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HARD AND SOFT MULTILINGUALISM

Abstract:

Based in analyses of the work of the Egyptian poet Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932) and the Iraqi Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati (1926-1999), this essay questions the heuristic and historical stability of the category “multilingual,” and suggests that the last century saw the rise of “a globalization of soft monolingualism.” In particular, Noorani suggests that Arabic-language poetry in the 20th century underwent an assimilation toward international norms of poetic expression and nationalist messaging, and that modern and postmodern national language repertoires in general may indeed be the product of such streamlining of linguistic forms through colonization and nation-building.

Keywords:

multilingualism ♦ monolingualism ♦ globalization ♦ Arabic literature ♦ Ahmad Shawqi ♦ Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati ♦ poetry

In the present age of globalization, with its unprecedented degree of international intermingling and proliferation of pedagogical and communication technologies, it would appear that the attainment of multilingualism has never been more in reach. This may well be the case, even taking into account the large number of locales in pre-modern times whose inhabitants were exposed daily to multiple languages before the ascendance of standardized national languages. Yet the facility of present-day inter-lingual traffic has come about in large part as the result of a process of linguistic leveling and homogenization that has eliminated many of the hard edges of linguistic

difference and rendered living languages increasingly congruent and mutually transparent. The development and dominance of modern national languages has, perhaps paradoxically, entailed powerful tendencies toward linguistic equivalence and interchangeability where formerly, difference and incommensurability were more the rule. This is not to say that linguistic distance was in the past untraversable or that such distance has now been eliminated. It is nevertheless clear that languages have been profoundly altered by the process of modernization and nationalization, such that they progressively conform to a common communicative template. Multilingualism may now be more accessible than ever before, but it is increasingly “soft” multilingualism, in that it remains within the confines of familiar linguistic norms. “Hard” multilingualism, which requires reckoning with formerly existing radical linguistic difference, is more and more confined to the learning of “dead” languages. The advancement of soft multilingualism has been a key factor in enabling many of the processes of contemporary globalization, and has in turn been furthered by them.

The author of a study of the lexical and stylistic modernization of standard Arabic published in 1970, Jaroslav Stetkevych (1970), concluded his work by drawing attention to the convergence of Arabic with modern national languages. “Translators can now quite effortlessly and smoothly render contemporary Arabic into other modern languages, and vice versa. Linguistic affinity is appearing where before there had only been disparity. Arabs find foreign languages easier—as others find Arabic” (115). According to Stetkevych, this is because “the contemporary Arabic literary language has crossed its genealogical linguistic borders and has entered into cultural linguistic affinity with the broad supragenealogical family of modern Western languages.” By this he means not only that “the stumbling block of a lack of semantic equivalence between the Arabic lexicon and the lexica of modern European languages has been largely overcome,” but that “the configuration of [Arabic] syntax” now conforms to European “thought-dynamics” (118). Standard Arabic has moved in this direction despite its firm retention of classical Arabic grammar and morphology. The linguistic convergence that Stetkevych identifies and the adaptive processes that he documents in his book are not unique to Arabic, but pertain to modernizing national languages in general. My aim here is to elucidate the distinction between hard and soft multilingualism and to argue that a key element in the globalization of soft multilingualism is an idea that is intrinsic to national language ideology—the idea that languages are self-generating.

To speak of a formerly existing radical linguistic difference is not to claim that there was once some kind of absolute and irreducible linguistic difference that is now lost. It is to argue, rather, that structural incompatibilities between languages have been and continue to be eliminated. On a number of levels, indigenous linguistic paradigms or frameworks have been transformed to approximate international norms, while remaining linguistic differences are increasingly molded to accord with established equivalents in multiple languages. The result is a degree of translatability and inter-linguistic transparency that never before existed on a global level. The processes underlying linguistic homogenization were set in motion by the rise of nationality and national languages, even in cases in which there was no nation-state to back these processes and to impose them upon language users. Hard multilingualism, in the absence of such homogeneity, entails not simply the assimilation of a foreign grammar and lexicon, but the initiation into a system of communication that cannot be abstracted from a foreign way of life and pattern of thought. The rise of national societies began to bring this foreignness to an end in a number of ways. Nationalization winnows away the plenitude of pre-modern social and cultural difference. The manner in which national social organization is a universalizing structure or template with common institutions, social roles, and normative concepts has been frequently discussed. The importance of the outlook and representative status of professional and bureaucratic bourgeois classes in the development of nations has likewise received much attention. On the cultural level, the creation of national narratives and rituals, the identification and bringing to light of folklore, and so forth, are well-known phenomena. On the linguistic level, the fashioning of standardized national languages, their promotion through mass education, and the eradication of variant dialects and non-national languages, are well-documented.

What has received less attention, however, is the manner in which those who fashioned national languages, at the same moment that they resurrected and glorified the distinctiveness of the incipient national language, worked to make this language the equivalent in functionality and expressivity of the languages of the world's ruling nations. National languages were called upon to fulfill the same national functions all over the world. They were required to convey, to a national public, government policies, scientific research, news of the nation and the world, political and social analyses and ideologies, modern normative concepts and the sense of self underlying them. These common functions and

modes of expression exerted homogenizing pressures on national languages. Moreover, the fact that the major European languages preceded other languages in these adaptations, and had achieved their own degree of equivalence due to cultural contiguities and modernizing processes, in addition to exerting colonial power over many regions of the earth, meant that the capacity to translate from these languages was indispensable for the rapid attainment of a national culture and organization. The result is that just as the political order of European nations has established the standard for the form of the nation-state, so has the (originally) European linguistic order provided the forms to which other national languages have adapted.

The Arabic language in its written form, like a number of other non-Western languages, has undergone a deep transformation in the last 150 years, most decisively for Arabic in the period from the 1890s to the 1920s. This transformation included the adoption of punctuation and the periodic sentence as a basic unit of meaning; the assimilation of the modern genres of writing including the literary schema of fiction, poetry and drama; the shifting of the semantic range of numerous words of the Arabic lexicon; and the coining and absorption of thousands of new words and expressions.¹ The transformation of Arabic poetry proved to be a more arduous and contentious process than that of prose; it was not until the 1950s that the distinctive linguistic and literary features of classical Arabic poetry were successfully superseded. The drastic remaking of poetic expression over a span of three generations therefore provides a striking illustration of the processes of linguistic convergence. We can get a sense of the distance that was traversed by sampling a specimen of the classical poetic style that was still dominant in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The following verses are from a renowned poem published in 1919 by the Egyptian Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932), the leading Arabic poet of his generation (Shawqi 1988, 45-52).

The division of day and night makes one forget –
 Remind me of love and my days of intimacy.
 And describe to me a high time of youth
 Imaged in both imaginings and touch;
 It gusted like the playful east wind,

A sweet sleep, and a stolen pleasure.

And ask Egypt, was the heart ever solaced of her,

Or did consoling time salve its wound?

As much as the nights passed over it,

It softened, though the nights' wont is to harden [the heart].

These are the opening verses of Shawqi's "Siniyya" ("poem rhyming in 's'"), which attempts to fashion a modern Egyptian identity by fusing Arabo-Islamic heritage with the pharaonic legacy of Egypt through the poem's description of architectural monuments. A number of elements make this and other poems of the classical Arabic tradition extremely difficult to translate into English in a successful manner. Classical Arabic prosody nearly defies rendering into any kind of English approximation. This is not so much because the rhythm is quantitative rather than stress-based, but because it is not based on straightforward patterns of repetition. Most of the sixteen meters of classical Arabic prosody are based on sets of three and four-syllable feet that allow variations on specific syllables in the line of poetry. To devise even a rough approximation that could distinguish between, say, the primary four or five Arabic meters would be extremely challenging in any European language. Moreover, classical Arabic poetry is mono-rhymed. Each line ends with the same consonant and vowel. Shawqi's "Siniyya" consists of more than eighty lines, each ending in the syllable "-si," creating an effect that cannot be approximated using the resources of existing English prosody.

Leaving aside the issue of prosody, we come to the system of topoi, motifs, poetic diction, and tropes that forms the basis of classical Arabic poems. Shawqi's poem, like countless other Arabic odes, begins with the topos of recalling youth and lost love. This is one of the greater topoi of Arabic poetry, and includes numerous sub-topoi, such as wistful remembrance of the place in which the poet grew up (*watan*). These sub-topoi are made up of conventional motifs, used by poets to improvise and fashion their own attempts at aesthetic originality. They often did so by attempting to alter and extend the meaning of conventional motifs in striking manners, making use of tropes, conceits, and other devices. To understand the aesthetic endeavor and even the meaning of the poem usually requires an intimate familiarity with the literary system from which the poem is constructed. Shawqi's poem, for example, draws on the conventional topos of the

poet's watan (the place of his youth) to invest the modern meaning of the same term (homeland, patria) with a specific form of subjectivity. Instead of recalling a specific locale or neighborhood, the poet identifies Egypt as the site of youthful love, from which he is now separated, not simply because of the inevitable passage of time, but because of political exile and British imperialism. In doing so the poem manipulates a number of classical motifs associated with nostalgic remembrance—the passage of “nights,” i.e. time and the process of mortality; love's defiance of mortality; the questioning of the beloved's abandoned abode, in this case substituted by the poet's homeland. The poem opens with a conventional address to two companions, indicated by the dual form of the command “remind me,” which again serves to establish the nostalgia-laden setting. The lines gain their punch from a number of tropes, including paronomasia, antithesis, and parallelism. The construction of the lines of the poem from an established body of motifs, objects, and object relations, continues through the poem as a whole.

The main body of Shawqi's poem centers on the classical topos of artful description, or ekphrasis (wasf).² Moreover, the poem as a whole is a contrafaction of a celebrated 9th century poem by the poet al-Buhturi, composed in the same rhyme and meter, which describes ruined Sassanid palaces and their frescoes. The point for consideration here is the difference between the nature and techniques of description in classical Arabic poetry and the post-Romantic expectations of contemporary readers. This difference creates a difficult barrier for successful translation. Whereas contemporary readers are accustomed to visualizing descriptive images, classical Arabic poetry relies mainly on the transfer of abstract visual attributes from one term to another in a manner not conducive to visualization. We may take, as a basic example, the image of the “moon-faced” beloved, used in a myriad of manners in a number of Islamic poetic traditions. The image works not by inducing the reader to visualize a person whose face resembles the physical appearance of the moon, but by transferring the visual attribute of radiance contained in the moon's brightness and resplendent aura that contrasts absolutely with its dark surroundings. This attribute is more a semantic property of the word “moon” than it is a picture of the moon called to mind. At the same time, the poetic image transfers to its object the moon's value as a brilliant heavenly body that has an elevated, nearly sacred position in the hierarchy of visual entities. This type of visual-semantic relationship is dominant in the descriptive passages of the “Siniyya.” The poet's

remembrance of Egypt, for instance, depicts Cairo's Gezira Island as a garden, and thence the Queen of Sheba wedded to the kingly Nile. Here is part of the description:

In the late afternoon she wears an embroidered gown

Of garments made in San'a or in Qass.

The Nile strips her. She feels shame and covers herself

From him with the bridge, between nakedness and dress.

Depictions of gardens with their contexts assimilated to courtly-erotic motifs is a standard topos of classical Arabic poetry. The point is not to bring a unique visual perception before the reader's eyes, but to bring a high-value register of meaning to a typical scene in a marvelous or fanciful manner. Pre-existing semantic properties are the point of departure, rather than supposedly raw visual impressions. This is why talented blind poets were able to attain fame for their striking images. In the following verse, Shawqi depicts the palm trees of Giza that still lament the pharaoh Ramses:

The palm trees standing [in mourning], having plaited their hair,

And denuded themselves but for their necklaces and collars...

The basis of the verse is again a standard, elegiac motif of lovely maidens who, oblivious to shame in their grief, have torn off their clothing. The inclination of a contemporary reader to attempt to visualize these kinds of conceits goes at cross-purposes to their operative techniques. The lack of semantic overlap between the classical Arabic poetic lexicon and contemporary English words, not to mention the contemporary reader's lack of familiarity with Arabic poetic motifs, makes it difficult to convey the poet's aesthetic endeavor in translation.

If we fast-forward about thirty years to the modernist "free-verse" poetry that took off in the 1950's, we find that nearly all of the obstacles to translation have been left behind. Consider the opening lines of one of the inaugural poems of this movement, "The Village Market," by the Iraqi poet Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati (1995, 134):³

The sun, and the starved donkeys, and the flies

And an old pair of army boots

Passed from hand to hand, and a peasant staring off into space

'At the start of the coming year

My hands will surely fill with cash

And I'll buy these boots'

And the cry of a rooster fled from its cage, and a petty priest:

'Nothing scratches your hide like your own fingernail'

And 'The path to hell is closer than the garden of paradise' and the flies...

In a nearly comprehensive manner, the poetics of this poem evince an assimilation to international norms of poetic expression that became dominant in the wake of modernist poetic movements like imagism and surrealism in Britain, France, Germany, and other European countries. International poetic norms had already come into place in European literatures with the rise of romanticism in the nineteenth century, but many non-European literatures, like Arabic, did not fully join the parade until after World War II. It was at this point that Arabic poetry could be easily translated into other languages and appreciated by international audiences. Arabic poets became fully integrated into the international literary circuit, attending writers' conferences and literary festivals, and giving readings in foreign metropolises.

In al-Bayati's poem, the effects of international integration are evident on a number of levels. With regard to prosody, considerable innovations have taken place, pioneered by al-Bayati's Iraqi colleagues Nazik al-Mala'ika and Badr Shakir al-Sayyab. These poets derived new meters from the metrical units of classical prosody consisting for the most part of the repetition of a single poetic foot, in a manner similar to English poetic meters. This allowed them to vary the length of poetic lines and to employ enjambment and stanzaic forms. It also enabled them to use variable rhyme-schemes. As a result, the fixed-length, self-contained, mono-rhymed classical poetic line ceased to be used by avant-garde poets.⁴ On the semantic level, the poetic transformation is even greater. Al-Bayati's poem does not depend in any way on the motif system or poetic lexicon of classical poetry. The system of relations among objects that enables classical poetic representation is no longer in effect. The techniques of visual description of classical poetry are no longer present. Al-Bayati employs instead the techniques of British imagism to render a poetic content that is foreign to

classical Arabic poetry. The images in al-Bayati's poem are designed to be visualized, and indeed, present themselves as a series of raw, objective sense-impressions. Not only is this kind of aesthetic endeavor familiar to a contemporary international reader, but by its nature, lends itself to translation. On the linguistic level, the poem is contrived to free its word-objects from any pre-existing rhetorical baggage, rather than to base its meaning on such baggage. On the thematic level, the contents of its images are stereotypical, not with respect to a corpus of Arabic literary motifs, but with respect to contemporary images of rural poverty in the Third World. Even the elements that are specific to an Arabic or Iraqi village take the form of "local color" that could be easily substituted by the local color of, say, a Mexican village. The reality that is rendered in the poem is not produced out of the semantic and rhetorical possibilities of a pre-existing and well-defined Arabic poetic tradition, but is a reality fashioned through norms and structures that are internationally intelligible. It is precisely through the full assimilation of international poetic norms and structures that the "national" Arabic poetry critics had long been calling for came into existence.

The evolution of mainstream Arabic poetry from a self-contained, courtly literary system to a nationalized and thereby internationally recognizable poetic practice provides a close analogy to and is intertwined with the similar transformation of the Arabic written language. Pre-twentieth century Arabic writing in general poses the same sorts of obstacles to translation and international intelligibility that are seen more particularly in classical Arabic poetry. The capacity to read pre-modern Arabic texts requires a significant educational investment. This is the reason that such a field as Orientalism existed. The mastery of an "oriental" language was seen as an end in itself, for it seemed to unlock the conceptual world and mode of thought of an alien civilization. Once one attained linguistic mastery, which entailed philological competence, one was able to delve into every facet of the oriental world. The foreign and peculiar mentality of the language seemed to be the determinative feature of oriental life, rather than social and cultural motives of a universal nature. Post-eighteenth century orientalists did not see hard linguistic difference as a given but as a sign of cultural idiosyncrasy. Orientalism, as an academic discipline, is inconceivable with regard to modern intellectual productions. The works of modern authors can be easily translated and understood; they don't appear to require the mediation of orientalist philology. Only by resisting and denying the modernity

of Middle Eastern cultures was Orientalism able to linger on as a discipline into the mid-twentieth century.

The hard multilingualism taken up by Orientalism, however, was never the norm even in the pre-modern world. Within the various and overlapping socio-cultural regions of the world pressures existed that led to significant degrees of homogenization among languages. This was the case among the vernacular languages of Western Europe, and was the case as well among the languages that participated in Islamic literate culture, such as Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu. Moreover, close contact among spoken languages exerted homogenizing influences as well. Before the dominance of national languages, multiple spoken languages tended to coexist in close proximity in densely populated areas. Social segmentation prevented languages from fading out of existence, but social contiguity often brought about multilingualism and some degree of linguistic homogenization. On the level of literary languages, dominant cultural languages exerted strong influence on the literary expression of emerging literary languages. Arabic exerted extensive influence on modern Persian. Persian, in turn, exerted such influence on Turkish and Urdu. The result was that these languages, in both their literary and spoken varieties, shared a massive stock of lexical items, parallel concepts and expressions, and even some grammatical structures. This is aside from common literary motifs, genres, prosody, and lore. Multilingualism led to and was facilitated by these homogeneities. As late as the nineteenth century prominent Arabic poets in Egypt took the trouble to compose collections of verse in Turkish and Persian. Even in the twentieth century, the celebrated Urdu poet Muhammad Iqbal, whose mother tongue was Punjabi, composed his most ambitious works in Persian. These phenomena can be regarded as instances of soft multilingualism (although Iqbal also published scholarly works and articles in English). Imperial high cultures did not usually programmatically impose a standard language, and the social conditions of pre-modern life enabled the persistence of multiple languages in the same locale. Yet both these phenomena also contributed to linguistic homogeneity and multilingualism.

The soft multilingualism of pre-modern life, however, was of a different character from the processes that I am calling soft multilingualism in the modern age of national languages. Modern processes of linguistic homogenization lead to a much more rapid, systematic, and global confluence of languages. Moreover, modern processes seem to be open-ended and accelerating. Whereas pre-modern

literary languages appear to have reached relatively stable forms after intense formative periods of influence, modern languages appear to converge continuously and ever more rapidly. This has presumably to do with the limits of pre-modern communicative exchange. In any case, what I would like to account for here is the systematic, global, and relentless nature of modern homogenizing processes. My argument is that the primary conscious impulse behind this is intrinsic to the notion and ideal of the national language. Specifically, the belief that language is self-generating, and as such serves as the collective expression of human progress, led linguistically-minded patriotic intellectuals to promote and enact language reform. The idea that human emancipation is a progressive process expressed in language is linked to the new public functions that reformers intended the national language to take on. The fashioning of a national language in itself was a project built upon these ideas. For the collective body, the nation, to be capable of agency and progress meant that its language—for many, a nation's defining feature—must be capable of revealing the utmost development of human knowledge and of the human moral condition. Revitalizing the self-generating forces of the national language would allow it to attain or re-attain this expressive capacity.

Aside from linguistic self-generation, many of the assumptions about the nature of languages that make modern language reform possible were present among pre-modern intellectuals writing in Islamic languages.⁵ The idea was generally entrenched that major ethnic groups, “nations,” such as the Arabs, Persians, Turks, Greeks and Indians, were characterized by each having their own language. These languages were understood as equivalent in kind, performing the same communicative function for their groups, even if many authors regarded their own language to be in some way superior to others. Although many gave Arabic primacy over all languages on religious grounds, this view was not universally credited. The famous eleventh century Hispano-Arabic jurist, Ibn Hazm, for example, ridiculed the notion that one language could be superior to another, and theorized that Arabic and Hebrew are sister languages born from Syriac (Ibn Hazm 1978, 37-39). Arabic grammarians and rhetoricians who argued for the superiority of Arabic did so on the grounds of its copious vocabulary and morphological forms and the expressive economy enabled by its declensions (Suleiman 2003, 42-49). Similarly, the fifteenth century Chagatay Turkish poet Mir Ali Shir Nava'i attempted to demonstrate the superiority of Turkish over Persian for poetic purposes by adducing one hundred Turkish

words that have no equivalent in Persian (1966, 6-16, *passim*). Yet the vocabulary of the Turkish in which he expounded his views was somewhere around half Persian (Nava'i 1966, xi). In contrast, the fourteenth century historian and social theorist Ibn Khaldun, while admitting the economy of classical Arabic, argued that one can be equally eloquent and communicative in any language (Ibn Khaldun 1992, 644, 648). In general, the notion that a series of ontologically equivalent languages are present in the world was not contested. The possibility and desirability of translating works among languages was accepted, as can be seen in the large number of philosophical and scientific works translated into Arabic in the early Islamic period. Although the ninth century theologian and prose stylist al-Jahiz held that poetry cannot be translated, and that translations of prose cannot avoid being error-ridden, he affirmed that prose is indispensable precisely because it is translatable (Jahiz 1969, 75-79). It seems to have been generally believed that meanings are common to all peoples, despite the variation in languages among them. Take for instance a famous and often cited grammarian-logician debate of the tenth century (Tawhidi 1965, 109-128). The grammarian conceded that meanings belong to the rational and eternal realm and are common to all people, while speech varies among peoples and is material and ephemeral. He denied, however, the capacity of logic to access the realm of meanings without the mediation of language, arguing that logic is merely a second-order derivative of the Greek language and its rules of syntax. Truth then can only be approached through the particular syntax and semantic relations of one's own language. Despite the grammarian's arguments, logic later became an established element of school curricula, alongside grammar. The idea that languages change—and in a way that is not simply a matter of degeneration—was also present. Ibn Khaldun, for example, argued that the spoken Arabic dialects of his time were independent languages stemming from classical Arabic, rather than corruptions of it, and that classical Arabic itself emerged in this way from the South Arabian language of Yemen (Ibn Khaldun 1992, 645). Ibn Hazm, cited above, drew his conjectures on language transformation on the basis of observing geographical variation in spoken Arabic (Ibn Hazm 1978, 36).

The presence of these notions of linguistic equivalence does not seem to have led at any time to the idea that a language may need to be systematically modified to keep pace with other languages. Modifications of this nature did take place in a cumulative manner. Arabophone intellectuals in various fields developed

and/or Arabicized significant bodies of technical terms. These terms then went into other Islamic languages. Authors working in fields like philosophy or Islamic law tended to write technical works in Arabic long after their own languages had become established for other types of writing. Their linguistic preference involved an implicit and sometimes explicit recognition that their own languages were not the most suitable for these types of works. This did not result in systematic campaigns to adapt the vernacular language to these purposes. In contrast, the rise of the concept of the national language in the late nineteenth century entailed discourses of language reform and programmatic endeavors to modify written languages.

The theory of the nation put forward by Ernest Gellner, although it is schematic and reductive, provides relevant insight in this regard (Gellner 2005). Gellner argued that the modern nation is an effect of industrial social organization, which requires that individuals within a given polity share a homogeneous high literate culture. Individuals feel, and are trained to feel, allegiance to this high literate culture and those who share in it because it is the basis of their rights, opportunities, and livelihood. The high literate culture is more or less the equivalent of the national language. The content of the culture is essentially the same in every nation—rationality, and the conception of the world as a unitary and morally inert cognitive order. This cultural framework enables industrial society to reproduce itself and progress economically. The emergence of nations requires, therefore, the transformation of pre-existing high literate cultures into bearers and instruments of the new industrial world-view. They must also be adapted from the province of elites to the demands of mass acculturation. What Gellner captures in his theory is the sense that there are homogenizing imperatives at work in the formation and persistence of national languages. The ascendance of a common social form, whether or not we deem it “industrial society,” but which in any case is intimately linked to nationality, brings about a change in the function and purview of written languages. The aspects of the high literary language that formerly embedded it in the culture of a specific way of life gives way to modes of thought and expression pertaining to the new social order. It is not only that the national language should be the homogeneous medium for the society as a whole. An equally important effect is that national languages become more similar to each other, as a result of both conscious efforts and structural pressures.

An intrinsic element of the ideal of nationality is the role of the nation as the collective unit of progressive human emancipation. The national language is involved in this role as the site of national self-transparency. The cognitive and moral condition of the nation finds its manifestation in the national language. This way of understanding language entails a key difference from the pre-modern notions discussed above, namely, that a language continually generates itself in a process of growth and development. It is in this way that the language remains the nation's self-manifestation as the nation progresses. The idea of linguistic self-generation was frequently adduced by language reformers in order to justify their programs. Consider for example a work published in Cairo in 1908 entitled, *The Book of Derivation and Arabicization* by the journalist Abd al-Qadir al-Maghribi. The purpose of this work is to set out a program for the expansion of the Arabic lexicon through the Arabicization of scientific and other terms from foreign languages. In the introduction, al-Maghribi sets up an equivalence between the Arab nation and the Arabic language. Just as the Arab nation has historically grown through reproduction as well as through assimilation of foreign peoples, so has the Arabic language grown through the same means—though termed “derivation” and “Arabicization” in the linguistic context. Al-Maghribi argues that it is incumbent upon contemporary Arabic speakers to activate these means in order to adapt Arabic to present educational needs. “When we understand that the growth of a language is one of its signs of life, and that the two primary factors in its growth are ‘derivation’ and ‘Arabicization,’ we children of the Arabic language are obliged to study these two arts exhaustively in order to give our language eternal life and perpetual growth” (Maghribi 1908, 8). Al-Maghribi devotes most of his book to demonstrating to linguistic conservatives that from its inception, Arabic has continuously absorbed words from foreign languages and assimilated them to its own forms. The purpose of this demonstration, however, is to urge contemporary Arabic speakers to embark on a program of conscious and systematic absorption of foreign words. Linguistic self-generation is a law and at the same time a prescribed practice necessary for saving the language from oblivion.

A crucial corollary of the idea that languages are and ought to be self-generating is the conception of language as a biological or organic phenomenon. Al-Maghribi invokes the evolutionary law (namus) of “the struggle for existence” and “the survival of the fittest” to explain the growth and extinction of languages

(Maghribi 1908, 31-32). He also explains the process of lexical assimilation as analogous to the body's assimilation of nutrition. The body remains authentically itself because it assimilates matter from foreign bodies according to its internal organic law (*namus*) of growth (Maghribi 1908, 29-30). Similarly, the renowned journalist, novelist and scholar Jurji Zaydan, in his book "The Arabic language is a living being," published in Cairo in 1904, invokes the biological "law of growth" and "law of progression" to equate the continuous regeneration of tissue in living beings with the life of a nation and the history of the Arabic language.⁶ Zaydan looks at the words newly coined or borrowed from foreign languages in every period of Arabo-Islamic history. He presents this phenomenon as a necessary law to which all living beings are subject. The attempt of contemporary guardians of Arabic purity to escape this law is futile. Both he and al-Maghribi, however, take care to insist that the assimilation of new words must conform to the inner logic of the Arabic language, and that unguided assimilation of words and constructions from foreign languages is harmful to the expressive capacities of the language.

The implications of this outlook for national language ideology are clearly expressed in the writings of an important pioneer of both language reform and Arab nationalism, the Levantine linguistic scholar and journalist Ibrahim al-Yaziji (1847-1906). Al-Yaziji wrote extensively on methods for modernizing the Arabic language and justified this process on the basis of a direct correlation between the Arabic language and the Arab nation as a historical community. Al-Yaziji endowed the Arabic language with a historical trajectory reflecting the historical vicissitudes he attributed to the Arab nation. The conception of linguistic self-generation enabled him to depict an opposition between the present degenerated condition of the Arabic language and its latent capacity as an expressive medium of human progress. What is implied in this narrative of revivification, however, is that Arabic must acquire the expressive forms, already present in other languages, that will enable it to encompass modern life.

In his writings on the Arabic language, al-Yaziji establishes the necessity of reform on the basis of the correlation between language and nation. In an 1884 article, al-Yaziji begins by stating that "[i]t is apparent that language is the greatest indicator of the conditions of nations and their level of civilization, their morals, mores, doctrines, politics, laws, sciences, arts..." He takes this further, making language the site of individual self-integration and thereby the link between humanity and nationality. "In sum, language is the human being

himself, in that the individual finds manifestation in it from out of his various elements, and language takes up the nation as a whole in that it is the image of the intellect, translator of the heart, and the impression imprinted by the self in its various actions and movements..." (Yaziji 1993, 21). It can be seen here that al-Yaziji links the "level of civilization" of a nation to the inner being of individuals through language. This linkage requires languages to be national in an intrinsic manner, and to have the capacity of self-generation in that they must continually grow and develop just as does the human self in this conception.

The idea that the national language is the expression of the moral condition of the nation is related to earlier notions that the excellence of a language derives from the virtue of its speakers. The poet and rhetorician Ibn Sinan al-Khafaji, for instance, explicitly linked the expressive superiority of Arabic over other languages with the superior virtue of the Arabs (Khafaji 1969, 40-43). His claims, however, imply a static view of language. Arabic was superior at its founding and it is that language, of the pre-Islamic and early Islamic age, that sits atop a fixed hierarchy of languages. The virtues it reflects are those of the Arabs of that age. There is no idea here that humanity is progressing and that this progress is visible in linguistic growth. The idea, rather, is that language is instituted once and for all at a given point in time, and subsequent additions or changes are not of consequence. This outlook can only result in some type of call for language reform when those who espouse it believe that the speakers of the language are failing to use the language correctly or in its pure form.

The connection between the national language and the moral condition of the nation enables al-Yaziji to link the decline and weakness of the nation with linguistic stagnation. In a series of articles on language reform published from 1897 to 1898, al-Yaziji decries the present impotence of the Arabic language in a telling manner (Yaziji 1993, 55-56). He laments that what was formerly the most copious and expressive of languages cannot be used by a present-day writer to describe even the bedroom he sleeps in, the mansions of the wealthy, or the streets of modern cities, due to the lack of words for the objects they contain. Al-Yaziji attributes this incapacity to the stagnation of the Arabic language after its golden age, and it is of course the case that a vast influx of imported items from Europe changed the complexion of daily life in Middle Eastern cities in the late nineteenth century. An important underlying issue, however, is that classical Arabic prose writers did not engage in detailed descriptions of everyday settings and objects. Descriptive prose in classical Arabic is usually abstract and the terms

used for objects like buildings and their internal divisions, or their furnishings, are ambiguous and imprecise by modern standards. Precise and fixed terms for different types of spaces—e.g. architectural or functional types of buildings – were not present because evidently, the conceptualization of spaces worked differently from our own. Moreover, visual specificity was seldom a primary aim in Arabic writing, and the kind of vocabulary that would have supported this aim was not well-developed or extensively utilized. The type of description that al-Yaziji felt the need for had developed particularly in European novels and related genres, and is connected with a new kind of interest in everyday life that was not present in pre-modern Arabic writing.

Classical Arabic grammarians instituted a division between the correct use of the language, in conformity with the usage of the early Arabs, and ungrammatical and unidiomatic speech. This division is retained by modern language reformers like al-Yaziji, but what is more important for them is the opposition between the innate capacity of the language to express human progress as it unfolds and the actual inexpressive condition of the language. Parallel to this is the opposition proclaimed by political and social reformers between the nation's capacity for agency and progress, and its present reality of disunity and passivity. In both cases, the process of self-generation has been disrupted due to the moral failure of individual Arabs and Arabic speakers. At the same time that al-Yaziji laments the current backwardness of the Arabic language, he asserts that not only is Arabic as capable as the most copious of existing languages in fulfilling the needs of modern life, but that Arabic, due to its system of roots and morphological patterns, is better suited than any other language to do so. Arabic, in its potentiality, is still in a state of youth, just as the Arab nation ought to be. "That which has afflicted [Arabic] is due to the lagging behind of the nation on the race course of civilization and progress" (Yaziji 1993, 56).

Al-Yaziji is not unaware of the difference between his conception of linguistic self-generation and the outlook of traditional language scholars. He touches on this difference in discussing the "instituting" of language, a topic that was a staple of the Arabic tradition of language scholarship. In contrast to the traditional view of the institution of language, in which the language was instituted as a whole at some point in the past and must be preserved thereafter, al-Yaziji argues that the instituting of language is a continuous process that keeps pace with historical development. "It is impossible that the language of a community no matter how perfect and broad it may be can attain a limit at which

it is suitable to be used in every age.” This is because meanings are not static; new meanings are always emerging. Therefore, “the true perfection of a language is that it be such that it is possible to derive from its existing forms words for emerging meanings” (Yaziji 1993, 64). Al-Yaziji is directly critical of the premodern Arabic lexicographers for the practical consequence of their conception of language, namely, that they only included in their dictionaries and treatises the words used by the early Arabs, and for the most part ignored meanings, coinages and loan-words incorporated after the early Islamic period. “This indicates that their preoccupation with recording the language was not in the direction of what we and the speakers of every language seek today in regard to defining words and facilitating their use for posterity” (Yaziji 1993, 65). Despite the adherence of the early language reformers to the theoretical framework and topics of the pre-modern scholarly tradition, they tended to be aware of the key difference between their own conception of language and that of their forebears. The new role that they demanded of the language, that it be the medium of the national public sphere, was intrinsically connected to their conception of language as self-generating.

Language reformers were able to put the notion of linguistic self-generation to multiple, seemingly contradictory uses in their various national language ideologies. As has been seen, linguistic self-generation derives its moral legitimacy from its status as an empirical fact—languages grow and change, as anyone can see. The “is” then is turned into an “ought”—self-generation becomes the reflection of a moral status for which the speakers of the national language are responsible. They must actively foster the growth of the language, and if the language fails to grow, this reflects the passivity, the internal moral failure of the speakers. Thus the conservatives who seek to preserve the purity of the language by shunning foreign accretions are in fact betraying the purity of the language, which lies in its unique logic of growth rather than in its actual manifestation at any point in time. Like the seed that turns into an oak tree, the essential nature lies in the self-determined biological process of growth and becoming. This principle was put to different purposes by different programs for reform. On the one hand, it could be used to justify adaptation to European linguistic forms, as discussed above. On the other hand, it could be used to condemn pre-modern linguistic adaptations and cast these as indicative of the moral failure that led to the distortion and degeneration of the national language. In the Arabic context, the post-classical development of the language, during

which scholastic forms of expression, ornate literary styles, colloquialisms, and Turkish terms entered the written language, was rejected wholesale in favor of the vocabulary and styles of expression of the initial Arabic literary florescence of the eighth to the eleventh centuries. Pre-modern decline and backwardness was identified with the post-classical phase which was depicted as a betrayal of the true internal logic of the language. The revived classical language, “pristine” Arabic, was then adapted to modern forms of expression. Similarly, in the Turkish context, the Ottoman Turkish adoption of Perso-Arabic linguistic forms was cast as the moral derailment, which could be restituted through the replacement of these forms with European forms that were true to the progressive internal logic of the Turkish language. In this way, languages were purged of their pre-modern cultural difference in the guise of returning to their authentic internal logic.

In these respects, national language ideology paved the way for the transformation of the Arabic language in accordance with European semiotics and forms of expression. Certainly, the conception of language imparted by the language reformers justified the adoption of constructions, the translation of idioms and expressions, and the mimicking of styles. At the same time, it helped establish classical Arabic as the national language and prevent spoken forms from displacing it. National language ideology, however, is only one component in a vastly over-determined process of homogenization. The pressures of a reorganized way of life on the framework of concepts and the modes of expression that prevail are irresistible regardless of ideology. Nevertheless, it is impossible to imagine that such pressures and transformations could take place without stimulating concepts and outlooks that in turn played a role in guiding the process. In any case, linguistic homogenization is no different from the homogenization that has occurred in every facet of life. Inasmuch as a common way of life has emerged and begun to impose itself since the rise of the nation-state, languages have adapted to conform to the needs of this common way of life. In pre-modern times, a traveller to a foreign land had to grapple with a way of life that was alien in fundamental ways, from the system of reckoning time to the spaces and objects of everyday life. Nowadays, one can travel to most any country and navigate daily life in the same manner one does at home. Transportation systems, banking systems, markets, communications, commodities, are more or less standardized throughout the world. National public spheres have more or less the same institutions, social classes, and

political mechanisms. Formerly different ways of life have been reduced to “cultural” differences, which are comparable on the national level to personal differences of taste and style among individuals in the same society. Each nation should have its distinctive culture, its personality, but this should not create structural incompatibilities with other nations. Likewise, the structural incompatibilities of different languages have been progressively effaced since the rise of nationality. Increasingly, multilingualism comes to mean learning the same language in multiple forms.

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¹ On the modernization of Arabic, in addition to Stetkevych (1970), see Cachia (1989), Somekh (1991), Versteegh (1997b).

² For a discussion of ekphrasis in this poem, see Noorani (1999).

³ On the impact of this poem at the time, see DeYoung (1998, 216-219). For the modernist techniques in this poem, see Noorani (2001).

⁴ On the rise of “free verse” poetry, see Badawi (1976), Jayyusi (1977), Moreh (1976).

⁵ Many of the writings referred to here are discussed by Versteegh (1997a) and Suleiman (2003, 42-55).

⁶ Zaydan (1988, 8-9). On Zaydan’s linguistic writings see Sawaie (1987).