

THE ARABIC LANGUAGE  
AND THE PRESENT CONDITIONS  
AND PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE  
OF THE ARABIC-SPEAKING WORLD

THE CUSTOMARY INTRODUCTION.

When one considers the extent and scientific and technical character of the work done in the field of communication in the past two or three decades, with a view to evolving a methodology of the social sciences there, one is struck by the impressive number and the no-less considerable diversity of factors which figure in this young, all-affecting discipline, recently freed from the hold of philosophy. Such is the case in all the social sciences and that, moreover, is why Lazarsfeld rightly contends that in sociological matters it is a good idea to multiply the "partial inquiries" in order, one day, to combine them into one all-inclusive sociology.

Translated by Robert Blohm.

Now the tradition-preserving system of the Arabic-speaking world, persisting in the face of the developed West, is one of those multiple factors and certainly deserves having devoted to it some of those "partial inquiries" which must find their way into research that provides the basis for socio-economic planning for the future of humanity; unless one wishes to exclude more than a hundred-million people from the march toward progress, it is difficult to imagine how, in the twentieth century, such an exclusion could be what anyone has in mind.

#### REGARDING A TERMINOLOGY.

Let us hope that all the countries of the world, without exception or distinction, will soon be on the verge of development, and unrestricted by any ideological, political, economic or other limits.

Ever since the idea—systematically taken up by the mass media and praiseworthy moreover—of being careful of the sensitivity of the underdeveloped countries gave birth to this expression, one has witnessed a phenomenon which is paradoxical if nothing else: only the intellectuals in underdeveloped countries dare, do not hesitate and, in fact, insist upon speaking openly of underdevelopment, while the non-intellectuals in those very same countries do not, from the outset, understand the trouble with such a classification.

One would, perhaps, better appreciate the import of this observation, which provides but one example among a number of others, if one knew that, in Arabic, the expression "on the verge of development" becomes "developing."

If the classification had been of persons—or categories of persons—and not of countries, certain drawbacks could, perhaps, have been avoided, which result from the untimely use of a terminology whose semantics changes from region to region and from language to language. Indeed the "opinion makers," whose status has been thoroughly studied by Catz and Lazarsfeld, in the United States, and by Bernard Lys, in France, exist even in the underdeveloped countries and it is indispensable that their actions and reactions in communication affairs be taken into consideration.

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Now communication is properly so called only if the transmitter and the receiver make use of a partially common repertory and, furthermore, are "interlocutors" or capable of so being. There must be a trace of dialogue; that is, the receiver should at least be capable—for want of being able to give a reply or a simple answer—of furnishing a value judgement on what he receives in order to avoid the dangers of hidden persuasion, recent heightened awareness of which is due to Vance Packard.

Receiver self-selection as predicted by both Schramm and Cartier is, it seems, still rather removed from the realm of possibilities for the entire Arab world where, hardly a few years ago, there was no hesitation in establishing ministries of "national orientation."

All this leads us, inevitably, to consider the problem of language in the context of mass communication. One overriding fact emerges here; namely, as a result of the recent development of the mass media serious gaps have become evident in linguistics throughout the world and, *a fortiori*, in the Arabic-speaking world where the nature of these problems is particularly serious by reason of what the Arabic language is.

The task of finding the scientific and technical means by which the mass media might be placed in the service of man, and of preventing the latter from being placed in servitude, is left to the great masters of sociology.

This short work is thus limited to an objective analysis of the Arabic language, as it is and as it can be, in terms of its vehicular capacities and, consequently, of its ability to satisfy the needs of all forms of communication and the mass media.

### THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

Arabic is not a modern language.

It cannot, *in its present state*, serve as an efficient vehicle of an advanced culture, whether humanist or technological. For nearly a millenium it has been frozen in its structure and its vehicular possibilities; however, over the past few years the mass media (namely radio and the press) have timidly and partially released it from its inertia by forcing within it an evolution which, although positive, is not adequate since it affects only a few

juridical and literary disciplines to the exclusion of the scientific and technical areas.

The Arabic-speaking East of today, cradle of the religions and the civilization of the *word*, introduced these two values to the West, which was able to free itself of the prejudices, myths and conformisms of the first and to integrate itself with the dynamic essence of the second in order to reach the civilization of *word-action* and to enter the realm of technology. The Arab world has, itself, nearly remained at the stage of the *word*, failing this liberation and integration.

Thus we find, for example, that the colossal work of the great Ibn Khaldun, the father of modern sociology, cannot be used effectively by the Arabs, his language and theirs having undergone no evolution.

Furthermore, the Arabic language, formerly a superb vehicle of Greek philosophy, cannot today be used to convey modern thought.

There are three apparent reasons for this 'unusability':

1. The Arabic language has, for centuries, maintained a very strong religious character. For Moslems it is the language of Revelation, and, thus, for Turks, Indonesians, Pakistanis and others who cannot understand it. Yet, whereas the latter have at their disposal a national 'secular' language the Arabs have none.

2. The Arabic language, the vehicular device of an impressive civilization of old, has remained tied to its ancient patrimony as if it were never to be more than the means of expression of History.

3. The Arab world has been bypassed by socio-economic evolution, on the one hand, and by the technological revolution on the other because it has remained cut off—for essentially political reasons—from the accelerated movement of contemporary scientific progress.

All this has inevitably deprived the Arabic language of a *terminology* indispensable to its improvement while clearly showing its genius and its logic, which are really quite extraordinary, reducing it in actual fact to an instrument for rhetorical expression.

Now, what role does rhetoric still play in modern technology

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and communication? How serious is such a situation if one considers that the quality of education and teaching—that is, of the formation of men—depends upon the quality of communication?

How, moreover, is the nature of communication determined, and how is it structured, in a community which writes a language without speaking it and speaks several dialects, from which spring several national languages, without writing them? What are the chances of survival of a written, non-spoken language at the end of the twentieth century? What remains of spoken, non-written languages other than a few historical and folkloric elements comprising, in the end, a sum of traditions which, if nothing else, are static and fixed on the past?

It is clear that those who are called upon to deal with the problems of communication in the Arabic language—for the same purpose as that for which they would deal with the pre-supposed problems in education in the Arabic-speaking world—have to consider, at the outset, the linguistic pluralism that is rendered approximately as follows:

ARABIC LANGUAGES	}	<i>Classical literature</i>	
		(written, not spoken)	
		<i>Modern literature</i>	
		(written, not spoken	
		—mass media)	
		<i>Dialects</i>	
		(spoken, not written)	Algerian
			Syrian
			Egyptian
			Saudi
			Iraqi
			Moroccan
			Jordanian
			etc.

This plurality results in the isolation of the Arabic-speaking linguistic communities from their 'human milieu' and makes

it very difficult for the phenomenon of osmosis to occur, and this is especially important at the mass-media level. An Algerian, a Moroccan or a Tunisian can understand practically nothing in the Egyptian, Syrian or Yemenite dialects, and *vice versa*. Likewise, an Egyptian will understand very little of the Iraqi dialect, and conversely.

Furthermore, in one 'complementary' (i.e. pre-secondary) level class a science teacher could discover that his students are divided into three groups according to how they designate the nozzle of a gas burner. For some it might be the 'head,' for others, the 'brain,' and for yet others, the 'eye.' This difference could arise from the fact that the students come from three different localities which are no more than twenty kilometres from each other.

Clearly the literary language is a common denominator, but it is not spoken; the coefficient of its understanding by the masses is very small and it functions above the level of the *spoken language*, the fundamental element of any human milieu. Indeed, a language is and will be what the men who use it are and will be.

Other morphological, philological and semantic peculiarities of the Arabic language are surely of interest to the mass media.

#### A RICHNESS OF LITTLE USE

It is clear that the Arabic language offers remarkable possibilities and has enormous vehicular potential. But the possibilities and the potential do not lie in the fact that it has close to 90 words (for the most part qualifiers or attributes, rarely substantives) for saying 'lion,' or an equal number of words and expressions synonymous with 'God,' while there exists no linguistic support in the language for such elementary and indispensable concepts as population, initiation, hibernation, etc. There is even less for all the objects, phenomena and concepts of the exact sciences. Surely in the mass-media and education it is preferable to have a single term to designate each of the distinct classes of objects of signification such as God, lions, desert, moons, wine, camels, etc., and to have linguistic support for each of the new concepts which are proliferating at an ever-increasing rate coinciding with the rate of progress in all areas of human knowledge.

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This serious gap, consisting in the lack of modern Arabic scientific terms, has been so overlooked that the attempt at filling it can no longer be put off: every day the rift deepens and the breach widens between the Arabic-speaking world and the world of science and learning where progress never ceases. Meanwhile communication is limited and incomplete, as is education and training. That is why any further delay can only complicate the possible solutions.

### A PECULIAR LOGIC

If each language—which is more than a collection of terms and grammatical and syntactic rules—is a living and evolving *Human Milieu* clearly it must have its own logic. Arabic logic displays certain characteristics and peculiarities which cannot be ignored by the mass media.

Rhetorical form is of major importance in the Arabic language and it very often ends up being of prime importance.

The semantics is, in virtue of this, weak, and a loosening occurs in the connection between the signifier and the signified to the detriment of precision and conciseness. It is rare, moreover, to find a grammar which contains rules allowing for several degrees of assertion, like Arabic grammar:

- § Simple assertion
- §§ Assertion reinforced by a particle
- §§§ Assertion reinforced by more than one particle
- §§§§ Assertion reinforced by swearing
- §§§§§ Assertion reinforced by swearing + a particle
- §§§§§§ Assertion reinforced by swearing + more than one particle

We have here not simple rhetorical forms but products of strict grammatical and syntactic rules. Furthermore the Arabic YES and NO have a semantic value different from that of the French, Russian, English or German YES and NO, for they correspond to a scale of densities and intensities of affirmation and negation which ascends according to a 'logic of approximation.'

In addition there is a 'contraction' in the tense of Arabic verbs which also greatly affects the logic of the language: while most modern languages have a complete set of moods and tenses, Arabic has only *two tenses* and one auxiliary for expressing the three logical tenses (past, present and future) with all their nuances and variations. The present and the future are expressed by one and the same tense in Arabic. The present tense of a verb also signifies the future, unless the verb is preceded by the appropriate particle for the future tense, which is not absolutely required; in that case its tense expresses only the future.

It is easy to imagine the confusion which can arise in the mass media and communication from this state of affairs. In Arabic the expression for WE TRAVEL can also mean WE SHALL TRAVEL, the difference in meaning being that between an actual and an intended state of affairs.

#### AN ALPHABET OF SILENT LETTERS.

The 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet are mute *consonants*. Syllables are obtained with the help of vocalizing accents. Moreover endings vary according to the function of each word in the sentence (subject, predicate, object) and to gender and number. Observe furthermore that, unlike modern Western languages, Arabic has three grammatical numbers: the singular, the dual and the plural.

Although it appears to present only morphological difficulties, this state of affairs profoundly affects the efficiency of communication, especially when it is purely visual. (It suffices to point out here that, in writing, everyone adopts the policy of not placing vocalizing accents above letters.)

Let us note, in this connexion, two major disadvantages which are especially serious for mass communication:

1. Contrary to the structures of all other languages, which are such that a text can always be understood in the course of its initial reading, the structure of Arabic is unique in so far as a *preliminary* understanding is required for an understandable reading to be possible.

2. An error in the vocalization of a word can produce a



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partial or complete change in the meaning of a sentence and make the remainder of the reading—or at least a full understanding of the text—very difficult, if not impossible. By means of a very simple illustration of changes in the meaning of a word induced by vocalization one can see how this phenomenon can occur.

Take the trilateral Arabic root *H L M* whose meaning embraces the concept of knowledge. This is what it can mean after vocalization:

$\overline{H}$  elm = science

$\overline{H}$  alam = flag

$\overline{H}$  alam = top

$\overline{H}$  alam = surname

$\overline{H}$  ulema = known

$\overline{H}$  allama = to teach

$\overline{H}$  oullema = has been taught

Correct vocalization by the reader is necessary if he is to understand the intended meaning, but this vocalization is possible only once he knows the required meaning.

### A COMPLEX WRITING

An Arabic typewriter has 70 alphabetical units, instead of the 26 with which machines having Latin characters are equipped. Almost every letter of the Arabic alphabet assumes four rather different forms according to whether it occurs alone, as the first letter of a word, within a word or as the last letter of a word. This creates certain difficulties in the design of teleprinter systems, which are compounded when these letters are taken with vocalizing accents. It is, moreover, apparently very difficult to build Arabic typewriters with complete vocalizing provisions.

As far as numerals are concerned, that zero is represented by a dot is a great disadvantage, for the dot can be inserted or deleted more easily than the 'O' representation.

It should be pointed out finally that Arabic words and sentences are written from right to left, but not numerical figures, which go from left to right, even when they appear in a text.

#### LANGUAGE—A MEANS OR AN END?

For too long a time language has been considered by the Arabs as an end. It is time that it be put in its proper place and take on its proper dimensions, in short, that it become an instrument of culture and human formation. It is time that it be placed in the service of man rather than used for his subjection.

The Arabic language has a compelling need to be released from the service of imprecise, emphatic expression and to be integrated with the tools of scientific thought, in short, to be clear and concise, in order that it may be used to convey all modern knowledge through present means of mass communication.

It is regrettable that there has been so much delay in carrying out this two-fold action of liberation and integration, for a hardening which has set in and threatens to arrest the slow development of the language and thus to preclude the improvement of the lot of generations of humans could have been prevented were that not the case. In fact, Arabic has so far virtually not been counted among the languages of the world's scientific production. Recent UNESCO statistics yield the following table:

22%	: English
17%	: Russian
15%	: German
11%	: Japanese
9%	: French

The remaining 26 percent of production is in other languages, including Italian, Spanish, Chinese and the Scandinavian languages. The Arabic contribution here is practically nil.

What is the fate of a language in which there is no significant scientific production, that is to say, a language in which there is no training of scientists and researchers in every theoretical and applied exact and social science?

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### EVIDENT SYMPTOMS

The lack of Arabic-language production in all the areas of modern learning is due to the slow development of the language, but this lack of production is also the reason for the slow development. What we have here is a vicious circle caused by the impact of language and production upon each other. It is a real impediment to harmonious communication and should be broken.

The same phenomenon occurs at the mass-media level in the Arabic-speaking world: the interdependence of language-communication makes degeneration mutual in as much as linguistic faults and gaps affect communication, whose quality lowers only to have repercussions on the language.

All this leads to a reconsideration of education, in particular its quality, its effectiveness and its adaptation to the needs and requirements of modern living. At present an Arab student receives an average of 4,000 hours of Arabic-language instruction during the twelve or thirteen years of studies constituting the three series of primary, 'complementary' and secondary schooling, not including the hours of instruction in other subjects given in Arabic. Then, once he reaches the university or the labour force, the high-school graduate uses only 16 to 20% of all that he has acquired of the Arabic language. This is proof that the language which is taught is set aside in current discourse.

Still there is in the Arabic language its malleability and the latent energy locked within it, which can bring it out of the impasse.

The mass media have already contributed to the partial evolution of the language: attributable to them are a series of terminological and structural innovations at least as valuable as those instituted by the three combined Arabic-language academies, in Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad.

The mass media will become a more important and effective force in the Arabic-speaking world only if they continue this work of creation and renewal, for the more the vehicular language improves, the more efficient mass communication will become, and conversely, so that the vicious circle in which the Arabic language is presently caught may be transformed into an ascending spiral. It suffices to give it the necessary push.

## A NORMALIZATION IN PROGRESS

Educators, linguists, sociologists, journalists, psychologists and stylisticians have, for some time already, been engaging in an attempt at normalizing the language. If progress appears slow as yet, it is no less considerable, and success is certain since the malleability of the Arabic language is of an immeasurably high degree.

The following is a summary of efforts made to this end.

1. Classical literary Arabic is being preserved as a source of the Arab cultural heritage and taught as such without being made the unique and essential object of instruction. This protects the sacred language of the Moslems and assures the continued existence of the object of care and research on the part of stylistic specialists without preventing the promotion of the study of an eclectic and vehicular secular language.

2. The modern language is, at the same time, being promoted, for it is the only possible vehicle of an advanced culture and advanced thought, by simultaneously taking the following measures.

a) In an effort to liberate the language, *Fundamental Arabic* is being separated from all the useless and superfluous elements which retard the evolution of the language. A laborious effort has been made to this end at the Institute of Oriental Literature in Beirut and its results should recently have been made public.

b) The teaching of Arabic is being viewed as a means of helping the child from the beginning to express the realities of his everyday life. This entails the preparation of new spelling books and textbooks according to modern linguistic methods. Terminology is chosen with concern for a gradual orientation toward modern science. Progressively the language which is taught becomes for the child, and later for the student, the vehicle of his intellectual development. In this way language is recast in its role as a factor in social insertion. It is a good idea here in the adoption of an eclectic terminology to be careful to avoid the difficulties inherent in the linguistic pluralism of the Arabic-speaking world.

c) The Arabic-language curriculum is being revised. The texts

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chosen are expressive of the reality of today instead of reflecting an amorphous past, so that language may become an instrument for the expression of the future in its prospective dimension.

d) The modernization of the Arabic language depends upon the creativity of Arabic-speaking scholars and thinkers. Now this creativity lies in large part outside the sphere of competence of linguists alone. They are cooperating with specialists in the various disciplines, whether scientific or of the humanities. It is the task of such joint teams to work out specialized lexicons for all levels of school and university education. To carry out this project the teams are resorting to one or another of the following three courses of action.

1. Words are found which can designate things which would otherwise have no signifiers in Arabic; that is to say, the idea or concept is expressed by already existing Arabic terms.

2. They proceed by 'derivation' or 'composition.'

3. Needed terms are transformed phonetically from other languages.

A final remark must here be made. The mass media cannot, as far as the use of Arabic is concerned, adopt the principle of the identification of signifier with signified, as urged by certain contemporary linguists and dialecticians. An inseparability of the two will nevertheless be recognized which does not preclude their distinction.