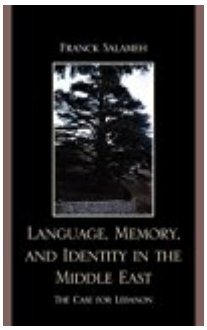
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Franck Salameh. *Language, Memory, and Identity in the Middle East: The Case for Lebanon.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010. xxv + 291 pp. $80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7391-3740-6.



Reviewed by John Myhill

Published on H-Memory (March, 2012)

Commissioned by Shirin Saeidi

Franck Salameh's *Language, Memory, and Identity in the Middle East: The Case for Lebanon* is a fascinating and important study of the diversity underlying the so-called Arab world. This region has heretofore generally been characterized as a monolithic whole, or at most divided only because of the interference of outsiders rather than the radical diversity of its occupants in terms of spoken dialect, religion, culture, ancestry, and citizenship. Salameh, on the other hand, shows us that it is diversity which is inherent to the "Arab world," while unity is only an ideologically imposed illusion; his book can be understood as following the general trend in studies of Western societies to recognize diversity and take seriously the narratives of previously marginalized groups, and applying this to a new case.

The central arguments of this book relate to the status of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is based upon the classical language and serves as the official language of all of the countries in the "Arab world." It is also the primary, perhaps sole, factor which can support the idea of a single Arab people, in the sense that according to Arab nationalist ideology, everyone who speaks Arabic is an Arab; the spoken dialects cannot do this because they are so radically diverse from each other as to be frequently mutually unintelligible.

Salameh argues that MSA and the ideology associated with it have shackled the people of these countries in two ways. First, MSA is intellectually stifling, because it is not a living spoken language, being based upon the language of the Koran: "[T]he Arabic language, in its Classical and Modern Standard forms, is a key factor in the Middle East's turbulence, authoritarianism, intellectual torpor, cultural rigidity, and lack of freedoms. Arabic, as argued Palestinian-American novelist Fawaz Turki, is a stern, arcane, highly ordered 'dead language,' not natively spoken by any member of the presumed Arab nation, leaving those associated with it mute and incapable of authentic, intimate, and uninhibited discourse" (p. xvii).

This is why, for example, literacy rates in all of the countries in the "Arab world" are low, in most cases shockingly low, in comparison to their wealth.[1] Salameh thus compares the status of MSA with that of Latin in western Europe in the Dark Ages, before Castilian, Catalan, Portuguese, French, and Italian were developed as full-fledged written national languages.

Second, the ideology associated with MSA imposes a monolithic Arab identity upon all of the diverse peoples who are understood to speak Arabic. This thinking is not indigenous to the Middle East, where Arab identity was traditionally ascribed only to Arabic-speaking inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula and Bedouins in general (just as, for example, English identity is only ascribed to people from England and not English-speaking Scots, Americans, etc.). Rather, the idea that everyone who speaks Arabic is an Arab was borrowed from European ideologies of identity in the twentieth century in an attempt to create a demographically massive "Arab people," stretching to the Atlantic and including groups which are not only enormously diverse but in some cases do not want to be considered to be Arabs or included in the "Arab world." But as Salameh notes, to the ideologues of Arab nationalism, it does not matter what these people may want. Thus one of the founders of Arab nationalism, Sati al-Husri, believed that: "Every person who speaks Arabic in an Arab.... If he does not recognize [his Arabness] ... then we must look for the reasons that have made him take this stand.... [U]nder no circumstances should we say: 'as long as he does not wish to be an Arab ... then he is not an Arab.' He is an Arab regardless of his wishes" (quoted, p. 9). Similarly, Michel Aflaq wrote, "When we [Arabs] are cruel to them [Arabic speakers who deny their Arab identity], we know that our cruelty is in order to bring them back [to Arabness], to their true selves of which they are ignorant" (quoted, p. 11).

Though this ideology has thus far been politically dominant--to the extent that outside of the Middle East it has generally been accepted without question while inside the Middle East it has been the only one which can be freely publicly stated--it has not gone unchallenged. Salameh reviews the writings of a number of Arabic speakers who have written in opposition to this view, among them the Lebanese Georges Naccache, Amin Maalouf, and Rabih Alameddine, the Egyptians Ali Salem and Taha Husayn, and the Syrians Nizar Qabbani, Adonis, and Antun Saadeh. The specific motivations of these individuals have varied--some have belonged to particular groups whose members often feel that the dominant identity and discourse of the "Arab world" does not represent them, their history, or their interests; some have seen the "Arab world" as an inherently multicultural and multinational world; some have felt that use of a dead literary language has stultified thinking and creativity in their societies in general; and some have been motivated by a variety of these factors. But all have been rejected by the mainstream Arabist view, which has thus far remained dominant.

Salameh then focuses upon how these issues have been addressed in a particular "Arab" country, Lebanon. This country in itself represents a microcosm of the diversity found in the "Arab world," with sizable populations of Shiites, Maronites, Sunnis, Catholics, Orthodox, and Druze. Salameh shows how this situation has resulted in those Lebanese who do not believe that Lebanon is an intrinsic part of a monolithic Arab world developing ideologies of resistance, emphasizing its radical diversity, including multilingualism, and its non-Arab past. They have therefore favored writing in French rather than MSA and understanding the present-day Lebanese to be the descendants and inheritors of the ancient Phoenicians, commonly credited with inventing the alphabet, or at least spreading it to Europe, as well as establishing the first great trade empire.

Against this background, Salameh turns to the thinking and activity of a particular Lebanese in-

tellectual, Said Akl (now approaching his 100th birthday), who has taken a more radical approach to constructing a durable non-Arab Lebanese identity by directly challenging Arabism at its linguistic source. Akl has developed and written in a standard Lebanese language, using a modified Latin alphabet to write the everyday speech of Lebanese people today, commonly known as the "Lebanese dialect" of Arabic but in Akl's view simply "spoken Lebanese"--this is parallel to the development of written Castilian, Catalan, and Portuguese in the thirteenth century to represent what had previously been considered dialects of Vulgar Latin. Salameh devotes a large portion in the book to a fascinating description of Akl's long and revolutionary intellectual journey. He describes how Akl's views and activities emerged from a general Lebanonist milieu but as he neared his fiftieth birthday took a more radical turn to directly challenge the linguistic status quo, beginning with his 1961 anthology of poems written in Lebanese, *Yaara,* and gaining strength with his establishment in 1967 of a printing house, Ajmal Ketub al-Alam, dedicated to publishing books in Lebanese. As a result, as of 2000 about forty books by Akl and others had been published in Lebanese

The importance of Salameh's study is even greater because in recent years there have been technological developments which will--if history is a guide--have a decisive effect upon how the relationship between MSA and the spoken vernaculars plays out. In the last two decades, the spread of electronic writing in media such as e-mails, SMS messages, and social networks like Facebook has brought about a new linguistic situation, as speakers of"Arabic dialects," as part of their everyday life, have begun to write their spoken languages in these new media.[2] This is parallel to earlier linguistic developments motivated by technological change. Technology played a crucial role in the replacement of Latin by the vernacular languages of western Europe--first, the introduction of paper, particularly into the Iberian Peninsula in the twelfth century, led to the establishment of Castilian, Portuguese, and Catalan as state languages in the thirteenth, and then the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century led to the same thing happening with French, English, Dutch, German, Danish, Swedish, and Italian in the sixteenth.[3] Whereas Akl's efforts to develop written Lebanese have only resulted in a modest number of books being written in one corner of the "Arab world," this technological revolution has resulted in young speakers of "Arabic dialects" writing these speech forms every day and, without any planning, developing a number of new written languages, varying from one dialect to another but written more or less systematically within each dialect.[4] We have already seen in the last year how the rise of these new modes of communication has threatened--and will probably doom--the sclerotic political systems of Arabic-speaking countries, as the citizens of these countries have used these media to organize demonstrations which have brought down governments supporting such systems. In the same way, these new media are also bringing into existence new written languages which will presumably eventually replace the sclerotic written language which has shackled the minds of the citizens of these countries. Salameh's book does not deal with the ramifications of these technological developments, which have to date had no ideological component, but it is inevitable that in the near future there will be a synergistic effect of technology and ideology comparable to that produced by the combinations of the introduction of paper and the rise of Castilian/Portuguese/Aragonese nationalism in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and the invention of the printing press and the Reformation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. And when this happens, Salameh's book will be the main source on the earliest ideological steps of this development, which took place in Lebanon, most notably in the thinking of Said Akl.

Notes

[1]. John Myhill, "Towards an Understanding of the Relationship between Diglossia and Literacy [Hayozma lemexkar yisumi bexinux]," 2009, on the Web site of the Israeli Academy: http://www.academy.ac.il/data/projects/34/diglossia_myhill_Eng_May2009.pdf.

[2]. David Palfreyman and Muhamed al Khalil, "'A Funky Language for Teenzz to Use': Representing Gulf Arabic in Instant Messaging," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 9, no. 1 (2003); and Eman Garra, "From a Dialect into a Language: The Cases of English and Arabic" (MA thesis: University of Haifa, 2007).

[3]. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

[4]. Dua'a Abu-Elhija, "Variation in Representation of Arabic Consonants and Grammatical Variables in Facebook," (MA thesis: University of Haifa, 2011).