

ARABIC AND THE CRISIS OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION IN THE ARAB WORLD

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Syria

*What's in a name? That which we call a rose.
By any other name would smell as sweet.
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes.*

Juliet

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Even though he may agree with the sentiment, an Arab will most probably deny the linguistic theory implied in these lines. Arabs in general tend to look at language, especially the Arabic language, not as a collection of symbols arbitrarily representing physical entities and ideas. According to a great many Arabs (linguists and non-linguists alike) Arabic is as sacred as **The Koran** which they believe is the verbal revelation of God. To others, Arabic is the basic factor in Arab nationhood and unity. To some others yet, the language has a mystical (beyond the religious and national) quality stemming from its perfect birth, its close association with nature, and the tenacity of its grammar and phonology against the forces of change during the past 1400 years. But to all of them language is a symbol of self-expression and self-identification.

Islam and the Arabic language have been linked together in the minds of most scholars and students of Islamic history. Arabic was chosen to be the medium through which God's message, **The Koran**, was relayed to the Prophet Muhammad. Belief in this fact is one of the basic tenets of Islam.

The reverence due **The Koran** has been transferred by many Moslems to the language of **The Koran**. This reverence is partly due to the indirect praise given in **The Koran** to the language. God himself says in «Surat Taha» : «And so we have made our revelation in Arabic Speech.» And again in «Surat Al-Shuara» : «So that you may warn them in clear Arabic.» But the point here is not so much to praise the language as to emphasize the belief that the message should be easily understood because the language itself had attained some degree of perfection. When the Angel Gabriel addressed Muhammad for the first time he simply said «Thou shalt read». The emphasis here is on the language in which **The Koran** was to be read. The word «Koran» itself means «that which is read.»

The Arabic chosen for the religious message was that of the tribe of Kureish. Dr. Subhi Al-Saleh, a prominent Arab linguist, recognizes the reason behind the choice of the Kureish dialect. He says : «The Arabic of Kureish was more refined and elevated than the other Arabic dialects. This is why pre-Islamic poets and orators used the Kureish dialect when they addressed themselves to their public». (1) However, Al-Saleh recognizes the effect of Islam on the language : «No wonder then that the Kuran used the ideal Arabic dialect, blessing its unifying influence, and elevating it to the peak of perfection, before which it was limited to only one tribe». (2)

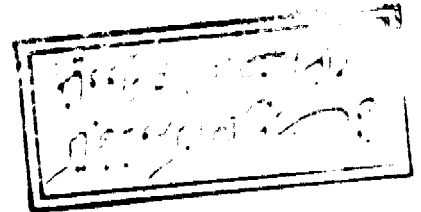
This of course is sufficient to make the defence and preservation of Arabic a sacred duty for the

1) Subhi Al-Saleh, *Studies in Linguistics*, Second edition, Beirut, 1962, p. 60. Titles of Arabic sources are translated into English for the purposes of footnotes and bibliography. Quotations from these sources have been translated by the present writer unless otherwise indicated.

2) *Ibid.*, p. 63.

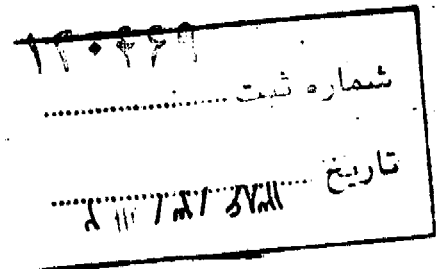
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