Language Nationalism and Consciousness in the Arab World

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INTRODUCTION

The use of Arabic stretches from Morocco in the west to Iraq in the east, and it is the mother tongue of some 150 million people in the nations of North Africa and the Middle East. The Koran (the sacred scripture of Islam) is also written in Arabic, and for this reason, Muslims in South Asia, South-East Asia and China are also familiar with the language. The current state of Arabic in the Arab world is often compared to the situation of Latin and the Romance dialects in pre-modern Europe, but this comparison is not particularly accurate if one focuses upon the issue of linguistic identity and its association with statehood and ethnic groups. To be sure, there is a correspondence between the use of written Latin in the fields of administration and literature in pre-modern Europe and the use of written Arabic today, and between the spoken Romance dialects used in daily life in Europe of the time and spoken Arabic today, but it must not be forgotten that Arabic also has the sacred and mystical characteristics possessed by Hebrew in pre-modern Europe.

Diglossia is a feature of the present day Arabic world, and modern Arabic can be broadly classified into written Arabic (called al-fuṣḥā) and spoken Arabic (called al-ammiyya). al-fuṣḥā basically functions as a written language, and is used in the media (television news etc.). It also functions as a common language right across the Arab world, and for this reason it is also referred to as Modern Standard Arabic. al-fuṣḥā was born as a result of the modernization of Classical Arabic, which is slightly different in terms of vocabulary and style.

al-'ammiyya, on the other hand, is basically a spoken language that does not have an orthography, and there are large differences between its regional dialects. al-'ammiyya and al-fuṣḥā differ greatly in pronunciation, grammar, and basic vocabulary, and in conversation, speakers of Arabic choose between them according to the situation. Actually, however, there are a variety of socio-linguistically inter- mediate language variations that can be observed depending on the degree of acquirement of al-fuṣḥā (the language of culture and education) by the speakers.

This is the social and cultural background of Arabic, and when it is discussed from the perspective of linguistic nationalism, the concept of the 'Arab' ethnic groups arises as an issue. For those living in the Arab world, the word 'Arab' has

two basic meanings: one refers to the Bedouin, or nomadic Arabs, and the other refers to the 'Arab people' or the 'Arab race'. The former usage has existed since long ago, while the latter, in contrast, has only existed since relatively modern times, and has political origins. However, it must be pointed out that even when the word 'Arab' is used with its meaning of the 'Arab people' or 'Arab race', there are a variety of possible meanings depending on the cultural, historical, political, or geographical context, but that the idea that it refers to 'speakers of Arabic' is central to its meaning.

1. ARABIC AND THE KORAN

Before Islam, the differences between the dialects used in the cities and by tribes on the Arabian Peninsula were not so great. Two principal dialect groups existed; the western dialect centered on Ḥijāz, and the eastern dialect centered on Tamīm, in addition to these dialect groups, a kind of common inter-tribal language called 'Poetic Koiné' was used for poetry, prophecy, proverbs, and other activities that did not relate directly to everyday life.

The Koran is written in a verse form called *saj'*, but when looked at from a historical linguistic perspective, it can be seen that the language of the Koran is based on the Ḥijāz dialect used principally in Mecca, and includes many expressions from Poetic Koiné. According to the teachings of Islam, the Koran is a collection of the revelations that Allah (God) handed down to his apostle, the prophet Muhammad. Accordingly, the Koran is regarded as the word of Allah, and Arabic is regarded as Allah's chosen language.

Following the production of a text version of the Koran by the Third Caliph, Uthman, the Koran became established as an Arabic text, and all followers of Islam were required to read and understand the Koran in its original Arabic language. The background to this was the belief that translation would distort the true meanings of the words, so that their original meaning would be lost, and that Arabic was Allah's chosen language and a divine gift, and that it alone could communicate Allah's true meaning.

The traditional Arabic grammar that came into being as one area of the study of the Koran was developed with the objective of describing Arabic with the simplest grammatical rules possible to facilitate accurate understanding of the Arabic in the Koran and to ease memorization. Because of the belief that the Koran is the word of Allah, the use of incorrect grammar in the Koran and the existence of words borrowed from other languages was a big problem, but, in particular, the issue of Arabic as being the original language of humanity became a point of heated theological dispute. However, with regard to this discussion, while the pure Arabic words thought to have been in continuous use in the Bedouin language have attracted the interest of grammarians as a topic of research, Arabic, the pillar language of Islam, was not linked to the ethnicity of the Arab peoples in their entirety.

2. THE RISE OF ISLAM AND ARABIC

Islam spread widely as a result of the great Arab conquest, and in the initial stages, conversion to Islam was promoted together with conversion to Arabic. In the Iraq region, before the conversion to Arabic, the Iranian languages and Aramaic were used, and in the Syrian region Aramaic (Syriac) was in general use, while Greek was used by a portion of the upper class. There were also Arabic speaking Christians. In Egypt, the majority of the population spoke Coptic, and Greek was used as the language of administration. The majority of people in North Africa spoke Berber languages, and there is also evidence that Punic (a Phoenician dialect) and Vulgar Latin dialects were spoken in parts.

Early in the period, educated bilingual Christians and Jews fluent in Arabic were already functioning as clerks and interpreters, but the majority of the conquered peoples acquired Arabic through daily contact with their conquerors. As a result, urban dialects with many of the characteristics of Creoles and Pidgins were born, and these were structurally different from old Arabic as represented by the Arabic used in the Koran.

The conquered peoples were not coerced into conversion to Islam by their Arab-Muslim conquerors, but many converted for economic reasons such as tax relief. These newly converted Muslims studied the word of Allah, the Koran, in Koranic schools called Kuttāb. However, the purpose of the Koran study at these schools was to memorize the Koran and understand its meaning correctly, and not to impart practical language skills through the Arabic used in the Koran. The role of Arabic in these schools was to teach memorization of the sections of the Koran word by word without error, and because of this, rather than being a tool for communication, Koranic Arabic took on a symbolic function.

The Koran became the universal sacred text in all regions, and the fundamental principle that it must be read in Arabic remains unchanged. It can be surmised that the diglossic society that can be seen in the modern Arab world was born in the two to three centuries that followed the conquest, and at least by around the 10th century. However, a substantial amount of doubt surrounds the extent to which the general Muslim population (almost entirely illiterate) understood the true meaning of the Arabic in the Koran. Naturally, they probably felt that the Arabic in the Koran possessed a mysticism (symbolism) that exceeded human understanding.

The same situation exists for Muslims whose mother tongue is not Arabic. Because the Arabic in the Koran is mystical and sacred, the languages in countries such as Iran that adopted Islam but not Arabic, borrowed directly from Arabic to express Islamic religious concepts.

Another aspect of Arabic that relates to the Islamic character of the language needs to be stated. Because the Koran was written in Arabic, Arabic was also used by Islamic scholars in the areas of Koran interpretation, Islamic law, and traditional grammar.

Classical Arabic (al-fuṣḥā) was born through the study of Arabic as a language,

and a group of Islamic scholars called 'ulamā' played an important role in this. These scholars memorized the Koran, and had a good command of Classical Arabic. From their base in the Arabic speaking regions they became active in all the Islamic regions where Muslims resided. These 'ulamā' scholars spread across the Islamic world used Classical Arabic as their common language. The Moroccan-born traveler of the middle ages, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, is thought to have spoken only Arabic. The reason that he could travel in the Islamic world was not just because of his extensive erudition in the area of Islamic scholarship as a member of the 'ulamā', but also because it was possible for him to communicate with the 'ulamā' in the various regions using Classical Arabic.

Classical Arabic was the common language of the religious elite, and at the same time it served to symbolize their privilege. In due course, free interpretation of the Koran was prohibited, and the study of Islam was reduced to adherence to tradition. In addition, in the Ottoman period, when the status of Arabic in the areas of administration and literature declined, this Classical Arabic came to be thought of as the words of the 'ulamā'.

3. ARABIC AS A CIVILIZATIONAL LANGUAGE

The Umayyad Dynasty Caliph, 'Abd al-Malik introduced a policy to switch from the combined use of Greek and Arabic for administration purposes to Arabic only, and following this, the position of Arabic in the field of government became established. Classical Arabic also became a pillar of Islamic culture in the arts and academia. In the early period, many works of literature written in the Persian of the middle ages were translated into Arabic, but following the foundation of a government translation facility known as the 'House of Wisdom' by the Abbassid Caliph, al-Ma'mūn, many Greek works of science and philosophy came to be translated into Arabic.

In the Abbassid period, Arab culture was fused with the cultures of Iran and Greece and the leading cultures of their dominions, and Arab-Islamic civilization flourished. This high-level and universal civilization was based on Arabic, and its advanced spiritual and material products spread with Arabic as the medium. Arabic words spread via the media of Persian, the common language of culture of the time, from the Arabic-speaking Islamic regions past Iran to the east, and after translation, into Europe via the Iberian Peninsula.

At this point I would like to emphasize that, during its historical development, Arabic acquired the characteristics of a civilizational language. In the history of humanity, only three true civilizational languages have existed - Latin, Chinese, and Arabic. These respectively formed the foundation for the European/Christian civilization, Confucian civilization, and Islamic civilization, and all three share meta-ethnic characteristics, accessibility, and the ability to construct words. None of these civilizational languages was the native language of one specific ethnic group, and the acquirement procedure for each was documented. Most important of

all, however, is that all three languages possess the ability to create new words which provides the adaptability to express new concepts.

4. ARABIC IN ARAB NATIONALISM AND PAN-ISLAMISM

4-1. The symbolic function of Arabic

As pointed out above, Arabic (al-fuṣḥā) has the following symbolic functions.

(A) Language of the Koran: A mystical function as the original language of God (Allah).

(B) Language of the 'ulamā': Served to bestow privilege as the common language for men of religion in the Islamic world.

(C) Language of the political and cultural élite: The communication medium for Islamic civilization.

The Arabic dialect al-ammiyya was used as the language of communication for daily life in specific regions and within specific groups, but it also served to indicate the group identity of the speaker in the same way that the dialects of Muslim, Christian and Jewish followers served to differentiate between these groups in Baghdad during the middle ages. However, a characteristic of these Christian and Jewish dialects, in the case of Baghdad, for example, was that dialectal differences were only recognized within that region, and that Christian and Jewish dialects with common characteristics did not exist across the entire Arabic-speaking world. Of course, the Christians and Jews in the Arabic-speaking world also used Arabic on a daily basis, but they also used Arabic for their cultural and religious activities. For this reason also, the three symbolic functions of Arabic mentioned in (A) to (C) earlier were not related to Arab ethnicity.

4-2. The language situation under the Ottoman administration

After the 16th century, the Arabic-speaking regions came under the control of the Ottoman Empire and the language situation changed completely. The native language of the ruling class of the Ottoman Empire was Turkish, and they uniformly adopted Turkish as the language of administration. Arabic and Persian were accorded respect as the languages of Islam and literature respectively, so the function of Arabic in (A) remained unchanged, but the role of Arabic in the culture (including scholarly activities) diminished to a great extent. The general public forgot many of the works written in Classical Arabic, Classical Arabic lost its vitality, and many speakers of Arabic came to share the view that Classical Arabic was a language used only by the 'ulamā', a closed group. Ironically, however, the role of Arabic as an Islamic language and as a civilization language survived, and many Arabic words were adopted for use in Turkish, and the word building power of Arabic was employed to create many new Turkish words.

4-3. The impact of Western Europe

The nationalism in the modern Arab world originated with Napoleon's Egyptian campaign of 1798. Limiting discussion of this event to language, of particular importance is the fact that Napoleon's army erected the first Arabic printing facility, and used this to make public announcements to the people of Egypt in Arabic. The rise of nationalism in Europe was intimately associated with the invention and development of printing technology, and, although different in direction, the introduction of printing technology in the Arab world also provided the opportunity for the rise of nationalism there. The background to the use of Arabic rather than Turkish by the French military was that befriending the Arabs was part of their policy of opposition to the Ottoman Empire, and this formed the blueprint for their policy towards the Middle East in the following periods. Egypt subsequently became independent of Turkey during the Muhammad Ali period, and adopted a policy of westernization much like Japan did during the Meiji Era. The government Bulaq printing facility was constructed, translation of western scientific materials was encouraged, and plans were introduced for Arabic schools and Arabic education.

Prior to the serious advancement of the great European powers into the Middle East in the latter half of the 19th century, groups of Christian missionaries dispatched from the countries of Western Europe to the Levant region (present Syria and Lebanon) played an important role. These missionary groups combined with the local Christian sects, and in time they became useful representatives for the great powers of Western Europe.

The French missionary groups had a relationship with the Maronite Christian sect followers, and mainly used French as their language, but the Protestant missionary groups from America acquired Arabic, and brought with them technology for printing in Arabic. They proceeded to produce new Arabic translations of the Bible, and produced many written works in Arabic for missionary use. Through these activities, the predominately Arabic-speaking local Christian Arabs brought the antiquated Classical Arabic back to life as modern Arabic, and, in fact, many of the supporters of the subsequent Arabic revival movement were Christians from Syria and Lebanon. These Christians produced almost all of the grammar books, dictionaries, and encyclopedias for the modernization of Arabic at around this time. In addition, these Christian Arabs were the first in the region to master Arabic printing techniques, and many switched to careers in journalism and moved to Egypt, where they published Arabic newspapers. Among these Arabic newspapers were Egypt's representative newspapers of today, such as *al-Ahrām*.

Newspaper publishing was important as heralding the advent of a media for propaganda, but with the increase in literacy, it also served to proliferate the use of modern Arabic. In addition, this provided an opportunity for preparation of the view of the 'Arab nation' as a joint visionary language community with a conceptual basis in the unified Arabic of its members. Because the Christians

played the key role in the modernization of Arabic, the Classical Arabic that had lost its vitality as the language of the 'ulamā' was liberated from the control of the 'ulama', and the Christians diluted its Islamic flavor and took steps down the path of 'Rebirth (Nahda)' by bringing it back to life once again as the language of literary culture. In time, the rebirth of Arabic would lead to the new 'Awakening (Nahda)' of the 'Arab nation'.

Even in opposition to the colonial administrations of the imperialistic powers of Europe, and to their policy for the Arab area, which was developed as a part of the strategy of opposition to Turkey, the Christian Arabs were calling for unification of the Arab nation and a revival of Arabic. The basis for the movement by the Christians was the modern version of Classical Arabic, al-fushā, and Classical Arabic's grand literary heritage that was historically the common property of the Arab nation. Before they could make realistic demands against the Western European powers and Turkey, something that transcended the religious and regional differences between the Arabs and that could be regarded as the personification of the Arab nation was necessary, and the only thing available was the modern version of al-fushā, the offspring of the common cultural language, Classical Arabic. The important factor that formed the basis for the rise of nationalism in Europe and the formation of regions was the replacement of Latin with the regional languages of the people, but in the Arab world, the regional dialects of al-'ammiyya and their corresponding regional divisions were the justification for the division and administration of the Middle East by the great European powers, and accordingly, it was al-fushā that played the important role in the rise of nationalism.

4-4. Turkey and the Arabic-speaking world

The concept of Pan-Islamism (unification of the Islamic world) became influential at the end of the 19th century at a time that corresponded with the end of the Ottoman dynasty. The object of Pan-Islamism was to oppose Western Europe by obstructing the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. However, in both good and bad senses, the role of Arabic in the Islamic world did not come under discussion. Soon after the advent of the Young Turk period, Turkey initiated a conscious political plan to confront the issue of Arabic, and after seizing political power in 1908, they restricted the use of Arabic in the Arabic-speaking regions of Syria and Mesopotamia. In concrete terms, they decreed that henceforth all education was to be conducted in Turkish, prohibited the use of Arabic in schools and punished students that broke this rule. Arabic was taught by Turkish teachers in Turkish, and those teachers involved in the teaching of Arabic had their salaries reduced. In addition, students that knew Turkish received preferential treatment with regard to employment. Even the khutba (sermon at Friday prayers) came to be delivered in Turkish. As a result of the severity of the language policies of the Turkish authorities in the Arabic-speaking regions, anti-Turkish feeling among Arabic speakers increased, and this led to the development of the Arabic revival movement at a variety of levels. In time, this local Arabic revival movements succeeded the

Arab national literary revival movement that rose in the Nahḍa period of the latter part of the 19th century, and the consciousness that to speak Arabic was to be part of the Arab nation became firmly implanted in the mind of the general population.

In Turkey, as part of Kemar Ataturk's subsequent secularization plan, a 'language purification' policy was enacted to remove words of Arabic origin from the Turkish language because of their association with Islam, and the written script was changed to the Latin alphabet. As a result, modern Turkish lost the words borrowed from Arabic, and the Islamic character of the language was diluted, but in addition, it lost the vocabulary creation power of the civilizational language of Arabic, and vocabulary created from pure Turkish and borrowed from foreign languages such as English increased.

4-5. Modern Arabic in the state

It is probably not an exaggeration to say that for Arab nationalists active from the 19th century to the start of the 20th century, Arab nationalism and the Arabic language meant the same thing. The concept of Arab nationalism with an 'Arab nation' and the doctrine of linguistically-unified al-fuṣḥā (modernized Classical Arabic), fundamentally had to cross lines between states, religions, and ethnic groups, and this has proved to be a dilemma for the statesmen of today in the various nations. At one extreme is the assertion of the al-Husri, that all speakers of Arabic are members of the Arab nation, and in practice, Arab nationalists such as Nasser have made extensive use of al-fuṣḥā. The other extreme can be seen in the view of the devotees of Greater Syrianism, the Egyptian Pharaohists and the Mediterraneanists, who not only actively downplay the role of Arabic, but also go to the extent of denying their Arab ethnic identity.

For the adherents of Greater Syrianism who are attempting to have the Syria/ Lebanon region distinguished as an historically autonomous zone, the role of Arabic in giving linguistic embodiment to Arab nationalism as a doctrine for the creation of a nation that transcends the opposite standpoints of the followers of Christianity and Islam, was not something that had particular importance. The adherents of Greater Syrianism have pursued autonomy for a region that they have claimed since the Phoenician period that preceded the rise of Islam, or, in other words, since before they came to speak Arabic. This view that stresses autonomous regionality is also held by the Egyptian Pharaonists, and is in opposition to Arabic-leaning Arab nationalism that views the entire Arab world as one nation. Pursuit of a regionalist foundation during the Pharaonic period of ancient Egypt was a natural result of the circumstances that required the Egyptians to overcome domestic religious differences and at the same time deal with the different cultures of foreign regions. The Mediterraneanist view (as represented by Taha Husayn) that places importance on the historical links with Europe was also born in Egypt.

In any case, the role of Arabic in the regionalism of the various areas was comparatively smaller than the role of Arabic in Arab nationalism. In extreme cases, Arabic is regarded as the language of the invader, but Arabic has normally

been positioned as the cultural language of the people and the state, and treated as a communication tool. It is an extremely interesting point that the idea to make the Arabic dialect used in Egypt (the Cairene dialect) the national language became popular among some scholars of language and literature in Egypt at the end of the 19th century, and writing in the dialect and research into it flourished. Some of the cooperating European scholars of oriental studies even went as far as to propose romanization of the script. This emphasis on the language of the people in Egypt was in stark contrast to the attitude of the Arab nationalists in Syria and Lebanon who viewed regional dialects with hostility.

Syria, Lebanon and Egypt were to set the stage for the Arab national movement, and two varieties of Arab nationalism suddenly arose in these areas. The first variety of nationalism was the Arab nationalist type which regarded the Arabic language as an important indicator of national identity, and the second variety was regionalistic nationalism that emphasized the differences between the region and the outside while at the same time treating Arabic itself as an external factor, and downplaying its national role in order to transcend internal differences. Between these two types of nationalism, the symbolic function of Arabic came to be evaluated in a variety of ways.

In countries that were heavily affected by the French colonization policy such as Algeria, the influence of French remains strong even today. However, with the revival of Islam seen right across the Islamic world, the symbolism of Arabic as the language of Islam came to be emphasized. This tendency was similar to the original vigorous surge in Arabic education (Koranic education) in the non-Arabic Islamic countries. During the period of French colonization, Algeria was subjected to a sweeping policy of assimilation, under which Arabic education and public use of Arabic were banned. For this reason, after independence, the only means of educating the people was the 'ulama' Arabic education that had continued piecemeal until that time. The government instated Arabic as the national language and riding the tide of the Islamic revival, switched to a policy that constituted a kind of Arabic imperialism. Under this policy, the élites educated in French and under French culture were compelled to use Arabic as the language of the state, but the powerful position of Islam led to a switch to an exclusivist language policy that marginalized the speakers of minority languages such as Berber. Despite the seemingly successful connection between the Islamic revival movement and Arabic imperialism in Algeria, it is of deep interest that there are people who regard the French colonial period as a thing of the past, and now see a new role for French in a variety of cultural activities including education.

The drawing of national borders has led to the appearance of languages such as Maltese in Malta, where the yoke of Classical Arabic (al-fuṣḥā) has been cast off, and the Latin alphabet adopted, and Israeli Arabic, which has become a minority language under Hebrew. On the other hand, in countries such as Syria and Egypt, new standard domestic languages (neither the standardized written language al-fuṣḥā, nor the daily spoken language al-'ammiyya) based on the language of the

urban upper classes and known as intermediate Arabic are in the process of being born. It is not possible to predict whether or not these circumstances will lead to the formation of national languages as occurred in Europe, but research into the dialects of the Arab nations by researchers from these nations is thriving, as evidenced by the level of activity of international conferences for scholars of Arabic dialects.

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