

**MERE *KALAM FADI*?:
LANGUAGE AND MEANING IN MODERN EGYPTIAN HISTORY**

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“In the beginning was the Word. . .”



Selected plates from "Costumes et portraits" in *Description de l'Egypte*
(Catalogue of the 1798 French expedition into Egypt)

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INTRODUCTION

AMERICAN SOAP OPERAS frequently introduce formerly deceased characters who trigger major epiphanies in any given episode. A doctor who died in a skiing accident is suddenly revealed to be the living father of a needy orphan. The diary of a rebellious misfit divulges her secret past in an Alpine nunnery. Such devices usually contribute to a renewed understanding of the plot, theme, and message of a television series and leave viewers with a sense of finally understanding “the truth.” Indeed, this sense of finality only lasts until the next surprise, resulting in a periodic pattern of revelation that suggests an asymptotic disclosure of the truth. Although the notion of an objective “truth” remains problematic and perhaps impossible, it is not far-fetched to say that modern historiography, too, becomes richer and fuller in a renewed appreciation of characters that have been virtually forgotten.

Bringing neglected characters “back to life” in historical narratives allows us to engage in a simultaneous act of *affirmation* and *reconsideration*. In the first case, the introduction of new knowledge and details about an individual’s life impregnates the already-existing narrative, giving it renewed life and affirming its cohesion. At the same time, the new knowledge may also necessitate a reconsideration of the broad structures and processes through which we understand history itself. In this case, “what we thought we knew” becomes more complex, problematic, or even untenable, and a revamped understanding of “what we know” becomes critical if we hope to construct a more accurate historical narrative.

John Selden Willmore is one such character that obliges both an affirmation and reconsideration of our understanding of a particular moment in history, namely colonial Egypt, and more importantly the approaches that have been used to understand the developments that have ensued in modern Egypt since Willmore’s time. Indeed, the life and works of this “man of no repute” provides a sparkling prism through which larger processes of colonialism, nationalism, and modernity crystallize in a manner that affirms contemporary understandings of Egyptian history. But the telling of Willmore’s life also necessitates a

reconsideration, not simply of Egyptian history, but rather of the methodologies that formerly have been used to study Arabic-speaking societies in the Middle East. In this way, the reintroduction of a barely remembered character in the drama of modern Egyptian history serves as a useful point of departure for a reassessment of contemporary academic approaches to the study of Egyptian history, politics, and culture. A brief digression into Willmore's life allows us to delve deeper into the implications of such resurrected characters to our understanding of Egyptian history.

“ARCHIVAL GHOSTS”: LOWER-LEVEL AGENTS AND THE EASTERN EMPLOYMENT LADDER

John Selden Willmore was by no means a Cromer, a Salisbury, or even a Dufferin. At one time or another, he would indeed interact with most of these figures. But in many ways, he represents the larger contingent of British colonial agents: those individuals that spent much of their lives in service to the Empire yet did not attain the famous status of the typical personalities usually identified with British rule in the East. Such servants of the British imperial enterprise, sometimes lacking any actual legal, military, or administrative training, found themselves in constant flux as they were frequently moved from one position to another within the administrative hierarchy and geography. The imperatives of colonial administration were such that a lower-level agent could prove his worth and eventually find himself running a Consulate or even an entire nation. In the service of empire, advancement on the employment ladder relied just as much on the changing political and military climate or the availability of other personnel as it did on one's own actual capabilities. This was the administrative machinery that would allow Willmore to rise, in only ten years, from a student interpreter at Constantinople to a Judge in the Cairo Native Court of Appeals.

One important difference between people like Willmore and the (in)famous viceroys of the East remains of special concern to the modern historian, namely the sheer vacuity of the historical record with regards to such individuals. Rarely in positions that warranted the use

of a personal secretary, these “archival ghosts” did not leave voluminous catalogues of papers to be sifted through at the British Public Record Office. Unlike in the case of Cromer, for example, the modern historian has little by way of memorandum or correspondence that reveals personal attributes of Willmore’s ideas, opinions, or decisions.¹ As for personal papers, Willmore may well have left something to his family. Given that no single study of Willmore has yet to be written, locating such materials – although they may be gathering dust in the attic of one fortunate grandchild or another – has proved impossible. The historical record remains slim, leaving the researcher faced with formidable challenges in forming an accurate narrative about the lives of lesser-known figures in the British colonial enterprise. Nonetheless, the situation is not hopeless. While some details of Willmore’s life and ideas remain inaccessible for now, it is possible to speak methodically and accurately with regards to certain aspects of his life and, most importantly, to his service in Egypt and his ideas surrounding Egyptian society, Arabic language reform, and modernization. In this study, I will focus primarily on these aspects of Willmore’s life and place them, in as much as is possible, in the larger context of his relevance to our understanding of Egyptian history.

Other than that he was born in 1856, little is known about Willmore’s childhood and adolescence. We can, however, obtain a general sketch of his professional service to the Empire.² As early as May 26, 1879 he passed a competitive examination earning him a position as a Student Interpreter at Constantinople.³ By 1881, he was promoted to Assistant Interpreter. Only after three years service did Willmore make his first request for leave in

¹ See, e.g., Roger Owen’s discussion of the challenges of biography in the Preface to Lord Cromer: Victorian Imperialist, Edwardian Proconsul (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Lord Cromer himself played an active role in leaving a body of documents upon which he hoped future biographers would base their research. These personal papers coupled with the enormous collection at the Public Record Office (PRO) represents both an opportunity and a challenge to the modern historian. Fortunately or unfortunately, John Selden Willmore was not as premeditating.

² A timeline of Willmore’s career in the Foreign Office can be gleaned through a survey of the Foreign Office Directories at the PRO and, particularly, *The Foreign Office List and Diplomatic and Consular Year Book* for the years 1879 to 1921, the beginning of his retirement on a government pension. He died ten years later on April 24, 1931.

³ Additional materials pertaining to Willmore’s cohort of student interpreters can be found in PRO FO 78/3427.

order to take his BA examinations at King's College, Cambridge.⁴ These early years witness Willmore's assignment to various tasks including, for example, reporting on transit trade to Persia and looking into Ottoman rules surrounding the traffic of the pilgrimage.⁵ In December 1884, he is assigned to Philippopolis to report with Captain Jones on riots in Macedonia.⁶ Shortly afterwards, he receives his first substantial appointment, in the context of Captain Jones' taking leave, as Acting Consul-General at Philippopolis. This position marks an important watershed as from hereon Willmore is regularly assigned to fill positions for higher-level administrators who are taking leave. Consequently, he finds himself in Angora as Vice-Consul in November 1885, Vice-Consul at Alexandria from January 1887, and, finally, Acting Consul at Alexandria in 1889.

During his time in Alexandria, we get the first glimpse of Willmore's interest in the Egyptian people in his report on the "Condition of Upper Egypt."⁷ This report, requested by Lord Cromer himself, reveals some of the themes that would attract Willmore's attention during the nearly thirty years he served in Egypt. Interestingly, his report is scattered with Arabic terms like "*mudirrehs*" [bosses] and "*shadoofs*" and "*sakkiehs*" – whether or not his supervisors actually appreciated his penchant for Arabic is questionable. In this relatively short report, his discussion focuses almost entirely on the "*fellaheen*" who he describes as being trapped between "the interference of the Sheikhs" and government officials who, by virtue of the *corvée*, have been calling them "away from their labour without adequate cause." He then turns to the question of their low agricultural productivity in comparison to "English labourers" but concludes that they are "capable of adapting themselves to European inventions" for want of one thing – *adequate education*. Education, and its link to Egyptian

⁴ John Selden Willmore, letter to Lord Dufferin, 11 April 1882, PRO FO 78/3403.

⁵ On the abrogation of transit trade to Persia, see a memorandum submitted by Willmore on July 8, 1884: PRO FO 78/3634. Willmore's appointment to examine Ottoman pilgrim traffic in October 1884 is mentioned in PRO FO 78/3635.

⁶ Wyndham appoints Willmore to Macedonia, 5 December 1884, PRO FO 78/3629. For Jones and Willmore's coverage of the riots, see correspondence in PRO FO 78/3775.

⁷ John Selden Willmore, "Condition of Upper Egypt (No. 167)," 4 March 1887, PRO FO 78/4042. All references to Willmore's trip to Upper Egypt are drawn from this three-page report.

modernization, becomes a recurring concern for Willmore. His discussion then turns immediately from the link between education and productivity to the issue of language. The Chief of Daira Sanieh, Willmore warns, has hired “at his own expense” an Austrian to teach French. Willmore notes that Egyptian opinion elevates French over all other European languages and that French “is likely to be cultivated in preference to if not to the exclusion of English.” The British concern with the teaching of French is a theme that various officials bring up time and time again.⁸ What is interesting about Willmore is the manner in which he ties the issues of productivity, education, and language together: productivity – modern development in fact – corresponds to changes in the current language situation in Egypt. This theme would serve as the cornerstone of his later publications.

Returning to Willmore’s career, his frequent movement deserves a brief note. Whether or not this constant moving about indicates his superb performance or, more realistically, his inability to prove himself as essential to any one place is up for speculation. At the same time, it strikes a resounding note with patterns of foreign office employment up to the present day, so it may have well simply reflected the mobility of most agents in service to the empire. Little information presents itself during this time about his performance of any duties other than basic administration. Indeed, there are a series of documents that point to what becomes a frequent occurrence of mistakes (or mishaps) on the part of Willmore. Dispatches are frequently sent to the wrong people.⁹ Accounts are left in disarray.¹⁰ Given such oversights, he does not seem to shine in the actual management of consular affairs. Yet, intriguingly, his performance proves impressive enough to earn his appointment to the

⁸ See, e.g., “Education in Egypt. Views on Question of Sending Young Egyptians to Europe,” 4 November 1888, PRO FO 78/4148. In this lengthy, confidential report to Salisbury, Cromer takes up the subject of English language instruction with great detail and concern, concluding that it “would greatly facilitate the task we have in hand.” See also the correspondence between Cromer and Ya’qub Artin Pasha in the summer of 1886 pertaining to Artin’s lengthy report on “L’instruction publique en Egypte,” PRO FO 78/3940 and PRO FO 78/3946. Owen (2004) gives little attention to Cromer’s views on education and language, but from his numerous notes of gratitude to Artin, it seems that Cromer’s interest in social issues was indeed substantial.

⁹ Willmore’s first request for leave as well as his final correspondence before being appointed Judge in the Native Courts are both sent to the wrong address. These are not the only occasions.

¹⁰ See ,e.g., Willmore’s mishandling of British accounts in the Ottoman Bank, PRO FO 78/4249.

Commission on Judicial Reforms in Egypt in March 1887 and, later, an even more important position.¹¹

In 1889, Willmore was appointed Judge in the Cairo Native Court of Appeal, a position he held until 1909. For our purposes, these twenty years of his life represent the focus of our interest in Willmore given that he himself insisted that his ideas on Egyptian society, language, and modernization were formed in the context of his experience in the Native Courts. As a letter to the Foreign Office in London suggests, he may not have realized the significance of this opportunity prior to his acceptance:

With reference to our conversation last Tuesday, I should like to think that in accepting office under the Egyptian Government, I am not in any way prejudicing my chances of promotion in the Consular Service. I am, of course, most pleased to accept the appointment, but I cannot help feeling that I shall be incurring some risk if I enter so uncertain a service as the Egyptian [sic] without having good reason to hope that I shall be able to return to my former career in view of circumstances which cannot now be foreseen. I trust that you will be so kind as to submit this point in the consideration of Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, in order that, in the event of his Lordships' approval, some form of assurance may be given me, which will make me feel more at ease in entering upon my new duties.¹²

His anxieties are put to rest by Lord Salisbury who assures him that reentrance into the Consular Service is possible. During his service in the Native Courts, Willmore publishes a book that he claims to have been working on "at odd moments, chiefly in vacation time, in railway trains and steamboats."¹³ This book, *The Spoken Arabic of Egypt*, was published first in 1901 and subsequently re-released in 1905, according to Willmore because of high demand. This book, and the ideas presented within it, functions as a useful prism through which to examine larger questions of colonial ideology, modernity, Egyptian historiography, and contemporary approaches to understanding such phenomena.

¹¹ John Selden Willmore, Letter requesting compensation for his work on the Commission on Judicial Reforms, 2 September 1887, PRO FO 78/4048.

¹² Letters relating to Willmore's appointment to the Native Courts are included in PRO FO 78/4249. See, particularly, two letters dated September 12 and 23, 1889.

¹³ John Selden Willmore, *The Spoken Arabic of Egypt* (London: Ballantyne Press, 1905): 1905 Preface, xxv. Originally published in 1901. All citations refer to either the first preface of the 1901 edition or the later 1905 preface.

“FIFTEEN YEARS’ INTERCOURSE WITH THE NATIVES”

Publishing his grammar on spoken Arabic would in fact prove a challenging task. In the first place, he found it difficult to secure the backing of a publishing house. In a letter to Oscar Browning, a prominent tutor at King’s College, Cambridge, Willmore expressed his frustration:

Bevan [a representative of Clarendon Press] was certainly not encouraging, nor was he in the least interested in my work. He didn’t think a single copy of a book on a living oriental language would sell in Cambridge – if anywhere in England. The ancients alone seem to have his sympathy!¹⁴

Moreover, Willmore was baffled by the rejection of his work given that “our Eastern possessions are so immense, and still expanding every year.” Indeed, his indignation stemmed from his own conviction in his authority on the subject, an authority derived from personal experience. This is a claim he makes over and over again. In the same letter to Browning:

But I tried to make him [Bevan] understand that my calling brings me more than any one else contact with all [Egyptian] classes and that I was therefore in a position to arrive at the truth.¹⁵

In responding to the critics of his first edition, Willmore again emphasizes his personal role, as someone whose authority derives from actually having lived and worked in Egypt. The author of a 1902 review who takes issue with Willmore’s transliteration receives this response: “It was because *I had heard* the helping vowel that I wrote these consonants double.”¹⁶

Moreover, he describes his methodology as firmly rooted in his interaction with Egyptians “of all classes”:

Not only have I submitted the spelling of these words to a native, and often to more than one native, but in many cases I have found the words written as I have given them by persons whose education is only such as to enable them to write phonetically or by *kâtibs* reporting the exact pronunciation of the speaker.¹⁷

¹⁴ John Selden Willmore, letter to Oscar Browning, 28 October 1898, Oscar Browning Papers, King’s College Archives, University of Cambridge. All references to Willmore’s letters to Browning are drawn from this collection.

¹⁵ Willmore, letter to Browning, 28 October 1898.

¹⁶ Willmore, Preface (1905): ix. Emphasis added.

¹⁷ Willmore, Preface (1905): ix.

Willmore remains convicted of the importance of linking the accuracy of his grammar to his personal experience during his service in Cairo. Unlike other scholars of Arabic that may never leave their offices in London, Willmore's comprehensive knowledge of colloquial Arabic derives from "fifteen years' intercourse with the natives" as well as his close study of "documents written in the vernacular."¹⁸

This insistence on authority rooted in experience is accompanied by his attempts to demonstrate the scientific nature of his methodology. This is perhaps one of the more remarkable aspects of Willmore's personality. He seems constantly preoccupied, manically in fact, with "flashing his credentials," reiterating to readers, critics, and friends alike the rigorous approach he adopts in studying his subject. He summarily dismisses Bevan's claims that his work is unscientific:

One more remark of his (Bevan's) I can't help repeating: namely that an unscientific treatise would be of no value. He seemed to assume that I had had no classical education in the language; which as a matter of fact it is only during late years that I have given my attention to living dialects! And my studies of the classical have begun at a far earlier period than his own (and they have had the advantage of being pursued abroad).¹⁹

In a sense, Willmore endeavors to elevate his own personal experience of the Arabic language to the level of academic science. His identification and categorization of certain linguistic components as being the "spoken Arabic of Egypt," from his perspective, requires a simultaneous claim of authority and scientific scholarship. Looking closer at both prefaces, however, it becomes obvious that Willmore is interested in much more than simply describing colloquial Arabic as he experiences it. His greater goal, which only becomes clear in the second edition, entails a linguistic revolution that reveals much about colonial ideology and Egyptian history.

In the first preface (1901), Willmore places himself firmly in the tradition of past "orientalists," Wilhelm Spitta in particular, who have carried out "serious attempt[s] to sketch

¹⁸ Willmore, Preface (1905): xii.

the distinguishing features of the literary and vernacular dialects.”²⁰ Indeed, much of the discussion of the first preface suggests Willmore’s conception of his project as an exercise in identification and classification of those parts of Arabic speech that comprise colloquial Egyptian. Put in another way, he seeks to bring *order* to the language. Consequently, his book focuses entirely on what has been dubbed “vulgar” Arabic or, in other words, Egyptian colloquial Arabic. Past grammars, he notes, betray a “confusion between two spoken dialects, such as Egyptian and Syrian, or a hopeless mixture of forms and expressions used only in conversation with those which are peculiar to the written language.”²¹ Instead, Willmore seeks to accurately isolate and categorize the characteristics of the colloquial. To this end, he engages in a lengthy discussion of “its precise place in the Semitic family.”²² This “vulgar” dialect represents the “everyday speech of the people” and to this end “care has been taken to avoid words which are not familiar to all classes.”²³ It is geared to “Arabic scholars” and, more importantly, to those who seek a “*practical* knowledge of the language.”²⁴

Willmore’s discussion of the attributes of Egyptian Arabic is wrapped in a larger argument advocating the adoption of the colloquial as the single written and spoken language of Egypt. It is this aspect of his work that has been held up by contemporary critics as typical of the imperial enterprise of “divide and conquer.”²⁵ Indeed, Willmore does suggest such changes as a critical means of maintaining *an* Arabic language in Egyptian society:

¹⁹ John Selden Willmore, letter to Oscar Browning, 28 October 1898. The portion in parentheses was added in superscript in the original document suggesting it was most likely an afterthought. This deliberate verbosity is typical of Willmore’s efforts to justify his work.

²⁰ Willmore, Preface (1901): xix. Wilhelm Spitta Bey’s Grammatik des arabischen Vulgärdialectes von Aegypten was published in 1880. Such pioneering works still garner the attention of modern linguists. See, e.g., El-Said Badawi and Martin Hinds’ discussion of Socrates Spiro’s 1895 dictionary of Egyptian Arabic in their “Introduction” to A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1986).

²¹ Willmore, Preface (1901): xix.

²² Willmore, Preface (1901): xx.

²³ Willmore, Preface (1901): xxii.

²⁴ Willmore, Preface (1901): xxv. Emphasis added. Interestingly, Willmore suggests that certain Arabic scholars would not be interested in his work: “It was startling to learn from a professor of Semitic languages at one of the English universities that he excluded the living Arabic dialects from his studies.”

²⁵ Walter Armbrust mentions Nafusa Zakariyya Sa’id’s The History of the Call for Colloquial and Its Influence on Egypt which describes “European studies of the colloquial” as attempts “to deceive Egyptians into believing that their opposition to adopting the colloquial would expose them to a greater danger than they realized, namely the extinction of both the modern and the ancient [written] languages, in favor of a foreign language as a result of their increased contact with the European nations. This was to make them

There is reason to fear that, unless this be done [adoption of the colloquial] and a simpler system of writing to be adopted, both the colloquial and literary dialects will be gradually ousted, as the intercourse with European nations increases by a foreign tongue.²⁶

Apart from this casual mentioning, Willmore offers little explanation of the reasons for his support of the colloquial. Only in the second edition of his book does Willmore tackle such issues head on. For now, he simply suggests that such a movement “would best be started by the press” and, moreover, that it would “need to be strongly supported by men of influence.”²⁷ The period of time required for such a change – again this focus on order – would be “say two years” in order “to spread a knowledge of reading and writing throughout the country.”²⁸ Perhaps indicative of the difficulty of publishing his work, Willmore’s last comments refer to his “indebtedness to the heads of some of the Departments of the Egyptian Government and others for subscribing for a number of copies of the book, and thereby enabling me to carry it through the press.”²⁹ This suggests that early Egyptian government officials may have actually been open to Willmore’s ideas given that they were willing to purchase copies of a book authored by someone so clearly in favor of Egypt’s adoption of the colloquial. All in all, the first preface to Willmore’s book reflects an important side of Willmore, namely his self-conception as offering an authoritative, academic study and classification of colloquial Arabic. It is only in the second preface (1905) that we are offered a glimpse into another side of Willmore, one that implies a delicate understanding of the complex issues at the heart of his advocating the adoption of the colloquial. Unlike the preoccupation with order and classification found in the earlier edition, the second preface demonstrates Willmore’s estimable understanding of the intricate social, political, and cultural dynamics intertwined in the Arabic language situation in Egypt.

accept the colloquial for writing – because it was the lesser of two evils.” See Walter Armbrust, Mass Modernism and Culture in Egypt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 45.

²⁶ Willmore, Preface (1901): xxiv.

²⁷ Willmore, Preface (1901): xxiv-xxv.

²⁸ Willmore, Preface (1901): xxv.

²⁹ Willmore, Preface (1901): xxv.

Perhaps as a slap in the face of Bevan, Willmore opens his second preface with a statement of the popularity of his work:

The new edition has been called for by the publisher in view of the continued demand for the Grammar both in Europe and in Egypt since the first became exhausted six months ago.³⁰

Noting that the book has been “favourably received” in Europe, Willmore then begins his usual discourse on the characteristics of Egyptian colloquial. This time, his remarks are meant as a response to a critical review in the 1902 *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. As in the first preface, Willmore’s concentration revolves around the identifiable (and thus classifiable) characteristics of the colloquial dialect. The larger part of his discussion focuses on the distinguishing markers that set colloquial Arabic apart from classical Arabic.³¹ Having painstakingly responded to each claim made by his critic, Willmore then turns his attention to the issue of the adoption of the colloquial as Egypt’s official language. Diverging from his preoccupation with ordering the Arabic language, Willmore’s discussion of a movement “for” the colloquial betrays an enormous insight into the complex dynamics of Egyptian language and society. Indeed, his discussion of such a movement suggests a nuance and delicacy not obvious in his earlier discussions of the characteristics of the colloquial. Noting the discontent of “a certain section of the native press” to his suggestion “that for secular purposes there should be one language for speech and literature, and that the vernacular,” Willmore contextualizes his support for the colloquial with reference to modernization, education, and the relationship between intellectuals and the masses.³² It is worth quoting an excerpt in full:

It would be interesting to know how far the opinion of the country is expressed in the articles which have appeared in the newspapers. Several native gentlemen of high standing have assured me that they desire the change. One goes so far as to say that all thinking men are in favour of it; another considers that the project would find more partisans if it had not been started by foreigners; the idea has been several times advanced and advocated by native writers in the *Muqtataf* since the year 1881. It is, I think, for the lower classes rather than the higher to express an opinion, as they are the interested party. It is not for a small number of persons who already possess a means

³⁰ Willmore, Preface (1905): vii.

³¹ Willmore, Preface (1905): vii-xii.

³² Willmore, Preface (1905): xiii.

of communicating their thoughts in writing to decide that the rest of the population shall have no means of so doing.³³

For Willmore, the issue of Egyptian language reform has captured the attention of both elites and the “lower [uneducated] classes.” In the end, he insists that it is the uneducated who have the most to gain from such a change. The next part of his discussion, which comprises the conclusion of his second preface, reveals Willmore’s own awareness of the complexity of the situation. We obtain a glimpse of a colonial servant who is actually much more in tune with the nuances of Egyptian society than his earlier obsession with classification suggests.

One by one, Willmore exhaustively engages the “principal arguments” of the Egyptian press against adoption of the colloquial.³⁴ Surprisingly, he responds directly and succinctly to each criticism. First, he addresses “the religious question,” namely that the adoption of the vernacular would in some way threaten the religion of Islam.³⁵ Noting first that the modern literary language used in documents differs markedly from classical Qur’anic Arabic, Willmore then makes allusion to countries like “Turkey, Persia, India, China, and a great many other countries where Arabic is neither spoken nor written.”³⁶ Islam, he contends, clearly does not suffer from the disparity between the spoken language and Qur’anic Arabic in such countries. Moreover, he returns to the theme of education that he mentioned in his report on Upper Egypt insisting “that it must be more in the interest of religious education, as of all other education, that the whole of the population should be able to read and write some form of Arabic than that a few persons only should have that privilege.”³⁷

Next, Willmore argues against the notion that the adoption of a local colloquial would prove problematic to the cultural unity of the Arab world. Again, he describes the current situation as being no better: it is rather one in which “the very great majority of persons search

³³ Willmore, Preface (1905): xiii.

³⁴ See Willmore, Preface (1905): xiii-xvi.

³⁵ In this respect, Willmore differs from the perspective of one of his contemporaries, Sir William Willcocks, who regarded colloquial Arabic as the key to a Christianized Egypt. To this end, he encouraged a translation of the Bible into Egyptian colloquial Arabic. Better remembered for his contributions to Egyptian irrigation works, his views on language can still be found. See, e.g., Arthur Goldschmidt Jr., Biographical Dictionary of Modern Egypt (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000): 225.

for, and are at the mercy of, not one but two interpreters, even when both the writer and his friend are living in Cairo.”³⁸ Admittedly, Willmore may be exaggerating and yet the phenomena he is alluding to are larger cultural patterns of writing, literacy, and media production and consumption in Egypt. Education alone would not improve the situation, as even “an educated Egyptian” may find it difficult to understand a letter from a colleague from another part of the Arab world.³⁹ Willmore also rejects as futile the possibility that the educated could encourage the use of standard Arabic by the masses if only such elites began to use standard Arabic for oral communication. He mentions correspondence with “one writer” whose friends have tried to make such changes but “confesses that they have to fall back on the vernacular in their lighter moods.”⁴⁰ One after another, Willmore engages the arguments against the adoption of the colloquial: the challenges of selecting a specific Egyptian dialect, the role of the Government in language reform, and the preservation of heritage and a connection to Egypt’s past. In each response, he reveals an adept consciousness to the complexities of Egyptian society and its use of the Arabic language. This consciousness arises from his own experience with the use of Arabic by native speakers. He even makes reference to realities that modern academic studies have only begun to explore. In describing the dissemination of the stories of ‘Antar in Egyptian society, Willmore notes:

In reality ‘Antar is very imperfectly understood even by persons of education; but the gist of the stories has been made familiar to all from interpretations, sometimes given by the reciter himself.⁴¹

Such patterns suggest Willmore’s awareness of a dynamic of text and commentary at the heart of the Arabic language, one that has only recently gained the attention of modern linguistics.

All in all, Willmore’s exhaustive handling of the adoption of the colloquial reveals an

³⁶ Willmore, Preface (1905): xiv.

³⁷ Willmore, Preface (1905): xiv.

³⁸ Willmore, Preface (1905): xiv.

³⁹ Willmore, Preface (1905): xiv.

⁴⁰ Willmore, Preface (1905): xiv.

⁴¹ Willmore, Preface (1905): xvi.

intimacy with Egyptian society perhaps obscured by his simplistic classification of its language. His proposals for reform prove even more revealing.

In arguing for the adoption of the colloquial, Willmore recognizes the necessity of the participation of all segments of Egyptian society in realizing such a change. A more naive approach would most likely assume that the intellectuals alone could move Egypt towards the adoption of the colloquial.⁴² To be sure, Willmore does insist that the movement “needs to be *encouraged* by the influential and patriotic among the native population.”⁴³ More importantly, Willmore’s entire discussion focuses on the importance of adopting the colloquial in light of the imperatives of Egyptian modernization, development, and literacy. Unlike the few Egyptian authors who would later advocate adopting the colloquial, Willmore’s perspective has little to do with the value of such a change to the national identity of Egypt. For Willmore, language has more to do with modernity itself. Consequently, the change requires the interaction of all strata of Egyptian society so as to bring Egypt in its entirety closer to increased literacy and sustained development. Willmore draws special attention to signs of such a change already emerging as demonstrated by a group of court clerks – his perhaps? – that already had begun to take testimonies in colloquial Arabic.

Formerly the statements of prisoners and the depositions of witnesses were invariably translated, as they were taken down, into the literary language. It is obvious under these circumstances the judges, who had only the papers before them, were left very much in the dark as to what had actually been said; but in the last few years there have been found clerks bold enough to take down the declarations at least partially in the speaker’s own words.⁴⁴

Like the advancement of the “fellaheen” requires education and language reform, modernization, in this case a rational modern judiciary, requires that the colloquial play a role.⁴⁵

⁴² Indeed, this would be the position of those few Arab nationalists that advocated adoption of the colloquial. They were less interested in the masses than in the role of intellectuals in effecting such a change.

⁴³ Willmore, Preface (1905): xvi-xvii. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴ Willmore, Preface (1905): xvii.

⁴⁵ As a postscript to the first preface, Willmore also attaches an additional “Note” or rather an extended quote of a passage from the work of an unnamed American who also supported the adoption of the colloquial. This citation runs to nearly half the length of Willmore’s own preface. Although Willmore

All in all, Willmore was perhaps right to insist upon his “fifteen years’ intercourse with the natives” as a suitable foundation upon which to base his support for the adoption of the vernacular. At the least, his discussion of the complexities rooted in such a movement reveal that he was aware of the social, political, and cultural nuances involved in such a change. More importantly, we only gain a glimpse into the depth of his understanding of Egyptian society as a response to his critics in the Egyptian press, that is to say others similarly familiar with the Egyptian context. To the critic from the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* however, who probably did not have anything like Willmore’s “intimacy” with Egypt, Willmore responds in a language that makes most sense to his Western academic critic, that is, the language of order, colonial ideology, and modernism.

IDEOLOGY, MODERNITY, AND CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO EGYPTIAN HISTORY

Timothy Mitchell has described how “colonizing Egypt” entailed the imposition of a colonial ideology that organized and represented reality as a rigid set of hierarchies.⁴⁶ The colonial project policed such boundaries in its efforts to make Egypt at once readable and conquerable. This distinctly European notion of modernity stemmed from a conception of the world-as-exhibition or, rather, a world where representations and the reality they depicted merged together in a complex fashion.⁴⁷ In this sense, the world-as-exhibition was simply an ordered representation of reality, but one increasingly taken for granted as constituting reality itself. Meaning within this colonial ideology was constructed through order, plans, frameworks, and categories. With reference to cities, institutions of learning, and the act of writing, Mitchell describes how colonial ideology introduced new assumptions of order into a

neglects to name the author, the most likely source would be the American philologist William D. Whitney who was best known for his grammar of Sanskrit.

⁴⁶ See Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁴⁷ See, especially, Chapter One “Egypt at the exhibition” in Mitchell’s *Colonising Egypt*. Further discussion is also available in Timothy Mitchell, “The World as Exhibition,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31.2 (April 1989): 217-236.

pre-colonial system (Egypt) that had traditionally constructed meaning in other ways, namely through contrast and difference. Traditional Azharite styles of pedagogy are a case in point:

Life within the teaching mosque of al-Azhar required no walls to divide classrooms, no desks, no ordered ranks, no uniforms, no timetable, and no posted curriculum. In short, as with the city, there was no order in the sense we expect, as a framework, code, or structure that stands apart.⁴⁸

The process of *enframing*, or establishing static hierarchies, was crucial to the “peculiar historical strangeness of the new kind of order.”⁴⁹ Colonizing Egypt was a process that sought to “re-order Egypt to appear as a world enframed”:

Egypt was to be ordered up as something object-like. In other words it was to be made picture-like and legible, rendered available to political and economic calculation. Colonial power required the country to become readable, like a book, in our own sense of such a term.⁵⁰

Modernity itself is the culprit. Colonial ideology, and the European conceptions of modernity at its foundation, relied on a series of intertwined binary systems, mechanisms through which reality could be identified, categorized, and, ultimately, ordered.

A hasty glimpse into the figure of John Selden Willmore mistakenly marks him as the very embodiment of the processes described by Mitchell. Willmore’s fixation on identifying *the* category of colloquial Arabic so as to produce a more orderly image mirrors Mitchell’s characterization of colonial ideology and the world-as-exhibition. In Willmore’s own words, “comparative philology is a science unknown in Egypt.”⁵¹ The “seats of such learning are to be found in Europe and America,” and his grammar is one such work intended to bring order to the seeming anarchy of Arabic. As I have suggested in my discussion of Willmore’s views on the adoption of the colloquial, his approach to Egyptian society and language was actually remarkably astute. In a quite significant manner, Willmore’s awareness of the complex social and linguistic dynamics in Egypt suggests that Mitchell’s characterization of colonial ideology may too easily dismiss the importance of the actual *practice* that occurred in the

⁴⁸ Mitchell (1988): 82.

⁴⁹ Mitchell (1988): 82. See, particularly, his extended discussion of “Enframing” in Mitchell (1988): 32-62.

⁵⁰ Mitchell (1988): 33.

⁵¹ Willmore, Preface (1905): xii.

implementation of colonial ideology. Modern colonial ideology may have sought to organize Egypt into a neat set of hierarchies, but individuals like Willmore, faced with practical realities “on the ground” so to speak, demonstrated a more judicious approach to the social, political, and cultural dynamics of nineteenth-century Egypt.

Like many of his contemporaries, John Selden Willmore’s ideas and actions were just as much a product of colonial ideology as of the diverse realities he faced in his position as a colonial administrator. Mitchell’s characterization of European processes of “colonizing Egypt” does indeed capture the nature of colonial ideology in its fixation on order, hierarchy, and representation. But in spite of its heavy theoretical dimension (or perhaps because of it), Mitchell neglects the complex realities at work in the ideas, careers, and trajectories of the people that were charged with *implementing* such ideologies in Egypt itself. Returning to the divergence between Willmore’s response to his European critics and that given to the native Egyptian press, it becomes clear that “colonizing Egypt” involved a much more complex process than that accounted for by Mitchell. In many ways, what Mitchell leaves largely unaddressed is the manner in which colonial ideologies of order and hierarchy maintained and perpetuated themselves over time, even when faced with conflicting traditional pre-colonial systems of meaning. More importantly, Mitchell makes no mention of the influence of colonial ideology on other non-political mechanisms through which rigid hierarchies of order were projected, albeit less tangibly, onto Egyptian society. People like Willmore and his “authoritative” grammar played just as much, if not more, of a role in reading (and misreading) Egyptian society and culture as the colonialists themselves. Addressing such lacuna is crucial to an accurate reading of Egyptian history. For a start, enormous insight can be gained by shifting our gaze to the work of Judge Willmore or, rather, to his intended audience and contemporaries: Western academic orientalist.

This work explores the methodologies and approaches at the heart of contemporary studies of Egyptian history, politics, society, and culture with an eye towards both affirmation

and reconsideration. As such, John Selden Willmore reflects the manner in which colonial ideologies of order, hierarchy, and modernity extended into the academic study of Arabic-speaking societies in the Middle East. At its core, the colonial project sought the transformation of the “disorder” of pre-colonial Egypt into a series of neat, rigid binary systems of order. Total and penetrating imperial authority required the existence of such order. Ideology, nonetheless, did not always triumph over the practicalities of Egyptian society resulting in actuality in a more flexible system than that described by Mitchell. No one knew this better than the colonial agents themselves.

Academic orientalism is another story. In its detachment from the real minutiae of Egyptian society, Western orientalists preserved more zealously the obsession of colonial ideology with order, categorization, and hierarchy. It is for this reason that Willmore’s response to academic critics draws on the rigid language of colonial ideology whereas his reactions to native Egyptians is more reasonable in its appreciation of the complex realities of Egyptian society. Contemporary academic approaches have remained overwhelmingly preoccupied with description, classification, and the ordering of Middle Eastern history, politics, and society – perhaps more intensely than the colonialists themselves. Indeed, one can even go so far as suggesting that this (European) modernist approach to the Middle East has been more rigidly articulated in academia than in the colonial project itself. The ultimate outcome of such academic approaches remains a skewed, incomplete, and imperfect understanding of the social, cultural, and political dynamics of modern Egypt.

Nowhere is this truer than in the methodological neglect of colloquial Arabic. Relying on sociolinguistic and anthropological approaches, I argue the existence of a pervading trend cutting across various academic disciplines that rejects the crucial role of colloquial Arabic to our understanding of the intricacies of Arabic-speaking societies. Essentially, this neglect of the importance of colloquial Arabic stems from the manner in which Western conceptions of modernity – embodied in colonial ideology – have resulted in academia’s almost singular

focus on the *description* of categories (social, linguistic, cultural, or otherwise) instead of the greater importance of how such categories *interact* with each other *in practice*. Like Willmore's first preface, academic approaches to the study of the Arabic language have focused all too much on describing and classifying colloquial Arabic. But unlike in the case of Willmore, there has rarely been a "second preface" through which contemporary studies have revealed a more delicate and shrewd understanding of the modern Middle East. As a result, such studies have ignored the larger context in which the *interaction* of colloquial Arabic with standard Arabic offers substantial insight into larger processes in Egyptian history and contemporary society.

This study is also about the place of non-traditional media in historical research. Texts, elites, and standard Arabic have for too long captured the lion's share of academic attention. Throughout this work, I seek to illustrate the colorful and multidimensional insight to be gained through an integration of new media in the writing of Egyptian history. Linguistic, anthropologic, and literary studies of Arabic-speaking societies have already explored elements of a world that has been generally neglected by modern historiography. Admittedly, this realm of colloquial Arabic, audiovisual sources, and even songs poses many challenges, but the benefits are undoubtedly worth the effort. As I hope will become clear, such a rejuvenated approach to the use of mediated sources is not only critical, but indeed it remains necessary given the manner in which meaning itself is constructed in Arabic-speaking societies.

Meaning – whether it be Arabic speech or, taken more broadly, our understanding of Egyptian history – is constructed relationally through the interaction of marked categories with each other. It is the *interaction* between standard and colloquial Arabic, for example, that produces humor, irony, or authority. Similarly, our understanding of developments in modern Egyptian society requires a focus on the manner in which different categories (the "elites" and the "peasants" for example) interacted with each other rather than simply focusing

on the classification of characteristics within the categories. Willmore's "precise" descriptions of colloquial Arabic may have been a suitable response to his academic critics. It revealed much less, however, about the actual dynamics of Arabic than his more delicate discussion of the adoption of the colloquial, a discussion that focused on the relationship of different strata of Egyptian society in evaluating the prospects for actual language reform. This is because his discussion of the adoption of the colloquial focused on practice, that is to say the actual realities that all groups in Egyptian society faced together. The implications of this change in methodology, I believe, will become clearer in the entirety of my analysis. A history of Egypt written "from the middle," or more accurately from a "pulsating center of gravity" to which all actors in society are drawn and interconnected, provides a fuller, more perfect, and cohesive version of modern Egyptian history.

The pulse of this work therefore engages the term "meta" at multiple levels: it is at once meta-historical and meta-linguistic. It focuses on the manner in which academics have carried out their endeavors to think, read, and write the Arab world. It is my hope that through a close examination of the methodologies scholars have used, we may achieve a deeper and more perfect understanding of their actual subjects such as the relationship of intellectuals and the masses in the emerging Egyptian state, the politics of representation, the Egyptian public sphere and political space, and the nature of Egyptian modernity. On all such counts, historiography and analysis of the Middle East has been hindered by an approach that elevates intellectuals, elites, and standard Arabic over the masses, popular culture, and colloquial Arabic. This approach itself is an expression of modernist and colonial ideologies that focus entirely on categories and hierarchies to the detriment of understanding the more important phenomena that occur across the fluid boundaries of such categories.

I have divided this work roughly into two parts. In Part One, I explore traditional linguistic approaches to the study of Arabic that reflect a fixation with order and classification instead of a more useful (practice-oriented) relational approach to language. I argue that in

spite of significant improvements in sociolinguistic analysis of Arabic, the dynamism and fluidity of Arabic continues to be characterized and approached through the context of the rigid hierarchies of the diglossic model. Linguists, all too often preoccupied with description, have neglected the more significant dynamics of Arabic, namely the manner in which the delivery of meaning, relevance, and clarity in Arabic takes place through the interaction of standard and colloquial Arabic. I propose a revamped model of Arabic, one that focuses on how meaning is constructed relationally through both standard and colloquial Arabic and serves as a foundation for engaging larger issues of modern Egyptian historiography.

Part Two explores how modern historical approaches to the study of Egyptian and Arab nationalism have maintained a consuming focus on classification to the detriment of a holistic understanding of the complex phenomena of nationalism in the Arabic-speaking Middle East. Keeping our renewed linguistic model of Arabic in mind, I use the study of Arab nationalist ideology as a means of bringing to life the manner in which the pursuit of order remains an obstacle to our understanding of Middle Eastern history. In this context, historians have focused almost exclusively on the textual ideologies of a representative group of nationalist intellectuals or, in other words, cultural production in standard Arabic while summarily neglecting the existence and interaction of the sphere of colloquial Arabic. In many ways, the essentialist claims of Arab nationalist intellectuals have reinforced the enframing process of colonial ideology. Having sketched out the broad trends at work in contemporary historiography, I look closer at specific historical approaches that, although increasingly improving on methodologies of the past, still manage to maintain a somewhat singular focus on rigid hierarchies while summarily ignoring the interaction that takes place between such categories. Intellectuals, elites, and standard texts remain the focus of such studies: perhaps the assumption is that these categories somehow exist in a cohesive manner separate from other phenomena. The result of these modernist approaches remains a highly

simplified, inaccurate, and alarmingly flat understanding of the Egyptian experience of nationalism.

As I noted at the outset, this work intends to function as both an affirmation and reconsideration of past analysis, approaches, and insights into modern Egypt. My purpose, therefore, is not simply to take a critical stance to my sources but, rather, to enrich them through a reconsideration of the manner in which they came to their conclusions. Indeed, I am fully aware that any relevant insights that I can offer into changing approaches to the study of modern Egypt has only proved possible because of the very methodologies that I seek to transform. An understanding of how the interaction of standard and colloquial Arabic produces meaning, for example, would be unattainable without having first developed a working notion of each of these variants within themselves. It is the rigidity of past formulations that concerns me. In an almost absurdist manner, improving the academic approaches of the past necessitates a deep appreciation of the invaluable product of such earlier methodologies to modern Egyptian history. It goes without saying that such acts of creative destruction have proven both challenging and humbling and yet, I confess, entirely exhilarating.

PART ONE – MODELS OF LANGUAGE

RIDICULE remains perhaps one of the most underestimated forces in the political sphere. Popular social criticism is often ignored by political scientists and left instead to anthropologists to explore under the heading of “popular culture.” Any mention of the “voice of the people” frequently serves as mere marginalia intended to enliven the primary historical narrative with its focus on formal politics, elites, and officialdom. This trend is surprising given that actual actors in Egyptian politics have historically showed an immense concern for the social criticism that was delivered in colloquial Arabic. Time after time, the historical record makes mention of moments, notably during periods of political upheaval and change, when vernacular songs spread across Cairo like wildfire. The British colonial administrators found such “chatter” worthy of mention in their reports to the Foreign Office in London. One such report in 1919 notes that:

It has been noticed lately in native quarters that street-boys, lower-class natives, seed vendors, etc., have been publicly singing a new song in the vernacular in which open insinuations are made regarding the arrival in Egypt of the ex-Khedive and ENVER Pasha. The song also contains uncomplimentary remarks about the G.O.C. [General Officer Commanding].⁵²

Interestingly, the description relates the colloquial song to the “native quarters” of Cairo, the realm of “street-boys, lower-class natives,” and “seed vendors,” or in other words, the masses.

Vernacular cultural expressions were considered important enough that actual copies of the songs along with translations were sent as dispatches. One such unsigned colloquial poem that was sent to London during the 1919 revolution makes reference to contemporary politics in a manner that suggests an engaged and informed populace, aware of political developments as they took place:

O Wilson, we have gathered together and to whom shall we address ourselves? For we have no newspapers – only those utterances of a lunatic in the [pro-British] “Mokattam”.

⁵² Police Report (Cairo), 31 July 1919, PRO FO 141/781/8915. Quoted in Marilyn Booth, “Colloquial Arabic Poetry, Politics, and the Press in Modern Egypt,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24.3 (Aug. 1992): 424.

Go, ye our delegates! Our Abbas is close at hand; two words are only required. Then in the twinkling of an eye we achieve our purpose – our great cause.

He betook himself on a pilgrimage to the great peoples and they (British), by what right did they take his kingdom from him and put his uncle in his place and deprive his son of his inheritance?⁵³

This poem is introduced by a scrawled note that describes it as “the song they say which the little boys in the street in Cairo and the ladies in the harems [sic] have been singing lately.”⁵⁴

Given that the officers included such occurrences in their reports, such songs were taken seriously as a glimpse into the contemporary political climate:

Several “popular” native songs are in circulation. Their theme is advice to “Allenby” to leave the country and to allow ABBAS, who is returning shortly, to rule it in peace and quiet. If their advice is not followed the consequences are to be serious.⁵⁵

The popular songs reflected the conviction of the masses in their own ability to effect change in the political system. Whether this sense of confidence was well-founded or not is another matter.

A concern for what I shall call the crucial role of the colloquial was not limited to the British alone but also emerges from the mouths of Egyptians. Gamal Abdel Nasser, in popular mythology the first “real” Egyptian to rule Egypt in over two thousand years, could not endure the “overwhelming spate of *nuktas* [jokes]” that occurred shortly after Egypt’s defeat at the hands of Israel in the 1967 war.⁵⁶ From his perspective, the situation warranted a reaction, and he ambivalently suggested that the people adopt a more reverent attitude:

The Egyptian people grab anything and crack jokes about it. They’re a people that love “the joke.” And this is a distinctive feature [of the Egyptians]. They philosophize worldly matters with it. But we can sometimes find our customs to be costly, so we must be [more] sincere.⁵⁷

⁵³ Both the original and a translation were sent to London on April 4, 1919 in a dispatch entitled “Egyptian Unrest. Translation of song now popular in Egypt.” PRO FO 371/3714. An image of the poem is included in the Appendix at the end of this study.

⁵⁴ April 4, 1919, PRO FO 371/3714/50207.

⁵⁵ CID Intelligence Summary, 24 May 1919, PRO FO 141/781/8915. Also quoted in Booth (1992): 430.

⁵⁶ Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid Marsot, “The Cartoon in Egypt,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13.1 (Jan. 1971): 6.

⁵⁷ ‘Adil Hammudah, *Al nukta al siyāsiyya: Kayf yashkar al-misriyūn min hukkamihim (The Political Joke: How Egyptians Crack Jokes about Their Government)* (Cairo, 1990): 17.

While acknowledging the distinctiveness of humor to the Egyptian spirit, Nasser recommends more respect and sincerity at a time of national crisis. But as Afaf Marsot suggests, the call of the *za'im* “fell on deaf ears, and the wit continued to flow at his expense, and that of the army, the population in general, and the enemy.”⁵⁸ This suggests a more pervasive quality to vernacular ridicule than implied in the British examples. For the British officer, the vernacular songs are the voice of the indigenous masses expressing their hostility to a foreign occupying power. In Nasser’s case, however, the ridicule targets Egyptian society at large and cuts across every level. It is more akin to a commentary on a tragic moment in Egyptian history in which the fate of all segments of Egyptian society is intertwined. Seemingly produced by and targeting the “entire population in general,” the vernacular songs reveal a conception of the cohesion of Egyptian society. Clearly, the vernacular deserves more than a hasty footnote in political and historical studies of modern Egypt. What is colloquial is not necessarily marginal, especially when the delivery of a vernacular song prompts a response from formal and powerful political authorities. In this sense, Nasser and the British may have had more in common than either was willing to acknowledge, namely an astute understanding of the complex dynamics of language in Arabic-speaking societies.

Colonial administrators and modern Egyptian rulers alike recognized that expressions in the colloquial were not mere *kalam fadi* (“empty words” or “nonsense”) but, rather, something to be taken very seriously. What was so threatening about rhetoric delivered in the vernacular to warrant the attention of political actors like Nasser or the British administrators? More importantly, if the target of such ridicule could be as particular as one commanding legion or as expansive as all of Egyptian society, how are we to understand colloquial utterances within the larger Egyptian public sphere? What role should colloquial Arabic play in Egyptian historiography? Surely, its relative importance in the writing of history should mirror the function it plays in Egyptian society. For this reason, the methodological neglect of the colloquial in historiography remains alarming.

⁵⁸ Marsot (1971): 6.

Most studies of Egyptian politics, society, and culture mention colloquial Arabic simply as the “ordinary” spoken Arabic of the people. In its written form, it manifests itself in the daily political cartoons, separate from the standard text of most newspapers articles.⁵⁹ This identification with political cartoons suggests a notion of colloquial Arabic as a marginal reality, one that simply looks inward and criticizes the public sphere without playing any additional role in it. Indeed, this conception of colloquial Arabic manifests itself in a plethora of academic disciplines and even in the social norms at the heart of contemporary Egyptian society. Supposedly representative of the “illiterate, uneducated, and unwashed” masses, colloquial Arabic has seemed to offer little insight for “serious” scholars of Egyptian politics and society in its formal, official, and dominant guise. How is it then that the mother-tongue of *all* Egyptians has come to be written out of the study of Egypt? The answer lies in the Arabic language itself or, more pointedly, in the ways people have sought to describe, understand, and approach it.

For better or worse, models of languages and studies of societies have historically been intertwined. The models that we use to describe language have a profound impact on the way we understand the societies that speak those languages. In the case of Arabic-speaking societies like Egypt, it is my contention that contemporary linguistic models of Arabic have maintained a singular focus on description, classification, and organization that manifests the preoccupation with order found in colonial ideology and European conceptions of modernity. From the appearance of what is arguably the most influential study of Arabic sociolinguistics, approaches to the study of Arabic have assumed its expression as a rigid set of hierarchies, most notably expressed in the categories of “standard Arabic” and “colloquial Arabic”. Within such a framework, colloquial Egyptian has regularly been defined by virtue of its “otherness” or marginality to standard Arabic. Put in another way, colloquial Arabic with its changing, dynamic nature has too easily been categorized as anything that is not standard

⁵⁹ See, e.g., Fatma Müge Göçek’s discussion of cartoons as a site of both representation and resistance in Political Cartoons in the Middle East (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1998): 1-11.

Arabic. Such order-oriented conceptions of Arabic, while perhaps useful for explorations like those of Willmore's into "vulgar" Arabic, evoke European notions of modernity in a manner that rarely captures the complex mass of linguistic and cultural intricacies at play in modern Egyptian society.

Some may doubt the utility of linguistics to the study of larger trends in politics and society. Indeed, the work of some linguists reinforces this hesitation. With an invaluable focus on the empirical changes that occur in speakers' behavior, linguists sometimes neglect the greater picture of the relevance of such empirical changes, making it difficult to find instances when linguistic approaches have been effectively used in a discussion of societal trends.⁶⁰ More recently, there are of course a number of exceptions to this rule. The research by Yasir Suleiman is noteworthy. Exploring the dynamics of language at work in the history of Arab nationalism, he suggests that the reason for the dearth of research on the relationship between language and society lies in the nature of "disciplinary specialization" that ultimately keeps the work of political scientists, historians, and linguists separate. He holds linguists particularly responsible and describes them as being "hemmed in by the imperatives of their discipline."

They tend to be interested in the theoretical foundations of linguistics or the generation of descriptive studies for individual languages or portions of languages. Hyphenated approaches such as psycho-linguistics or socio-linguistics (henceforth "sociolinguistics") answer to two masters, which tend to pull them in different directions and, more often than not, assign those who profess expertise in them to the margins of the parent disciplines.⁶¹

Even given the innovative nature of his integration of linguistics and social sciences, Suleiman's discussion of colloquial Arabic functions basically as an "aside" to his primary tale of standard written Arabic and its place in the ideology of Arab nationalism. Suleiman's

⁶⁰ Walter Armbrust has described how "the sociological dimensions" of linguistic phenomena "receive only cursory attention." Heath's three-hundred-page study on Moroccan Arabic, therefore, uses merely four pages to discuss actual language practice. See, e.g. Chapter Two on "The Split Vernacular" in Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and, especially, 48-55.

⁶¹ Yasir Suleiman, *The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003): 4.

characterization of the contributions of Salama Musa, for example, remarkably makes standard Arabic the focal point. In describing the body of Musa's work, Suleiman manages to transform the opinions of an ardent advocate of the colloquial into a discussion of standard Arabic:

Witness the fact that, although he [Musa] calls for replacing standard Arabic by Egyptian colloquial as the national language of Egypt, he nonetheless seems to direct most of his linguistic-reform proposals toward the former. Witness also the fact that he himself does not use the colloquial in writing.⁶²

When the colloquial figures prominently in a thinker's work, as it did with Salama Musa, academics have still managed to deflate and undercut its importance by describing it simply as a footnote to standard Arabic.⁶³ We cannot rely on linguists, therefore, to address gaps in our understanding of Arabic-speaking societies; we can, however, utilize their research and data in an attempt to address the methodological lacuna.

My analysis looks both backward and forward. In the following pages, I explore the linguistic foundation upon which a false dichotomy has been built in the study of Arabic-speaking societies, namely the notion that "colloquial equals marginal". This notion has embedded itself in the study of the Middle East with disastrous consequences particularly with respect to our understanding of Arab nationalism as I shall suggest in Part Two. In the first section of Part One, I discuss the historical development of linguistic models of Arabic. I argue that in spite of the shift from a rigid, hierarchical understanding of the Arabic language to an awareness of its fluidity and dynamic nature, the foundational models of Arabic continue to cast a shadow over Arabic sociolinguistics. Descriptivist approaches to Arabic have consumed the field, resulting in a seeming obsession with categorization and a reluctance (or inability) to step back and realize the greater dynamics at work in Arabic. The paradigm shifts from the initial notion of diglossia to more fluid "levels" of Arabic and, finally, to the models

⁶² Suleiman 189.

⁶³ Interestingly, Suleiman's work contains chapters with titles such as "The Past Lives On," "The Arabic Language Unites Us," and "Arabic, First and Foremost." A cursory glance at the book's structure alone demonstrates that Suleiman is less interested in how "The Arabic Language Divides Us" or even the question of what kind of Arabic is actually "first and foremost" in the lives of native Arabic speakers.

of code-switching that are popular today all represent crucial steps forward in our understanding of Arabic. Yet they still retain a problematic view of Arabic as a divided language, an understanding of Arabic that differs dramatically from the way in which actual Arabic speakers experience the language in practice in their daily lives.

What I propose then is an approach to Arabic that emphasizes the changes that occur across the boundaries of standard and spoken Arabic, that is to say a model of the Arabic language that focuses on the *interaction* of standard and colloquial Arabic as one cohesive unit. European conceptions of modernity have saturated the linguistic discourse on Arabic. Assuming an approach that focuses on the relational interaction of categories rather than their separate characteristics opens the door to a renewed and more perfect understanding of Arabic and the societies that speak it. More pointedly, the delivery of meaning and relevance from Arabic speaker to listener occurs by virtue of the interaction of colloquial and standard Arabic. Colloquial Egyptian is not simply the *kalam fadi* of standard Arabic. Rather, both are essentially necessary to the construction of meaning in ways that diverge from modernist colonial ideology. In this expanded understanding of colloquial Arabic as a crucial element in the production of meaning, the reason for the concerns of Nasser and the British agents becomes clearer if not ingenious. Indeed, such actors demonstrated a more perceptive grasp of Egyptian history, politics, and society than contemporary academia – with its focus on static order – has managed to achieve.

BOUNDARIES, ORDER, AND MODERN LINGUISTIC APPROACHES TO THE ARABIC LANGUAGE⁶⁴

A word on methodology

A cursory elaboration on certain linguistic terminology will prove useful for engaging the nuanced and complex dynamics of the Arabic language. Broadly speaking, Arabic manifests itself in a variety of forms which contemporary linguists have generally categorized

into two variants: colloquial Arabic and standard Arabic. Colloquial Arabic is the embodiment of variation *par excellence*. In terms of linguistic categories of morphology, phonology, and lexicon, it exhibits differences across countries, within countries, and even from village to village. As a spoken dialect, variation in colloquial Arabic can make communication between Arabic-speaking individuals from two different regions difficult and sometimes even impossible.⁶⁵ For the purposes of this study, I will use “colloquial” and “spoken” interchangeably to refer to the dialects spoken across the Arabic-speaking Middle East. I will use “Egyptian Arabic” or simply “Egyptian” to specify the Egyptian colloquial Arabic spoken by Egyptians and contained in an approximated written form in the Egyptian colloquial press of the nineteenth twentieth century. Standard written Arabic, on the other hand, refers to the modern derivative of classical Arabic as embodied in the Qur’an. When using the term “standard written Arabic” or simply “standard” Arabic, I am referring to the variant of Arabic that is associated with Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Standard Arabic is the official language of Egypt and the domain of grammarians and other prescriptive individuals concerned with “proper Arabic.”

Moreover, I will make constant reference to both “codes” and “registers” throughout this work. I use the terms broadly to identify distinct types of speech that can be differentiated from each other by virtue of linguistic markers in morphology, phonology, and lexicon.⁶⁶ The distinction between codes also presents itself in the ideas speakers have about their own language. For many speakers of Arabic, the notion that colloquial Arabic is something

⁶⁴ In this section, I draw on some ideas and research developed in a series of tutorials with Professor Clive Holes entitled “Language, Community, and Identity in the Arabic-speaking Middle East” during Trinity 2003.

⁶⁵ At its core, pan-Arab ideology that focuses on the shared language of Arabic as a signifier of the unity of the “Arab world” rejects the blatant realities of the diversity of spoken Arabic.

⁶⁶ I have limited my discussion of such linguistic markers so as to only introduce those characteristics relevant to my analysis of linguistic data. Characteristics distinguishing the colloquial from the standard range from phonological shifts (from “al” to “il” in the case of Egyptian for example) to larger syntactic changes such as the order of subject, verb, and object. Haeri (2003) and Versteegh (1997) offer useful discussions of such differences. Holes’ approach (1995) is notable in its inclusion of dialectal linguistic patterns alongside those of standard Arabic instead of merely offering a limited discussion of the dialects on their own. This makes sense since most native speakers experience the two registers alongside each other in their everyday lives.

separate and different to standard Arabic becomes conventional wisdom as early as childhood.⁶⁷ Indeed, most distinguish between standard (*fusha*) and the colloquial (*'ammiyya*) while paying less attention to differences between MSA and classical Arabic.⁶⁸

Distinguishing between standard and colloquial as two distinct registers, therefore, is tenable. At the same time, I realize that my use of the terms “code” and “register” remains problematic given that recognition of colloquial and standard Arabic as separate codes suggests a rejection of their function as a cohesive unit. As I will detail below, however, it is possible to discuss the interaction and relationality of codes as a means of drawing out the cohesion of Arabic. What I am more interested in is the changes that occur in practice at the boundaries of switches from colloquial to standard than actual descriptions of each code itself.

The linguistic terminology itself has contributed to the scant attention of linguists to the study of Arabic as a cohesive unit.⁶⁹ Critical methodological challenges arise in any endeavor to discuss a language in its unity when it has historically been defined in terms of its existence in two separate variants. In a way, shifting our attention away from the unique function of each of the two codes and towards their interaction implies a rejection of the modern linguistic categorization of Arabic being comprised of separate variants. An approach that emphasizes the unity of Arabic, it would seem, consequently rejects the realities of diglossia. Practice and speakers’ ideas about their own language, however, suggests the opposite. Colloquial Arabic and standard Arabic remain distinctly different in terms of formal linguistic markers as well as their functional attributes and uses. How then is it possible to speak of the existence of “distinct codes” while simultaneously acknowledging the variants as part of one unit?

⁶⁷ Haeri has pointed out the sacred connotations evoked by standard Arabic for most Egyptians whose first experiences hearing standard Arabic were those of Qur’anic recitation during childhood. See the “Introduction” in Niloofar Haeri’s *Sacred Language, Ordinary People: Dilemmas of Culture and Politics in Egypt* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

⁶⁸ See, e.g., Dilworth B. Parkinson, “Knowing Standard Arabic: Testing Egyptians’ MSA Abilities,” *Perspectives on Arabic Linguistics V*, eds. Mushira Eid and Clive Holes (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1993): 47-73.

A useful way of addressing this methodological challenge lies in the notion of *saliency* as a marker of switches in code. In her 1999 study of the speech of Jordanian women, Enam Al-Wer describes the processes by which speakers preserve certain attributes of the colloquial Arabic spoken in their communities. Accepting the notion that “different [linguistic] variables behave differently,” Al-Wer proposes that “the speakers’ response to the community’s pressure towards the maintenance of its local norm of speech correlates with the speakers’ degree of awareness of the various variables.”⁷⁰ In other words, speakers will react to the pressure of their community in either maintaining or rejecting specific linguistic behaviors. As such, certain variables (audible linguistic markers that express themselves in morphology, phonology, and lexicon) are more *salient* than others. On a social and cultural level, certain markers are more characteristic of certain spoken Arabic dialects. For example, the colloquial “*innaharda*” [today] is almost exclusively identified with Egypt. This is not to say that non-Egyptian Arabic speakers will not use the term, but that when it is used, the association it will have is a distinctly Egyptian one. Salient markers also exist at the smallest levels of analysis such as when the consonant [q] becomes [ʔ] or glottal stop in speech, often evocative of urban speech patterns.⁷¹ By focusing on those features that are most salient to different codes, it is possible to distinguish between speech practice *intended* as one code or the other. For our purposes, this means that a focus on saliently dialectal or colloquial features will make it possible to distinguish between alternative changes toward colloquial Arabic or standard Arabic while simultaneously regarding the switches as part of a cohesive whole.

⁶⁹ Holes describes his work as an attempt to “redress the balance, and view the languages as an integrated whole.” See the “Preface” in Clive Holes’ *Modern Arabic*, (New York: Longman, 1995). Hereafter, Holes (1995).

⁷⁰ Enam Al-Wer, “Why Do Different Variables Behave Differently? Data from Arabic,” *Language and Society in the Middle East and North Africa: Studies in Variation and Identity*, ed. Yasir Suleiman (Richmond: Curzon, 1999): 47.

⁷¹ The salience of shifts from [q] to [ʔ] emerges in most linguistic literature. See, e.g., Hassan Abd-el-Jawad, “The emergence of an urban dialect in the Jordanian urban centers,” in *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 61 (1986): 53-63; Enam Al-Wer, “Why Do Different Variables Behave Differently? Data from Arabic,” *Language and Society in the Middle East and North Africa: Studies in Variation and Identity*, ed. Yasir Suleiman (Richmond: Curzon, 1999): 38-57; Muhammad H. Ibrahim, “Standard and Prestige Language: A Problem in Arabic Sociolinguistics,” *Anthropological Linguistics* 28.1 (1987): 115-

What is critical, therefore, for our study (and represents somewhat of a departure from traditional linguistic approaches) is a focus not on the codes themselves as separate, fixed registers but, rather, on the points at which salient markers suggest a switch from one code to another. I am more concerned with the dynamics that take place across the boundaries of each register as opposed to the nature of the register itself. Indeed, my argument is that this focus on relationality represents the process by which meaning itself is constructed in Arabic. Traditional linguistic approaches have demonstrated a general preoccupation with *descriptivist* analyses of the two codes while not enough attention has been given to the holistic *function* of the codes when approached as a single unit. This approach reflects European conceptions of modernity and, in doing so, it represents a serious limitation on our understanding of the Arabic language.

Diglossia and Arabic Sociolinguistics: Bringing Order to the Arabic Language

In 1959, Charles Ferguson released an article, aptly titled “Diglossia,” which represents perhaps one of the most critical works to the study of the Arabic language.⁷² Its importance lies as much in its content as in the manner in which it has influenced subsequent writings on Arabic. Basically, Ferguson describes the existence of a dichotomous language situation in which two distinct and unique language variants exist in separate situational domains. Language use, for Ferguson, is influenced primarily – almost statically – by situational variables. Today, the details of his conclusions have been found to be largely inconsistent with subsequent empirical data of Arabic speech in practice. Indeed, contemporary models of code-switching have in large part rejected the situational framework offered by Ferguson. The basic premise of the existence of a diglossic structure in Arabic, however, has remained largely intact. His contribution remains seminal because it touched upon characteristic trends in Arabic that no one had yet elucidated at the time the article was

126; and T.F. Mitchell, “What is Educated Spoken Arabic?”, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 61 (1986): 7-32.

⁷² Charles Ferguson, “Diglossia,” *Word* 15 (1959): 325-40.

published. As such, Ferguson’s contribution marks the starting point of our exploration into the need for a change in approaches to the study of Arabic. Given its widespread influence on the field and its articulation of a notion of diglossia that remains the framework for contemporary approaches to Arabic, it warrants a closer look so as to better understand the nature of modern approaches to the Arabic language. As we shall see, the models used to represent Arabic parallel similar trends in academic approaches to the study of politics, history, and the culture of Arabic-speaking societies.

For Ferguson, the term “diglossia” refers to the general language situation existing when two distinct variants of one language are used differently for reasons determined by situational variables. Pointing to Arabic, Swiss German, Haitian Creole, and Greek, Ferguson studies situations where “two varieties of a language exist side by side throughout the community, with each having a definite role to play.”⁷³ In the case of Arabic, the model of diglossia rests on a dichotomy of bounded domains in which high (H) and low (L) variants of Arabic (standard and colloquial, respectively) alternately function and reside. Apart from the existence of two variants side-by-side, Ferguson points to a number of other characteristics of a diglossic language situation. Most importantly, both variants have *specialized functions* to play in unique, and often mutually exclusive, domains. As Ferguson details, “In one set of situations only H is appropriate and in another only L, with the two sets overlapping only very slightly.”⁷⁴ Intriguingly, Ferguson suggests a rigid categorization of the variant “normally used” in a range of “possible situations”.⁷⁵

	<u>H</u>	<u>L</u>
Sermon in church or mosque	x	
Instructions to servants, waiters, workmen, clerks		x
Personal letter	x	
Speech in parliament, political speech	x	
University lecture	x	
Conversation with family, friends, colleagues		x
News broadcast	x	

⁷³ Ferguson 325.

⁷⁴ Ferguson 328.

⁷⁵ This chart is reproduced from Ferguson 329.

Radio “soap opera”		x
Newspaper editorial, news story, caption on picture	x	
	<u>H</u>	<u>L</u>
Caption on political cartoon		x
Poetry	x	
Folk literature		x

Although “situational” factors are at the heart of Ferguson’s categorization, he offers no explanation of the variables used to distinguish between different situations. Interestingly, captions differ by virtue of their framing a picture or a cartoon, and literature similarly varies based on its content. So-called “folk” literature is associated with the low variant while “poetry” remains in the high variant.⁷⁶ Much of Ferguson’s categorization seems arbitrary. Perhaps one could point to the possibility of prepared written materials being relegated to the high variant, but even then, that assumes a completely scripted sermon or university lecture – not always the case as any academic will attest.

Ferguson’s use of terminology also proves problematic and reflects the fixation of modernist ideology with the imposition of order and rigid hierarchies. In describing standard Arabic as the high variant and colloquial Arabic as the low variant, Ferguson’s approach epitomizes what will be a constant association of standard Arabic with superiority and colloquial Arabic with “the marginal.” He describes the prestige and superiority generally garnered by the high variant of the language. Speakers of Arabic themselves provide evidence of this “superiority” of standard Arabic:

Sometimes the feeling is so strong that H alone is regarded as real and L is reported “not to exist.” Speakers of Arabic, for example, may say (in L) that so-and-so doesn’t know Arabic. This normally means he doesn’t know H, although he may be a fluent, effective speaker of L. If a non-speaker of Arabic asks an educated Arab for help in learning to speak Arabic the Arab will normally try to teach him H forms, insisting that these are the only ones to use. Very often, educated Arabs will maintain that they never use L at all, in spite of the fact that direct observation shows that they use it constantly in ordinary conversation.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ The distinction itself seems more likely wrapped in a prescriptive formula: what is written in the low variant is automatically identified as “folk” literature.

⁷⁷ Ferguson 329-330.

Ferguson also emphasizes the roots of the high variant in a “sizable body of written literature ... which is held in high esteem by the speech community.”⁷⁸ The high variant remains “*al-fusha*” while the low variant is referred to as “*al-‘ammiyyah*.”⁷⁹ Taking his work in its entirety, we may sketch out a broad set of categories implied by the diglossic model:

<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>
Standard	Colloquial / Vernacular
Fusha	‘Ammiyyah
Superior	Inferior
Canonical and literary	Folk
Acquisition=formal education	Mother-tongue
Grammatical standardization	Dynamic linguistic variation
Complex grammar	Simple grammar

This dichotomization represents much more than a mere conceptual tool. Within this framework, standard Arabic becomes the focal point for high culture, standardization, and formal superiority while colloquial Arabic remains marginal, inferior, and grammatically simple. This is not to say this was Ferguson’s own assessment of the two codes, but simply to point out the way in which the foundational research into Arabic created a rigid set of hierarchies, a system of order that future studies would draw upon in their own conclusions that sometimes reinforced and sometimes diverged from those of Ferguson. In such a static system, each variant carried with it a distinct set of meanings, implications, and inheritances.

Rereading Ferguson, however, it becomes clear that even he recognized that his model left a large segment of speech practice unaccounted for. In addressing “communicative tensions which arise in the diglossia situation,” he points to the existence of “relatively uncodified, unstable, intermediate forms of the language [in Arabic, “*al-lugah al wusta*”] and repeated borrowing of vocabulary items from H to L.”⁸⁰ Ferguson’s attempt to address this challenge to his model is limited:

In Arabic, for example, a kind of spoken Arabic much used in certain semiformal or cross-dialectal situations has a highly classical vocabulary with few or no inflectional

⁷⁸ Ferguson 330.

⁷⁹ Ferguson 327.

⁸⁰ Ferguson 332.

endings, with certain features of classical syntax, but with a fundamentally colloquial base in morphology and syntax, and a generous admixture of colloquial vocabulary.⁸¹

Remarkably, Ferguson recognizes the existence of a “cross-dialectal” speech pattern although he characterizes it as a situationally created phenomenon. This begs the question of why he maintained such a rigid categorization in his model. Nonetheless, Ferguson’s model emphasized the exclusivity of the two variants while neglecting the interaction that frequently took place between them in actual language practice. Subsequent research would explore further the intricacies of this “cross-dialectal” speech yet, until the inception of studies on code-switching, it would remain limited by a focus on the order, categories, and boundaries of the diglossic model.

Evolution of the model: Levels, discourse, and switches

Rather than offer a detailed literature review, I seek here to demonstrate the changes made by subsequent models that could be generally categorized under the following headings:

1. *Descriptive* models that extended Ferguson’s categorization of Arabic speech further through identification of various levels, styles, or types of Arabic. Regardless of their improved classification of variation, such models preserved a problematic focus on simply identifying the characteristics of the categories themselves.
2. Approaches that shifted away from description to *explanation* of the various ideational, discursal, and topical factors that influenced language choice. Such approaches were a critical step forward: they recognized the fluidity and dynamism in actual Arabic speech while simultaneously exploring the reasons for such variation. Nevertheless, such models adopted the conception of a functional differentiation of language in which language form reflected language discourse.
3. Lastly, recent trends that focus on *code-switching* hence locating the site of linguistic analysis at the fluid boundaries of registers as opposed to within them. This represents the most promising approach and the point of departure for an understanding of Arabic as a cohesive unit.

In many ways, linguistic analysis has seemingly come full circle. From Ferguson’s passing reference to “cross-dialectal” speech, linguistic models have become increasingly focused on such speech. The third category above places the largest emphasis on such interdialectal

⁸¹ Ferguson 332.

speech and does so in a way that departs from earlier descriptivist tendencies. Practice has also become more important, and levels of analysis have grown smaller and smaller.

The first extensions of Ferguson's model sought to describe and classify even further the variation that occurred in Arabic speech. Such research was carried out in the context of increasing speech complexity related to the surge of mass media and communications across the Middle East. This complexity encouraged researchers to elaborate models of Arabic "in the form of continua or scales capable of handling MSA/dialect morphological hybrids and cooccurrent syntactic phenomena."⁸² As such, the works of people like Blanc, Badawi, and others accepted the diglossic assumption with a series of caveats, caveats intended to impose a set of classifications on the variation that clearly took place in patterns of speech practice. Their response then was to create new categories by which such variation could be classified and, thus, accounted for. In his 1960 study, for example, Blanc distinguishes five varieties of Arabic:

1. *Standard Arabic*. Essentially any one of a range of classical Arabic styles without dialectal admixtures.
2. *Modified Classical*. Classical Arabic with dialectal admixtures.
3. *Semiliterary* or *Elevated Colloquial*. Any plain or koineized colloquial that is classicized beyond the 'mildly formal' range.
4. *Koineized Colloquial*. Any plain colloquial into which leveling devices have been more or less liberally introduced.
5. *Plain Colloquial*. The homespun speech characteristic of a given region.⁸³

Interestingly, the recipes of each "type" of Arabic are simply mixtures of Ferguson's high and low variant in varying ratios. Rejecting Ferguson's rigid dichotomy of high and low, Blanc nonetheless utilizes only those two variants in creating a new set of categories. Blanc's model is essentially a tweaked version of diglossia that allows for the existence of classicizing and leveling devices that move an individual's speech closer to MSA or colloquial, respectively.

⁸² Holes (1995): 278.

⁸³ See, e.g., Haim Blanc, "Style Variations in Spoken Arabic: A Sample of Interdialectal Educated Conversation," *Contributions to Arabic Linguistics*, eds. Charles A. Ferguson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960): 80-156. Quoted in T.F. Mitchell, "What is educated spoken Arabic?," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 61 (1986): 11. "Koineization" or leveling refers to the "replacement by a speaker of features of his regional vernacular variously by those of another or by elements of the written language." Fn. 2 in Mitchell (1986): 30.

The poles toward which the devices pull, however, remain simply standard or colloquial Arabic.

A similar approach that offers a hierarchical organization of Arabic speech practice is El-Said Badawi's 1973 model. Unlike Ferguson, Badawi introduces education as a variable that determines the language choices available to a speaker. Depending on his level of education, an Arabic speaker may choose from five different levels:

1. Fusha al-turath: "the classical or literary (Arabic) of the heritage", otherwise *classical Arabic*. Traditional classical as taught, for example, at Al-Azhar.
2. Fusha al-asr: "the classical of the times" or "modern literary Arabic" or *modern standard Arabic*. Classical as modified in response to the demands of modern civilization. Appropriate for radio news bulletins, political speeches, scientific writing, etc.
3. 'Ammiyyat al-muthaqqafin: "the colloquial of the cultured" or *cultured colloquial*. Formal speech used for serious discussion without reference to any written text.
4. 'Ammiyyat al-mutanawwirin: "the colloquial of the enlightened" or *educated colloquial*. Influenced by contemporary life but not by CA/MSA grammar. The everyday conversational style of educated persons with family and neighbors.
5. 'Ammiyyat al-ummiyyin: "the colloquial of the illiterate" or *plain colloquial*. "Mother tongue". Uninfluenced by CA/MSA or by modern civilization. Occurs on TV in children's shows and in situation comedies.⁸⁴

Interestingly, the two levels of standard are distinguished by the quality of modernity itself. The demarcations of the three levels of colloquial, however, seem fairly arbitrary. Although Badawi's model suggests the greater choice of lexicon and styles available to the educated, it offers little insight into the dynamics that inform actual language practice.

Time and time again, linguistic studies of Arabic reflected an overwhelming interest in inscribing order and boundaries into the Arabic language. Only through such a fashion could Arabic become "readable" to academic inquiries. The general outcome of this approach was the notion of a sort of Arabic language continuum with classical Qur'anic Arabic and the most salient of colloquials comprising the poles of the continuum. The search for an elegant model that accounted for variation simply resulted in the creation of additional categories, hierarchies that would inevitably neglect certain speech types. This is not to say that their work did not

signify progress in the field but, rather, that they conceived of their task as the categorization of complex and diverse realities in the Arabic language.

Classification could not last forever. The increasing complexity of the hierarchy suggested that the language situation was not as static as it originally seemed. Description alone proved an insufficient mechanism for explaining such variation. Instead, increased attention focused on the reasons behind such variation and, specifically, on the ideational, discursal, and topical factors that corresponded to the selection of one code over another. Representative of this second trend in linguistic methodology, Clive Holes' seminal work on the speeches of Abdel Nasser engages the complex dynamics of Arabic head on.⁸⁵

From the outset of his 1993 study, Holes notes the manner in which descriptive studies of Arabic have been at the forefront of the field:

Almost all the work done so far has been addressed to the descriptive problem in answer to questions such as "What is Educated Spoken Arabic?" and "What linguistic features characterize interdialectal Arabic?". Little attention has been paid to questions which seek to explain observed variation like "What factors cause a speaker to switch styles?", "How is a switch signaled, linguistically and paralinguistically", and "What range of styles do individual speakers possess, and how do they use them?"⁸⁶

Holes then shifts his gaze to the more revealing phenomenon with regards to the challenges of categorizing any given parts of a speech sample:

The difficulty in describing and explaining the patterning of data which are not at the extreme ends of any style spectrum which might be proposed (that is, most data) is that, though there may be stretches of discourse in which all the components are 'dialectal' and others where they are all 'standard', there are others – the majority? – *where dialectal and standard features alternate within a sentence, or a phrase, or, if the focus is narrowed even further, the individual word.* The initial descriptive problem, and one which is rarely addressed head on, is the decision as to where, and on what linguistic or other grounds, one draws lines around parts of a text, or parts of a sentence, or even parts of a phrase and claims that a transition from one system to another has occurred.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ See El-Said Badawi, *Mustawayāt al-‘Arabiyya al-mu‘āSira. (Levels of Contemporary Arabic)*. Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1973. I have adopted T.F. Mitchell's summary of Badawi's argument as quoted in Mitchell (1986): 12.

⁸⁵ Clive Holes, "The Uses of Variation: A Study of the Political Speeches of Gamal Abd al-Nasser," *Perspectives on Arabic Linguistics V* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1993): 13-45. Hereafter, Holes (1993).

⁸⁶ Holes (1993): 17.

⁸⁷ Holes (1993): 17-18. Emphasis added.

Description was not as easy as earlier studies of Arabic implied. The process of description itself seems rather arbitrary. Instead, contrast becomes the focus of analysis. Changes in code cannot merely be discussed in the context of levels, variants, or styles. They actually occur at the smallest levels of study. Yet such barely perceptible changes may have a significant effect on the production of meaning:

There is no reason to believe that stylistic switches must always or even usually be sharp. Parts of any oral performance in any language can impressionistically sound slightly more or slightly less ‘formal’, ‘official’, ‘friendly’, (or any of the other subjective labels we habitually use to describe our impressions) than other parts, often without it being exactly clear where within the totality of a text the increased ‘formality’, ‘friendliness’, etc. begins or ends. Intonation patterns, voice quality, pitch, and speed of delivery, as well as in the Arabic case the more frequently studied proportion of dialectal versus standard linguistic features all contribute to what a speaker really ‘means’ and how his/her performance is interpreted by the interlocutors or audience.⁸⁸

In this context, identifying specific codes within “the totality of a text” misses the larger point of how meaning is delivered through the interaction of marked categories. This perspective places contrast and difference at the forefront of linguistics and, in doing so, departs from the modernist fixation with order and categorization. At this juncture, it would be useful to briefly review exactly what occurs – from a linguistic perspective – when a speaker switches from one code to another.

As in most academic disciplines, the terminology utilized by linguists remains just as contentious a subject as the linguistic interpretation of their data. Whether the phenomenon is dubbed “switching code” or “code-switching” and exactly at what level it occurs with what frequency: all such questions continue to be debated within the field.⁸⁹ For our purposes, I will adopt Heath’s notion of code-switching as the “alternation by a speaker ‘between continuous utterance segments in one language L_x and another language L_y with abrupt and

⁸⁸ Holes (1993): 20-21.

⁸⁹ See, e.g., Celso Alvarez-Cáccamo, “From ‘Switching Code’ to ‘Code-Switching’: Towards a Reconceptualisation of Communicative Codes,” in Code-Switching in Conversation: Language, Interaction and Identity, ed. Peter Auer (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

clear-cut switching points, often at phrasal or clausal boundaries.”⁹⁰ Or, in other words, “it is when speakers stop speaking one language and begin speaking another.”⁹¹ Switching from one code to another can be quite obvious, for example when a Moroccan speaker switches from Arabic to French in a single spoken discourse. Conversely, given the difference between standard and colloquial Arabic, code-switching can also refer to changes between the two that occur at the location of salient markers. As such, the notion of saliency remains critical to identifying switches in code. A basic switch resembles the following sample taken from a conversation about censorship in Egypt:

fana ‘aayiz akkallim ‘ala ‘il-masraH il-maSri
wuškaliyyaat il-masraH ilmaSri
wu >> hal hunaaka mustaqbal li-l-masraH il-maSri?

So I want to talk about the Egyptian theater
and the controversies of the Egyptian theater
and “Is there a future for the Egyptian theater?”⁹²

As indicated by *‘aayiz* for MSA [want] as well as the phonological change of /al/ to /il/, the first two lines are clearly Egyptian colloquial. The third line, however, marks a switch with the salient MSA interrogative particle *hal*. Such switches can occur at the level of sentences, clauses, words, or even phonology. More important than the level at which code-switches occur is the fact that they occur at all and their implications on our understanding of Arabic. Linguists have sought to identify the reasons for code-switching, proposing a switch from one code to another as an attempt to convey authority, irony, humor, solidarity, and even empathy. The invaluable contribution of this type of linguistic research lies in its seeming rejection of descriptivist approaches in favor of a recognition of the dynamic changes that occur from moment to moment in Arabic and, subsequently, their endeavor to understand how such switches in code fit into the larger context of a speaker’s attempts to convey their message.

⁹⁰ Jeffrey Heath, *From Code-switching to Borrowing: A Case Study of Moroccan Arabic* (London: KPI, 1989): 37. Cited in David Wilmsen, “Codeswitching, Code-mixing, and Borrowing in the Spoken Arabic of A Theatrical Community in Cairo,” *Perspectives on Arabic Linguistics IX*, eds. Mushira Eid and Dilworth Parkinson (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1996): 70.

⁹¹ Wilmsen 70.

This becomes clearer in a closer look at Holes' analysis. Importantly, his data comes from a series of political speeches by Gamal Abdel Nasser, or, in other words, the archetypal situation that Ferguson categorized as the realm of the high variant.

In his study of six speeches delivered by Nasser, Holes illustrates the way in which Nasser's use of certain linguistic codes (MSA and Egyptian colloquial) relates to certain ideational and discursal factors. His research reveals the complex, fluid nature of communication in Arabic. This analysis of the interplay between "language form and discourse function"⁹³ highlights the way in which speakers may prefer certain linguistic codes to others depending on their subject matter, audience, intended purpose, and the meaning they are trying to communicate. Clearly, Holes' methodology is more comprehensive than earlier approaches. Most importantly, its innovation lies in its central focus on practice. In the speeches, a dichotomy emerges between Nasser's language use when delivering general subject matter "of political abstraction and symbol" and that of more personal, emotive, and concrete messages.⁹⁴ For example, in a speech delivered during the Suez Crisis, Nasser addresses his fellow Egyptians in an attempt to embolden them for the upcoming challenges. He speaks to them directly and personally in the Egyptian colloquial that metaphysically binds them all as Egyptians:

fi 'ayyi makaan HanuHaarib... min beet li beet wa min qarya li qarya... 'amalu kida fi l-Harb il-'uZma illi faatit iš-šu'uub waṅtaSarit wa xala'it baladna.... in-naharda sabatna huḷli byuqarrir maSirna... sabatna huwa illi byuqarrir mustaqbal waTanna...

In any place we will fight... from house to house and from village to village.... That's what the people did in the Great War, and they triumphed and created our country.... Today we have proved who it is who decides our fate...we have proved who it is who decides the future of our homeland...⁹⁵

A number of markers indicate the distinctly Egyptian colloquial delivery of the speech.

"*HanuHaarib*" is used for MSA "*sanuqaatil*." Nasser also uses "*in-naharda*" in the place of

⁹² Wilmsen 71. The >> denotes a switch in code from Egyptian colloquial Arabic to an approximation of standard Arabic. The capitalized letters indicate emphatic consonants.

⁹³ Holes (1993): 21.

⁹⁴ Holes (1993): 24.

MSA “*al-yawm*.” Identifying the collective bonds that hold Egypt together, he speaks primarily in the first person plural. He also speaks about realities that the Egyptian audience could identify with, namely concrete and familiar moments in Egypt’s past, the Great War of 1914-1918. Moreover, there is an intimately personal message being conveyed as he discusses his own commitment to Egypt’s destiny. He formulates this commitment with reference to the past:

kuntu mawguud fi l-faluuga, zayyimaa intu ti’rafu...
 “I was at Faluga, as you know”⁹⁶

He insists upon his present commitment to Egypt during the 1956 upheaval:

ana mawguud ma’aaku hina fi l-qaahira...
 “I’m with you here in Cairo”⁹⁷

And in reference to the future, Nasser refers to his children in Cairo:

ma Talla’thumš barra miš HaTalla’hum barra
 “I have not sent them away and nor am I going to”⁹⁸

Both Nasser’s message and his language are intensely personal. It is almost as if he is speaking individually to each person in the audience as he displays his commitment to Egypt; he even seems intent on proving to them that he perceives his own fate and destiny (and that of his children) to be tied to that of Egypt. Placing both himself and his words up for scrutiny, it is as if Nasser knows that the veracity of his commitment to Egypt will most effectively manifest itself in the forms and phraseology of a distinctly Egyptian colloquial.

Conversely, the Egyptian dialect does not prove a suitable medium for delivering a different, more abstract message meant to appeal to a larger audience. Only a few days later, after the landing of British and French troops, Nasser delivered a speech at Al-Azhar where he elaborated on the difference between the principles of peace and surrender:

’innaha Hiinama tudaafi’u ‘an Hurriyyatiha wa ‘an istiqlaaliha wa tad’u li-s-salaam fa hiya ta’lamu ‘ilma l-yaqiin maa huwa l-farqu bayna s-salaami wa l-istislaam...

⁹⁵ Holes (1993): 39. Appendix: SPE 2, Lines 1-5. I have included the transcriptions as provided by Holes. See the “Appendix” in Holes (1993).

⁹⁶ Holes (1993): 40. Appendix: SPE 2, Lines 13-14.

⁹⁷ Holes (1993): 40. Appendix: SPE 2, Lines 23-24.

⁹⁸ Holes (1993): 40. Appendix: SPE 2, Lines 22-23.

... When (Egypt) defends its freedom and independence, and calls for peace, it knows perfectly well what the difference is between peace and surrender.⁹⁹

As Holes indicates, Nasser's language here is "in as pure a *fusha* as any scholar could desire" with "mood and case endings... scrupulously respected."¹⁰⁰ In discussing abstract principles of freedom and independence, Nasser speaks in the language of classical Arabic. Not only does Nasser's code choice relate to the nature of the topic, but it is also important to note that this abstract message is not simply meant for the Egyptian audience but for the entire Arab world and the invading powers. In order to maintain Egypt's honor, Nasser insists (in the elevated "high" language of *fusha*) that:

wa 'inna kulla fardin min ib-..min 'abnaa' iha ya'lamu maa huwa s-salaam wa 'inna kulla fardin min 'abnaa' iha ya'lam 'ann al-muHaafaZata 'ala s-salaam taHtaagu ila guhdin wa gihaad, taHtaagu 'ila 'araqin wa dimaa' wa 'inna kulla fardin min 'abnaa' iha yahdifu 'ila l-muHaafaZati 'ala s-salaam wa 'inna l-muHaafaZata 'ala s-salaam laa ta'ni bi 'ayyati Haalin min al-aHwaal 'inna haaða huwa l-istislaam...

Every one of them [Egypt's sons] knows what peace is, and every one of them knows that preserving peace needs effort and struggle, needs sweat and blood. . . . And every one of them is aiming at preserving peace, and in no way does 'preserving peace' mean surrendering...¹⁰¹

Eager to maintain Egypt's primacy under the watchful eyes of his Arab neighbors, Nasser speaks to a wider audience and, therefore, speaks in a language that cuts across local colloquial dialects. In such a context, standard Arabic evokes the breadth of Nasser's vision of pan-Arabism with Egypt at its head. Holes concludes by reiterating the relationship between language form and discursal function:

The relationship between form and meaning in the extracts examined so far can be summarized by saying that *fusha* is used by Nasser to convey messages which are abstract, idealized or metaphorical. At the interpersonal level, this ideational content is paralleled by an absence of personalization. The *'aammiyya*, on the other hand, is used to convey the concrete and the physical, and is strongly associated with the personalization of issues.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Holes (1993): 39. Appendix: SPE 1, Lines 1-3.

¹⁰⁰ Holes (1993): 23.

¹⁰¹ Holes (1993): 39. Appendix: SPE1, Lines 7-14.

¹⁰² Holes (1993): 33.

Whereas Fergusson's diglossic model implied the use of standard Arabic for formal political speeches, Holes' analysis reveals that other factors contribute to code choice within situations. This in itself represents a more productive understanding of Arabic. Slightly problematic, however, is the conception of language form as a function of discourse. For Holes, Nasser switches from one code to another within the same situation – a formal political speech – as a function of topical, discursal, and ideational factors. In other words, the distinction between two variants – this time as a function of discourse – is basically maintained by this approach. Nonetheless, Holes' methodological shift away from mere description and towards explanation marks a substantial step forward in the understanding of Arabic, most importantly because of its focus on practice.

What becomes clear from the above discussion is the manner in which traditional linguistic approaches to the study of Arabic typify the quality of European modernity's attachment to systems of order, hierarchy, and categorization. Just as Timothy Mitchell described the fervency with which colonial ideology sought to impose order on Egypt so as to make it "readable," contemporary linguistic approaches have projected rigid systems of categorization onto a linguistic reality that functions in a very different manner than the models of language suggest. Static descriptions of high and low registers offer little insight when compared to the greater importance of the relationship between the registers. Until fairly recently, this interaction of standard and colloquial Arabic has been neglected in favor of endeavors to describe the immense and diverse variation that occurs in Arabic speech patterns. As such, the study of code-switching provides the foundation upon which more productive models of Arabic should be created. Newer models of Arabic – and, more importantly, cultural expression that occurs in the medium of Arabic – must account for the moment-to-moment changes that occur in speech at multiple levels of study from the perspective of morphology, phonology, and lexicon. Admittedly, this is not an easy task. But, as Holes' research suggests, conceiving of Arabic as an "integrated whole" remains critical.

Indeed, it is time to move away from categorization and description and towards a relational model of Arabic. In a new approach that recognizes the unity of Arabic, it becomes clear that meaning itself is constructed and produced through the interaction of both standard and colloquial Arabic.

THE COHESION OF ARABIC: MULTIPLE CODES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

John Selden Willmore may have been consumed by his efforts to precisely describe and classify the “spoken Arabic of Egypt.” But, at the same time, he also demonstrated a perceptive understanding of the complex dynamics of the Arabic language and Egyptian society in his opinions on the adoption of the colloquial in practice. As an attempt to instill his ideas with the authority of modern scientific method, Willmore appeals to order, hierarchy, and categorization; colonial ideology itself affirms the worth of his academic work. In contrast, concrete matters of reality – a movement in support of the colloquial for example – required a more delicate appreciation of the practicalities of the Egyptian situation. Hence, Willmore’s self-appointed task of classification gives way to a focus on the interaction of all segments of Egyptian society in advancing the colloquial.

Modern linguistic approaches to Arabic, on the other hand, have remained primarily concerned with order – indeed, more than colonial agents like Willmore himself. The fixed categories of the diglossic model have persevered amazingly given Ferguson’s own early recognition of a thriving “cross-dialectal” speech pattern. Consequently, colloquial Arabic has gradually come to signify all that is marginal in Arabic-speaking societies from cartoonists frustrated with the state of undemocratic politics to the illiterate masses opposed to the Western-oriented nature of their government and intellectuals. The first step in redressing this misapprehension lies in a renewed model of Arabic, one that recognizes the crucial role of colloquial as a constitutive element, alongside the standard, in the Arabic language. In this sense, two codes may indeed be better than one. That is to say that it is the phenomena of code-switching that allows a speaker to effectively communicate an intended message.

Within the framework of a new model for the study of Arabic, I argue that distinct processes occur in Arabic as a function of code-switches that necessitate the linguistic study of Arabic as a cohesive unit. One such phenomenon involves a simultaneous process of translation and a text/commentary dynamic that have the effect of locating a speaker relative to his subject while making his message relevant to his audience. Such processes of commentary and translation are made possible by the relationality of multiple codes and not by the characteristics of the codes themselves. More importantly, the interaction of codes allows for the delivery of meaning, clarity, and relevance in a way that would be difficult – if not impossible – through the use of any single code. Such phenomena manifest themselves in a multiplicity of dimensions in Arabic-speaking societies –regardless of situational or discursal factors and across diverse mediums of spoken and written Arabic. In elaborating on the central features of this model, I will approach existing linguistic samples from a renewed perspective that explores switches in code in the larger context of a unity of registers. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how colloquial Arabic – functioning as one element in a relationally constructed system – comprises an essential component to the construction and delivery of meaning in the Arabic language, and, thereby, to underscore its utility to the understanding of Egyptian politics, history, and culture in the studies of other academic disciplines.

Intriguingly, the clearest example of the interaction of codes in the delivery of meaning reveals itself in a reassessment of a non-linguistic work. In applying linguistic approaches to written Shari‘a jurisprudence, it is possible to look more closely at the text/commentary dynamic of Arabic that allows for the comprehensive delivery of meaning. Brinkley Messick’s seminal work, The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in A Muslim Society, reveals the way in which this text/commentary dynamic lies at the heart of the social, historical, and cultural fabric of the Arabic-speaking world. Messick’s research provides a unique perspective with which to better understand the phenomena of code-

switching as a process through which speakers communicate a cohesion of meaning. Some may question the merit and applicability of Messick's work to our study of Arabic given its focus on textuality. Admittedly, Messick's model describes the way in which original text and marginal commentary work together to communicate the meaning of Shari'a jurisprudence. Nonetheless, it is the interdependence of text and marginal commentary posited by Messick that parallels the function of code-switching. At the least, Messick's work allows for unique insight into the way in which code-switching is necessary to the communication of meaning in Arabic.

In his discussion of Shari'a jurisprudence, Messick explains how judges discerned the meaning of the Shari'a through a combination of text and marginal commentary. This was primarily the style of pedagogy by which students were expected to learn and understand the Shari'a and the various interpretations of it by different schools. It is worth citing an extended extract of Messick's discussion so as to illustrate the interdependence of text and commentary in conveying meaning:

An additional set of attitudes surrounding authoritative texts may also be introduced with reference to instructional methods. As a second and integral part of the standard lesson, an initial recitation by the teacher of a segment of a *matn*, or basic text, was followed and complemented by his elucidating commentary, his *sharh*. This *matn/sharh*, text/commentary relationship was a fundamental one. ... While students would endeavor to acquire the *matn* by heart, this technique would not be applied to the *sharh*. The *sharh* served the subordinate role of informing a student's comprehension of the principal focus of instruction, which was the *matn*.¹⁰³

Messick then explains the way in which this combination of text and commentary manifests itself in written works:

Standing alone, abbreviated *matns* are often only barely comprehensible, since they are composed in a kind of stripped-down, subconventional prose in which many of the connecting words and phrases of ordinary discourse are elided. A minimal accomplishment of a *sharh*, in the oral lesson as in written composition, was the filling in of such rudimentary connections. In written works, the resulting expanded text, that is, the *matn* plus *sharh*, typically represented a much closer approximation of normally comprehensible prose. This transformation was made possible by a very important and immediately obvious fact about the text/commentary relationship: its physical

¹⁰³ Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993): 30.

aspect. While the *matn* is a textual ‘body,’ *sharh* means to ‘open up’ (another referent is to surgery). The commentary, ranging from trivial linking words to lengthy and important doctrinal elaborations, is inserted in spaces opened up in the original text. Although they remain distinct, the two are not physically isolated from each other, as are either footnotes located on another part of the page or entirely separate volumes. With the commentary embedded directly in the original text, grafted into spaces opened up in its body, the two alternate in a jointly constituted, *matn-and-sharh* text: a segment of *matn* is followed by a segment of *sharh*, which is followed by another segment of the *matn*, and so on. A range of markers, from different ink colors and a type of overlining to conventional wording shifts (“he said” / “I say”) were used to signify the transitions back and forth between the two.¹⁰⁴

Not only are the text and commentary physically intertwined, but the actual meaning of both the original text and the commentary is accessible only through the function of text and commentary together at once:

In a work of *sharh*, interpretations literally become part of the text interpreted. If it consisted only of its insertions, a work of commentary would be merely a collection of disconnected and unviable fragments. Instead, a *sharh* work is actually taken to be the sum of the *matn* and the added comments, involving a complex notion of full quotation. Encompassed by the larger *sharh*, the *matn* appears in continually interrupted bits and pieces, but the quotation is faithful, word for word, and eventually complete. Interpretive in intent, the commentary genre joins two insufficiencies. It is the destiny of a *matn* to be interpretively expanded by *sharh* and that of a *sharh* to depart from a global invocation of a *matn*.¹⁰⁵

Finally, likening *matns* to an Arabic consonant string, Messick explains the interdependence of text and commentary noting that, “Both consonant strings and *matns* are open to, and ultimately dependent upon, the interpretive interventions of vowelings and textual commentary.”¹⁰⁶ The parallel between the functioning of *matn/sharh* and changes in code is striking. In the same way that the *sharh* inserts itself into the *matn* and, thus, makes the meaning of the *matn* accessible, code-switches insert meaning into a speech or conversation by marking segments of “text” apart from segments of “commentary.”

Like the intertwined functioning of the *matn* and *sharh*, the interaction of different codes function as audible markers that help listeners discern the speaker’s message. In this context, *discernment* does not refer to the understanding of Shari’a but, rather, the understanding of the speaker’s attempt to communicate authority, humor, endorsement, or a

¹⁰⁴ Messick 30-31. A copy of one such *matn/sharh* text is included in the Appendix at the end of this study.

¹⁰⁵ Messick 31.

wide range of other attributes. This is not to say that “authoritative text” will always be delivered in MSA and commentary in colloquial.¹⁰⁷ Rather, my goal is to point out simply that it is through switches in code within a single discourse that meaning is communicated. Just as the *sharh* inserts itself into the body of the *matn*, multiple codes may be embedded in a single discourse so that the meaning can only be truly understood by a comprehensive consideration of what is being said, how it is being said, and even how it is being said *differently* from something else. Unlike written jurisprudence, there are no changes in color or margins to clue in a listener to a code-switch. In this context, salient markers become all the more important as morphological, phonological, and lexical clues provide hints as to the actual meaning of a speaker’s message. For this reason, the phenomena of code-switching remains quite significant because of the way in which, simply through changes in salient linguistic markers, it produces meaning. With this text/commentary dynamic, it is possible to survey a number of examples in which a switch in code functions so as to insert meaning and clarity where maintenance of a single code would not do so.

Returning to Nasser’s speeches, for example, Holes highlights the instances in which Nasser follows a statement made in classical Arabic with one in colloquial Egyptian. Describing this “organizational discourse,” Holes explains that such switches represent “the difference between speech material which is seen as ‘text’, and material which is to be construed as a ‘commentary’ on, or an exegesis of, that text.”¹⁰⁸

- a. ša’aaruna ’annana sanuqaatil, sanuqaatil wa lan nusallim . . . [MSA]
 “Our slogan is that we shall fight, we shall fight and we shall never
 surrender”
- b. da ša’aar kulli fard min il-quwwaat il-musallaHa, wa da ša’aar kulli
 fard min aš-ša’b . . . [ECA]

¹⁰⁶ Messick 33.

¹⁰⁷ Anderson has described how nationalism entailed processes of vernacularization that often reversed traditional hierarchies so as to increase the value of vernacular languages relative to standard languages. This is not the case in the Arabic-speaking Middle East, however, where modernity has involved the maintenance of standard (sacred) languages at the top of a hierarchy with vernacular expression at the bottom. The nuance of this point is far too frequently neglected by researchers eager to apply Anderson’s ideas to Arabic-speaking societies. See Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1991/1983).

¹⁰⁸ Holes (1993): 27.

“That’s the slogan of every individual in the armed forces, and that is the slogan of every individual of the people. . .”¹⁰⁹

It must be remembered that Nasser’s speech was not only meant to encourage the Egyptians themselves but also as an indicator of Egypt’s status in the Arab world. Nasser’s first comment does indeed play the role of text, and it emphasizes Egypt’s integral role in the seat of pan-Arabism. Merely delivering the slogan in classical Arabic, however, does not prove the most suitable means of sending this message to the hearts of his fellow Egyptians. Nasser switches then into Egyptian colloquial to insist that this slogan belongs to “every individual.” Interestingly, the commentary does not necessarily explain or elaborate on the text. Instead, it makes the text *relevant* to the Egyptians in a more direct manner than it would have been if only delivered in classical Arabic. In this excerpt, therefore, Nasser code-switches so as to communicate the relevance of an abstract, classically-delivered principle to his Egyptian audience.

In another example, the rhetorical power of Nasser’s statement seems to actually rely on code-switching:

- (17) a. kaanu biy’uulu nnu fiih Hurriyya siyaasiyya aw fiih dimuqraaTiyya siyaasiyya. . . [ECA]
“And they used to say that there was political freedom and there was political democracy”
- b. wa laakin il-istiḡlaal wa l-’iqTaa’ wa ra’s il-maal al-mustaḡill qaDaa ‘ala kilmit id-dimuqraaTiyya [MSA]
“But exploitation, feudalism and exploitative capital put an end to the idea of democracy-”
- c. illi ‘aaluuha [ECA]
“-which they meant”
- d. ‘alaṣaan kida iHna bin’uul [ECA]
“so that’s why we say-”
- e. laa yumkin fi ‘ayyi Haal ‘an yuqaal ‘anna hunaaka Hurriyya ‘illaa ‘iḏaa tawaffarat ad-dimuqraaTiyya s-siyaasiyya ma’a d-dimuqraaTiyya al-’igtimaa’iyya [MSA]
“it is impossible in any circumstances for it to be claimed that there is

¹⁰⁹ Holes (1993): 27. The notations in brackets refer to whether the statement was delivered in an approximation of Modern Standard Arabic or Egyptian colloquial Arabic, respectively.

freedom unless political democracy exists alongside social
democracy”¹¹⁰

In the same way that the true meaning of the *matn/sharh* can only be realized through their interdependence, Nasser’s criticism of democracy in earlier Egyptian history becomes meaningful and relevant through his skillful use of code-switching. It is only by switching into Egyptian colloquial that Nasser can effectively criticize the claims of the pre-revolutionary government in Egypt by lessening the distance between himself and his audience through their shared colloquial. Indeed, just as the *matn/sharh* use such markings as “he said / I said” to clarify their message, Nasser uses code-switching to set his conception of democracy apart from that of pre-revolutionary Egypt. Unlike the earlier example relating to the slogan of the Egyptian people, Nasser does not use colloquial Egyptian here to explain his statements in classical. Instead, he uses colloquial to set up a contrast between what “they said” and Nasser’s own opinions (“that’s why we say”): the colloquial is used to create distance between Nasser and the nature of democracy in pre-revolutionary Egypt. In this case, he even seems to use classical Arabic not as an original text to be explained but rather as a means of creating his own new authoritative text. Whereas (in colloquial) “they used to say that there was political freedom and there was political democracy,” Nasser insists (in standard Arabic) that actually, “exploitation, feudalism and exploitative capital put an end to the idea of democracy.” In 17(d) and 17(e), Nasser inscribes his own scriptural text by proclaiming in colloquial that “*we say*”– followed by a switch to MSA – that: “it is impossible in any circumstances for it to be claimed that there is freedom unless political democracy exists alongside social democracy.” In a way, Nasser has replaced the “text” of those that proclaimed there was freedom in pre-revolutionary Egypt with his own authoritative text. The effect of Nasser’s code-switches is to set Nasser’s social and political program apart from those that came before him. Essentially, he is assuring his audience that a new era has begun.

¹¹⁰ Holes (1993): 32.

His speeches parallel the *matn/sharh* in the extent to which conveyance of Nasser's true effect, be it rhetorical, scriptural, or exegetical, relies on his use of code-switching.

The text/commentary dynamic of code-switching also holds true in informal situations wherein code-switching represents a means by which meaning and relevance is more effectively communicated. In the following example from a conversation, the speaker switches from colloquial Egyptian to classical Arabic, not for the purpose of endorsement or authority, but rather because without such a switch in code, he would not be able to convey the sarcastic sense of his message:

masraHeyyat kida maktuuba min naas asadza fi gama'aat,
miš Ha'uul 'asalibhum
bitit'allif bi'annahum muwaZZafiin fi wizart is-saqaafa,
masraHeyyat ba'a bi-l-luḡa l-fuSHa, >> 'kayfa Haaluka ya ḏaa-l-maal?'
>> 'ala T-Tarii'a di wu maHaddiš biyruHHA wala Haaga

Plays written by people who are professors at universities,
I won't mention their style,
Written as if they were employees of the ministry of culture,
Plays in literary Arabic 'How dost thou, O man of wealth?'
Like that, and no one goes to them or anything.¹¹¹

In his focus on humor, Wilmsen suggests that the function of the switch to MSA in '*kayfa Haaluka ya ḏaa-l-maal?*' is to draw emphasis around the statement. More pointedly, the meaning of the entire statement relies on the use of a switch to standard Arabic so as to highlight the inaccurate depiction of life in plays that are delivered in standard Arabic. Like in Nasser's denunciation of democracy in pre-revolutionary Egypt, the *meaning* of the passage above – that is to say “poking fun” at plays where characters speak in standard Arabic – would not effectively be conveyed without code-switching. Indeed, the speaker's message would make less sense if it was delivered in an Egyptian colloquial: “*izz'ayyikk ya ḏaa-l-mal?*”. The essential element of the speaker's message – criticism of the unrealistic style of plays scripted in MSA – requires a switch in code so as to convey the speaker's opinion of the artificial

¹¹¹ Wilmsen 73. The >> marks a switch in code.

nature of such plays. Even in this informal context, changes in code are crucial to the communication of meaning.

CONCLUSION

Even some who accept the intrinsic importance of colloquial to the Arabic language will still reject the notion that this somehow suggests a more general importance to colloquial for the study of Egyptian society, history, and politics. Nonetheless, people like Nasser and the colonial administrators reflect the immense seriousness with which colloquial Arabic is regarded by actors within the Egyptian public sphere. The question ultimately concerns how Arabic cultural expression is to be read and understood. Approaches that seek order, defined boundaries, and the identification of rigid categories are simply incompatible with the manner in which meaning constructs itself in Arabic-speaking societies. European conceptions of modernity, however, are based on such rigid, binary systems of order. Contemporary linguistic approaches to the study of Arabic demonstrate the futility of focusing on categories themselves.

Instead, the more fruitful focus of analysis remains at the flurry of dynamism taking place across the actual boundaries of distinct categories. Indeed, the boundaries themselves are fluid and cannot be defined in the tidy manner consistent with European modernity. Saliency then becomes critical. In the case of language, this phenomenon occurs when speakers switch from standard to colloquial Arabic using distinct markers and, thereby, manage to effectively communicate meaning. The meaning within either language form becomes accessible explicitly through the relationality of the standard and the colloquial.

A more perfect reading of Egyptian history must proceed in a similar fashion that focuses on the interaction of categories. As I discuss in Part Two, historians of Arab nationalism systematically rejected colloquial Arabic as a viable medium, site, or method of analysis in their singular focus on ideology and the standard written texts of nationalist intellectuals. This does not simply mean that Egyptian history neglects the masses because it

rejects the colloquial. The burgeoning field of subaltern studies has already turned its gaze to such deficiencies. Indeed, the repercussions are much more serious and far-reaching: the *meaning* of Egyptian history – in its entirety – cannot be accessed without a critical focus on how various social categories – elites, workers, peasants – interacted with each other. Just as the relationality of colloquial and the standard represents a site around which meaning constructs itself, understanding Egyptian social, political, and cultural history necessitates a greater focus on how the categories historians have focused on thus far actually interacted with each other in practice.

THE TEACHER called on me to read. I started haltingly. She began interrupting me, correcting me, quietly at first but gradually, as I stumbled on, with more and more irritation, leaving her desk now to stand over me and pounce on every mistake I made. She was an irascible woman, and I had not prepared my homework.

“You’re an Arab!” she finally screamed at me. “An Arab! And you don’t know your own language!”

“I am not an Arab!” I said, suddenly furious myself. “I am Egyptian! And anyway we don’t speak like this!” And I banged my book shut.

Leila Ahmed, A Border Passage

PART TWO – PATTERNS, PERIODS, AND NARRATIVES OF HISTORY

REFLEXIVITY of a sort emerged long before anthropologists first began to preface their research with lengthy narratives locating themselves within the larger context of their ethnographies. An earlier, perhaps malformed, version of reflexivity seems to materialize in a series of inquiries into the state of oriental studies in imperial Britain. In a 1984 address at St Antony's College, Albert Hourani provided a snapshot of three such reports written at three very different moments in British history: the Reay Report (1909), the Scarbrough Report (1947), and the Hayter Report (1961).¹¹² The three reports are striking in their shared anxieties about the flaccidity of British oriental studies *vis à vis* the Continental tradition, yet what is more intriguing is the extent to which the discussion of oriental studies in Britain, and particularly the teaching of languages, relates to the changing political imperatives facing a slowly-contracting empire.

In the earliest report, the teaching of oriental languages comprises one aspect of the practical training of civil and consular service in the Empire. The 1909 Reay Report laments the nature of language study in Britain, not on account of the nature of the subject itself, but rather because of Britain's veritable weakness when compared to the many institutions for oriental languages at other European urban centers.¹¹³ The discussion of language instruction remains wrapped in a larger discourse of the practical and imperial challenges faced by Britain in the age of empire. The actual situation, as Hourani suggests, was not so bleak and the report largely ignored the "tradition of private scholarship" that took place "outside teaching

¹¹² The talk was given at the Eleventh Annual Conference of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies at St Antony's College, Oxford on 8–11 July 1984. It was subsequently published in Albert Hourani, "Middle Eastern Studies Today," Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies) 11.2 (1984): 111-120. Hereafter, Hourani (1984).

¹¹³ This view was shared by non-British specialists as well. In his 1919 assessment of schools that taught the vernacular, William H. Worrell, an American, notes that the first such school, the *Regio Instituto Orientale*, was established in Naples as early as 1727. Having provided an exhaustive catalogue of other such schools across Europe, he shifts his attention to Great Britain only to conclude that, "Last of all the European powers and peoples to become interested in practical instruction in living Oriental languages have been the British government and the English people." See William H. Worrell, "An Account of Schools for Living Oriental Languages Established in Europe," Journal of the American Oriental Society 39 (1919): 189-195.

institutions.”¹¹⁴ In the end, the Reay report recommends the establishment of a center for oriental studies in London which would ultimately become the School for Oriental and African Studies, a school that “should be based” on a “*balance between pure scholarship and practical training.*”¹¹⁵ Fundamental to this pragmatic view of oriental studies was an insistence on “creating a tradition of scholarship; as the Report put it, in the language of the time”:

There should be a balance between the classical and the living, spoken languages. The Report pointed to new methods of teaching; it was important not only to know the structure of a language but to know how to use it in various contexts. Again, the teaching of languages should be combined with teaching the history, religion and laws of those who spoke them, and it was not enough to teach the inherited cultures, it was also important to teach sociology and anthropology.¹¹⁶

Interestingly, the principle of balance espoused in the Reay Report as early as 1909 recognized the utility of the living colloquial languages within a multidisciplinary context to an improved understanding of the Middle East. Practical imperatives of colonial administration gave way to an appreciation of the complex and diverse teaching required. Not all academic members of the Committee, however, agreed with what was, looking back, a seemingly revolutionary suggestion, an innovation made possible by the sense of pragmatism deemed necessary in the administration of the colonies. A certain Professor of Chinese at Cambridge, H.A. Giles, insisted that, “Mere colloquial seems to be beneath the dignity of a University.”¹¹⁷ Although alone in his pronounced doubt, it is not farfetched to imagine Giles’ comment as indicative of a larger trend within oriental language studies, an academic field traditionally consumed by enthusiasts of classicism who need not leave their armchairs to study “real Arabic.”¹¹⁸

Indeed, it is not surprising that more than fifty years later, the Hayter Report would censure British oriental studies for still not having accomplished the balance mentioned in the earlier Reay Report. Hourani notes the excessively critical nature of the language used by the

¹¹⁴ Hourani (1984): 113.

¹¹⁵ Hourani (1984): 114. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁶ Hourani (1984): 114.

¹¹⁷ Hourani (1984): 114.

Hayter Committee in its characterization of “departments of languages of oriental studies [who were] described as being ‘inward-looking’, lacking interest in modern studies and languages, and cut off from other departments in the universities.”¹¹⁹ Reflexivity, in the case of British oriental studies, consistently highlighted the deficiencies of knowledge pertaining to the Middle East. This underlying anxiety over the status of British oriental studies took place, of course, within the larger context of a series of processes by which European imperial powers sought categorical knowledge of the Middle East in connection with its political domination of the region, a phenomenon famously described by Edward Said and the countless reactions to his work that continue to be written today.¹²⁰ But more importantly, the reports’ unanimous agreement on the principle of balance as a means of improving the discipline offers critical insight into the social realities of the Middle East itself, dynamics that a tradition of political administration over the colonies – if anything – gave British academia tangible insight into. In a sense, early European oriental studies – with its practical link to the political machinations that Said denounces – had at its disposal a body of knowledge garnered from years of “fieldwork” that any anthropologist today would envy.

The principle of balance was itself a statement of methodology derived, not from theoretical exercises, but from a practical (albeit tainted) awareness of the manner in which knowledge of the Middle East required a simultaneous concentration on the past and the present, the modern and the classicist, or alternatively: standard and the colloquial. Colonial ideology may have focused primarily on order, as Timothy Mitchell suggests, but in actuality, colonial practice acknowledged the existence of a more flexible system of meaning. Academic studies or “readings” of the Middle East, however, were not as rooted in such practice. In the reports, deficiencies in British oriental studies are frequently blamed on the culture of language departments that seem overly concerned with the classics and, therefore,

¹¹⁸ Professor Giles was perhaps the very type of professor Bevan had in mind when he insisted to Willmore that “not a single book on the vernacular” would spark any interest in the British academic community.

¹¹⁹ Hourani (1984): 117.

¹²⁰ See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

isolated from the modern. Taken together, the reports make one message resoundingly clear: advances in British oriental studies can only be made through increasing integration of the “living language” (and everything it stands for) into the framework of modern academia. The principle of balance is not simply a balance of subject material but, more importantly, a principle through which to *approach* the Middle East as a subject. In this context, Professor Giles’ skeptic voice doubting the dignity of the colloquial betrays a larger phenomenon, namely the reluctance of academia to engage the colloquial in their endeavors to think, write, and understand the politics, culture, and societies of the Arabic-speaking Middle East.

For all intents and purposes, “orientalizing” the Orient necessarily included the study of colloquial Arabic, the living language of the people over which British colonial administrators ruled. Acknowledging the importance of colloquial Arabic to academic / imperial endeavors does not of course exonerate the motivations behind such pursuits. From translations of the Bible into colloquial Egyptian Arabic to attempts to culturally “divide and conquer,” interest in the colloquial arose from diverse and often conflicting motivations.¹²¹ Nonetheless, a century of involvement in the Arab world at both the individual and official level left Europeans convinced of the crucial place of colloquial Arabic in their knowledge of and relationship to the Arabic-speaking Middle East. It is not surprising then that the waning of European influence in the Middle East following the decolonization and independence movements of the 1950’s and 1960’s would gradually contribute to the diminishing role of colloquial Arabic in the discipline now known as Middle Eastern Studies.

Expressing European conceptions of modernity without the foresight of the experience of colonial “fieldwork,” contemporary academic approaches articulated more rigidly a system

¹²¹ Sir William Willcocks embodied the complexities of colonial ideology’s engagement with Egyptian society. As an engineer brought to Egypt in 1883, he carried out a series of initiatives that contributed to the abolition of the *corvée*, the increased productivity of the Nile Valley, and surveys that resulted in the construction of the First Aswan Dam. Shortly after World War I, Willcocks criticized a British scheme for an Upper Nile irrigation project for which he was tried and convicted for sedition and criminal libel in the Supreme Consular Court in Egypt in 1921. At the same time, he regarded Egyptian colloquial as the means to a Christianized Egypt and advocated the translation of the Bible into the colloquial dialect. Such individuals interacted with Egyptian society in complex and sometimes peculiar ways. See, for example, the

of hierarchies, categories, and organization in their endeavors to describe the Middle East. This trend was reinforced by the emergence of a cohort of Arab nationalists. Just as the British and the Europeans recognized the significance of colloquial Arabic to their imperial exploits, Arab nationalist intellectuals acknowledged the relevance of colloquial Arabic to their own designs. There was one distinct difference. Whereas early orientalists deemed colloquial Arabic critical to progress in oriental studies, many Arab nationalists would ultimately regard it as threatening to the Arab nationalist project and reject it in their own formulations of Arab national identity. Their rejection of colloquial Arabic for political reasons has allowed for a further misreading of Arabic cultural expression, one that emphasizes order over relationality. In a way, the discipline of modern Middle Eastern studies has been deprived of the insights made by early orientalists who often carried out their “academic” research in the context of their service to the empire.

Contemporary discourse on Middle Eastern history suffers from the very deficiencies that the Reay Report sought to address through its principle of balance. Specifically, academic inquiries into the nature of Arab nationalism, impressive in both quality and quantity, remain skewed and limited in the manner in which contemporary approaches have focused more on the categories within the phenomena than on the interaction of such categories. One could say that the Arab nationalist project was so successful in establishing a particularly singular vision of *the* “Arab world” that an entire era of nuanced, diverse social and political realities has been virtually forgotten by contemporary societies living in the Middle East as well as the Western specialists that write on them. Having established their simplistic rhetoric as the basis of contemporary academic discourse, the early articulators of Arab nationalism have been successful beyond their dreams in establishing the notion that a scattered group of populations were bound by their use of Arabic – a language that when spoken reveals more differences than these thinkers were willing to admit. This is even more

entry for Willcocks in Goldschmidt (2000). Willcocks is even listed as the manager of an Arabic newspaper in Paul Hartmann’s *The Arabic Press of Egypt* (London: Luzac, 1899).

peculiar given the manner in which events like the Reay and Hayter reports underscored the interaction of standard and the colloquial as a more balanced and accurate prism into the realities of the Middle East.

Part Two explores the larger context in which contemporary historiography has essentially rejected colloquial Arabic as a viable site, agent, or medium for understanding Arabic-speaking societies. It is my argument that this departure from a “principle of balance” corresponds, relates to, and draws on European modernist ideology and its fixation with hierarchy, order, and categorization. The colonialists may have sought to impose an ordered framework onto Egypt and, thereby, make it “readable.” But their efforts have been basically eclipsed by contemporary academic approaches that preserved this concern for order but lacked the practical context of colonial administration that, for the colonialists, resulted in a more flexible, fluid understanding of Egyptian realities. In this sense, this story of contemporary historiography parallels that of traditional linguistic approaches to Arabic and the rigid categories articulated by it. Just as linguists have focused their efforts on the description of separate variants of Arabic, the modern historiography of Arab nationalism has neglected the interaction of the high and the low in the Egyptian experience of nationalism.¹²² Or, in other words, modern historiography has placed all too much attention on intellectuals, elites, and the standard texts they produced while summarily neglecting the interaction (consumption and production even) of such ideologies with the so-called “popular” masses.¹²³ *Meaning*, in this case the Egyptian experience of nationalism, is better understood through an approach that focuses on the interaction of emergent concepts of high and low culture –

¹²² Nationalism brings such trends to light most succinctly because like modernist ideology, it draws on a rigid hierarchy of social types in advancing a certain ideological project.

¹²³ Automatically assigning colloquial forms of expression to the “illiterate masses” proves problematic as elites themselves often co-opted colloquial mediums, the *zajal* for example, as a means of reaching out to larger groups or, simply, in hopes of developing a specific art form. With a command of multiple languages and educated at the expense of the Egyptian nobility, Ya’qub Sanu’ is a case in point. See, e.g., Irene Gendzier’s *The Practical Visions of Ya’qub Sanu’* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966).

intellectuals and masses, standard and colloquial – than by traditional approaches that have focused on the category of the nationalists alone.

Admittedly, the modernist preoccupation with the ordering of history (temporally, spatially, geographically, etc.) has proven a somewhat effective means of organizing the multidimensional aspects of broad and complex historical phenomena. But while such ideology has provided critical insight into social groups for example, it leaves much to be desired with regards to how such ideal types interacted. Our understanding of elites and peasants, for example, as separate groups remains impressive. Yet a focus on such categories has sometimes overshadowed the more important interaction that occurred between them in practice. With reference to language, I discuss this historical trend from two perspectives: first, the tendency in the early stages of modern research into Arab nationalism for nationalism to be studied as an *ideology* and, therefore, by means of *standard* Arabic texts written by intellectual elites and, secondly, the manner in which the history of Arab nationalism was written in an era when nationalism seemed *the* fundamental political, social, and cultural development of the modern Middle East. As such, many of the first historians of the Middle East were ardent Arab nationalists themselves. Given the nationalist claims of the existence of “one Arab people” united by “*the* Arabic language,” it is not surprising that later academics would integrate such claims into their narratives and, thereby, gloss over the importance of colloquial Arabic to an accurate understanding of Arabic-speaking societies. Ideology overwhelmingly overshadowed practice in contemporary academic approaches to the Middle East that were detached from the practical realities of colonial administration. The principle of balance that seemed so critical for early orientalists has been replaced by a methodology that favors the high over the low.

The writing of Egyptian history exhibits a similar fixation with order that has frequently resulted in a misreading of specific groups, moments, and developments in modern Egyptian society. Given the constraints of this study, a thorough review of the breadth of

literature on Egyptian history remains unfeasible. What I seek to do, however, is to engage the broad historical approaches that have informed such works. Even the most adept readings of Egyptian history have been consumed by a focus within categories while summarily neglecting the more intriguing processes that occur across them. While representing a critical step forward, more recent endeavors to write “subaltern narratives” or histories “from below” maintain a focus on specific categories (albeit new ones) that parallels the maturation of linguistic approaches to Arabic that continued to neglect the interaction of marked variants. Within such a framework, high and low cultures routinely claim thrones for themselves as if they existed in their own realm. As I have suggested with reference to Arabic, meaning constructs itself relationally and, therefore, the interaction of high and low represents the more productive focus of historical analysis. More pointedly, such notions of high or low actually constituted themselves by virtue of active interaction with the other. Cultural forms of expression – whether in audiovisual discourse or the “reading” of history – requires an awareness of these dynamics of relational processes of interaction, mediation, and negotiation across boundaries.

EARLY NARRATIVES OF ARAB NATIONALISM

Texts and Ideologues

The history of Arab nationalism has largely been written by the nationalists themselves. This is not to say that academics have not been critical of the Arab nationalist project – in fact, many have – but rather that the claims of Arab nationalist ideology comprise the very assumptions upon which contemporary approaches to Arab nationalism are founded. In many ways, the essentialist claims of the Arab nationalist project mirror the essentialist perception of “the Orient” adopted by Western orientalism.¹²⁴ Western orientalism recognized

¹²⁴ Partha Chatterjee picks up on this, noting that: “I was struck by the way Orientalism was implicated in the construction of not only the ideology of British colonialism which had dominated India for two centuries, but also of the nationalism which was my own heritage. Orientalist constructions of Indian civilization had been avidly seized upon the ideologues of Indian nationalism in order to assert the glory and antiquity of a national past. So Indian nationalists had accepted the colonialist critique of the Indian present:

the relevance of colloquial Arabic. However, Arab nationalist ideology rejected colloquial Arabic because of the threat it posed to its own political project.

A plethora of studies have been written on Arab nationalism. I have found it useful to discuss the literature on Arab nationalism through the prism of various “narratives” of Arab nationalism. As such, it is possible to sketch out the general intellectual trends that have characterized the literature on Arab nationalism and, in doing so, point to widespread trends in contemporary approaches to the study of Arab nationalism. What becomes clear in examining the narratives – both old and new – is the extent to which they have been informed by the claims of the nationalists, particularly with regards to language, as the basis of their own approaches to the subject. Even more importantly, old narratives of Arab nationalism have favored the study of intellectuals and high culture without acknowledging their role as simply one category in a relationally constructed system.

Israel Gershoni’s delicate handling of the historiography of Arab nationalism offers a useful point of departure for a closer analysis of the dynamics of language wrapped in historiography.¹²⁵ Describing Arab nationalism in the years between 1920 and 1945 as “the era in which it moved from the intellectual periphery to the cultural and political center,” Gershoni locates his work as a sketch of three “successive historiographic narratives” through which Arab nationalism was understood in the decades following this critical era.¹²⁶ The first – “contemporary accounts of the aspiration for Arab unity that emerged in the Arab world in the late 1930s and in the 1940s” – Gershoni dismisses as “sporadic surveys” and a “mixture of journalism and scholarship.”¹²⁷ It is the second and third narrative, the “old” and the “new” narrative, which receive the main emphasis of Gershoni’s analysis. Recognizing the utility of

a society fallen into barbarism and stagnation, incapable of progress and modernity.” See Partha Chatterjee, “Their Own Words? An Essay for Edward Said,” quoted in Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East, eds. James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997): 42.

¹²⁵ Israel Gershoni, “Rethinking the Formation of Arab Nationalism in the Middle East, 1920-1945: Old and New Narratives,” Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East, eds., James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997): 3-25. Hereafter, Gershoni (1997).

¹²⁶ Gershoni (1997): 4.

¹²⁷ Gershoni (1997): 4.

such a discussion of narratives as opposed to the specificity of any one author's discussion of Arab nationalism, I seek here to examine both narratives in hopes of illustrating the manner in which modernist ideology expresses its fixation with order in contemporary historiography.

The "old narrative" of Arab nationalism developed in the specific social and political context of the heyday of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s. This narrative represented the shift of the study of Arab nationalism from the journalistic coverage of the 1930s to a "scholarly pursuit" with "academic standing."¹²⁸ In other words, Arab nationalism became a subject of scrutiny by intellectuals and academics. The foundations created by these first intellectuals would remain the basis of most contemporary discussions of Arab nationalism. Most importantly, the old narrative was guided primarily by the "history of ideas" and, as such, tended to look at Arab nationalism primarily as an ideology.

The major project of this form of the history of ideas was to reconstruct 'unit-ideas' and 'mind,' individual or collective. In more ambitious cases it assumed that the 'largest distinctive aim of the intellectual historian . . . is to describe and explain the spirit of an age.' The underlying supposition was that besides the 'theoretical' or 'philosophical' interest inherent in the ideas in themselves, they were also the expression of whole cultures or societies, constituting the primary force in shaping their historical evolution and in stimulating processes of social and political change.¹²⁹

Given its singular conception of Arab nationalism as an ideology, early studies of it read like a collection of "greatest hits" of Arab nationalists. Most studies "deal with specific texts by leading intellectuals" frequently the same grouping of intellectuals chosen out of a pool of Arab theoreticians that normally included the likes of Edmond Rabbath, Qustantin Zurayq, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Bazzaz, and Sati' al-Husri.¹³⁰ Gershoni includes within the old narrative the writings of a diverse range of academics, from Elie Kedourie, Albert Hourani, and Sylvia Haim, to Anwar Chejne, Bernard Lewis, and Hisham Sharabi. The actual selection of intellectuals chosen by these authors as the "representative" voices of Arab nationalism,

¹²⁸ Gershoni (1997): 4.

¹²⁹ Gershoni (1997): 6. See, also, Arthur Lovejoy, "Reflections on the History of Ideas," Journal of the History of Ideas 1.1 (Jan 1940): 3-23.

¹³⁰ Gershoni (1997): 7. Albert Hourani's seminal study of Arab thinkers in the "liberal age" proceeds in a similar fashion with a structure revolving around the thoughts of such representative ideologues. See Albert

however, pales in importance to the similar methodology and approach that unites their work. This is especially important for our purposes. As an ideology, Arab nationalism represented little more than a set of texts to be catalogued and interpreted by academics. In their endeavors to understand Arab nationalism, writers of the old narrative focused exclusively on the written production of a core group of intellectuals, that is to say the thoughts, ideas, and writings (in standard Arabic) of a specific ideologically-driven group of individuals.

The other salient characteristic of the old narrative was the assumption that “the central feature of the Arab nationalist ideology of this era was the conviction that the Arabic language was the chief element in forging the Arab nation.”¹³¹ While acknowledging the role of history, religion, and values in Arab nationalist ideology, the old narrative nonetheless posits the “cultural-linguistic dimension of Arabness” as the primary component in uniting the Arab world. Of course, this acceptance of language as a unifying force echoed the claims of the nationalists themselves. More importantly, however, the emphasis on language was just as much a product of the old narrative’s methodology that conceived of Arab nationalism solely as an ideology and, consequently, focused on texts in standard Arabic written by intellectuals alone. Little is made of Arab nationalism in its social, cultural, or political trappings. It is reduced to a mere matter of intellectuals and their ideas.

The problematic nature of the old narrative lies in its acceptance of the claims of ideologues who were themselves engaged in struggles to establish their voices as being representative of their societies. Moreover, the old narrative suffers from a neglect of the context in which such intellectuals wrote and, specifically, of what Gershoni refers to as “processes of dissemination and reception of the Arab nationalist idea at the different levels of culture and society.”¹³²

The old narrative pays scant attention to whether, in those societies in which Arab nationalism predominated (particularly in the Fertile Crescent), it prevailed among

Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983/1962).

¹³¹ Gershoni (1997): 7.

¹³² Gershoni (1997): 10.

non-elites as well. It typically is content to draw conclusions about the nature and influence of nationalist ideology by perusing “high,” “formal” texts produced by a handful of “representative” intellectuals, usually ignoring “nonformal” expressions such as can be found in the press or periodicals.¹³³

This is perhaps the most important characteristic of the old narrative, namely its assumption of the existence of ideologies in a vacuum. Focusing on “representative” intellectuals is not necessarily wrong. But concentrating on the ideas of such intellectuals without recognizing their production within a larger system does prove problematic. “Nonformal” expression is just as important for what it reveals about the elites as what it says about the masses. Indeed, the relative absence of the masses from the old narrative remains altogether perplexing given that that most of these works were written during Nasser’s populist-oriented nationalism in the years preceding the 1967 war. Even more confusing given that the writing of history – as a discipline – in other regions of the world, namely Western Europe, had already engaged the masses as an agent and actor in historiography.¹³⁴ The history of Arabic-speaking societies seemed more concerned with categories than with the dynamics of their interaction. Much of this legacy had more to do with the people that were writing the histories than the ones that were living them. This was no truer than with George Antonius.

An Arab Awakening: “Masses Need Not Apply”

Most studies of Arab nationalism make some reference – usually in their introductions – to Antonius’ “classic study” *The Arab Awakening*.¹³⁵ First published in 1938, *The Arab Awakening* recounted the birth of the Arab national movement from the perspective of George Antonius, a member of the British civil service who has alternatively been called a “broken and bitter man” or hailed for having done the “greatest service to history” by various

¹³³ Gershoni (1997): 10.

¹³⁴ By the 1950s, Richard Cobb had already written his seminal study of the role of “the people” in the revolutionary armies of the French Revolution. See, e.g., Richard Cobb, *Les armées révolutionnaires: Instrument de la Terreur dans les départements, Avril 1793 – Floréal An II* (Paris: Mouton, 1961).

¹³⁵ George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (London: Kegan Paul International, 2000/1938).

individuals.¹³⁶ Although it may fall short of the expectations of academic writing, Antonius' work remains critical to understanding the old narrative. More pointedly, it reveals the extent to which the ordering of Middle Eastern history singled out one group, the intellectuals, as the foundation for approaches to Arab nationalism. Purporting to tell a story "that has never been told in full before," Antonius describes his goals as follows:

It aims at giving, not the final or even a detailed history of the Arab Movement, but an account in outline of its origins, its development and the main problems it has had to face, in the form of a continuous narrative interspersed with such analysis as seemed necessary to elucidate the problems.¹³⁷

Antonius claims *The Arab Awakening* as a foundational text for an untold story, the seeming *Ur-Text* of Arab nationalism. Supposing that his claim as the first articulator of this narrative is not taken seriously enough, Antonius emphasizes his authority through a discussion of methodology that makes his work seem all the more innovative:

[T]here appears to be no work, in any of the languages with which I am acquainted, in which the story is told from the beginning, that is to say from the earliest stirrings of the Arab awakening one hundred years ago, down to the present day. Nor is there in existence, to the best of my knowledge an account that derives its authority from an equal reference to the Arab and the foreign sources. Just as the Arabic histories rely almost exclusively on Arab sources, so the works published in the European languages will be found to have been mainly based on Western sources. . . . The task of examining all the relevant sources has taken me several years of research in European and American libraries, and a great deal of traveling and personal inquiry in the Arab world.¹³⁸

Unlike earlier works on Arab nationalism, Antonius claims to offer a more comprehensive, more accurate telling of its origins by virtue of his command of Arabic and European sources as well as his own personal dedication to finding "the truth" so to speak. He brings order to the tale of Arab nationalism, and his authority, or so he hopes, lies in his individual person. But like any other author – academic or otherwise – Antonius has a particular target in mind when writing his history supposedly "without bias or partisanship."¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Fouad Ajami refers to Antonius as "a broken and bitter man" in his *Dream Palace of the Arabs* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998) while H.A. Gibb referred to *The Arab Awakening* as the "greatest service to history" in *The Spectator* 161 (25 Nov 1938): 1912.

¹³⁷ Antonius (1938): Preface.

¹³⁸ Antonius (1938): Preface.

¹³⁹ Antonius (1938): Preface.

Contemporary scholarship has acknowledged the extent to which Antonius' work was intended as the product of a historian-advocate who had a political motivation in mind when writing his history of nationalism.¹⁴⁰ Antonius had been deeply involved in the Arab national movement himself and targeted Western policymakers who in 1938 were on the cusp of critical decisions with regards to the fate of Palestine. As I shall make clear below, Antonius' "history" was just as much an articulation of his own "dream palace of the Arabs" as it was a depiction of its organization. Antonius' study becomes the bedrock upon which the edifice of modern scholarship on Arab nationalism has been constructed. With this in mind, it is critical to understand his conclusions as well as the methodology through which he arrives at them.

Standard Arabic provides the singular prism through which Antonius elaborates a vision of Arab nationalism that unites geographically, linguistically, and culturally disparate populations into one "Arab" people. Up until now, the discussion of language as a uniting factor for the Arabs took place primarily amongst intellectuals within their own societies. The extraordinary import of Antonius' book, and the reason perhaps for its timelessness, is that it offers the first substantive formulation of Arab nationalist ideology in the medium of modern academic discourse. Establishing himself within a tradition of scholarship and research, Antonius organizes what were formerly ideologies of various Arab nationalists into an authoritative, academic statement of the origins of Arab nationalism. Within this authoritative formulation, language rules supreme just as it had in the dominant strands of Arab nationalist ideology in the 1930s.

This is clear from the first sentence of his masterpiece:

The story of the Arab national movement opens in Syria in 1847, with the foundation in Bairut [sic] of a modest literary society under American patronage.¹⁴¹

Interestingly, Antonius pinpoints the birth of Arab nationalism to a specific time and place, namely a literary society in nineteenth-century Beirut. Centered in Beirut and financed by the

¹⁴⁰ See, e.g., Albert Hourani's discussion of Antonius' purpose in "*The Arab Awakening Forty Years Later*," *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East* (London: Macmillan, 1981): 193-215.

¹⁴¹ Antonius (1938): 13.

Americans, this “modest” group of intellectuals also has ties to the West, an appealing and familiar image to Western academics. His discussion of the collectivity of the “Arab world” emphasizes the cultural and linguistic dimensions of Arabness. Antonius describes a historical process consisting of both “racial arabisation” and “linguistic arabisation” through which “the populations of the conquered countries gradually acquired Arabic as their mother tongue.”¹⁴²

Linguistic arabisation proved the stronger of the forces because unlike the “physical and economic limits to the capacity of a country to admit and absorb migrations from the outside”:

The spread of the language was not circumscribed by those limitations. While Arabic went on advancing until it had completely enthroned itself, the tide of racial penetration found itself damned within narrower confines.¹⁴³

As the Arabic language gradually asserted its seat of royalty, Antonius describes the changing dynamics of identity that occurred across the Arabic-speaking Middle East.

The connotation of the word *Arab* changed accordingly. It is no longer used solely to denote a member of the nomad tribes who peopled the Arabian peninsula. It gradually came to mean a citizen of that extensive Arab world – not any inhabitant of it, but that great majority whose racial descent, even when it was not of pure Arab lineage, had become submerged in the tide of arabisation; whose manners and traditions had been shaped in an Arab mould; and, most decisive of all, whose mother tongue is Arabic. The term applies to Christians as well as to Moslems, and to the off-shoots of each of those creeds, the criterion being not islamisation but the degree of arabisation.¹⁴⁴

One cannot help but wonder exactly whose perspective Antonius claims to be representing when he discusses the presumably fixed “connotation” of the term Arab. Furthermore, in contrast to the specificity with which he describes the origins of Arab nationalism, the notion of Arabness and its link to the “mother tongue” of Arabic seems almost timeless. As William Cleveland explicitly highlights in an essay reconsidering Antonius’ work:

These are Antonius’ three main components of Arab nationalism: ethnicity, shared traditions, and language. Throughout most of his book, he fails to define the first, ignores the second (except for the final section on Mandate Palestine), and places most of his emphasis on the third.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Antonius (1938): 15.

¹⁴³ Antonius (1938): 16.

¹⁴⁴ Antonius (1938): 18.

¹⁴⁵ William Cleveland, “The Arab Nationalism of George Antonius Reconsidered,” Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997): 68. Hereafter, Cleveland (1997).

The first third of Antonius' book revolves around the theme of a cultural revival and literary awakening that are synonymous with the first stirrings of the Arab national movement. His methodology of the study of Arab nationalism focuses almost exclusively on language and is less revealing for what it says about Arab nationalism than as a harbinger of countless subsequent studies on Arab nationalism.

His starting point is the debased state of Arabic language in the late eighteenth century and the general 'retardment of cultural development' among the Arabs. Outlining the lack of educational facilities and the absence of printing presses in Syria, Antonius skillfully sets the foundation for his nationalist argument: 'Without school or book, the making of a nation in modern times is inconceivable'. Obviously, the converse is also true – with school and book, the making of a nation is possible, and Antonius sets out to demonstrate that the Arabs acquired, in abundance, these two essential building blocks of nationhood.¹⁴⁶

In a sense, Antonius articulated the notion of "imagined communities" even before Benedict Anderson's seminal work on the role of print in the formation of national consciousness.

Assuredly, there is some insight to be gained from the study of Antonius' book, but there are a few points that must be made specifically with regards to our discussion of language and historiography.

Presenting his work as a "history" based on modern research and all the authority that entails, Antonius, while not an academic himself, purported to offer an academic rendering of the complex story of Arab nationalism. As such, Antonius claims for himself (and others repeatedly affirm this claim) the position of *the* foundational text of Arab nationalism. In large part, Antonius' interest lies primarily with intellectuals, nationalists, and the cultural ideologues at the heart of Arab nationalism. His study reflects the order-oriented approach of the old narrative in its focus on Arab nationalism as an ideology, albeit an ideology born of a cultural revival, but nonetheless a textual tradition associated with the cultural production of a representative category of intellectuals.

Language enthrones itself – his words – into the narrative of Arab nationalism. In its methodological focus on intellectuals and standard Arabic, *The Arab Awakening* has seized for

¹⁴⁶ Cleveland (1997): 69.

itself an uncanny influence on the studies of Arab nationalism that have followed it. Indeed, it continues to be a subject for discussion today. This is not surprising given the popularity it enjoyed at the time of its publication in a multiplicity of realms including diplomatic, intellectual, and cultural spheres. Its relevance emerged in a specific political context:

In order to appreciate what a revelatory work *The Arab Awakening* was, it is necessary to imagine a British scholarly and political world in which the contents of the Husayn-McMahon correspondence were largely unknown. It is also important to recall that the book appeared on the eve of the London Conference of 1939. In this setting *The Arab Awakening* arrived like a bombshell. Within British foreign and colonial office circles as well as among certain members of parliament, it immediately became a cause célèbre and led to a whirl of official activity, including the secondment of Antonius to a special subcommittee of the London Conference to assist the British government in producing a definitive English version of the correspondence for publication. As Elizabeth MacCallum concluded in her review, Antonius' work was a text that "has made history as well as recorded it".¹⁴⁷

Its reception in the United States met with similar acclaim. Paul Knabenshue, American consul in Baghdad, wrote to the Secretary of State insisting, "I unhesitatingly pronounce Mr. Antonius' book the best work which has ever been produced on the subject."¹⁴⁸ Perhaps Knabenshue missed the preface in which Antonius claims it to be the only book ever produced.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with Antonius' role as a political advocate. Indeed, academia has gradually realized the difficulty and perhaps undesirability of complete objectivity in research.¹⁴⁹ Nonetheless, it is important to realize that Antonius' work was disseminated and accepted as authoritative across multiple circles. It offered the very expression of order and hierarchies embodied by modernist ideology. In its neglect of the interaction of the masses in the production of nationalist ideology coupled with disregard of the realities of spoken Arabic, Antonius' study laid the basis for subsequent research that manifested a sheepish acceptance of the preeminence of standard Arabic to the formation of Arab national consciousness. The "objective" history that Antonius purports to tell is riddled

¹⁴⁷ Cleveland (1997): 83.

¹⁴⁸ Cleveland (1997): 84.

with inaccuracies, misrepresentations, and a strikingly imperfect approach to Arab nationalism, one that arises from his own simplistic characterization of the literary and cultural trends of the modern Middle East. Antonius made an enormous contribution, a troublesome one, to the study of Arab nationalism. Only negligible progress has been made away from this approach and towards slightly modified methodologies that still preserve a focus on order.

“NEW” NARRATIVES: THE MAINTENANCE OF ORDER IN MIDDLE EASTERN HISTORY

While allowing for a broader inclusion of social, political, and cultural categories in Middle Eastern history, the so-called “new” narrative of Arab nationalism nevertheless has maintained a singular focus on the ideology, actions, and motivations of Arab elites. This new narrative parallels those linguistic models of Arabic that sought to extend Ferguson’s categorization of variation while ultimately preserving a conception of rigid hierarchies within the Arabic language. Admittedly, the most important change in the new narrative is its assessment of Arab nationalism as more than just ideology. In the words of Gershoni:

Hence, the historian of nationalism could not confine himself or herself solely to the study of the history of ideas and the dynamics underlying the evolution of a collective consciousness. Nationalism, rather, was posited as a multidimensional historical movement closely connected with social and economic changes, political and institutional developments, and the specific sociopolitical context of each Arab society individually and all of them together as a cultural unit. Nationalism came to be regarded as no less a political movement, a cultural system, a social phenomenon, and sometimes an economic force as an ideology.¹⁵⁰

A singular focus on texts alone was no longer considered a sufficient means of understanding a phenomenon that cut across social, political, and cultural realities. Context suddenly became critical to the study of Arab nationalism. Given this methodological shift away from an obsession with texts to the consideration of context, authors gradually began to consider categories that had formerly been ignored. “The emergence of new middle-class strata in the large urban centers” – the *effendiyya* – rightfully became a focus of the new narrative, and

¹⁴⁹ One of the reasons Edward Said’s *Orientalism* continues to spark debate is his suggestion that complete objectivity in academic research is impossible. See, particularly, the discussion “Orientalism Now” in the last third of *Orientalism*.

such actors were regarded as “the dominant social force in urban culture and politics.”¹⁵¹ At this juncture, it suffices to point out that the new narrative broadened the study of Arab nationalism to include agents and factors that were essential and complementary to the earlier texts that were studied. The texts alone were no longer regarded as containing the entire truth. Instead, the focus on intellectuals expanded to include a new category, the *effendiyya*, who were too quickly identified with a burgeoning middle class. Remarkably, the discourse surrounding the *effendiyya* captures most vividly the problematic nature of modern historiography’s almost exclusive focus on categories even when the categories themselves, like in the case of the “effendi,” pose a series of challenges to simple classification.

A case in point is the evolving body of work that has emerged by the pen of Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski that explores the historical development of nationalism in Egypt. Two of these works, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900-1930* (1986) and *Redefining the Egyptian nation, 1930-1945* (1995), are of particular importance specifically because of the manner in which they deal with various categories like the “intellectuals” and the “*effendiyya*”. A momentary digression, however, is necessary. Although the two studies clearly express modernist ideological approaches concerned with order, it is also important to note the manner in which they represent exploratory works for what would become Gershoni’s later contributions to changes in methodological approaches to Middle Eastern history. That is to say that Gershoni himself has encouraged crucial transformations in contemporary approaches to Egyptian history and, in particular, the study of nationalism in the Middle East. A recent collection detailing the importance of such changes captures Gershoni’s own adroit understanding of the complex matters at hand. It is worth quoting an extended excerpt:

The second general issue [in new approaches to the discipline] is the study of elites – the ideas, policies, and practices produced by elites, their experiences, and identities – on which Middle Eastern studies has traditionally been focused. It was assumed that this form of enquiry would give a clue to wider society, culture, or politics in general.

¹⁵⁰ Gershoni (1997): 12.

¹⁵¹ Gershoni (1997): 16.

This proved misleading, however, as the outcome was a description of the life of the elites alone. Then came the reaction: Scholars became enthusiastically caught up in the history of nonelites, termed “history from below” and “popular culture”. Now, scholars are seeking the social and cultural middle ground, the middle discourse, somewhere between the “high learned culture” and the “low illiterate culture”. There is an attempt to explore the relative social role of both elite and nonelite groups in shaping what Dominick La Capra has defined as “common culture”. Yet we still know very little about interactions and the mutual feedback between different layers of culture. It is easy enough to isolate a specific cultural layer or trait, a discourse, intellectuals, and secondary intellectuals, and to discuss each of them as defined units. It is far more difficult, however, to identify systems of interaction, negotiation, and agents of mediation operating between these units and the layers of the various levels of culture, society, and politics. Scholars need to ask where, in the space between high and low cultures, are the lost voices and experiences that were never given attention. It is questionable whether the suppressed, “missing” discourses have indeed been extricated and, if so, what their significance is to the entire cultural field.¹⁵²

Intriguingly, Gershoni implies that a focus on the *interaction* of categories represents the real substance of Middle Eastern history. More importantly, the retrieval of “lost voices” and “missing discourses” remains a critical component to understanding the “entire cultural field” as an integrated whole. Order, in this case the categorization of elites and nonelites, proves an obstacle to an accurate understanding of Middle Eastern history. Instead, the notion of a “common culture” in Egyptian society only becomes possible, as I have suggested, through the relational interaction of categories within a cohesive cultural unit. Against the backdrop of this remarkable insight into a more useful historical methodology, the somewhat traditional approach of Gershoni’s earlier works seems entirely alien.

Separated by a space of nine years, the two studies explore the development of nationalism in Egypt from 1920 to 1945. The dates are not entirely arbitrary but representative of the obsession with periodization that characterizes modernist approaches to history. Taken together, the two studies describe the changing loyalties of Egyptian society from the turn of the century until shortly after World War II. The 1986 study describes the transition from the traditional Egyptian-Ottoman-Islamic orientation dominant in Egypt until World War I to a new orientation towards a particularly “Egyptianist” strand of territorial

¹⁵² Israel Gershoni and Ursula Woköck, “Doing History: Modern Middle Eastern Studies Today,” *Histories of the Modern Middle East* (London: Lynne Renner Publishers, 2002): 4-5.

nationalism in the 1920's. For Gershoni and Jankowski, the 1920's represent an era during which Egyptian intellectuals articulated a notion of Egyptian national identity that followed in the tradition of the territorial nationalisms of Europe. In the second study on "redefining the Egyptian nation," the story taken up in the first work is continued. They argue here that the territorial nationalist Egyptianism of the 1920's was replaced, in the 1930's, with three new conceptions of national identity that they refer to as Islamic nationalism, integral Arab nationalism, and Egyptian Arab nationalism. Such changes in Egyptian identity, they contend, took place in the context of two new "orientations" in Egyptian society that located Egyptian affinities with the "East" and the larger "Islamic mood." They conclude that Egyptian Arab nationalism became the dominant trend and, ultimately, it is this strand of Egyptian Arab nationalism that consumed Egyptian society in the 1930's and represented the tradition from which the populist politics of Nasser would emerge.

The history of Egyptian nationalism recounted by Gershoni and Jankowski focuses on intellectuals, elites, and ideologies. Admittedly, minor shifts in methodology occur from the first study to the second. The product of such changes though is basically negligible. In their first book, Gershoni and Jankowski's explanation of methodology implies a departure from the singular focus on ideology characteristic of the old narrative. For them, nationalism is "both an ideological construct and a practical way of life".¹⁵³ At the outset, then, one is prepared for a study of nationalism that reaches beyond the type of texts that have originally been considered. Surprisingly, their approach to the study of "a practical way of life" remains preoccupied with elites:

The study of nationalism needs to concern itself with three interlocking dimensions. The first is an understanding of the perceptions that constitute nationalism: the ideas and patterns of thought that make up specific nationalist ideologies. The second is the interplay of nationalist ideas and nationalist actions: how nationalists attempt to realize their values in the real world. The third is the perpetual interaction and reciprocal influence of nationalist ideas and actions, on the one hand, and the external historical conditions in which nationalists find themselves, on the other: how historical

¹⁵³ Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986): Preface, vii. Hereafter, Gershoni, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs* (1986).

circumstances influence nationalist doctrines and behaviour, as well as how these ideas and actions shape the course of historical evolution.¹⁵⁴

They have refreshingly included context and praxis alongside ideas in their study.

Unfortunately, it is the ideas, historical context, and praxis of the nationalists alone that warrants their attention. Dissemination of ideology, the interaction of the masses, or even their existence is largely ignored. The limitations are blatantly obvious: how much can a limited focus on the ideologies of a particular stratum of Egyptian society reveal about a phenomenon that – their argument, not mine – eventually flourished into a populist-oriented mass movement? Admittedly, they confess that they have little interest in the masses. In doing so, they draw on Robert Darnton’s categorization of four “possible categories of historical inquiry into ideas based on the type and range of evidence being examined”:

The history of ideas (the study of systematic thought, usually in philosophical treatises), intellectual history proper (the study of informal thought, climates of opinion, and literary movements), the social history of ideas (the study of ideologies and idea diffusion), and cultural history (the study of culture in the anthropological sense, including worldviews and collective *mentalités*).¹⁵⁵

They locate their analysis rigidly within the second and third category while dismissing outright the relevance of the fourth to their study. Indeed, they reject the “popular attitudes and opinions of the *uneducated* masses” as a viable site for analysis given that their “collective *mentalité* can be recaptured – *if at all* – only through the extensive utilization of Egyptian oral folklore, proverbs, and traditions.”¹⁵⁶ This seems the perfect historical expression of diglossia. Their point is that insight into the “uneducated masses” requires an integration of colloquial Arabic sources. It would be more accurate to say that a complete understanding of the second and third category, namely the elites, requires an integration of the “masses” because of the manner in which the categories actually all interacted with each other in one cultural system. Paradoxically, they tell a story of nationalism and Egyptian history – a tale that automatically

¹⁵⁴ Gershoni, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs* (1986): Preface, viii.

¹⁵⁵ Robert Darnton, “Intellectual and Cultural History,” in Michael Kammen (ed.), *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980): 337. Quoted in Gershoni, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs* (1986): Preface, xii.

¹⁵⁶ Gershoni, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs* (1986): Preface, xii. My emphasis added.

deems an expansive methodology – through a recounting of the ideas and praxis of Egyptian intellectuals, as if no one other than them ever existed.

Fortunately, their second study admits the existence of a new sector of Egyptian society, the *effendiyya*, but the manner in which it does so offers limited insight into either the category of the *effendiyya* itself or the interaction of the *effendiyya* with the greater Egyptian society. Again the masses remain silent, marginal, and irrelevant, even in this “new” narrative. Put simply, Gershoni and Jankowski describe the emergence of the *effendiyya* as a new sector of Egyptian urban society and the fundamental reason for a shift of “Egyptian national identity” from the territorial nationalist perspective of the 1920’s described in their first book to a space in which Islamic nationalism, integral Arab nationalism, and Egyptian Arab nationalism vied for dominance and, eventually, from which Egyptian Arab nationalism becomes the paramount ideology from the 1930’s onward. Their characterization of the *effendiyya*’s role and origins is worth quoting in full as it represents a crucial part of their argument:

In brief, our argument is that the processes of urbanization, educational expansion, and the formation of new occupational groups which occurred in Egypt under the parliamentary monarchy eventually resulted in the creation of a significantly different effendi population from that found in the early decades of the century. Larger in size as well as more traditional in outlook than the smaller, more Westernized educated upper and middle class of the previous generation who had been the authors and audience of the Egyptianist approach dominant in Egypt prior to 1930, this “new effendiyya” population was the most important social group responsible for the movement of Egyptian nationalist thought and action away from its earlier territorial nationalist perspective and toward the supra-Egyptianist outlook which emerged in the post-1930 period.¹⁵⁷

According to them, this “new effendiyya” differed from the “authors and audience” of old with respect to their values. “Urbanization” and increased “expanded education” are the reasons for the entry of the *effendiyya* into the “new human geography” of Egypt.¹⁵⁸ Unlike the “Western-oriented” intellectuals of the 1920’s, the *effendiyya*, they suggest, were loyal “to

¹⁵⁷ Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 11. Hereafter, Gershoni, *Redefining* (1995).

¹⁵⁸ Gershoni, *Redefining* (1995): 12. Gershoni notes an increase in literacy from 13.8% in 1927 to 18.6% in 1937 and 22.8% in 1947. This leaves nearly 80% of the population unaccounted for.

the more meaningful and indigenous Arab, Islamic, and Eastern dimensions of Egyptian life.”¹⁵⁹

The remainder of their analysis assumes the agency of the *effendiyya* as the process through which Egyptian national identity was completely transformed. Patterns of urbanization, expanded education, and growing literacy resulted in the emergence of a new stratum of Egyptian society, one that embodied an Arab, Islamic, Eastern orientation – a sector which by implication was apparently nonexistent before the 1930’s. Hence, a “new market for intellectual production and consumption” was created by the demand of the supposedly non-Western *effendiyya* as intellectuals increasingly modified their ideas for the new consumers. In this framework, Egyptian elite intellectuals articulated new notions of Egyptian identity to reach larger and larger audiences of *effendiyya* consumers. Consequently, the territorial nationalism advocated by intellectuals in the 1920’s mutated into a widespread orientation towards Egyptian Arab nationalism.

Gershoni’s analysis remains problematic on multiple levels that relate to his rigid description of the *effendiyya* as a social category. For example, with regards to Egyptian intellectuals writing for the new *effendiyya* in the 1930’s, where was the parallel concern for consumption during the 1920’s? Whereas the study of intellectuals in the 1920’s makes no mention of intellectuals responding to an audience, the second book suggests that the intellectuals of the 1920’s were both “author and audience.” This seeming aloofness of earlier Egyptian intellectuals diverges dramatically from the characterization of intellectuals in the 1930’s as seemingly frantic in their endeavors to write for the *effendiyya* audience. The approach used in the second study incorporates a quantitatively larger segment of Egyptian society (intellectuals and effendis) but, in doing so, it adopts a static understanding of the groups themselves as well as their interaction with each other. In many ways, such changes echo similar attempts to develop more accurate linguistic models of Arabic, endeavors that

¹⁵⁹ Gershoni, *Redefining* (1995): 15.

resulted in further categorizations that inevitably failed to account for the complexities of reality.

According to Gershoni, the characteristic conception of the modern Egyptian effendi was that represented by the cartoon figure “Misri Effendi” in the pages of *Ruz al-Yusuf*:

With Western trousers and jacket, half-Western fez, and Eastern prayer beads, Misri Effendi contrasted visually with the even more portly, more elegantly Western-dressed pashas of the upper class as well with the peasantry in their traditional galabiyas. His function in the political journalism of the period was that of observer and/or interlocutor; a wry commentator on the follies of rich and poor alike.¹⁶⁰

What Gershoni does not explicitly mention is how such a representation was itself an embodiment of a multidimensional interaction of categories: traditional and modern, Western and Egyptian, upper class and peasantry. To simply classify Misri Effendi as a symbol of the middle class would be inaccurate. Instead, the *effendiyya* are better understood almost as a fluid state of being: an aspiration to and embodiment of social mobility. With prayer beads from the East and clothing from the West, the effendi himself is the product of the interaction of marked categories. In this sense, the *effendiyya* cannot be understood as a defined class in Egyptian society but rather, as Ryzova has suggested, as emblematic of “passages from non-modernity to modernity in its many forms.”¹⁶¹ The faces of other ideal types that interacted with the *effendiyya* also presented themselves in the Egyptian press. The ideal type of the *ibn al-balad* is one such example. In her seminal study of the concept of *ibn al-balad*, Sawsan el-Messiri suggests how representation of Egypt itself became a site for the interaction and negotiation of cultural categories.¹⁶² A 1941 editorial in *al-Ithnayn* gave birth to the character of “Ibn al-Balad”. From the comments of the originator of this caricature, it appears that the category of *ibn al-balad* constructed itself in relation to other cultural categories:

¹⁶⁰ Gershoni, *Redefining* (1995): 7.

¹⁶¹ See Lucie Ryzova, *L'Effendiyya ou la modernité contestée* (Cairo : CEDEJ , 2004).

¹⁶² In many ways, the conception of “*ibn al-balad*” identity was itself a product of the interaction of marked variants of the Arabic language. As Messiri notes, “The *ibn al-balad* speaks Arabic in the local Egyptian dialect and not ‘broken Arabic.’ If an Egyptian does not master his mother tongue, which has happened often enough as a result of westernization, foreign occupation and the emphasis on foreign education, he may be referred to sarcastically as a *khawāga*.” See Sawsan El-Messiri, *Ibn al-Balad: A Concept of Egyptian Identity* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978): 2.

In the year 1941, the chief editor of *al-Ithnayn* magazine held a meeting with the editorial staff of Dār al-Hilāl (the publishing house), in which it was decided that the caricature of *al-Misri Effendi* did not, and should not, symbolize the Egyptian, because it represented the lowest class of government official, that is the effendi class, or petty bureaucrats. They decided that the personality of an *ibn al-balad* represented a more independent and emancipated personality and one which really represented the Egyptian.¹⁶³

Conceptions of modern Egyptian identity were a product of the interaction – whether conflicting in nature or not – between various marked categories in Egyptian society. Within such a framework, it seems almost impossible to discuss the historical relevance of any group in Egyptian society without reference to the sea of categories that surrounded it and even constituted it.

Returning to the notion of a “new” narrative of Middle Eastern history, Gershoni and Jankowski’s study of the Egyptian experience of nationalism, although diverging from a singular focus on texts and ideologues, remains focused on categories in the construction of historical narratives. They allow for the introduction of a new sector in Egyptian society – the *effendiyya* – but this proves problematic perhaps most importantly because the category of the *effendiyya* was itself a product of the interaction of various other ideal types (or marked categories) in Egyptian society. In this respect, their ordering of Egyptian history takes as its focal point one of the more unruly, unclassifiable phenomena of modern Egypt. Moreover, they do so without mentioning the interaction, or presence even, of other segments of Egyptian society notably the Egyptian masses as typified in the category of *ibn al-balad*.

Other recent approaches to Middle Eastern history have also sought to redress the misreading of the old narrative. Undoubtedly, endeavors to write “subaltern” narratives or histories “from below” represent important advances in historiography. Indeed, as I have mentioned earlier, it may be impossible to discuss a relational approach to the categories of Egyptian society without first having an idea of the categories themselves. Yet such efforts have simply reversed the traditional focus, resulting in the description and classification of

¹⁶³ Messiri 48.

categories other than the elites but without mentioning the larger social context in which they emerged.

In fact, such narratives have frequently turned to the medium of colloquial Arabic as a sort of prism into “the subaltern.” Joel Beinin, for example, has examined the representation of workers in modern Egyptian *zajal* (pl. *azjāl*), or colloquial poetry. Many of these poems are presumably written by workers themselves. Beinin’s characterization of the *zajal*, however, suggests a dichotomous relationship between a colloquial “discourse of popular opposition” and the “hegemonic form of Egyptian national literary culture expressed in standard Arabic.”¹⁶⁴ The problem – categorization of fluid phenomena – occurs again when Beinin relegates colloquial expressions to the realm of the masses: “Colloquial Egyptian Arabic is the only medium of expression for the majority of illiterate Egyptians, who do not easily understand standard Arabic.”¹⁶⁵ This notion of some type of functional division to the Arabic language is highly problematic. It assumes that cultural expressions of the literate must somehow be understood separately from those of the illiterate. Beinin then uses *azjāl* to demonstrate the diversity of opinion within the emerging working classes of Egypt. Little mention is made of the way in which elites may appropriate colloquial poetry for their own purposes.¹⁶⁶ Indeed, the assumption in such works is that to access the subaltern, one need simply focus on colloquial Arabic. Not surprisingly, such approaches neglect the dynamic of Arabic as a cohesive whole in which colloquial only presents one aspect of a relational system. Searching for the subaltern through the lens of colloquial Arabic simply represents a reversal of the old narrative’s focus on the standard texts of intellectuals. The product of such a methodology is, as Beinin’s recent book *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East*

¹⁶⁴ Joel Beinin, “Writing Class: Workers and Modern Egyptian Colloquial Poetry (*Zajal*),” *Poetics Today* 15.2 *Cultural Processes in Muslim and Arab Societies: Modern Period II* (Summer 1994): 191.

¹⁶⁵ Beinin 192.

¹⁶⁶ Marilyn Booth has described how colloquial poetry was not simply the medium of the masses. Indeed, modern Egyptian elites have regularly enlisted the capital of colloquial poetry for their own purposes. See, e.g., the discussion of elites preserving the “purity of the *zajal* form” in Marilyn Booth’s “Colloquial Arabic Poetry, Politics, and the Press in Modern Egypt,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24.3 (Aug 1992): 419-440.

suggests, a focus on separate categories in a unitary system even if they are categories that have been relatively neglected by a historiography focused on elites.

One notable exception in the history “from below” deserves mention as its application to intra-society history – especially in the case of Egypt – would prove invaluable. In his study of Arab and Jewish workers in mandate Palestine, Zachary Lockman describes how the two societies have been traditionally studied as if they existed completely separate from each other. Referring to this approach as the “dual society model,” Lockman describes how this “paradigm of historical interpretation which informs much of the literature has been premised on the implicit or explicit representation of the Arab and Jewish communities in Palestine as primordial, self-contained, and largely monolithic entities.”¹⁶⁷ Interestingly, one of the reasons Lockman identifies for the maintenance of this model is the low number of historians and scholars with a command of both Arabic and Hebrew resulting in analyses being based on the sources of either one language or the other but rarely both. The scholar of Egyptian history faces similar, but perhaps more easily conquerable, challenges with regards to standard and colloquial Arabic. According to Lockman, the dual society paradigm has managed to establish itself within the field:

The result has been a historiography which has hardly questioned the representation of the two communities as self-evidently coherent entities largely or entirely uninfluenced by one another. This approach has rendered their mutually constitutive impact virtually invisible, tended to downplay both intracommunal divisions and intercommunal linkages, and focused attention on episodes of violent conflict, implicitly assumed to be the only normal, significant, or even possible form of interaction.¹⁶⁸

The assumption of the two communities as separate categories within the unitary narrative of mandate Palestine has obscured the complex social, political, and cultural realities of the region. In place of this crude focus on categories, Lockman suggests a “relational paradigm” that seeks to understand Palestinian Arab and Jewish communities in relation to each other,

¹⁶⁷ Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 4. An earlier articulation of this argument can be found in Lockman’s “Railway Workers and Relational History: Arabs and Jews in British-Ruled Palestine,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35.3 (July 1993): 601-627.

that is “through their mutually formative interactions, how they shaped one another in complex ways and at many levels.”¹⁶⁹ This relational approach to the history of mandate Palestine is not intended to “replace the old narrative, with its focus on elite politics and diplomacy” but rather “to complement, extend, and complicate it, and more broadly to raise new questions which may help open up fruitful avenues of research.”¹⁷⁰ Lockman’s observations are fruitful indeed. To acquire an accurate understanding of workers in Palestine, the subject of his study, Lockman realizes the importance of approaching his subject through a focus on the interaction of categories (Arab and Jewish) rather than either of the categories alone. Admittedly, Lockman is primarily interested in applying the relational paradigm to two communities, but it is not difficult to see the implications of such an approach to understanding different strata within a single community. When applied to various marked communities within Egyptian society, the relational paradigm remains perhaps the most useful step forward in the development of contemporary approaches to Middle Eastern history. Such an innovation acknowledges the manner in which various categories interact to produce meaning. As such, a “relational” approach to the ideal types of Egyptian society (intellectuals, elites, *effendiyya*, *ibn al-balad*) offers an accurate and more perfect reading of Egyptian history. One can only hope that Lockman’s study on the category of “workers” in mandate Palestine will soon be incorporated into a larger exploration of the interaction between workers, intellectuals, peasants, and other social types (Arab and Jewish) living in mandate Palestine.

CONCLUSION

Albert Hourani’s introduction to Jacques Berque’s classic study on Egypt praises Berque’s “unusual power of imposing an intelligible pattern on a large body of facts.”¹⁷¹ As

¹⁶⁸ Lockman (1996): 7.

¹⁶⁹ Lockman (1996): 9.

¹⁷⁰ Lockman (1996): 9.

¹⁷¹ Albert Hourani’s “Foreword” in Jacques Berque, *Egypt: Imperialism & Revolution*, trans. Jean Stewart (London: Faber & Faber, 1972).

the example of the *effendiyya* suggests, bringing order to a large body of complex and multidimensional facts is not always easy. This becomes even more challenging when such realities construct themselves in relation to other facts. Berque may indeed have imposed patterns on Egyptian history in a remarkable way, but Hourani's remarks should rightfully be extended to Berque's contemporaries and many of those that have followed him.

Modernist ideology's concern for order poses significant challenges to the accurate reading and writing of history. All in all, "new" narratives of Middle Eastern history continue to reflect a tendency towards description, classification, and categorization. This is not to say that the works of people like Gershoni, Beinin, or Lockman are not important. They are. Indeed, it is only through their work that a serious reconsideration of contemporary approaches to Middle Eastern history can take place. Without the histories of intellectuals, workers, and peasants, we would not know enough about such categories so as to accurately describe the processes of interaction between such groups that might have occurred in practice.

Admittedly, given the constraints of this study, I have focused entirely on the methodological trends in the modern historiography of Egypt. What I have not offered in this work, however, is my own version of a history that focuses on the interaction of categories that I regard as being so essential to an accurate understanding of Egyptian history. Indeed, I intend to construct such a history – written from a "center of gravity" – in future works, but it has been my aim in this study simply to draw attention to the methodological challenges ahead. We can be sure, however, that a history written "from the middle" will more adeptly describe the way various actors in Egyptian society interacted with each other. Such a narrative will shift attention away from a singular focus on the interaction of elites or the reaction of elites to external factors. But more importantly, it will explore how diverse and fluidly-defined strata in Egyptian society acted and interacted in the context of a shared set of

demographic challenges, cultural spheres, political developments, environmental changes, and intellectual currents.

For the modern historian, diverse mediums of Egyptian cultural expression represent a virtual treasure trove of primary sources that offer a glimpse into the interactions of marked groups in modern Egyptian history and society. The colloquial press, entertainment magazines, and popular songs: all provide insight into markers that identified categories in Egyptian societies. These boundaries, however, were not as rigid as modernist interpretations would suggest. Misri Effendi wore a Western suit while clinging on to his prayer beads. Inhabitants of mandate Palestine were at once workers, Arabs, Muslims, and in the process of becoming Palestinians. Contemporary approaches to Egyptian history must engage such complex systems of diacritica and place them in a dynamic process of interaction with each other in the same way that Egyptians did themselves in their own constructions of modern Egyptian identity.

CONCLUSION – PRACTICE AND MEANING IN MODERN EGYPTIAN HISTORY

DURING an interview for a collection of biographies on historians of the Middle East, Charles Issawi explained his unease with the frenzy presented to him by modern Middle Eastern history:

I find the lack of *trends* in the Middle East – that is after the first few, formative, centuries – rather frustrating. In Athenian, Roman, and European – particularly English – political history, one sees a steady development, from one state to its logical successor, “from precedent to precedent”. The same is true of European economic history in, say, 1100-1800 A.D. I do not see any such trends in Middle Eastern history, though the fault may lie in my inadequate knowledge. . . . I see no significant trend, no movement from somewhere to somewhere, no progress. Unhistorical as this may seem, I cannot help regarding this aspect of Middle Eastern history as a major deficiency.¹⁷²

For Issawi, the dearth of “trends” in Middle Eastern history not only makes the craft of the historian more challenging, but this absence of order is itself a “major deficiency.” His comments suggest that there is almost a unique quality to other forms of history – his examples are notably all Western – that is not shared by Middle Eastern history. Indeed, according to Issawi, the challenges posed by the disorder of Middle Eastern history seem virtually insurmountable. It is as if the substance used in the writing of the history of Western civilization is simply nonexistent in the Middle East. The modern Middle Eastern historian then is faced with the arduous task of creating order where there is none.

Whether or not the writing of Middle Eastern history is in fact a completely unique process remains a critical but complex question. Admittedly, I have left this issue somewhat unaddressed. The assumption of this study has been that dynamics specific to the Arabic language require a change in contemporary approaches to the history of Arabic-speaking societies in the Middle East. It is not far-fetched, however, to imagine that similar patterns of rigidity and order have been articulated with respect to the history of the greater Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Indeed, the phenomenon I have described may reflect larger issues related

to academic scholarship on non-Western societies. Further work that, I think, would enrich this study would explore the scholarship on high and vernacular cultures in other non-Western societies as well as the way such phenomena have been studied in Western societies themselves. At the end of such inquiries may lie a renewed approach not only to the history of Arabic-speaking societies but, more importantly, to the manner in which academics approach the complex interaction of emergent high and vernacular cultures in a multiplicity of diverse societies. Opportunities for such progress are indeed abundant. My focus in this study, however, remains Arabic and the societies that speak it.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with contemporary endeavors to understand the social, cultural, and political dynamics of Arabic-speaking societies. Indeed, seeking order in the world around us may perhaps remain one of the characteristic traits of the human condition. Even within this study, I have articulated my own scheme of boundaries and organization onto disciplines, individuals, and methodologies that may not regard themselves as having anything to do with each other in spite of the very real manner in which they express similar ideological fixations with order, categorization, and classification.

The notion of order then is not problematic in itself. What this study has sought to explore, however, is how the types of order expressed in modernist ideology are simply not productive as an approach to the reading and writing of Middle Eastern history. European conceptions of modernity are ill-suited to the study of Arabic-speaking societies like Egypt where meaning is constructed relationally and, therefore, must be understood through a focus on the social, political, and cultural dynamics that actually occur in practice. Otherwise, we will simply continue to seek out what cannot be found. Mere chimeras of reality will be written in the place of more perfect historical narratives simply because they speak the language of modernity.

¹⁷² 15-16 March 1991. Interview with Charles Issawi in "Chapter Two: Charles Issawi," Approaches to the History of the Middle East: Interview with Leading Middle East Historians, ed. Nancy Elizabeth Gallagher (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1994): 58-59.

This study draws on the effervescent insight percolating at the intersection of linguistics, historiography, and anthropology. In exploring the invaluable contributions of a diverse cohort of researchers and academics, I have sought to point out the thread that links their work in a fascinating manner: a distinctly European conception of modernity – modernist ideology itself – has elevated order and representation over reality itself. Practice has taken a backseat to ideology, to the detriment of our understanding of Arabic-speaking societies. Moreover, this phenomenon has expressed itself more fully in academic discourse than in the actual colonial project of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The creation of rigid hierarchies required by the act of “colonizing Egypt” pales in comparison to the even greater fixation with order that lives on today in the modernist academic project of “writing Egypt.”

Part One explored this dynamic with reference to contemporary linguistic scholarship on the Arabic language. From Charles Ferguson’s seminal analysis of the Arabic language, the writing of order essentially became the preoccupation of modern Arabic sociolinguistics. Models that sought a departure from Ferguson’s rigid binary categorization frequently managed to produce a more complex hierarchy, one that ultimately maintained the static categories offered by Ferguson. In spite of their increasing level of categorization, such descriptivist approaches routinely neglected the fluid dynamics that occurred in actual speech practice. Ultimately, a shift of focus from description to the more crucial phenomenon of code-switching allows for a more perfect understanding of the Arabic language. As such, it is the interaction of marked categories – and not the characteristics of the categories themselves – that allows for the delivery of meaning. This revamped understanding of the linguistic dynamics of Arabic, I think, contributes to a reconsideration of contemporary approaches to the history of Arabic-speaking societies.

Part Two discussed how the fixation of modernist ideology with order has resulted in an imperfect understanding of Egyptian history. Intellectuals, elites, and texts represent the substance with which narratives of Egyptian history have been constructed. In many ways,

this phenomenon manifests itself most vividly in contemporary approaches to nationalism in the Middle East that neglect the role of colloquial Arabic as one part of a relational system through which meaning is constructed. Texts received the bulk of attention because they seemed to offer more accessible (and, thus, classifiable) insight into those trends and categories that remain the focus of modern historiography. This assumption, however, overlooks the critical manner in which forms of cultural expression cannot be disassociated from each other in a precise, orderly manner. Instead, a more productive approach to history must take into account the cohesion and interaction of diverse types of cultural expression within a single sphere. Taken to a larger level, this is to say that social categories like the “intellectuals” or the “*effendiyya*” are best understood with reference to the other groups with which they interacted. Merely describing social categories in a rigid order, such as that embodied in *Description de l’Egypte*, the imperial record of Napoleon’s expedition into Egypt Workers and the frontispiece of this study, says very little about the actual history of such groups. Workers, peasants, effendis, intellectuals, and other marked categories in Egyptian society are approached more productively from a center of gravity which interconnects the ideas, actions, and experiences of all parties involved.

For John Selden Willmore, this center of gravity was the contentious nineteenth-century debate over the adoption of the colloquial as Egypt’s official language. The implications of such a change in the social fabric of Egypt prompted Willmore to approach the question of language in a manner that recognized the interconnected interests, concerns, and agency of multiple strata in Egyptian society. In this way, Willmore’s focus – the very real possibility of adoption of the colloquial – was a practical one, a pulsating center of gravity that would influence the lives of all categories within Egyptian society. His ultimate support for the movement took practicalities “on the ground” into consideration. Such an approach resulted in Willmore’s perceptive appreciation of complex social dynamics in Egyptian society, an awareness that remained basically absent in his contemporary academic

counterparts who were more concerned with order than reality. All the grammars in the world could not match Willmore's "fieldwork."

Essentially, a more perfect version of Egyptian history can be attained through a practice-oriented approach, one that concentrates on the actual interaction that occurred between categories as opposed to simply describing them within a larger hierarchical order. Just as linguists made serious progress in their understanding of Arabic when they shifted from a focus on colloquial and the standard to the interaction of the two that actually took place in speech practice, major insights into the history of modern Egypt are to be gained from a focus on the manner in which social categories acted, reacted, and interacted with each other in practice. Although this study has focused more on the methodology of contemporary approaches, it should be understood as one small aspect of my larger inquiry into the cultural history of modern Egypt. This work then forms the methodological basis of what I hope will be a more comprehensive analysis of the interactions of various strata in Egyptian society in the early twentieth century. Non-traditional forms of cultural expression offer an invaluable glimpse into such practice and, more importantly, into how diverse Egyptians from different groups conceived of developments within their own society. Approaching mediated sources of cultural expression, however, requires the adoption of a more accurate conception of how meaning is constructed in Arabic-speaking societies.

John Selden Willmore and his administrative colleagues were more aware of this than their academic counterparts back in London. Indeed, the British colonial project – with an extended sabbatical of "fieldwork" at its disposal – realized more adeptly the complexities and nuances of Egyptian society. In contrast, academic orientalist have preserved a zealous concern for writing order into Middle Eastern societies so as to make such societies both "writable" and "readable" for modern scholarship. In doing so, they dismissed too quickly as mere *kalam fadi* what in fact represents critical processes taking place in a distinctly Egyptian modernity, the ordering of which continues to influence the lives of countless Egyptians today.

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