

ANTI-THESIS

Arabic as a scholarly language? Pitfalls of multilingualism in scholarship

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Virtually all Arabists at some point ask themselves whether they should take into account specialized literature in Arabic, whether to take part in conferences held in Arabic countries, and which language they should choose for publishing their work. In this paper, we try to review this question in a broader context of the language of scholarship. By adducing historical and typological parallels, we

reflect on the role of language in conducting research and exchanging ideas.

The authors of this article are both linguists specialized in Semitic languages; therefore, they concentrate on the problems of their field, although these should be relevant to some extent also for the adjacent fields in the humanities.

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Arabic Scholarship: State of Affairs

The starting point for the discussion about the academic use of Arabic and other languages of the MENA regions at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies was twofold. On the one hand, there are some initiatives at universities in Germany that encourage Arabists to use Arabic for scholarly purposes: the ongoing seminar *Ḥalqa ‘arabiyya* in Marburg (Centrum für Nah- und Mittelost-Studien, “Wirtschafts-arabisch”) and the yearly conference “Kompetenzorientierung im Arabischunterricht” at the University of Bamberg on the methodological and pedagogical challenges of teaching Arabic, which includes many talks in the Arabic language. On the other hand, it can be observed that the speakers of Middle Eastern and African languages obviously form the minority at the conferences dedicated to the respective languages, and these languages are rarely used there for academic talks. A regular conference on the Arabic dialectology “AIDA” is an example of a rather successful interaction between Arabic and Western scholars and has Arabic as one of its working languages. Nevertheless, the program of “AIDA-2019” includes 104 talks in English and French and only 11 talks in Arabic. Is this disparity a result of the politics and

mentality of Orientalism, or are there other reasons?

If we compare the situation of Arabic scholars and the Arabic academic language with that of other languages and countries, we will conclude that they occupy the middle position between other languages with a long written tradition, such as those of Eastern Europe and Far Eastern Asia, on the one hand, and languages without written traditions, on the other. Conferences dedicated to e.g. Russian or Chinese involve many native speakers and may be held partially or completely in those languages. See, for example, the Annual Conference of the International Association of Chinese Linguistics, with its mixed English-Chinese program ("About IACL"). To be sure, there are discussions within the respective scholarly communities whether everyone should switch into English in their academic work, but at least this is not the current situation.

Conferences and publications dedicated to languages with recent written and scholarly traditions are carried out almost completely in Western European languages; see as an example the International Conference on Swahili Language and Linguistics, held in English (World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology, "Cape Town Program").

However, to our knowledge, there is a recent tendency in linguistics to engage native speakers of these regions in descriptive and theoretical work with their vernaculars. It is obvious that one should support the idea of engaging native speakers from countries with young scholarly traditions so that they become linguists, to motivate them, to treat them as equals, and possibly even to give them quotas at conferences, considering that in the past they were treated primarily as objects rather than subjects of research. The situation of Arabic scholarship is different. It would be wrong to call it young: it has a long history that has been maintained in the humanities but, unfortunately, interrupted for several centuries in the natural sciences. With the decline of the Caliphate, the sciences in the Arab world fell into decay and are still in crisis. They are taught in English or French at the universities of Arab countries, while receiving an education at Western universities is considered more prestigious there. Kuwait University may serve as an example: its *Guide of the University Faculties (dalīl kulliyāt al-jāmi'a)* for the academic year 2018/2019 says that, in some faculties, like the Faculty of Sciences, the language of study is English. In Morocco, sciences are taught in French, see Sulaimani, this volume.

As for the humanities in the Arabic world, we observe that, to a certain degree, they are detached from and lack integration into the modern scholarship of North America and Europe. In contrast to some other historical situations when international scientific contacts were impossible due to geographic or political restrictions, with Arabic scholarship, at least in certain fields, this restriction comes from within Arab society itself and probably has an ideological character. A large role in this ideology is played by the Arabic language, which many of its native speakers consider radically different from other languages.

Difficulties for Western Scholars in Interacting with Today's Arabic Scholarship

Before addressing the impact of isolation on Arabic scholarship, let us discuss the differences between Arabic and Western scholarship in the academic language and linguistic traditions.

A serious problem in the interaction with Arabic scholars today is the lack of a shared terminology, not only in the humanities, but in all likelihood in science as well. Whereas Arabic in the course of its history was a perfect vessel for scientific discussion and in its heyday overlapping with the Middle Ages in Europe produced an immense body of academic

literature in many fields, from grammar and lexicography to mathematics, astronomy, geography and medicine, this changed with the advent of modern science and scholarship.

The example of Arabic linguistics is typical: the tradition of Arabic grammar going back to the work of the famous grammarian Sibawayhi (d. ca. 180 AH/796 AD) with its own set of linguistic terms and modes of grammatical explanations neither conforms to modern linguistics nor is applicable to other languages. For example, in the paradigm of past-tense verbs, the Arabic tradition makes a distinction between 3rd-person singular feminine *katab-at* (she wrote) and 1st-person singular *katab-tu* (I wrote): instead of treating them as members of a uniform paradigm, they classify the first ending as a sort of nominal feminine morpheme (*mu'annath*), while the latter is treated as a 1st-person singular pronoun (*ḍamīr*) (Weigelt 54-55). Furthermore, the term *naṣb* is used for both the nominal accusative ending *-a(n)*, like *kitāb-an* (a book), *al-kitāb-a* (the book), and the verbal subjunctive ending such as *yaktub-a* ((that) he writes), as if these two phenomena were not only phonetically similar on the surface but also comparable syntactically (Weigelt 63). Idiosyncrasies such as these are not matched in the other descriptive grammars, even those of other

Semitic languages, despite their typological similarity. Nevertheless, the traditional terminology is very much alive and in use in Arabic countries, still determining the way Arabic grammar is learnt and discussed.

If shared terminology simply does not exist for a particular language, as is the case in many fields of Arabic scholarship, then who should create it, foreign scholars or native speakers of Arabic in their striving for integration? We side with those who favour the latter approach, not least because we are keenly aware of many special problems inherent in creating appropriate terminology for Arabic. One conspicuous difficulty may be the structure of Arabic morphology. Creating terms from existing roots according to a limited number of Arabic patterns requires a good, not to say perfect understanding and knowledge of the language, because the semantic interaction of a root and pattern is often not easy to predict. Borrowed terminology, on the other hand, may seem alien, not forming part of the Arabic language system. As for existing terms, they may have a different meaning in the Arabic tradition, and Arabic scholars would not want to change it.

But who will decide whether a given newly created term is accepted by the scholarly community in all the Arabic countries? In

some polities, new words are discussed and then either accepted or rejected by the institutions that play a role of authorities on vocabulary, such as the *Académie française* in France or the Academy of the Hebrew Language in Israel. As for the Arab countries, they do not and cannot have a common institution that would decide for every one of them on linguistic issues.

In addition to the terminological problems, one can observe that Arab linguists and philologists frequently have interests that are quite different from those of their European colleagues. Their approach to language history generally does not rely on comparative linguistics, which emphasizes the necessity of using genetically related languages for the purpose of reconstructing their common ancestor. The Arabic scholars are primarily interested in the internal history of their own language. Thus, the Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic does not supply external etymologies, but gives citations from texts from various periods in the history of Arabic (The Doha Dictionary). Furthermore, they do not normally have a predilection for describing dialects or dialectal history, but tend to be rather prescriptive in the use of the standard literary variant. Nor do traditional Arab grammarians attribute any value to linguistic typol-

ogy. All these ideological differences frequently complicate interaction between Arab and Western scholars.

Multilingualism in Scholarship

The situation with using Arabic for academic purposes is part of a more general discussion about multilingualism in scholarship. Here, two competitive interests come into play: the value of universal science for the progress of humankind, on the one hand, and national interests and anti-globalism, on the other hand. If we accept a need for academic multilingualism, we face a number of questions, which are certainly rhetorical to some extent, because they do not have *good* answers: Is there a list of languages that should be used in scholarship, or are all the languages spoken by scholars equally suitable for scholarship?

How many languages should a scholar learn in order to understand issues that are relevant for his studies, and how much time should he invest in it in proportion to his research?

Should the science of language be different from other fields in which language is not the subject of study?

Does a language that does not have all the registers of speech, including scientific terminology and scholarly discourse run the path toward being endangered?

These questions are valid not only for Arabic, and, furthermore, it seems that the answers depend on the person or entity who asks. For an individual scholar, it is preferable to *understand* as many languages as possible, but to *write* in a language that is comprehensible for the largest part of the target audience. For a state or nation, it is important to develop science in its own language and to teach it at universities, although it can accept the use of the most widely used language as a compromise in order to participate in international programs. A first step may be the mandatory use of abstracts in Arabic in the case of an article in a European language or vice versa. This could at least facilitate communication and exchange among the scientific communities.

Historically, several models of academic multilingualism are known to have existed in various periods. Greek was the scholarly language par excellence in Antiquity, and Latin fulfilled the same role in Europe in Middle Ages, while in the Middle East a comparable role was allotted to Arabic at the same time. Since the 18th and especially in the 19th century, following the standardization of European literary languages, European scholars began to use them in writing. Thus, William Wright wrote in English, Carl Brockelmann and Theodor Nöldeke in German, Albert

Kazimirski de Biberstein in French, Ahatanhel Krymsky in Russian, etc., although all these Arabists and Semitologists were polyglots and experts in many languages of Europe and Asia and could mostly read each other's research papers. At the same time, scholarship in other parts of the world remained isolated. In the course of the twentieth century, worldwide scientific interaction became gradually more intensive, and the question of going back to the one-language model became critically acute, resulting in the domination of English in many fields.

History also shows us that this situation is not a cause for alarm. The sociolinguistic model in which different languages are used in different situations has been widespread throughout history and time. Whether or not Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, actually said: "I speak Spanish with God, Italian to women, French to men and German to my horse" (Braunmüller and Ferraresi 2), he was familiar with all these languages and used them in different circumstances. An interesting case of diglossia characterized the writings of the medieval Jews in Arab countries: Maimonides, the famous philosopher and physician who lived in Egypt in the 12th century, used to write in two different languages depending on

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the subject of his paper: his medical works are in Arabic, but theological ones are in Hebrew. The poet and philosopher of Al-Andalus, Solomon ibn Gabirol, wrote poetry in Hebrew and philosophy in Arabic. There are, of course, similar examples in Islamic countries as well, among them Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), who wrote various books both in Arabic and Persian. The list can be extended ad infinitum.

Therefore, accepting the value of multilingualism in general does not preclude insisting on a unique language or a restricted set of languages for international academic interaction in those cases when the scholarship from very different corners of the world should be brought together. This also holds for the scholarship of the twenty-first century.

Isolation of Scholarship

Not only language has a potential to isolate scholars from their colleagues from abroad; sometimes this can happen for political or ideological reasons. One may ask a general question: can such isolation be useful, that is, can it lead to the emergence and proliferation of independent scholarly ideas? In particular, has Arabic scholarship, being independent, generated theoretical ideas that can amplify general linguistic theory?

In order to answer the first question, we should refer to a historical parallel, namely, to the results of the isolation of scholarship in the former USSR. In the Soviet Union, most scholars were not permitted to travel to *capitalist* countries and it was difficult, sometimes impossible, to access foreign publications. Those scholars who were not able to overcome this obstacle frequently remained unfamiliar to world scholarship, since their ideas were accessible only to a limited audience of their Soviet colleagues. For example, a Russian and Soviet linguist and Arabist Nikolai Yushmanov, who died in 1946 before any meaningful contacts with the outside world became possible, is unknown despite his important research on Arabic grammar. In contrast, his disciple, the Assyriologist Igor Diakonoff, who was able to publish his work in European languages and interact with foreign colleagues since the late 50's, became widely known and acknowledged abroad.

The second question, namely the impact of Arabic linguistic tradition on the general theory of language, was studied in Jonathan Owens' work *The foundations of grammar: an introduction to medieval Arabic grammatical theory*, Frank Weigelt's *Einführung in die arabische Grammatik-tradition*, or the series edited by K. Versteegh, M.G. Carter *Studies in the*

History of Arabic Grammar. Unfortunately, many Western scholars find the Arab theories more interesting for the history of science than for the general theory. Thus, in the Epilogue to his volume, J. Owens states:

In conclusion the question can be posed whether the Arabic grammarians achieved their stated aim, that of accounting for and explaining all the facts of the Arabic language... One has seen that at nearly all points in Arabic theory there are loose ends, unresolved disputes, disputes arbitrarily decided in favor of one party or the other, interesting intimations whose consequences were not adequately followed through on, and components not fully integrated with each other. The frailties of Arabic theory look decidedly modern (263).

This brings us back to the general question: can we talk about *European, Western* vs. *local* science? People talk about science beginning in connection with the first civilizations: Mesopotamia, Egypt, ancient Greece, India and China, see the volume dedicated to the ancient world in *The Cambridge History of Science* by Jones and Taub. Throughout further history, there was an active process of infor-

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mation exchange, which also affected the Middle East. Having taken advantage of the achievements of Greek civilization, Arab medieval science made significant progress and passed knowledge further to medieval Europe. In modern times, the exchange of knowledge became easier and tends to cross not only geographical, but also social barriers. International conferences are organized for the exchange of opinions, ideas, and discoveries among scholars from different countries, while open-access makes the publication accessible for almost anyone. In the modern world, the most widely accessible international language is English. This is an objective fact, irrespective of what one thinks about why it happened and whether it was good or bad. This is why a publication written in English or a talk conducted in English reaches nowadays the maximum audience.

A famous nuclear physicist, human rights activist, and Nobel laureate, Andrei Sakharov, published in 1968 an article "Progress, Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom" (this article is now available online), in which he discusses, among other things, the freedom of scholarship. He formulated two main theses that concern the topic under discussion:

"1. The division of mankind threatens

it with destruction. (...) 2. Intellectual freedom is essential to human society – freedom to obtain and distribute information, freedom for open-minded and unfearing debate, and freedom from pressure by officialdom and prejudices."

Summing up, despite a possibility of some temporary benefit of isolation, the harm it can cause to scholarship is greater, because it leads to stagnation, reinventing the wheel, and decline in the quality of research and teaching. Therefore, it does not matter which language is used in scholarly or cultural endeavours; it is important that the idea is spread widely. There is no national science; there is just the international community of people engaged in scholarly work. Arab politics and Arabic linguistics or literature may therefore be discussed in any language. It is incomprehensible to us why it should be preferable to discuss problems of Arabic in Arabic.

Conclusion

Considering the many and important problems apparent in the use of Arabic as a meta-language in scholarly publications, we do not quite see or comprehend the benefit gained. In addition to the arguments discussed above, overall, it seems

that the effort considerably outweighs possible gains. Scholarship on the Arabic language and the Arab countries should be free to use any meta-language. In the end, it is the content that determines the worth of research and scholarship, not the language it's presented in.

Using Arabic as a scholarly language may be useful for the development of education in Arab countries and native linguistic terminology, but exporting the use of Arabic into the international context results in the isolation of the Arab scholarship from the mainstream science. For this reason, we do not see any necessity to use Arabic in publications on Arab culture or Arabic literature on the world stage.

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