

The Method of Reform

by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn
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I know only three paths to linguistic reform — old ones, not new — and I do not claim to have invented them, for others before me have already walked these ways.

The first is to publish and revive the ancient works of the Arabs, the books of science and literature they composed, so that people may read them and draw from them two inevitable benefits.

The first benefit is to learn the authentic styles of Arabic, to absorb its most refined expressions, and to appreciate the vastness of the minds and intellects of those who came before us.

The second is to awaken in readers a feeling for that lost grandeur and vanished honor — a feeling strong enough to stir them to rise and reclaim it, to restore to the Arab nation the dignity and high political standing it once enjoyed.

Linked to this method, too, is the translation of useful works written by Europeans, which can broaden our minds and elevate our souls.

The late *Ustadh al-Imam* — may God be pleased with him — advanced far along this path. He founded the *Society for the Revival of Arabic Books*, which published *Al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ* and other works. But death came before his mission could be completed, and the Society's work dissolved, leaving no trace behind.

Last year I read that the government, through the efforts of my esteemed teacher *Aḥmad Zaki Pasha*, had issued a decree on this matter. Yet a whole year has passed without result, and I fear this initiative may have met the same fate as the one before it.

The second method is to bring together a group of scholars well versed in the language — men of knowledge and taste who truly understand its substance and its style — to create what this age needs: new terms formed by one of the legitimate methods of derivation, metaphor, or naturalized borrowing.

This group should also work to replace the many colloquial words now in use with their proper equivalents from classical Arabic, and to oversee the standards of writing, poetry, and oratory — protecting them from the encroachments of pretenders who call themselves poets and men of letters.

We need such a body now more than ever, for *classical Arabic has become an artificial language*. It will not regain its former vitality unless it finds among its people *skilled physicians* capable of diagnosing its ailments and prescribing its cures.

Some years ago, there was an attempt to found such an association at the Teachers' Club. We rejoiced and hoped for good. The newspapers greeted the idea with lavish praise and enthusiasm. But before long it fell into deep slumber, and its hopes now seem no more than pleasant dreams of success and fulfillment.

The third method is to *accustom children, from their earliest years to precision of expression and to choosing the best words they can*, by every possible means. In this way, they will grow up with a strong natural sense of Arabic and will need grammar only as a form of linguistic philosophy — which is, after all, its proper purpose.

And I know no one *better suited* to this work, nor *more capable* of it, than *Ustadh Aḥmad Effendi al-Qaṭṭān*, in his little “garden” that he spoke to you about a few days ago. If he can promise me that he will cultivate classical Arabic in that garden as he cultivates intelligence and character, then he deserves my warmest praise — and it becomes our collective duty to rise and do all we can to bring this garden and others like it into being.

By means of these three methods, which I have now set forth in detail, we can restore to the Arabic language the glory it once possessed.

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