Changing Norms, Concepts and Practices of Written Arabic

A 'Long Distance' Perspective

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Throughout the history of Arabic, there has been tension between norms and practices of written Arabic, sometimes even open controversies over norm content and validity, over 'correct' versus 'deviant' practices, over concepts inscribed in, and contested by, language ideologies – and all situated in changing historical circumstances. This essay is an attempt to frame the current situation in a 'long distance' perspective on changing norms and practices of the written language. I shall do so by zooming in on some specific ('formative') stages of tension and change, such as

- the event of the early codification and standardisation of the *'arabiyya*
- subsequent normative and non-normative practices of writing Arabic, 'destandardisation'
- the *nahḍa*, vernacular writing, and the 'restandardisation' of *'arabiyya* as a prescriptive norm
- the current 'late modern' age of lessening formality in public interaction and the advent of digital communication > 'destandardisation', vernacular and mixed Arabic writing

I shall argue that processes of standardisation and destandardisation, with shifting norms of use, have come in waves, and that the current trend of destandardisation is of a kind that is not likely to be reversed. (The discussion has an admittedly Egyptian slant.)

On Norms and Standard Norms

In line with the view of writing as social practice (and inspired by Bartsch 1987), I think of 'norms' as established by practices which have come to be regarded as appropriate for specific social contexts. The practices which become norms are regarded as appropriate because they are practices of people who are social role

models in the community (“users who are regarded as imitation-worthy and therefore have prestige,” Bartsch 1987: 239). When speakers or writers follow certain practices as ‘norms to be followed’ in certain domains/functions, it means that these norms have *validity*, are valid, for users in those domains and functions.

A *standard language norm* is the product of a process of selection and codification of features and variants of a language to function as a model of correctness, defined by people who have become *norm authorities*, role models supported by official institutions (Bartsch 1987: 78). The standard language has validity in the language community in so far as speakers/writers perceive its norm to be valid, i.e. that they *accept* it as a *model/measure of correctness* – without necessarily having access to it.

The *codified norm*, as laid down in grammars and dictionaries, is *prescriptive*, that is, it prescribes how the standard language should be practiced. In educational settings there will be sanctions against breaking the norm, the writings of the learner will be corrected and graded according to his/her compliance (or lack of it) with the rules of grammar, orthography, lexicon and style. In the public sphere, competent writers are expected to comply with the standard norm, and failure to do so will evoke criticism.

Bartsch distinguishes “the *prescriptive standard* as a normative concept of language planners, from the *empirical standard* as a descriptive concept of socio-linguistics. The prescriptive standard has an empirical reality as far as it plays a role as *the ultimate model towards which the sub-models for the standard linguistic usage are oriented*”. The prescriptive standard tends to be “considered as a point, i.e. a *single variety with no variation* between points”, while the empirical standard, on the other hand, “is a range, namely *a set of linguistic means and situations of their use*, including a lot of variation recognized and accepted as standard by the population” (Bartsch 1987: 258, my italics).

As the standard language norm is associated with prestigious authors and cultural products, the norms of the standard acquire an aesthetic value that goes beyond the value of effective communication which favours unity, rather than diversity, of expression. Thus, “linguistic usage conforming to the standard variety is ‘good’, ‘pure’, ‘melodious’, ‘sweet’, although there might not be any objective base for the assignment of these attributes”. In addition, the unitary standard often acquires the value of being an identity symbol for the whole population, nation, or state (ibid.: 265–266). These values are central in shaping what is referred to as ‘standard language ideology’.

Norms exist for most kinds of language practices, informal norms based on accommodation to language practices of the models of one’s surroundings: first parents and other family members; later on peer groups tend to become more

important models for orienting one's speech. Nonstandard speech undergoes continuous change under the radar of norm authorities; changes motivated by a variety of social factors, such as migration from rural to urban communities and leveling through language contact, or by changing social values in society – for instance the seemingly global trend towards less formality in public interaction, or by the introduction of new domains for language use, such as audio-visual media, the internet and the spread of digital communication. (Factors that do not affect the use (and norms) of *writing*, however, shall not be considered here.) By 'standardisation' I refer to the processes by which a language variety rises to become and function as a standard language (typically 'selection', 'codification', 'elaboration' and 'implementation', cf. Haugen 1966) – while 'destandardisation' refers to a development "whereby the established standard language loses its position as the one and only 'best language'" (Coupland and Kristiansen 2011), or, I would add, where the validity of the standard is significantly challenged, in practice, as the sole variety for (public) written purposes.

The Event of Codification and Standardisation of *al-ʿarabiyya*

Most language historians (on whom I rely for this section) agree that at the time of the advent of Islam (early 7th century), there existed among the bedouin who inhabited the Arab peninsula, besides their spoken varieties (dialects), a special register, a super-tribal variety of Arabic in which they composed epic poetry. This poetry was recited, memorised, elaborated and orally transmitted from one generation to another by 'professional' poet/reciters (only to be recorded in writing towards the mid-8th century), and its conventionalised variety, as a norm for poetry, became one (some say the most important) of the linguistic sources for the codification of Arabic. The text of the Qurʾān, reflecting the same kind of 'high' register, constituted the other main source. In addition, the early grammarians constantly refer to the 'pure' desert Bedouin as models of correctness (while some scholars claim that these 'informants' were not just any tribesman, but those among them who were well versed in the oral poetry tradition ...)

The process of codification and standardisation was motivated by the rapidly increasing importance of Arabic as the language of the expanding Arab-Islamic empire.¹ Among the early philologists there were, however, different

1 Access to Arabic was a requirement for a career, not only in the religious establishment, but also in the administration of the empire and its cultural life.

views about the sources for codification of the correct language. Versteegh (1983) reminds us of the situation before the canonisation of the one valid Qurʾān edition (sanctioned by ʿUthmān), namely with several competing readings and a range of variants.² The pre-Islamic poems also existed in many parallel versions until the philologists set out to work on them, imposing uniformity by reducing alternative forms: “The prescriptive, corrective and editing endeavours of the first native grammarians”, says Corriente, “were motivated by their concern for regularity, understandable in the minds of those who forged a grammaticized language, a vehicle of universal culture, out of a bundle of dialects. Yet these people had their eyes open for the peculiarities of Bedouin speech, and did not neglect it in their works, although they tacitly implied, or expressively said, that only ‘Arabiyya, the central core of O[ld] A[rabic], was to be imitated and analogically extended to unprecedented situations” (1976: 68).

The *Kitāb al-naḥw* (Book of grammar) by Sībawayhi (d. 796) represents “a complete description and rigorous analysis of *al-ʿarabiyya* in its ideal form”, and all later grammatical work depends on this work, claims Carter (2003). Fischer (2006) agrees that Sībawayhi’s work established the norms of Classical Arabic grammar, while *al-Uṣūl fī al-naḥw* (The Principles of Grammar) by al-Sarrāj (d. 928), that is more than a century later, is attributed with having “effectively standardized Arabic grammar” (Owens, cited by Patel 2010: 525–526), implying that for quite some time grammarians would have different views on the flexibility or strictness of the norm. Suleiman reports discussions between those who operate with “a ‘correct’ vs. ‘incorrect’ classification on the one hand, and those who operate with more or less acceptable forms” (*afṣaḥ* vs. *aqallu faṣāḥa*) (1996:108–109).³

One area of the language where the norm apparently was unstable and variable is orthography.⁴ The writing system and the script was taken over from

2 Many features of the orthodox Qurʾānic text still differ from what became the codified norm, however, “partly because of the West-Arabian dialect features that are reflected in the text, partly because the syntax found in religious discourse by its nature tends to be unruly or deviating. The early philologists simply invented a harmonising explanation for these anomalies (or rather: explanations, as they often disagreed with each other)” (Carter 2003:86–87, my translation).

3 This tension resembles the tension inherent in standardisation processes in modern times, between ‘stability’ and ‘flexibility’ as equally vital properties for the functioning of a standard language.

4 Some of the points concerning orthography, where even writers of the scholarly elite would be inconsistent, are the same as we find are variable today: the writing of *hamza* and its chairs, and the treatment of final weak radicals.

Aramaic (Nabatean) orthographic conventions and was gradually adapted and refined to represent the emerging norm of *al-ʿarabiyya*.

Normative and Non-Normative Practices of Writing Arabic

Despite certain inconsistencies of orthography, the codified standard of *al-ʿarabiyya* continued to be the sole and undisputed ‘measure of correctness’ and to have validity as such across the medieval Arab-Islamic world.

However, for all the veneration of *al-ʿarabiyya* in Arab society, not all writers followed the prescribed norm. Widespread practice of neglecting the rules of the standard language has been documented throughout the centuries – at first most systematically studied in medieval texts written by non-Muslims (Judaean-Arabic and Christian manuscripts), who were believed to be less concerned with and less trained in the Muslim sacred language. Only recently one has come to realise how very widespread indeed the practice of writing in sub-standard language must have been, also among Muslim writers. Many who tried their hand at writing may have missed the target norm because of lack of sufficient competence in the rules of grammar, certain deviations reflecting interference from their spoken vernacular. Some writers may have intended to revise their texts, but did so only partially;⁵ or maybe an incompetent scribe or copyist was to blame. However, still others *intentionally* chose to not comply with the normative standard, opting for a way of writing which was less formal, less high-flown, for various kinds of audiences. Jérôme Lentin, writing the EALL lemma on ‘Middle Arabic’, emphasises that “many writers have left us works written both in faultless or even sophisticated Classical Arabic and works written in Middle Arabic [and that] for those writers at least, one has to abandon the idea of their inadequacies in Classical Arabic” (Lentin 2006: 217). Also Joshua Blau believes that, “some authors employed a ‘more Classical’ language when they addressed higher layers of their audience, but a more vernacular style when writing for lower strata” (Blau 1981: 188).

Thus, while many writers themselves most likely engaged in what we call variation and choices among more and less formal styles/registers, from the standpoint of norm authorities and other prescriptivists, deviant forms were considered ‘mistakes’, or ‘solecisms’ *lahn* (*al-ʿamma*). As is well known, an

5 “[T]he use of literary reflexes in colloquial passages decreases the further one gets into the book, implying that scribal resistance to colloquial forms was worn down by the frequency of their occurrence” Davies 2000, 67.

entire genre of books and pamphlets were devoted to exposing grammatical and lexical mistakes among literate (but not professional) people (*laḥn al-ʿamma*) in written documents of all kinds and correcting them in accordance with the normative standard. Even norm authorities, such as grammarians, could accuse each other of breaking the rules. Due to the link with a sacred heritage, the issue of grammatical correctness became associated, not only with learning and intellectual status, but with honour and moral dignity – or shame and moral depravity. However, what Georgine Ayoub succinctly calls “the horror of the mistake in Arab culture”, entailed that it is also had its fascinating aspects: “Laḥn fills with horror, but also intrigues. Linguistic errors become fresh and stylish in anecdotes and witty remarks, as confirmed by great writers, from al-Jāḥiẓ to al-Ḥarīrī” (Ayoub 2007: 633).⁶

One early case of what must be considered *deliberate* Middle Arabic writing, is Usāma bin Munqidh’s (1095–1188) memoirs (*Kitāb al-Iʿtibār*).⁷ There seems to be no doubt that Usāma was well competent in the standard language: according to Schen (1972) he “spent ten years of his youth in Tripoli studying the Arabic disciplines under Shaykh ‘Abdallāh of Toledo, ‘the Sibawayhi of his times’”. He further composed “a substantial amount of poetry [...] a number of prose works, among them books on *adab* and rhetoric. [...] These facts will prove relevant when we discuss how an author who had written extensively in impeccable ‘*arabiyya* – to whom, in fact, writing CA was second nature – came to produce a composition containing so many MA elements, not to mention stylistic solecisms” (Schen 1972: 221). The numerous deviations from normative standard Arabic in the text, as reported by Schen, are of orthographic, morphological and syntactic nature, similar to the catalogue of features observed in other medieval Middle Arabic texts. Schen speculates at length around plausible circumstances in the production of the manuscript to explain its non-standard style: on whether old age had dimmed the scholarly (and thus linguistic) capabilities of the author, or whether incompetent scribes may have made mistakes in copying the manuscript. He concludes, that most likely the elderly Usāma had dictated his memoirs to a scribe in a relaxed style, wavering between ‘correct’ and colloquial language, in accordance with various text functions. Then the scribe, being under some stress in writing down what the master says, adjusts some, but not all, of the vernacular forms that occasionally pour from his mouth. The manuscript was printed only in 1886 (1889?) in

6 For a continuation of this tradition today, see Brustad, this volume.

7 Translated as: *An Arab-Syrian Gentleman and Warrior in the Period of the Crusades; Memoirs of Usāmah ibn-Munqidh*, trans Philip K. Hitti. New York, 1929.

Paris;⁸ it is conceivable that the text underwent further ‘improvements’ until it reached that printed stage – however, it still is considered a specimen of ‘Muslim Middle Arabic’.

Undoubtedly, many texts which have come down to us in standard language form, were composed in a substandard register but subsequently revised and corrected by copyists or editors. One recent documentation of this practice is Dana Sajdi’s delightful study of the chronicle by the “Barber of Damascus” (Sajdi 2013, 2009), a layman in 18th century Damascus, who wrote on significant as well as less significant contemporary events, drawing on his various kinds of knowledge, from (limited) education, of some specific formal genres, and of oral poetry and traditional story-telling, in short – making use of the cultural as well as linguistic resources available to him. The barber was not the only one practising this kind of ‘pre-print journalism’, in hybrid texts – alongside the formal chronicles in *fuṣḥā* produced by the traditional group of ‘*ulamā*’.

Sajdi came over an original manuscript of the chronicle only after she had found it in a much reformed, standardised, printed edition from the early 1900s, edited by a certain al-Qāsimī: [...] The intention behind his edition [...] was, in his own words, to “delete the superfluous and keep the essence of this history, and refine (the language), correcting to the extent possible [...] Thus, by the time that al-Qāsimī was writing, the movement of the standardization of the Arabic language was already in full swing, leading al-Qāsimī to view the barber’s language as incorrect and to translate it into ‘correct’ – that is, what came to be considered ‘modern standard’ Arabic” (Sajdi 2009:132).

Another specimen of a ‘Middle Arabic’ chronicler is the well-known Egyptian historian ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī (1754–1825). Al-Jabartī was educated as a religious scholar at al-Azhar, so he must have been trained in Arabic grammar. Besides his famous *History of Egypt* (*‘Ajā’ib al-athār fī al-tarājim wal-akhbār*), he wrote two shorter chronicles, one is an account on the first seven months of the French occupation of Egypt (*Tārīkh muddat al-faransīs bi-miṣr*).⁹ In this text, writes Moreh, al-Jabartī sharply criticises “the ‘corrupted style’ and grammatical errors contained in the first French proclamation which was probably translated by Syrian Christian dragomans or translators who had accompanied the French. Yet he himself violated the elementary principles of classical Arabic grammar and syntax [...] *Mudda* is characterized by negligence of literary usage and form in addition to a proliferation of colloquial terms, expressions,

8 Edited by Hartwig Derenbourg.

9 Edited and translated by Moreh 1975. Moreh also mentions Jabartī’s “expurgated edition of *Alf layla wa-layla* ‘Thousand and one nights’ from which he [Jabartī] removed the pornographic passages”! (Moreh 1975, 2 + n. 5).

and linguistic patterns". Moreh believes that the text may have been "a rough draft written without paying special attention to the rules and for this reason the text is especially interesting from a linguistic point of view" (1975: 25–26).

The literary genre in which this manuscript and other chronicles are written, "is a direct offspring of the late Mamluk period" and are written "without attempting to give them a classical touch", says Moreh (*ibid.*: 30) The two other known historical texts by al-Jabartī are in a 'better' (more normative) shape, but neither is free from deviations and vernacular influence.

And what about the famous book by al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1801–1873), *Takhlīṣ al-ibrīz fī talkhīṣ bārīs* (The extraction of pure gold in the abridgement of Paris, 1834)? In an introduction dated 1958 (reprinted in the 1993 edition) on al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's style, the manuscript is said to have been full of lexical and grammatical mistakes (*mal' bil-aghlāṭ lughawīyya wa-naḥwīyya*); the prominent French orientalist Silvestre de Sacy, whom al-Ṭaḥṭāwī frequented in Paris, advised him to have it corrected, and that on his return to Egypt he found the time and opportunity to consult the learned teachers at al-Azhar, and so a great many outright mistakes, bad style and colloquialisms were corrected and removed before the text was published in print for the first time. In his dissertation on al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1968) Karl Stowasser finds even the printed edition replete with deviating forms typical of many medieval texts, both syntactic and morphological, some reflecting vernacular features, other obvious hypercorrections (a long list in Stowasser 1968: 32–37). The lexicon is replete with vernacular words as well as neologisms and calques based on French – many of which have become part of the lexicon of a modernised standard Arabic (*ibid.*: 38–57). The style and structure is only superficially standard Arabic, claims Stowasser, who suggests that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī would compose the text mentally, in his natural vernacular, an appropriate medium for the practical, descriptive content of the book, and then slightly standardise the language while writing it down. It is, again, interesting that a text could be printed in such a nonstandard shape. I believe it must be indicative of the range of acceptability, or normative flexibility, concerning written Arabic at the time.

How, then, does the language of 'Middle Arabic' texts relate to our terms of norms and standard language? While many scholars view Middle Arabic as a cover term for the language of written texts that combine standard and nonstandard (vernacular) features in highly variable and idiosyncratic ways, along the continuum between the polar varieties, Lentin (2006: 217) insists that despite great variability,¹⁰ texts written in Middle Arabic have so many

10 "the multiplicity of its manifestations" (Lentin and Grand'Henry 2008, XIII).

peculiar features in common, “the regular or systematic occurrence of which proves the existence of a *norm*,¹¹ to which anybody writing in Middle Arabic has to conform”. He calls it a “standardized register”, “available for those who wanted to use it”, existing “beside the standard usage of Classical Arabic”. More carefully, but in the same vein, Blau writes that “in the course of time, a certain mixture of Classical and Neo-Arabic elements *came to be thought of as a literary language in its own right*, employed even by authors who were well able to write in a ‘more Classical’ language” (Blau 1981: 188, my italics). I am not in a position to judge whether the practices of writing in a mixed (Middle Arabic) style are sufficiently consistent to qualify as an alternative ‘standard norm’; my inclination, however, is to regard the comprehensive practices of Middle Arabic writing as exponents of ‘destandardisation’ – namely, (as above) a development whereby the validity of the standard as the sole variety for (public) written purposes is significantly challenged.

Humphrey Davies puts it thus: “If the use of Middle Arabic is found to be widespread and consistent, a further implication would be that, had it not been for the linguistic self-consciousness and ‘reforms’ introduced during the *nahḍa* of the nineteenth century, Middle Arabic might well have become the standard form of written expression in Egypt (and no doubt elsewhere)” (2008: 111).

The *nahḍa*: The Rise of Vernacular in Writing and the ‘Restandardisation’ of *al-‘arabiyya*

Literary historians tend to attribute the rise of vernacular writing in the second half of the 19th century to the introduction of European-kind theatre to the Egyptian cultural scene (around 1870), first as translations and adaptations, then as original plays written for the home public. According to Nelly Hanna (2003), however, the ground was well prepared, by extensive use of the vernacular in writing by the secular middle class in 16th to 18th century Cairo. Vernacular expression may even have been encouraged by the local Mamluk rulers, who were Turkish speakers, and apparently more at ease with the local vernacular around them than with the Classical language. It is not clear, however, to what extent the texts Hanna refers to are vernacular in nature, or rather in the line of mixed, Middle Arabic, language (see Doss 1996 for further elucidation of these points).

11 “an autonomous variety” (as above).

Anyway, the theatre genre readily offered a domain for the vernacular, being based on dialogue, performed in direct speech by live actors. Besides, the use of everyday language orally on the scene continued a popular tradition. Two pioneers in vernacular drama translation and writing are Ya'qūb Ṣannū' (1839–1912) and 'Uthmān Jalāl (1829–1898). Jalāl translated French comedies (Molière) and tragedies (Racine), adapting them to an Egyptian context, and wrote social farce and political satire in Egyptian vernacular (see Woidich 2010, Bardenstein 2005). Ṣannū' was a pioneer also in vernacular prose writing; in 1877 he published the first issue of his satirical newspaper *Abū naẓẓāra ẓarqā'* / *Abu naḍḍāra ẓar'a* (The one with dark glasses), for the larger part written in colloquial Egyptian Arabic (see Zack 2014). Woidich makes the point that Ṣannū' in his newspaper – as in the theatre – used the *dialogue* as format for his social and political satire in vernacular, drawing on the connection between direct speech, humour and the informal variety (Woidich 2010: 70). A didactic concern, namely to reach the ordinary, illiterate people, was both explicit and implicit in the agenda of these reformers. In the following years, oppositional writing in the vernacular, in part or in whole, became widespread – mobilizing against corrupt government as well as colonial powers and occupation, and addressing the problems of the people in a style meant to combine education, enlightenment, and entertainment.¹²

An outstanding representative of this trend was 'Abdallāh al-Nadīm (1845–1896), who in his satirical and didactic journals *al-Tankīt wal-tabkīt* (Joking and reproaching 1881) and *al-Ustādh* (The professor, 1892–1893) used simple *fushḥā*, straight or elevated *'ammīyya*, and occasionally a blend of the two varieties in various passages (see Doss 1997 on al-Nadīm's language policies and linguistic style).

However, to the leading intellectuals of the *nahḍa* there was (with very few exceptions) no question of raising the status of the vernacular to the point of codification and standardisation and recognition as an official norm. The linguistic forms and the orthography in these texts, are, however, remarkably uniform in view of the lack of an established tradition for writing the vernacular – reflecting a process of informal standardisation, of conventional norms developed through usage. The time was ripe, argues Anwar Chejne (1969), for an Arab Dante or Cervantes to come to the stage, and initiate a new Arabic standard on a prestigious local vernacular. In Europe, nationalism had promoted standard languages to be based on the language of the people, the living *lingua materna*, as opposed to the 'high' language of sci-

12 Samples of these texts have become easily available to us through Doss and Davies 2013.

ence and religion (in Western Europe) represented by Latin. In most places, the dialect/sociolect of the educated urban elite was the base for codification and standardisation of the national language, overarching the regional, rural dialects.

However, the Arab nationalist movement emerged as pan-Arabic (against Ottoman and European powers alike), and the elaboration and promotion of the shared national language and cultural heritage centered on the standard *ʿarabiyya* of this heritage. The *nahḍa* intellectuals, in Egypt and the Levant, rose to raise the consciousness of the people for the progress of the nation, and called for reforms in education, for Arabisation, for reforms in the teaching of Arabic, and some even for reforms of the grammar itself. The (often quite harsh) fights between conservatives and liberals in the language reform issue is well documented (e.g., Gully 1997, Patel 2010, Suleiman 1996). Suleiman claims that every proposal at simplification of grammar would be hit in the head with a counter-proposal (1996:102–103). With regard to the prominent role of Christian Levantines in the *nahḍa* language movement, Patel makes it clear that their position was in many ways similar to their Muslim Arab compatriots: “they shared a common concern for the correct use and purity of the Arabic language based almost exclusively on classical normative principles” (Patel 2010: 122).

From our perspective, the main point is that the *nahḍa* leaders were seeking to restore control over language practice; as Marwa Elshakry says, “reformists and purists alike began to call for greater linguistic supervision and standardization” (2008: 726). There was a new (renewed) regime of a normative standard: in a catalogue of ‘linguistic offenses’ detected in the contemporary press, *Lughat al-jarāʾid* (Newspaper language, al-Yāzījī n.d/1901), the large majority of offenses relate to lexical and semantic deviations from classical usage, such as plural forms of nouns with deviant meaning from the medieval lexicographical sources, or verbs occurring with prepositions not found in those sources – rarely obvious mistakes in conjugation or case endings. Most of the usages exposed to shame by al-Yāzījī were not, however, successfully ‘purified’, and are attested today in dictionaries based on modern written usage (such as Hans Wehr). And while the force of normative grammar was re-imposed, the lexicon was expanded to meet the requirements of ‘modernity’, or rather of the needs and practices of writers and translators, professional or not. Also, in their “efforts to make Arabic a workable instrument of communication [...] reformist scholars probably made substantial progress in introducing a simple functional style which forms the basis of newspapers and modern literary Arabic. However, this is not matched in grammar, where conservatism has been particularly fierce” (Patel 2010: 112).

The status of the vernacular, however, was also affected by another current: the emergence of the new discipline of ‘dialectology’, with an interest in everyday spoken language of the people and a conceptualisation of ‘dialects’ as structured and autonomous entities. Dialect studies in Europe had developed in the context of the national romantic ideas about people and authenticity. European orientalists, having studied Latin, Greek and Classical Arabic, travelled to the colonial lands in North Africa and the Middle East (together with missionaries and tradesmen,) became acquainted with the spoken language of these places – and ‘discovered’ *l’arabe vulgaire*. With the help of native informants and assistants, orientalists sought to record and describe the spoken tongues in the form of textbooks and grammars (, Larcher 2003).

This perception of spoken vernaculars/ dialects as entities in their own right *vis à vis* the standard written norm, was new to Arab linguistic scholarship – with its exclusive focus on *al-‘arabiyya*, and its view of the spoken vernaculars as consisting of deviant features (*lughāt*), lacking order and grammar (*qawā‘id*) – and *not* as varieties in their own right. The need was felt for a term different from the polysemic *lughā – lughāt* (which signified different ‘languages’ as well as local peculiarities, and also lexical words and idioms). *Lahja* is part of the native repertoire of metalinguistic concepts (“tip of the tongue; way of speaking”), and is adopted as the technical term for the new discipline of dialectology (*‘ilm al-lahajāt*) at some time around the turn of the century. At the same time, however, enters also the term *‘āmmiyya* – first as a qualification of *lughā*, and then by itself. According to Diem (1974:6) the earliest among the “modern” works (1886–1908) whose concern is to rectify the spoken language, use *‘āmmiyya*. Al-Nadīm uses “*al-lughā al-‘āmmiyya*” in 1893.¹³

Campaigns calling for the promotion of the vernacular as the standard language towards the end of the century received very little support from native intellectuals; the fact that colonial officials were among the strongest and most active in the promotion campaign for *‘āmmiyya* did not exactly help the cause. Rather, the ‘restandardisation’ of *al-‘arabiyya*, directed at the laxness and poor style (*rakāka*) of substandard practices, and purifying the written language of colloquial features, promotes a conceptualisation of a strict dichotomy in the Arabic language. The term ‘diglossie’ now makes its way into the Arabic

13 In contemporary usage, I suggest that the distribution of *lahja* versus *‘āmmiyya* may be seen in terms of ‘counter concepts’, i.e. *lahja* is opposed to *al-lughā al-‘arabiyya* while *‘āmmiyya* is opposed to *fuṣḥā*; but also in terms of stance, or social value, i.e. *lahja* is neutral/positive, while *‘āmmiyya* is neutral/negative – perhaps also in terms of Halliday’s distinction between *users* (of a ‘dialect’, *lahja*) and *uses* (of a ‘register’, *‘āmmiyya*).

language debate from its original application to the Greek language situation (Lecerf 1932, Marçais 1930/31). Monteil (1960:69) attributes the coining of the term *al-izdiwāj al-lughawī* to a certain al-Ḥajj as late as 1956.¹⁴ The interest in the spoken dialects *per se*, however, remained marginal. While both the Syrian and Egyptian language academies appointed a special committee for the study of dialects (*lajnat al-lahajāt*), activities were concentrated on *al-ʿarabiyya*, and the academies were dominated by language purists (Hamzaoui 1965, 1975).

In conclusion, the normative standard, challenged by substandard writing practices (Middle Arabic) was by the end of the *nahḍa* given *new normative force* through the efforts of purist language reformers and their pan-Arab ideology – a process I refer to as ‘restandardisation’. On the other hand, the *acknowledgement* of vernacular dialects different from, and opposed to, *al-ʿarabiyya*, resulted in the language community gradually thinking in terms of a dichotomy. The discreteness of the varieties and their clear cut functional distribution came to be considered natural.

The Current Late Modern Age of Increasing Informality and the Advent of Internet: ‘Destandardisation’, Vernacular and Mixed Arabic Writing

With the concept of *fuṣḥā* vs. *ʿammiyya* dichotomy established, the language Academies were to promote the standard variety and preserve its norm – with only minor concessions to new usages as part of the (prescriptive) norm to be taught in schools and respected by writers of Arabic as a model of correctness. Competent writers found a way of employment in being a language corrector (*muṣaḥḥiḥ*) in the press and publishing houses. As mentioned above, however, writing practices developed with new styles for straightforward communication, and under the impact of translation, as a considerable amount of news and information was adapted from French or English sources. What may be called ‘empirical norms’, based on actual journalistic models, gave wider scope for new phraseology and syntactic flexibility (considered *fuṣḥā*).

The (semi-)colloquial press, which had been at its high in the 1890s and 1900s, declined rapidly in the following decades, “until they disappeared completely by the 1950s” (Fahmy 2011:76). The popularisation of new media: the radio, the phonograph and movies, presented new outlets for colloquial expres-

14 He quotes another prominent Lebanese, Anīs Furayḥa, on “un problème délicat”: *athar izdiwāj al-lughā fī l-mujtamaʿ* in 1955 (Monteil 1960, 71).

sion, and these were uncontested by language guardians, as the vernacular was considered a threat to orthodoxy only when it was written or printed.

I doubt that the language cultivators, now institutionalised authorities in academies and committees, or in ministries and Arabic departments at the universities, in fact exercised much control over writing in Egypt in the 20th century – apart from, of course, imposing and securing the position of normative *al-ʿarabiyya* as target in the school system. Rather, the literary ‘ethics’ of the time, echoing the pan-Arabic political ethics, called for a certain normative self-discipline. The literary development of the novel and short stories towards social realism, on the other hand, imposed the question of (appropriate) style to represent in writing the speech of common people. It became commonly accepted to use *ʿammiyya* in dialogue (reflecting direct speech), in a frame of *fuṣḥā* narrative; although a few prominent writers (notably Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and Nagīb Maḥfūz) strongly objected to accepting anything but ‘correct’ forms into the literary sphere. Some writers openly struggled with the dilemma: we have the popular writer Iḥsān ʿAbd al-Quddūs (1919–1990) arguing with himself in the introduction to the second edition of his novel *Anā ḥurra* (“I am free”, n.d.) – in the end finding peace and calm in the following solution: that a longer fictional work may well have *ʿammiyya* in the dialogue, whereas shorter stories may – or may not, according to the general ‘atmosphere’ of the story (Mejdell 2006b: 205). The issue was never settled, but, from now on, it only occasionally flared up in heated debate.

Longer narratives in the vernacular were, until recently, not admitted as ‘literature’; Woidich 2010 and Zack 2014 both mention the fictitious genre of *muzakkirāt* (“memoirs”), popular among the general public in the 1920s, in which characters from the bottom layers of society “tell their lives”. A few ‘real’ autobiographies of non-elite authors were written in a style very close to *ʿammiyya*. Also satire and caricatures are considered entertainment, not ‘real’ literature, and not governed by norms for variety usage (see Håland, this volume). As Woidich argues, using *ʿammiyya* is not controversial for purposes of humour and joking, nor for the ‘oral’ genres, mimicking direct speech, as drama and plays. The struggle of *ʿammiyya* poets to be taken ‘seriously’ (Mejdell 2006b) is perhaps not over, but they have long since been admitted to literary journals and seminars.

The obvious pluralism in literary expression in the last decades, including the choice prose writers have in selecting from the entire linguistic repertoire, supports what Clive Holes noted more than 20 years ago, that “writers have felt freer to develop their own patterns of standard/dialect usage” (1995:307). According to Marilyn Booth, writing in the early 1990s, “a stream of new poets [...] are erasing boundaries between *fuṣḥā* and *ʿammiyya* poetry in technique,

imagery and subject. Syntax and diction move between linguistic levels [...] The choice of linguistic level in itself is seen as meaningless; how the language is used determines poetic strength and communicative power" (Booth 1992: 447).

Boundaries and Bivalency

Developments in writing practices are moving fast, accelerating the last decades, with the advent of and access to internet. The various genres on the internet: blogs, Facebook, Twitter, are outside the control of filtering authorities, and allow for a wide range of linguistic choices (Doss 2004, Pepe 2014, Brustad this volume, and Nordenson this volume).¹⁵ The language of these outlets also finds its way into publishing houses and print media: vernacular as well as standard language, bivalent and mixed language, sometimes interspersed with foreign language linguistic and cultural loans, reflecting an urban, youthful idiom, often ironic and 'cool'. Such linguistic heterogeneity, increasingly accepted by the younger population – but also contested by traditional language authorities – will it be reflected in a new kind of variable, pluralistic notion of Arabic, and hybrid norms of writing?

Structural differences between the standard language and any local or regional vernacular variety are found at any level of linguistic description, and are not a fantasy created of language ideology, of course. However, the perception of separation and discrete borders between the varieties are strengthened by the dominant concept of diglossia, of *fushā* versus *‘ammiyya*. These boundaries are, however, challenged by writers – and observers, who for artistic or ideological or scholarly reasons (or perhaps all motivations combined), tend to promote ways of writing (practicing) Arabic across the linguistic repertoire. Writers can do so to a large extent by exploiting the common ground of Arabic varieties, the *shared* and the *bivalent* structural and lexical items. I define 'shared' items as items that have the same morphophonological and phonetic shape across the varieties or registers of a speaker/writer, while 'bivalent' items are "words and segments that could equally belong, descriptively and even pre-

15 Quoted from Pepe 2014: "every blogger has his own rule"; "when I started blogging, I was only interested in speaking out my personal feelings; my language was not excellent and I was switching between AM and a weak FU"; "[he] chooses the language that is better able to convey the message that he wants to express, and the decision is totally improvised, there is no order, nor specific criteria of choice"; "I prefer simple FU that is very close to AM and if it is necessary to use AM to indicate a specific cultural sign [...] then I use AM to give the text more taste [...] My preference for FU or AM depends on the subject."

scriptively, to both codes" (Woolard 1999:7¹⁶). Due to the nature of Arabic script, which does not (normally) denote short vowels, many morphophonological distinctions between standard Arabic and vernacular varieties are concealed in writing. In this way, a great number of items which differ in phonetic shape depending on whether they are interpreted and realised *in speech* according to the standard or the vernacular system, are bivalent in writing. For instance, يكتب can be realised as high formal standard *yaktubu*, as plain standard *yak-tub*, or as vernacular *yiktib*.¹⁷ If grammatical markers for future tense are added, however, which differ in standard and vernacular in a way that shows in the script, items are not bivalent: سيكتب *sayaktub(u)* and هيكتب or هيكب *hayik-tib/hayiktib* (unless one wishes to 'play' on hybrid forms for special effect).¹⁸ As sentence structure to a large extent – but far from totally – is shared by standard Arabic and vernacular, there is much common ground on which to construct sequences that have an ambiguous, fluid character, neither quite standard nor plain vernacular.¹⁹ This extensive common ground in written Arabic, with shared and bivalent structures and items, provided for, I believe, the ease of mixing in medieval Middle Arabic just as it provides for the ease of boundary crossing and mixing in contemporary texts.

The prize for the most uncompromising attempt to erase boundaries between *fushḥā* and *‘āmmīyya* and create a 'third language form' (*lughā thālitha*) goes to the prominent Egyptian dramatist Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898–1987) in the mid-1950s. He wrote two plays using a bivalent strategy,²⁰ aiming at a text which could be both read as *fushḥā* and performed as *‘āmmīyya*. Besides restricting himself to congruent lexicon, and insisting on forms such as (*hā*)*dhā* and *da* being allomorphs (not his term, but the idea makes sense), he had to avoid grammatical words and forms that would mark variety; for instance, plural endings would only be *ين* and not *ون*, so the plural nouns had to be syntactically in

16 Woolard uses 'bivalency' in a context of Latin/Spanish and Catalan/Castilian 'bilingualism'.

17 I disregard here the vernacular preverb *b-* which occurs in unmarked present tense.

18 For constraints on mixing word-internally in *spoken* styles, see Mejdell 2006.

19 While normative standard grammar has VSO as the default order of constituents, there are cases where SVO are more natural, sometimes even correct. On the other hand, studies have shown that Egyptian vernacular may have SVO as preferred order, but in the past tense, and with intransitive verbs, the verb often precedes the subject, so the distribution is not discrete, but with considerable overlapping, and in modern standard usage, SVO is sharing with VSO as the (empirical) norm.

20 Woolard uses the term 'strategic bivalency' as "a language user's deliberate manipulation of such [bivalent] elements" (2007, p. 488).

oblique case (in the standard grammatical system) to formally match the vernacular plural *-īn*; consequently they were either in object function, introduced by *ʔ* (*'inn/'inna/'anna*) or in genitive constructions. However, as Woolard and Genovese remark, “it takes work for speakers and writers to stay for long within the confines of a bivalent zone of convergence between languages” (2007:489), and al-Ḥakīm renounced the project after these experiments.²¹

Of a very different nature is the kind of boundary crossing we find in many of Ṣalāḥ Jāhīn's (1930–1986) satirical writings. He switches and mixes between stretches of standard language and vernacular, and combines items and features from the two registers in a playful, unexpected manner that provokes laughter, such as a lexically vernacular verb with a standard language inflectional ending;²² sometimes insertions of the other code is motivated by punning or by the needs of a rhyme (he often imitates the traditional style of rhymed prose, *saq'*). This kind of (seemingly) ‘wild’ mixing sounds very funny to native ears, but also gives the writer occasion for expressing sarcasm and irony, playing on the contrastive connotations of standard and vernacular respectively. The controversial (and courageous) Egyptian writer, journalist and editor Ibrāhīm ʿĪsā (b. 1965) follows up this style in his polemical writings. Again, there are passages in his articles that are impossible to classify in terms of a dichotomy of standard versus vernacular; however, while these texts may be said to blur the boundaries, they simultaneously exploit bivalency *and* contrast (Mejdell 2014).

For *writing* in an intermediate, or mixed, register or style, Gabriel Rosenbaum coined the succinct term *'fuṣḥāmmiyya'* (2000), occasionally showing up in Arabic blogs and tweets. *Lughā wuṣṭā* is a frequent term in Arabic academic studies; however, it is used by some to refer to a lower register of *fuṣḥā*, by others to refer to a style, spoken or written, that draws on both varieties (Mejdell 2010).

So what are the concepts in use by the younger generation who practice extensive boundary crossing? According to Teresa Pepe, and her comprehensive (2014) study of Egyptian blogs, the term *lughā wuṣṭā* is not in common use: they describe their practice as *mazg* and *khalīṭ* (mixing) of *fuṣḥā* and *'āmmiyya*..²³

21 More on the experiment in Somekh 1991:42–44, Mejdell 2014:274–275.

22 Thus violating a principle governing ‘naturally produced’ hybrid forms in speech, cf. Mejdell 2006, 2006a. See also Mejdell (forthcoming) on Ṣalāḥ Jāhīn's style.

23 This is confirmed by the LCAW survey: only a very few (8%) report they know the concept, 16% among the university graduates (p. 69).

When discussing writing in Arabic, as opposed to English, they mostly use the term *bil-ʿarabī*, but also *bil-ʿarabiyya*. As noted above, *al-ʿarabiyya* in most contexts refers to the standard language, *al-ʿarabiyya al-fuṣḥā*. The Egyptian dictionary of Hinds and Badawi renders *ʿarabi* as “Arabic, the Arabic language”, *il-ʿarabi l-faṣīḥ* as “literary Arabic” – and the idiom *bil-ʿarabi* as “in plain language”. *Il-ʿarabiyya* is “the Arabic language”. The respondents in the LCAW Cairo survey, gave *ʿarabi* as one of the terms for “the language you learn at school”, second only to (but far below) *al-ʿarabiyya al-fuṣḥā*.

Conclusion

And the normative standard? It is still the only variety taught to children in school, it is produced in the majority of newspapers and magazines and other publications. It shares a few written domains with colloquial and mixed varieties. Its linguistic structure has remained unchanged, slightly modified in certain respects, but more variation in styles and registers may be observed, with a preference for straightforward, simple syntax and close-to-colloquial style. This variation in writing represents empirical norms, not all in tune with prescriptive (school) grammar, but within the range of ‘accepted’ standard language. Certainly its native users will continue to disagree when it comes to its boundaries – perhaps the authorities who prescribe the standard norm will admit and include the variability and flexibility of the empirical norms.

However, the *validity* of the normative standard as such is not in question, it is rather the *exclusive* validity of the standard which has been, and is being, challenged. Norm authorities do not control the written practices outside the formal institutions (school and university, and the religious establishment). On the web and social media people are writing in a range of styles and registers and varieties, even scripts and languages. They write in *fuṣḥā* and/or in *ʿammiyya*, in both, in a mix, they insert slang (*luḡhat al-shabāb*) and English expressions, in Arabic and Latin script. The *acceptability* of writing in other varieties than standard language has also been demonstrated in the survey response of the urban population of greater Cairo, and is likewise reflected in the language of literary publications produced by leading publishing houses.

Pluralism of expression is held to be a characteristic of late modern society – all over the world. The signs of destandardisation we see in (parts of) the Arab world, opening up new *norms* for writing, represent a process which, I believe, will not be reversed.

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