THE CONCEPT OF "THIRD LANGUAGE" AND ITS IMPACT ON MODERN ARABIC POETRY

To the memory of Salah Abd al-Sabur, 1931-1981.

1. "Third language" in Prose

The term al-lugha al-thālitha ("The Third Language") gained currency in the world of Arabic literature mainly in the 1950s although its underlying concept is apparently much older. It is sometimes synonymous with another term, al-lugha al-wuṣrta ("The Middle Language"), but not always identical with it.¹

This term was originally designed to describe (or encourage) the rise of a type of style in written prose which, though adhering to the basic norms of classical Arabic, is easily understood by any speaker of Arabic, and is not far removed from the vocabulary, structure, and rhythm of spoken dialects.

A prominent exponent of al-lugha al-thālitha was the famous Egyptian playwright Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm. In 1956 he published a play entitled al-Safqa ("The Deal"), in which he introduced a type of Arabic which, according to al-Ḥakīm, could solve the diglottic problem in the field of drama. In his postscript to that play,² the author tells us that the type of language he devised is comprehensible both in terms of fushā (hereafter: FUS) and of spoken Arabic. By producing such a text, the playwright is released from the dilemma as to which of two linguistic levels he is to employ in his dialogue. In other words, the device would make it possible to write plays which, when read in print, can be understood in accordance with the norms of classical Arabic; but when staged, it is adaptable, automatically and without incurring many textual changes, to the level of the local dialect (ʿammīyya, hereafter: AMM). The following written sentence (al-Safqa, p. 43) can operate, therefore, on two linguistic levels, as specified below:


2 T. al-Ḥakīm, al-Safqa, Cairo n.d. [1956], pp. 159-162.
can be read in terms of FUS as follows:

\[ \text{ismahū lī bikalimatīn šaghīratin} \]

it can also be realized in terms of Egyptian (Cairene) Arabic:

\[ \text{ismahūlī bikīlma šughayyāra} \]

Al-Ḥakīm’s “new language”, then, is not only an experiment at producing a FUS text which is reminiscent of the spoken idiom. It is also an attempt to create a bivalent text which exploits the inherent ambiguity of non-vowelled Arabic script. In point of fact, in his postscript to al-Ṣafqa he did not use the term “third language”; but that term gradually came to denote the textual type inaugurated in al-Ṣafqa.³

In 1966 al-Ḥakīm made another attempt at writing a play with a bivalent text—al-Warta (“Dead Trouble”).⁴ This time, however, throughout the play he uses a number of forms and functionals which are exclusively dialectal, e.g.—illi, di. In the postscript to al-Warta,⁵ he contends that in using such functionals he is not really violating the norms of classical Arabic, because illi, for instance, is nothing but a shorthand form of alladhi. The same applies in al-Ḥakīm’s view to such words as biddi, āywa, maʿrāfsh(i).

Al-Ḥakīm’s innovation aroused heated debate among critics and linguists,⁶ and it would seem that it did not generate a great deal of enthusiasm among other Arab playwrights. Furthermore, al-Ḥakīm himself seems to have abandoned the idea of producing plays with bivalent texts. Most of the plays he wrote in the 1960s and 1970s are either in simplified FUS or in straightforward spoken Arabic.⁷

On the other hand, recourse to a simplified form of FUS, with a certain affinity to the language of daily speech, far from being aban-

³ The term “third language” is actually used in the postscript to al-Ḥakīm’s play al-Taʿām lī-kull fam, which was published in 1963, although the author seems to refer in that case to the simplified type of FUS rather than to the strictly bivalent type.
⁴ T. al-Ḥakīm, al-Warta, Cairo n.d. [1966].
⁵ Ibid., pp. 189-199.