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Arabic Language and Language Teaching:  
Policies, Politics, and Ideology

Arabo e didattica dell'arabo:  
politiche, politica e ideologia

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# Which Arabic and Why? Policies, Politics, and Teaching

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[One day, the famous grammarian] al-Farrā' made several mistakes while speaking in the presence of Hārūn al-Rašīd. [The vizier] Ja'far b. Yaḥyā al-Barmakī pointed this out to the caliph, who said: "Al-Farrā', are you speaking incorrectly?". "Commander of the Faithful", replied al-Farrā', "while it is natural for the Beduins to inflect words correctly, for city-dwellers [like me] it is not. When I prepare, I speak correctly; when I speak off the cuff, I make mistakes". Al-Rašīd appreciated al-Farrā's words. (Ibn Ḥallikān, 1968-72, vol. 6, 147)

Premodern biographical literature offers plenty of anecdotes like the above, where important grammarians such as Abū Zakariyyā al-Farrā' (d. 822), one of the most prominent scholars of his generation, are shown making mistakes in the inflection of words (*i'rāb*). These stories are meant to reassure the reader: incorrect inflection, the narrator seems to imply, is not a terrible fault – even a great grammarian can get away with it with the caliph's blessing. Ultimately, Arabic may only be mastered completely by the original Bedouin Arabs, who are seen as living repositories of the purest form of language and the largest vocabulary. City-dwellers, no matter how learned, are bound to make mistakes.

While these anecdotes have specific literary purposes in their original context, they also illustrate an important point for the modern linguist: from very early on, there existed two contiguous ideas – an ideal *form* of Arabic on the one hand, and an acceptable *use* of Arabic on the other.

More than a millennium after al-Farrā', the issue is far from resolved – on the contrary, it has grown in complexity as well as implications. Indeed, to this day, the very concept of Arabic language can be understood differently in different domains. In its understanding as a sacred language, Arabic, for many of its speakers, represents a perfect

and refined language (*fūṣḥā*) with immutable rules, that conveys sacred contents and operates as an intermediary between the human and divine realms. In a non-religious context, Arabic acts as a communal code for formal and transnational communication (MSA, FSA), standardized and prescriptively homogeneous beyond the use of national or regional varieties that articulate country specific nuances. From a sociolinguistic perspective, it is an open, negotiable language (with varieties and variation devices) capable of satisfying intrinsic human needs, suitable for personal and daily communication, adaptable depending on social groups and geographical locations. This complexity of the Arabic language and its use poses a great challenge inside the classroom.

This special issue of *LCM* addresses some of the core problems generated by such complexity: How do we represent the variability of Arabic in the classroom and from which standpoint? Is there a conscious or unconscious relation between teaching practices and ideology? To what extent do language certifications exert influence on linguistic policies? And finally, how does the Arabic language convey political and ideological contents? Our working assumption in putting together this special issue was that the different perceptions of Arabic listed above depend on the ideological framework within which the language is spoken, studied, and taught.

It should be noted that, for the purposes of our investigation, we understand ideology in its broadest sense, devoid of negative connotations: a system of philosophical theories, social values, and religious beliefs providing a key to decoding existence and the universe. Indeed, the Arabic language has historically been used for different, at times conflicting ideological instances – it has been linked, for example, both to the Islamic identity and to the Arab identity. These, in turn, are connected to specific political objectives: “Islamic identity” refers to an ideal unity of the *Umma*; conversely, the discourse on “Arab identity” is linked to the birth of modern nationalist states, or the aspiration to a unitarian political subject of all Arab countries. Similarly, ideology has been at the basis of teaching policies by determining preference for one specific variety which is deemed more prestigious in a hierarchical perspective, or more appropriate in given sociocultural contexts. In short: throughout this issue, both “Arabic” and “ideology” are treated as multifaceted, porous concepts with many intersecting nodes. These nodes are the objects of our investigation.

Within this framework, our contributors explore two main issues: first, they look into the ways in which Arabic reflects ideological, politi-

cal or religiously oriented meaning, and how ideologies may influence the vision and expectations of its users, including learners and teachers. Secondly, they illustrate how different ideological approaches determine the practice of language teaching, with regards to the selection of varieties, curricula, and certifications.

Five of our contributors discuss issues related to teaching, both in general terms and with case studies. While Solimando and Golfetto discuss general issues within and outside the Arab world, Chakrani, Edres, and Columbu focus on specific countries – France, Jordan, and the US (and anglophone countries) respectively.

Cristina Solimando argues that language assessment can be (and in fact is) used as a tool for influencing language policies by establishing prestige, priorities, and hierarchies, and may ultimately lead to the suppression of diversity by presenting language as standardized and homogeneous. Solimando looks at the assessment systems recently developed by five academies across the Arab world in order to investigate potential ideological orientation in test objectives, content, and rationale.

Marco Aurelio Golfetto looks at corpus linguistics, another tool that has recently begun to be considered in the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language. One of the greatest advantages of corpus analysis is that it bypasses users' personal bias, allowing them to base their work on what language is rather than on the intuition of what language ought to be. Golfetto explores advantages and disadvantages of corpus-based teaching, especially applied to the case of Arabic as a language of politics, arguing that it can be successfully used as a complementary tool to traditional teaching practices.

Brahim Chakrani analyses French language policies regarding the instruction of Arabic, considering the historical relationship with the Arabic language and its speakers, from the colonial to the postmodern era. Chakrani argues that the debate surrounding Arabic instruction in French schools is not primarily a discussion about minority linguistic rights, but rather, it is a byproduct of ideologically motivated educational policies that aim to maintain the prominence of French and marginalize the role of Arabic, both within the Arab world and in the French diaspora.

Nijmi Edres introduces an additional factor in her discussion of Jordanian linguistic policies. She investigates how Arabic language textbooks and curricula help to build a connection between a national identity and a religious – Islamic – one. Edres identifies pragmatic needs behind the teaching policies, pointing at the importance of the Arabic

language for the construction of identities in the contemporary Middle East and at its enduring politicization.

Alessandro Columbu looks at teaching material developed outside the Arab world, and in particular in the United States, to respond to the increasing demand for Arabic instruction at university level. Columbu employs decolonisation and post-colonial theory to look at the ideological implications of the political agendas implicit in popular and widely adopted textbooks and their proposed content for teaching Arabic as a foreign language. He argues that current widely used teaching materials risk perpetuating patterns of European and North American cultural hegemony.

In the second part of this issue, four contributors discuss linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects such as variation, the relations between standard language and local varieties, and between Arabic and other languages. Again, while Al-Zaghir and Reda, as well as Lachkar, examine general issues connected to the use of language, Daniëls and De Angelis focus on Lebanon and Egypt respectively.

Helge Daniëls analyses the political and ideological motivations for the use of the Lebanese dialect in some Media outlets. She discusses a small corpus of news bulletins by the Lebanese radio Voice of the South which, contrary to the linguistic metanorm for ‘serious programmes’, broadcasted the news both in MSA and in Lebanese dialect. Daniëls argues that the choice to breach the metapragmatic norms, while framing the language use in the news bulletins explicitly as ‘the Lebanese language’, can be implicitly interpreted as a comment on Lebanese national identity.

Zainab Al-Zaghir and Ghsoon Reda examine a case study in variation and its potential implications for teaching Arabic as a foreign language. They explore and compare relativisation strategies in the standard and dialectal varieties and argue that a middle language such as FSA, while useful for native speakers, is not an ideal solution for teaching students at beginner levels.

Francesco De Angelis looks at how the growing corpus of prose literature written in an Arabic dialect is still not part of the literary canon, unlike poetry, which in the past decades has managed to carve its own small space in the manuals of history of Arabic literature. Concentrating on the case of Egypt, De Angelis argues that, with the growing opportunities afforded by social media, prose in dialect is destined to become increasingly widespread, which will make it impossible to ignore.

Finally, Abdenbi Lachkar discusses the status of Arabic and its varieties in the Arab world, focussing on Morocco and Lebanon in par-

ticular. Lachkar examines aspects of the relation between Arabic and other post-colonial languages and concludes by reflecting on the future development of Arabic, especially in connection with new technologies.

Despite our contributors' different approaches, some keywords emerge across the board. Two such keywords are colonialism and identity: on the one hand, the legacy of colonialism still has an impact on language policies and teaching curricula. On the other, the Arabic language, or at least one of its varieties, is fundamental for both Arab and Muslim identity. Indeed, variation and local varieties are two more key issues which, over the past century, have become impossible to ignore: using and/or teaching a vernacular Arabic may (or may not) be an ideological choice, but it does have ideological and political implications. A final issue is innovation in teaching: some of our contributors highlight the importance of using tools such as corpora for retrieving unbiased chunks of language, as well as a means of familiarizing students to the natural use of language.

None of these issues is unique to Arabic – on the contrary, they are found in other widely used languages, albeit in different combinations. The case of Chinese is particularly interesting: in the People's Republic of China, centralised language policies function as a tool for cementing national cohesion around the official language and have strongly influenced the status and use of local varieties. We believe that this special issue's research questions may be asked fruitfully from a comparative/contrastive perspective, where they may yield wildly different results but may also shed light on parallel mechanisms and suggest further new paths for investigation.

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