

Wednesday Talk: A Matter of Consequence (On the Teaching of Ancient Languages in Egypt)

al-Siyasa, 12 September 1923

I do not wish, this time, to write on this subject as one proposing a solution; for the subject, as we shall see, is too weighty and too complex a matter for a single writer to settle, or for a single researcher to propose a solution to on his own. It needs, rather, that writers and researchers turn their attention to studying it and thinking it through, and to seeking out whatever solution best serves Egypt's own interest in the matter. I had imagined that a subject of this kind would naturally occur to the Ministry of Education, which would then study it in an organized fashion, asking people's opinions on it in preparation for whatever new educational system we might put in place. But I find the Ministry of Education averse to inquiries of this kind, or else receiving them in a manner quite unlike the way weighty matters ought to be received. This is because, as I have told you more than once, the Ministry of Education has no clear, defined policy in education at all, and instead follows, in its educational policy, a method of mere collision — if collision can be called a method — or else the old Dunlopian method of restriction, which there is no longer any excuse for persisting in now.

I wish, in this piece, to content myself with simply setting out and laying open the question, and to ask those writers who take an interest in a subject of this kind, and who are able to form their own opinion of it, to study it carefully, and to present the results of that study to the public.

This subject carries a weight in Egypt that it does not carry in other countries; for Egypt — or rather, the scholarly, historical, and political life of Egypt — stands connected to three distinct branches of civilization. Egypt cannot avoid understanding these civilizations correctly, nor avoid maintaining a strong connection to each of them.

Egypt is connected to the civilization of the Pharaohs, and I need not describe this connection or argue for it. She is connected to Arab civilization, and I need not describe this connection either. She is connected to European civilization, and I need not describe this connection, any more than I need describe her connection to the two civilizations already mentioned. Egypt's national life, then, compels her to

deepen her connection to Pharaonic civilization — that is, to understand this civilization without any intermediary, meaning to understand the hieroglyphic language and the Coptic language. I do not think anyone disputes a proposition of this kind, and I would, if anything, fear that people might exaggerate its importance, since everyone is already convinced of the pressing need to study these two languages. Egypt's national life also compels us to maintain a strong connection to Arab civilization — that is, to properly understand, write, and speak the Arabic language. This is not so easy a matter as you might think; we might one day find ourselves needing to demonstrate that we do not, in fact, properly understand Arabic, nor write nor speak it well. But the matter does not stop at studying Arabic alone, for Arabic alone cannot truly be understood; other languages, upon which its understanding depends, must be studied alongside it — we must, alongside it, study the Semitic languages. Here, then, is another group of languages, no easier to study than the first, and our need to study them is no less than our need to study the first group — indeed, I would claim it is greater, far greater; for Arabic is, in fact, our national language.

Egypt's national life, her future, and her advancement, all compel her to maintain a connection to European civilization — that is, to master the languages of Europe. And understanding Europe's languages and civilization is not confined to understanding English, French, and German, and the other European languages besides. Alongside these, we must also study the ancient language or languages, and the ancient civilization or civilizations, to which Europe and its modern civilization trace their own origins — I mean the Latin and Greek languages, and Latin and Greek civilization. Here, then, is a third group of ancient languages, whose study our own national life itself compels us to undertake, if we wish to be genuine participants in modern civilization — adopting it with real understanding and insight, rather than as mere imitators or as men putting on an affectation.

These, then, are the three groups of languages we cannot avoid studying. It is obvious that no Egyptian, however gifted, however intelligent, could possibly study all of these languages at once; and it would be absurd to demand that every Egyptian receiving a higher or secondary education study every one of them. But it is equally obvious that it would be folly, poor judgement, and a real danger to our national life, for all Egyptians together to neglect all, or even some, of these languages. There must, then, be among us some who master Arabic and

the Semitic languages, and others who master Greek and Latin.

There must be established, in Egypt, an educational policy that ensures the distribution — if the expression may be allowed — of these languages among educated Egyptians, so that these educated Egyptians, through a kind of scholarly social cooperation, can support one another and make up, between them, for one another's gaps. What, then, might such an educational policy look like, and what method might be adopted for studying these languages, and generalizing this study as widely as possible?

One should not rely, in this, on higher-education schools alone; for higher-education schools are not established to teach the basics of languages, but rather for specialization in them. I confess I cannot picture a student who has obtained his secondary-school certificate, and then goes on to study the basics of Latin or Greek from scratch at a higher institution; for this, difficult as it is, brings little real benefit — it forces the student to waste his time on the rudiments of the language, when that time ought instead to be spent on the literature of that language, and on the finest examples of its eloquence.

Nor should one rely, in teaching these languages, on special schools established just for this purpose; for such special schools, by their very nature, will attract only a small number of students, both because they are special schools, and because their certificates will carry no financial value capable of making people desire them or scramble after them.

Nor should one rely, in teaching these languages, on the primary schools; it is enough for a child there to learn to read and write in Arabic, and whatever else is taught at that level. What remains before us, then, is only the elementary school and the secondary school. But the time available for study at these two levels is limited, too narrow to accommodate the study of all, or even some, of these languages, alongside the scientific, literary, and practical subjects that must also be taught in these schools, and that this kind of education simply cannot do without. We arrive, then, at a single conclusion: that it is the elementary and secondary schools alone that are in any position to teach these languages, and that the time available in these schools is too limited for this study. Division is therefore essential, and distribution is therefore essential. How, then, might this division be made, and how might this distribution be arranged?

This, then, is the weighty question I would wish thinkers, and those who hold an opinion on educational matters of this kind, to give their attention to. I believe it to be a far weightier, far more useful question than a great many of those which writers and thinkers busy themselves plunging into these days.