

# Specialised Dictionaries in the Arab World : An Overview

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## 1 - Introduction

We define a specialised dictionary as a dictionary whose lexical entries are restricted to a certain area or sub-area of human knowledge. Such a dictionary may be unilingual, bilingual or multi-lingual and the lexical entries may be part of a glossary or accompanied by explanations of varying lengths in one or more languages. Furthermore, the specialised dictionaries may appear in the form of a bound book or as software for a terminology bank or machine translation (Al-kasemi, 1984 / 1985).

This paper attempts to provide the reader with an overview of specialised dictionaries which have been published in the Arab World and which constitute the major reference for Arab translators.

## 2 - Historical Background

a - Although unilingual dictionaries were known in the Arab World as early as the fifteenth century, the emergence of bilingual and multilingual lexicons and dictionaries could not materialise until the Arab culture came into contact with foreign cultures. The first manifestation of such contact appeared during the

nineteenth century when Mohammad Ali and his successors embarked on an ambitious modernisation campaign. Some of the facets of which were a scholarship programme to France, the establishment of schools, including the Language Academy (Dar Al-Elson) in 1835 and translation of French scientific and technical books as students returning from France were instructed to translate one book each, in addition to their involvement in committees which culled scientific terms and tried to find Arabic equivalents for them. Efforts at this stage, however, did not produce more than unsystematic and limited lists of French and Arabic and Arabic terms (Hijazi, 1978).

b - The end of the First World War signalled the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East and the appearance of several Arab states in the aftermath. This political change ushered in a parallel linguistic change as the Turkish language had to cede its place to Arabic. Thus the Arab government which was set up in Damascus in 1918 sought to establish a body to be entrusted with the task of Arabising the administration and the educational system. This body



- (21) نعمة رحيم العزاوي، النقد اللغوي عند العرب، منشورات وزارة الثقافة والفنون، بغداد، ١٩٧٨.
- (22) البرجاني (الوساطة بين المتنبي وخصومه، القاضي بن عبد العزيز البرجاني).
- (23) الأمدي، الموازنة بين شعر أبي تمام واليحيى، أبو القاسم الحسن بن بشر الأمدي.
- (24) أبو محمد عبد الله بن مسلم بن قتيبة، الشعر والشعراء.
- (25) نعمة رحيم العزاوي، المرجع السابق الذكر.
- (26) Idem.
- (27) Idem.
- (28) طه حسين، مستقبل الثقافة، عن أنور الجندي، المرجع السابق الذكر.
- (29) علي العناني، مجلة النهضة الفكرية، ١٩٣٣، عن أنور الجندي، الفصحى لغة القرآن، دار الكتاب اللبناني، بيروت.
- (30) أنور الجندي، الفصحى لغة القرآن، المرجع السابق الذكر.
- (31) Gilbert Grandguillaume, Arabisation, Maisonneuve et Larose, Collection Islam d'hier et d'aujourd'hui, Paris, 1983
- (32) "L'arabe ne serait-il dès lors que la langue du passé? Certainement pas. L'arabe deviendra opérationnel, il l'est déjà dans mains secteurs. Mais la condition pour cela est de ne pas le laisser se perdre, se vider de tout contenu propre, perdre forme et couleur en versant dans le mimétisme du langage occidental", Gilbert Grandguillaume, op. cit.
- (33) انظر أيضا توصيات ندوة مونس حول تشجيع تعليم العربية في بلدان الاتحاد الاقتصادي الأوروبي، ٨ - ٩ تشرين الأول/أكتوبر ١٩٨٧.
- (34) "Il reste maintenant à faire en sorte que, dans un contexte ou autant de sujets sont abrodés, l'Organisation puisse offrir pour chaque concept véhicule le terme juste". Françoise Cestac, la traduction et les services de conférences à l'Organisation des Nations Unies.
- (35) Mala Tabory, Multilingualism in International Law and Institutions, Sijthoff and Noordhoff, Rockville, Maryland, U.S.A.

### Notes

- (1) Bernard Coorie, Major World's Languages, Croom Helm, London, 1987
- (2) محمد عابد الجابري ، تكوين العقل العربي ، نقد العقل العربي ، المركز الثقافي العربي للنشر والتوزيع ، الدار البيضاء ، ١٩٨٧ .
- (3) علي عبد العظيم (عن عالمية اللغة العربية) مجلة الأزهر سنة ١٣٩٢/١٣٩١ عن أسور الحدي ، الفصحى لغة القرآن ، الموسوعة الإسلامية العربية، دار الكتاب اللساني ، بيروت .
- (4) The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Islamic Literatures, Vol. 9 P. 954, 1984.
- (5) أنظر أسور الحدي ، المرجع السابق الذكر ، للمزيد من التفاصيل .
- (6) Encyclopaedia Britannica, op. cit.
- (7) م .ع . الجابري ، تكوين العقل العربي ، المرجع السابق الذكر .
- (8) Idem.
- (9) القاضي عبد الجبار ، عن م .ع . الجابري ، المرجع السابق الذكر .
- (10) محمد عابد الجابري ، بنية العقل العربي ، نقد العقل العربي ، المركز الثقافي العربي ، الدار البيضاء ، ١٩٨٧ .
- (11) Idem.
- (12) Idem.
- (13) Idem.
- (14) Idem.
- (15) الجابري ، تكوين العقل العربي ، المرجع السابق الذكر .
- (16) الجابري ، بنية العقل العربي ، المرجع السابق الذكر .
- (17) The New Encyclopaedia, op. cit.
- (18) الجابري ، تكوين العقل العربي ، المرجع السابق الذكر .
- (19) محمد بن جرير الطبري ، جامع البيان عن تأويل آية القرآن عن "النقد الأدبي عند العرب"
- (20) جلال الدين السيوطي ، الاتقان في علوم القرآن .

early documents issued soon after Arabic was introduced into the United Nations. Because of the extreme literalness which had its justifications, those texts read like Arabic texts written in English. A coherent form suits the spirit of the age, while a new meaning is valuable to the Arabs.

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between the text and the thinking, or between language and thought, although some addresses in non-scientific fields are rather reiterative and repetitive in all the six languages.

In the United Nations, and for the Arabic translator in particular, there is some degree of freedom from Arabic thinking, because some non-Arab thinking underlies the text to be translated. This is an advantage for the language.

#### 5 - Conclusion

There is no question that the Arabic language is swinging in the hands of the Arabs between the affection and infatuation of those adept in it and knowledgeable of its rules and those who are jealous for Islam and, therefore, seek to preserve the language of the Holy Quran, on the one hand, and degradation on the part of those ignorant of it or despise it for various factors, including the social factor, on the other hand. It has survived safely, in spite of the hinderances it had to contend with and the enfeeblement of its lexicon to which its admirors have also inadvertently contributed .

The international forum has served the Arabic language by giving it a push forward. Yet, the language must not be detached from its glorious past. It is now engaged in refining its terminology so that it will serve the meanings and the concepts. The term is only a means of clarification of the meaning or the concept, which can be completely new to Arabic, while the mentality behind the text to be translated, which in most cases is written in English, is usually non-Arab. This insures the separation between language and thought and the freedom from the plague of preoccupation with words which has been an attribute of Arabic texts for a long time.

Thus the (translated) Arabic text in the United Nation is Arabic in form but non-Arabic in content. This was very clear in the

are closely related. While the interpreter has to be proficient in his job, the address is, nevertheless, the core and the source of his work. It is well known that simultaneous interpretation is based mainly on meaning and content, so if the address was "meaningless but reads and sounds as if it were meaningful", its conveyance is bound to prove difficult for the interpreter because he will be preoccupied with the words. However, United Nations documents issued in Arabic prove that this language is capable of matching the other languages in all fields, in view of its characteristic merits. Although Arabic was entangled, at some period, in a verbal maze, its connection with the Holy Quran has preserved its structure and delivered it to us intact, in spite of the above-mentioned defects.

It can thus be seen that the meaning is the essence in the meetings and conferences of the United Nations, dealing with social subjects such as crime prevention, drug control, assistance to disabled and elderly people, the advancement of women, scientific subjects like new and renewable sources of energy and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, specialized legal subjects in the field of international law and international trade law, etc.

Nevertheless, many Arab discussions in conferences dealing with important subjects revolve on words.

Not only the interpreter, but also the Arabic translator in the United Nations is a conveyor of ideas, so if he is content with a feeble literal translation devoid of meaning he will be in default. Experts often write reports in languages other than their mother tongue, sometimes in a poor style, without paying much attention to the text. The Arabic translator must, nonetheless, pay full attention to the text, which has to be understandable and smooth and deliver the intended meaning accurately.

One of the characteristics of the United Nations in general, particularly in scientific and specialized topics, is, therefore, the distinction

#### 4 - The international perspective

##### 4-1- Introduction of Arabic into the United Nations

##### 4-1-1- The distinction between language and thought

The Arabic language, a language of exalted literature and verbous polemics, was introduced into the United Nations at an apportune time. Thus,daily contact was established with the five other working languages, i.e., Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. The situation in the United Nations has the following characteristics :

(a) The subjects discussed are scientific, specialized and very diverse . Thus, scientific accuracy is necessary;

(b) Since the meetings deal with current subjects, most of the concepts are novel and, therefore, new terms are necessary to express the new concepts;

(c) Extremely literal translation initially characterized the United Nations documents. This was due to the necessity of disposing with the synonymal chaos which had afflicted the language in the ages of decline and because distinctions had to be evolved gradually, taking into account that "if the subjects dealt with by the organization are varied, it is necessary for it to assign to every concept a term that indicates it accurately".(33) This applies to all working languages. Some people are of the opinion that "the use of Arabic in the General Assembly would lessen the impact of the Arabs. A statement delivered in English or French was thought to be more effective than an address in Arabic which most delegates would have to follow through interpretation".(34) This is not true, because, on the one hand, there is simultaneous interpretation also from English and French and not only from Arabic, and many delegations are not fluent in both English and French. On the other hand, there are two points : the quality of the Arabic address and the quality of simultancous interpretation from Arabic, and these two points

the Co-ordination of Arabicization in the Arab World and strengthen the Councils (Majmaa's) of Arabic Language. Coordination is indispensable;

(c) Fascination with non-Arab cultures: This fascination is traceable to various reasons, such as the colonial heritage and social status. There is nothing wrong with it unless it is accompanied by an underestimation of Arabic language and heritage, taking into account that "la culture arabe en son ensemble est un patrimoine et ignoré, une terre perdue".(30) "Is Arabic now the language of the past? Definitely not. Arabic will become a practical language, it is already so in many areas".(31) It is time that the Arab should have a close look at his past and be proud of his language. It is desirable that he learns other languages so as to be acquainted with other civilizations and mentalities;

(d) The standard of education : It is necessary to raise the standard of education and increase its Arabization so that Arabic will become the language of daily usage and transaction. This applies in particular to university education because the phase of scientific research requires a proper scientific accuracy and discipline;

(e) Grammar and the teaching of Arabic to non-Arabs: Arabic grammar should be reclassified and its teaching facilitated and systematized. Advanced audio-visual means should be used to encourage the learning of Arabic by foreigners;(32)

(f) The terminology crisis: It is necessary to increase co-ordination and to issue a comprehensive dictionary that distinguishes accurately between the heaps of synonyms which, as a part of the above-mentioned verbal heritage, has become a burden on the Arabic language.

(g) The Arabic press: The press can play a significant role, particularly in the classicalization of colloquial dialects or, in other words, the simplification of classical Arabic for the benefit of both the public and the intellectuals.

property. The clergy have no right to impose their guardianship over it."(27) They also include Ahmed Amin, whose opinion was that "the language is our property; we are not the property of the language". On the other hand, others were of the view that Arabic defies "the reform of its rules by removal and addition, or merely by addition, since such a change would estrange it to the language of the Quran, the Traditions of the Prophet, Arabic literature and the religious, philosophical and international Arab mentality".(28)

Those who advocate renovation (tajdid), and who are called "the enemies of Arabic"(29) by Anwar Al-Jundi, include: Lutfi Elsayyed (1913), Qasim Amin (1912), Elkhoury Maroun Ghusn (1926), Abdel-Aziz Fahmi (1944), Elzahawi (1910), Salama Mousa (1926), Sayyed Aql (1961), Anis Freha/Amin Elkhoully (1955) and Luis Awad (1947).

It is really fortunate that classical Arabic has escaped from the trap of colloquial dialects and that Arab intellectuals have come to tend to introduce classical Arabic into the latter in their daily conversation, Communications and meetings. The classical language has also penetrated the homes through radio and television. It cannot be denied that Arabic has made great progress nowadays and since the nineteenth century, but the situation is still not ideal. Following are some of the corrective measures proposed:

(a) Quality of writing: It is necessary to adopt official decisions to provide that good quality must be sought in correspondence and writing in Arab countries, on the example of some countries such as France, in order to protect the language. The execution of such decisions must be followed-up;

(b) Plurality of linguistic authorities: It is to be noted that linguistic authorities in the Arab world are numerous and incapable of coping with the situation in view of their small budgets and scarce resources. It is therefore necessary to augment the capabilities of the Permanent Office for

Some poets, such as Bashshar ibn Burd, Abu-Nawwas and Abu-Tammam, tried to break the rules of antiquity, so some critics, like Ibn-Tabatiba and Ibn-Faris, confronted them with the utmost attacks. Some Arab scholars, however, questioned the infallibility of the ancients. These scholars include Al-Jarjani(22), Al-Amidi and Ibn-Qutaiba(23) who says :

".... nor did I view the earlier with reverence because of his precedence or the later with dispise because of his antecedence . I have, rather, considered both parties with justice, granted each party its due and awarded it with what it deserves."

Conflict between the supporters of the old and the propogators of the new, and between the poets, was acute. That conflict was "personal and detached from technical reasons. It was prompted by factors which had nothing to do with literary tradition"(24) or was ideological and "caused much of the linguistic criticism which had reached us".(25)

"The earlier critics, in particular, were convinced that Arabic was a language which was fully developed and had reached the utmost perfection, so that the Arabs and the Arabic speaking people have only to protect and defend it and rid it from anything foreign or new."(26)

In this way they condemn Arabic to antiquity, being incapable of renovation .

### 3- The Arabic language and The Arabs today

#### 3-1- The old and the new again

In modern times, some Arab thinkers appeared who considered renovation to be in the use colloquial dialects in writing and some who rejected the old traditions. These include Taha Husein, who advocated the development of grammar and had the opinion that "the language is our

"The conventions were so rigid that the reader was allowed only a rare glimpse into the poet's feelings. Indeed, such feelings were put through a sieve of intellect, and personal experiences were transformed into arabesque-like work of artistry, if not art. In the hands of mediocre versifiers and prose writers, however, literature became mannered and completely artificial".(17)

## 2- Old and new: a recurring struggle

The old is what was new at some time and newness will inevitably become oldness . But whenever someone initiates something extraordinary or new he comes into conflict with those who fear for their old . Innovation is necessary for evolution, given that the new contains some improvement .

For the Arabic language, "the Arab mind is until now tied to that physical non-historical world established by the age of tadwin (codification) on the basis of the lowest level of Arab civilization in history, the civilization of the bedwines, which was adopted as an origin and thus imposed on the Arab mind a certain way of judgement based on judging the new by the views of the old."(18)

There was an invitation to rely on pre-Islamic poetry even for the interpretation of the Quran, with its sagacious verses and glorious meanings . Al-tabari says :

"If something in the Quran looks incomprehensible, then look into poetry, because poetry is Arabic."(19)

Ibn-Abbas said :

"If you ask me about mysterious words in the Quran, look for them in poetry, for poetry is the book of the Arabs."(20)

"The Arabs were occupied with the Quran. They attended to its interpretation and safeguarding. It was a basis for many language sciences of Arabic."(21)

certain framework which must not be broken-out of. When the structure of language and law was completed and there was no room for more, the structure of legislation became also complete for the legislator. The rhetorical Arab mind became a prisoner of the structure it had built around itself. There was no alternative to stagnation and immitation (taglid)".(13)

When the age of tadwin (codification) was over and the great books were written, replication began. The "result was the appearance of types of meaningless phrases which read and sound as if they were meaningful. This was the prominent characteristic of the literature of the age of decline in Arab culture, the age which followed Al-Sakaki immediately and in which the interest of Arab culture was focused on verbal cosmetics".(14)

While Arabic grammar has an impeccable structure and is associated with logic and interacts with it, and while Arabic is rich with terms which follow a coherent and accurate system of expression of meanings, it is to be noted that the Arabs were so entangled in texts and infatuated with words that the words became almost the sole objective.

A factor which contributed to this was the fact that Arabic is a musical language, so much so that "the musical tone in the Arabic language compensates for, or hides, the poverty of the meaning and makes superfluous words seem meaningful even if they were not; for here the ear replaces the mind in accepting or rejecting".(15)

However, "rhyming, and generally preoccupation with the structuring of speech, blocks mental control not only for the listener but also for the speaker. When the speaker is engaged in decorating his speech with the available verbal cosmetics his mind comes under the influence of two types of association: that of words and that of meanings".(16)

This is exactly the situation generally afflicting Arab speeches and correspondence nowadays.

It is thus clear that at least some of those concerned with language did not overlook the importance of comprehension and exposition and the necessity of making speech ballanced and meaningful.

However, "the infatuation with words made them the focus of Arab thinking. It is really surprising that among all those wide and manifold studies and discussions abounding in books on language, religious law (Fiqh), theology and rhetoric and dealing with subjects like the origin of languages, precedence of words or meaning, determination of the system of speech and the system of the mind, etc., one does not find any interest in the relationship between language and thought, in a more general way, or any interest in the role of language in the process of thinking. The reason for this is obvious. The lack of concern with the relationship between language and thought is here due to a lack of concern with the process of thinking in itself, independent of words and language. The rhetorists, with their various inclinations and their different specializations, were not concerned with the question: How do we think? The question which occupied all their minds was: How to speak eloquently?."(10)

Therefore, "the Arab mind was formed, basically, through interaction with texts (in the interpretation of the Quran, in language and in theology)".(11)

Thus, "the formation of the rhetorical mind takes place through the memorization and study of texts. Its interest would focus mainly on the "structure of speech" and not on the structure of the mind".(12)

It is regrettable that "the rhetorical Arab mind could not progress further. Its great achievement in the field of language and religious law (fiqh) constituted not merely linguistic and legislative rules which had to be followed but also a restriction of the mind .... a creation of a framework for the mind, by which I mean the enclosure of its action mechanisms within a

"Eloquence does not appear in single words but in words combined in a certain way. In combination, each word must acquire a quality."

(Judge Abdul Jabbar)

"In the final analysis, speech pertains either to informing the listener about something or asking him to do something, i.e., information and request."

(Abu Yaaqoub Alsakaki, in Miftahul Uloum)

"Eloquence (bayan) is the knowledge of how to deliver the same meaning in various ways, by increasing or decreasing the clarity of its indication, thereby avoiding making a mistake in the conformity of speech to the desired meaning."

(Abu Yaaqoub Alsakaki, in Miftahul Uloum)

"The question revolves on eloquence (bayan) and comprehension (tabayyun), explanation (ifham) and understanding (tafahhum). The more eloquent the speech, the better, just as the more discerning the mind, the better. The one who explains and the one who comprehends share the credit, but the one who explains is better than the one who comprehends, and like-wise the teacher is better than the student."

(Al-Jahiz, in Albayan wa Altabyin)

"Eloquence requires 'discernment, prudence, discipline and training' as well as 'perfection of the tool and the craft.'"

(Abu Uthman Al-Jahiz)

"There is no order or discipline in speech unless its parts are related to each other and based on each other, one part being a corollary of another."

(Abdul Qahir Al-Jarjani, in Dalailul al Ijaz)

of life and entered all homes. The scientist is here an integral part of society, living with his age and for his age, affecting others and affected by them.

It can be said that non-Arabs have benefited from Arab scientists more than the Arabs themselves have. For those scientists were practicing their intellectual and scientific activities for the sake of science and knowledge as such and only exceptionally with the purpose of exploiting them for the benefit and advancement of their society, and thus had little contact with realities.

From Spain, in particular, these sciences crossed to the Western world, where they were copied, studied and utilized.

In contrast, the sciences of language, theology and logic flourished among the Arabs. Society was permeated with linguistic currents which had the ultimate aim of explaining and interpreting the Holy Quran or the promotion of a religious school. Important books were written on language and related sciences. Eminent scholars appeared, such as Ghazali, Ibn Hazm, Ibn Rushed, Ibn Tufail, Al-Farabi, etc.

Arab scholars were concerned with rhetoric, semantics and eloquence, in their various branches and forms. Religious scholars and pious people were engaged in the study of language, as well as of religion, for the same purpose. They distinguished between the various types of speech, as well as between different levels of understanding (tabayyun, fahm and talaqqi) and communication (tabyeen, ifham and tableegh). Their writings were accurate and deep. They broke-down the study of speech into two aspects, one concerning speech in itself and its subject (the letter or manzoum of speech) and the other concerning its content (manqoul), whether based on reason or on.(9)

The following quotations indicate the extent of their concern and how accurate and deep they were:

Thus Arabic retained its purity and beauty through the ages. The poverty it suffered from during the ages of decline were not caused by any defect in it but rather by inadequacy on the part of its own people and connivance on the part of those who, for various reasons, stand against it. Nevertheless, Arabic has been praised by many orientalists, like Louis Massignon, R. Blachère, etc.

"The grammarian would be equally sure that his keen insights into the structure of Arabic grammar were of the utmost importance in preserving that literary beauty in which Arabs and non-Arabs alike took pride". (6)

Because of its connection with Islam and with the national identity, the Arabic language has played an important role in the liberation of Arab countries from colonization .

The Arab nation had eminent scientists who excelled in the various fields of knowledge and who had many merits. They added to the knowledge which was originally taken over from the Greeks. The activities of "Baitul-Hikmah" (the House of Wisdom) which was established by Al-Maamoun enriched and diversified Arab culture. But for those scientists, who conducted isolated experiments with the sole purpose of exploring the secrets of nature and arriving at valid conclusions, "...the practice of science was carried on privately and quietly, in an individual and intermittent manner."(7) Arab science, the science of Al-khawarizmi, Al-Bairuni, Ibnul-Haitham, Ibnul-Nafis, etc., remained outside the mainstream of Arab culture. It did not contribute much to the enrichment of the Arab mentality, the renovation of its patterns or the examination of its postulates. Thus, for Arab culture, time remained flat from the age of tadwean (codification) to the age of Ibn Khaldun. It stagnated and froze from the age of Ibn Khaldun to the modern Arab Nahda (renaissance) which is yet to be seen".(8)

This contrasts with the industrial and technological revolution which has been taking place in the western world and which transformed all aspects

## The Arabic Language:

### Arab Recognition and International Perspective

#### 1- The Legacy

The mentality of the Arabs is reflected in their language, just as the mentality of other nations is reflected in theirs. A lot has been written and said about this subject. At present, "Arabic sticks out like a sore thumb in comparative semitic linguistics because of its almost (too perfect) algebraic - looking grammar, i.e. root and pattern morphology. It is so algebraic that some scholars have accused the medieval Arab grammarians of contriving some artificiality about it in its classical form."(1)

On the other hand, Arabic language science is the "miracle" of the Arabs, just as philosophy was the "miracle" of the Greeks.(2) Arabic has spread from the Atlantic Ocean to the borders of China. It was also "the foremost international language from the eighth to the fifteenth century and its major universities were attended by students of international culture from all over the world."(3)

"The vast majority of Arab writings are scholarly. ... There are superb, historically important translations made by medieval scholars from Greek into Arabic; historical works, both general and particular; a range of religiously inspired works; books on grammar and on stylistics, on ethics and on philosophy."(4)

The jealousy of the Arabs and the Moslems for the Arabic language, which is the language of the Quran, the traditions of the Prophet and Islamic Jurisprudence, has incited them to defend and protect it from every adulteration or defect, all the more so since, after the Islamic Empire extended far and wide and Arabs mixed with non-Arabs, the language began to be infiltrated by foreign influences threatening to undermine its structure.