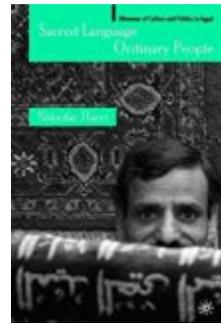




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Deconstructing the Monolith: Arabic between the Qur'an and the People of Egypt

Deconstructing the Monolith: Arabic between the Qur'an and the People of Egypt

This fascinating little book describes in some detail the social and power structures related to what has often been termed Arabic diglossia in contemporary Egypt. Niloofer Haeri, whose earlier works have also contributed significantly to sociolinguistic study of Egypt, has here attempted to unravel for her readers the tangle of ideas, attitudes, and practices which inscribe the complicated status of the language codes at use in contemporary Egypt, with particular focus on the apparently monolithic status of Classical Arabic, or Fusha, the language associated with institutions of literacy, in contrast to usages of Egyptian Arabic (the primarily spoken Arabic dialect[s] in Egypt).[1]

Haeri's preface offers a personal introduction to the her topic, for she traces her own relationship with Classical Arabic as the language of religious observance and sacred text in her own Persian-speaking family, and her later introduction to Egyptian Arabic as a necessary language speaking tool for everyday interactions in her anthropological and sociolinguistic field work in Egypt. She also points out the powerful role that language has in the politics and construction of contemporary states, citing the English-only movement in the United States as an example. With two powerful questions Haeri then launches her inquiry: "Why is citizenship in part defined in relation to a language [Classical Arabic] which is no

one's mother tongue? What does it mean to have a divine language as the official language of a state?" (p. x). In this fashion Haeri introduces us gingerly to the sphere of sociolinguistic contestation waged in several arenas at once, with important implications for students, researchers, and scholars concerned with Egypt and Arabic, and for Egyptians and Arabic speakers themselves.

In the introduction Haeri points out the intimate relationship between the language of the Qur'an and the historical development of institutions of religion and literacy. Although Classical Arabic has remained the language of literacy in the Arab world for over fourteen centuries, the spoken language codes of Arabic speakers today are sufficiently divergent from the Qur'anic exemplar that it is not possible to consider Classical Arabic as the native language of anyone today, but a necessarily secondary language of literacy acquired through schooling. Haeri gives a quick simplified overview of the linguistic differences between the two forms of Arabic with which her study is concerned, Classical and Egyptian Arabic, in a large table (pp. 4-8), avoiding the complexity of the multiple spoken dialects by using Cairene Arabic as the primary model for her Egyptian Arabic.

She reflects on other examples of diglossia, most specifically that of Greek *katharevousa* and *dhimotiki*, by which she suggests points of comparison for the study of the social and political forces and battles which are part of the historical and social process of maintaining

and investing in diglossia. Common to situations of both Arabic and Greek in the last two centuries has been the challenge of developing for modern exigencies a well-preserved linguistic code bound to ancient sacred textual traditions. While in modern Greece, social and political forces recently (1975) installed the spoken demotic into literacy functions, the alignment of political and social forces in the Arab world have kept the classical language as the sole legitimate code for literacy functions. Haeri's book is an exploration of the implications and consequences of that fact in the face of the transformations of modern Egyptian society.

The introduction looks in depth at the forces of resistance to change in a language maintained as sacred, and how this comes in conflict with the social needs for linguistic productivity in a rapidly changing world. Using the idea of ownership versus custodianship as contrasting modes of relationship between speakers and their languages, Haeri suggests that users of vernacular tongues act as owners of their language, and may feel freer to alter it. Users of languages held as sacred, on the other hand, according to Haeri, act as custodians, taking much less freedom in altering or adapting a code, the "ownership" of which is attributed to the divine. Applying this distinction to Arabic, Haeri has pointed out that the source of linguistic power, agency, and authority in Arabic has been projected away from the human community, while the community of language users is held responsible to and for that authority. Arabic cultural institutions linked to language and literacy, then, have engineered the longevity and legitimacy of classical Arabic through descriptive and prescriptive rules, and through language and pedagogical policies in service to that projected authority. By such measures, Egyptian Arabic, like dialectal varieties of Arabic elsewhere, has been denigrated as defective, deficient, undesirable, even embarrassing. Various historical attempts to "modernize" Arabic dating from the mid-nineteenth century, however, indicate how practice has challenged, manipulated, and been constrained by this diglossic polarization of language usage. Attitudes and practices which involve language, as explored and documented by Haeri in her work, however, reveal a much more complex range of language functioning between Classical and Egyptian Arabic.

In chapter 2, entitled "Humble Custodians of the Divine Word: Classical Arabic in Daily Life," Haeri investigates how Classical Arabic functions in the social, cultural, and daily lives of her Egyptian informants. Through interviews, she detailed the language attitudes

and language registers used in the various activities of the lives of her informants. She found that Classical Arabic was present in peoples' lives through religious practice (prayer, reading the Qur'an, religious and scriptural study, and listening to Qur'anic recitation in a variety of circumstances), bureaucratic literacy functions related to the state, schooling, and mass media (p. 31). Her quick analysis of television programming found uses of Classical Arabic scattered throughout the broadcast day, for calls to prayer, religious programming, and the news, with the larger portion of air time in Egyptian. While many of her informants detailed their experience of acquiring Classical Arabic through schooling in the kutaab (Qur'anic pre-school), and through later stages of education, their attitudes about and aptitudes for spoken and written Classical covered a broad range. All, however, bore witness to Classical Arabic as a locus of power, be that the punitive power of the teacher in the kutaab or in high school, or the power of rewards and prestige for excelling. Haeri also indicates that while schooling is mandated in Classical Arabic as the language of instruction, the pedagogical reality is often something else altogether. Her study reveals the interesting fiction maintained between the official educational policy and what actually occurs in classrooms. (This is an issue not only of what will reach the students, but of being able to produce teachers competent in Classical.) In the conundrum of educational language policy, the linguistic hypocrisy conspires with elite cultural institutions to bring about the consequent disenfranchisement of many, marked by resentment and discomfort at the authority of Classical Arabic which inspires some kind of guilt for less than linguistic perfection. While Classical Arabic inspires respect and resentment, several of Haeri's informants also confessed to a sense of the ease and directness of self-expression in Egyptian Arabic contrasting with a comparative stiltedness and stuffiness of Classical. This authority and power of Classical Arabic, in consort with state language and pedagogical policies, has contributed to a differentiation among modern citizens based on religious and ideological identity. Haeri mentions the role of Classical Arabic as a historically constructed qualification for the modern identification of Arab, and as a locus of unwritten discrimination between Muslims and Copts and men and women for high school- and university-level Arabic teaching jobs (pp. 47-49, 65), and with respect to their status as citizens.

In the third chapter, "Text Regulation and Sites of Ideology," Haeri examines in greater detail the day-to-day mechanisms of language regulation that contribute

to the continued ascendancy of Classical Arabic, and confirm it as a locus of projected power. By first reviewing recent literary and anthropological scholarship on “authors” and “texts” in culture (including a lovely treatment of the role of editor), Haeri then focuses in on the steps of mediation in the production of printed texts as a means to interrogate the relationship between ideology and language. Through interviews with three copy editors or “correctors” working in Cairo today, she examines the educational and career paths of these linguistic gatekeepers, discusses their attitudes towards language and religion, and ideology and the state, and the heterogeneous spheres in which Classical Arabic text production now occurs. She points out that the power of Classical Arabic to affect social relations is such that all texts must submit to the regulatory authority, even those of the President Husni Mubarak, in order to appear in print (p. 68). Thus the consequences of Classical Arabic’s linguistic regime include limitations on the possibilities of expression, official (high-level) censorship, and the low-level censorship of minutiae, even to the point that Husni Mubarak’s speech is translated and edited by the literary establishment in order to come into conformity with the historically developed rules of the literary establishment in brokering the projected power of Arabic as subject—the divine word. Thus, as Haeri says, “that most of what gets printed has more than one author, so to speak, has both cultural and political implications” (p. 72).

Chapter 4, “Creating Contemporaneity: Struggles with Form,” deals with the historical struggles of developing Classical Arabic in journalistic language since the mid-nineteenth century for use in broader and broader fields of modern use, including scientific discourse, advertisements, modern economics, etc. “How does one force a grandiloquent, oratorical and highly literary language to become an unaffected medium for reporting on the mundane affairs of the world, for commercial advertisement, for expressions of charged emotions or for seeking help in finding a missing child who had left home to fetch a kilo of grapes, wearing a striped shirt? If the historical and ideological reasons against using Egyptian Arabic in print were not the result of any one group’s conscious decisions, that there was a choice to be made became an object of fierce debates among Egyptians that began in the last decades of the nineteenth century and that has continued with various degrees of intensity to the present” (p. 77). Haeri finds evidence of this contestation in the expanding field of newspaper publication in Egypt.

While it is clear that there was concern that news-

paper writing itself would dilute the sacred and pristine nature of Classical Arabic, there were a number of suggested language reforms which were discussed in print in the first half of the twentieth century for how to deal with contemporary language needs, including programs for purifying Arabic of foreign influences, and on the other end of the spectrum, proposals for publishing in Egyptian Arabic in Latin letters, and otherwise disconnecting Arabic from its Qur’anic roots. Haeri points out evidence of journalistic Arabic diverging from established standards of Classical, and attempts to account for the growing incidence of such differences by referring to foreign-language discourse. Citing the work of the eminent Arabist Jaroslav Stetkevych in order to disagree, Haeri argues that much of what is attributed to outside foreign language influence is in fact influence of the spoken language. Be that as it may, the analyses that Haeri offers in support of her own theory are not strong enough to convince. Indeed, I would contest her analyses on several counts. This is not the forum for detailed argument over the analysis of her sample texts, but suffice it to say that Haeri’s work requires expert interrogation on these points. What is refreshing about Haeri’s work, however, is her skeptical readiness to take on and question received wisdoms about this very area of language contestation. For she posits that blaming any erosion of Classical Arabic on foreign influence was and is more acceptable than finding the cause in the influence of Egyptian Arabic. Similarly, the fact that some programs for language reform were associated with leftist or secularist political ideologies may also have contributed to their fate.

At the same time, Haeri’s three examples of interviews taken from different media in the press and representing various degrees along the range of Classical to Egyptian in newspaper Arabic more convincingly demonstrate that Egyptian Arabic has been increasingly tolerated in print in certain spheres of popular culture and concern. Yet, while some aspects of Classical Arabic grammar have been dispensed with for the most part in modern stylistics, other elements of Classical grammar, syntax, and case are stubbornly maintained contrary to vernacular popular usage. While she documents that the negotiations between Classical and Egyptian in the press and other media continues to this day, Haeri nonetheless acknowledges that conservative forces still hold sway in print and have held fast against incursions of the vernacular into many domains of print media.

In the fifth chapter, “Persistent Dilemmas: Pleasure, Power and Ambiguity,” Haeri examines the continued cultural contest between Classical and Egyptian Arabic

into the 1990's, with all its linguistic, literary, political, and ideological dimensions. While pointing to the undeniable existence of a "heterogeneity of language and style far more so than a century earlier" (p. 114), she asserts that the issue of language choice persistently poses a dilemma for participants in contemporary Egyptian culture. From interviews with poets, writers, intellectuals, and publishers, we discover that Classical Arabic may constitute a space of peculiar (read elite) literary pleasure, for certain things can more safely be expressed in Classical than in Egyptian Arabic, by virtue of the formal distance of Classical which acts as a buffer against potential social disapprobation so stinging and vividly delivered in Egyptian.

The informants who professed this particular enduring love of Classical Arabic thanked their schooling for its role in their acquiring the language of literacy. Haeri then launches into an examination of the transformations of school curricula (or lack thereof) for Arabic in both private and public Egyptian school systems. Haeri rightly, I think, asserts that the state has engaged in active competition with religious educational institutions (and al-Azhar in particular) for the custodial role over Classical Arabic as a source of social power. This tension between the state (and its educational arm) and religious institutions for control over language and religious education and publication results in setting up mutually contradictory practices between linguistic conservatism and claims to modernity and progress.

Haeri also briefly sketches the history of rare publication of poetry and prose in Egyptian Arabic, pointing out the dearth of examples, the seeming ban on its publication, and the remarkable lack of native scientific attention published on the linguistics of Egyptian Arabic, despite evidence of market demand for materials written in Egyptian Arabic. Several attempts made to establish opportunities for publication in Egyptian have encountered circumstances that conspire to bring such experiments to a standstill. Censorship, linguistic chauvinism, and the identification of champions of publication in Egyptian with political opposition all contribute to repeated examples of nipping in the bud such attempts to gain a larger market share for print media in Egyptian Arabic. Haeri's presentation offers a much more nuanced picture of the ongoing language debate between various conservative forces and the popular and social requirements for a modern language owned and controlled by its practitioners.

In her conclusion Haeri concisely and clearly restates,

sums up, and re-emphasizes her argument, offering a complex picture of the roles of language in the state, religion, society, and social identity in contemporary Egypt. Using examples of recent controversies in the press over language change and linguistic authority, Haeri finally declares: "the censure of Egyptian Arabic from official and national culture seem [sic] prevent Egyptian from tapping its many potentials. Egypt's constitution makes no mention of the existence of Egyptian Arabic, educational institutions do not teach it, in textbooks no historical characters seem to have spoken in this language, and in cultural productions involving print, it is shunned. For these and other similar reasons, as I have tried to indicate, Egypt has a fraught and uncertain relationship with its own contemporaneity" (p. 150).

Thus emerging just so far from behind her attempt at balanced presentation, Haeri affirms the central role of language and language policy in social identity conflict in contemporary Egypt. For on the whole, throughout the book, Haeri tries to play it safe and hide her own position on these controversies. The exposition on modernity is well framed, in that she traces it as a concept developing historically and bound to certain processes. While her points on vernacularization and the building of modern nation states are well taken, and she has described the status and attitudes around the use of the various registers, she has but briefly touched on content of discourse in Egyptian which challenges the status quo. Haeri acknowledges the fact of exclusion of certain types of discourse, but she has not explored what is outside the perimeter of official exclusion, what messages are silenced by such exclusion, or the personal, social, and political costs of such systematic exclusion.

Indeed, the two-edged external power of language authority is indicated by my very reaction to Haeri's work: despite the value of her exposition, I cannot but complain loudly about her system of transliteration of Arabic, both of Egyptian dialect as spoken or read, and that of Classical print texts as read. Despite her disclaimer (pp. xv-xvi), Haeri's transliteration is full of problems, inconsistencies, and inaccuracies, starting with the transliteration of the opening verse of the Qur'an as recited by her informant Nadia (p. 27) for performance of her prayers. This transliteration cannot represent the written text of the Qur'an, and has several mistakes should it represent Nadia's oral recitation as well (p. 40). There are numerous, numerous problems in the transliteration, including downright mistakes. Haeri's work could have used a good editor or corrector on this count.

As I mentioned above, there are also several instances in which I would disagree with Haeri's syntactical analysis of her examples. Moreover, I would challenge Haeri on several counts for the translations she offers of her sample texts. *Taqdiir*, for instance, cannot be "destiny," as Haeri's translation would have it (p. 50), but "estimation," "valuation," or "regard." I will not trouble you with the full list of these and like problems.

Indeed, the internal problems and contradictions of Haeri's linguistic representation of Arabic can be illustrated with one example. Haeri reports a high school memory by one of three copy editors/correctors discussed at length in chapter 3 (p. 117). The corrector recalls how his Arabic teacher would denigrate his students' use of Egyptian Arabic with the phrase "my ears don't allow the language of donkeys." Haeri's transliteration of this Arabic sentence, however, does not represent Classical Arabic, phonetically or grammatically. So either the quoted teacher was a donkey himself, using the very language he was denigrating, or the transliteration represents the Egyptian Arabic speech of the man reporting the memory (and the use of the masculine verb with the usually feminine word for "ear" would still give us pause). If accurately transliterated, a clear exposition

of the possible layers of this ambiguity could easily have strengthened Haeri's argument about the complexity and intermeshing of linguistic registers. As it is, we cannot tell who might be the linguistic donkey—teacher, student, or even the reader. For the strength of my own reaction to these ambiguities indicates somehow the strength of the prescriptive authority of Classical Arabic which permeates even the field of Arabic language study here abroad—a fascinating addendum to my reading of Haeri's book. In spite of this and related minor problems in the details of transliteration, analysis, and translation of her Arabic sample texts, Haeri's book is a very informative and enjoyable read which will do much to prepare students and scholars for the central importance of Arabic language and language policies to the study of contemporary Arab societies.

Note

[1]. Niloofar Haeri, *The Sociolinguistic Market of Cairo: Gender, Class, and Education* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996); and Niloofar Haeri and R. Kirk Belnap, eds., *Structuralist Studies in Arabic Linguistics: Charles A. Ferguson's Papers, 1954-1994* (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1997).

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