Representations of Arabic in Egypt, 1940-1990

John Eisele

This paper will outline the political, cultural, and social debates in Egypt in the post-war period which formed the background of the linguistic analyses done in that period in the Arab world. The specific focus will be on the intellectual debates between four Egyptian writers: the "traditionalists," including the critic, poet, and litterateur Abbās Mahmūd al-‘Aqqād and the historian of language politics, Nafūsā Zakariyya Sa‘īd, and two "modernists," the leftist journalist Sa‘lāma Mūsā, and the playwright Līnīn al-Ramlī. The "traditionalists" championed the cause of the use of fiṣṭa, while the modernists championed the cause of "popular" speech, either by using the colloquial dialect as a written language or by using a popularized or "easier" form of fiṣṭa, or by advocating the use of Latin script. Each of these writers gave a number of social, cultural, religious, and linguistic arguments to back up their polemic. I will examine these arguments, and the various topoi and tropes which they used, within a framework inspired in part by the work of Pierre Bourdieu. That is, I will situate their ideas and arguments within the scheme of differing "regimes of domination" (whether linguistic, cultural, religious, etc.), which existed at that time, both within Egypt and the Arab world, and between Egypt and Western Europe/North America. This is preliminary to examining the actual state of linguistic analyses done from that time onward in Egypt, to see the extent to which these general intellectual stances reflected or affected actual linguistic practice in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world.

Adopting a framework based on Bourdieu's notions of "habitus" (cultural predispositions or values), "practice" (ways of doing things generated by, but not completely determined by, habitus), and "strategies of distinction" (ways in which people with differing control of "cultural capital" relate to the predispositions and values of a dominant cultural habitus), this paper will identify the differing values (and stigmata) that individuals in a field of inquiry place on the various features of the subject of their study and on its manner of representation. Thus, I will view the development of a field of inquiry as a narrative structured around a series of topoi which encapsulate these values. In turn, these values determine in large part the basic units of analysis as well as what counts as evidence in the analysis. For the Arabic tradition of grammatical representation of Arabic, these values include: unity, purity, continuity, and competition, each of which is a social and cultural response to specific historical pressures. This is summarized in the following chart:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 NARRATIVE</th>
<th>2a VALUE</th>
<th>2b STIGMATIZE</th>
<th>3 MASTER TOPOI</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Arabic language prior to Islam—as recorded in <em>Mu‘allaqat</em>—is a single language, underlying Arabs in single culture</td>
<td>one language</td>
<td>diversity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Arabic language as contained in Quran: Quran revealed in a “clear” language, understood by all Arabs (later: Quraysh dialect is the “best” Arabic)</td>
<td>universality</td>
<td>parochialism</td>
<td>UNITY</td>
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<tr>
<td>2) Islamic conquests, spread of Arab tribes &amp; Arabic language: contact with non-Arabic languages leads to contamination of Arabic, need to preserve the purity of the language</td>
<td>Arabic, bedouin (oral)</td>
<td>foreign, urban</td>
<td>PURITY</td>
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<tr>
<td>(conflicts or paradoxes in tradition shown at level of practice)</td>
<td>written</td>
<td>oral</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>elicit</em> grammar judgments (early grammarians)</td>
<td>isolated Arab dialects</td>
<td>urban &amp; Quranic Arabic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basra (vs. Kufa) ‘schools’ of grammar</td>
<td>rules, systemization</td>
<td>(vs. description, variation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4) cultural conflict or competition with other Islamic languages (Persian, Turkish) (Age of Decadence</td>
<td>religious contexts: religious contexts:</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
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<tr>
<td>leads to “decline” of Arabic (= devaluation of its ‘cultural capital’—its ‘capital’ was limited to fewer contexts)</td>
<td></td>
<td>non-Arabic lang.</td>
<td>COMPETITION</td>
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<tr>
<td>5) reemergence or rebirth of Arabic, after contact with West (revaluing of Arabic)</td>
<td>continuity</td>
<td>change</td>
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<tr>
<td>(6) attempts to maintain purity of language through education &amp; language academies (vs. colloquial)</td>
<td>purism</td>
<td>colloquial</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7) cultural conflict/competition with the “other”: European languages</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>foreign languages</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8) importance or centrality of Arabic to Arab nationalism &amp; Arab unity</td>
<td>unity</td>
<td>diversity</td>
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These values and stigmas reflect some of the most important elements of the linguistic habits of the Arab tradition. However, at the level of practice there were various strategies used which both conflicted with and supported these habits and traditions, which is advanced in the context of the continuity of the modern scientific study of Arabic, which is an old as Indo-German languages. Arabic is as old as Indo-German languages, if not older.
is more advanced, yet is also renewed and renewable, all of which serve to buttress the traditional viewpoint, yet in a modern, scientific fashion.

Most of al-'Aqqād's comments concern the topos of linguistic "purity" and here he is explicit about basing his arguments for the Arabic linguistic purity and superiority on the scientific (i.e. "linguistics" especially "phonetics") merit of the language, not just on nationalist ones, which is something that "others" do. In doing this he is first of all buying into the idea of the hierarchization of language prevalent in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European linguistics, which was often used against Arabic (as a "lesser developed" Semitic language as opposed to the supposedly more developed Indo-Germanic languages) but here he uses it to argue for the superiority of Arabic. In doing so, however, it is important to note that he is extolling or valuing the very features of Arabic that Salāma Mūsā (an anti-traditionalist) devalues and wants to rid Arabic of, viz. the valuing of poetic or emotion-based rhetoric, as is evident in the title of the book: Arabic is the "expressive language" or "poet-language," unique because of its 'arūd (system of prosody) but also because of its letters, its vocabulary, its morphology, its cases, and its expressions. From its very base and nature, Arabic is an essentially poetic language—it is poetic to its core, it creates the material of poetry. Arabic poetry derives its strength and uniqueness from the very structure of the language, which is itself "poet-like." To support this argument for the emotional and poetic purity of Arabic, however, al-'Aqqād resorts to the scientific facts of its linguistic structure. Here he shows himself to be very definitely not a modern "scientific" linguist by his rather naïve arguments about the phonetic and phonological features of Arabic, since they appear to be based primarily on Arabic orthography and not on actual Arabic sounds or phonetics. For example, he notes that Arabic 1) does not have as many letters as Russian, but it has more places of articulation (while Russian has the same sounds for different letters but with secondary articulation); 2) is distinguished because of letters that don't exist in other languages; 3) does not have to use two letters to represent one sound like "th" or "sh"; 4) does not lack one letter found in other alphabets which it needs to inaugurate a new pronunciation, (5) has an alphabet set up to show an "artistic, musical relation between neighboring letters." Arabic is, in sum, a "poet-language" with regard to letters because it uses the speaking system in the best way possible, which leads to artistry in musical rhythm. It is easy to show how mistaken these ideas are, especially in light of actual modern linguistic practice. What is more interesting and important, however, is to note that the comments of language mavens such as these (and those of John Simon and William Safire in the United States on English) are not necessarily based on real linguistic evidence, but rather on appeals to notions of purity, logic, or clarity, reflecting in a very clear fashion the dominant linguistic habitus of the culture in which they are produced. al-'Aqqād comments, in addition, show the influence of the "scientific" habitus of the dominant world culture, based on his appeals to "scientific linguistics" in his arguing for the pure, poetic nature of Arabic.

Al-'Aqqād's further arguments based on the linguistic nature of Arabic emphasize the uniqueness of Arabic vis-à-vis other languages, thus appealing to the topos of both purity and competition. Here there is no reference to the notion of the "scientificness" (and hence the "objectivity" and "modernity") of these opinions; they seem rather to represent a very direct reflection of the strong cultural influence of the dominant Arabic linguistic habitus, which at times blinds the holder of these opinions to their inherent contradictions. For example, at the morphological level Arabic is unique and "eloquent" because words can have two meanings simultaneously, metaphorical and scientific, (i.e., there is ambiguity in Arabic and that is deemed good). At the same time, however, Arabic word patterns, unlike those in other languages, decrease ambiguity and increase clarity (i.e. there is ambiguity in other languages and that is deemed bad). Al-'Aqqād appears to be referring to the metaphorical uses of words and expressions, things that are not unique to Arabic and that are a universal characteristic of human languages by being more "poetic," since one can put them anywhere in a clause and still retain their case and meaning. This is also a feature of many other case languages such as Latin, which has even more pronounced freedom in poetic word order. Perhaps the strength of these culturally influenced views on linguistic purity and uniqueness may be derived from the fact that they are often related to "myths of origin," as shown by the writer's comments on the uniqueness of Arabic prosody. While every language has poetry, in al-'Aqqād's opinion, only Arabic has a complete art independent of other arts: only Arabic has rhyme, meter, and rhythm. The basis for his distinguishing Arabic prosody from the prosody of all other languages, and specifically from other Semitic languages, has to do with the origins of this prosody, namely in the chanting of the caravan leader (haddī). Based on this "myth of origin," therefore, Arabic and its prosody are unique, since it can be traced back to something which no one else could share, making it ineluctably "original." Myths of origin such as this, which are not original to al-'Aqqād's, are part of the dominant linguistic habitus of Arabic. By delimiting a language and its cultural products throughout its history, they serve as well to reify it historically, making its representation into something more tangible, continuous, and permanent, thereby bringing together the various cultural topos of purity, unity, and continuity.

Salāma Mūsā, a well-known journalist and cultural critic from the left, was, like al-'Aqqād, a language "maven" with little knowledge of modern linguistics. His analysis of the Arabic linguistic situation is primarily word-based, and although he criticizes traditional Arabic rhetoric, it is based on the number and kinds of lexical items that are used and not on sentence structures or argument types. It is interesting to note at the outset that his statistics for word counts in primitive versus developed languages seem to be made up out of the blue and vary from one chapter to another: primitive languages have about 300 words, while developed languages have at first 100,000 words, then later 5,000 or 10,000. Actual word counts are less important, however, than the rhetorical effect of applying a Marxist approach to the question of linguistic development. In this view, social development, including language, is tied to economic systems and development. For Mūsā, Arab linguistic underdevelopment is the greatest reason for social underdevelopment. Since all social phenomena (including language) are based on a specific type of economic system (he mentions agriculture-based versus industrial based), then one can help change the economic
system by changing the social system, specifically, by renewing language. Underlying this Marxist perspective is a belief in the “Sapir-Whorf” hypothesis, or “linguistic determinism,” the idea that the words of a language determine our thoughts and feelings and determine our behavior (as Mūsa describes it) “as if they were orders.”

Like al-ʿAqqād, Mūsa is concerned with “language purity” as expressed in his concern for precision and clarity in language, but “purity” here is understood in a very different fashion, influenced by a modern scientific notion of mathematical precision and non-ambiguity: in a perfect language, words are never obscure or ambiguous, they should be as distinct as numbers, and if the goal of language is understanding, then refinement in language means precision. His reinterpretation of the topos of “purity” in terms of logic, clarity, and conciseness leads him to make the boldest of his proposals for the redevelopment of Arabic, namely that writers write in the language of the people—i.e., colloquial Arabic—about modern problems.

In order to accomplish this, he wants to change the way Arabs (or more specifically, Egyptians) think about their language, and on each point he reverses the traditional topos and proposes a radical revaluation of it: “Purity” is reinterpreted as “clarity,” which demands that Arabic must be rid of inaccurate words, of “old” words whose meanings have changed, and must supplant the traditional rhetoric of arousal and emotions, by a modern one of logic and reason. “Competition” (both “external” with the West and “internal” with popular, colloquial culture) is turned on its head, with Mūsa declaring that the Arabic language is “mute” when it comes to modern science, and therefore Egyptians should adopt things from the West wholesale, such as the Latin alphabet, vocabulary for scientific and modern inventions, and even the word formation processes that go into word derivations (i.e., Arabs should use Greek and Latin as the source for their neologisms). To overcome the internal competition (from colloquial) he borrows the topos of “unity” by calling for uniting colloquial and fusha, for “taking from the colloquial for writing as much as possible, and from fusha for speaking as much as possible until we achieve their unification.”

“Continuity” is also reinvented in Mūsa vision; whereby it ceases to be an historical continuity with the past and is interpreted as a contemporary continuity and unity with the world and with the future of this world. He critiques Egyptian writers by labeling most of them “xalafiyūn” or “ancestralists,” or “those who look back to the past,” and criticizes classicism as the “disease” of the Arabic language, which prevents the nation from being industrialized and thus keeps it from being a modern nation. In a very Bourdieu-like analysis he identifies graduates of Dār al-ʿUlūm as the worst of the “recalcitrants,” because they are inaccessible to people, have narrowed horizons, and therefore have become a class with an economic position, with a class consciousness based on preservation of Arabic in its present rigidity, and who view calls for language change as attacks on their economic interests. To undermine this class of recalcitrants and hit them where it hurts the most, he calls for doing away with the case system of Classical Arabic. Continuity with the modern world means discontinuity from the ancient world and from the ancient, frozen, agricultural-based words which keep the society ancient, frozen, and agricultural-based. Examples of such words are wazīr (minister), which has aristocratic connotations, (while sikritēr [secretary] has democratic ones); and the effect of words like damm (blood) or ṣār’ [arrest] or arḍ [harvest] especially on people in the Saʿīd, which carry the remains of ancient culture and prevent the spread of the modern.

Finally, Mūsa rejects the notion of “unity” as it is normally understood in the tradition (as a unity of Arabic speaking peoples wherever they may live) in favor of his idea of Egyptian nationalism and his program of tamsīr “Egyptification.” Despite the radical differences between the programs of al-ʿAqqād and Mūsa, they nevertheless both address the same sorts of topos in their approaches (unity, continuity, competition, and purity), and both interact with the competing dominant habitus of the West by borrowing “modern” notions and applying it in their valuations or revaluations of the Arabic tradition.

The third writer reviewed here, Nafisā Zakariyya Saʿīd, is unlike both al-ʿAqqād and Mūsa by being an academic historian of language politics. Her history of the call for the use colloquial in Egypt is a remarkable work both for the breadth and depth of its historical data, as well as for its unabashed political stance. Saʿīd is clearly on the side of the dominant linguistic tradition of Arabic culture, and views the call to use colloquial in place of fusha as one of the most dangerous of propaganda appeals that Arabic expression has faced, “the most violent crisis it has known in its long history, and the most violent cultural revolution since Islam.” Like the previous authors, her argument makes use of the same narrative topos in dealing with the Arabic language tradition, but with different emphases. For example, it is surprising to note that despite the work being composed and published at the height of Nasirism and Arab nationalism (1956-1966), it does not deal with or even mention for the most part Arab nationalism, and the role of Arabic in solidifying Arab unity. The only sustained reference to Arab unity comes in the recitation of the traditional “myth of the origins” of fusha as the force which unified Arab tribes before and after Islam, after which Islam and the Quran become the driving force behind the language’s unifying power.

There were many tribal dialects with one literary language, which developed from the dialect of Qurash which “won out” over the other dialects because of (1) its religious, economic, and political authority, and (2) its large supply of forms (“material”), (3) its delicate style, and (4) its ability of expression in different arts of speech; it won out over all Arab tribes and became the language of literature for all Arab tribes: every Arab came to compose his poetry and his speeches and prose in the language of Qurash, all of which happened before the Quran was revealed. The Qurʾan being written in the language of Qurash strengthened its authority and thanks to the Qurʾan it increased its “precision” and its “rules” and its meanings developed. Thanks to the Qurʾan it has remained the language of literature and writing until today. It (the Qurʾan) is a miracle with which no other language can be compatible, and it (Arabic) will remain in authority as long as the Qurʾan remains.
In contrast to this, the beginning of colloquial is described as a “disease”: it appeared in the age of the Prophet when a man made a grammatical mistake and the Prophet said: “Guide your brother, he has gone astray.” From there the field of _lahn_ literature developed, but only as a part of prescriptive, normative grammar, not as a topic of interest in and of itself—to try to stop the spread of the “disease,” which was reaching epidemic proportions due to excessive contact with “foreigners.”

Sa‘id’s take on “continuity” is also interesting, since, rather than deny the existence or position of colloquial she notes that there has always been diglossia in Arabic, with each variety having its own specialized area, living side by side for centuries until the end of the nineteenth century (the beginning of British occupation) when Spitta’s book appeared calling for the use of colloquial over _fuṣā_. The topos of linguistic and cultural continuity also plays an important role in one of the central accusations of the work, which is that the foreigners who call for the use of colloquial wanted to do away with _fuṣā_ because they wanted to separate Arabs from their cultural heritage and legacy in religion, sciences, and literature, which would further the aims of the occupation (whatever they may be, since they are not mentioned, and Arab unity is still not mentioned in this context.)

Sa‘id’s use of the topos of “purity” is also very traditional in spirit and substance, emphasizing the “inability” of the colloquial as a literary language and the “capability” of _fuṣā_, possessing as it does “laws” which regulate it and control is expression. Colloquial, on the other hand, does not possess such laws, it is spontaneous, changing from generation to generation, according to their needs and circumstances. Nor is Arabic anomalous or abnormal, since every language has diglossia. It is therefore a “natural” language.

Most of this work is related to the topos of “competition,” both with the “internal other” of colloquial expression and culture, and with the “external (or foreign) other” who values the internal competitor (colloquial) over _fuṣā_. In Sa‘id’s view, the foreign writers who treat the study of Egyptian colloquial present it in “scientific” dress, but this serves only to hide its biased goals which bears no relation to science. It is important to note that Sa‘id’s critique here foreshadows later critiques of scientific discourse as hiding political and social biases, but she also employs a trope which is criticized by the final writer under review here, al-Ramlí, viz. blaming a weakness in Arab society on a foreign source without fully considering its domestic roots. Thus, according to Sa‘id’s historical narrative, Europeans first became interested in Arab dialects in the latter half of the nineteenth century and introduced its study into schools and universities. They subsequently became interested in writing it and were helped by Arabs living in their countries. The English and Germans who then called for colloquial as a written language held high positions in the administration of Egypt at the beginning of its occupation by the British, and this is a clue to their true intentions in studying colloquial: to put an end to _fuṣā_ in the literary field and to replace it with colloquial. To this end, they accused _fuṣā_ of “rigidity” and difficulty because of its grammar, letters, and material, and strove to show that colloquial could have a written literature and that it could be used to treat scientific and high literary topics. But, according to Sa‘id, their attempts showed the inability of colloquial for treating refined topics, without any literary or scientific style. Once this germ (as in “disease”) of an idea was put into circulation, it was taken up by Arabs in Egypt who called for colloquial use as a written language. The struggle between colloquial and _fuṣā_ was, according to this narrative, instigated by foreigners (before which time they coexisted peacefully), and the violent struggle between Arab proponents of colloquial or _fuṣā_ followed these foreign calls and was hence due to the influence of the men of British imperialism.

Sa‘id’s argument is a powerful one, in part because she uses to good effect one of the most potent topos in the Arabic linguistic habits, that of foreign competition. Her argument, however, lacks depth in considering the motives and cultural background of the Europeans who initially made these calls. For instance, it is not clear why the Europeans did this, except to “separate the Arabs from their cultural heritage” (which is something quite different from other views that it harmed Arab unity, something that was non-existent at the end of the nineteenth century). Ascribing to these Europeans motives of consciously wanting to harm the Arabs is an unprovable exaggerated accusation, since their proposals could have been well-intentioned and may still have served the interests of colonialist occupiers of Egypt, and thus harmed Arab interests. Also, she does not look at the background of these writers in the field of “Orientalism” itself; if she had she would have found that they were actually in the minority, with the majority (and most influential) of Orientalists emphasizing and valuing the study of the written language, culture, and texts to the exclusion of the colloquial. She also fails to note the social-cultural background of these Europeans and the ideas which propelled them to study and propagate the use of dialects which were related to the _zeitgeist_ of the time, namely Romanticism, and how it viewed language, race, ethnicity, “naturalness,” and the value it placed on written language as opposed to spoken. Thus, Willcocks in his lecture on the “inventive spirit” links it to the use of a natural spoken language, and not an unnatural written (dead) language like Latin or _fuṣā_. But this “natural, inventive” language can only have a value and an authority through a written literature, a written grammar, dictionaries, and the like. Hence their calls for colloquial to be used as a written language were engaged more so with nineteenth-century European ideas and prejudices about language and culture (which are not examined by Sa‘id) and less so with the politics of the language (which is Sa‘id’s primary emphasis). Perhaps for ideological reasons, she does not note the possibility that there were real conflicts and struggles that were going on in Egypt and elsewhere with regard to language issues which were not discussed in printed form by Arabs due to the force of linguistic authority. The fact that it was foreigners who first broached it in print does not mean that Arabs had not thought those same thoughts before them. Finally, the oddest thing about this book is its nearly complete silence on the topic of Arab nationalism: not until the final page does Sa‘id mention Arab nationalism and the role that _fuṣā_ played in strengthening the ties between Arab countries. It may be that she is leaving things unsaid because they are too obvious to a reader living in Nasirist Egypt or in any Arab country during the mid-1960s, but it may also reflect her greater sympathy with Islamism over Arabism, although this is not made explicit.
The final writer under review here takes these final points as the locus of his theatrical critique of Arabs and their views on language, truth, words, and actions. In his play entitled *In Plain Arabic* (*Bis-l’arabî l-fâsîh*),20 Linûn al-Ramlî presents a very harsh critique of modern Arab political speech. There is not much said directly about language in and of itself, but the point of the play is in part to show how language is used or misused. The story’s general premise is related to the notion of “foreign competition” and the tendency of Arabs to blame the West for their failings, and of trying to distance themselves from the West even as they are drawn more closely into it. The play is structured around three main topoi: truth versus falsity, reality versus unreality, and words versus actions, each of which is a reflection of the traditional concerns of the dominant Arab regime which al-Ramlî is criticizing. The traditional concern for “purity” is here reinterpreted as a concern for “truth” versus “falsity.” Echoing Mûsa, al-Ramlî views that the most important aspect of language is communicating the “truth” and understanding “reality,” both of which are blocked or short-circuited by traditional views and uses of language. The disconnect between reality and unreality is further exemplified in the Arab views of “competition”: for al-Ramlî, 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.” Finally, al-Ramlî comments on the topoi of “unity” very explicitly, very critically, and very satirically, pointing to the disconnect between words and actions: 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 real confrontation and destroy the veneer of “unity.” The divide between word and action, truth and falsity, and reality and unreality is shown in various fashions in the works, the most important one of which is language. In the following excerpt from the play, the form of the language used indicates the degree of “falsity”: political clichés (“*antarrîyâr*”) are in *fuṣâḥa*, expressing Arab unity and desire to get revenge or rights wrongs (lines 7-15), while dissonance and disagreement is in colloquial (retreating back from the “nice words” expressed in *fuṣâḥa*) (lines 16-24), finally retrograding into an oath on the Quran (introduced by a French “s’il vous plaît” (*Arabic Endeavor IV*), in which the Christian Maronite cannot participate (lines 27-35).
Elsewhere, however, al-Ramlī’s use of language seems to have an opposite effect, whether intentional or not. While the Arab students range back and forth between furṣa and colloquial, and most Westerners are depicted as speaking in broken Arabic, the British authority figures with whom the students come into contact at various points (the professor and the inspector) speak in perfect furṣa. This may have been a satirical comment on the “foreigner” speaking Arabic “better” than an Arab does, but it also seems to reinforce the dominant linguistic habitus or authority at the same time by having come from the mouths of the foreign authorities.

Each of the main topoi present in the dominant narrative of Arabic linguistic habitus is present to a greater or lesser degree in each of these authors, at times congruent with the tradition, at times critical of it and at odds with it. All of the authors recognize the importance of the notion of “continuity,” but it is of a different kind for the traditionalists versus the non-traditionalists (or modernists). The former seek a continuity in identity with the Arab past, a “diachronic continuity,” while the non-traditionalists seek continuity in individual terms, and extended metaphorically from that, a continuity with the culture and society of the world at large, and with their age—they seek a “synchronic” continuity. The topoi of “purification” is to understand in ways that go beyond simply maintaining grammaticality or purity of lexicon; it is understood by the traditionalists as “elocution,” (i.e., fasahah), or “ability” or “power” (of expression), while for the non-traditionalists it is reinterpreted as “clarity,” “logic,” or ultimately, “truth” or “truthfulness.” All of the authors recognize “competition” with the West, but use it and deal with it in different ways: traditionalists use this competition to differentiate themselves further from the West, to strengthen Arab identity and independence, while non-traditionalists want to either be like the West or to use it to critique the Arab position. This understanding of “competition” may be clarified by relating it to the notion of “continuity” delineated above: the traditionalists feel that the best way to compete with the West is by strengthening one’s identity with the past, through classicism (using their most highly valued cultural artifacts), i.e., through a “historical” or diachronic continuity, while those who called for colloquial or some other type of reform (such as no case endings or Latin script) were influenced by romantic notions of language and dialect, and later by scientific positivism and modern linguistics valuing of actual speech over written texts, and emphasized instead a continuity not with the past but with one’s own time, a kind of “synchronic” continuity, rather than a diachronic one. “Unity” as well is understood in radically different fashions: against the Arab (and Islamic) unity of the traditionalists the non-traditionalists oppose a “humanistic” unity, understood in contemporary terms. Yet the most surprising thing that I have encountered in these writings is the lack of an explicit appeal to Arab “unity” as being central to the use of furṣa, or to its being relegated to the margins of the argument, or to its outright condemnation in al-Ramlī’s work. The most widely known ideas about the role of the Arabic language in fostering Arab nationalism and unity are largely absent from these works, which is not surprising for the non-traditionalists, but is quite surprising for the traditionalists, and may reflect the origin of these opinions, viz. Egypt.  

Endnotes

1 This is a report of a work in progress, a much larger research project that examines Arabic as a social construct. It is a metalinguistic critique of analyses of Arabic done in both the Arab grammatical tradition as well as in modern theoretical frameworks. The goal of the whole project is to ground these analyses in a perspective which is more aware of the cultural, historical, and theoretical limitations and biases of representations of Arabic which are produced in both traditions. Understanding these biases (some of which derive from non-linguistic sources) and the contradictions they give rise to, it is hoped, will help to reinvigorate linguistic study in both fields by providing linguistic researchers with a framework in which to evaluate their analyses in a critically reflective way.
3 It is important to note that I do not presume in this table to have exhausted the inventory of topoi in the linguistic habitus of Arabic, nor do I mean these categories (unity, purity, continuity, competition) to be taken as clear-cut, non-overlapping things. Rather, they are labels for a clustering of features along a cultural, social and linguistic continuum, and each of them is related to the twin cultural functions of the Arabic language, one religious and the other secular.
4 Abbās Mahmūd al-'Aqqād (1889-1964) was a journalist, and politician, poet, and critic. According to the Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature (97-98) he was a defender of cultural values who arose from humble beginnings to become one of the major figures of Egyptian thought. He started as a journalist for nationalist papers, became a member of the Egyptian Senate in 1925, was elected to the House of Representatives in 1929, but by 1930 he was imprisoned for criticizing the lack of freedoms in Egypt, and in 1935 was expelled from the Wafd Party itself. After that he devoted himself to his literary pursuits, which included poetry (he was a member of the Diwan group of poets) and novels, but he was most prolific in and made his most significant contribution as a literary critic. In his works of criticism, he initially emphasized the role of feelings in poetic creativity but later stressed its intellectual aspect as well.
6 Ibid. p. 9.
7 A further point of contradiction is brought up later in (Chapter Seven) when he claims that Arabic is superior because it does not have letters which share place of articulation, but then is also better because not every letter has to have an independent place of articulation (i.e., they can share them), which appears to be a pure contradiction.
8 For example, 1) he neglects to note that faskim (or emphasis) in Arabic is itself a secondary articulation, and that, 2) these sounds do exist in other languages, but even if they did not, they are not evidence of “superiority” Also, 3) Arabic does have to use two letters to represent a sound, namely (see Arabic Endnote V) for “eh” and 4) it does have “missing” sounds, which is what characterizes Arab accents—there is no /p/, no /v/ no /h/, no /¼/ and (in some dialects), limited vowels, and (in Egyptian at least) no interdental (j, j), which are pronounced as (¼, ¼), to say nothing of the dialectal variation in the pronunciation (see Arabic Endnote VI) from region to region. Finally, the alphabetic order of letters reflects little about the language—this fact, and all of the previous facts, are related to the orthography of the language and are only tangentially related to actual linguistic and phonetic facts of the language.
9 Salāmā Mūsā (1887-1958), according to the Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature (554-555), was a prose writer and intellectual of Coptic origin known for his studies on socialism and Fabianism, and for his support of the labor movement in Arabic literature. He studied in England, and upon his return to Egypt he founded (with Husnī al-'Arabī) the first socialist party in the Arab world, but later joined the Wafd Party when Sa‘d Zaqlāl became its leader. He was a staunch modernizer and populist of Western culture and sciences, and criticized past writing in Arabic as “monarchical”.
12 His argument concerning how this will progress is rather unclear: at times he seems to think that changing the language will lead to a changing of the social system and thereby the economic system, while at other points he seems to think that making Egypt into an industrial society will produce a futurist society, in which writers write in the language of the people about their problems.
Creating al-Sayyida al-Istihlakiyya: Advertising in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt

Mona Russell

The lore of feminist history places the Wafdist Women’s Central Committee boycott of British goods in 1922 as one of the great accomplishments of the early women’s movement in Egypt. The women, led by Huda Sha’rawi, initiated this boycott in protest against the British occupation, as well as the arrest and exile of nationalist leaders. It included both British goods and services, encompassing merchandise, merchants, banks, artisans, functionaries, doctors, pharmacists, and dentists. The work of the boycott began with a handful of women making phone calls, and within a few hours, it evolved into about two dozen women seeking the cooperation of Egyptian merchants. Ultimately, the news of the boycott reached thousands through women’s committees in the provinces. Apparently, the boycott was not taken seriously at first. In fact, the British did not acknowledge its significance until after the Wafid announced its support on 23 January, two days after the British received the telegram from Huda Sha’rawi. The women suffered no ill consequences, other than some snickering, as they confronted potential violators of the boycott. The male signatories of the Wafid manifesto, on the other hand, were ordered arrested and the newspapers publishing the manifesto were suspended.¹

A cartoon appearing in al-lata’ if al-masawwara prior to the boycott depicted such a venture as a difficult and male enterprise. As illustrated in Fig. I, John Bull dangles a basket of English goods over an effendi, who represents the Egyptian people. John Bull boasts that he must import goods now that he has set foot and planted his flag (in Egypt). Meanwhile, the effendi attempts to cut the rope holding the basket, but one strand stubbornly remains. The commentary beneath the cartoon indicates that Egyptians need a sharper knife, and that knife is the compliance of traders, i.e., not consumers.²

Although the idea of a boycott resonated well with nationalist men and women, it lacked serious long-term consequences. In part, this shortcoming was due to its timing. The protectorate ended about a month after the start of the boycott. More importantly, the targeted stores, items, and services had a limited and elite patronage. The boycott highlighted the uneven nature of consumer development in Egypt. In Western Europe and the United States, the growth of consumerism was an organic development related to social and economic changes which had been taking place.

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