

Ease Grammar and Writing! (The Arabic Language Question — 10)

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Al-Adab Magazine — November 1, 1956

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to speak to you on a subject that may well prove heavy, and I beg your pardon for its weight, for truth is always heavy — it grows light only for people of firm resolve, and I take it on faith that you are people of firm resolve, since you are Arabs who prize earnestness over jest, and prefer candor to evasion and equivocation. And between myself and those who will take issue with what I say stands what Abu al-'Ala once said:

Take my opinion — let that suffice you from me — for all the crookedness and warp within me And what do my companions want of me? They wished my speech, and I wished my silence A great distance lies between us — they made for their own bearing, and I made for mine

The subject is heavy because it concerns classical Arabic, and the education of the people. How often we speak of this classical Arabic tongue! How often we proclaim our pride in it, our reliance on its heritage, our devotion to it and to its great legacy, and our certainty that it is the very foundation of our unity — the bond that gathers the Arab peoples together across all their scattered and distant homelands, the bond that never breaks! We speak of this, and speak of it at length; we discourse upon it, and discourse at great length; we fill our mouths with it, and our hearts find reassurance in it, and our souls stir at the mention of it, until we overflow with enthusiasm, confidence, hope, and certainty. But once we have finished with all this, and our senses return to us — or we return to our senses — and the enthusiasm subsides, we content ourselves with what we have said, and what we have heard, and what we have applauded, and what we have shouted, and then we scarcely accomplish anything at all.

I do not deny that the scholars of language in the Arab countries, for all their differences, exert themselves fiercely, and spend more of their time and energy than they can well afford in protecting the language, preserving it, guarding it, and shielding it from every mischief or harm that might befall it. But the grave question I now pose — and which I want each and every one of you to pose to yourselves in all honesty — is

this: for whom do we preserve this language? For whom do we safeguard it? For whom do we wish to immortalize it? For whom do we spend all this effort, time, and money in its cause? Do we do all this for our own sake — to monopolize learning, so that it may be said we are scholars, custodians, who handle the Arabic language as we please, having bent it to our own mastery, free to steer it however we love and desire? Or do we do this so that the language may belong to all the peoples — not to one particular class among them, the class of scholars, imams, and custodians, but to every class of the Arab peoples: the elite and the cultivated, the middling, and the poor alike?

This is the question around which I wish to build my discussion.

That there are scholars among us is beyond doubt; it is enough that I should be here in Damascus, and meet the luminaries among the members of the Scientific Academy of Damascus, and meet this excellent circle of Levantine intellectuals, to become convinced that the Arabic language is alive and strong, that it has its custodians, and that it has champions who defend it and guard it, warding off from it every mischief, folly, and corruption. Nor do I doubt that the other Arab countries hold something resembling what exists in the Levant, whether in greater or lesser measure. But the one thing beyond all doubt is that this Arabic language, for whose sake so much time is spent, has not yet reached the peoples — or scarcely anything of it reaches them beyond echoes that serve them nothing at all.

Nothing proves this more clearly than the fact that, were we to look closely into the state of the Arabic language across the other Arab countries, we would find that most of those who read and write cannot manage to hold their own tongues steady in this classical Arabic. And we would find something worse still: we would find a great many young people, in more than one Arab country, thinking and openly declaring that this language has become incapable of keeping pace with modern life; thinking and declaring that this language has become incapable of expressing the very essence of the soul in this modern age; thinking and declaring that this language has become unfit to serve as the language of writing, or the language of literature, in certain circles. And how many there are who have taken to turning away from this language altogether, toward the colloquial speech that people use in the streets, in the villages, and deep in the countryside — writing in this vernacular, finding it easier to write in than classical Arabic, more pliant to their purposes, and better able to depict their emotions, their passions, their inclinations,

and whatever thoughts and meanings pass through their minds, than classical Arabic ever is.

They justify this by many reasons, the chief of which is that they cannot learn Arabic, because it is difficult, and because it is tedious. And because when the pupil goes to school, and listens to his teacher's lessons in Arabic — in grammar, or morphology, or rhetoric — he gains from his teacher one thing only: an aversion to the teacher, an aversion to the Arabic language, and a turning toward whatever else might distract and relieve him from this heavy burden.

Do not imagine that I exaggerate or overstate the case, for this is a plain fact that only the stubborn would deny. And do not tell me that our schools have produced a fine body of distinguished writers and men of letters — these are merely the deviation that proves the rule, or the exception that confirms it, as the saying goes. But the pupils in our schools detest nothing so much as they detest their lessons in Arabic. And yet, if they should happen to listen to a lecture on the Arabic language, on its ancient glory and its immortal, magnificent heritage, they rise up in enthusiasm, filled with vigor, faith, and admiration for this language. But once that enthusiasm subsides, they return to remembering the teacher, and his heavy words which he used to dictate to them, or deliver to them at school, and those grueling questions with which he used to test them from time to time.

And the matter is graver still than all this. For we, in this modern age we live in, have come to believe that education is the right of the whole people, from the earliest years until the boy or girl reaches maturity. We do not, therefore, permit education only to the fortunate few who find it within themselves to study, and whom life allows the leisure to devote themselves to study, spending upon it some measure of effort, time, and money — rather, we impose this education upon rich and poor alike, upon strong and weak alike, upon the capable and the incapable alike. We impose this education upon the whole people, and we punish those who fall short in discharging this duty — the duty, first, of educating themselves, and, after that, of educating their sons and daughters.

Our laws punish those who fall short in educating their sons and daughters, and this means that we are imposing education upon these vast millions who make up the generations of these Arab countries.

And if we impose education upon all these millions, we must seek out for this education the proper means that will truly bring it to success, and we must not burden the vast multitude we are teaching — this enormous multitude of girls and boys — with what we might burden the small minority who have the time, the effort, and the money to spare. Education must, then, be easy; it must be accessible; it must be palatable — this multitude must find in it no hardship and no distress, and must not need to endure the heavy burden that is now imposed upon our children by sheer compulsion.

And there is another matter no less grave than this: that we are living now in the twentieth century — that is, in an age in which history itself has changed, in which material civilization has changed utterly, in which intellectual culture has changed almost as utterly, and in which the mind itself has changed, as a consequence of all this change in civilization and culture. And yet we go on teaching Arabic in our schools and institutes exactly as the ancients taught it in their own schools and institutes more than a thousand years ago.

We might perhaps ask the very small minority to bear this burden, to take on this labor, to step outside the twentieth or nineteenth century, and learn grammar, morphology, and language exactly as the ancients learned them. But you cannot, under any circumstance whatsoever, ask these vast millions to expend such effort, to bear such a burden, to step outside the life they actually live — a life of hardship, toil, and struggle — merely to enter another life of which they may understand nothing at all.

So when you wish to teach these children in primary school, or these young people in secondary school — when you wish to teach them grammar — you teach them grammar exactly as al-Mubarrad, and his teacher al-Mazini, and their various students once taught it in the mosques of Basra, and exactly as al-Kisa'i and al-Farra' once taught it in the mosques of Kufa, or the mosques of Baghdad. Yet the gulf is vast between the primary school we establish deep in some village and the mosque of Basra, or the mosque of Kufa, or the mosque of Baghdad; and the gap is immense between the twentieth century and the eighth or ninth century in which those scholars lived.

The ancients lived a particular kind of life, shaped on one side by the original Arab desert existence, on another by the newly arrived Greek philosophy, and on a third by the material Persian civilization that surrounded and encompassed them entirely. We, by contrast, have been

turned away from that original Bedouin existence; modern civilization has swept over us to our very ears; the philosophy of Aristotle and the other ancient Greeks has slipped from our memory, and today this philosophy is known only to the very few, men like my friends Dr. Mansour Fahmi and Dr. Jamil Saliba. Persian civilization has become a matter of concern only to the Persians themselves, when they study their own history. Our civilization now is modern civilization, and we concern ourselves with our own ancient civilization only to preserve from it whatever still connects us to the past, so that our identity may not perish, so that we may not lose our Arab character, and so that our bond with our glorious past may remain strong.

If, then, you wish to teach grammar to these poor pupils, how would you have them understand that the sentence "the book was read" is a verb built for the passive, and that "the book" stands in place of the missing agent, because the agent has been omitted for one of the purposes discussed in the science of rhetoric and the science of grammar, and the object has been made to stand in its place? How would you have an Egyptian, Levantine, or Iraqi pupil, not yet twelve years old, understand such talk? What is this "agent" that has been omitted? What is this "object" put in its place? What is this "unknown" for which the verb has been built?

And when you wish him to understand the words of God Almighty: "And if anyone of the polytheists seeks your protection, then grant him protection until he hears the words of Allah, then deliver him to his place of safety" — you tell him that "anyone" in the phrase "and if anyone of the polytheists" is the agent of an omitted verb, understood to be "seeks your protection," and that the implied sense of the verse is: "and if anyone of the polytheists seeks your protection, grant him protection."

Then the pupil asks you: and where, then, is this first instance of "seeks your protection"? Where do we get it from? What is the point of this verb appearing twice? Why not simply content ourselves with the one verb the Qur'an itself was content with? How would you answer him?

As for myself, I once asked one of the sheikhs for the grammatical analysis of this verse, and he analyzed it just as you have heard, so I said to him: "My good sir, are you adding to the Book of God?"

The cause of this lies in the fact that the ancient grammarians had decreed, as one of their rules, that the particle "in" [if] can only govern a verb. And when it appeared in the Qur'an, and in the speech of the Arabs,

followed instead by a noun, they did not submit to what appeared in the Qur'an, nor to what appeared in the speech of the Arabs, whether in prose or verse — rather, they sought to make the Qur'an submit to the rule they themselves had decreed. Their own philosophy made this manner of interpretation seem natural to them, and they were able to bear it, and to carry its weight, because their minds, in that age, in those years, were philosophical minds, shaped by metaphysics — or "what comes after nature," as they called it — which Aristotle had bequeathed, and which the Arabs had inherited; and so they were able to understand such talk. But our young people today live in an age that scarcely troubles itself with metaphysics or "what comes after nature," and live in an age in which hardly anyone knows Aristotle except specialists. So when you speak to them of the verb, and speak to them of an omitted verb explained by what follows it, and cite this verb to them, they fall into utter bewilderment.

And if you wish to teach the pupil the words of God Almighty, "But as for Thamud, We guided them," and you make him understand that "Thamud" is not the object of "We guided them," but rather the object of an omitted verb understood as "We guided," and you then tell him that the meaning, or the implied sense, of the verse is: "As for We-guided Thamud, We guided them" — the pupil can do nothing but laugh first, and then scoff, and then turn away from both teacher and lesson altogether. Thank God he does not turn away from Islam, or from the Qur'an — for Islam is far too strong, and the Qur'an is far too strong, to be affected by such trifling.

Or if you say to the student or the pupil, "We Egyptians do such-and-such," or "We Syrians do such-and-such," and ask him to explain or analyze this grammatically, you would have him imagine an omitted verb understood as "I specify: we Egyptians," or "I specify: the Syrians." But what possible sense does this "I specify" make here? It has no meaning whatsoever, except that we have found this word in the accusative, and found this expression indicating specification, and so we have supposed this verb, and supposed this reasoning — and we are certainly free to suppose whatever we please. But the pupils, too, have small and simple minds, which we ought not burden with more than they can bear.

And if you say to the pupil, "Beware of laziness," and ask him to analyze this expression grammatically, you would invent for him an implied verb — I do not know it, and neither does he, nor where it came

from or how it arose — namely, "I warn you." And since you have omitted the verb, you were forced to use the detached pronoun in place of the attached one, so that you did not say "your-wariness," but rather said, "beware of laziness."

I myself love all this talk most dearly, and I assure you that grammar is the dearest of all the Arabic sciences to me, and I assure you that I find a pleasure unmatched by any other when I sit with my friend Ibrahim Mustafa, and we discuss some chapter of grammar together, and attempt to analyze some Qur'anic verse according to the grammarians' rules, or some line of verse according to the grammarians' rules.

Nor do I forget that I discussed with him, more than once, the grammatical analysis of the noble verse:

"Nor is there any blame upon those who, when they came to you that you might mount them, and you said, 'I cannot find anything on which to mount you,' turned away, their eyes overflowing with tears of grief that they could not find anything to spend."

How is this verse to be analyzed? For there we have: "when they came to you that you might mount them," "you said, 'I cannot find,'" and then "turned away" — two verbs, and "when" requires a response. Where does that response lie? Is it "you said, 'I cannot find,'" or is it "turned away"? It is enough to consult Abu Hayyan's Grammatical Analysis of the Qur'an to see what is said there. But is this the sort of work pupils in our schools are asked to do, whether young or old?

That is one chapter; and there is another, no lighter than it.

The natural order of things is that people write in order to be read, and read in order to understand; we write in order to be read, but we do not read in order to understand — rather, we must first understand in order, afterward, to read. And if this may perhaps be tolerated when it comes to the distinguished, the gifted, the quick-witted, what, then, do you ask of these millions? How can you demand of this vast multitude of small children, at this early age, that they understand the books given to them in school before they are able to read them as they ought to be read? They are expected to understand before they can read — or else to read wrongly, and thereby earn the displeasure of their teachers and instructors.

We must, then, choose between two things: either we wish to preserve the Arabic language within our various learned academies, warding off from it every harm, protecting it from every danger, reviving its ancient heritage, and striving to add to it whatever new and beneficial elements we can, without doing it harm — or else we are doing all this only for ourselves, and for those like us among the specialists, with no concern whatsoever for the common people, nor for the education of the common people. In which case we do no more than what specialists do for ancient Greek, or for ancient Latin — that is, exactly what specialists do for dead languages.

Do you wish Arabic to become one of these dead languages, given over entirely to specialists, mastered by no one else?

That is one option.

The second: that we are doing all this so that Arabic may become a truly living language, just as German, Italian, French, English, and Spanish live, along with the other living languages that people speak, and write, and understand when they read them, or read in order to understand them. So that when they read it, they understand it without hardship or difficulty; and when they learn it, they find in it no toil, no hardship, and no burden beyond what any pupil finds in ordinary life when learning any of the things he learns in his youth.

And I need not go far to prove this. Look at our own pupils in secondary school! We teach them Arabic, and we teach them one or two foreign languages besides. In which of these languages do these pupils actually become cultivated? In which of these languages do these pupils more quickly manage to speak, understand, and converse? Do you imagine they become cultivated in Arabic? Do you imagine they hasten to converse in classical Arabic, hasten to read it or understand it? Or is the reality something else entirely?

As for myself, I have tested this many times, and what I know from experience is that our pupils learn English and French faster than they learn Arabic — were it not that their own sentiments impose upon them a certain reserve, and impose upon them a certain effort, in favor of their own tongue.

I assure you, gentlemen, that everything I have laid before you thus far depicts a very real danger, one I pointed to two days ago in opening the conference of the language academies; and I would add to it that

there are now great writers, read throughout the Arab East, some of whom are now calling for the outright abolition of grammatical inflection and the rules of grammar altogether. I, for my part, call only for easing the rules of grammar, and easing Arabic writing, so that the language may spread, and truly become the language of the peoples, and truly become a living language. But there are those who have written, in these very recent days, demanding the abolition of the rules of inflection, and the silencing of word-endings, for no reason except that they never learned Arabic properly as pupils in school, and for no reason except that the old grammar, the inherited writing system, and the teachers who taught that old grammar and that inherited writing system, all proved incapable of making this great writer love the language, and instead made him hate classical Arabic, planting this hatred deep within him — so that now he scarcely loves anything so much as he detests speaking this language, and does not scruple to demand the abolition of the rules of inflection, the silencing of word-endings, and the reduction of classical Arabic to just another colloquial dialect.

You, too, stand between two choices: either you truly desire the unity of the Arab peoples, and are true believers in that unity, zealous in guarding it, ready to strive for its sake with your lives, your souls, your wealth, and your interests, whatever they may be — in which case you must make your Arabic language the language of the peoples, not the language of an elite few.

Or else your talk of this unity is mere words, and nothing more — and I take refuge in God, and pray He spare you all, from that. In which case, let the Arabic language die; let the colloquial dialects become the language of writing; and consider, then, that should a Syrian wish to read an Egyptian book, he will have to translate it into his own Syrian dialect, and an Iraqi, should he need to read something Syrian, will be forced to translate it into the Iraqi dialect.

Choose, then — for you have no escape from choosing. If we continue as we are, refusing to depart from the old grammar and the old writing, refusing to let our young people and children read in order to understand, rather than understand in order to read — if we refuse to move beyond grammar and writing as they have always been — then inevitably, out of this ancient classical Arabic, different languages will arise, just as French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese once arose out of ancient Latin.

Latin has died, and its sons and daughters succeeded it. Do you wish Arabic to die as well, and to be succeeded by its own daughters, already taking shape in the various Arab countries?

This, then, is the question: a choice. And I know that nothing is harder for a human being than choosing. We love the old, and cannot bring ourselves to relinquish it except through hardship, effort, and struggle, and only after our hearts have been torn with regret — but there is no escaping what cannot be escaped.

Having said all this, I do not call for abandoning the old altogether — indeed, I hope I am among the people most devoted to preserving our Arab heritage, especially in literature and language. But why should the old grammar, the old writing, the old rhetoric, and all these Arabic sciences established in an age quite different from our own, not be allowed to develop, just as the sciences themselves have developed? Let us preserve the old for the study of specialists in universities and institutes, and set aside for the wretched millions of children and young people a simple, easy course of learning — in the hope that among them may emerge someone who will add to the wealth of this ancient heritage, refine it further than we ourselves have managed, and revive this ancient legacy more fully than we ourselves have managed.

I know that all this will not please a great many people, not in Damascus alone, but in Egypt and the other Arab countries as well. But I do not wish to lie to the Arabs, and it has been said that the scout does not lie to his own people; nor do I wish to be like those who say that the nation of Muhammad is doing just fine; nor do I wish to be like those who find reassurance in a precarious position. Rather, I love — and I wish for my fellow Arab citizens — that they remain forever watchful, that they never be caught unawares, and that they never look up one day to find that they have been studying, striving, laboring, and toiling for their own sake alone, and not for the sake of their peoples.

We must, then, look into all of this, and look into it with the eyes of the brave, who face facts and do not shrink from them, and with the eyes of true counselors, who do not wish to monopolize learning for themselves, apart from the common people and the nation. And it is misery enough for people that those who monopolize wealth should also monopolize material life; but the worst monopoly of all is the monopoly of what God created to be shared among all people alike — namely, learning, knowledge, and culture.

Scholars of the Arabic language ought never monopolize Arabic learning for themselves; rather, it is their duty to spread it widely. Nor should they imagine that, in publishing some book of the ancients, they are truly spreading it. For a book is not truly spread except among those who are able to understand it, and to make use of it.

Ask yourselves: how many Arabs have read this or that book of al-Jahiz? Ask yourselves: how many Arabs have read *The Book of Misers*, or *The Book of Squaring and Rounding*, and similar old books which we ourselves read and find delightful, and which certain orientalist read and find delightful too? Ask yourselves: how many Arabs have read these books? Scholars have read them, and those resembling scholars, and students of the higher sciences — but the millions of ordinary Arabs know nothing whatsoever about them. And I know people who, when I mention such things to them, shake their heads, shrug their shoulders, and mock the very mention of them.

I once read, in the newspapers, someone criticizing the Egyptian National Library for its lack of activity, claiming that this institution had printed only a single book — a book called *Al-Fadil*, by Abu Yazid al-Mubarrad. This was published, gentlemen, in a daily newspaper! "*The Book of Al-Fadil*, by Abu Yazid al-Mubarrad"! This writer published such a thing, and the newspaper that published it for him did not even know that al-Mubarrad's name is Abu al-Abbas Muhammad ibn Yazid — instead making him "*Abu Yazid al-Mubarrad*" — nor that the book is not called *Al-Kamil*, but rather is called *Al-Fadil*, and so on in this manner. And of course, "above every man of knowledge there is one more knowing still." Perhaps al-Mubarrad does have some book called *Al-Fadil* — but I confess I have never read it, nor even heard of it before today.

It is not really my place to speak of all this — I address myself, rather, to two groups of people: I speak, before anything else, to the scholars who are capable of doing good but do not step forward to do it; and then I speak to the educated young people, who have every right to demand that scholars ease their language for them, and not widen the distance between them and their own Arab identity.

And I have no doubt whatsoever — none finds its way into my mind at all — that the Arab governments, were the scholars to say to them: "Here is the new, simplified grammar, suited to the minds of young people in this age, which touches nothing of the essence of the Arabic language, near or far, and changes nothing of its true nature — and this

is what will help young people master it, speak it, read it, and understand it" — I have absolutely no doubt that, should the scholars present this simplified writing system to these governments, one that allows young people to read correctly, understand correctly, and make the language a part of their very hearts, a part of their daily lives, rather than an affected tongue they struggle to produce only when absolutely necessary — should the scholars bring all this before the governments, then I am entirely confident that every single Arab government would not hesitate for a moment to adopt this grammar, to adopt this writing system, and to spread this grammar throughout the schools, and to spread this writing system as well.

I once saw a reading textbook, for our primary schools here in Egypt, that had fallen victim to "pedagogy" — and God spare us from pedagogy! It claimed that the colloquial language might be easier for children to understand, and so it introduced certain colloquial phrases and expressions into the book. When I raised this matter with the Minister of Education, he did not hesitate to promise me he would look into that outrage.

Come forward, then, gentlemen scholars — and here I address myself to our three academies now in session together in this Arab capital — come forward, gentlemen scholars, and bring to your governments an easier system of writing, and an easier grammar; bring your language closer to the peoples; and rest assured that, should you do so, you will render a service far finer than the great and formidable one rendered by the grammarians of Basra, Kufa, and Baghdad in ages past.