [home to 12 million Greeks].” Indeed, from the times of the Caliph al-Ma'mun (ca. 800 CE) to the beginnings of the twenty-first century, the “Arab world” had translated a paltry 10,000 books: the equivalent of what Spain translates in a single year.²⁵

But clearer heads are prevailing in Arab countries today. Indeed, some Arabs are taking ownership of their linguistic dilemmas; feckless Arab nationalist vainglory is giving way to practical responsible pursuits, and the benefits of valorizing local speech forms and integrating foreign languages into national, intellectual, and pedagogic debates are being contemplated. Arabs “are learning less Islam and more English in the tiny desert sheikhdom of Qatar” read a 2003 *Washington Post* article, and this overhaul of Qatar's educational system, with its integration of English as a language of instruction—“a total earthquake” as one observer termed it—was being billed as the Persian Gulf's gateway toward greater participation in an ever more competitive global marketplace. But many Qataris and Persian Gulf Arabs hint to more pressing and more substantive impulses behind curricular bilingualism: “necessity-driven” catalysts aimed at replacing linguistic and religious jingoism with equality, tolerance, and coexistence; changing mentalities as well as switching languages and textbooks.²⁶

This revolution is no less subversive in nearby Abu Dhabi where in 2009 the Ministry of Education launched a series of pedagogical reform programs aimed at integrating bilingual education into the national curriculum. Today, “some 38,000 students in 171 schools in Abu Dhabi [are] taught ... simultaneously in Arabic and English.”²⁷

And so, rather than rushing to prop up and protect the fossilized remains of MSA, the de-

The Arabs' failure to modernize may be a corollary of their language's inability to conform to the exigencies of modern life.

24 *Arab Human Development Report 2003* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2003), p. 54.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 66-7.

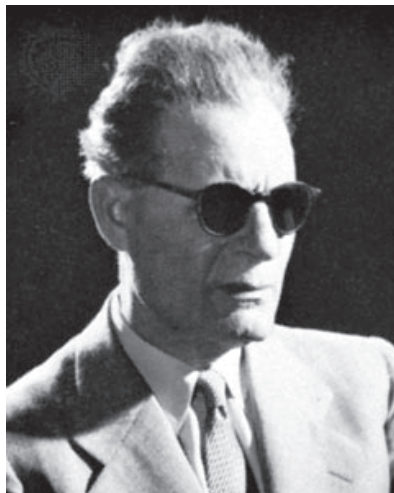
26 *The Washington Post*, Feb. 2, 2003.

27 *The National* (Abu Dhabi), Sept. 15, 2010.

bate that should be engaged in today's Middle East needs to focus more candidly on the utility, functionality, and practicality of a hallowed and ponderous language such as MSA in an age of nimble, clipped, and profane speech forms. The point of reflection should not be whether to protect MSA but whether the language inherited from the Jahiliya Bedouins—to paraphrase Egypt's Salama Musa (1887-1958)—is still an adequate tool of communication in the age of information highways and space shuttles.²⁸ Obviously, this is a debate that requires a healthy dose of courage, honesty, moderation, and pragmatism, away from the usual religious emotions and cultural chauvinism that have always stunted and muzzled such discussions.

LINGUISTIC SCHIZOPHRENIA AND DECEIT

Sherif Shubashy's book *Down with Sibawayh If Arabic Is to Live on!*²⁹ seems to have brought these qualities into the debate. An eighth-century Persian grammarian and father of Arabic philology, Sibawayh is at the root of the modern Arabs' failures according to Shubashy. *Down with Sibawayh*, which provoked a whirlwind of controversy in Egypt and other Arab countries following its release in 2004, sought to shake the traditional Arabic linguistic establishment and the Arabic language itself out of their millenarian slumbers and proposed to unshackle MSA from stiff and superannuated norms that had, over the centuries, transformed it into a shrunken and fossilized mummy: a ceremonial, religious, and literary language that was never used as a speech form, and whose hallowed status "has rendered it a heavy chain curbing the Arabs' intellect, blocking their creative energies



Taha Hussein, considered the "dean of modern Arabic literature," recognized the futility of thinking of classical Arabic as one unified and unifying language. "Nobody speaks it at home," he wrote, "[in] school, [on] the streets, or in clubs ... People everywhere speak a language that is definitely not Arabic, despite the partial resemblance to it."

... and relegating them to cultural bondage."³⁰

In a metaphor reminiscent of Musa's description of the Arabic language, Shubashy compared MSA users to "ambling cameleers from the past, contesting highways with racecar drivers hurtling towards modernity and progress."³¹ In his view, the Arabs' failure to modernize was a corollary of their very language's inability (or unwillingness) to regenerate and innovate and conform to the exigencies of modern life.³² But perhaps the most devastating blow that Shubashy dealt the Arabic language was his description of the *lahja* and *fusha* (or dialect vs. MSA) dichotomy as "linguistic schizophrenia."³³

28 Salama Musa, *Maa Hiya an-Nahda, wa Mukhtarar Ukhra* (Algiers: Mofam, 1990), p. 233.

29 Sherif al-Shubashy, *Li-Tahya al-Lugha al-'Arabiya, Yasqut Sibawayh* (Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-Misriya li'l-Kitab, 2004); Cherif Choubachy, *Le Sabre et la Virgule: La Langue du Coran est-elle à l'origine du mal arabe?* (Paris: L'Archipel, 2007).

30 Choubachy, *Le Sabre et la Virgule*, pp. 10, 16-8.

31 Shubashy, *Li-Tahya al-Lugha al-'Arabiya*, p. 18.

32 Choubachy, *Le Sabre et la Virgule*, pp. 17-8; Shubashy, *Li-Tahya al-Lugha al-'Arabiya*, p. 14.

33 Shubashy, *Li-Tahya al-Lugha al-'Arabiya*, pp. 125-42.

Standard Arabic is a symbiotic bedmate of Islam and the tool of its cultural and literary tradition.

For although Arabs spoke their individual countries' specific, vernacular languages while at home, at work, on the streets, or in the marketplace, the educated among them were con-

strained to don a radically different linguistic personality and make use of an utterly different speech form when reading books and newspapers, watching television, listening to the radio, or drafting formal, official reports.³⁴

That speech form, which was never spontaneously spoken, Shubashy insisted, was Modern Standard Arabic: a language which, not unlike Latin in relation to Europe's Romance languages, was distinct from the native, spoken vernaculars of the Middle East and was used exclusively by those who had adequate formal schooling in it. He even went so far as to note that "upward of 50 percent of so-called Arabophones can't even be considered Arabs if only MSA is taken for the legitimate Arabic language, the sole true criterion of Arabness."³⁵ Conversely, it was a grave error to presume the vernacular speech forms of the Middle East to be Arabic, even if most Middle Easterners and foreigners were conditioned, and often intimidated, into viewing them as such. The so-called dialects of Arabic were not Arabic at all, he wrote, despite the fact that

like many other Arabs, I have bathed in this linguistic schizophrenia since my very early childhood. I have for very long thought that the difference between MSA and the dialects was infinitely minimal; and that whoever knew one language—especially MSA—would intuitively know, or at the very least, understand the other. However, my own experience, and especially the evidence of foreigners studying MSA, convinced me of the deep chasm that separated

MSA from dialects. Foreigners who are versed in MSA, having spent many years studying that language, are taken aback when I speak to them in the Egyptian dialect; they don't understand a single word I say in that language.³⁶

This "pathology" noted Shubashy, went almost unnoticed in past centuries when illiteracy was the norm, and literacy was still the preserve of small, restricted guilds—mainly the ulema and religious grammarians devoted to the study of Arabic and Islam, who considered their own linguistic schizophrenia a model of piety and a sacred privilege to be vaunted, not concealed. Today, however, with the spread of literacy in the Arab world, and with the numbers of users of MSA swelling and hovering in the vicinity of 50 percent, linguistic schizophrenia is becoming more widespread and acute, crippling the Arab mind and stunting its capacities. Why was it that Spaniards, Frenchmen, Americans, and many more of the world's transparent and linguistically nimble societies, needed to use only a single, native language for both their acquisition of knowledge and grocery shopping whereas Arabs were prevented from reading and writing in the same language that they use for their daily mundane needs?³⁷

As a consequence of the firestorm unleashed by his book, Shubashy, an Egyptian journalist and news anchor and, at one time, the Paris bureau-chief of the Egyptian *al-Ahram* news group, was forced to resign his post as Egypt's deputy minister of culture in 2006. The book caused so much controversy to a point that the author and his work were subjected to a grueling cross-examination in the Egyptian parliament where, reportedly, scuffles erupted between supporters and opponents of Shubashy's thesis. In the end, the book was denounced as an affront to Arabs and was ultimately banned. Shubashy himself was accused of defaming the Arabic language in rhetoric mimicking a "colonialist discourse."³⁸

34 Ibid., p. 125.

35 Choubachy, *Le Sabre et la Virgule*, p. 119.

36 Shubashy, *Li-Tahya al-Lugha al-'Arabiya*, pp. 125-6.

37 Ibid., pp. 126-8, 130; Choubachy, *Le Sabre et la Virgule*, p. 121.

A deputy in the Egyptian parliament—representing Alexandria, Shubashy’s native city—accused the author of “employing the discourse and argumentation of a colonialist occupier, seeking to replace the Arab identity with [the occupier’s] own identity and culture.”³⁹ Ahmad Fuad Pasha, advisor to the president of Cairo University, argued that the book “was added proof that, indeed, the Zionist-imperialist conspiracy is a glaring reality,”⁴⁰ aimed at dismantling Arab unity. Muhammad Ahmad Achour wrote in Egypt’s *Islamic Standard* that

Shubashy has taken his turn aiming another arrow at the heart of the Arabic language. Yet, the powers that seek to destroy our language have in fact another goal in mind: The ultimate aim of their conspiracy is none other than the Holy Qur’an itself, and to cause Muslims to eventually lose their identity and become submerged into the ocean of globalization.⁴¹

Even former Egyptian president Husni Mubarak felt compelled to take a potshot at Shubashy in a speech delivered on *Laylat al-Qadr*, November 9, 2004, the anniversary of the night that Sunni Muslims believe the Prophet Muhammad received his first Qur’anic revelation. Mubarak warned,

I must caution the Islamic religious scholars against the calls that some are sounding for the modernization of the Islamic religion, so as to ostensibly make it evolve, under the pretext of attuning it to the dominant world order of “modernization” and “reform.” This trend has led recently to certain initiatives calling for the modification of Arabic vocabulary and grammar; the modification of God’s chosen language no less; the holy language in which he revealed his message to the Prophet.⁴²

38 See, for example, Muhammad al-Qasem, “Li-Tahya al-Lugha al-‘Arabiya ... wa Yasqut Sibawayh... Limatha?” *Islam Online*, July 10, 2004.

39 Choubachy, *Le Sabre et la Virgule*, p. 181.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 189-90.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

THE LATIN PRECEDENT

However understandable, this onslaught was largely unnecessary. For all his audacity, spirit, and probity, not to mention his provocative dissection of the linguistic and cultural conundrum bedeviling the Arabs, Shubashy failed to follow his argument to its natural conclusion, and his proposed solutions illustrated the hang-ups and inhibitions that had shackled and dissuaded previous generations of reformers.

Like Taha Hussein, Salama Moussa, and Tawfiq Awan, among others, Shubashy seemed at times to be advocating the valorization and adoption of dialectal speech forms—and the discarding of MSA. But then, no sooner had he made a strong case for dialects than he promptly backed down, as if sensing a sword of Damocles hanging over his head, and renounced what he would now deem a heresy and an affront to Arab history and Muslim tradition—in a sense, resubmitting to the orthodoxies of Arab nationalists and Islamists that he had initially seemed keen on deposing.

His initial virulent critiques of the Arabic language’s religious and nationalist canon notwithstanding, his best solution ended up recommending discarding dialects to the benefit of “reawakening” and “rejuvenating” the old language. There were fundamental differences between Latin and MSA, Shubashy argued:

Arabic is the language of the Qur’an and the receptacle of the aggregate of the Arabs’ scientific, literary, and artistic patrimony, past and present. No wise man would agree to relinquish that patrimony under any circumstances.⁴³

43 Shubashy, *Li-Tahya al-Lugha al-‘Arabiya*, pp. 133-4.

Big language unification movements have been met with failure, wars, genocides, and mass population movements.

In fact, contrary to Shubashy's assertions, this was a dilemma that Europe's erstwhile users (and votaries) of Latin had to confront between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. For, just as MSA is deemed a symbiotic bedmate of Islam and the tool of its cultural and literary tradition, so was Latin the language of the church, the courts of Europe, and Western literary, scientific, and cultural traditions. Leaving Latin was not by any means less painful and alienating for Christian Europeans than the

abandonment of MSA might turn out to be for Muslims and Arabs. Yet a number of audacious fifteenth-century European iconoclasts, undaunted by the linguistic, literary, and theological gravitas of Latin orthodoxy, did resolve to elevate their heretofore

lowly, vernacular languages to the level of legitimate and recognized national idioms.

One of the militant pro-French lobbies at the forefront of the calls for discarding Latin to the benefit of an emerging French language was a group of dialectal poets called La Brigade—originally troubadours who would soon adopt the sobriquet La Pléiade. The basic document elaborating their role as a literary and linguistic avant-garde was a manifesto titled *Déffence et illustration de la langue Françoise*, believed to have been penned in 1549 by Joachim Du Bellay (1522-60). The *Déffence* was essentially a denunciation of Latin orthodoxy and advocacy on behalf of the French vernacular. Like Dante's own fourteenth-century defense and promotion of his Tuscan dialect in *De vulgari eloquentia*—which became the blueprint of an emerging Italian language and a forerunner of Dante's Italian *La Divina Commedia*—Du Bellay's French *Déffence* extolled the virtues of vernacular French languages and urged sixteenth-century poets, writers, and administrators to make use of their native vernacular—as opposed to official Latin—in their creative, literary, and official functions, just as they had

been doing in their daily lives.

Latin, nevertheless, persisted and endured, especially as the language of theology and philosophy, in spite of the valiant intellectuals who fought on behalf of their spoken idioms. Even during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, students at the Sorbonne who were caught speaking French on university grounds—or in the surrounding Latin Quarter—were castigated and risked expulsion from the university. Indeed, the Sorbonne's famed Latin Quarter is believed to have earned its sobriquet precisely because it remained a sanctuary for the language long after the waning of Latin—and an ivory tower of sorts—where only Latin was tolerated as a spoken language. Even René Descartes (1596-1659), the father of Cartesian logic and French rationalism was driven to apologize for having dared use vernacular French—as opposed to his times' hallowed and learned Latin—when writing his famous treatise, *Discours de la Méthode*, close to a century after Du Bellay's *Déffence*.

Descartes' contemporaries, especially language purists in many official and intellectual circles (very much akin to those indicting Shubashy and his cohorts today), censured Descartes, arguing French to be too divisive and too vulgar to be worthy of scientific, philosophic, literary, and theological writing. Yet, an undaunted Descartes wrote in his introduction:

If I choose to write in French, which is the language of my country, rather than in Latin, which is the language of my teachers, it is because I hope that those who rely purely on their natural and sheer sense of reason will be the better judges of my opinions than those who still swear by ancient books. And those who meld reason with learning, the only ones I incline to have as judges of my own work, will not, I should hope, be partial to Latin to the point of refusing to hear my arguments out simply because I happen to express them in the vulgar [French] language.⁴⁴

44 René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (Paris: Edition G.F., 1966), p. 95.

Successful language unification movements normalize speech forms already spoken natively.

Yet, the psychological and emotive dominance of Latin (and the pro-Latin lobby) of seventeenth-century Europe remained a powerful deterrent against change. So much so that Descartes' written work would continue vacillating between Latin and French. Still, he remained a dauntless pioneer in that he had dared put into writing the first seminal, philosophical treatise of his time (and arguably the most influential scientific essay of all times) in a lowly popular *lahja* (to use an Arabic modifier.) He did so not because he was loath to the prestige and philosophical language of his times but because the French vernacular was simply his natural language, the one with which he, his readers, and his illiterate countrymen felt most comfortable and intimate. It was the French *lahja* and its lexical ambiguities and grammatical peculiarities that best transmitted the realities and the challenges of Descartes' surroundings and worldviews. To write in the vernacular French—as opposed to the traditional Latin—was to function in a language that reflected Descartes' own, and his countrymen's, cultural universe, intellectual references, popular domains, and historical accretions.

CONCLUSION

This then, the recognition and normalization of dialects, could have been a fitting conclusion and a worthy solution to the dilemma that Shubashy set out to resolve. Unfortunately, he chose to pledge fealty to MSA and classical Arabic—ultimately calling for their normalization and simplification rather than their outright replacement.⁴⁵ In that sense, Shubashy showed himself to be in tune with the orthodoxies preached by Husri who, as early as 1955, had already been calling for the creation of a “middle Arabic language” and a crossbreed fusing MSA and vernacular speech forms—as a way of bridging the Arabs' linguistic incoherence and bringing unity to their fledgling nationhood:

MSA is the preserve of a small, select number of educated people, few of whom bother using it as a speech form. Conversely, what we refer to as “dialectal Arabic” is in truth a bevy of languages differing markedly from one country to the other, with vast differences often within the same country, if not within the same city and neighborhood ... Needless to say, this pathology contradicts the exigencies of a sound, wholesome national life! [And given] that true nations deserving of the appellation require a single common and unifying national language ... [the best solution I can foresee to our national linguistic quandary] would be to inoculate the dialectal languages with elements of MSA ... so as to forge a new “middle MSA” and diffuse it to the totality of Arabs ... This is our best hope, and for the time being, the best palliative until such a day when more lasting and comprehensive advances can be made towards instating the final, perfected, integral MSA.⁴⁶

There are few Arabs doing critical work on Standard Arabic who do not end up being cowed into silence.

This is at best a disappointing and desultory solution, not only due to its chimerical ambitions but also because, rather than simplifying an already cluttered and complicated linguistic situation, it suggested the engineering of an additional language for the “Arab nation” to adopt as a provisional national idiom. To expand on Shubashy's initial diagnosis, this is tantamount to remedying schizophrenia by inducing a multi-personality disorder—as if Arabs were in want of yet another artificial language to complement their already aphasiac MSA.

Granted, national unification movements and the interference in, or creation of, a national language are part of the process of nation building and often do bear fruit. However, success in the building of a national language is largely

45 Shubashy, *Li-Tahya al-Lugha al-'Arabiya*, pp. 142, 184-5.

46 For the full text of Husri's address, see Anis Freyha, *al-Lahajat wa Uslubu Dirasatiha* (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1989), pp. 5-8.

dependent upon the size of the community and the proposed physical space of the nation in question.⁴⁷ In other words, size does matter. Small language unification movements—as in the cases of, say, Norway, Israel, and France—can and often do succeed. But big language unifica-

It is society and communities of users that decide the fate of languages.

tion movements on the other hand—as in the cases of pan-Turkism, pan-Slavism, pan-Germanism, and yes, pan-Arabism—have thus far been met with not only failure but also devastating wars, genocides, and mass population move-

ments. Moreover, traditionally, the small language unification movements that did succeed in producing national languages benefitted from overwhelming, popular support among members of the proposed nation. More importantly, they sought to normalize not prestige, hermetic, (written) literary languages, but rather lower, degraded speech forms that were often already spoken natively by the national community in question (e.g., Creole in Haiti, Old Norse in Norway, and modern, as opposed to biblical Hebrew in Israel).⁴⁸

Shubashy's call of "down with Sibawayh!" meant purely and simply "down with the classical language" and its MSA progeny. Overthrow-

ing Sibawayh meant also deposing the greatest Arabic grammarian, the one credited with the codification, standardization, normalization, and spread of the classical Arabic language—and later its MSA descendent. Yet, calling for the dethroning of one who was arguably the founding father of modern Arabic grammar, and in the same breath demanding the preservation, inoculation, and invigoration of his creation, is contradictory and confusing. It is like "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results," to use Albert Einstein's famous definition of insanity. Or could it be that perhaps an initially bold Shubashy was rendered timid by a ruthless and intimidating MSA establishment? After all, there are few Arabs doing dispassionate, critical work on MSA today, who do not ultimately end up being cowed into silence, or worse yet, slandered, discredited, and accused of Zionist perfidy and "Arabophobia." Salama Musa,⁴⁹ Taha Hussein,⁵⁰ and Adonis⁵¹ are the most obvious and recent examples of such character assassinations.

Ultimately, however, it is society and communities of users—not advocacy groups, linguistic guilds, and preservation societies—that decide the fate of languages. As far as the status and fate of the Arabic language are concerned, the jury still seems to be out.



47 Ronald Waurdhaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), pp. 353-74.

48 John Myhill, *Language, Religion, and National Identity in Europe and the Middle East* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2006), pp. 9-12.

49 Ibrahim A. Ibrahim, "Salama Musa: An Essay on Cultural Alienation," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Oct. 1979.

50 "Taha Hussein (1889-1973)," Egypt State Information Service, Cairo, accessed June 10, 2011.

51 See Adonis, *al-Kitab, al-Khitab, al-Hijab* (Lebanon: Dar al-Adab, 2009), pp. 9, 14, 16-9.