

ZAKĪ MUBĀRAK ON THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

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1. Introduction

To anyone interested in language politics, it seems rather strange that the contribution of Zakī Mubārak is almost universally ignored. Generally speaking, the works of this Egyptian man-of-letters are only briefly mentioned, whether in Arabic or in other surveys of modern Arabic literature. This may be explained to some extent by his having been a self-declared anti-Establishment intellectual, quarrelling with the likes of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and others. Nevertheless, there is certainly no reason to minimize his literary role; perhaps, on the contrary, he deserves our attention even more as a controversial figure seeking an independent intellectual course.

Muḥammad Zakī ʿAbdassalām Mubārak (1891-1952) was born in the village of Sintrīs in Upper Egypt. After having attended the local *kuttāb*, he studied for several years at al-Azhar, where he was close to Sufi circles. In 1916 he left al-Azhar in order to study at the Egyptian University, obtaining his Ph.D. degree in 1924. Meanwhile, he had taken part in the anti-British demonstrations of 1919 and spent about a year in jail, which probably strengthened his antipathy towards the British administration in Egypt. In 1927 he went to Paris, coming back four years later with another Ph.D. degree, this time from the Sorbonne. Upon his return, he taught at various schools and at the American University in Cairo. In 1937-1938 he taught Arabic Literature at the Teachers' College in Baghdad to support himself and his family. Meanwhile, he had started publishing prose and poetry in various newspapers and periodicals, gradually becoming better known in literary circles in Egypt and abroad.

Besides books on al-Ghazālī, on the poetry of Ibn Abī Rabīʿa, and on Arabic prose in the fourth century of the Hegira, Mubārak published books on his sojourn in Paris (Mubārak 1931) and in Iraq (Mubārak 1939a), as well as articles of literary criticism and on other matters (some collected in Mubārak 1939b). We are interested here, however, in a short book of his focusing on the role of language in the nationalist struggle in Egypt.

2. Mubārak on the Role of Language

In 1936 Mubārak wrote a short work entitled *al-Luġa wa-d-dīn wa-t-taqālīd bi-ītibārihā min muqawwimāt al-istiqlāl* (Language, Religion and Customs as Constituent Agents of Independence) (I translate *taqālīd* as "customs" since Mubārak uses it synonymously with ʿādāt). This he prepared for a government competition held that year with a prize of £E100, a large sum in those days. The subject of independence, topical for an entire generation, intensified in public debate in the year of the

Egyptian-British treaty. Mubārak very probably entered the competition not only to gain a much-needed money prize, but also because he had been politically involved in this issue and wished his views to become well-known; he admits that much in his preface to the text. During the First World War, he had adhered to the ultra-patriotic Nationalist Party *al-Hizb al-Watani*, and, after the war, to the *Wafd* Party. His patriotic views found expression in this composition, which he published even before the competition results were made known. The original edition is very rare nowadays and is seldom to be found in public libraries. It was reprinted, however, in the Cairo series of *Kitāb al-Hilāl*, no. 476, in August 1990. In the event, Mubārak was only one of the winners and the prize was divided between several participants in the competition.

The discussion on language comes first and is the most important section in Mubārak's text (covering the first 39 pages). From the start, he focuses on what he perceives as the close ties between language and independence, taking Egypt as his prime example. Using one's own language, he asserts, impresses upon one the love of independence. He complains about the need to communicate in other languages with foreigners who do not learn Arabic even if they stay in Egypt for several years. Foreigners have to study the local language in Paris, London or Berlin — but not in Cairo. This creates a sentiment that Egypt does not belong to the Egyptians. Mubārak is pleased with his own ignorance of English, as this attests his feeling of independence. Reverting to his earlier argument, he bemoans the fact that other languages shamelessly crowd out Arabic in numerous government offices and private business establishments, which he interprets to mean that Egypt's national language has partners! Based on his own experience abroad, he argues that this could never happen in France, and Egypt should vie with it in employing Arabic — and Arabic only — on all administrative and commercial signboards.

Mubārak then goes on to education. Maintaining that hardly any independent nation uses any language of instruction but its own, he urges Egypt to employ Arabic as the language of instruction not merely in primary and secondary schools, but throughout the universities. He sees the use of English and French in many university faculties as a catastrophe. The fact that the teachers of other languages are always foreigners prevents Egyptians from mastering such languages perfectly themselves. Arabic, he contends, is eminently suited to instruction in any discipline whatsoever and its use would encourage writing and translation (resulting in the establishment of specialized libraries). Carried out seriously and systematically, the use of Arabic as the medium of education would be another step towards independence. A large number of scientific publications in Arabic would result in Egypt's taking the cultural lead of all Arabic-speaking people, east and west. Setting up specialized Arabic libraries in Cairo, side by side with the existing English and French ones, would enhance Egypt's scholarly prestige everywhere. The key to all this is teaching all fields in Arabic, in every school and university.

Among the pertinent criticisms which Mubārak presents in order to support his arguments are the following: How can we claim independence when we do not have even one dictionary reflecting the development of modern Arabic; not one Arabic library specializing in the sciences or medicine; not a single study in Arabic on Egyptian antiquities; not one legal compendium without quotations in foreign languages on every page; not a scholar who contents himself with Arabic sources alone; not a Minister whose visiting cards do not use foreign words; not one university library most of whose holdings are not in other languages; no large city some of whose quarters do not sell newspapers mostly in foreign languages; no government office whose logo does not contain English — all in all, a situation in which Arabic is being pushed aside and forgotten.

Mubārak then addresses the President of the Egyptian University, Aḥmad Luṭfī as-Sayyid Pasha by name, blaming him for the situation at the university and urging him to introduce Arabic as the mandatory language of instruction in all faculties, eradicating the disease represented by the employment of English and French and dismissing those teachers who are unable or unwilling to adjust to this change. He then draws the attention of the University President to another related issue, that of the language employed in dissertations. Mubārak opposes permitting the presentation of dissertations in any language a student chooses (even in the domains of Arabic and Islamic studies) and even the addition of a foreign-language summary to those written in Arabic.

Further, he reminds his readers that the French, British and Italians promote vigorously their respective languages in their colonies. If these consider language spread an essential element of colonialism, should not patriots perceive their own language as one of the bases of independence?

Well-aware of the diglossic character of Arabic, Mubārak favours a simplified idiom, widely employed and easily understood — that already used by teachers and pupils in class, clear in meaning and devoid of obsolete words. As he sees it, the instrument for creating and spreading such a language is the press, which by nature caters to all strata of the population, in all spheres of life. For the sake of clarity, he recommends to vocalize all texts throughout. Aware that this would necessitate a large expansion in the number of printing characters, he also suggests reducing the printed form of all consonants to one form for each — thus more or less compensating for the proposed increase.

One way of bringing the Arabic language closer to all Egyptians, Mubārak maintains, is to produce more interesting books in Arabic and to increase the number of publishers and of public libraries with Arabic holdings. Such steps would increase the number of readers in Arabic, for reading intensively in one's own language is also a component of independence. Mubārak blames both authors and the general public for a "non-reading atmosphere", expressed in the fact that not even the best books achieve more than one edition. He criticizes in particular the many thousands of

public officials who do not read books and hardly any periodicals, as it seems to him. Mubārak's policy recommendation for remedying this situation is the establishment of a special commission in the Ministry of Education to encourage publishing in Arabic. The committee should deduct ten piastres from the monthly salary of all government officials and in return supply each of them with five or six high quality books every year. Since most officials have families, this is bound to encourage the taste for reading among a wider public. Mubārak argues that promoting language also means fostering education and culture, and calls on Egyptians to adorn their homes with "book treasures".

In summing up the part of his book discussing language, Mubārak reverts to education, referring in the main to the pupils of secondary schools (*al-madāris at-tānawīyya*). Based on his own experience as a teacher, he strongly urges abolishing the study of the history of literature in those schools, which he considers a waste of time, since no pupil can benefit from it before studying literature itself. Moreover, he is revolted by the book used in Egyptian schools for this discipline, written by people ignorant of pupil mentality.

3. Conclusion

This work is characteristic of Mubārak's personality and style. He writes frankly and fiercely, pursuing his convictions, unhesitatingly criticizing the President of the Egyptian University, the Ministry of Education, the government bureaucracy and practically everyone else in Egypt. For somebody submitting an essay in an officially designated competition, this is, to say the least, rather unconventional, but deserving of admiration.

In the debate on our main issue of interest, Mubārak shows himself very adept at evaluating the politics of language, an almost unknown academic discipline at the time. He had, however, read by then a great deal on language and literature, in both Arabic and French, and reflected on the issue of language as a basic component in independence. True enough, Egyptian and other Arab intellectuals had already been discussing such issues as the alphabet, Arabization of foreign terms, and language training. However, Mubārak's arguments are refreshingly direct, cogent, and incisive. They are also unusually comprehensive. In today's terms of reference, he discusses language status, language corpus, language shift and loss — all from the perspective of a nationalist eager for Egypt's cultural independence. As regards language status, he calls for Arabic, rather than English, to be used as the official language. He perceives language corpus as the introduction of new Arabic terms in the sciences and otherwise. Education in Arabic alone, at all levels, should prevent language shift to English and the consequent loss of Arabic. Based on his arguments, Mubārak produces several policy recommendations (even if he does not use this term himself):

- a. To encourage the use of Arabic, rather than English, in both private and public contexts.
- b. To adopt Arabic as the language of instruction not only at school, but also at university level, in all faculties.
- c. To write all consonants in one single form, always with the proper vowels.
- d. To promote writing and publishing in Arabic, particularly of scientific works.
- e. To institute and develop public libraries in Arabic throughout Egypt and thus foster "a reading atmosphere".
- f. To create a simplified Arabic, easily grasped by everyone, and to use the press for its dissemination.
- g. To promote the reading of Arabic books everywhere, especially among government officials and their families.
- h. To teach Arabic texts at school rather than the history of literature.

Again, all the above are insisted upon as buttressing Egypt's cultural (and, subsequently, political — by implication) independence via the promotion of Arabic and the downgrading of English and other foreign languages. I am not aware if Mubārak had read Herder's (1853) thesis about the power of language in creating a nation, but he was utterly convinced that it could — and should — secure its independence.

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