Teaching and Learning Arabic in Early Modern Rome: Shaping a Missionary Language*

Aurélien Girard

The teaching of Arabic in Rome was primarily guided by Catholic missionary activity. The rise of the study of the languages, and especially eastern languages, was promoted by the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, a pontifical congregation founded in 1622 in order to coordinate missionary activities under the direction of the Pope. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Roman officials attributed a special importance to the mission of the Middle East. After the abandonment of major crusading projects the belief developed that the conversion of Muslims would be possible by pursuing a policy of cultural influence. Above all, it was hoped that the return of the ‘schismatic’ or ‘heretical’ Eastern Christian Churches into the Catholic fold would be quick and easy. This optimism with regard to missionary activities in the Levant, which faded in the second half of the seventeenth century and even more during the century that followed, led in Rome to the encouragement of institutions preparing members of the religious orders for the mission in these lands.

Ever since its foundation, the Propaganda had been deeply committed to the study of languages on the part of the missionaries, for whom it was vital to be prepared to disseminate the principles of the Catholic faith in the tongues of the intended recipient populations. The Propaganda explicitly recovered

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the tradition of the medieval missionary methodology propounded by Ramon Lull and the decrees of the Council of Vienne from the fourteenth century on. The developments in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Rome provide unique insight into the relationship between mission and language. This essay will explore the political promotion of the teaching of Arabic in the pontifical capital and examine its consequences.

Thanks to the quality of the Roman bureaucracy in the post-Tridentine era, the archives of the Congregation are extremely rich and especially where the Arabic language schools are concerned, provide material for a detailed study of the early modern period. In the last fifteen years Roman intellectual life in the post-Tridentine era has received new attention from historians, also thanks to a novel interest in the links between missions and the circulation of knowledge. Giovanni Pizzorusso in particular has focussed his research on Oriental studies and on the intellectual environment around the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide, a milieu qualified as ‘a scholarly complex with a universal vocation’ by Antonella Romano.


3 In recent years the historical study of linguistics has concerned itself increasingly with missionary linguistics, thanks especially to the Oslo Project on Missionary Linguistics and the International Conferences on Missionary Linguistics, organized and published since 2003. On the agenda of this research, see O. Zwartjes, ‘The Historiography of Missionary Linguistics. Present state and further research opportunities’, Historiographia Linguistica, 39, 2012, pp. 185–242.
