

From the Papers of Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

Easing Arabic Grammar and Reforming Arabic Writing

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Among the late Dean Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's papers one finds a draft of an undated letter addressed to the Minister of Education (or Public Instruction) of that era, concerning the easing of Arabic grammar and the reform of Arabic orthography. In it he states that "*these two problematic issues hold a grave danger more evident than needing description or exposition.*" These two issues occupied the mind of Taha Ḥusayn and his contemporaries. Some, such as the late 'Abd al-ʿAzīz Bāshā Fahmī, even entertained proposals to adopt Latin letters. Taha Ḥusayn strongly opposed that, disputing it vigorously. Yet to this day, these two thorny questions remain without resolution, and continue to burden minds — both among specialists and the general public throughout Egypt and the Arab world. It is hoped that publishing this letter now may contribute toward finding a solution. As Taha Ḥusayn says in the letter, "*The proper life of the Arabic language is conditional upon solving these two vexing problems.*"

His Excellency the Minister of Public Instruction,

You were good enough to address to me two issues whose real effect upon our lives is profound, one more immediate than the other. The first pertains to **easing Arabic grammar**, making it compatible with the age in which we live, and consonant with the sensibilities of modern reason. The second pertains to **reforming Arabic writing**, so as to preserve readers from error and enable them to read the text as its author intended it — and as he desires others to read it.

There is no doubt that these two vexing matters carry a danger so manifest that it requires no further description or explanation. It suffices for me to say: the sound life of the Arabic language is contingent upon solving these two problems. I will not delude ourselves with the gravest of deceptions, nor mislead our souls with the most flagrant fraud, if we imagine we have truly taught our pupils and students the Arabic language, understood it, illuminated it, empowered them to express themselves with it correctly, or to understand it rightly when they read in books or newspapers, or hear it from preachers or lecturers — in the same way that people express and comprehend in their own tongues and in the style common among them.

In reality, we scarce attain any of this. The experiments that admit no doubt or dispute have shown that our youth are very far from knowing their language even to a modest degree — much less mastering it, manipulating it aptly, discerning its subtleties and secrets. And yet our youth endure long hours studying Arabic, along with their teachers, bearing heavy effort: four years in primary education, and five years in secondary education. Then they reach university or higher institutions, and still they are more helpless than ever in formulating their thoughts or expressing them correctly — by writing, or speaking, or discourse — let alone in crafting fine poetry or elegant prose.

The Ministry of Public Instruction itself has come to recognize this truth — after experience convinced it and events pointed to it. So it has asked those concerned with teaching Arabic to reflect on why this manifest inability exists, and what means might be adopted to remedy it. Several months ago, the Ministry posed these questions; many responded privately to the Ministry or in articles and

chapters published in newspapers and journals. But I chose silence: I read the Ministry's inquiry and declined to reply, convinced that such answers, however worthy, would not avail. They would reach the Ministry, be read, then shelved or lost to neglect.

I was convinced that the Ministry would not adopt any of the proposals I—or others—might suggest, because doing so would require boldness that official circles may not undertake except after prolonged hesitation. That hesitation might lead them to shrink back, and to endure the disfavor equivalent to chngement. Moreover, I had resolved long ago not to press the Ministry directly on some aspects of reform that require firmness, resolve, daring, and confronting the difficulties born of entrenched conservatism. I determined to let reform unfold gradually in accord with the nature of change, to nurture it bit by bit across generations.

I would not have departed from that plan — one that I adopted for myself long ago — if I had not perceived, from your talk and your strong desire to reform the matter of the Arabic language, a glimmer of hope that compelled me to revisit matters I had long set aside. How delighted I am, indeed, when I observe that your own views on reforming grammar and orthography precisely match what I have long aspired to! May your willingness to undertake this reform prove a fortunate beginning and a happy introduction to successful steps, God willing.

A few years ago, I presented a report to one of the former Ministers of Education, drawing attention to the fact that the grammar we teach our pupils today is essentially the same grammar taught in Basra, Kufa, and other Islamic centers in the second and third centuries of Hijra — that is, we are teaching the grammar of over a thousand years ago. I noted that almost all other sciences have evolved: their premises, rules, teaching methods, research paradigms have all changed. Yet Arabic grammar remains as though untouched — except by abbreviations that ease difficult matters, but which sometimes make the hard even harder, or lead the teacher into obscurity. It is ironic that while all other fields evolve, this one is left behind; yet we use it to educate new minds whose intellectual capacities differ from those of centuries past.

Surely, we cannot insist on teaching nature or medicine today in the manner of al-Rāzī, Avicenna, Aristotle, or Galen. But we persist in teaching grammar and morphology as though time stood still since al-Kisā'ī and Sibawayh. This paradox arises from a deep error in judgment rooted in a long tradition: the belief that grammar is identical with language — that to alter its rules is to tamper with the language itself. Because Arabic is sacred — the language of the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition — its guardians have deemed grammatical change tantamount to sacrilege. Yet history attests that language evolves and writing reforms without damaging the essence of the Qur'anic or poetic idiom. Yet many remain unaware of this or unwilling to accept it, believing that grammar must remain unmoved.

But grammar is merely rules designed to guide language in its nearest, easiest usage. Those rules were invented historically, debated among grammarians, refined over time. Their diversity did not ruin language; it did not imperil it. If today someone proposed a new rule — for example, stating *“the subject is raised with no overt nominative”* — the language would continue; “subject” would still be understood as in the nominative. The effect on real speech would be minimal, while the benefit could be large: the easing of burdensome abstractions that make learning tedious.

Now more than ever our students, growing in an era of deep knowledge and complex thought, deserve relief from needless burden. If we refuse it, we alienate them from Arabic. I believe we have

already succeeded in estranging many young Egyptians from their language and its sciences. Among all school-taught disciplines, few provoke loathing more than grammar, morphology, rhetoric, and belles-lettres — because they do not speak to the student's own nature; they do not appeal to his reason; they are puzzles, not tools.

How can we ask a student to understand that in *Muḥammad aqala* we must posit an implied agent, a hidden subject, and that this subject may be hidden sometimes permissively and sometimes obligatorily — when all the while it is realized as a fixed position? Such abstractions belong to memory, not comprehension. How can we then expect pupils to master such rules when they can hardly grasp them? If we could spare them all of that and make grammar accessible, loveable, useful — we risk only a modest danger, but promise immense gain. I am confident that such relief will shift the young learner's attitude toward Arabic; their engagement will grow, and the results will come sooner than we expect.

As for **reforming writing**, the need is no less urgent — perhaps more so. Not everyone must study grammar, but everyone must read and write — and must be protected from error in doing so. You have spoken powerfully about this need. The root of the difficulty is the same as with grammar: people believe writing is sacred and must not be altered. Yet writing has changed over time; scholars have corrected and improved it without harming the language.

As with grammar, writing is bound by evolution. We should imitate our predecessors who sought to mark the *soft letters* and *diacritics* (harakāt) so that writing resembles pronunciation. In doing so we would empower even unlearned readers to read correctly. The Qur'anic manuscripts themselves bear witness to experiments in dotting and vocalization. Why should we not continue that tradition now?

Writing Arabic today is flawed: half of its letters are rigid and unexpressive; the rest are flexible and unmarked. Many words become ambiguous when vowels are omitted. Only those who already understand the language can disambiguate. That cannot suffice for a literate society. If we want democracy — which presupposes that the populace reads and writes — we must make writing honest and complete. If not, we force people either to learn before reading or to read without comprehension.

I do not doubt the need for a committee of experts to tackle these reforms. First, a small committee to simplify grammar; you may review their proposals and expand into a broader body. Second, on orthography, consult various stakeholders: al-Azhar, Dar al-‘Ulūm, universities, the Language Academy. If consensus emerges on core principles — such as marking soft letters or diacritics — open the topic to a public contest, not only in Egypt but across the Arab world and beyond.

In closing, I propose that you accept these suggestions with the deepest thanks and highest esteem.
Your devoted,
Ṭāhā Ḥusayn