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Arabic Language

The language codified by the grammarians of al-Baṣra and al-Kūfa in the second/eighth century as representing the speech of the pre-Islamic Arabs and the language of the Qur’ān. Ever since, this language has been the one in which most of the Islamic cultural and religious heritage has found expression. Historical, geographical and social varieties closely related to this language exist or have existed and a number of linguistic communities currently use variants of this language.

Considerable controversy surrounds such questions as the status of Arabic (*al-‘arabiyya*, *lisān al-‘arab*) before and at the time of codification, the status of the variety of Arabic used in the Qur’ān at the time of revelation (see DIALECTS), the nature of the relationship between Arabic and the colloquials spoken in the various parts of the Arab world as well as the nature of the relationship between this “classical” Arabic language and that used for written and formal spoken communication in the Arab world today. This article will outline current terminology relating to the varieties of the language and then address these questions. (For an outline of the structure of Arabic, the reader is referred to works such as M.C. Bateson’s *Handbook* and C. Holes’ *Modern Arabic*.)

Varieties of Arabic

Twenty modern states use Arabic as an official language: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates

and the Yemen. To this list should be added the Palestinian Authority/State and Israel, where Arabic is not the principal language, but is nevertheless widely used. The language used in all of these states, and taught in their schools, is said to be structurally identical to the classical Arabic language and the language of the Qur'ān (*al-fuṣḥā* or "classical Arabic"). It is, however, freely admitted that both its vocabulary and idiomatic usage have developed considerably. One, therefore, frequently finds a distinction being made between classical Arabic, on the one hand, and contemporary Arabic (*al-luġha al-'arabiyya al-ḥadītha* or *al-mu'āṣira*), on the other. Contemporary Arabic, which in Western studies is frequently referred to as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or, mainly in textbooks, as Modern Literary Arabic, is not a variety used for everyday, informal speech by any community, even if certain groups would like to see it become one. Nor is it a purely written language. It is, perhaps, best described as a formal language, used for all types of formal communication, both written in most contemporary literature and in the press and spoken on all formal occasions, including "serious" programs on radio and television as well as in most educational contexts. Its use is acquired mainly through formal education and only a relatively small group within the communities which it serves as an official language can be said to have mastered it.

For informal communication, regional dialects, referred to as *al-lahjāt* or as *al-'āmmiyya*, the language of the commonality, or sometimes as *al-dārīja*, the popular language, is used. In Western research, they are commonly called "colloquials." The various dialects all belong to the same recognizable type of Arabic, sometimes called neo-Arabic, but show a great deal of divergence among themselves, increasing according to geographical distance. The dia-

lects of the extreme west and those of the eastern parts of the Arabic world are thus almost mutually incomprehensible. Dialects are normally referred to by names derived from the geographical area in which they are used, qualified, at times, with a reference to the religious status of the users. For purposes of classification, a distinction is made between sedentary (*ḥadārī*) and Bedouin (*badawī*) dialects, the Bedouin dialects being those descended from the varieties used by tribal groups that migrated from the Arabian peninsula well after the original conquests. These groups may later have settled so that one encounters places where the sedentary population speak Bedouin dialects (see BEDOUIN). The sedentary dialects are again subdivided into town (*madanī*) and village (*qarawī*) dialects.

The term "Proto-Arabic" has frequently been used for the language in which the Thamūdic, Liḥyānic, Ṣafā'itic and Ḥaṣā'itic inscriptions were written (see ARABIC SCRIPT). This language may be an early stage of the later Arabic language. K. Versteegh suggests that it be called Early North Arabic to distinguish it from the language of Arabic inscriptions (Proto-Arabic) and that the language of the Islamic papyri pre-dating the codification of Arabic be called Early Arabic (*Arabic language*, 26). It is to be hoped that this distinction will be adopted.

Classical Arabic is the language which was defined at the beginning of this article. The term is, however, used for a wide range of purposes. It is thus commonly used for the formal language as opposed to the colloquials throughout all periods of the development of Arabic but also for a specific period in the history of this development. Sometimes this period is narrowly defined — for instance, classical as opposed to medieval — while at other times it is defined more broadly — the classical

language as opposed to the modern. It is also ordinarily used to designate a style of language, that of literature and religious learning as opposed to the “modern standard” of the press. In short, readers of works where this term is used would do well to look for clues as to its exact meaning in the specific text in which it is encountered. In this article, it is used as a translation of the Arabic term *fushā* for all of the varieties of the formal language irrespective of the period from which they stem.

Old Arabic is a term sometimes used for the tribal dialects which are supposed to have co-existed with classical Arabic as vernaculars from pre-Islamic times onwards. The use of this term signals a belief in an essentially diglossic relationship between these dialects and classical Arabic. Most Arabs, and certain Western researchers, prefer to see these dialects as local variations of the classical language. Evidence as to the nature of the dialects is limited to a few scattered remarks in the works of the philologists regarding the forms they perceived to be unusual.

From Old Arabic, or from the dialects of the classical Arabic if one subscribes to this view, developed the medieval vernaculars collectively known as Middle Arabic. Much can be inferred about this stage of development from various kinds of text produced in circumstances where the normative influence of classical Arabic was not too strongly felt, either for religious reasons (Jewish and Christian Arabic) or because the purpose of the text was simply too mundane to warrant the effort entailed in attempting to produce correct classical Arabic. It is generally recognized that the modern colloquials developed from Middle Arabic vernaculars.

The impression of diversity — which the plethora of terms used above must necessarily create — should not be left unquali-

fied. The Arabs will insist on the essential unity of their language and are right in doing so. Anyone with an educated person's command of Modern Standard Arabic finds it easy to acquire the knowledge necessary to read classical or medieval Arabic texts and the divergence between the various dialects is, on the whole, small, considering the distances and geographical obstacles which separate their users.

Classification and early history

Arabic is usually classified as belonging, alongside the south Arabian and Ethiopian languages, to the southwestern branch of the Semitic family of the Afro-Asiatic phylum. The classification as such is relatively undisputed, yet a number of points pertaining to its meaning deserves special consideration. Firstly, the group of languages referred to as the Semitic family is not such a widely divergent and heterogeneous one as, for instance, the Indo-European family, and a comparison to one of the smaller branches of the latter, such as the Romance languages, would provide a truer picture of the facts. Secondly, the varieties within the Semitic family tend to show continuous rather than discrete variation among themselves. This family of languages should therefore be seen as a large and varied continuum, specific segments of which have, at specific points of time, been liberalized and codified, becoming, through this process, the individual Semitic languages of antiquity and modern times.

The early history of the Arabic language cannot at present be satisfactorily established. This is mainly due to the lack of sources or to the unreliable nature of those sources which do exist. At the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān, Arabic had long been the bearer of a literary, mainly poetic, tradition. Yet the development of the Arabic script (see CALLIGRAPHY), and hence of Arabic as a written language, is

almost entirely connected to the transmission of the text of the Qur'ān. The process was a long one and the Arabic script was not fully developed until the end of the third/ninth century. Epigraphic evidence of Arabic predating the revelation of the Qur'ān is mainly limited to five brief inscriptions the oldest of which is the five-line Namāra inscription from 328 C.E., written in Nabatean characters, but in a language which is essentially identical to Classical Arabic. Then follows the Zebed inscription dated to 512 C.E., the Jabal Usays inscription dated to 528 C.E., the Harrān inscription dated to 568 C.E., and the Umm al-Jimāl inscription, also from the sixth century C.E. All of these are brief inscriptions representing an early stage of the Arabic script. All these inscriptions tell us, however, that for some time before the Arabic language emerges into the light of history with the mission of the prophet Muḥammad, a language very similar to classical Arabic was in use on the peninsula and in neighboring areas, and that some of the users of this language had mastered the art of writing (see EPIGRAPHY AND THE QUR'ĀN).

The poetic literature of the pre-Islamic Arabs was committed to writing only through the efforts of the Muslim philologists towards the middle of the second/eighth century. The earliest preserved specimens of the tradition would seem to date from the beginning of the sixth century C.E., so that the time span in which oral transmission was unsupported by writing was quite considerable. This has made several researchers doubt the validity of the poetic evidence for purposes of research on the linguistic situation prior to the codification of Arabic. In addition, there is evidence indicating that the philologists collecting the poems may have corrected them a bit during the process. To rely on

the poetic corpus as evidence for the linguistic situation prior to the codification of Arabic is therefore to rely on the work of early Muslim philologists. Another matter is that the very nature of poetry, and the specific use to which poetry was put in the pre-Islamic society of Arabia, makes it likely that the language of the poetic corpus may not directly represent the linguistic varieties used for purposes of everyday communication within the tribes of the peninsula. The question which arises at this point, to wit, that of how great the differences between the language of the poetry and the vernaculars were in pre-Islamic times, has been a matter of contention throughout the twentieth century. Currently, the proponents of the view that the "poetic koine" existed in a diglossic relationship with the vernaculars would seem to outnumber those who think that the "poetic register" and the vernaculars essentially represented one and the same language. The latter view, which is represented mainly in the writings of K. Versteegh, does, however, have the considerable weight of the Islamic scholarly tradition to recommend it. See POETRY AND POETS.

To sum up, of the very little that can be known about Arabic before the dawn of Islam, we know that varieties very similar to classical Arabic were used for several hundred years before, extending over an area encompassing not only the Arabian peninsula but also parts of the Fertile Crescent. We also know that some of these varieties had sufficient prestige to be used for inscriptions and poetic composition. We do not, however, know who the users of these varieties were, what name they gave to their language, or for what other purposes, besides inscriptions and poetry, they may have used them. Nor do we know how great were the differences between the va-

rieties in question since only one of them, classical Arabic, has been preserved for us in the form of a corpus of text and a systematic description.

Codification

The actual codification of Arabic took place, as has already been stated, in the second/eighth century. The first dictionary was compiled — but never completed — by al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (d. 175/791), who also codified Arabic prosody. The first grammar is the famous *Kitāb* of al-Khalīl's student Sibawayhi (d. 177/793), which was completed and transmitted after the author's death by his student al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ (d. 221/835).

Among the factors usually mentioned to explain the process of codification, the most important are, on the one hand, the needs of non-Arab citizens of the empire to master Arabic as well as the linguistic corruption which supposedly came about as a result of the uprooting of Bedouin tribesmen from their natural environment and, on the other hand, the decision taken during the reign of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 65/685-86/705) to make Arabic the language of the public registers. It should, however, be noted that the early works on grammar are not elementary textbooks for teaching language to beginners. On the contrary, a work such as the *Kitāb* is concerned mainly with explanation and the systemization of the hierarchical ordering of facts with which the student is assumed to be familiar into a coherent whole. It is, in short, a treatise on grammar. Yet, the object of this systematization is definitely not Arabic as it was spoken in the time and place of the actual codification. Sibawayhi aims at an ideal which M. Carter terms "good old Arabic" (Sibawayhi, 526). The data of which Sibawayhi makes use include pas-

sages from the Qur'ān and verses of poetry, but also data obtained from contemporary Bedouin. This indicates that "good old Arabic" was a living language among the Bedouin at the time, in the sense that they could produce it upon demand, but not necessarily that it was a common medium of day-to-day communication. It should be noted that although as a totality the three groups of data are seen as embodying "good old Arabic," no individual group is given priority or accepted uncritically. The variety among the "readings" (*qirā'āt*, see READINGS OF THE QUR'ĀN) of the Qur'ān sometimes makes it possible to reject certain readings. Poetic usage is in some cases seen as differing from prose and certain Bedouin usages are dismissed as incorrect.

M. Carter has argued convincingly that Sibawayhi's system of grammar was, on the whole, inspired by the science of "law" (*fiqh*) as it was taught at that time. This implies a wholly pragmatic view of language: A language is not a system — though its grammar is — but rather a type of behavior, the individual acts of which are to be judged "by motive, structure and communicative effectiveness" (M. Carter, Sibawayhi, 526). Communicative effectiveness is the absolute. Speech is right (*mustaqīm*) if it conveys meaning, but wrong (*muḥāl*) if it does not. Structural correctness, on the other hand, is relative and speech may be *mustaqīm qabīḥ*, that is, make sense and thus be right, but still be structurally incorrect and hence "ugly." This implies that the codification of Arabic was neither a prescriptive project, aimed at teaching a forgotten language — or a language rapidly becoming forgotten — nor a descriptive one, aimed at setting down the facts of acknowledged contemporary usage. Rather it was a conservative effort, intended to keep linguistic behavior from

straying too far from what was the “way” of the Arabs (q.v.) and, more importantly, of the Qurʾān.

The Qurʾān

The Qurʾān is somewhat self-conscious with respect to its language. Generally speaking it identifies the language (the word used is *lisān*, “tongue”), in which it is revealed as that of the Prophet (Q 19:97; 44:58), as that of the Prophet’s people (*bilisni qawmihi*, Q 14:4) and as Arabic (Q 26:195; 46:12). The epithet “Arabic” is also given to the Qurʾān itself (Q 12:2) and to its function as a decisive utterance (*hukm*, Q 13:37).

As was recently pointed out by Jan Retsö, the Qurʾān, which is the oldest source in Arabic which actually talks about a language named after the Arabs, does not contrast the Arabic language to any other languages identified by name. Throughout, the epithet *ʿarabī*, “Arab” or “Arabic,” is contrasted to *aʿjamī*, “non-Arab” or “non-Arabic,” but it is never stated that the Arabic tongue is not understood by non-Arabic speakers. Indeed, verses such as Q 26:199 seem to indicate that the Qurʾān would be understood by non-Arabs should it be recited to them. However, it is also clear, from e.g. Q 16:103, that one whose tongue is *aʿjamī* cannot be expected to produce Arabic.

In order for the Qurʾān to be able to declare itself Arabic, there had to exist some sort of criteria for what is Arabic and what is not. Such criteria may, of course, be very loose, but if one assumes that the *aʿjam* were foreigners in the sense of people speaking languages entirely different from Arabic and maybe even incomprehensible to an Arab the Qurʾānic argumentation loses much of its force. For the argument “this is Arabic and hence divine” to have any noticeable force, the criteria for what is Arabic have to be quite narrow, to amount,

in fact, to a standard of language recognizably out of reach of the ordinary member of society. In the words of J. Wansbrough: “The linguistic tradition to which reformers and prophets, as well as poets, turn may be ancient. What it must be, is other than the current *usus loquendi*...” (QS, 103).

The philologists’ choice of the poetic corpus as the second source for the codification of Arabic has been taken to indicate what the tradition to which Muḥammad turned was. Their use of contemporary Bedouin informers demonstrates that this tradition was, at least in some areas, still alive at the time of codification. What is important to note is that the tradition is presented neither as a language nor as a literature but as a way of life, an ideal of culture. Even in works specifically devoted to the language itself, it is the “speech of the Arabs” (*kalām al-ʿarab*) which is presented and it is presented as a “way,” a set of manners and customs. Equally important is the fact that both the Qurʾān and the philologists present the tradition as essentially somebody else’s. Whether the “way” of the Arabs consisted in the active use of case and mode endings (*iʿrāb*) no longer in use in the vernaculars, as the proponents of the “poetic koine” hypothesis would have it or merely in the deliberate use of an archaic tradition of poetic diction and eloquent speech encompassing such features as the careful pronunciation of the glottal stop (a phoneme not realized in the Meccan dialect), use of the elevated register of poetry, the use of rhymed prose and the deliberate creation of parallelism, the effect would be much the same. The point, in both cases, is the appeal to a tradition which is both an essential part of the community’s heritage and at the same time definitely not a “natural” part of the community’s everyday language. Whoever coined the translation “classical” for *fushḥā* knew what he was doing.

The current situation: diglossia

The concept central to most descriptions of the linguistic situation of the Arab world today is that of diglossia. In Ferguson's classic paper from 1959, diglossia is defined as "a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superimposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written or formal spoken purposes, but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation" (Diglossia, 336). To Ferguson, this definition is an attempt to outline one specific type of language situation, in the hope that other contributions, outlining other types of language situations, would in the end lead to the establishment of a viable taxonomy. However, much of the discussion relevant to Arabic pivoted on the validity of the concept itself, with alternatives such as pluriglossia and multiglossia competing with models employing the concept of variation along a continuum.

The crux of the problem lies in the fact that Ferguson's original article outlined the properties and areas of use of two "varieties" of language as if these varieties — which Ferguson later identified as cases of register variation — were linguistic (sub-) systems in normal and frequent use. As is shown by D.B. Parkinson's attempts to have Egyptians produce classical Arabic, at least this high variety is used very seldom by most members of the Egyptian speech community in any kind of pure form. Though I do not know of any published investigations of the problem, I would predict that "pure" Egyptian colloquial, with-

out the slightest admixture of classical forms, is not very common either. In most cases of actual conversation, elements of the high variety and elements of the low variety are mixed in such a manner that it is frequently difficult to identify both the underlying matrix on which the specific instance of usage builds and the target at which the user aims. Actual usage is normally neither "high" nor "low" but somewhere in between.

S. Badawi's very influential *Levels of contemporary Arabic in Egypt* recognizes this problem. For him, modern Egyptian Arabic exhibits a continuum of socio-linguistic variety which he illustrates through the identification of five imaginary levels: "the classical of the heritage" (*fushā al-turāth*), "contemporary classical" (*fushā al-ʿaṣr*), "the colloquial of the cultured" (*ʿāmmiyyat al-muthaqqafīn*), "the colloquial of the enlightened" (*ʿāmmiyyat al-mutanaawwirīn*) and "the colloquial of the illiterate" (*ʿāmmiyyat al-ummīyyīn*). Although Badawi stresses that the levels are imaginary points of reference on a scale of free variation, he does assign specific linguistic features to the different levels. However, analysis of actual speech will show that there is normally a mixture of elements from various places on such a scale, operating on all levels of analysis. Not only may a sentence contain some words that are markedly classical side by side with some that are markedly colloquial but a single word marked as one variety may take an ending marked as another. The varieties, seen as levels on a scale, are therefore not discrete systems. The study of this phenomenon, called code-switching, has currently not reached the point where any decisive results can be established but a considerable amount of research is at present being carried out.

If Ferguson's original term diglossia still remains the most frequently used description of the current linguistic situation

in Arab societies, it is because, as he himself points out, the type of variation which he calls diglossic is just that and not pluriglossic because there are only two identifiable poles or ends to the scale of variation (Epilogue, 59). Furthermore, these poles are identifiable in the sense that systematic descriptions do exist, based, for the classical end of the scale, on the Arabic linguistic tradition and for the colloquial end, mostly on textbooks aimed at foreign students.

Attitudes

As K. Versteegh recently pointed out, languages are surprisingly often discussed as if they were some kind of living organisms, capable of birth, growth, change and decline. Yet they are not. They are patterns of human behavior, conventions acquired and manipulated by individuals. The attitude which the individual user of a language takes towards that language is therefore a matter of some importance. Of even greater importance are the attitudes which researchers take towards the object of their research.

Classical Arabic is, throughout the Arab world, seen as the Arabic language *par excellence*. Correspondingly, the colloquials are often seen as not being languages at all, but rather as chaotic, unsystematic and lacking in grammar. Yet a certain ambivalence of feeling towards the use of the classical language is often reported. D.B. Parkinson relates how users with an active command of the classical language are often constrained to deliberately employ a certain admixture of colloquial forms, even when speaking from rather formal platforms like that of the university lecture theatre (Variability, 92). On the other hand, suggestions for linguistic reform involving modification of the classical language or letting the colloquials take over some of its functions are either met with

hostility or ignored. Classical Arabic remains the language in which the religion of Islam finds expression throughout an area considerably greater than that of the Arabic-speaking countries. It remains the language in which the cultural and political life of the Arab world is conducted and the language used by most mass media in the Arab world. It may be that the percentage of speakers who can claim an active command of the language is rather small, but there is no sign that this will seriously affect its position.

Classical Arabic is often treated as something of a special case in modern linguistics. Dominant trends, such as generative grammar, have assigned a somewhat important place among their data to the "intuition" of "native speakers" about their "first language." Classical Arabic does not quite fit in here since there is no one who has it as a first language. This may, unless due care is taken, lead to a view of classical Arabic as somehow "artificial" or "congealed" or as a "dead language" artificially kept alive by the conservatism of certain elites. The feeling that the "real" or "living" Arabic language is represented by the colloquials is quite widespread. This has the laudatory effect of drawing attention to the actual colloquial usage in which most communication within the Arab world takes place, a field which is seriously understudied. It is, however, also an attitude which an Arab may regard as offensive. Not only is this person denied the status of a "native speaker" of his own language, he is also being told that he may not really master it (Parkinson, Variability), and that it is a foreign language, or at least a strange dialect, even to the great linguists from whom he inherited its rules (Owens, *Foundations*, 8). One cannot help but feel that this is quite unnecessary and certainly counterproductive.

In the end, classical Arabic is much more

than a language. A ḥadīth of the Prophet, related in the *History of Damascus (Ta'rikh madīnat Dimashq)* of Ibn 'Asākir (d. 571/1176) illustrates this point: "Oh my people! God is one and the same. Our father [i.e. Adam, (see ADAM AND EVE)] is the same. No one amongst you inherits Arabic from his father or mother. Arabic is a habit of the tongue, so whoever speaks Arabic is an Arab" (Y. Suleiman, *Nationalism*, 22). Classical Arabic is thus the heritage of all Arabs, though it may not be the heritage of any individual Arab. It is the primary indicator of the Arab identity, though individual Arabs may partake of it in varying degrees. In most cases it is, and as far as we know it may always have been, more of an ideal to be striven for through painstaking effort, than an actual habit of everyday life, but this does not diminish its reality nor its status. As a matter of fact, it enhances it, for such strife is the theme around which the entire religion of Islam revolves. Thus, Arabic is more than the language of Islam, it is part of Islam. It is, as indeed are all languages, a phenomenon of culture, not one of nature, and changes as does the culture for which it is a medium changes but at the core it is unchanging, just as the document which is at the core of the culture of Islam, the Qur'ān, is unchanging.

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Arabic Literature and the Qur'ān

SEE LITERATURE AND THE QUR'ĀN

Arabic Script

Arabic script (*al-khatt al-'arabī*) refers to 1) a set of characters and their sequential and spatial arrangement, 2) their forms and media and 3) the typology of a consonant-only system (*abjad*) denoting utterances in an abbreviated manner with linguistic and sociological implications (P. Daniels, *Fundamentals*, 730). Arabic script also forms part of the broader concept of Arabic writing which usually defines one Arabic variant (classical, Modern Standard or "written") within a multiglossic environment (see ARABIC LANGUAGE). The significant role of Arabic writing in religion, art, administration and scholarship, as well as in public and private life, characterizes the Arabic-Islamic world as a literate culture, albeit one in which the written and oral