CHAPTER 4

Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism: Arabic Representations and the Study of Arabic

Manuela E.B. Giolfo and Francesco L. Sinatora

Introduction

The concepts of Orientalism and neo-Orientalism have been approached through and have shaped the academic discourse in the humanities and the social sciences. Whereas Said’s (1978) notion referred to a stereotyped representation of the Orient by the West for political and colonialist purposes, the more recent notion of neo-Orientalism is generally understood in literature across the humanities and the social sciences as an exacerbation of Orientalism and in reaction to post-9/11 Western Islamophobic representations of Islam.

In this chapter, we argue that language is a central element in the interpretation of the concepts of Orientalism and neo-Orientalism. In particular, this work approaches these two notions through an analysis of the Arabic representations and the study of Arabic. It starts by outlining the Western interest in Arabic throughout history and how it clashed with the Arab dominant representation of Arabic. It identifies Modern Arabic as the linguistic component of Arab renaissance and Modern Standard Arabic as a neo-Orientalist linguistic policy. Unlike traditional understandings of the notions of Orientalism and neo-Orientalism, which are framed within a West-East dichotomy, our operative definition of neo-Orientalism is informed by that of Indian scholar Avadhesh Kumar Singh. Quoting Singh, Nair-Venugopal (2012) defines neo-Orientalism as the new avatar of Orientalism:

Neo-Orientalism stands for the “discourse about (sic) Orient by the people of the Orient located in the West, or shuttling between the two”... or

* Although the ideas expressed in this chapter come from a joint research project by both authors, Manuela E.B. Giolfo is the author of the Introduction, and the sections Arabic and Orientalism, Modern Standard Arabic and Neo-Orientalism, and MSA and Neo-Orientalism in Western Academia; Francesco L. Sinatora wrote the sections The Western Interest in Arabic, Arab-Dominant Representation of Arabic: Arabic as One and Unique, Arab Renaissance and Modern Arabic, and the Concluding Remarks.
the “discursive practices about the Orient by the people from the Ori-
ent ... located in the non-Orient for the people of the non-Orient” (p. 13).
In its latest manifestation as neo-neo-Orientalism [sic], it is a “discourse
about the Orient, constructed by the Occident (West = America) and
Orient in collaboration.” (p. 236)

Such a collaboration can be found in the development of the concept of Mod-
er Standard Arabic as a monoglossic representation in contemporary post-
colonial Arab countries as well as its implementation in the Western curricula
of Arabic as a foreign language. The chapter concludes with some positive ex-
amples in the Arab world and in Western academia which go towards a holistic
and translingual understanding of Arabic in a globalized world.

The Western Interest in Arabic

Western interest in Arabic was initially motivated by a polemical intent. The appropriation of the Arabic language was functional to the refutation
of the Islamic message. Arabic became at a later stage necessary for the un-
derstanding of Western philosophical thought. As a matter of fact, until the
15th century Aristotle’s work was available only in Arabic, through the work
of translation conducted by Arab scholars. The study of Arabic was therefore
functional to the investigation of the roots of Western civilization. However,
as soon as the original Greek sources became accessible, the interest in Arabic
saw a dramatic downturn. This decline was also motivated by the Western
scholars’ conviction that the Arabic translations were permeated by Islamic
thought, in a context in which Islam was still perceived as a threat to Chris-
tian Europe. Hence, the study of Arabic survived solely as an ancillary to the
study of medicine, mathematics, and astronomy, as well as to the study of
biblical Hebrew.

Three centuries later, Humanism and Enlightenment sparked an interest in
exotic languages and cultures. Arabic became a subject of ‘Oriental languages
and literatures.’ These included languages that were not Semitic, such as
Persian, and languages that were detached from the Islamic culture, like Chi-
nese. Such a characterization of Arabic as an exotic language went hand in
hand with a vision of the Arab world as backward and underdeveloped, as op-
posed to a putatively enlightened and superior Western civilization. In the 19th
century, within the new paradigm of Semitic comparative linguistics, Arabic
became one of the languages of the Semitic family, along with languages that
represented the roots of Judeo-Christian civilization. Its study became moti-
vated by a merely classificatory intent.