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In copertina: Rapallo, circa 1932. Da sinistra: Pietro Minoletti (1879-1960, dirigente della Magneti Marelli), Juan Ramón Masoliver (1910-1997), Basil Bunting (1900-1985), Eugen Haas (1904-1969). Masoliver e Haas erano lettori, rispettivamente di spagnolo e tedesco, all'Università di Genova. Collaboravano con l'inglese Bunting al "Supplemento Letterario" (1932-33) del "Mare".

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Modern Standard Arabic
and the Teaching of Arabic as a Foreign Language:
Some Cultural and Linguistic Considerations[1]

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This paper highlights the need for a critical understanding of the concept of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as it is used in textbooks and curricula of Arabic as a foreign language in Western universities. Despite the lack of a widely agreed-upon definition of Modern Standard Arabic, in teaching practice MSA is portrayed as a unified, written and spoken variety. We argue that MSA presents itself as a tool deriving from a defensive Arab stance which refuses the Western "orientalist" characterization of Arabic as a fragmented language. We believe that the concept of proficiency underlying MSA-based educational materials and teaching practices is the manifestation of a new ideology which results from Arab-Western collaboration, i.e. a "neo-orientalist" approach. We argue that by considering diglossia as a cultural artifice of Western colonialism, MSA-centered teaching practices efface the complex sociolinguistic landscape of contemporary Arabic communication. We advocate the adoption of educational practices based on a more realistic representation of contemporary Arabic and its complexity.

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[1] Although the ideas of this paper come from a joint research project of both authors, in the present article Manuela E.B. Giolfo is to be held responsible for paragraphs sections 1, 2, 3 and 5, and Francesco L. Sinatora for paragraphs sections 4, 6, 7 and 8.

Manuela E.B. Giolfo, Francesco L. Sinatora

1. Introduction

This paper highlights the need for a critical understanding of the concept of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as it is used in textbooks and curricula of Arabic as a foreign language in Western universities. Despite the lack of a widely agreed-upon definition of MSA, some linguists conceive of it as a non-uniform language form used primarily for written communication, and as a close relative of Modern Arabic, which arose in the nineteenth-century Arab world as an instrument to integrate Western modern, secular and positivist thought into the Arab society. In the teaching practice, on the other hand, MSA is portrayed as a unified, written and spoken variety. In this paper it is suggested that MSA-centered teaching practices may hide neo-orientalist intents.

As the Indian scholar Avadhesh Kumar Singh observed:

> Neo-Orientalism stands for discourse about Orient by the people of the Orient located in the West, or shuttling between the two. [...] Neo-Orientalism, the new avatar of Orientalism, is a body of the obtaining discursive practices about the Orient by the people from the Orient (that is the difference) located in the non-Orient for the people of the non-Orient. [...] Neo-Orientalism (Neo-neo-Orientalism) in its latest manifestation is a discourse about the Orient, constructed by the Occident (West = America) and Orient in collaboration.[2]

While Arab pedagogues and teachers declare that their adoption of MSA rests on practical and pedagogical reasons, we advance the hypothesis that the image of Arabic as a unified written and spoken language denies the complexity of contemporary Arabic, which results in an "emulation" of the languages of postcolonial powers. This unifying intent may derive from an Arab defensive stance toward Western "orientalist" representations of Arabic as a multifarious language. In fact, such Western representations, which

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[2] http://avadheshkumarsingh.com/Orientalism%20and%20Neo.pdf.

arose in conjunction with the emergence of Western hegemony, were considered as an instrument of divide and rule and contributed to the Arab perception of their linguistic reality as inferior and vulnerable.

The learning and teaching of Arabic as a foreign language in the 21st century has been defined by both the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and by the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in terms of "proficiency". Students of Arabic should achieve a high level of language skills and should be able to function effectively in almost any Arabic-speaking context. However, numerous Western universities seem not to care enough about the effective application of such guidelines to the development of their curricula of Arabic studies. In particular, we observed that disinterest is shown by some universities toward the concept of native speaker proficiency, which should function as the pivot between the guidelines and their assessment procedures on the one hand and curriculum and syllabus design on the other. As conversational native speaker proficiency essentially rests on colloquials, such a disinterest seems to reflect the absence of the real need to communicate in an interactive manner - that is to say, to engage in an authentic dialogue with a native Arabic speaker, despite the complexity of such a task. It could also be ascribed to Western neo-colonialist condescension, deriving from the awareness of belonging to a hegemonic society, already accused of being "orientalist".

The analysis of the Arab and the Western representations of Arabic throughout history conducted in this paper, led us to the hypothesis that MSA, as it is taught in some Western universities, represents Arabic as Arabs want the West to perceive it. As Western academic institutions have furthered this representation in their MSA-based curricula, MSA has come to be associated with the language to be used to communicate with "the Western foreigner". The wishful vision of MSA as a unifying and unified linguistic reality should be seen as an obstacle towards a genuine, more authentic and less ideological, understanding of the linguistic situation of Arab society. To this end, Western universities should engage with linguists in a careful consideration of the concept of "proficiency in Arabic" with the aim of implementing the results of

such a reflection in curricular design, however challenging this task may appear.

2. The Western "utilitarian" interest in Arabic

The past ten years have witnessed a dramatic expansion of programs of Arabic as a foreign language in Europe and in the United States. More importantly, collaborations between Arab and Western scholars in the preparation of teaching materials of Arabic as a foreign language have affirmed their dominance in the American academia. Such collaborations have gone hand in hand with the production and wide diffusion of textbooks as well as the implementation of curricula based predominantly or exclusively on Modern Standard Arabic.

The linguistic concept of MSA was introduced in the 1960s with the implementation of audio-lingual methods for the teaching of Arabic. Proficiency was conceptualized as the learners' achievement of overall communicative competence in the four linguistic skills, namely speaking, listening, as well as reading and writing. A series of widely used textbooks based on the acquisition of MSA, which was published by the University of Michigan, included "Elementary Modern Standard Arabic" (Abboud 1968), and "Intermediate Modern Standard Arabic" (Abboud 1971). As Ryding (2006: 14) observed, paraphrasing Bernhardt:

> Whereas the knowledge of classical languages may have been the traditional European mark of a gentleman and a scholar, as Bernhardt points out, in postcolonial America a much more "utilitarian" viewpoint arose that would "prefigure a 20th-century view of functionalism in language use" (1998, p. 42). Bernhardt goes on to discuss the tensions that arose in young America regarding issues of teaching foreign languages as opposed to vigorously fostering the spread of English - issues of cultural and linguistic assimilation, elitism and functionality. For example, she quotes the influential Coleman report of 1929 that recommended a strict focus on reading skills for foreign languages (p. 48). With American involvement in World War II, it became clear that in terms of

foreign language capacity, there was a "critical deficit that
had to be remedied essentially overnight". (49)

If the interest in the achievement of overall communicative
competence in Arabic through MSA appears to be more connected
with reasons of "utilitarian nature", functionalism underlying the
study of Arabic in the West is not at all new.

Europeans approached the study of Arabic without a genuine
interest in the Arab and Islamic culture in itself. In fact, Arabic was
initially studied with a polemical intent, that is to refute the
principles of Islam. Subsequently, Europeans began to realize that
Arabic was needed to understand Western philosophical thought and
the roots of Western civilization through the reading of Aristotle's
work as it had been elaborated by Arab scholars. It was only when
the original Greek sources became available to Western scholars in
the 15th century that the West discovered that the Arabs' translations
of the Aristotelian ideas were permeated with Islamic thought.

The interest in the study of Arabic further survived as an
ancillary to the study of medicine, mathematics, astronomy, as well
as biblical Hebrew. However, Islam was still perceived as a threat to
Christian Europe. With the arrival of the Enlightenment in the
eighteenth century came an interest in exotic languages and cultures,
and Arabic became part of the so-called "Oriental languages and
literatures". This characterization went hand in hand with a
conception of the Arab world as backward and underdeveloped as
opposed to the modern and "superior" Western civilization. The next
step was the nineteenth-century shift towards a study of Arabic as
one of the Semitic languages, with a classificatory intent, within the
new paradigm of Semitic comparative linguistics. In the wake of
these new trends in European linguistics, a theoretical interest in the
Arabic dialects arose, placing the Arabic language within the new
comparative paradigm.

From this historical bird's eye view, it emerges that up to the
eighteenth-century the Western interest in Arabic was exclusively in
its literary and codified form, which was consistent with the Arabs'
perception of Arabic. Only at a later stage did an exclusively Western
interest in Arabic dialectology emerge. While some Western scholars

continued focusing solely on literary Arabic, thus neglecting dialects, early Western dialectologists devoted themselves entirely to the study of Arabic colloquials. However, it was only in the twentieth century that the linguistic complexity intrinsic to the peculiarity of Arabic was taken into consideration. Ferguson (1959: 334-335) described this complexity in terms of diglossia as:

> [...] a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects [Low] of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety [High], the vehicle of a large and respected body of literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.

In most Western universities Arabic is currently taught in departments of social sciences and international studies. Although a communicative competence in Arabic seems to be required for the study of Arabic within this new academic framework, and despite the complexity of Arabic portrayed by linguists, such a communicative competence often focuses on one single linguistic form based on literary Arabic, namely Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). We also note that the place of Arabic in Western universities, if compared with previous historical periods, remains that of an ancillary to the study of other disciplines. In fact, the contemporary interest in the study of Arabic appears to be framed by the major political, economic, social and cultural issues that dominate Western discourses and Western international agendas.

3. The Arabs' image of Arabic

As observed by Versteegh (2006), the Arabs' interest in their language and civilization prior to colonialism was absolute. Their approach to Western cultures through the study of European

languages was only a pragmatic choice dictated by military, diplomatic and commercial interests.

The first centuries of the Arab-Islamic civilization are characterized by a process of standardized language codification based on two sources of literary Arabic, namely the Qur'an and pre-Islamic poetry, which constitute at the same time the cornerstones of the Arab-Islamic civilization and of Arab-Islamic identity, respectively its religious and its ethnic components. The reasons for this standardized codification arose from the need to facilitate communication within the rising empire, to maintain control and to regulate the expansion of lexicon in the new social and geographic context. This is probably what scholars of the calibre of Ibn al-Sarrāj (1985, quoted in Versteegh 2006) meant when they argued that grammar was supposed to lead the people "towards" (*naḥw*) the language of the Arabs, that is to say a form of literary Arabic which would expressingly and ideally represent the Arab-Islamic civilization. This standardized literary language, as it was codified by early grammarians, was supposed to constitute a tool of linguistic as well as cultural hegemony. During this historical phase the purpose that guided scholars was twofold: on the one hand, the intent was to describe this language, and on the other, it was to teach it in the newly conquered territories. The goal was to make the Arabs themselves aware of the rising of an Arab-Islamic civilization as a politically independent and a culturally self-referential reality. The "idealizing" scope of this phase is represented by the standardized language codification process itself, whose ideological component was functional to the political and socio-cultural project of the Neo Empire. In the light of these considerations, this standardization process appears to be a form of linguistic policy informed by the creation of a conquering Arab and Islamic unity.

If at the beginning of the Arab-Islamic conquests the standardization coincided with the creation of a linguistic ideology based on a religious and an ethnic component, the latter was reinforced during the classical age through a mythification of the "authentic native speaker", i.e. the Bedouin. Although prior to the classical period grammarians already claimed that they were basing themselves on "Bedouin informants", together with the above

mentioned literary sources, it is not clear at all whether they actually codified a uniformed language, i.e. the language of the Qur'an, that of pre-Islamic poetry and that of the Bedouin tribes, or rather a religious-poetical *koine* used as an artificial language transcending the Bedouin tribes' colloquials. It is in the classical period that the Bedouin was idealized as the authentic Arabic speaker whose language was to be imitated and reflected in grammars, though, as it has been pointed out by Arabic language historians (cf. Versteegh 2001; Owens 2006), grammarians of this period already had a preconceived idea of what was correct, and were prone to elicit from their Bedouin informants what they wanted to hear. Such an idealization of the Bedouin informants could be seen as functional to the need to introduce the Arabs to their linguistic ancestors, or Arabic proto-speakers. As noted by Versteegh, in fact, the target of this grammar approach were all Arabic native speakers. The Bedouin represents the ideal speaker of the Arab-Islamic civilization, and epitomizes its ethnic component on top of the Islamic component provided for by the Quranic source. Arabic emerges from this phase as both the language of Islam and the language of the Arabs. Hence, during the pre-classical and the classical phases, an idealization of Arabic was functional to establishing and reinforcing the Arab-Islamic hegemony. What is worthwhile to note is that both the Arabs and the Europeans were, for different and partial reasons, interested either exclusively in the study of standard Arabic or exclusively in the study of Arabic dialects (this latter interest being shown only by European linguists). There was no place for a holistic vision of Arabic as a complex linguistic reality.

But again, there is a certain tendency in contemporary Western academia to teach Arabic detached from a comprehensive understanding of its central role within the Arab-Islamic civilization. This conveys the misleading message to learners that it is possible to reach communicative competence without on the one hand a thorough understanding of the historical self-reflection of the Arabs through language and on the other disregarding at the same time the trace of the evolution of the language and what native speakers actually *speak*.

4. Arabic and the nahḍa

Despite their political and administrative subordination to the Ottoman Empire, the Arabs perceived that they belonged to a hegemonic civilization based on a cultural and linguistic unity. Due to their appreciation of an indissoluble link between Arabic and Islam, as well as to their strong sense of belonging to an "Arab and Islamic" civilization, the Arabs perceived the Arabic language as superior.[3] This perception of superiority remained essentially unaltered until the nineteenth century, when the Arabs were confronted with Western modernity and with the rising colonial aspirations of France and England in the Arab World.

France and England considered the religion and the language of their colonies as backward and an obstacle to their *mission civilisatrice*. The idea prevailed that European language and culture had to be introduced in the colonies (cf. Versteegh 2006). Meanwhile, for the first time the West realized that they needed to communicate with the Arabs (and not only read their literary production) on a larger scale. Arabic appeared to Europeans as a heterogeneous, fragmented reality. It was not only the language of Islam or of literary texts, but it was also many different spoken forms. The interest in the spoken dialects - which started in the previous centuries with the Christian missionary work - also grew simultaneously with the emergence of a new discipline, that of anthropology, whose aim was to study the roots of humankind in all its forms, including the study of primitive human language, represented by the vernaculars of remote and exotic tribes.

Western emphasis on Arabic dialects was at odds with the Arabs' attachment to *fuṣḥā* and with the consequent Arab lack of interest in the vernaculars. The Arabs' stance towards *fuṣḥā* and the dialects can be understood in the light of Eisele's (2002) *topoi* of Unity, Purity, Continuity and Competition. These *topoi* are recurrent motifs in the most dominant tradition about which Arab representations of Arabic

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[3] On the Arabs' perception of their language as superior, see also Suleiman 2003: 45-46.

cluster that involve the valorization of *fuṣḥā* and the consequent depreciation of colloquials. Through the first *topos* linguistic diversity is seen as a threat to cultural, religious and political unity. Purity refers to *fuṣḥā* as the language of an ethnic tradition. Continuity emphasizes the transmission of the written sources of this tradition. Finally, while Arabic initially had to "compete" with Persian and Turkish, in modern times it is in competition with languages representing colonial and post-colonial interests, namely French, English and Spanish on the one hand, and American English and Russian on the other. Furthermore, while until the colonial period the Arabs regarded Arabic dialects with disinterest, the stigmatization of these dialects emerged consistent with the following rising trends outlined by Ferguson (1959: 336-337):

> (1) More widespread literacy (whether for economic, ideological or other reasons), (2) broader communication among different regional and social segments of the community (e.g. for economic, administrative, military, or ideological reasons), (3) desire for a full-fledged standard "national" language as an attribute of autonomy or of sovereignty. When these trends appear, leaders in the community begin to call for unification of the language, and for that matter, actual trends toward unification begin to take place.

Moreover, the Western interest in "what until then had virtually no value" to Arabs contributed to the perception of Western scholarship as "orientalist". In other words, by creating an image of the Arabs which did not correspond to how the Arabs viewed themselves, Western scholars and their academic interests were considered to be at service of Western hegemonic powers and their strategy of *divide et impera*.

If the Arabs' perceived association between the Western growing interest in the dialects and their colonial aspirations led them to think that their cultural identity could be threatened by their complex linguistic reality – as this latter seemed to be opposed to the unity of the literary language, symbol of the Arab and Islamic civilization –, as a matter of fact, as observed by Versteegh (2006: 8), the European

colonial powers destroyed the existing educational system. Such educational system was characterized by – and aimed at perpetuating through the spread of the literary language – a holistic conception of Arab and Islamic civilization together with its superiority. The destruction of such this system was a fierce attack on the core of Arab cultural identity.

Furthermore, the "encounter" with the West and its modernity triggered an Arab reaction known as *nahḍa*. The *nahḍa*, or "Arab renaissance", initially emerged as a cultural notion and laid the foundations for the Arab political nationalist thought which developed in the second half of the nineteenth century. While several scholars (Antonius, 1938; Hourani, 1962; Haddad, 1970; Kallas 2008) argued that the debate over modernization had its roots in the work of Christian missionaries from the beginning of the 18th century, other authors (Tibawi, 1971, Khoury, 2003 [1983]) argued that the *nahḍa* was a drift that came from within the Arab world. Quoting Swedenburg (1980), Khoury (2003 [1983]: 110, footnote 14) explained that:

> The *nahḍa* then was not so much a missionary-inspired resuscitation of a "dead" language, as the reworking, modification, and streamlining of the Arabic language by native Syrians (with missionary ties) to make it serviceable for the introduction of Western ideas, particularly positivist science, into the area.

This Arab "awakening" or "rebirth" arose from the desire to integrate Western positivist ideas in the Arab society and to adjust to the concept of Western modernity. This desire, which seems to have emerged from an unprecedented sense of inferiority and backwardness vis-à-vis the Western culture and which culminated in a sense of vulnerability during the colonial period, triggered a debate within the Arab world as it was clear to all that societal modernization could not happen without linguistic modernization.

From this time on, it seems to us that the Arabs began reflecting on their own language and civilization from a defensive perspective as their image of Arabic began to be influenced by their experience

as being subordinate to a new hegemonic system. The sense of linguistic fragmentation which had been emphasized by the West and which derived from the presence of spoken dialects which differ from the literary language, known otherwise as diglossia, could only be overcome through the implementation of a renewed unified and unifying language, i.e. a renewed process of standardization.

While conservatives advocated the adoption of Classical Arabic and the rejection of all foreign linguistic elements, others argued that modernization could only occur by elevating the dialects to fully-fledged standard languages. A third group, that of modernists, had the upper hand. These called for a modern unifying language (i.e. Modern Arabic), which, based on a reform of Classical Arabic in order to cope with modern European notions, would serve the political purpose of uniting the Arab world. Conservatives and modernists argued that:

> H[igh] must be adopted because it connects the community with its glorious past or with the world community and because it is a naturally unifying factor as opposed to the divisive nature of the L[ow] dialects. In addition to these two fundamentally sound arguments there are usually pleas based on the beliefs of the community in the superiority of H: that it is more beautiful, more expressive, more logical, that it has divine sanction, or whatever their specific beliefs may be (Ferguson 1959: 336-337).

Advocates of colloquial, conversely, argued that:

> Some variety of L must be adopted because it is closer to the real thinking and feeling of the people; it eases the educational problem since people have already acquired a basic knowledge of it in early childhood; and it is a more effective instrument of communication at all levels. (Id.)

5. The rise of Modern Arabic

Monteil (1960) defined "modern" or "living" Arabic (Pellat), neo-Arabic or "neo-Classical" Arabic (Lecerf), "median" Arabic (Berque), "New High" Arabic (Wehr), "contemporary literary" Arabic (Semënov and de Baranov), or "Modern" Arabic (British and American scholars) as a modern form of Classical, that is regular, written, literal, literary Arabic. Highlighting such a "continuity", Arabs call it as they have always been calling the literary language in opposition to their vernaculars, that is, simply, *al-ʿarabiyya* "Arabic", or *al-fuṣḥā* "the most eloquent [language]", exactly as they would do with Middle Ages Arabic. Rarely do they use more specific terms such as *al-ʿarabiyya al-ḥadītha* "new Arabic", *al-ʿarabiyya al-ʿaṣriyya* "Modern Arabic", or *al-ʿarabiyya al-muʿāṣira* "contemporary Arabic".

As observed by Lecerf (1933: 6), Modern Arabic, before becoming a literary language, was primarily the language of a group of nationalist movements and their press. In 1960, Monteil quoted some remarks concerning the unification of modern Chinese on the basis of the masses' need for a common national, unified and normalized language:

> The influence of this common language is limited. Plays in this language do not attract massive audiences, some movies have dialect subtitles, the radio broadcasts programs in dialect as well as others in the "common" language, and also in numerous schools teaching occurs in the dialect". (Lo Tchang-Pei, Director of the Institute of Linguistics, 1956; quoted in Monteil 1960: 26)

Monteil (Id.) concluded that such remarks could apply to the situation of Modern Arabic, described as:

> The "common" language of communication, of the institutions and the academia, of the press and the radio, a language that allows an educated Lebanese or an educated Iraqi to communicate with a Moroccan, thus an inter-Arabic and pan-Arabic language, which needs to be at the same time

according to the expression of Sāṭiʿ al-Ḥuṣrī (1958: 42) "unifying" (*muwaḥḥida*) and "unified" (*muwaḥḥada*).

Monteil at first characterizes Modern Arabic as a written language, not distinguishable from "Classical Arabic" in terms of grammar system, with the exception of some syntactic simplifications and innovations. One important trait of Modern Arabic seems to be that its phraseology and stylistics "contain elements of European origin, in contrast with the spirit of the 'Arabiyya' ". This trait arises from "the practical need to translate new notions" (Monteil 1960: 26). Monteil then concludes that Modern Arabic has also become a *spoken* language. Interestingly, Lecerf (1932: 186) had noted that "the daily use of neo-classical Arabic in teaching, administration and politics, makes of it what it was not anymore, i.e. a not only written, but also a spoken language", and Wehr (1934: 10) had predicted, somewhat enthusiastically, that "in the future the classical language will be more and more the daily language of educated people". This prediction did not come true.

In fact, despite the defensive pan-Arab nationalist myths, the daily language of "educated people" continues to be one of the regional dialects. Although the speaker deems suitable and tries to speak the classical in exceptional situations, it is the syntax of colloquial Arabic (cf. Brustad 2000) that actually insinuates itself among syntactic borrowings from European languages. The syntax of colloquial Arabic functions as an unaware scaffolding, (cf. Giolfo, Sinatora 2011) shaping the form of the expression on which the contemporary speaker superposes the westernizing lexicon which continues arising from the "modern" needs. Moreover, the syntax of colloquials also insinuates itself in the modern form of written Arabic which was also defined as "the Arabic of the press", Ibrāhīm al-Yāzijī's (1899) *lughat al-jarāʾid* "the language of newspapers".

Some Western linguists, like Lecerf (1932: 186) – who affirmed that "classical Arabic lives on among the educated layers of society not only as a written, but as a more or less aware norm for the dialect" and that "the model is so present in the spirit that it frequently penetrates the structure of dialectal sentences, as soon as the level of the conversation goes above daily topics" – and Wehr,

seemed to allude to a sort of codification/standardization of Modern Arabic. However, the presence of the colloquial syntax that we observe today both in the spoken and in the written expression seems to corroborate Louis Brunot's (1956) statements that the concept of Modern Arabic as a standardized form or as a codified use of the language actually appears as "very artificial and more or less fabricated". Moreover, we cannot anymore conclude with Lecerf (1954: 37) that it is only due to "the clumsiness of some people" that written Arabic seems not to be able to serve as a means of natural oral expression.

6. Modern Standard Arabic: a non-uniform and non-standard variety

The alleged uniformity of Modern Written Arabic (often called Modern Standard Arabic) has been refuted by several recent studies (Parkinson & Ibrahim 1999; Van Mol 2003; Ibrahim 2009; Wilmsen 2010), which showed that spoken varieties exert a considerable influence on written Arabic at the lexical, phonological and syntactic levels.

An explanation for the non-uniform nature of Modern (Standard) Arabic was provided by Badawi (1973), who observed that unlike the *fuṣḥā al-turāth* (which is Badawi's term to describe Classical and Quranic Arabic as they are used today), *fuṣḥā al-'aṣr* (contemporary *fuṣḥā*) covers a variety of topics and domains of knowledge, from medicine to the arts, as well as the human and social sciences. Moreover, it is used in "radio news bulletins and political commentaries, and previously prepared and read-out educated speech" (Badawi 1973: 90). Furthermore, Badawi recognizes a cohesive role of Modern Arabic between past and present Arab society, by arguing that "what is represented through the *fuṣḥā al-'aṣr* is the effort of society to connect with societies which preceded it and the effort to subjugate new ideas to the language structure and lexicon" (Id.). Such a variety of usage has, according to Badawi, two main consequences. On the one hand, it poses impediments to grammatically-correct oral expression, in that the speaker needs to devote more attention to the content rather than to linguistic correctness, and in particular to case endings. On the

other hand, the divergence of domains expressed through this linguistic level has caused a linguistic disunity.

What emerges from the studies on Modern (Standard) Arabic conducted by European and Arab scholars is that the alleged standardization thereof is not supported by linguistic evidence. We advance the hypothesis here that the very concept of "standard" derives from a linguistic idealization which is deeply rooted in the Arab dominant linguistic ideology characterized by the above-mentioned *topoi* of Unity, Purity, Continuity and Competition. This idealization underlies the contemporary Arab representation of Arabic which led to the conceptualization of Modern Standard Arabic, as it is portrayed in Western textbooks and curricula of Arabic as a foreign language.

7. MSA, a Barthesian Myth?

As some authors (Ryding 2005, Ibrahim 2009) recently pointed out, a fully-agreed definition of MSA does not yet exist. Kaye (1972) argued that MSA is an ill-defined variety, in that it can only be defined by saying what it is not. From the numerous attempts of linguists to clarify the status of MSA, some of which have been reported in Ibrahim (2009: 22-23), Mejdell's (2008) discussion on the presumed "standardness" of MSA was, in our view, the most significant. Aligning with Mejdell, who "concludes that although it serves some criteria of the standard language such as codification and elaboration, it [MSA] does not cover the criteria of being the spoken variety in most required formal spoken registers" (2009: 23), we think that the very notion of "standard" is crucial to understand how this concept has been applied in textbooks and curricula of Arabic as a foreign language.

Although numerous linguists (Meiseles 1980; El-Hassan 1977; Mahmoud 1982) described MSA primarily as a written language sharing many characteristics and uses with Modern Arabic and Modern Literary Arabic, and many others showed that written Modern Arabic is non-uniform, its alleged standardization, we argue, refers to its idealization as a variety which is fully homogenized and that can serve both written *and* spoken purposes.

As we stated at the beginning of this contribution, the term MSA was introduced in textbooks of teaching Arabic as a foreign language in the US. Although it could be argued that the English term "standard Arabic" may evoke that first process of standardization of Arabic by the early grammarians, of which MSA constitutes a "modern" version, in language textbooks "standard" seems to convey the meaning of a unified, written and spoken language. The teaching of MSA, in fact, emerged after the Second World War to help Western learners reach full writing, reading as well as speaking and listening proficiency in a diglossic language. The focus on MSA as an instrument to enhance oral proficiency in Arabic is clearly expressed in recent textbooks (Abboud and McCarus 1983; Abboud, al-Kasimi 1997; Brustad, Al-Batal, and al-Tonsi 1995 and 1996, Middle East Center for Arab Studies (MECAS) 1959 and 1965, Rammuny 1994, Schulz et al. 2000). In their introduction to "Standard Arabic: an Elementary-Intermediate Course", Schulz et al. (2000: ix), for example, stated that:

> This book is based on the well-tried *Lehrbuch des modernen Arabisch* by Guenther Krahl, Wolfgang Reuschel and Eckehard Schulz and has been conceived as a comprehensive course for beginners, in which particular attention is given to a speaking-focused training. It presents the basic grammar, vocabulary and phraseology of written and spoken Modern Standard Arabic (MSA).

Schulz, in his "A student grammar of modern standard Arabic" (2004: xiv), clearly stated that MSA is a written language, as the spoken domain is covered by dialects:

> The Arabic dialects are not included in this book because its focus is on (official) written usage, and this usage does not differ dramatically between Morocco in the West and Iraq in the East in the field of grammar.

Moreover, while linguists emphasized the difficulty in identifying the boundaries between Modern Literary Arabic and Modern (Standard) Arabic (cf. Ibrahim 2009, Gully 1993), textbooks suggest the

equation between Modern Standard Arabic and the Arabic used in the media:

> When conceiving the texts, particular attention was paid to impart and to consolidate those patterns which occur over and over again in spoken and written MSA and to provide the learner with a guide to master different communicative situations and strategies. The book also contains more or less timeless news and exercises to practice listening comprehension and to introduce the style of the news in newspapers and in radio and television to the students. (Schulz et al. 2000: ix).

What emerges from Schulz et al.'s introduction is that MSA is primarily media Arabic. Given the strong link between the diffusion of the press and that of Modern Arabic since the nineteenth century, and since linguists showed that some media (cf. Blanc 1960) were responsible for oral expression in Modern Arabic and for the diffusion of a more uniform language which facilitated cross-regional understanding, the focus of textbooks on media Arabic justifies the use of Modern Arabic as a spoken language. While textbook authors portrayed an image of MSA as a unified written and spoken language, and linguists emphasized the written and fragmented nature thereof, we argue with Wilmsen (2006: 135, note 2) that MSA as it is presented in textbooks and curricula of Arabic as a foreign language in Western universities is:

> [...] somewhat misleading in that it fosters in novice learners the impression that they are about to acquire a form of the language that is in some sense analogous to other standard spoken language forms, for instance, RP English, which it is not. In the more sophisticated, it serves to maintain the fiction that this form is standard to all regions of the Arab world.

It seems to us that the ideological load of MSA outweighs its linguistic component. In what follows, we advance the hypothesis, based on the definition of MSA as a highly ideological and idealized variety, that MSA emerged and affirmed its presence as a neo-

orientalist tool in curricula of Arabic as a foreign language. Despite the fact that textbooks of Arabic as a foreign language, such as Alosh (2000) and Brustad, al-Batal, al-Tonsi (1995 and 1996) acknowledge that vernaculars play an important role in Arabic usage, the role of MSA is predominant due to, according to Alosh, practical and pedagogical reasons. For example, Alosh affirms that the limited nature of the classroom impedes the replication of native speaker performance. Moreover, he argues that the teaching of MSA meets the primary goal of academic graduate programs, i.e. reading; it avoids initial confusion among the students; it provides students with oral skills which they will need in any case at higher levels of proficiency; it lays the foundation for future acquisition of dialects (which, according to him, occurs through simplification of the more complex structure of MSA), and finally it is a desirable solution because MSA is readily understood throughout the Arab world. The use of MSA is not only predominant in textbooks, but also in teaching curricula and practices.

An understanding of MSA as it is used in textbooks and language curricula requires an awareness of the strong ideological nature constituting it. Such ideological component has to do with how spoken and written Arabic varieties and languages of colonial/postcolonial powers are perceived within the Arab world. In the Arab perception of Arabic varieties, for example, written Arabic is associated with authority and power, as well as with Unity, Purity, Continuity and Competition, while spoken Arabic traditionally evokes intimacy, spontaneity, as well as fragmentation, vulgarity and vulnerability. (cf. Anghelescu 1993, Haeri 2003, Suleiman 2011). On the other hand, postcolonial languages are associated with innovation, modernity, quality, media and advertising (cf. Suleiman 2004, Stadlbauer 2010).

On top of this, and most importantly, due to the pervasive implementation of MSA-based curricula, MSA is considered the language of communication with the "other", i.e. the "language of the (neo-colonialist) foreigner".

In light of these considerations, we posit that the neo-orientalist component which characterizes the teaching of MSA as a foreign language is twofold. On the one hand, it corresponds to the Arabs'

desire to provide an image of Arabic as a unified, uniform, modern language just like any European language appears to be. Such a representation derives from a defensive stance which is deeply rooted in the colonial period, during which the Arabs perceived the Western scholars' emphasis on the fragmentation of Arabic as an instrument of *divide et impera*. From the Arab perspective, MSA appears as an Arabic *ad usum delphini* for the West, in that it is an Arabic expurgated of the complexity intrinsic to its diglossic system. It is a form of neo-orientalism in the sense that it corresponds to the image the Arabs in the West offer about the Arab world for Westerners. On the other hand, the perpetuation of MSA-based teaching practices results from a complying Western attitude. While such an attitude may protect from the risk of being identified as "orientalists", it sadly prevents university learners from acquiring a holistic understanding of the Arab-Islamic society and its complex linguistic reality. Ironically, the pedagogues' characterization of MSA as a practical ideology-free solution to achieve educational purposes while overcoming diglossia, as well as any religious or regional connotation, appears to be a Barthesian myth, in that it conceals its inherent ideological, neo-orientalist nature.

8. Concluding remarks

In this contribution we shed light on the utilitarian motivations underlying the Western interest in Arabic throughout history. Furthermore, we envisaged the Arabs' representation of Arabic within a framework of dynamics between hegemonic powers. The emergence of Modern Arabic as the modern written language in the nineteenth century occurred as a response to a sense of inferiority, vulnerability and backwardness which could only be overcome through the introduction of secular and positivist concepts through language. While until then Arabic marked Arab-Islamic identity, the perceived incompatibility between European secular notions and Islam resulted in an Arab emphasis on the ethnic over the religious component. In the second half of the twentieth century, through the introduction and the diffusion of MSA in textbooks and curricula of Arabic as a foreign language in Western universities, Modern Arabic,

which is used primarily as a written medium, was extended to the spoken domain in the teaching practice. We showed that MSA presents itself as a tool deriving from a defensive Arab stance which refuses the Western "orientalist" characterization of Arabic as a fragmented language. Instead, it portrays a fully Westernized and modernized Arab identity.

The concept of proficiency underlying MSA-based educational materials and teaching practices appears to us to be the manifestation of a new ideology which results from an Arab-Western collaboration, i.e. a "neo-orientalist" approach. While Arabic linguistics moves towards more and more thorough descriptions of the complexity of the Arabic language system, teaching practice and curricula seem to continue to adhere to a very narrow representation of the language. We argue that by considering diglossia as a cultural artifice of Western colonialism, MSA-centered teaching practices efface the complex sociolinguistic landscape of contemporary Arabic communication.

The "neo-orientalist" approach hypothesized in this contribution seems responsible for an unwillingness to start a "continuing dialogue between assessment procedures and syllabus design" (Eisele 2006: 219). Beyond ideology, and language policy, such a dialogue should be inspired by both the proficiency-oriented guidelines of the frameworks for the teaching of foreign languages (i.e. CEFR and ACTFL).Ultimately, it is such a continuing dialogue that should inform the general guidelines with a practice of assessment procedures, syllabus and curriculum design stemming from the consideration of the peculiarity of the Arabic language system.

To sum up, this contribution urges the adoption of educational practices based on a more realistic representation of contemporary Arabic and its complexity. We hope to have made clear that embracing the complexity of Arabic does not mean adopting an "orientalist" approach. Rather, it would represent a reverse tendency with respect to the Western utilitarian approach to Arabic towards a more holistic study of the language of the Arabs and Islam. Such an approach would ultimately distance itself from "orientalist" and "neo-orientalist" positions and the connotations these words

represent, and would bring us closer to the very perception the Arabs had of their culture and society in the pre-colonial age.

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