

## WHAT STYLE OF LANGUAGE FOR OUR LITERATURE?

(A plea for Simple, Correct Arabic.)

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TWO ARTICLES have recently appeared in THE MOSLEM WORLD from the pen of my old friend, Rev. Percy Smith, B. D., as a plea for the publication of evangelical literature in what he calls "Vulgar Arabic." I am glad he does not call it "Colloquial," for if that term be taken to denote merely language "understood of the people" then many of us would vote solidly for it; unfortunately it is often used to mean "slang," and that is where he and we part company. Throughout the following remarks Mr. Smith's "Vulgar Arabic" will be taken to mean what the native Christians of Egypt laughingly call "Mush-mush language," i.e. that in which the negative is rendered by "mush."

Now we do not deny that quite an important minority of missionaries (and others) in Egypt and Syria hold the view so well expounded by Mr. Smith. But, had they been in the majority, even, that would not have altered the fact that the Arabic-writing peoples of these two lands are dead against them, and as Mr. Smith says, "*It is the people that rule.*"

In proceeding to demonstrate the truth of the statement, I cannot attempt to follow my old friend in his excursus into the "Comparative Grammar of Semitic Languages"; being merely a practical Arabic writer and publisher, my arguments must be based upon such matter-of-fact things as today's paper and today's bookshop.

It is only fair to recognise, however, that the situation in Egypt and Syria can by no means be judged by what my friend knows of Algeria, Tunis, etc., any more than I can judge of these countries from what I know of the

case here. As the Arabic proverb says, "Sahibul-bait adrâ bimâ fihî" (The occupier of the house knows best what is in it).

In the first MOSLEM WORLD article (IV 1:59) the writer used strong language when he said: "It seems to me that those who oppose translations of the Scriptures and the publication of other literature in the modern Arabic dialects are following the policy of Rome in withholding the Word of Life from the people in their own tongue." He has not exactly impugned our *motive*, otherwise one would have replied "Honi soit qui mal y pense!" But that is not to say that we admit that slang speech is the "own tongue" of the people, i. e., the language in which *their own books* are written!

In order to explain exactly where one stands, perhaps one had better classify the possible ways of writing a book under four divisions and then comment upon each. We will call them "High," "Broad," "Bi-lingual" and "Simple," and after explaining why we object to the first three, the appeal will be on behalf of the last of the four.

1. "*High*" Language. By this is meant not merely sentences which are correct grammatically (in high-flown Quranic mould) but out-of-the-way vocabulary, such as causes the reader to turn up his lexicon. One need not go far to seek for examples. Take almost any educational primer; at the very beginning will be found the definition of the term (a bad method, educationally) to which are added the words "lughatan wastilâhan" (linguistically and conventionally), a phrase that nearly breaks the heart of a young student. All such things should be ruled out of court except when one is writing for sheiks and others of that ilk.

For a Beyrut example, take the first sentence of the Arabic translation of "The Pilgrim's Progress" "*Fasta-zhlaleu bihi*" (so I sought shelter there). In the next line he speaks of "Sinatu-n-naum" (the year of sleep—whatever that may mean). Now, as these books are usually printed unvowelled, the young student is certain to read: "Sanatu-n-naum" (the year of sleep)! But was

this stilted language the kind of thing the "Immortal Dreamer" wrote down? Never! Listen to the original

"As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den, and laid me down in that place to sleep; and, as I slept, I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and behold I saw a man clothed with rags standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back."

Possibly someone may ask if we have not published a book at the N. M. P. in "flowery" language, called "Quranic Discussions." That is quite true, but let me say, firstly, that all the hard words are explained in copious footnotes; secondly, that not only the name of the book but also the list of contents gives ample warning to the reader that the book is specially written for those educated up to the "sheikh" standard; further, that throughout this particular book its writer is discussing the exegesis of *Quranic passages*! In any case, out of our own 260 Nile Mission Press publications, not 10% are for this class of reader, and even those are being revised with a view to simplification where possible.

2. "*Broad*," or "*vulgar*" or "*slang*." This meets with more opposition than any of the others. None of the 300 mission-schools of Egypt teach their children to read in it now, merely because the parents (Christian as well as Muslim) will not tolerate it! They say, "Our children talk slang in the street free of all charge: what we pay fees to you for is to teach them the proper language." One Gospel (St. Luke) has been issued in this vulgar tongue; we printed 2000 copies of it some ten years ago, but there was never any demand for it, and the agent of the B. & F. B. S. informed me that the Egypt General Mission, to whom the making of the translation had been a labour of love, had now taken over the remainder of the edition. I have recently learned, privately, that if and when the E. G. M. prepare another, this new one will not be printed for the people at all but some copies will be struck off for the lady-workers to

take with them when themselves reading to illiterate women. For such an object one can only invoke God's blessing upon them; the case is altogether exceptional, and, further, a thing that is never printed can hardly be said to have any vogue as published literature, and therefore does not really come within the point of view of this article.

Then, again, as to Professor Macdonald's much-quoted remark about over-hearing a sheikh say *Mush kids*—well, what of it? There are several exceptionally famous phrases which will often drop out, perhaps unconsciously, in the midst of a sermon or address, and one can have nothing but commendation for the sheikh who suddenly dropped from the "drowsy" style of narrative, usual to the very "drowsy" subject of Canon Law, to a short interrogative phrase, which, one would judge, was intended to wake-up his class. But, in any case, the man was not writing a book.

But do people realise the strength of the opposition made by Egyptian Christians (of whom there are nearly a million) to the scheme, advocated *by foreigners* now and again, for publishing Scriptures and religious books in the slang language (mush-mush)? When I wrote to the editorial staff of the Bible Society asking whether they accepted two axioms in Bible-translation: (1) that God's Word should be *understood* by the people, and (2) also *respected* by the people; the object in view was merely to represent the view-point of the community of 40,000 Protestants—12,000 of whom are communicants—who are very insistent that even spoken addresses should be in "Lugha Mutawassita" (middle language), and who would never, of their own free-will, agree to books being printed in Egyptian slang. Not that there are no books in that patois, there *are*, and that is exactly why Christians cannot bear for God's Word to be in the same, for such books, without exception, conform to certain recognized laws, they are (a) indecent, (b) "comic" in a way, (c) not to be obtained from any respectable bookshop!

I have just rung up the proprietor of Al-Hilâl Library

and asked him how many of the 2,400 Arabic works in his catalogue could be had in "Lugha Ammiya" (Vulgar Tongue). He replied at once that he happened to have had by him for several years past some copies of a defunct magazine called *Al-Ghazzâla* (The Gazelle), but nothing else whatever; as to his 2,400 books, why of course they were in *Arabic*; but if we must have "Ammiya things" then we would have to go and buy on the street pavement, for such things could not be found in bookshops." (A Muslim bolstering Islam? Not at all, he is a Syrian Christian trading in Egypt, who has learned by long experience that he has to supply what the people demand, for "*It is the people that rule.*" Why should we go directly against the stream of public opinion, wasting precious effort, time and money on what the people will not accept?)

3. An attempt has been made to publish one or two short portions of Scripture, having the Beirut version in one column and a new "vulgar" translation on the opposite side. This does not seem to have satisfied anyone; and to occupy double space, during the present paper famine with its 1000 or 2000% increase in cost, is quite out of the question.

4. I would like to direct earnest attention to the *Simple Style*. Mr. Smith has quoted the late Dr. Moulton, the famous Biblical Scholar, as saying: "The Holy Ghost spoke absolutely in the language of the people," and our only possible reply is, "Unquestionably every missionary should do the same."

Visiting the large American Mission Evangelical Church at Assiut in September, 1916, I greatly enjoyed the excellent sermon preached by the pastor—a capable man and for twenty years pastor of a church of 700 to 800 communicants—and at my request he wrote it out for publication. I was told by some of the missionaries that he used Colloquial in preaching, but he appeared to me to be merely colloquial in the matter of using the vocabulary of everyday life (exactly as our Master did by the lake-shore).

For forty years the American Mission in Egypt

(United Presbyterian) used a Metrical Version of the Psalms which was above the people, but a few years ago they set out to make an entirely new version in altogether simpler language, and even with choruses as simple as Salvation Army ones, but not in "slang." We had the privilege of printing and binding three large editions, and I am absolutely sure that the thousands of pounds (and the years of labour) spent on this work have been splendidly invested.

As an example of simple, yet correct style, let us open a volume of Spurgeon's Sermons, absolutely at random and quote a few words:

"He does not gad about to go and hear this and that, but he knows what has saved his soul, and he holds fast the form of sound words. The young man is safe."

Notice that Spurgeon's simplicity does not prevent correctness of style and nicety of taste. What can be more beautiful than the following from another page, also opened at random:

"'Fear Not' is a plant which grows very plentifully in God's garden. If you look through the lily beds of Scripture you will continually find by the side of other flowers the sweet 'Fear Nots' peering out from their hiding-places of green leaves."

Now this is the kind of thing to appeal to the Arabic reader—beautiful similes with simple words. In the course of years of intimate contact with *the people*, (I have slept in native houses as many as 22 nights in a single month) many suggestions have been discussed but never yet has a native Christian asked for the "Vulgar Arabic."

To turn to a non-ecclesiastical source; the need of simplicity is recognized by M. Clément Huart, Professor at the "Ecole des Langues Orientales" of Paris, who wrote as follows in the closing sentences of his "History of Arabic Literature"—

"The Arabic tongue with its skilfully composed grammar, is sufficiently malleable to enable it to express modern thought, and at the same time to supply the whole of the Moslem East with the new technical terms

in chemistry, medicine and most sciences. *The path one would fain see the writer of the future tread is that of the search for limpidity and simplicity of expression.* Once these are attained, a brilliant career may be predicted for Arabic Literature, which like Islam itself, will endure for many an age to come." (My italics.)

There is still, however, one misconception to be cleared away from the minds of several people who have spoken and written as though Arabic (in its written form) were, like Latin, merely a corpse dressed up for exhibition by interested ecclesiastical authorities! Even so learned and exact a writer as Prof. Macdonald has said:

"Dead languages can never be evoked to living use, however strong our spells or firm our purpose. They will only walk as ghosts among us and blast and thwart our labours." (Aspects of Islam. p. 321.)

Now that would have been very much to the point if written Arabic had been a dead language! But it happens to be very much *alive*!! A vigorous staff is at work in a special department of the Egyptian Ministry of Education producing textbooks, for all subjects, in Written Arabic.

But it may be argued that school-books are apt to be as dry-as-dust as the bookmen who produce them. If so, let us look farther afield. It would be very interesting to hear (from those who imagine that Arabic and Latin are in the same condition) how many *daily* newspapers were published entirely in Latin in Italy at the time of the outbreak of War (1914)!! As to Egypt, the following list, extracted from a larger one in Zwemer's "Distinction of Islam," p. 158, is eloquent testimony to the fact that Written Arabic is not only alive but pulsating with energy.

"An impartial observer might suppose that there is hardly any nation in Europe that has a stronger incentive to learn Arabic than the English . . . their position in Egypt, where *Arabic is a living tongue*, where the press pours out an increasing stream of publications . . ." (T. W. Arnold, C. I. E., M. A., Litt. D., in *The Bulletin of the London School of Oriental Studies*.—Our Italics.)

*List of Arabic Daily Newspapers* published in Egypt before the War. (Some of these have died since the War began, but that will not affect the question of the

language used. About half of them are flourishing to-day.)

Al-Mukattam.	Al-Jarêda.	Al-Ahâli.
Al-Mu'ayyad.	Al-Afkâr.	Al-Akhhâr.
Al-Ahrâm.	Al-Mahrûsa.	Al-'Alam.
Al-Watan.	Misr-el-Fatât.	Al-Liwa.
Misr.	Wadi-n-Nil.	Ash-Sha'b.

In Written Arabic.....	15
In Colloquial Arabic.....	0

Total	15
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*Arabic Weeklies, Monthlies, etc.* (The list includes two series of novels, but that will not effect our question of the language used.)

In Written Arabic.....	46
In Slang (Indecent Comics)....	3

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As to the amount of serial reading-matter consumed in the one country of Egypt, the P. O. reports that it delivered, during 1917, local periodicals to the number of 6,976,000 and sent abroad 1,202,000. This refers to newspapers, etc., *published in Egypt only*.

Only five or six "Colloquial" papers were started (to my knowledge) during the past 20 years and none of them lived long, being suppressed by the Government or dropped for various reasons. They were all slangy and indecent and "supposed to be" comic!

In 1912, Socrates Bey Spiro (the compiler of a widely-used Egyptian Colloquial Dictionary) suggested in the preface to his new Grammar that two Colloquial daily papers should be started as an experiment, one in Cairo and one in Alexandria. Even after allowing for the War, the simple fact remains that nothing was done: such proposals always fall upon deaf ears. Why is this? Merely because the people do not want such things, which are entirely "foreign" to their taste and ideas. What need is there for any of us to try to force upon the people printed books and papers in a written language they either, cannot, or will not, tolerate?

*A Suggestion.* It would not be at all impossible for a few literary missionaries to meet a few Egyptian and



Syrian Scholars (not Algerian, for conditions vary so greatly) to discuss the possibility of further simplification of the language. Some day (perhaps eight or ten years hence) we may be able to issue a few books in a "Middle Language," somewhat analogous to present-day Hebrew. (I cannot admit that Hebrew is equivalent to our "Mush-mush" slang.) Here are a few suggestions which might, perhaps, in turn suggest others:

(a) Feminine Plural of the verb to be replaced by Common Gender Plural;

(b) The case-vowels (perhaps also the final nun of Al-Mudari') might be dropped altogether;

(c) But no shin (at the end of the verbs) and no mush-mush. Other points would come up and the commencement would be but a tentative one. One is always ready to receive suggestions.

Mr. Smith quotes Renan, who says:

*"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 forms have developed in opposite ways."*

Now that is what I call the "Middle Language" and that is what I hope to see revived some day. Who will co-operate in this?

*In the meantime*, much may be done by way of insisting upon greater simplicity. I have endeavoured to make a strong point of this in my own Arabic grammar course, "Arabic Simplified." In the course of the first 150 lessons I have, as far as possible, used only words of every day occurrence. The last fifty lessons could not be conformed to this rule, for they were translated from a Government Grammar.

The following extract from our N. M. P. "Regulations" as to MSS offered for publication, whether by our own staff or by outside helpers may be of interest:

1. Do not be too literal, think of the idiom of the language you are *translating into*, more than the one you are translating from. (Let your Arabic translation read like *free, original* Arabic, with Oriental proverbs, not Western ones.)

2. On the other hand, translate *all the meaning*, do not leave out important points.

3. Choose the middle path between the profuse style which writes twenty words where ten would do, and the "clever" style of condensed epigrammatic writing. (Epigram is clever in original writing, better not attempt it in translating.)

4. If an allusion is not likely to be understood by the reader, a simple footnote is allowable.

5. Write in clear, correct language but (with the exception of books for educated students) *use simple words that everybody understands*.

The matter of simplicity is of intense importance, since our message, dealing as it does with eternal verities, is literally one of "life and death." Yet, on the other hand, we have to put it in a palatable form, for if it be not accepted by the people, we labour in vain.

ARTHUR T. UPSON.

*Cairo.*