Myth, values, and practice in the representation of Arabic

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Abstract

Ferguson's (1959) short article, "Myths About Arabic," is a seminal article on language attitudes. In its brief expanse, he sketches out a number of ideas whose implications have yet to be coherently developed, whether related to Arabic or to any speech community. In this article I will critically examine some of these ideas and methods and compare them to my own research project on the representation of Arabic East and West, which is directly related to it and is actually an outgrowth of it.

Introduction

Charles Ferguson, in his article "Myths About Arabic" (1959), described the attitudes that Arabs typically have of their language and its various registers (whether "true" or not) as myths. This kind of approach has been followed by others since then, such as the "linguistic ideology" approach of Silverstein (1979), Woolard and Schiefflin (1994), and other anthropological linguists, and the language myths approach of Harris (1981), who has termed modern linguistic approaches themselves "myths," as well as myself in my own work in progress, which seeks to examine the Arabic language as a cultural construct. Research of this type may be described in general as being a critique of "representations" that seeks to uncover the limitations and biases (as well as, ideally, the insights and utility) of these representations, which in turn reflect the cultural, historical, theoretical, and generic limitations and biases of the holders of these opinions. Ideally, these critiques themselves should be included in the analysis along with other types of linguistic and meta-linguistic representations. That is, they should aim for a kind of "critical reflexivity," (as discussed in Knauft 1996), which will be exemplified in the following discussion of Ferguson's ideas of language myths, which I will then compare to my own approach.

Ferguson and language mythology

Ferguson's "Myths About Arabic" is remarkable both for the scope and insight of some of his most wide-ranging and general statements (which are cursory and introductory in nature), and for the rather limited domain of some of his specific comments (which take up most of the paper), which points to the need for expanding the scope of the analysis to take in a much wider range of attitudes and opinions, including those of the researcher. The wide-ranging statements include the following definition of his basic term, "myth": myths are "attitudes and beliefs... about the language of the community as well as other languages and language in general," even when they correspond to objective reality or are true (Ferguson 1968[1959]: 375). That is, all attitudes and beliefs (about languages) whether true or false are called myths — everything is a myth. This is a rather remarkable statement, perhaps the most interesting comment of the article, presaging later epistemological developments in literary and cultural studies decades later. It is an insight, however, that is not carried over into the rest of the paper, and not applied to the author's own ideas in the same manner as it is applied to the ideas of others. Rather, the domain of application of this notion of myth is applied only to the "relatively uniform" Arab views of the Arabic language. Within these limits, Ferguson describes four myths that Arabs have about Arabic, which he acknowledges are arbitrary but which nevertheless form a "well-integrated single body of attitudes and beliefs" throughout the expansive Arabic speech community: (1) the superiority of Arabic, (2) the classical–colloquial diglossia, (3) dialect rating, and (4) the future of Arabic.

Each one of the points that he mentions was, and still is, a very important barometer of Arabic language attitudes, but his comments on the "superiority of Arabic" are the most detailed and interesting[1] and I will confine my comments to them. They also are the most revealing not just for what they say about Arab attitudes toward Arabic but also for what they reveal about the nature of "mytholigization," including the need for the researcher to maintain an air of critical self-awareness in the selection of data and the structuring of the analysis, as well as the need to expand the domain of the analysis to include more areas of language attitudes, beliefs, and practices.

He discusses three areas of language superiority which play a role in Arabic language attitudes: the aesthetic, the linguistic, and the religious. However, in addition to providing details of the Arab's beliefs in these areas, his critiques of these beliefs reveal his own implicit biases and "myths," if you will. For example, he notes that aesthetic notions of the superiority of Arabic are reflected in Arabs' opinions about their poetry,

namely that it is the most beautiful. He expands on this point in the following manner:

It has been pointed out that Arabs often seem to respond more deeply to the rhythms and phonetic symbolism of the classical language under these conditions [poetic recitations] than to the semantic content of the poem or the speech (Ferguson 1968[1959]: 376).

While he tries to qualify this statement somewhat, it ultimately stands as is, that is to say as a restatement of the Orientalist cliché about the Arabs' love of empty rhetoric over meaning, of emotion over reason, etc. In the conclusion of these comments he switches from a discussion of poetic recitations (presumably involving educated Arabs) to a reference to the illiterate peasant, who would prefer the incomprehensible beauty of Classical Arabic (in what situation it is not noted) to the perfect comprehensibility of normal conversational Arabic. Left unsaid in this is the researcher's own notion of aesthetic language, which appears to be "perfectly comprehensible" normal everyday speech, which itself reflects an aesthetic standard (modernist, English, American) that is as "mythical" as the Arab standard: the formal complexities of modern English poetry are just as intricate and capable of overwhelming or distracting the listener from the intended semantic content of the poem as are the formal structures of classical or modern Arabic poetry, this being one of the many functions of poetic language in any language. In other words, what is missing here is a recognition on the researcher's part that in his comments and analysis he is also reflecting a certain tradition, a cultural linguistic mythology if you will, that may appear just as irrational or emotional to the Other as the Other's beliefs do to him.

   The need for a critical self-awareness on the part of the researcher is also evident in the discussion of Arabs' linguistic myths of superiority. According to Ferguson these are two in kind: one based on verbal derivation (it is logical and symmetrical) and the other based on the lexicon (it is vast, rich, extensive, etc.). The former belief or myth (in the logical and symmetrical qualities of the root and pattern system as expressed especially in the system of verbal derivation) is countered by noting the illogicality and "near chaos" of the nominal system (plurals, gender and number, etc.). In making this argument, however, Ferguson reveals his own presupposition regarding what is meant by "logical and symmetrical," namely that it is easy to learn (". . . these facts [regarding the illogicality of the nominal system] go unnoticed until an Arab is forced to teach his language to a speaker of another language" [Ferguson 1968: 377]). In addition to this, however, this implicit argument against the "logicality" of the language

(that logicality = easy to learn) contradicts another very widely held belief among Arabs that goes unmentioned by Ferguson, namely that Arabic is *difficult to learn*, not just for foreigners but also for Arabs themselves.

Aside from indicating the need for expanding the domain of the analysis to include a wider variety of language beliefs and attitudes, including those of the researcher, Ferguson's article also points to the need for reference to specific works or practices by specific authors or actors, since the reliance on purely anecdotal evidence leads to unnecessary contradictions. For example, in discussing the "logical symmetry of the language," he notes "some Arabs" feeling of lexical inadequacy, while the next point describes the "Arab's" pride in the vastness of his lexicon. He may be referring in the former comment to some modernist and reformist criticisms of traditional Arab grammar and how it is taught, some of which critiqued the tradition from within and some from without, but that is unclear from his comments. This lack of specificity may be applied to his own comment that the "vastness of vocabulary" might actually be a disadvantage (Ferguson 1968[1959]: 377–378), which seems to be offered simply as a speculative "counter-myth" since there is no evidence to support it.

A final comment on the need to expand the domain of the analysis is related to the third basis for Arabs' view of the superiority of Arabic. As outlined by Ferguson, this is the Islamic religion, as represented in an argument that he paraphrases as follows: "God is all-knowing, all-powerful; He knows . . . all languages; He chose Arabic. . ., consequently it must be better" (1968[1959]: 378). He terms this the "unanswerable argument" and it may well be from the standpoint of theology or personal faith. But religiously inspired views of language also have political and social aspects to them, which are answerable and can be dealt with. It is a shortcoming of Ferguson's article that he does not refer to the political dimension of Arabic language attitudes, which would be important in understanding the researcher's own attitudes toward his object of study as well as in understanding the reception of those opinions among the subjects of that study. Such a discussion would also help in understanding the position of contemporary Arab Christians toward Arabic, who, Ferguson notes, also hold these religiously influenced views about Arabic. For example, the difference in the usage of, and the views toward, Arabic between contemporary Arab Christians and medieval Arab Christians may be explained in large part as an outgrowth of the political ideology of Arab nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a movement in which Arab Christians played prominent roles, especially as a counterweight to the competing ideologies of Islamic nationalism and Ottoman-Turkish nationalism.

Ferguson's delimitation of Arab beliefs about their language is true in general, but it is itself limited and selective, revealing the biases and

interests of the researcher himself. These biases are in turn an indication of the further "myths" and unstated premises of modernist linguist reasoning, a point that I do not think Ferguson would deny, given the wide ranging definition that he gave to the term "myth." It is important to note in this regard that Ferguson himself later noted the "special attitudes" that American linguists have toward language planning that set them apart from the rest of society, observing that "it is my view that these attitudes of American linguists are also a shared and culturally transmitted set of beliefs about language and have no more basis in research or fact than the attitudes of the society at large" (Huebner 1996: 299). In this Fergusonian spirit, therefore, I hope to provide some of what is missing in Ferguson's own sketch of myths about Arabic — not just more facts about the Arabs and their views (i.e. expanding the domain of the analysis) but a finer understanding of what the term "myth" means, and an application of this notion of "myth" to the analysis itself.

Enlarging the domain of analysis

I am presently involved in a rather large work in progress dealing with the culture-wide perception and representation of Arabic in Arab-Islamic contexts, as well as with the implications of cross-cultural representations of Arabic in the West. I view this work as an outgrowth of some of the ideas and original insights presented in Ferguson (1959), which I have tried to expand upon and clarify. There are three areas that I have considered in the development of this analysis: the domain of application, the basic terms, and the rhetorical or analytical style.

While Ferguson limited his domain of study to Arabic and to Arab views of Arabic only, I have aimed to keep the domain of study rather open at this point, including in it both specialists' representations (linguists and grammarians) of Arabic and other languages, as well as nonspecialists' views on language, and I would eventually like to include both their "metalinguistic" talk about language as well as the details of language use (code-switching involving difference levels and dialects of Arabic, as well as non-Arabic languages). The domain of study should also include at various points along the way a consideration of how the analyst (and the analytical framework itself) is reflecting a particular ideology or world-view, an approach that could be applied to the representation of any linguistic situation or speech community.

This is a rather large "domain of study," one that demands a better understanding of the basic terms of the analysis, especially the notion "myth." Rather than using the word "myth" (or even "ideology") to refer

to the social and cultural constructs that shape an individual's view of reality, I prefer to use the word "representation." I view these kinds of representations as part of larger congnitive processes by which human consciousness views, re-presents, and objectifies the world as "reality." They are constructs determined by social-cultural and individual experience and social-historical phenomena or "practices" and are by their very nature limited and contingent (a feature I take to be a given of any representation, be it a scientific theory or a literary text).

I have sought out a framework that could handle these disparate aspects of the representations of Arabic, and of languages in general, that could provide me with a way of treating each different kind of representation on a similar basis, including the very analytical framework that is being developed, using the same or similar elements of analysis for each kind of representation. I have therefore settled upon an approach heavily dependent on Bourdieu's (1991) ideas of habitus and practice, enriched by Hanks' (1987) notion of genres and generic practices. Bourdieu's succinct characterization of habitus is that it involves "lasting dispositions to action," interpretable as being an ideological perspective, a cultural system of expectations giving rise to recognizable actions or practices. In Hanks' view (or my reinterpretation of it), these practices are interpreted as genres, as generic practices: they are conventions or principles, "schemes and strategies," that structure and organize a discourse (e.g. linguistic works), within a cultural code. While they are shaped by habitus or cultural expectations, they also serve to shape and influence those cultural expectations. In this they are like Todorov's (1973) notion of "generic expectations" that derive from more general cultural expectations but also feed back into them to influence them and develop them. Within these discourses, using these discursive principles, specific works by specific individuals ("specific practice") are directed toward a particular audience that has certain specific expectations. They are formed by and reflect generic expectations or practice as well as culture-wide expectations or ideological perspectives, but they may be nevertheless improvised and novel. This framework may be summarized as in Table 1.

The kinds of "myths" or representations that Ferguson was dealing with could have been a reflection of any one level of these mediating representations, but from his claims that they were "relatively uniform" throughout the Arabic speech community, it seems clear that he was dealing primarily with notions of habitus or linguistic ideology. It also appears that he conceived of this ideology as being fairly uniform without much variation, and in this he is similar to Bourdieu in his conception of the linguistic habitus of French. I believe, however, that the Arabic linguistic situation (as well as that of other speech communities) involves more than one "regime of

Table 1.   *Representations*

World "reality"	Mediating representations			Human consciousness individual
	habitus	*generic practice*	*specific practice*	
	"dispositions to action," an ideological perspective, cultural expectations	conventions for organizing discourse, i.e. how to talk about a particular topic to a particular audience	a specific work by a specific author, a specific utterance in a specific context	

authority" as part of the habitus or culture-wide expectations about the Arabic language and its many varieties. This is reflected in the first column in Figure 1, which represents a preliminary sketch of how this framework may be applied to the Arabic linguistic situation. The various domains of linguistic authority reflect culture-wide views concerning the different language varieties in the various Arabic speech communities, including that of (a) the classical language ("fusHa") and its modern reflex, Modern Standard Arabic (which functions as the "dominant" regime of authority); (b) the various colloquial dialects internal to a nation-state or a region (in which there may be a "standard dialect," often that of the national capital); (c) various colloquial dialects differing from nation to nation or region to region, in which language attitudes toward the "self" vs. the "other" dialect may reflect wider political, social, and economic issues; and (d) non-Arabic languages, primarily the dominant European ones (French and English), which are still an influential (and some would say intrusive) force on Arab cultural life due to the economic and political hegemony of Western Europe and the United States. Related to the influence of the latter group of languages is the "Europeanist" view of language, as espoused by Arabs trained in the West, as well as by Westerners dealing with the issue of the Arabic language in some way (linguists, diplomats, language learners, etc.). Finally, it is important to note that the box-like representation of the Figure is misleading in the sense that each of these domains of authority is overlapping, and individuals may be susceptible or responsive (either positively or negatively) to any one of them at various times or even at the same time, thus affecting their view, understanding, representation, and perhaps usage of Arabic in myriad ways.

The second column in Figure 1 represents the various discourses in which the Arabic language has figured as an important topic of discussion, including the specialist discourse of traditional Arabic grammar and the various issues internal to it which have kept it alive for over a thousand
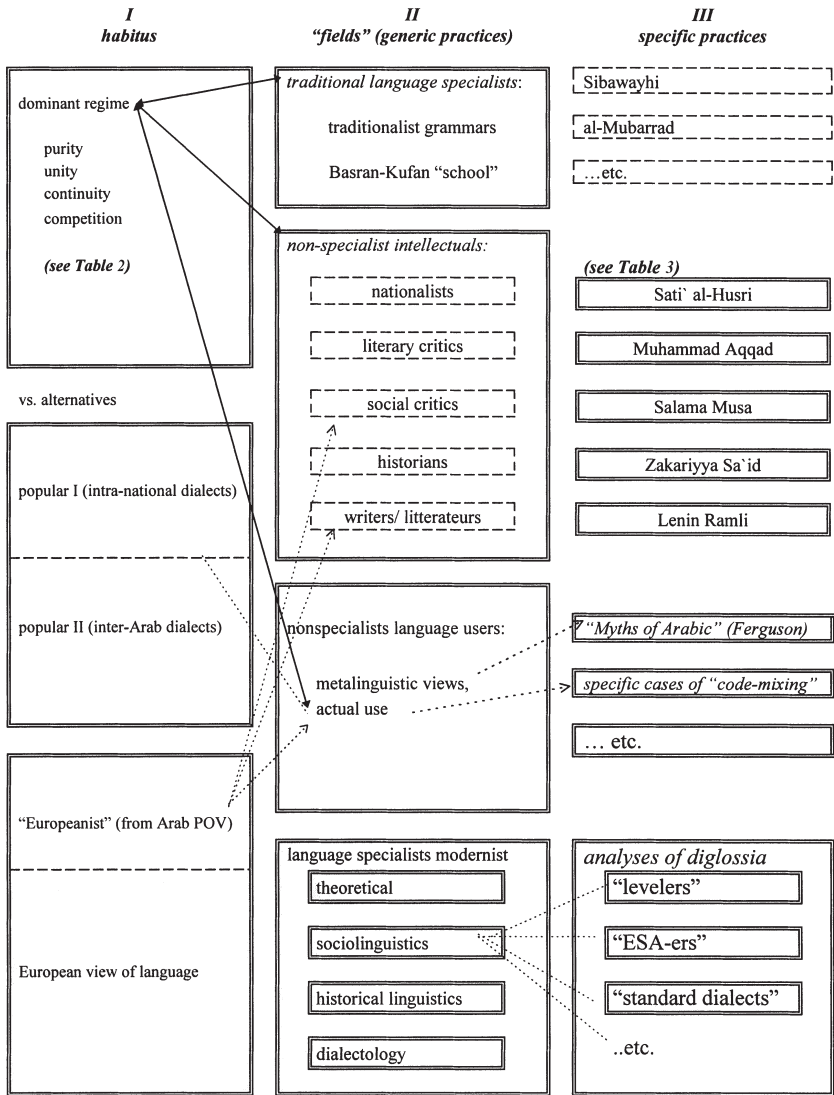
I habitus	II "fields" (generic practices)	III specific practices

Figure 1.   *Application of the framework to Arabic*

years; the discourse of nonspecialist Arab intellectuals[2] who have dealt with the political, social, literary, and historical implications of Arabic language use and usage, especially in the modern period; the discourse of nonspecialist language users, whose metalinguistic views about their own dialect and how it relates to other dialects and to Classical Arabic formed

part of the subject of Ferguson's paper, as well as their own language use, which reflects in an indirect fashion these culture-wide linguistic perceptions and opinions; and the discourse of modernist language specialists who have dealt with Arabic in any one of the subfields of theoretical linguistics, sociolinguistics, language pedagogy, etc. There may be other types of discourse not mentioned here in which the representation of the Arabic language plays an important role, and the figure is not meant to imply that these discourses are discrete and nonoverlapping — quite the contrary: they do overlap, and they are "aware" of each other, and individuals may participate in more than one discourse, perhaps even in a single work, by borrowing ideas and terms from an alternative discourse in arguing for or against it, etc.

The third column in Figure 1 reflects the output of actual individuals who have referenced Arabic language issues in their works, whether centrally or peripherally, as intellectuals, native speakers, linguists, etc. These "specific practices" run a wide gamut and it would be difficult to relate them in a coherent fashion without reference to the discourses of which they are a part, and the cultural expectations and ideologies in which they participate. It is in this area that Ferguson's brief paper was especially lacking, and I believe that it is necessary to give the greatest focus to this area in the future, as a source of information regarding actual linguistic views and practice, as well as the details of how these various regimes of authority and generic practices interact.

As an example of how I would proceed in this analysis using this framework, I have summarized in Table 2 aspects of the habitus of the dominant regime in Arabic speech communities (at the head of column 1 in Figure 1), and in Table 3 I have summarized aspects of the specific works of non-specialist Arab intellectuals who have dealt explicitly with Arabic in their works (the second group of names in column 3 in Figure 1).[3]

As reflected in Table 2, I have taken the rather vague notion of habitus for the dominant regime of Arabic linguistic authority to be reflected (or perhaps "reified") in the topics or commonplaces that underlie the "story of Arabic." (The source of inspiration for this approach is contained in the work of Hayden White, as exemplified in White 1980). These are notions such as *unity, purity, continuity*, and *competition*. I have derived these from modern (nineteenth and twentieth century) narratives about the development of Arabic, but they can also be found in late medieval writers such as Ibn Khaldun and in part in the writings of medieval grammarians and philologists and the literate and literary elites. These four cultural tropes that underlie the "story of Arabic" bear some similarity to Ferguson's four myths of Arabic: his discussion of Arabs' views regarding (1), the superiority of Arabic, is related to the commonplace of "purity";

Table 2.   *The "dominant" regime of authority in Arabic linguistic habitus*

1. Narrative	2a. Value	2b. Stigmatize	3. Master topoi
1. Arabic language prior to Islam, as recorded in *pre-Islamic poetry*, is a *single language, uniting Arabs in single culture* – Arabic language as contained in Quran: Quran revealed in a "*clear*" language, understood by all Arabs – *(later: Quraysh dialect is the "best" Arabic)*	one language universality Quraysh dialect	diversity parochialism non-Quraysh dialects	unity
2. Islamic conquests, spread of Arab tribes & Arabic language: – contact with non-Arabic languages leads to *contamination* of Arabic, the need to preserve the *purity* of the language – this results in indigenous attempts to *record* and systematize the language in grammar: *'ilm al-luġa, naḥw & ṣarf, fiqh al-luġa* etc. – *(conflicts or paradoxes in tradition shown at level of practice:* – *elicitation of grammar judgments (early grammarians)* – *Basran (vs. Kufan) "schools" of grammar*	Arab, bedouin (oral →) written *isolated Arab dialects* *rules, systemization*	foreign, urban oral *urban Arabic* *(vs. description, variation)*	purity continuity
3. cultural conflict or *competition* with *other Islamic languages* (Persian, Turkish) leads to "decline" of Arabic (= *devaluation of its "cultural capital"* — its "capital" was limited to fewer contexts)	*religious contexts:* Arabic *other contexts:* non-Arabic language	non-Arabic language Arabic	competition
4. reemergence of *rebirth* of Arabic, after contact with West (revaluing of Arabic)	continuity	change	*continuity*
5. importance or centrality of Arabic to Arab nationalism & Arab *unity*	unity	diversity	*unity*
6. attempts to maintain *purity* of language through education & language academies (vs. *colloquials*)	purism	colloquial oral	*purity*
7. cultural conflict/*competition* with the "other": *European languages*	Arabic	foreign languages	*competition*

the myth regarding (2), the classical–colloquial diglossia, is related to the topos of "unity" as well as that of "competition"; the myths regarding (3), dialect rating, may also be seen as falling under the rubric of "competition"; and the myth regarding (4), the future of Arabic, is related to that of "continuity." As with Ferguson's very general discussion, these commonplaces are rather abstract and generalized and in need of further specification and finer distinctions. This will be provided for in the discussions of the various discourses and generic practices that derive from and feed back into the various regimes of Arabic linguistic habitus. At the moment, this discussion is in the developmental stage, and I can only provide a sketch (summarized in Table 3) of certain "nonspecialist intellectuals" as examples of how individuals interact with a discourse or discourses, which in turn reflect the various regimes of authority and how they interact with one another in shaping the representation of Arabic.[4]

With these nonspecialist authors, I have tried to show how the values implicit in the habitus or ideology of various regimes of authority (regarding the Arabic language) have been reflected in specific works about Arabic, but what I have found is that things are not that simple. Rather than always finding, for example, a simple one-to-one reflection, I have also found analyses that show more of an interactive, dialogic process in which the dominant authoritative practice is affected by rival authorizing practices. For example, al-Aqqad, a linguistic conservative (or "conservator") argues from a traditionalist perspective but borrows a modernist trope in arguing for the "scientific" bases for the motifs underlying his representation of Arabic (involving continuity, purity, and competition): Arabic is as old as the Indo-Germanic family of languages, and thus as worthy as they are of scientific linguistic study; the purity of Arabic is confirmed "scientifically" based on its phonetic structure and its logical word patterns (echoing one of Ferguson's myths); and finally, while in competition with modern European languages, Arabic proves to be just as advanced as they are, since it is endowed with tenses as they are. Musa, on the other hand, is a linguistic radical, who uses the same modernist rhetoric of science and the scientific but to the opposite effect. However, in arguing from a modernist perspective he nevertheless reflects the dominant Arab way of talking about language — viz. in terms of "continuity," "purity," and political "unity" — even though his aim is to subvert these very beliefs and to reinvent them in a modernist guise.

My long-term goal is to examine more of these specific works and practices as being reflections of various discourses, which must be then elucidated and related to the culture-wide predispositions and ideologies. Each step of this process involves so many layers of representation and re-representation that it is at times difficult to know where to start. For

Table 3. *Specific practices: nonspecialist Arab intellectuals views on Arabic*

topoi	al-ʿAqqād (1960)	Mūsā (1948–56)	Saʿīd (1956–66)	al-Ramli (1990)
Continuity	old, developed, renewed (+) Continuity with Arab past and cultural heritage a necessity	old, (−) frozen, unchanging Advocates a "continuity" with *present world* culture not with Arab past	Along with "competition," this is her most important premise, she uncovers a foreign plot to replace fusha & thus deprive Arabs of their "past" cultural legacy	not all that important an issue directly, but if related to "unity: then this is a source of Arab weakness in confronting the West
Purity	unique due to "poeticness" ambiguous (+) poetic (+) & scientific (+) *letters*: only Arabic has certain sounds, it has all the necessary "letters" *word* patterns [here ambiguity = (−)] *cases* more poetic because they can be moved around *prosody* unique in origin (from camel cadence), not "Semitic" "eloquence" = clarity, without ambiguity even at level of sounds	unique due to *emotional* rhetoric (−) ambiguous (−) old rhetoric (−) emotional (−) scientific / logic (+) Arabic alphabet is "bad", –should use *Latin* script should use *foreign* scientific words (=unity with world) no more cases! no more cases! language should have "clarity" ("logic"), as *unambiguous* as math symbols	*fuṣḥa* is "capable" "eloquent" (colloquial is "incapable") the "purity" and "eloquence" of *fuṣḥa* is assumed	language "purity" is reinterpreted as "truth": the most important aspect of language is communicating the "truth," and understanding "reality"

Table 3.   (*Continued*)

topoi	al-ʿAqqād (1960)	Mūsā (1948–56)	Saʿīd (1956–66)	al-Ramli (1990)
Competition	because of what it represents Arabic is under attack, but it is not clear from whom. Colloquial poets use same meter as classical therefore calls to stop using them are destructive, ill-intentioned. Arabic superiority has "scientific" basis, namely time and tense: Arabic has "tense" therefore it is an "advanced" superior language	Arabs should learn from West, adopt things from them: including *alphabet*, vocabulary, and word derivations	European calls for colloquial as written language only meant to undermine *fuṣḥā* — they were not "scientific" by undermining *fuṣḥā* they sought to cut Arabs off from their cultural legacy Arab calls to use colloquial as written language due to *foreign* influence, not indigenous	the overt competition with the West is revealed to be a covert competition among Arabs themselves. Arabs represent themselves as "victims" of the West, of foreigners, even though they are more often the victim of their own lack of candor and self knowledge: *"they can't confront the West because they can't confront themselves and their reality."*
		in comparison to other languages, Arabic is backward, underdeveloped		
Unity	not at all explicit	emphasis on Egypt and Egyptianization, not on unity with Arab world, but: many of his arguments against traditional features are based on "unity" with world culture	surprisingly, not all that explicit, as if it was so obvious it did not need to be said (?) it is mainly related to *continuity, especially historical continuity.*	Treated very explicitly, very critically, and very satirically: calls for Arab Unity in the face of provocation from the West is the main reason for the lack of "truth" in Arab speech; in order to preserve "unity" they have denied themselves the freedom to discuss issues candidly: but this masks divisions which are still there, simmering, and which come to the surface in any real confrontation and destroy the veneer of "unity"

example in approaching the traditional differentiation between what are called the "Basran" and "Kufan" schools of traditional Arabic grammar it is necessary to consider the account of modernist Western historians of linguistics, who discount the reality of these two schools as distinct schools of grammar, as against the tradition itself, which recounts this story as an important component of the history of Arabic language study. So far, however, I have found that much of what underlies these stories and their retelling in modernist histories of grammar has to do with authorizing practices — namely, what constitutes the basis for evidence in the linguistic discourse: in traditionalist discourse the basis for evidence was very personal and contextualized (a specific grammarian, with a specific source, from a specific place and time) and it had its "homology" in the discourse of legal reasoning, another kind of authorizing practice that was highly personal and contextualized, as noted in Carter (1999).

However, even in expanding the domain of the analysis well beyond that contained in Ferguson's original paper, it must be kept in mind that the representation that I am developing will still be selective and contingent and must be evaluated on that basis. That is, I would like to apply a critical self-awareness and reflexivity to my own representation, which may be initiated by considering a comparison of the rhetorical styles of Ferguson's paper to my own.

Summary: the rhetoric of representations

I would finally like to address the third point of comparison listed at the beginning of this article, namely the rhetorical style of these two approaches. Ferguson's style in this paper is marked by two features: (1) a tendency to generalize about attitudes and beliefs, and (2) a tendency to personalize or personify those generalized views. That is, he tends to gener-alize characteristics over individuals (viz. a belief in these "myths") such that he attributes these views and attitudes to an individual, or a group of individuals. As a result his paper is peppered with phrases such as: "the Arabs feel," "Arabs are aware," "the Arab feels," "in Arab circles... a feeling," "emotional involvement of reciter and audience," "the illiterate peasant will prefer," the uneducated, the educated, or half-educated, "the Arab's belief," "felt by native speakers," etc. This rhetorical style strongly implies a unity of views or a homogeneity of beliefs that may not be borne out by closer observation, but it also is an "essentializing" form of dis-course that is found commonly in Orientalist discourse (a factor that may account for some of the negative reactions he received from Arabs, as described in Ferguson 1987).

However, whereas Ferguson spoke in terms that reified a typical individual or group of individuals in terms of a set of beliefs, what I tend to be doing in my "counter-mythology" is reifying or objectifying a set of beliefs away from individuals and attributing it to something else — the "habitus" or "generic practices." This is, I believe, very much "in the spirit of the times," and I think such an approach can be useful in highlighting certain aspects of cultural and cross-cultural linguistic representation, and that is why I am pursuing it. But there are problems inherent in this approach as well. First of all, I am making the (unintended) claim that these cultural constructs are independent and preexistent attributes of a "culture" that I have so far not defined in any way. Second, the depersonalized and objectified elements of the "habitus" may be so reified as to take on a life of their own, as shown by the way that the notion of "civilization" has become reified and put to political purposes in the "clash of civilizations" scenario put forth by Samuel Huntington (1996). Thus the somewhat benign, "soft and fuzzy" views of Arab or Islamic culture ("seven kinds of nuts are used in the sebou` ceremony") can be transformed into the looming Frankenstein monster of Huntington's "Islamic civilization" ("Muslims are nuts") in which the objectivized, desubjectivized, depersonalized elements of Islamic practice and belief have been re-personalized and re-subjectified (or anthropomorphized) into a dangerous actor on the world stage.

How to deal with and counteract the negative effects of this different form of essentializing discourse remains a task for the future. For the moment it must be noted simply that these kinds of approaches highlight both the usefulness and limitations of representations, in that the insights provided in one area may overshadow its deficiencies in another. It is necessary always to keep in mind that they are useful fictions and hence are like Ferguson's "myths," and that the aspects of the reality they describe are only parts of that reality, making the representation itself limited and contingent — useful and insightful for some purposes, but nonetheless limited.

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Notes

1. Ferguson does not discuss point two (diglossia) here but rather points to one of his other seminal 1959 articles on that topic. His comments on "dialect rating" here are important as perhaps the earliest discussion of language attitudes in an Arabic context, but his observations have not been borne out by more recent studies of language attitudes among Arabs. The situation is much more complex than he portrayed it, and one wonders if the situation has really changed that much or if his sample was much too limited to be

revealing. Finally, his comments on "the future of Arabic" are simply an outline of Arab views, with little or no comment on them, after which the article ends.

2. In an American English context the equivalents of these writers have sometimes been referred to as language "mavens" or, as Bolinger (1980) dubs them, language "shamans" and include such writers as Edwin Newman, John Simon, William Safire, among others.

3. I will not be exemplifying the generic practices or discursive fields represented in column 2 of Figure 1. This notion is a new aspect of my analysis, which I have not fully developed, but I believe that much of what I was taking initially to be "habitus" (especially in modernist linguistic writings) is better understood as part of the generic practice of a specific discourse or subdiscipline. In the future I hope that many of the insights derived from rhetorical analyses of scientific discourses can be applied here.

4. The four authors are meant to represent different discourses as well as different political and cultural ideologies: al-Aqqad is a conservative literary critic and litterateur and Sa'id is a conservative historian of language, while Musa is a radical Marxist journalist and social critic and Ramli is a leftist playwright and screenwriter. The highlighted cells of the table indicate the aspect that is most important for each author, while the shaded cells indicates a secondary interest.

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