

**DEVELOPMENT OF THE ARABIC LANGUAGE
FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE MODERN ERA
TILL THE FOUNDING OF LANGUAGE ACADEMIES
IN THE ARAB WORLD ***

by

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In its long history, the Arabic Language passed two main stages of development : first, the flourishing of Arab-Islamic Civilisation and its spread East and West during the early centuries of the Islamic history; secondly, the stage of modern Arab renaissance which began with the beginning of the 19th century A.D.

The factors and instruments by which development in both stages was achieved were both similar and dissimilar. The present paper tries to review similarities and differences, and to bring to the fore the chief difficulties which faced the Arabic Language in modern times and called — among other means — for the establishment of language academies to guide the development of the language to meet the requirements of the modern age of technology. As examples of such difficulties one may mention : the lack of adequate Arabic terminology for the teaching of modern science in Arabic schools, and similarly for the translation of up-to-date, advance scientific references and text books from foreign languages ; the specific difficulties, arising from the duality of the written and spoken Arabic ; the necessity of simplifying and modernising Arabic script and the burdensome Arabic grammar ; the debatable question of how far contemporary authorities may go in creating, adopting or adapting Arabic or foreign terms for the requirements of science, technology and culture. *عضو اتحاد الجامعات العربية*

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The efforts to overcome these difficulties represent an important part in the developmental processes of the Arabic language, from the first third of the 19th century till the present. The general awakening of the modern Arab world proceeded with the advance of the 19th century, manifesting itself in the profound changes in the life of the Arabs, culturally, socially and politically. It was essential for progress, that the Arabic language should keep pace with this forward movement and should harness its rich classical heritage to the service of the modern progress of the Arabs. A major movement of translation initiated and directed by Rifa'a began towards the middle of the 19th century to open wide the doors for foreign culture and literature.

A revival and modernisation of classical Arabic poetry was heralded by the warrior poet al-Barudi (d. 1904). Writings on religious, social and political reform inspired by al-Afghani and Sheikh 'Abdu provided the Arabic language with the opportunity to exercise and develop its powers of expression and to acquire efficiency as an instrument of national life. The press emerged as a factor of increasing importance in Arab national life. Arab linguistic researches and literary productions began to find their way to world congresses. Early forms of narrative art: such as the short story, the novel and the drama made their appearance in Arab Literature towards the end of the last century.

As progress gathered momentum in the latter half of the 19th century, many leaders of Arab thought and reform became aware of the necessity of founding Arab academies on the lines of the "Academie française", to guide the development of the Arabic language, to assist in the surmounting of the difficulties referred to above, and to provide a vehicle of expression adequate to the needs of modern life and thought. Notable among these leaders who advocated the establishment of competent bodies to supervise the development and reform of the language were Rifa'a, Sheikh 'Abdu, and Hifni Nassif (of Egypt), Shidiaq, and Jabr Dhomut (of Lebanon). As a result, in the last decades of the 19th century there began to appear some early forms of language academies of which perhaps the earliest was the "Oriental Scientific Academy" founded in Beirut in 1882 A.D., but this academy did not last long.

Ten years later a group of Egyptian scholars — headed by : Tewfik al-Bakri, Sheikh 'Abdū, and Shanqiri — met in Cairo and founded a language academy (1892). They soon proceeded to direct their energies to linguistic and literary discussions and the substituting of Arabic for the foreign cultural terms which were infiltrating into the language of the everyday life of the Egyptian people. The activities of this early Egyptian academy aroused great interest in linguistic studies which were echoed by the leading writers and editors of the Arab cultural journals and magazines of these days : (e.g. al-Hilal, al-Muqtataf, al-Ostaz, and al-Bayan). This academy, however, was also shortlived.

A landmark in the movement for the establishment of an Egyptian language academy was the symposium held at Nadi Dar el 'Olum in Cairo (1908). A number of specialised papers on various aspects of language development were presented by leading Egyptian thinkers and scholars, with discussions continuing daily for a fortnight. Hifni Nassif, President of the Dar el 'Olum Club, who was the initiator of the symposium, presented a comprehensive research on the subject ending with a recommendation which was unanimously adopted — that a language academy should be founded to undertake the work of Arabization terms and the expansion of the Arabic language vocabulary.

Another attempt at founding an Egyptian language academy was launched in 1918 by a group of thinkers who made their centre of activity the National Egyptian library, prominent among them were Lutfi el Sayyed and Hifni Nassif.

The year 1919 may be taken as the beginning of the era of permanent language academies in the Arab World, for in that year the Syrian Arab Scientific Academy was established in Damascus, and since 1961 has become known as the "Damassus Academy of the Arabic Language". In 1932 a new Cairo Academy of the Arabic Language was founded, and it began functioning in 1934. This Cairo Academy — which included among its members scholars from other Arab countries as well as foreign Orientalists — has become the meeting place of Arab language academicians, and the central legislating body in language development affairs. In 1947 the Iraki Scientific Academy was founded in

Baghdad, and in 1961 a centre for the Coordination of Arabization in the Arab World was established in Ribat — Morocco, under the auspices of the Arab League, and later became one of the establishments of the Arab Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organisation. A Union of Arab Language Academies is the latest step in the process of Arab academy organisation, and the development of the Arabic Language is now proceeding successfully.



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