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# Middle East – Topics & Arguments

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#13–2019

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Gavin Murray-Miller

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## ANTI-THESIS

## Touching Language! Postcolonial Knowledge Production, Language Practice and Arabic Studies in Germany

Christian Junge

This paper argues for using academic Arabic more actively in Arabic Studies in Germany. Based on an ongoing discussion at the Centre for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at the Philipps-Universität Marburg about the pros and cons of dealing more closely with academic knowledge production from the MENA region, this paper sheds light on the potentials of academic Arabic for non-native students and scholars. In the framework of postcolonial studies, it discusses the linguistic,

epistemic and ethical benefits of using academic Arabic in teaching and researching more actively and maps recent German initiatives to foster academic Arabic. As a conclusion, it calls for a close affective contact with Arabic: daring to touch language and be touched by language!

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Studies, Arabic Studies, Academic Arabic, Learning Communities

### Postcolonial Knowledge Production

More than forty years ago, Edward Said published his ground-breaking critique, *Orientalism* (1978), which became a foundational work of Postcolonial Studies. As one of its major points of criticism, it argued that European Orientalism constructed its own image of the *Orient* in which the *Oriental* subject is not able and not allowed to speak for itself; rather, it is a passive, inferior object of the presumably active, superior West. The main features of such a mindset are, according to Said, already embodied in Karl Marx's famous statement on the French peasants claiming, "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Said xiii). Using this statement to explain the mentality of Orientalism, Said analyses, on the one hand, the far-reaching epistemic and political consequences of silencing the voices and texts from the MENA region. On the other hand, however, he doesn't shed light on them, since he doesn't deal with texts written in, for instance, Arabic, Ottoman or Persian. In this regard, he himself also silences the *Oriental* subject to some degree. In contrast, Postcolonial Studies foreground the life and agency of subjects from colonized regions. In this regard, languages play an important role in deconstructing or opposing imperial hegemo-

nies, for instance by subverting hegemonial languages (Ashcroft et al.), provincializing universalizing theories (Chakrabarty) or investing in regional languages (wa Thiong'o).<sup>1</sup> However, dominating and imperial languages often leave little room for regional knowledge expressed in a *regional* language. In the field of Arabic-French translations, Richard Jacquemond sees Marx's mindset still pretty much at work. "In fact, Said could have completed Marx's statement by adding: 'and if they [i.e. the *Oriental*s] are to represent themselves, they will have to do so using *our* language'" (Jacquemond 148). While Area Studies have often been interested only in "native informants - not native intellectuals" (Mamdani, xiv), as Mahmood Mamdani criticizes, Wolf Lepenies demands the constitution of intercultural learning communities ("Das Ende der Überheblichkeit"). Adding the dimension of language here, intercultural *and* multilingual learning communities, in which *native* intellectuals and scholars do not have to translate their knowledge into hegemonial academic languages, would certainly facilitate epistemic self-representation of the MENA region.

### Language Practices

In the last decades, language practices have changed significantly in Arabic and

Islamic Studies in Germany and elsewhere - especially in the field of teaching Arabic as a *modern* foreign language, putting more emphasis on linguistic immersion (Abdalla), active usage (Wilmsen) and colloquial and youth language (Orfali et al.). In addition, Arabic (in all varieties) as a source language (*Quellensprache* in German) of texts, films, songs etc. was always an integral part of Arabic Studies. Shifting the focus from teaching and researching Arabic to teaching and researching *with* Arabic, this article discusses language practices of Arabic as academic language (*Wissenschaftssprache* in German) in teaching and research in Arabic or related Studies in Germany. This paper understands *academic Arabic* as a linguistic register of Modern Standard Arabic used for academic knowledge production in, for instance, texts, discussions and lectures; spoken academic Arabic is often blended with dialectal usage.

To the best of my knowledge, there are no statistics or studies about the practices of academic Arabic in Arabic Studies in Germany yet. While this paper attempts to gather the first basic facts about teaching and research, this is often difficult and would need a larger research project. Arabic is widely used as a teaching language for most language modules. In con-

trast, content-based modules (*Fachmodule*, for instance, on Arabic literature, history or politics) are rarely taught in Arabic and don't demand that the students write final papers in Arabic, as many colleagues confirm.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, looking at the official module descriptions of the MA programs doesn't provide any hard facts, since most of them don't mention the teaching languages,<sup>3</sup> with the exception of MA programs in Berlin and Marburg, where eleven or two content-based modules respectively can optionally be taught in Arabic (Freie Universität Berlin; Centrum für Nah- und Mitteloststudien). However, any statistics on the actual use of Arabic as an academic teaching language would require a broad empirical study.

Academic conferences in Germany related to Arabic Studies mostly avoid Arabic as a working language. In the German Oriental Conference, the representative conference of the German Oriental Society in Germany, German and English are the official conference languages (DMG, "Dot2017. 33. Deutscher Orientalistentag 'Asien, Afrika und Europa'"). In the last two conferences in 2014 and 2017, of the more than 60 papers given in the Section of Arabic Studies, only two were in Arabic, according to the official programs (DMG, "DOT2013.

Programmheft zum 32. Deutschen Orientalistentag", "33. Deutscher Orientalistentag 'Asien, Afrika und Europa' Programm"). In the peer-reviewed journal *Der Islam*, a journal for the history and culture of the societies in the MENA region before the 19th century, Arabic is one of the official journal languages along with German, English and French (*Der Islam*). However, in the last five years, from 2013 to 2018, no article was published in Arabic. As for the reviews published in this period, the 171 reviewed books do not include any studies written in Arabic or in any other regional language (*Der Islam*). Similarly, from 2013 to 2018, the journal *Middle East - Topics & Arguments*, dedicated mostly to modern politics and societies of the MENA region, reviewed twelve books, none of them written in Arabic or in any other regional language (*META*). In addition, it would be informative to survey the number of referenced academic sources in the journal articles, according to their languages.<sup>4</sup>

All these figures have to be interpreted with extreme caution. Nevertheless, they show a reservation towards speaking academic Arabic actively in seminars and at conferences and towards reading studies written in Arabic. There are many good reasons for this reservation, starting with the difficulties non-native students have in

learning Arabic from scratch, the poor infrastructure of borrowing books from an Arab university library and the incompatibility of academic terminology in many scientific fields. These and other obstacles are discussed in the second article in the section *Anti/Thesis* by Michael Waltisberg and Vera Tsukanova. But how *could* Arabic Studies in Germany nonetheless benefit from using academic Arabic more actively?

#### Linguistic, Epistemic and Ethical Benefits

From the perspective of Postcolonial Studies, fostering academic Arabic in the field of academic knowledge production on the Arab world offers linguistic, epistemic and ethical benefits. First, it certainly improves the linguistic skills of the students and scholars. While in recent years much didactic emphasis has been put on teaching media Arabic (Elgibali and Korica), academic Arabic is an often-neglected register of Modern Standard Arabic; however, didactic tools and materials can partly be found in manuals on essay writing and specialised translation (Lahlali and Krahl et al.). Competences in academic Arabic empower non-native academics to present their research in Arabic to Arab colleagues, to receive knowledge expressed in Arabic and to discuss it critically in Arabic. Competences in speaking, listening, reading and writing

academic Arabic are mainly communicative skills; they facilitate scientific dialogue with Arab colleagues. They are not per se philological skills; they don't help to understand linguistic nuances in pre-Islamic poetry, but they do help to understand how Arab scholars interpret pre-Islamic poetry today.

Second, competences in academic Arabic provide access to academic knowledge expressed in Arabic. In Arabic Studies abroad, i.e. outside the Arab world, knowledge of the *native Arab intellectual* remains largely neglected, if not expressed in or translated into one of *our* main hegemonial languages, English or French. While some works from famous scholars like 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Kīlīṭū and Khālid Ziyādah have been translated in the framework of postcolonial criticism (Spivak, "Theory in the World: A General Introduction"), the large majority remains untranslated and therefore widely unreceived by non-Arab scholars. This article neither considers Arabic knowledge of the Arab world to be per se more authoritative and insightful, nor does it want to spare it criticism. Rather, it argues for de-exoticizing academic Arabic and seriously accessing Arabic knowledge in order to be able to engage with it critically - as with knowledge expressed in any other language.

The contemporary knowledge production in the Arab world suffers from a lot of difficulties and drawbacks regarding basic education, academic funding, censorship and knowledge distribution (Hanafi and Arvanitis 1-17). With this background, is it really worthwhile accessing knowledge in Arabic? Beyond the potential epistemic benefit, discussion with Arab colleagues and the reception of Arabic studies provide an ethical value as such, I argue. For Arab scholars, they facilitate epistemic self-representation and support building intercultural and multilingual learning communities between native and non-native speakers on an equal footing. Even if Arabic knowledge were epistemically not compatible or didn't meet *our* standards, it provokes a meta-epistemic reflection on the discursivity of knowledge production in the Arab world and abroad and forces *us* to think about our positionality in the field of Arabic Studies, raising questions like: on what do and don't we speak and do research, why and to which end, from where and when, with whom, to whom, against whom – and in which language?

To conclude, using academic Arabic more actively would enrich the linguistic skills of non-native scholars, enlarge their academic knowledge and refashion their scholarly contacts with native scholars.

Therefore, using academic Arabic more actively in Arabic Studies in Germany is highly desirable. But is it also feasible?

### Initiatives in Germany

In recent years, several events and initiatives in Germany were established to increase awareness of the need to use academic Arabic more actively. In the field of teaching, Huda Zein at Cologne University, for instance, has developed an advanced language course dedicated exclusively to writing a complete final paper in Arabic.<sup>5</sup> In Marburg, Assem Hefny and Christian Junge together teach language courses on academic Arabic to accustom students to read Arabic studies and discuss them in Arabic, as well as to give papers, read and write essays in Arabic. Also at Marburg University, the so-called *halqa arabiyya*, founded by Sherif El-Habibi, Assem Hefny, Vera Tsukanova, Eylaf Bader Eddin and Christian Junge, offers students and researchers the possibility to present and discuss their research in Arabic (Centrum für Nah- und Mittelost-Studien, “Wissenschafts-arabisch”). These separate initiatives are framed by the 2016 founding of the Professional Association for Arabic (Fachverband-Arabisch e.V.) at Bamberg University, which has a section dedicated

to fostering the teaching of academic Arabic (Amīn 32).

In the field of research, things are changing, too (Winckler and Junge, “Opening Up the Text: Arabic Literary Studies on the Move”). Some workshops at conferences intentionally include Arabic as a working language, like “Reading Wittgenstein in Arabic”, a workshop held in 2012 at the Freie Universität Berlin by Islam Dayeh (Forum Transregionale Studien, “Zukunftsphilologie”), and “Arabic Popular Culture”, convened in 2017 by Peter Konerding in the Arabic Studies Department at Bamberg University (Menalib, “Arabische Populärkultur”). In the framework of the “Higher Education Dialogue with the Islamic World”, funded by the German Academic Exchange Service, projects like “Trauma in the Arab World” (2017-2019) by Andreas Kaplony<sup>6</sup> and “Spiegelungen – *in`ikāsāt*” (2018) by Eckehard Schulz<sup>7</sup> put together intercultural and multilingual learning communities using academic Arabic for knowledge production. In addition, “Arabische Philologien im Blickwechsel – *naḥwa dirāsāt`arabiyya bi-ru`ā muta`addidah*”, founded in 2013 by Barbara Winckler and Christian Junge at the Freie Universität Berlin in co-operation with Bilal Orfali at the American University of Beirut, is an annual bilingual summer school program

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that offers junior scholars at European universities the possibility to present their research in Arabic and junior scholars of Arab universities to present theirs in English (Arabic Philologies).

These initiatives are taking place in a larger framework of academic transformation in the field of Arabic and Islamic Studies outside Germany. At Barcelona University, for instance, the MA program “Modern Arabic Language and Culture”, founded in 2016, is taught entirely in Arabic (MEAC). In addition, the research project “Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies: For a New Approach to World Literature” by Francesca Orsini at the School of African and Asian Studies in London seeks to practice a “reading together” of comparative multilingual methodologies. These and other projects *invest* in academic Arabic in order to develop new teaching and research strategies for research *with* the Arab world. This goes along with Arab initiatives to foster academic Arabic as a modern and relevant language of knowledge production,<sup>8</sup> like the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, which puts great emphasis on teaching academic Arabic to native speakers and making academic Arabic the primary language of instruction (Doha Institute, “Academic Ethos”).

### Touching Language, Affective Arabic

Building on these initiatives, this article argues that using academic Arabic more actively in Arabic Studies in Germany is in general possible and desirable. However, implementing such an approach on the ground needs time, engagement, resources and infrastructure. For already-overloaded BA and MA programs, it is certainly a challenge to combine this approach with an equally possible and desirable impetus for instance to foster interdisciplinary methods and theories and to make Arabic Studies compatible with Area Studies and Global History. In addition, especially junior scholars who invest in academic Arabic may face career problems in the Western academic field, since publications in Arabic may not be considered as having the same value as publications in English or French. Taking these and other constraints into account, the article presents this approach in the framework of Postcolonial Studies not as an imperative mission, but as an empowering option, as Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh have put it in regard to decoloniality. In their understanding, the concept and praxis of decoloniality is just one way of achieving liberation from the colonial matrix power (224-225). In the ongoing open discussion at the Centre for Near and Middle Easter Studies, this is one

among other options for reflecting critically on our knowledge production on the MENA region.

And yet, I personally believe that *touching regional languages* – and Arabic in the examples discussed here – offers a promising strategy for European Area Studies in establishing postcolonial-sensitive contacts with the researched world regions. In this regard, *touching language* may be understood as daring to actively use regional academic languages and taking them epistemically and ethically seriously in order to critically engage with the knowledge expressed in these languages. At the same time, it may also mean for students and scholars to be touched by these languages, intellectually and emotionally, as a kind of lived academic experience; it means to actively speak and write in these regional languages and to expose oneself as a non-native speaker to the linguistic and academic criticism of native scholars. To conclude, using regional academic languages more actively means to affect and to be affected by these languages. In the examples discussed here, touching language turns academic Arabic into affective ‘*arabiyah*’.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive survey of the postcolonial dimensions of linguistics, see Stolz, Warnke, and Schmidt-Brücken (eds.).

<sup>2</sup> This impression is based on the public discussions with colleagues at the conference "Arabisch als Fremdsprache im deutschsprachigen Raum", held from 23 to 24 February 2018 at Bamberg University (Amīn, "Ūrūbbā turīd ta'allum al-'arabiyyah") and personal communications with German students at the summer schools in 2014, 2017 and 2018 in the framework of "Arabische Philologie im Blickwechsel" (arabicphilologies).

<sup>3</sup> This relates, for instance, to the MA programs of Arabic Studies at the Universities of Bamberg, Munich and Münster.

<sup>4</sup> For informative statistics on the average number of references in Arabic, English, French and other languages quoted in Arabic Studies published in the journal *Iḍāfāt*, see Hanafi and Arvanitis 230.

<sup>5</sup> Mail communication with Huda Zein, 14 April 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Mail communication Sarah El Bulbeisi, 13 April 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Mail communication Eckehard Schulz, 21 April 2019.

<sup>8</sup> In an important article, Widād Qāḍī also argued for the need for Arab students and scholars of Arabic Studies to take into account the Western Arabic Studies publishing in English and other languages (Qāḍī, "Qaḍīyyat al-marjī'iyah"). Thus, in order to establish intercultural and multilingual learning communities for mutual exchange, one needs to foster both the use of academic Arabic in Arabic Studies at non-Arabic universities and the use of academic English in Arabic Studies at Arabic universities, as is the aim of the summer school program "Arabische Philologien im Blickwechsel" (Arabic Philologies).

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