Article

DIOGENES

Diogenes
58(1–2) 106–118
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0392192112444981
dio.sagepub.com

The Study of Arabic

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Arabic is an important language in several ways: it is one of the youngest and most evolved of the Semitic family, it is the vehicle of the third and most recent of the Abrahamic religions, it extends (still) over a very large geographical area, it is fifth or sixth in the number of speakers in the world, and it is one of the six official languages of the United Nations. This paper will offer some reasons why and how Arabic should be studied, in view of the long and close relationship between the Islamic and the Western worlds, the unique dual status of Arabic as a divine and secular means of communication, and the humanist content of its literature ("humanist" here in the Graeco-Roman sense, not as a form of atheism). The perspective is entirely personal, though it is hoped it will have some general validity. Works selected for comment are not random, but they do represent only a small portion of the many monographs and articles now appearing. Occasional assertions will be made without attribution to keep the bibliography to a minimum. For immediate further reading, two works of general reference (McAuliffe 2001–2006 and Versteegh 2006–2009) are indispensible for their coverage of all the issues raised in this paper.

Even before the coming of Islam there was interaction between the pagan Arabs and the Christians and Jews, some of whom were ethnic Arabs themselves, and the creation of the Islamic empire in the early 7th century made them all citizens of the same state. The non-Muslims were either bilingual (some from before Islam) or had abandoned their original tongue in favour of Arabic, which was proclaimed the official administrative language of the empire after a few decades of Islamic rule. The Christian population turned this to their advantage by serving as polyglot collaborators and translators for the Muslims in their insatiable appetite for works of Greek philosophy and science. They also exploited the Arabness of Islam to claim that, since the Qur'an was not revealed in their own language (Syriac in this case), it was not addressed to them and therefore not binding, on the grounds that it would be absurd to send down commandments in a language the believers would not understand, and so could not be punished for disobeying them. The Muslims had no rebuttal for this argument, since it was their own dogmatic position that Arabic had been chosen to bring Islam to the Arabs for that very reason; however, they seem also to have been unaware of the irony that the case was presented to them in flawless Arabic. This debate was part of an unceasing polemic between Muslims and Christians documented back to John of Damascus (c. 675–749), and it was his disciple Theodore Abū Qurra (c. 740–c. 820), Melkite Bishop of Ḥarrān, and himself renowned for his mastery of Arabic, who formulated the linguistic independence of the Christians in the manner just described. It is fair to say, however,

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https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192112444981 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that he was unusual in his superior linguistic competence when set against the general standard of non-Muslim writers.

The study of Arabic by Westerners (a geographical cover term for non-Muslim Europeans and all the intellectual dependencies created by their imperialist and colonialist ventures in the Old and New Worlds over the last five centuries) began with the encounters between Muslims, Jews and Christians in Spain and Sicily, in a mostly harmonious ethnic and religious mixture. There was an intermittent symbiosis also in the Holy Land between Arabs and Crusaders, but it is culturally less significant. Malta is different: the Arabic-speaking population is entirely Christian and writes in the Roman alphabet, as if the language had passed along a Möbius strip and moved seamlessly from its Semitic origins and Islamic contents into the world of Latin Christianity. Maltese thus represents the only substantial departure of Arabic from its Islamic roots, though it remains Arabic in structure.

In Spain and Sicily Arabic was the prestige language in all communities, so much so that in the 9th century the Spanish Christians were rebuked by the Bishop of Cordova for their ignorance of Latin. In that period northern European scholars actively commissioned and collaborated in the translation of Arabic texts into Latin, mostly in Toledo, and the debt of Christian scholarship to the Arabs is acknowledged explicitly by Roger Bacon (1214–94), who also criticises the poor standard of the translations and recommends that Arabic should be studied more thoroughly. In Sicily another Roger, the Christian king Roger II (reigned 1101–54), ordered a geographical survey of the known world to be compiled by the Muslim geographer al-Idrīsī, composed in Arabic, one of the languages of the court of Roger and other Sicilian monarchs, though there is no evidence that Roger himself could read or write it. In this same period the first complete translation of the Qur'an into Latin was made, by Robert of Ketton (finished in 1143). It is a curious irony of history that after Spain was reconquered (the last victory in a long series of campaigns occurred in 1492), Arab scholars made their way to Holland and France and played a part in the establishment of the university study of Arabic. The earliest professorial appointment was in 1539 in Paris, and by the 17th century there were chairs in a number of European cities.

By this time Islam presented quite a different face to the West. It was no longer ethnically or linguistically Arab, but Turkish, Persian and Indian as well, in the three great dynasties of the Ottomans, Safavids and Moguls. Nevertheless, while their own languages now achieved a literary efflorescence in their own right, Arabic remained the underpinning of their religion and law, and continued to be the vehicle of doctrinal and legal discourse. Although these empires were seen as a military threat (the Turks in particular), they were recognised as economic partners, and trade with India and further East was a major factor in European dealings with the Arab countries through which the luxury goods had to pass. The 17th century saw the first complete translations of the Qur'an into European languages (Italian 1547, German 1616, Dutch 1641, French 1647, English 1649), testifying to a serious effort to come to terms with a religion that was making inroads into European territory. Luther, on the other hand, saw an opportunity to use the Qur'an (in the 1543 reprint by Bibliander of Ketton's Latin version) as ammunition against the Pope. The first printed edition of the Qur'an in Arabic was published in Venice in 1537 or 1538 – only a single copy survives, and the reasons for printing it remain obscure, but we have to assume it was done with the consent of the Vatican at least. The likely intentions are most clearly stated in a later work, the aggressively annotated Latin translation of the Qur'an by Ludovico Marracci (Padua 1698), bearing the pugnacious subtitle, "Refutation of the Qur'an, in which the axe is applied to the root of the Mahometan superstition, and Mahomet has his throat cut by his own sword."

Such hostility is proportional to the degree of the perceived threat of Islam, hence highest in the religious sphere, but secular Arab culture was greatly admired: the first book printed in England,

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192112444981 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Caxton's *The Dictes and Sayings of the Philosophers*, 1477, is a collection of sayings of wise men translated ultimately from an Arabic original.

While religious polemic was a strong motivation for the Western study of Arabic, it was never the only reason. Commercial, political and military interests were also a factor, overtly and covertly. The priorities are succinctly stated in a proposal submitted to the French National Assembly in 1790 for the foundation of three Arabic chairs, entitled "*De l'importance des langues orientales pour l'extension du commerce et le progrès des lettres et des sciences*". And we must always assume that spying would be involved, though it is seldom publicly discussed. We do have, however, more than a glimpse of it in the Arabic grammar of the 19th century chest-beating patriot Anton Tien. In his introduction he cannot conceal his anxiety that the English are falling behind in espionage, and warns that "there is no country in Western Europe to which the encouragement of the study of Arabic should be a matter of more vital interest than England". He laments the superior training of the Russians and Italians, and cites a letter to a newspaper pointing out the generally low standard of linguistic skills in the British armed forces and asking, "does not this savour of unreadiness?"

This is only a generation after the Crimean War, and the enemy would be the Russians rather than the Turks, which makes Tien all the more fascinating, because he served as an interpreter in the Crimea. And on top of that he was an ordained priest who revised the Arabic version of the *Book of Common Prayer*. There is no reason why Edward Said should have picked him up in his book *Orientalism*, as there are plenty of more notorious candidates, but Tien's muscular Christianity is combined with exactly the intellectual arrogance Said rightly deplored, as displayed in Tien's boast that he has attempted "for the first time to adapt the construction of Arabic grammar to the Western mind" – by dismissing the terminology of the long Arab grammatical tradition and replacing it with inappropriate Western categories which, moreover, he translates into Arabic, though the results would be meaningless to Arabs, as well as useless to the learner. Said's position needs no elaboration here, but it is worth noting that his approach has been applied by Adrian Chan to the attitude of Westerners to China. According to Chan the academic study of China in the 19th century in particular was in the hands of missionary scholars obsessed by the desire to impose Christian concepts upon the Chinese which were not only alien to Confucianism and Buddhism but were not even represented in the vocabulary, such as "God", "Heaven" and "Sin". The professors did not hesitate to provide their own Chinese renderings. This way of thinking was normal at the time (and alas persists), and there can be few more obstructive and pointless interventions in Arabic scholarship than Gustav Flügel's decision to renumber the verses of the Qur'an in his edition of 1834 because he thought the Muslims had got it wrong.

The utilitarian reasons for studying Arabic, commercial, evangelical, political, military etc., have little relevance to the present paper. Nor is there much to be gained by examining the use of Arabic as a tool in the social sciences, history, anthropology, geography and others, where it is only the medium of an enquiry into the behaviour of a particular linguistic community, and the output is a description, a narrative or a theory about the target group independent of the language. The argument to be put forward here is that there are two features of Arabic, one unique and one universal, which, when taken together, justify the study of Arabic literature for its own sake. It is not a proposition that will ensure success in grant applications or faculty appointments, so those for whom such things are important need not read any further.

The dual status of Arabic as a medium of divine revelation on the one hand and as a vehicle of everyday human interaction on the other, may not be unique. There could well be other languages with this property today, as in the past. What is unique to Arabic, however, is the way this duality was rationalised by the re-interpretation of the figure of the Biblical Adam. Unlike the Christian

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Adam, who symbolises the divided nature of man, Pascal's half-angel, half-beast, Adam for the Muslims is the locus for the origin of the Arabic language, which he spoke in Paradise with God and the angels long before it was ever spoken on earth.

The difference between the Biblical and Qur'anic Adam is evident in the way names were assigned to living creatures. In Judaism and Christianity the account is unambiguous: it was Adam who gave them their names, and God simply accepted them, "And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field , and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof" (Genesis 2.19, Authorised King James Version). Such a notion is inconceivable in Islamic dogma, which does not admit the possibility that a created being could make choices and impose them on its Creator. On the contrary, the Qur'an states clearly that "God taught Adam the names", and Adam then passed them on to the angels, with whom he conversed in Arabic, as proof that he was superior to them in knowledge (Qur. 2.31-2; cf. Carter 2004: 444). An outsider might ask whether this special view of Adam can be traced to any Jewish or Christian heresy of the time, but it would not make any difference to the fact that the Muslim Adam satisfactorily accounts for the relationship between God, mankind and the Arabic language.

The Islamic narrative of Adam's linguistic persona is impressively coherent. It does not claim that there is an unbroken sequence from celestial to terrestrial Arabic: the Muslims knew well that Arabic was not the oldest language in the world, and accepted that even Adam himself did not speak Arabic after he fell to earth. It took many centuries for human language to reach perfection by natural evolution, and become worthy of the divine revelation, namely in the language of pre-Islamic poetry, a form of Arabic which was then and is still now regarded as the pinnacle of linguistic achievement. Just how important Adam was for the history of Arabic is apparent in the claim in some mediaeval sources that he was the first to compose poetry in that language, though it was dismissed as anachronistic and blasphemous.

This scheme also locates the Prophet in the same framework. Adam, who spoke Arabic in Heaven, was the ancestor of all mankind, and Muḥammad, one of his descendants, was the individual in whom the two varieties of Arabic converged, his mother tongue having evolved to become identical with the divine form of Arabic in which God addressed him.

It is this Muslim explanation for the dual nature of Arabic which makes it unique among world languages, and it follows that all use of this language has a transcendental dimension. It is not the content of the language which is holy but the language itself. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith pointed out in the 1950s, the Qur'an is analogous to Jesus in having simultaneously divine and human nature. But whereas Christians, with the help of the doctrine of transubstantiation, internalise Jesus by symbolically eating his body and drinking his blood, Muslims internalise the entire revelation by memorising the Qur'an. This "inlibration", as it has been called, is an act of "logocentrism" (another recent term) in which the words of the Qur'an have an effect on the believer comparable to that of Christ in the Eucharist.

Words thus acquire a power in Arabic that they do not have in other languages, and Muslim scholars can rightly speak of the "magic" of Qur'anic diction. A rather neglected work by Odette Petit (1982) may be the first monograph to explore the linguistic aspects of the Islamic revelation from this perspective, starting from the dual nature of the language in which the Qur'an was revealed, divine and human, representing an ancient and well-recognised polarity between دين ("religion") et دنيا ("this world"), one eternal, the other transient. In the same way as Christ became Flesh, Islam became Word ("Apostle and Word of God" is one of the titles of Jesus in the Qur'an). Petit shows that all the important constituents of Islam involve speech of one kind or another: the word Qur'an (القرآن) means "recitation aloud", the Traditions of the Prophet are a vast collection of

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"narrative discourse" (حديث), the science of theology is كلام, "talking (about God)", and the Qur'an itself is a "clear verbal statement" (بيان) from God in the form of direct personal "address" (خطاب, this term not as prominent in Petit as it should be). All this in human language, with human rhetorical modes, and structured by human logic (this last we cannot go into, but see Gwynne 2004). Petit is not imposing an interpretation on the data but only pointing out what the Muslims themselves have said: the last third of her book reviews the ideas of a 15th century scholar (al-Suyūṭī, d. 1505) who himself is citing *in extenso* a 10th century predecessor (Ibn Fāris, d. 1004), thus corroborating how deeply entrenched these ideas were in the minds of mediaeval Muslims.

These qualities of Arabic determined the way it was studied by the Muslims, as examined by Nadia Anghelescu (2004). Instead of analysing Arabic purely as an abstract system of expression, she aims to describe the place and importance of the language in Arab society as seen by its speakers. Here she comes close to the position of the mediaeval grammarians in their dispute with the logicians over their assertion that logic was superior to grammar because it was a universal mode of discovering the truth. Against this the grammarians argued that grammar was superior because the truth can only be stated in individual languages, of which Arabic is the most sublime example (we shall not comment here on the standard of the dialectic). The sheer orality of Arabic remains its essential feature: the Qur'an began as actual speech, and has to be memorised and recited and listened to as a spoken text: it is not designed to be read silently or even read out aloud, though both happen frequently. In principle all books are memorised by hearing them, but eventually the burden on the memory became too great, and manuscripts took the place of personal contact with scholars, though the convention was preserved that they were simply an *aide-mémoire*. As a result the knowledge of the past upon which Islam depends became an enormous library, and Islam a religion of nostalgia, as pointed out some time ago by John Wansborough, referring to al-Suyūṭī.

The transformation of Islam from an oral to a literary phenomenon was probably complete by the end of 10th century, when there were no personal links any more with the earliest days of Islam even through second or third generation connections, and what was left was a written corpus in a language whose grammatical principles had been fixed for ever. Management of this language was shared among the scholars of the so-called "Islamic sciences", i.e. the disciplines which maintained its form (phonology, morphology, syntax), interpreted its meanings (lexicography, exegesis, rhetoric, semantics) and applied its contents in real life (jurisprudence) or metaphysically (theology), all of them drawing their data and their authority from this corpus. This is where the mortal Adam comes to the fore: human language after the Fall was purely conventional, unlike the primaeval language in Heaven, where all meaning was assigned *a priori* by God. This gave scholars the power to coin technical terms by a process called اصطلاح ("consensus"), originally denoting reconciliation or "coming to terms", as the English still has it. Control of the technical vocabulary was jealously guarded by the specialists of each discipline: lists of terms were drawn up, dictionaries and encyclopaedias were compiled, and definitions endlessly challenged and refined, reaching a peak in the centuries treated in Gerhard Endress (2006), the last flowering of Arab/Islamic civilisation while it was still intellectually independent of the West. It was in the 18th century that the largest Arabic dictionary was written, about a century before works of a similar compass began to appear in Europe. The storing and cataloguing of this knowledge is more than just a convenience for scholars: the Arabic encyclopaedias were in effect inventories of permitted knowledge, defining and legitimising the scholarly professions. The situation resembles that described by Holmquist (2004:14) in connection with a much older management system, when he describes the catalogue of the Alexandria Library under the Ptolemies:

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> Its primary objective was to provide the rulers of Alexandria with a unique means of domination by placing at their almost exclusive disposal knowledge that could serve to buttress their authority.

To administer that knowledge a very efficient educational system was developed. Arabic literature is rich not only in pedagogical works as such but in works about pedagogy, and Islamic educational methods have long attracted Western scholarly attention. As early as 1709 was published an edition and Latin translation of al-Zarnūji's *Instruction for the learner* (تعليم المتعلم: *Ta'līm al-Muta'allim*, English translation by von Grunebaum & Abel 1947). This work is a treatise of advice to students, written in about 1200, in the period when Islam perfected its scholastic intellectual structure, and it achieved enormous popularity in the Muslim world. Pedagogy still attracts scholarly interest today, as a number of papers in Lowry, Stewart & Toorawa (2004) bear witness, and one reason for this is that Islamic values are currently being taught in environments where Western-style secularism is facing opposition, and the reference point is moving away from Western educational principles and back to the traditions of mediaeval Islam.

The goal of an Islamic education was to train the student in the sciences relating to the transmission of the corpus of knowledge essential for the survival of Islam. Since in principle the transmission was oral, as mentioned above, the reliability of the content depended not on its intrinsic plausibility but on the moral probity of each link in the chain of transmitters. Small wonder that an early judge pronounced that anyone caught lying in these matters would never be believed again. Their names, with the mark "liar", are in fact preserved in the biographies and will remain there as long as Islam exists.

It follows that a Muslim education is essentially an ethical process. It was not the curriculum which interested al-Zarnūjī and others but the moral and physical comportment of the student, and indeed of the professors. Advice is given on the best diet to enhance the memory, what to wear, methods of study, sources of financial aid, how to treat one's fellow students, how to choose a professor to study with, the importance of modesty and piety, how to disagree with a professor and so on. There is even advice on how to wake up a professor who has fallen asleep – we must bear in mind that classes would begin straight after the dawn prayer, a little like Heidegger and his early morning lectures, and also that to supplement their stipends professors would sometimes teach in more than one institution, which might mean rushing from one building to another.

That building as likely as not would be a Madrasa (مدرسة), lit. "place of study", an institution that first appeared in the 10th century in the eastern Islamic lands and spread prolifically. The Madrasas were all charitable or government foundations, with permanent academic and administrative staff, stipends and salaries, and a library and accommodation. They were also expressions of power, either of the regime or of the legal or sectarian school which founded them (Tabbaa 1997, esp. ch. 7: "Propaganda and Education in the Ayyubid Madrasa"). The first Western universities were modelled on the Madrasa, and we still speak of "fellows" of colleges "reading" subjects with their students in pursuit of the "baccalaureate" which gives the student the "licence" to transmit knowledge further, all terms with an Arabic origin ("baccalaureate" not yet established beyond doubt).

The output of the Madrasa was the "learned man" (عالم), i.e. schooled in the non-fictional literature of the "Islamic" sciences mentioned above, especially law; these are the figures collectively now often referred to by the plur. *'ulamā'* (علماء). A higher aesthetic plane was achieved by those who went further, largely by self-education, and added *belles-lettres* to their accomplishments to earn the title "educated man" (أديب), a person who has been taught أدب, "correct behaviour, good manners", implying a broad knowledge of literature and the ability to improvise a verse or two of poetry if the occasion demanded it. The connection between a literary education

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and good manners persists in modern Arabic, where the same root has been extended to denote "literature, arts", reflecting our term "humanities" for a similar range of academic disciplines once based on the Greek and Latin writers as sources of moral guidance.

There is an abundance of information about the educated classes, scholars, officials and rulers, and their temperament, character and academic pedigree, their works, and their performance in public disputation, which took the place then of the televised debates of our time. The *'ulamā'* were of slightly less exalted status, but because their authority was personal, great attention was paid to their morals, and Arabic biographical works are often arranged by discipline, so that the scholar's credentials can be easily checked. It is in biography and in works of history and general entertainment that Arabic literature displays the humanistic quality which justifies reading it for its own sake. The variety of scholarly and literary life is well represented in two recent biographical reference works, Cooperson & Toorawa (2005) and Lowry & Stewart (2009), with portraits of the works and careers of many Muslim authors.

In this literature the focus is on the "old Adam" as he is called in Christianity, the potential sinner. As already mentioned, his disobedience did not give rise to a doctrine of Original Sin in Islam, instead he is simply the biological ancestor of mankind in all its strengths and weaknesses. The Classical Arabic term for the human race is بنو آدم , lit. "sons of Adam", expressing the common humanity and therefore fallibility of the whole species. But each individual has the free will to earn salvation or punishment, and the foibles, peculiarities, vices and virtues of the "sons of Adam" are an endless source of fascination for Arab authors. Contrary to the distorted image, Islam is far from being a religion which represses individuality. Although there was always a segment of the population (and there still is) whose ambition was to control and limit every deed and thought of the believers, it has only ever had sporadic success, and most Muslims get on with their lives unconstrained by such excessive piety.

Indeed, to judge by the literature, fanaticism was looked upon with detached amusement or open resentment. The tone was set by the Prophet himself, who informed a group of industrious followers that they were better Muslims than a certain character who always happened to be away at prayer just when there was work to be done. The most energetic reformer of Islam, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) spent much of his life in jail for being a public nuisance, and was obviously heartily detested by the authorities, not to mention the numerous enemies he made among his fellow Muslims by accusing them of corruption.

There were numerous public figures who lived their own antisocial lives, rather like Diogenes. As well as the achievements of the great and good, Arabic literature chronicles every kind of wayward behaviour, obscenity, blasphemy, bad puns, drunkenness, all the misdemeanours and failings we would expect from human beings, in this case our own cousins, the sons of Adam in the Arabian line. If there had been newspapers in 11th century Cordova, "Man bites dog" would doubtless have been the headline of a report on an incident involving the eccentric grammarian al-Rabaʿī (d. about 1026).

Humour is part of humanism, and the same jokes reappear over the centuries. A driver in the USA is said to have received from the traffic police a photograph of his car speeding, accompanied by a notice of the fine he had to pay. He responded by sending a picture of a cheque for that amount, only to receive in return a picture of a pair of handcuffs, upon which he promptly paid the fine. There is a mediaeval Arabic equivalent of this story: a miser is too mean to buy a meal at a restaurant, so he stands outside smelling the food. The restaurant owner is just as miserly, and asks him to pay for it, to which the first miser replies, "If you want to charge me for smelling your food I will pay you by letting you have a look at my money."

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Such anecdotes both amuse and elevate the reader because they are usually based on real life, pure fiction being a relatively minor genre in mediaeval Arabic (after all, you have to trust the language to be a truthful reflection of reality). They are the human, hence humanist elements of a language whose religious and secular dimensions are complementary, as outlined above. In the Muslim cosmology Classical Arabic has existed from the moment of the creation of mankind (Adam's first words were in Arabic), and will continue to exist until the world ends. As a result Muslims found themselves in a linguistic environment comprising a revealed and finite set of necessarily true utterances (the Qur'an and everything synonymous with its contents) and an unrevealed, potentially infinite set of not necessarily true utterances (indeed often false), which are the speech of ordinary, fallible mortals. This second discourse is where we read the humanist material, but it is couched in a form of Arabic which is structurally identical with that of the Qur'an.

In linguistic terms this means that fully inflected Classical Arabic cannot change; even the modern written form remains close to Classical Arabic, although its inflections are now almost entirely virtual, and there are signs of systemic deviations from the Classical standards, while the uninflected colloquials are increasingly common in preaching and other types of public speaking where previously only Classical Arabic was heard. Actual reform, however, either by legislation or spontaneously, is out of the question until the divergence between Classical Arabic and the ill-defined written form now in use (optimistically baptised "Modern Standard Arabic" by Western observers) reaches the point of mutual incomprehensibility. Then the past will have to be translated from one kind of written Arabic to another. Here the study by Niloofar Haeri (2003) is especially revealing, as it highlights the uneasy relationship between written and spoken Arabic. In the common mouth, Classical Arabic is being marginalised to such an extent that it now occurs largely as quotations embedded in the colloquial, and has become "iconic", as Haeri terms it, i.e. quasi-religious in nature, and removed from everyday life. A related field is public oratory, on which there is a growing literature, especially on presidential speeches. These are not always delivered at the highest Classical level, though this can be intentional, for rhetorical purposes, an option which the mediaeval orators never had. An old joke runs that with one long-winded president the audience would always know when he was about to finish because he would slip into his local dialect as he gradually lost control of the Classical form.

Islam still has a long way to go before there can be anything resembling the Christian Reformation, where the scriptures and liturgy were transferred from Latin to the European vernaculars. The creation of a vernacular Qur'an with full dogmatic, canonical and liturgical authority is a very remote possibility indeed, not least because the colloquials are still developing standard written forms for the Arabic now spoken in a profusion of local and regional dialects, and there is no telling which national dialect, if any, might become the universal written medium for all Arabs. Meanwhile everyone has to refer to texts in Classical Arabic and its modern reflex in all matters of religion, history, aesthetics, philosophy, law, dogmatic theology, not to mention a vast body of *belles lettres*.

This literary predicament of Islam has been exquisitely captured by Italo Calvino, speaking of the "confining act of writing" by which the Islamic revelation was first preserved. A certain scribe makes an error while writing down the revelations and because it goes unnoticed by Muḥammad he abandons his faith. The scribe was wrong, says Calvino (1981:182f), because

> [t]he organization of the sentence, finally, was a responsibility that lay with him; he was the one who had to deal with the internal coherence of the written language, with grammar and syntax, to channel into it the fluidity of a thought that expands outside all language before it becomes word, and of a word particularly

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> fluid like that of a prophet. The scribe's collaboration was necessary to Allah, once he had decided to express himself in a written text. Muhammad knew this and allowed the scribe the privilege of concluding sentences. But Abdullah was unaware of the powers vested in him. He lost his faith in Allah because he lacked faith in writing, and in himself as an agent of writing.

The modern consequences, where Classical Arabic is becoming a foreign language, are summed up by Haeri (2003: 110), that to write in Classical Arabic "requires a translation of the 'self' into forms of writing that still show ongoing struggles with the 'alien' word and their own". Nevertheless, if and when there are language reforms (they have been talked about since the 10th century), the "scribes" of today will still have to consult the mediaeval texts in order to decide what to retain, what to reject, what to renew. This will generate a whole new set of texts as the religion revisits its past in order to define its future, and again Calvino will be proved right (though not perhaps for the reasons he expected) in his observation in another context that "no book which discusses another book can ever say more than the original book under discussion". History shows that the Qur'an is a text of ever-expanding productivity, which has still not been exhaustively paraphrased or even fully understood yet: Jorge Luis Borges likens it to a volume with an infinite number of leaves and no middle page. The corpus will continue to grow as the interpretations proliferate, as prophesied in Ecclesiastes 12:12, "of making many books there is no end".

This representation of Islam as a religion imprisoned in its language may be an over-simplification, but there is an illuminating contemporary parallel in the use of Arabic at the United Nations. Lutz Edzard (1998) examines how Arabic has adapted – or not – to the conventions of United Nations discourse. In a logical extension of the Whorf hypothesis the UN is creating a system of thought in which everything you can say tends to be formulated in such a manner that it can easily be rendered into the other official languages, and may well have been said already in one or another of them. Fortunately, human nature is not as consistent as the UN would like it to be, and there are plenty of misunderstandings documented by Edzard where widely disparate Arab cultures, loyalties, values and policies collide.

Journalists have always known how to manipulate their readers, and the reporting of the Middle East conflict is an obvious topic where language use reflects ideological positions, the stock example being the choice of "freedom fighter" or "terrorist" for the same person. Torkel Lindquist (2003) treats exactly this issue as reflected in the Arab and Israeli press. He quantifies and tabulates the key vocabulary items and is even able to document a chronological development in the usage reflecting changes in attitudes. In discussing and defining such notions as *jihād*, martyrdom, terrorism in Arabic and Hebrew, and describing their history and their literary and theological resonance, Lindquist provides a semantic depth that no dictionary can offer and, coupled with the new linguistic concept of pragmatics (here literally "doing things with words"), he gives us a picture of a discourse which parallels that of the UN on a totally different plane, but with the same self-conscious selectivity. Yasir Suleiman (2004) covers similar ground but from the perspective of interpersonal relations in Israel, and the way Hebrew and Arabic are used as weapons in "the battle of national identities" on a more intimate level such as street signs and public announcements. Here language is both a symptom and instrument of irreconcilable differences, and we should not forget the fact that the Qur'an itself is a declaration of linguistic identity which is still in force and with undiminished power.

Language learning is another kind of interface between societies, and the teaching of Arabic offers a good illustration of the problems which can arise from cultural interaction. There has been a two-way intellectual traffic since the days of the Toledo translators, and native speakers have been assisting their colleagues in Europe from at least the 16th century, several of them known to

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192112444981 Published online by Cambridge University Press

us by name. But profound qualitative and quantitative changes have occurred as a result of the occupation beginning with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, after which the Arab world lost its cultural autonomy, and Western academic values and methods were absorbed by Arab students taught in the West or in foreign foundations on Arab soil. In language teaching there was a paradigm shift (pun intended) as more and more Arab graduates of Western universities were recruited as language instructors, and oral competence replaced literary Arabic as a pedagogical priority. With the growth of linguistics as a new university discipline, research by Arabs into their own language has also changed, and the theories of the indigenous grammarians are no longer central to the subject or even taken into account.

A striking example of the negative influence of Western ideas on Arabic pedagogy is the concept of diglossia. Arabic, like many languages, has from the first existed in two spoken varieties, one elevated, for oratory and poetic declamation, one private and informal. With the coming of Islam the elevated form became the default literary language as well (before Islam there was no written literature, just a few lines of inscriptions). It was never a problem, as it only affected the literate minority, who knew from infancy that the language they spoke at home was not identical with the one they were taught to write and use in public. In 1959 this natural state of affairs was the subject of an article by Charles Ferguson, who gave it the name "diglossia", already used in 1930 to characterise the linguistic situation in the Maghrib, but now elevated to the theory that there was an unbridgeable gap between the "High" and "Low" forms of the language. This was taken to heart in the Arabic-speaking world, notably among students of linguistics at Western universities, and produced a kind of phobia, interfering with language teaching in a harmful way. Labouring under this false dichotomy, native speaker instructors began, not always unconsciously, to impart to their students (a) that they will never become competent in Classical Arabic, and (b) this does not matter much because speaking the colloquial was a far more useful achievement. What was once a pragmatically trivial difference between two registers of the same language became an irreconcilable polarisation (a well-known pedagogical grammar of the 1960s spends the first 97 pages on the alphabet and writing system). Over the years the original concept has been challenged. First the existence of absolute diglossia was denied completely and replaced by "triglossia", three languages with a middle form neither purely colloquial nor purely classical, the "third language" of educated interdialectal communication. This opened the floodgates, and next came four kinds of Arabic ("quadriglossia"), then five, then many ("multiglossia", "pluriglossia"), and finally, to everybody's relief, a continuum of varieties with an infinite number of intermediate forms ("spectroglossia"). This leaves us back where we started: it was always a problem of literacy, not of a conflict between two different languages.

Much of what has been said above will have to be revised when the influence of computers has become measurable, and the following remarks about new media are purely tentative. The initial reaction to the innovation of printing, and later of radio and television, was hostile, because they depersonalised the transmission of knowledge and were seen as a threat to the authority of religious scholars. Even in the Middle Ages it took some time to substitute manuscripts for face-to-face learning, and, needless to say, the system was abused in spite of the copyright mechanisms. It is slightly surprising, therefore, that the internet and all its facilities have been so quickly embraced throughout the Islamic world, and it is impossible to predict how this will change the role of Arabic as the medium of global Islamic communication. Even when internet discussions are in English or non-Classical Arabic (increasingly a written-down colloquial is being used), they remain essentially a translation of a debate which began in and still depends on Classical Arabic, and we have to wait and see where Adam will be accommodated in this new electronic cosmos.

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Gary Bunt (2009) shows how enthusiastically the web is now being exploited, though his assumption (p. 3) that mediaeval knowledge transmission was a kind of “open source” of universal accessibility, which the internet simply replicates, is too simple. The entry qualification, literacy, excluded almost all the population, as it still does with computers. What is truly new, however, is the unrestricted availability of a searchable corpus of religious and legal texts which makes every Muslim potentially his own mufti. Muslims have always had the right to consult as many muftis as they like to obtain a fatwa favourable to their case, but we cannot tell how Muslims will deal in future with a situation where the client can bypass the mufti. So far, on-line fatwas still come with the traditional authority of the issuing mufti, which is conferred on him by his education and reputation, but no doubt software is already being developed for identifying precedents among the huge array of legal cases, as has been done in Western jurisprudence.

The computer has brought to fruition the germ of an idea planted long before the technology existed to realise it. In the late 10th century it was observed that the Qur’an is a non-linear document, a nexus of ideas linked across large spaces, where the meaning of one verse may not become apparent until another, distant verse is paired with it, in modern terms a hypertext. Hitherto only those who had memorised the whole Qur’an had instant access to all its contents in their neurological RAM, but now that the Qur’an is digitised anyone can search it electronically. Gone, of course, is the “inlibration” mentioned above, and we cannot yet know how the depersonalisation of the Qur’an in this way will affect the religious experience of Muslims.

This paper will conclude by asking the question, “can the study of Arabic be a dialogue?” The very titles of Torkel Lindquist (2003) and Yasir Suleiman (2004) preclude such a possibility in the belligerent context they describe, and there are many similar titles in the secondary literature, some rather frightening. The atmosphere is best caught by an incident in which Suleiman refused to speak Arabic in response to threats and abuse from Druze troops in Israel, and instead, he says, “I stuck to my linguistic guns” and spoke English (p.9). The choice of words is revealing, and surely not accidental, showing that language can always be used as a weapon.

The “orientalism” described by Edward Said effectively makes dialogue impossible. Both Borrmans (2005) and Waardenburg (2005) document the lamentable presumption of superiority on the Western side and the reactions of Arabs forced into aggressive rejection or passive acceptance, incidentally showing how little has changed since the topic of Orientalism was featured in the 1963 issue of *Diogenes*. However, the scholarly activities chronicled by Borrmans and Waardenburg cannot be said to constitute a true dialogue, rather they are an antiphony of points of view, hostile or sympathic, stated with greater or lesser vehemence, as has been going on since John of Damascus (who himself was attacked by his own co-religionists for being too “Saracen-minded”). There will always be an agenda, a strategy, a doctrinal or political axe to grind, often exacerbated by an imbalance of power, and the polemic invariably fails to convert the opponents. Considering that most of the literature we read is by authors long dead, a dialogue would seem to be ruled out anyway. A possible exception is ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baġdādī, who died in 1231, but evidently from 1957 had a number of conversations via a medium with John and Ivy Videan about translating his *Kitāb al-’Ifāda* (كتاب الإفادة) into English. When they told him they did not know Arabic, he sent them an Iraqi to do the job (‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baġdādī 1965: 8–9).

There are alternative, less exotic approaches. In 1984 the founder of the Australian Oriental Society, the Sinologist A. R. Davis, formulated his ideals in a lecture entitled “In search of love and truth”, that is, we must be drawn towards the object of study for its own sake. For Richard Frank (1996), the purpose of studying (in his case) mediaeval Islamic theology is not to understand it, which implies some kind of encapsulation of the topic within boundaries imposed by the observer, but to learn to think like the people inside that culture. We all live in the same house of language,

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192112444981 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in Heidegger's phrase, but the languages differ, and instead of trying to "get into other people's minds", we should make an effort to participate in the way they see things. The Sinologist Florentina Vişan (2005) agrees: Edward Said, she says, might have achieved more alienation than reconciliation, and her position is that at least in her Romanian university there is a constant effort to "render the experience of 'Oriental' culture explicit, to transfer this experience for methodological reasons that bear no false claim to absolute objectivity", with the aim of "creating a large, humanistic competency which never excludes relativity and the possibility of an alternative" (p. 57), all this in a country lying both geographically and culturally between the two worlds (Anghelescu 2005).

Humanism does not require dialogue, only infinite curiosity and respectful disinterest, and attempts at a dialogue are likely to subordinate the study of Arabic to private motives, polemical, apologetic or academic. The idea that studying Arabic is in itself a humanist undertaking is not new: it was argued with conviction by Goitein (1987); see also Carter (1997: 38). Although the utilitarian priorities have never changed, and political, military and commercial motives still predominate, scholars will always be challenged by the awe-inspiring coherence of Islamic theology, the subtlety of legal and grammatical argument, Avicenna's refinements of Aristotle's logic, the Arab mathematicians and astronomers *en bloc*, the complexity of Arabic poetry, the insights of social historians, all of them stretching our intellectual and emotional capacities to their limits. No disparagement is intended here of specialist researches in these fields, indeed everyone needs a topic to work on, including the present writer. But no matter how profoundly the contents of Arabic literature are explored within individual academic disciplines, the exercise will remain incomplete if the humanity of the author is left out of account. The reward for achieving some understanding of an Arabic text lies in the sense of recognition of a like-minded human being in another culture, another son of Adam who just happens to use a different language.

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