

## A PLEA FOR LITERATURE IN VERNACULAR ARABIC

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THE following thoughts have been suggested to me by the reading of a little work by M. Arsène Darmesteter, the French philologist and lexicographer (d. 1888), entitled "*La vie des mots étudiée dans leur significations.*" (Paris, Librairie Delagrave 3 ième édition, 1889.) Although treating only of the French language, this work deals with phenomena, especially in the Introduction, that are common to other languages also. In quoting from this author, I have translated the passages into English.

This article may be considered a continuation of that which appeared in *THE MOSLEM WORLD* for January 1914, entitled: "A Plea for the Use of Versions of Scripture and of other Literature in the Vulgar Arabic." In that article I wrote, "There is a continuous evolution of all language, and the tongues which exercise the greatest living influence to-day and possess an ever-growing literature are just those that cultivate in literature the living form of the language, while not neglecting what the past has produced." The language spoken by a people reveals the soul of that people, and the modes of its thought. The forms of the language furnish the mould in which their thoughts take consistent shape. In like manner, the nearest approach to the soul of a people is by way of the language that they constantly use. Darmesteter says, "But leaving aside these two questions of origin, let us consider language in the manifestations of its life. Being immediate forms of thought, instruments created by it to express itself, languages are so many mirrors in which are reflected the habits of mind and the psychology of the peoples that speak them."

On the constant evolution of every living tongue, an evolution which nothing can finally arrest, our author

says, "Every tongue is in a state of perpetual evolution. At any one moment of its existence, a language is in a state of equilibrium more or less durable by reason of the action of two opposed forces, one of which, the conservative force, tends to maintain it in its actual state; the other, the revolutionary force, tends to push it in new directions."

Of the first of these two tendencies, he says: "The action of a civilization, however humble it may be, the respect of tradition, the care with which the pronunciation of the child is watched by those round about it, a natural good taste and the instinctive desire for choiceness of language; at a higher stage of literary development, the influence of the sacred books, as for example, the Bible in the countries of Germanic speech, and the Koran in Moslem countries; or, at a higher stage still, the influence of literary works which by their inherent beauty command universal admiration and inspire in the minds of future generations veneration for their incomparable form: these are the principal causes which maintain the purity of a language. They are embraced in one word—the cultivated expression of thought."

On the other side he says: "In face of this tendency there arises the revolutionary force, which shows its action in *phonetic alterations* in the pronunciation, *analogical changes* in the grammar, and *neologisms* in the lexicology."

Without entering into the operation of these changes in Arabic during its evolution, as they can be observed in comparing the living speech with the classical tongue, we turn to the conclusion of the author: "The life, the health of language consists in following as slowly as possible the revolutionary force which will always carry it along rapidly enough, by holding strongly to the conservative principles"; and again: "The proper course to be followed by a language consists in yielding gradually to the innovating force, allowing itself to be held in at the same time by the conservative tendency; otherwise the transformations would be too rapid and the language would not preserve its unity."

The author then inquires: "What will happen if one of these two forces alone is in operation, holding the other in respect and nullifying its action? When the revolutionary, neologic, force remains inert and the language is in a state of immobility, there is then danger for that language. Certainly those peoples whose civilization is without change and without history, can keep their language intact indefinitely; there being no change in thought, no need is felt of a change in the expression of thought. *But when a false respect for tradition prohibits a language from following the course of ideas and there arises a contradiction between the thought of a nation and the form in which that thought is clothed, then the language may exhaust itself and perish.* We have a remarkable example of this in the classical Latin, the Latin of the writers and of higher Roman society, which, *refusing to follow the popular Latin in the free play of its development, became crystallized in its respect for the consecrated form,* and towards the end of the empire perished of inanition, leaving its place to that popular idiom so full of life and force that it gave birth to a numerous family of languages and a still greater number of dialects, fully equipped for the conquest on its own account of that empire which the other abandoned." (Italics mine. P. S.)

The analogy is very close between the history of the classical Latin and the classical Arabic in their attitude towards the respective popular tongues born of them or closely related to them. Although the Latin, with more or less of classical purity, remained in use as a literary medium long after the period assigned by the author as the time of its decay, it was only as a dead language. No doubt its persistence as a literary medium was greatly due to its being the language of the Roman Catholic Church and hence, up till the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation, the language of learning and religion. So also the classical Arabic, in a more or less purely classical form, is in use to-day exclusively as a literary language, but is not the living language of the Arabic-speaking peoples. The scission that was produced or rather accentuated as the classical Latin refused to follow the

popular speech in its development is paralleled by what occurred in the case of Arabic. The classical Arabic, for the same reasons as the classical Latin, with the added religious reason, more powerful still, refused to recognize, to say nothing of following, the popular Arabic, to its own detriment and that of the living speech. For surely if the spoken tongue had been cultivated in literature throughout its history, the result in the modern speech would have been much superior to its present state, and there would not have been the wide gulf that actually exists between the language of books and that of speech.

This same analogy between the Latin and the Arabic is noted by Renan in his "*Histoire des langues sémitiques*," from which I gave a long quotation translated into English in the article above referred to. He says: "The literary Arabic is not as some philologists would have it, a wholly artificial language; the vulgar tongue, on the other hand, was not born entirely, as some have claimed, of the corruption of the literary language; but there existed an ancient language, richer and more synthetic than the vulgar tongue, less regulated than the literary form of the language, out of which the two have developed in opposite ways. We may compare the primitive Arabic to what the Latin language must have been before the grammatical labours which regularized it, about the time of the Scipios; the literary Arabic to the Latin language as we find it in the monuments of the century of Augustus; and the vulgar Arabic to the simplified Latin spoken about the sixth century, and which resembled in many ways more the ancient Latin than that of Virgil or Cicero. . . . There took place with the Arabs, in the first century after the Hegira, what has been seen every time that a great mass of diverse populations finds itself all at once subjected to a language too learned for it; the people who only seek to make themselves mutually understood, make for themselves a tongue more simple, more analytic, less burdened with grammatical flexions. Arabic could not escape entirely the tendency which leads all languages towards a dissolution, caused by the incapacity in which

the descendents find themselves of compressing their thought into the synthetic forms of the language of their fathers."

Since, however, the popular Arabic in its evolution has not been developed under the aegis of a popular literature, but has followed its innovating tendency only partially restrained by the influence of the classical literature, which has become more and more remote from the life of the common people, what should be the attitude of the Christian missionary, whose chief concern is the uplifting of the masses by means of the Gospel, which he seeks to make the chief formative influence in their moral and spiritual development? Seeing that the masses are ignorant of the classical tongue, and in view of the difficulty for them to learn and appreciate the highly developed grammatical and syntactical forms, which no longer correspond to their modes of thought, what *moral*, *religious*, or *psychological* reason can be evoked against literature in the present-day form of the language?

I know that some consider the spoken tongue to be so poor and incorrect as to be beneath serious notice, and in consequence have never thought it worthy of sympathetic study and research. That is not, however, the tendency of present-day linguistic science. Our author says: "The most varied tongues, from the most august to the humblest, are noted, examined and investigated in their history and their reciprocal relations. A vast enquiry is going on to establish a complete catalogue of all the languages spoken to-day on the surface of the globe, and special effort is bestowed on the determination of their origins, the tracing of their developments, and the discovery of the forms through which have passed the pronunciation, the lexicology and the grammar of these tongues, and in the measure of the possible to recover behind their history, the history of their different civilizations."

My own experience in the study of the living tongue, on the contrary, is the discovery of its extent and the wealth of words and expressions in use, a richness developed, naturally, according to its own genius, and not to be judged by the standards of the classical tongue.

One might ask further, what *linguistic* reason can be urged against *a written literature* in a language which is a *fact of linguistic development*? For those able to read and understand the classical Arabic there is material enough for them to draw upon, although my experience is that a very limited number even of those who can read the literary language have a sufficiently extensive vocabulary to benefit fully by that knowledge, and the use of the dictionary is almost nil, at least in the Barbary States. Words outside the vocabulary of daily life are almost always learnt *orally*.

But for the great mass who have never studied the literary tongue, is it reasonable to leave them without literature in their own speech? A considerable number have learnt the letters and can read the words but are discouraged by being often unable to understand the vocabulary of the literary language, to say nothing of the fine mechanism of its syntax.

If it be urged that literature in the common speech would induce an indisposition in the majority to obtaining a knowledge of the classical language and literature, it may be replied that *the choice is not between literature in the classical as opposed to the modern form of the language, but between literature in the modern speech and no Arabic literature for them at all*. On the contrary, I believe that being able to read the modern Arabic will be an incentive to some at least to become acquainted with their classical literature. Others fear, perhaps, that such a policy if followed would tend to the degeneration of the literary Arabic. But it is a fact that *as far as the living language is concerned it is the people that rule and not the savants and the grammarians*. As our author says: "The ancients had already recognized this fact: the people is sovereign in the matter of language: 'Populus in sua potestate, singuli in illius,' said Varro, and before him Plato: 'The people is in matter of language a very excellent master.' Voltaire recognized it while deploring it: 'It is sad that in the matter of languages, as in other customs more important, it is the populace that directs the leaders of a nation.'

“Universal suffrage has not always existed in politics, but it has ever existed in the matter of language; there, the people is all powerful, and also infallible, because its very errors sooner or later, have the force of law. Language is indeed a natural creation and not a rational and logical construction. Mankind, in order to communicate their ideas, have recourse to an assemblage or system of natural signs which are in constant modification, in time and space, under the action of physiological and psychological laws; but from the moment that the greater part of men understand each other by the aid of this system, it has rendered all the services that one has the right to expect of it. For that very reason *even logical errors and anomalies, from the time that they are accepted by all, cease to be anomalies and become legitimate forms of thought.* This is the foundation of the principle that *‘in the force of usage alone, is found the rule of language.’*

“*‘Quem penes arbitrium est jus et norma loquendi.’*”

At the end of this section Darmesteter says: “*Language follows its course indifferent to the complaints of the grammarians and the laments of the purists.*” (Italics are mine. P. S.)

These are facts in Arabic as a spoken language as in all other tongues. Why not recognize it and use this pliable instrument in the education and evangelization of the Arabic-speaking peoples? What would not linguists give to find more abundant traces of the popular Arabic throughout its history up to the present time? But nearly all such traces have been effaced by the purists, although perhaps sufficient remain, here and there, in popular songs of an undoubted early date, to enable us to get a more or less clear idea of the North African Arabic at the time of the Arab invasion in the eleventh century.

It must not be thought that what we advocate is a recent innovation. Ibn Khaldoun in his “History of the Berbers” (written 1378) observed that the North African Arabs of his day had already corrupted the pure language of Modhar and of the Koran, changing the grammatical inflections and allowing the use of solecisms. He mentions the epic songs of the Beni-Hilal. Of these pieces he

says that they are not without regularity and cadence as well as a certain facility of expression, *in them, however, the rules of the inflectional syntax (إعراب) are quite neglected*; but says he, "We have already proved in our 'Prolegomena' that the absence of the grammatical inflections does not influence the exact expression of thought." The purists of his day despised these productions of the popular genius, considering them without value because of the non-observance of the literary syntax and prosody. Fragments of these "chansons de geste" have been preserved in the oral tradition of North Africa.\*

To come to more recent times, the Arabic-speaking Jews have long employed the popular language to convey religious and moral instruction as well as to amuse, not only orally, as in the traditional Targums of the Torah and the Haphtarah given in Arabic in the Rabbinical schools, but also in writing, although always in the Hebrew character. Some of this popular literature has no pretense to literary style or correctness, being produced often without care or ability, but other portions of it are of quite a good order. I have before me as I write the first fasciculus of a work published at Tunis in 1903 in the

\*Compare the following extract translated from "Les Arabes en Berbérie du XIe au XIVe siècle," by M. Georges Marçais, Docteur-ès-lettres, page 9: "A notable portion of these poems (epic poems of the Beni-Hilal) and not the least interesting for us, are neither printed nor even written, but are preserved in a fragmentary state by oral tradition. This is especially the case with those fragments spread abroad throughout North Africa, which allude to the 'taghib,' that is, 'the march towards the West,' the exodus of the tribes towards the countries of the setting sun. The exploits of the Beni-Hilal have originated an extremely abundant literature of a singularly wide area of dispersion. They form one of the favorite themes of story-tellers in the cafés of Cairo; they are found in Upper Nubia and Kordofan; they are mixed up with the legends of the Barbary States, in Kabylia as well as in Morocco, in the South of Tunisia as in the region of Tiaret and of Mascara, where Bel has been able to gather an important episode (El-Djazia).

"That these narrations are ancient no one can doubt. They were well-known in the time of Ibn Khaldoun. The learned had nothing but contempt for these productions of the popular genius; the Arab sheikhs themselves regarded them as of no value; but the author of the 'Prolegomena' with his clear-sighted eclecticism found pleasure in listening to them and did not judge them unworthy of a place in his work; he reproduced from them some lengthy fragments and gives a summary analysis of those dealing with the departure of the Arabs towards the Barbary States. (Cf. Ibn Khaldoun I, 23 to 25; Prolegomena III, 361 to 368.)

"Utilized with prudent criticism, these texts are documents of the first order for the study of the language of the nomades by whose means the 'arabization' of the Maghreb was accomplished."



ordinary Arabic. It is entitled **ספר אהלי צדיקים מעשייו** and contains Midrashim on Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sodom and Isaac. There are also published translations of the Haggada for the different feasts in the popular Arabic, although these will probably gradually disappear before the same kind of thing in French, of which I have lately seen a copy, but these Arabic publications in the Hebrew character have long served a useful purpose, both for religious instruction and for amusement. Are Christian missionaries going to be less wise than the children of Jacob?

It is useless to try and convince oneself that the language has not changed, and that the difference between the forms of speech and the literary grammatical forms are only mistakes due to ignorance, as Bresnier held, as appears from his Grammar (*Cours de Langue Arabe accompagné d'un Traité du Langage Usuel*), where treating of the latter, he says "As I have already said, this cannot be a Grammar; it is an exposition of the popular corruption of the forms of the language indicated in the preceding chapters [on the literary Arabic]. This corruption is capable of extension or of restriction according to the degree of instruction or education of individuals, and according to the usage received in different places. *In the case of educated persons this corruption maintains itself within the limits of the toleration accorded in all languages to familiar discourse*; with the vulgar mass it knows no bounds but those of the arbitrary instinct of analogies and of the hesitations resulting from an instruction absolutely nil or without solid foundation." (Italics are the author's own.)

This I feel gives a false view of the case. The mother-tongue of all the Arabs, learned and unlearned alike, the living and only language used for the ordinary affairs of life is the popular Arabic, *with its so-called corruptions, which are now become laws of speech*. The literary language is always more or less an acquisition, and in so far as the modern speech differs from it, by so much is the difficulty increased of learning the language of literature. If there is any tolerance or condescension on the part of those who

have acquired the literary language, in their use of their mother-tongue, it appears to me to be the height of snobbishness. Be this as it may, *in this matter it is the people that rule and not the purist and the littérateur.*

Is there any valid reason, then, why only the literary Arabic should be written and printed? Why not use the vernacular Arabic in writing and in print as well as in speech, for by its means, to use the language of a French writer one could "popularize a crowd of new notions useful to the natives who could assimilate them without effort." An *oral literature*, a popular poetry in the vernacular Arabic does already exist, which appeals to the minds of the common people. Why not seize upon this means of communicating religious, moral, and educational knowledge? There is a *good* Arabic speech very expressive and graphic and rich—in expressions and vocabulary. A child of ordinary ability can soon learn the letters and combine them into words. The vocabulary he has at hand already in the daily speech. In case of necessity if a word or expression is wanting in the ordinary speech of a district, it may be found in the speech of another district, and at all times one can draw from the classical store.

Islam will not and cannot do this work of "*Vulgarisation*," to use a French expression. To do such a *popular* work it would have to throw overboard the doctrine of the inviolable sanctity of the Koranic Arabic. But I can see no reason that should hinder Christianity and the enlightening energies of European civilization from using to the full *this most potent of all means for the uplifting of a people—its living speech, the revelation of, and the nearest means of reaching, its mind and heart and soul.*

PERCY SMITH.

*Constantine, Algiers.*