The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy

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Perhaps it is fitting to begin a chapter on literacy in the Arab world by stating at the outset that we know little about the subject. With one major exception (Wagner, 1993), we have almost no ethnographic knowledge of what goes on in classrooms at any stage of the twelve-year formal schooling. This is, all the more regrettable because literacy rates in the Arab world continue to be low according to the statistics offered in the Arab Human Development Reports of 2002 and 2003 (henceforth, AHDR). Yet, one has little empirical bases to take advantage of. Insofar as children are concerned, there are many basic questions that remain unstudied. What do children learn in elementary school? How do they view their learning material and what kinds of relationships do they develop with the language of instruction? What are the experiences of middle- and secondary-school children? What kinds of relationships with the written word do the educational systems in the Arab world cultivate? Due to the lack of empirical studies, one often has to rely on a kind of backward reasoning - inferring what must be taking place - from statistics on literacy and/or from scattered anecdotal studies written up in academic and nonacademic venues. What about the meanings of literacy? It is well known - as was the case among Christians in the Middle Ages - that for Muslims, literacy has been historically connected to the ability to read the Qur'an. But how have ideas about literacy transformed in the course of the twentieth century when mass education had its beginnings? Who is considered literate now?

Given the paucity of ethnographic studies, this chapter aims to contribute in this respect by offering a number of ethnographic details based on two periods of my own fieldwork in Cairo in 1987-1988 and 1995-1996. I should mention that literacy was not the primary concern of either period of research but I did make relevant observations. There are perhaps no generalizations that can be made with regard to literacy in the Arab world without being qualified with respect to inequality. Most of the discussion in this chapter has to do with urban lower-middle-class children who have no chance but to attend the public school system. Even when families have minimal money to spare,
let alone are comfortably upper class, they make every effort to send their children to private schools, because, in most countries, the public educational systems are dire states (AHDR, 2002, 2003). In Egypt, until a decade or two ago, private schools were mostly although not exclusively Catholic missionary schools whose main languages of instruction were various European languages. In the past few decades, Islamic private schools have also been opened whose curricula are different and they teach in Arabic, while significantly emphasizing the teaching of English in particular.

Although the ethnographic details offered here are based on research in Egypt, some of the clues, questions and insights they lead to are relevant to the rest of the Arab world. In the first part of this chapter, I begin with a brief background section and go on to pose a number of questions on various aspects of education in Egypt. In the second part, I take advantage of the series of AHDRs that discuss many important matters, including education and literacy. I hope the ideas addressed in this chapter can lead to a dialogue with the authors on as crucial a matter as literacy. All the reports have a constructively critical approach and therefore have received deserved attention and praise in the media. The major concept that is utilized in the 2002 and 2003 reports is “human development,” which is defined as a process of enlarging choices. Every day human beings make a series of choices - some economic, some social, some political, some cultural... Human development is both a process and an outcome. It is concerned with the process through which choices are enlarged” (AHDR, 2002, p. 15).

The report notes that human development is a multidimensional concept with a number of central constituents - two of which are human freedom and knowledge acquisition: “human development is inextricably linked with human freedom... human development is freedom. However, this freedom, the ability to achieve things that people value, cannot be used if opportunities to exercise this freedom do not exist” (AHDR, 2002, p. 18). In the 2003 report, the Arab world is compared to seven world regions (i.e., North America, Oceania, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, South and East Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa) and is found to have had “the lowest freedom score in the late 1990s” (p. 27).

Some Background Context

In the Arab world, the official language is Classical Arabic, which is the language of the Qur’an and the medium of public education, bureaucracy and print. The nonprint media are dominated by Egyptian Arabic – the majority of radio and television programs are in that language as well as theatre and films. Print media, on the other hand, allow very little Egyptian Arabic. Until the 1960s, there had been little debate about what the language of instruction must be – probably because all institutions of learning belonged to various religious establishments, the most famous of which is the al-Azhar, founded in the tenth century. In the nineteenth century, for the first time, it was the state that founded a variety of professional and vocational schools. At the same time, toward the end of that century, newspapers began to appear. To my knowledge, the historiography of this period with regard to language choice has not been undertaken. One can imagine that there were debates because shortly after the publication of newspapers began, concerns with language matters were among the most frequent topics written about (Haeri, 2003). In any case, the choice was made to ‘simplify’ [tablīt] and ‘modernize’ [taḥdīth] Classical Arabic rather than use Egyptian Arabic – the mother tongue of a majority of Egyptians. One can also imagine that the colonization of Egypt in 1882 by the British made Egyptians far keener on preserving Classical Arabic than choosing the ‘weaker’ unwritten language that had no textual monuments worthy of pride and no relation to their identity as Muslims. The language of the Qur’an is quite different from the various Arabic vernaculars that are spoken as mother tongues across the Arab world. It
differs on fundamental grounds so that without studying it formally, one cannot read or write it. In addition, it was perceived as lacking vocabulary for modern technology and the sciences. Simplification has meant avoiding archaic and complex grammatical constructions, using (where possible) constructions that are closer to the vernaculars and also an updated vocabulary. More than a century and a half have passed since the early efforts at simplification and modernization began.

By ‘reforming’ the language, it was strongly hoped that literacy would spread more easily and, hence, Arab societies would move faster toward modernity and progress. Language reform was seen as essential to social progress. Examining literacy rates at the moment, it is clear that this hope has not been fulfilled. It is possible, given detailed studies, that in certain historical periods various countries were more successful in raising literacy than is the case now, but we lack such research. My central argument in this chapter is that the main reason for exceedingly low literacy in most of the Arab world is that the language of education in the public educational systems is Classical Arabic and various modernized versions of it. That is, I argue that underprivileged, lower-class Arab children are asked to surmount obstacles that no other children in the world are asked to do — namely, learn their subjects while lacking proficiency in the language in which those subjects are written. This is true for Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs such as Copt pupils in Egypt, with the difference that the latter are further marginalized through repeated mentions of the relationship between the language of instruction and Islam in government textbooks. Simultaneously, it is also the case that public educational institutions fail at almost all levels from the quality of textbooks, to crowded classrooms, to badly trained teachers, and so on. Hence, even given a language of instruction that is no one’s mother tongue, with better textbooks and improved schools, the literacy rates would be higher. As I argue at the end of this chapter, what impedes this move is not entirely due to small budgets for education and other similar factors. A complex web of ideologies with respect to language, nationalism, religion, secularism and the status of Arabic as a former language of empire has made it difficult to make fundamental changes in the public educational systems.

It is by now a truism that standard languages that are the media of education generally belong to the ruling classes (Bourdieu, 1977, 1982). In the case of the Arab world, the upper classes are not, in fact, the ones who speak and use or know the official standard language better than other classes. They are generally far more fluent in foreign languages such as English and French, which they learn while attending private schools as children. In addition to careers in literature or journalism, knowledge of the official language is necessary for the vast bureaucracies in the Arab world. It may not be too unreasonable to say that public schools seem geared to creating armies of low-level civil servants. In the upper echelons of the civil service, those who acquire posts in diplomacy, for example, hire others in the lower rungs expressly because they have better language skills and can write the letters that their bosses would have more difficulty drafting. Hence, those with power occupying the highest paid jobs are fluent in foreign languages. It therefore goes without saying that in this case, the knowledge that brings most power with it is not of the official language of the country but rather of the colonial languages that ‘left’ but came back with even more power through capitalism and globalization.

Who Is the Pupil Imagined to Be?

Following regular conversations with middle- and secondary-school students during the course of several months in 1995-1996, I examined a number of their textbooks with various questions in mind. My interest lay in trying to understand what kinds of individuals the pupils are imagined to be through an analysis of the form and content of their textbooks. Do the forms
and content of textbooks show attempts at persuading the pupils to learn to read and write? Are they imagined to be intelligent, spirited beings in need of updated material? What kinds of knowledge are considered worth passing on to them? What kinds of future citizens are they hoped to become? Are these children, a majority of whom are economically underprivileged, considered as individuals with potentially important roles to play in the future of their society?

The students that I met had many complaints and a frequent one had to do with their Arabic language classes. Let us remind ourselves of the importance of this subject. In Arabic language classes, students are taught Classical Arabic, the official language of Egypt and of all Arab states, but not the mother tongue of Egyptians or other Arabs. As the official language, public education textbooks are in that language. To learn any subject, whether literature or chemistry, students need to master the official language well—a language that is significantly different from their mother tongues (Mamoun, 1999; Wagner, 1993). Therefore, it is crucial to see how well the Arabic language is taught.

When I looked at the textbook for Arabic for the first year of middle school (Ministry of Education, Egypt, 1989–1990), I understood the complaints of the students I interviewed. To begin with, the textbook is printed on cheap-quality newsprint paper. Other than on its cover, it uses no colors, paintings, photographs and so on, except for a few poor-quality black-and-white drawings. So, it is quite an uninviting book to hold, to look at and then to read. The material in it is dry and outdated. The language used is so stilted and old-fashioned that one wonders for whom the textbook writers thought they were writing.

It is surprising that the contemporary of modernized versions of Classical Arabic are barely represented in the lessons. Why is this? Is this a change from other years? What then, has been the point of so much (contested) effort expended on linguistic modernization? The textbook begins with an introduction addressed to teachers in which the link between Classical Arabic and Islam is the first thing that is mentioned: “Thanks be to God who honored the Arabic Language with the Nobel Qur’an, and prayers and peace upon its Messenger Muhammad, speaker of the clear Arabic language....” The introduction goes on to describe the contents: “And this book...took care to offer to the student these rules [of grammar] through pleasurable stories and human values and...useful contemporary scientific discoveries,...alongside contemporary culture, and the guarding of the essence of Arab culture [al-zaaatiyya al-thaqafa al-‘arabiyya], and [of] Islamic values [al-qiyam al-islamiyya] that the sons and daughters of the Arab nation are proud of (Ministry of Education, Egypt, 1989–1990, p. x).” The introduction also states that the book does not offer anything new in the “science of grammar.” This is a rather curious statement although it is a truthful one. Why not offer a new way of teaching the language? Countless Arab educators have been urging precisely that for decades.

As for the lessons, the first one offers four verses from the Qur’an from the Sura of Luqman (verses 14–17) and begins with “Said Almighty God” followed by verses which appear in large quotation marks and are fully vowelled, as is the case with any edition of the Qur’an in Arabic. That is, Arabic script does not have symbols for short vowels and, because grammatical cases in Classical Arabic are represented by three short vowels, these must be added in the form of diacritics. Hence, a vowelled text means that the short vowels are orthographically present and indicate the case of the word they appear on, for example, whether a noun is in the nominative, accusative or genitive. Because the Qur’an is always printed with orthographically marked vowels, the pages of such textbooks look similar to the Qur’an. The content of the first lesson is about how one should treat one’s parents. This lesson is then followed by comprehension and grammatical-analysis exercises. The second lesson is on the pursuit of knowledge from the sayings of the Prophet
Muhammad. Other lessons are on the unity of Arabs, love for Egypt, the contribution of Arabs to mathematics, more verses from the Qur’an, several old morality tales and so on. Most lessons are either directly about religious themes or are verses from the Qur’an. The language of lessons, their vocabulary as well as the particular grammatical constructions they are meant to illustrate, are stunningly archaic, heavy and humorless. It is no wonder that the majority of students feel alienated from such classes and tell countless jokes about the language and teachers of grammar (Haeri, 1996). In this as well as other textbooks, the relationship between the language and Islam is continuously underlined — yet another reason for not assuming that the public school system is “secular” as opposed to those that are within the mosque-university systems, such as the al-Azhar system in Egypt (see also Starrett, 1998).

I would argue that the physical properties, format, language and contents of this book (almost all textbooks looked the same) demonstrate that the pupils are not imagined to be beings in need of any persuasion. It is as though the authors implicitly acknowledge that the readers of their textbook are going to be for the most part poor children with little means for an alternative education. It is unclear on what bases the authors thought they would encourage and motivate the students to pay enthusiastic attention to the lessons. This conclusion is substantiated by the comments of the students who were interviewed. To begin, they as well as older adults who were interviewed about their school experience stated that they found Arabic language classes extremely boring and unbearable — some even said that they hated these classes. Students also complained that their grades in other subjects depended in part on whether their answers in exam questions were considered “Classical Arabic enough” by the teacher. Many students said indignantly that their grades are lowered in their exams even when they answer the questions correctly but make a few mistakes with regard to Classical Arabic grammar. Others lamented their lack of mastery of the case system, stating that they had not used it correctly, mistaking accusative for genitive or vice versa. No Arabic vernacular has a case system. They also complained that the language of the textbooks of Classical Arabic was just too difficult. A young man in his early twenties commented that he twice failed the final national exams in secondary school (required for a high school diploma) only because of the exams on Classical Arabic. Dilworth Parkinson, who spent several years researching Egyptians’ language abilities and what they consider to be Classical Arabic, has administered detailed written tests to a large sample of subjects. In addition to finding that many educated people are “uncomfortable with the form,” he also came to the conclusion that “Some even express resentment toward the form for its difficulty and the effect of the results of their Arabic school tests on their future career choices” (Parkinson, 1991, p. 40).

A Relationship With the Language of Literacy

Perhaps among the concepts in the field of literacy that are in need of further development are the types of relationships that learners come to develop with their language(s) of instruction. This question is important for understanding the impact of affective bonds on the quality of different groups’ development of literacy and for why skills such as reading and writing get maintained or not after pupils drop out or finish their schooling. Let us examine this relationship in more detail.

It was mentioned previously that instead of choosing a vernacular as the language to be standardized and taught at school, the decision was made to ‘simplify’ Classical Arabic. The problem is that what seems objectively and linguistically ‘simple’ is not perceived as such by pupils. If ever it is crucial to examine literacy as social practice, it is in the case of potentially competing languages of instruction. Familiarity with the language of the Qur’an is part and parcel of...
whole series of rituals and celebrations with which children grow up. Muslims must pray in Classical Arabic and read the Qur’an in that language in order for these activities to count as fulfilling their religious obligations. They hear the Qur’an recited live or on radio and television since infancy. The language comes to be associated with countless childhood memories and a deep affective bond is developed. Much encouragement comes in the form of parents teaching their children to recite verses by heart or parts of the five daily prayers and having them perform in front of family and friends. The language does not seem difficult to them.

By contrast, when children go to school, they face simultaneously old versions of Classical Arabic and examples of the ‘simplified’ language. The ratio of the modernized version of Classical Arabic has not been studied and, at least on the surface, seems to vary by subject matter and grade level. In any case, the simplified version they are supposed to learn to read and write in seems to have an odd relationship both to the language of religion and to their mother tongue. Whose language is that? Not theirs and not God’s. It is the language of some lessons in their textbooks, books and newspapers. Even children’s magazines that run serial comic strips like Mickey (copyright is held by Walt Disney) are in this ‘simplified’ version of Classical Arabic. They do not see this language as ‘simpler’ but rather more difficult and more intimidating. While faced with the language of the Qur’an, they are told what various verses mean and are asked to memorize short sections, the language of instruction demands of them active production. Through repeated readings, performances and their own memorization, they begin to perceive of the language of the Holy Book as aesthetically unsurpassed. The sounds of this language soothe and move them. Hence, the language of religion is not on a scale from simple to difficult – it simply does not enter such comparisons.

A striking comment made both by high school students and older adults, men and women, was that they grew to dislike reading in general, especially “longer pieces” like books. This was true even for the librarians that I interviewed. With few exceptions, people educated in public schools stated that they find the language of books too difficult and it takes them too long to read just a few pages. For fiction and nonfiction reading material, they commented that they found the language “heavy” and “scary” and that they simply did not enjoy the activity. These comments were confirmed in answers to other questions, such as Do you have a favorite author; a favorite book? Do you know X (i.e., name of famous author)? Do you read magazines and newspapers?

Other than an occasional letter to a friend or a family member, the activity of writing in general was often not a part of the daily routine of most lower-middle-class people that I interviewed. This is because the types of jobs they engaged in, for the most part, did not require them to write, with the exception of those who were teachers. But the same people who found reading difficult commented that they found writing even more so and quite intimidating. The “day-to-day written output” (Street, 1993, p. 2) of people in such occupations and social classes is exceedingly small. There is no reason to believe that these results are due merely to the inevitably small sample of one researcher talking to various people in the course of a few years. All available statistics on literacy and book-reading point to the generality of the conclusion that the public educational systems in most countries in the Arab world produce graduates or dropouts who do not like to read or write beyond a minimum that is required of them. Olson finds writing a “powerful tool of cognition, a tool central to cultural development in the West and perhaps elsewhere as well” (1999, p. 132). In the case of Arab children being taught reading and writing in Classical Arabic, we do not have enough studies to be able to analyze what happens to their cognitive development. Once out of school, writing is used very little unless one’s employment requires it and even in that case, it is generally formulaic writing. There is almost no teaching of writing autobiographical works or writing that is intended mainly
as self-expression. But the relationship between writing and cognition remains to be investigated.

There has been a long-standing debate among educationalists and others in the Arab world about whether some of the features of the Arabic script pose special problems for mastering reading. Wagner (1993) found some evidence in Morocco to support this view. However, the Arabic script is used in Iran with some modifications and, if anything, the script is even less suited to Persian, which is an Indo-European language and for which the script was not developed. Nevertheless, there is little evidence to suggest that Persian-speaking children have particular difficulties with the script and, in fact, literacy rates are comparatively far higher in Iran. Were it not for the truth of the famous saying that Arab readers have to first understand what they are reading before they actually read it (in reference to figuring out, e.g., what noun is in the nominative in the absence of a diacritical mark indicating it), the script does not pose any more special problems for Arab children than other scripts like that of English.

In an article about the poor state of publishing in the Arab world and the "death" of the Arab reader that appeared in The Chronicle of Higher Education (Del Castillo, 2001), the head of the publisher's syndicate is among several others who gave his views on the subject:

...the quantity of books published in the Arab world is small, especially relative to the region's population. ... There are 275 million Arab speakers in 22 countries, but for Middle Eastern publishers, print runs of 5,000 are considered huge. ... A best-seller in Egypt is a book that reaches just 10,000 copies sold, a tenth of what a best-seller in the United States might do. Only a few books make it into the stratosphere of 50,000 or more copies. (p. 55)

The article goes on to present publishers' opinions regarding the question of lack of readership in the Arab world:

[The head of the syndicate] ... says that some of the distaste for books is created by educational institutions, starting at an early age. "Textbooks in most of the Arab countries are a means of torture for students. They are very badly written, very badly illustrated, poorly printed, too long, and tedious," he says. Often, he says, the books are written by employees of the country's education ministries, which are viewed by the public as corrupt. "All of this has the effect of making students hate reading," he says. (p. 59)

Communities of Practice,
Communities of Participation

Given the distinct experiences of many people with the language of religion on the one hand, and the language of education, print media, bureaucracy and most other written material on the other, we should consider one other line of inquiry with respect to low literacy rates in the Arab world. The language of religion is practiced through daily rituals and reinforces the identity of the believer as a member of a moral community. At home, at the mosque, and at work, people pray together - creating and re-creating the bonds of a larger community. They participate alone and with others in performing rituals that have come to have significant meanings in their lives. It is difficult to locate activities and rituals that after decades of mass education have similar features - allowing speakers to become a member of a community of practice and promoting their participation in larger political or cultural activities. These are often accomplished by either performing religious rituals or using Egyptian Arabic for various creative purposes. Barton and Hamilton (2000, p. 7) use the concept of "literacy practices" to conceptualize the "link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded. ..." Our interest is in social practices in which literacy has a role." As I suggested previously, for those who have attended public schools and must work hard to make ends meet, reading and writing barely figure in any routine activities unless their job requires them.
literacy practices, then many people engage in them to various degrees in their daily life.

Newspaper-reading and singing the national anthem come to mind as potential candidates of routine activities one does with the official language. I was unable to find data on the first and I would speculate that the number of people who enjoy reading the newspaper daily is probably not very small but still significantly smaller than those who do the daily prayers. Moreover, I found people who kept a part of a newspaper and read it slowly over the course of weeks. These were generally low-income adults with little money who sought reading material appropriate to their age. For adults whose reading level is about fourth grade, there are few alternatives to newspapers and popular magazines. The former are far less expensive and easily found on the street or in various homes and offices for free. Singing the national anthem probably comes close (at least for a while) to a significant ritual and probably does help in creating a bond among the citizens, the language and the nation. 

It seems that the majority of people do not attain a level of literacy that allows for participation in various creative or civic communities when their official language. This is the case even when people actually do develop enough competence in the language because there is tremendous self-consciousness with regard to the use of the official language. Even grammar teachers, copyeditors, and university-educated people speak routinely of their fear of making mistakes (Haeri, 1996, 2000). The point is that vernacular Arabic is used in most communities of practice and, as a mother tongue, it allows for participation in various dialogues. There is also, as was just stated, the language of religion that is used in many rituals. The place of the official language is unclear - it seems that for most people, it has not turned into a language whose practice allows for social participation.

Literacy and the Production of Knowledge

A variety of statistics are available on literacy in the Arab world and there are significant differences between them, at times as much as 20 percent. As with other statistical compilations of literacy rates, literacy is either not defined at all or is vaguely defined as "adults fifteen years or older who can read and write." Of course, as everyone knows, it all depends on what they can read and write. In what follows, I critique the AHDRs of 2002 and 2003, which contain extended discussions of education and literacy. As was mentioned previously, these Reports, written by a team of Arab scholars, put on the table, as it were, a whole host of important problems in the Arab world. The discussions cover topics such as freedom and democracy, knowledge production and acquisition, education and literacy, women's empowerment, youth, economic growth, poverty, governance, political and human rights, public health, technology and Arab cooperation. On most of these issues, the Reports do not shrink from criticism and are forthright although they were written under a variety of difficult constraints. The authors felt they were under pressure not to be critical. Yet, they decided, as they say, to not turn a blind eye to the shortcomings of the region.

In the 2002 report, under the heading "Bridled Minds, Shackled Potential," we read: "About 65 million adult Arabs are illiterate, two thirds of them women. Illiteracy rates are much higher than in much poorer countries" (AHDR, 2002, p. 3). The 2003 report is subtitled "Building the Knowledge Society" and its main focus is on the "knowledge deficit." The goal is defined as helping to build an "Arab knowledge society." In one foreword, the author states that the report "seeks to promote a debate on key questions of knowledge, to help diagnose some of the
major challenges facing the Arab states in this area."

The report repeatedly cites different kinds of data that show that low literacy rates play a major role in many different areas—most notably in "knowledge acquisition" and "knowledge production," but also in low demand for newspapers, the extremely low number of books published, very low readership of books published and so on.

The authors search within diverse kinds of data to find the reasons but, on the whole, they remain somewhat perplexed. For example, as one important explanation they state that family structure in the Arab world is authoritative so the child becomes accustomed to suppressing her or his inquisitive and exploratory tendencies (2003, p. 51). I would argue that, on the one hand, this is not a fair characterization of all Arab families—the structure of the "Arab family" varies greatly across countries, classes, urban versus rural areas, different educational backgrounds, different historical periods, and so on. On the other hand, the countries with which data on literacy are compared, such as Iran and Singapore, could also be argued to have rather authoritarian family structures and yet both countries fare far better in terms of literacy. However, one crucial factor that those countries have in common to the exclusion of Arab countries is that their children are taught either in their own mother tongue or in another vernacular such as a colonial language.

The first AHDR report says nothing on the point. The 2003 report states that "Language is the reservoir of knowledge in general, and a people's mother tongue is the main medium for their creativity and knowledge production [italics added]" (p. 174). If that is indeed the case, then why aren't Arab children taught in their own mother tongue? And why are both reports silent on this question? In the 2002 report, the question of language is left wholly untouched. It is stated with urgency that:

There are many signs of decreasing internal efficiency of education in the Arab world, including high failure and repetition rates, leading to longer periods spent at different stages of education. However, the real problem lies in the quality of education. Despite the scarcity of available studies, complaints concerning the poor quality of education abound. The few available studies identify the key negative features of the real output of education in Arab countries as low level of knowledge attainment and poor and deteriorating analytical and innovative capacity. (p. 54)

The authors do not consider the fact that knowledge is communicated through a variety of vehicles, and chief among them is language. If pupils do not have enough mastery over the vehicle of knowledge, they will perform poorly. If in their thinking processes, they have to worry primarily and continually about the grammar of Classical Arabic (whether the noun is in the nominative or accusative or whether the vocabulary they have chosen will pass as Classical Arabic), then indeed their "analytical capacity" can deteriorate. Yet, in their discussion, the role of language is only mentioned relative to information technology and the "digital divide." Otherwise, the relationship among education, literacy and language is left silent.

In the 2003 Report, an entire section is devoted to language. It begins with a certain acknowledgment of the language situation: "Classical Arabic is not the language of cordial, spontaneous expression, emotions, feelings and everyday communication. It is not a vehicle for discovering one's inner self or outer surroundings" (p. 7). If Classical Arabic is neither the language of everyday communication nor a vehicle for inner or outer discovery, then what is it doing as the medium of education? Is not education meant to "lead outward" to propel learners toward discovery of themselves and the world? Notwithstanding this explicit statement of the problem, the Report does not entertain the alternative and goes on to make recommendations about reforming the situation. Perhaps to justify why it does
not call for changing the status quo, the Report states that

In the Arab historical experience, Arabic is also connected with two basic matters that are closely associated with both the existence and the future of Arabs. The first is with 'identity'; the second is the question of the 'sacred.' The Arabic language is the distinctive feature that distinguishes the Arab identity. It is the language of the holy Qur'an. And it was the rallying point for the intellectual, spiritual, literary and social activities incarnated in an entire human civilization, namely the Arab Islamic civilization. (p. 133)

I interpret the Report to be saying that although we must acknowledge the problem of language, we cannot call for a radical break with the past because of these very reasons.

As for the suggestions the Report makes, most are as old as the modernization project itself and are rather difficult to comprehend. In the first category are recommendations for the "gradual simplification and rationalization of grammar," increase in translation into Arabic, the use of modern linguistics for better grammatical analysis of the language, the Arabization of all higher education and so on. In the second category, there is a call for "strengthening the relation between the Arabic language and thought..." a concerted institutional effort by specialists in psycho-linguistics in order to reveal the relations between the characteristics of Arabic, its morphological, grammatical, lexical and rhetorical resources, and the functions of the brain" (p. 124). This line of suggestion gets only more alarming as the Report proceeds. A second suggestion is brought to prevent "a sense of defeat before the sweeping hurricane of data and information society": "A bold response requires devising a new software toolkit to process texts and to make access to knowledge more efficient, whether in Arabic or other languages... tools for indexing, extraction and judgement..." (p. 124).

It seems evident that underprivileged Arab children do not in the first instance need a "software toolkit" but rather a language that facilitates their development rather than shackles their thinking. This series of recommendations have not worked for decades and there is no reason to believe they will work now. One wonders what is "bold" about repeating what has not worked. The Reports are rightly concerned with knowledge production and, here again, among many other factors, the affective bonds with the language through which knowledge is to be produced are crucial. Without self-confidence in the vehicle of knowledge production, it is difficult to imagine how one would proceed.

We are fortunate to have access to the detailed and longitudinal ethnography of literacy in Morocco - a study that remains unsurpassed in its depth and breadth insofar as the Arab world is concerned. In this study, Wagner (1993) argued against the position of UNESCO that literacy in the mother tongue is best for children: "... the generalization that first language literacy is axiomatically best requires serious reconsideration in light of specific contexts of language use and literacy acquisition; in the case of our data in Morocco, this presupposition can be rejected" (Wagner, 1993, p. 183). In comparing literacy acquisition in Arabic-versus Berber-speaking children, Wagner's team found that "... the difference between language groups [Arabic-speaking versus Berber-speaking] diminished with time and was no longer statistically significant during the later years of primary school. Thus, as hypothesized, there appears to be some advantage to speaking dialectal Arabic as a mother tongue when first beginning to read, but any advantage diminishes substantially over subsequent years of schooling" (p. 176). It was observed that "... the Berber-speaking children of the rural sample, monolingual when they entered primary school, made consistent progress toward Arabic-Berber bilingualism during the 5-year course of this study as a function of their increased contact with Arabic-speaking peers in the classroom and in the bilingual town environment (p. 180; emphasis added).
I argue that these findings do not support the assessment that the advantages of mother-tongue literacy can be rejected in the case of Morocco. Wagner (1993) stated that although there are many differences between Moroccan and Classical Arabic, one can still say that they are receiving their education in their mother tongue: "Moroccan Arabic speakers can be thought of as learning literacy in their mother tongue in the same sense that non-standard dialectal English speakers (e.g., African-Americans in the United States; Scottish-English speakers in Great Britain) are learning mother tongue literacy when they learn to read English" (pp. 172-173). In certain respects, the situation of nonstandard speakers is radically different from that of Arabic speakers. Wagner cited the reason for the catching up of Berber with Arab children as a matter of contact between the two groups. Why should contact make such a big difference? Whereas Berber children can make friends with children who speak Moroccan Arabic and who can serve as live models for learning the language, Arabic-speaking children will never have friends who speak Classical Arabic (the language of instruction) as their mother tongue or even as a matter of routine. In this sense, they will not have bilingual friends nor will they have the advantage of having peers who speak a language that they need to learn to read, write and comprehend. It is for this reason that the situation of minority children or those who are confronted with learning a former colonial language is fundamentally different. Hence, one could modify the UNESCO position and say that a language that is some group's mother tongue is desirable as a medium of literacy, although even here one needs to investigate the affective bonds between the language and the learners.

Arab children are not confronted, as are other children, with a standardized language of instruction whose most intimidating features could be that it is the language of the upper classes and that of exams. The language that they have to learn, they are told, is the language of God and of the holy Qur'an. In addition to clerics, children also may come across television or radio programs in which intellectuals switch between Classical Arabic and their vernacular. These experiences are very different from, say, Telegu-speaking Indian children learning English or Haitian children learning French. Hence, Wagner's findings do not support the claim that the superiority of mother-tongue instruction can be rejected. There are no native speakers of Classical Arabic just as there are no native speakers of Latin, however 'modernized' a version one would like to consider. Arab children cannot observe or listen to those who speak their language of instruction as their mother tongue because they do not exist. They are confronted with a language that has basically one style - formal and bookish; one cannot speak in a casual style in Classical Arabic not because the language itself lacks the resources but rather because speakers do not and have not used it for casual purposes for centuries.

Crucially, in Wagner's study, the sample population was under fifteen years old (1993, pp. 72-75). As in Egypt, the serious study of Classical Arabic grammar and the corresponding requirement of better knowledge and utilization of it begin in middle school. Up until that point, the pedagogical emphasis is on teaching vocabulary rather than grammar. At higher levels - beginning in sixth grade, the active use of the official language is far more of a requirement. In fact, I argue that the relative success in reading and writing that Wagner found was due to the absence of insistence on grammar during the primary years of schooling. I believe if students in grades higher than the third had been considered, the problems with the language of instruction would have been far more easily observable. Based on a background paper for the 2004 AHDR, which was carried out in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, the authors of this report conclude that the material and the exercises in the textbooks are so "standardized" and "rigid" that they become a "vehicle" for the language itself, "dissociated from the text subject" (2004, p. 149).
Conclusion

I have argued that a major reason for low literacy rates in the Arab world is that lower-class Arab children attending public schools are not taught in their mother tongue but rather in Classical Arabic and various "modernized" and "simplified" versions of it simultaneously. Given other contributing factors, such as the poor quality of teaching material, absence of well-trained teachers, crowded classes and so on, the impact of not teaching children in their vernacular is even greater. Children's television programs modeled on Sesame Street ("Iftihya Simsim") and Electric Company ("Al Manaahil"), in which formal vocabulary was used in entertaining and colorful productions with a certain spirit, seem to have met with success in teaching children the alphabet and some reading (Palmer, 1993). But again, these programs emphasized vocabulary-building far more than grammar.

Many questions, including what happens to the cognitive development of underprivileged Arab children as a result of their experience in public educational systems, remain unanswered due to the lack of studies. Various bibliographic searches, including one in dissertations, turned up no substantial studies on any aspect of literacy in the Arab world. In a recent conference entitled "The Arab Child's Language Under Globalization," the communiqué offers a clue as to why the concern of many people in the Arab world as expressed in the number of conferences on the themes of children and education still does not translate into some fundamental changes. The 'Arabic Language' is endowed with animacy and humanity. This is also the case with the AHDs. The language is routinely said to be 'in need of protection,' 'in peril' and danger; it is 'in crisis' and needs 'help.' Television commercials using any language other than Classical Arabic must be banned and parents must not prefer to speak to their children "in the dialect of their country of origin rather than in Classical Arabic" (Gulfnews.com, 2000). Yet, it is, in fact, poor Arab children who are in need of protection and whose future is 'in peril.' Why is saving the language more important than saving the children? As the 2000 AHDR implies, many efforts seem to be intended to service the language itself, divorced from the why and how and the intended audience's needs. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that insofar as education is concerned, there is a class apartheid in place in most of the Arab world. Those with means bypass the perils of the public educational systems and send their children to private schools, where they almost always master a former colonial language and go on to seek their place in the global economy. And the majority, who cannot afford this road to the future, go around in circles created by those who will not change the situation because the children of the poor are not threatening their grip on power.

Notes

1 Some scholars prefer to use the term Modern Standard Arabic to refer to the modernized versions of Classical Arabic. In linguistic fact, it is the case that the Classical Arabic of 100 years ago is different from that of today. However, in Arabic, all kinds of Classical Arabic are referred to by the same term al-lughah al-arabiyyah al-fusha ("the Eloquent Arabic Language"), or fusha (pronounced fuss-ha) for short. It is only among a minority of intellectuals that terms such as the third language or modern fusha are used.

2 The CIA, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program and UNESCO all seem to have their own statistics.

3 In one of the forewords to the second report, the dilemma of open self-criticism carried out in the hostile political context of world politics today is very well described.

4 It seems that part of the strangeness of the whole section on language is that it is probably the result of translation from Arabic into English. The clue to this comes from wanting psycholinguists to reveal the functions of the brain or asserting that Classical Arabic is not the language of "cordial" communication. Classical Arabic provides many means of cordiality and, in fact, it is difficult not to be cordial in, say, greeting interactions...
in that language. I surmise that something important has been lost in translation here.

5 In an article that appeared posthumously in the English language al-Ahram weekly published in Egypt (February 2004), Edward Sa'id discusses his experience with learning Classical Arabic. He made a conscious effort when he was already an adult to learn the language because his education had been in English. He asks Anis Frayha, a very prominent linguist at the American University in Beirut, to teach him. Some time after this experience, Sa'id was asked to give a lecture in Arabic. A relative of his went up to him after the lecture and told him that he was very disappointed because Sa'id had failed to be eloquent. “But you understood what I said,” I asked him plaintively. ‘Oh yes, of course,’ he replied dismissively, ‘no problem: but you weren’t rhetorical or eloquent enough’. And that complaint still dogs me when I speak since I am unable to transform myself into a classical faqeel, or eloquent orator. Many years after that experience, Sa'id writes in this article, “I’m still trying to sort out the problem. . . . still loitering on the fringes of language rather than standing confidently at its center” (emphasis added). If a world-class erudite scholar like Sa'id keeps ‘loitering on the fringes,’ unable to muster enough confidence in his linguistic abilities, what can we expect from pupils from the lower classes?


References


