

Islamization of Linguistics

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I. NON-ISLAMIC LINGUISTICS UNDER RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES

Linguistics has been struggling under the stranglehold of religious beliefs, superstitions, and ethnocentrism for centuries. The role and nature of human languages was perceived through the worldview preached by various religions. There have been claims for the divine origin of certain languages, conferring a special status on their speakers. Greeks, for example, believed that their language was superior to all other languages. It was the language spoken by the Olympian gods. Theirs was the only language with regularity, rules, and meaning; all other languages were arbitrary and meaningless, *barbaroi*, whence the modern English word "barbarian."

In India, where Panini (sixth century B.C.E.) wrote the first comprehensive grammar of a human language, Sanskrit was believed to be the language of gods and worthy to be studied and used by the high caste of Brahmans only. The low-caste Hindus could not listen to the Sanskrit verses from the holy scriptures, and severe punishments were prescribed for such sacrilegious acts. As late as 1912, the Muslim linguist, Mohammad Shahidullah, was denied admission to the master's course in Sanskrit at the University of Calcutta. The Hindu professors of Sanskrit were shocked at the possibility that a Muslim could be allowed to read and hence defile the Vedas, the holy scriptures of Hindus. They bitterly opposed his admission.¹

In the Judaeo-Christian world, too, similar unscientific views persisted until recently. Hebrew was God's own language, the language spoken in the heavens, the first language spoken on the earth and therefore the mother of

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¹Muhammad Enamul Haq, ed. 1976, *Muhammad Shahidullah Felicitation Volume*, (Dacca Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1976), p. xiii.

all languages in the world. Wonderly and Nida, discussing the impact of early Christian beliefs on linguistics, admit:

One of the factors which retarded linguistic progress was the belief among early Christian writers and persisting well into the Renaissance era, that all languages were derived from Hebrew.²

II. NON-ISLAMIC LINGUISTICS SECULARIZED

It was toward the eighteenth century that linguistics was secularized and freed from religious influences. This process was accelerated when the European linguists discovered Sanskrit and their Indo-European roots, both racial and linguistic. The secular linguists, with a new zeal and vigor, introduced precision and scientific methodology to the study of language affinities, tracing Proto Indo-European roots and discovering the linguistic structures of various languages. Hebrew and Sanskrit were no longer studied as the mothers of all languages or as divine languages. This opened a vast area for research and scientific investigation.

The secular tradition, developed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has made linguistics a respectable science. But it has been made into a tool to be used by colonialists, politicians, missionaries, and ethnocentric interest groups to promote their ideologies and impose their languages and cultural and religious standards. We will restrict ourselves to only two such examples.

The most interesting example is the emergence of Marrism under the patronage of Soviet communism. N.J. Marr (1864-1934), a Georgian by birth, dominated Russian linguistic research and led to what may be called Marrism. This school of linguistics tried to establish the intrinsic superiority of the Russian language and the inherent inadequacies of the other Soviet languages. Languages, according to Marrism, were not national but class phenomena and thus Marrism and Marxism were integrated in the study of languages. This provided a justification for imposing Russian, the "inherently revolutionary language," on the speakers of other languages in the Soviet Union. Robins says that Marrism will be remembered: "as an awful warning of the extent to which modern tyranny can keep fantasy enthroned in defiance of fact."³

²William L. Wonderly and Eugene Nida, "Linguistics and Christian Mission," *Anthropological Linguistics*, 5:104-44.

³R.H. Robins, *A Short History of Linguistics*. (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1967) p. 225.

The second example is from the 'free world.' The linguistic differences between the English spoken by black Americans and the so-called standard English were noticed by linguists as well as by laymen. But these differences were used as evidence to establish the genetic deficiency of the speakers of black English. Carl Bereister observed: "the language of the culturally deprived children . . . is not merely an underdeveloped version of the standard English, but is basically a non-logical mode of expression."⁴

It was through the forceful assertion of the sociolinguistic studies of Labav that this erroneous claim was refuted and it was established that black English was equally structured, rule governed, and logical.⁵ For example, the deletion of the final *s* in the third person singular in a paradigm like

I write

he write(s)

is rather an overregularity and not a lack of logic.

III. ISLAMIZATION OF LINGUISTICS

A. SPEECH FACULTY A DIVINE GIFT

Linguistics as a scientific study of human languages studies language as an innate faculty common to all humans. The faculty of speech is species-specific and species-uniform to all humans. No matter what society, high or low, advanced or primitive, all the members of all human societies are endowed with this faculty. The Qur'an specifically refers to this gift:

الرَّحْمَنُ * عَلَّمَ الْقُرْآنَ * خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ * عَلَّمَهُ الْبَيَانَ

The beneficent (God) taught the Qur'an. He created man, taught him the mode of speech (Qur'an 55:2-4).

It is clear from this verse that Allah created man with the faculty of speech, not with the Greek, Hebrew, or Arabic speech. It is not a particular language, but a capacity to learn any particular human language that is innate to human beings. All human languages are worth studying and equally important. It is possible that some language might have been a vehicle of God's message sometime in the history of the speakers of that language.

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانٍ قَوْمِهِ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمْ

And we have not sent any messenger except with the language of

⁴Carl Bereister, "An Academically Oriented Preschool for Culturally Deprived Children," in Fred M. Hechinger ed., *Preschool Education Today* (New York: Double Day, 1966).

⁵William Labav, *The Study of Non-Standard English*, (Champaign, Ill.,: National Council of English Teachers, 1970).

the people, in order that he might make (things) clear to them (Qur'an 14:4).

This concept about the possibility of being the medium of divine revelation for all languages is missing in ethnocentrically oriented ideologies.

The study of even the so-called primitive and most backward languages, such as the Amerindian languages and those spoken by tribes in Africa and Asia, has shown that every language has a sufficiently rich vocabulary for the expression of all the distinctions that are important for the society using it. The primitive languages are no less systematic. The scientific study of human languages has convinced linguists that all languages, and correspondingly all dialects, are equally "good" as linguistic systems. All varieties of a language are structured, complex, rule-governed systems which are wholly adequate for the needs of their speakers.

B. LANGUAGE DIVERSITY AND ISLAM

The ultimate goal of linguistics is not to study a particular language and discover language-specific rules but to find out the universal features of human languages in general – their structure and behavior insofar as they help to understand the innate capability of human beings to acquire a language and to produce infinite sentences after being exposed to a limited corpus of that language. The growth and diversification of languages and change in their phonetic, phonological, and syntactic rules is an important field of inquiry. Synchronic and diachronic linguistics, comparative study of different languages and of language varieties, both on geographical and temporal parameters, and changes in language provide an important study of one of the signs of the existence of God. The Qur'an invites us to study and respect the diversity of languages and declares it an important sign of divine power at work in the organization of the universe. The variation in languages is listed alongside other phenomena of nature, such as:

1. The power of Allah to bring the living from the dead and the dead from the living.
2. His power to create human beings from clay.
3. His power to create helpmates among mankind and ordain love and mercy between them.

The text of the particular verse in which the variation of languages is mentioned reads:

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَأَلْوَانِكُمْ
إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

and among His signs is the creation of the heavens, and the earth, and variation in your languages and your colors, verily in that are

signs for those who know (Qur'an 30:22).

Thus a scientific study of language variation is as important as the study of the creation of the earth and the heavens. In the variation of languages lie God's signs, and those who attempt to know them are designated by the Qur'an as *عالمون*, an honorable title conferred by God on linguists who are motivated by this world-view.

The variation among languages can be described by definite rules. They vary so systematically and with such regularity that linguists have compared these rules to the "sound laws" of physics. Every time we study a new language, analyze its grammar, and compare its new forms with its old forms or other related dialects and languages, we marvel at the perfect design in its structure and exclaim:

So blessed be Allah the best of creators!

فَتَبَارَكَ اللهُ أَحْسَنُ الْخَالِقِينَ

It was with this Islamic understanding and respect for the variation of languages that the early Muslim grammarians set out to investigate correspondences among different languages. Kopf remarks on the contribution of Muslim linguists in the area of comparative linguistics:

They arrived at achievements and applied scientific methods that surpassed those of Western philologists of the 18th century. Until that period it was customary in Europe to establish a foreign origin of words merely on the ground of phonetic resemblances without paying regard to phonetic laws and other linguistic features or historic facts. The Arabs had already reached the point of investigating the phonetic changes which Persian words underwent on their transition into Arabic, and also succeeded, within the narrow limits of their knowledge, in establishing certain phonetic correspondences between Arabic and some Semitic sister tongues.⁶

The Qur'an thus not only recognizes the existence of the diversity of languages as a manifestation of Allah's will but also presents it as a challenge for research and understanding. This is very different from the Tower of Babel theory presented by the Bible. According to the Bible, the diversification of human languages was inflicted as a punishment on mankind in order to "confound their language, that they may not understand one another."

⁶L. Kopf, "The Treatment of Foreign Words in Medieval Arabic Lexicography," *Scripta Hierosolymitane*, 1961, 9:197.

III. THE LANGUAGE OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LANGUAGE OF REVELATION

The general principle for the selection of a language for divine revelation seems to be the adoption of the language of the people for whom the message is intended. Arabic is one such language chosen according to this eternal divine principle. It was chosen as a medium of the last divine message because it happened to be the mother-tongue of the last messenger of Islam and of the language community chosen to establish the word of God on earth under the immediate leadership of the Prophet (PBUH). The words *عَرَبِي* (Arabi) and *عَرَبِيَّان* (Arabiyyan) occur eleven times in the Qur'an. This is only to emphasize the fact that the messages of Allah had been revealed in other languages in earlier times, whereas, the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, the language of the people who were the immediate addressees of the message.

In earlier times when the language variation and the geographical barriers were insurmountable, prophets would be sent to particular linguistic groups, and their role was limited to their particular regions or language communities. But the function of Islam as the final and universal message is to unite all linguistic communities, all nations, and all races. Arabic was the language selected to perform the role of an international Islamic language, the medium of the last divine message addressed to all of mankind:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا كَافَّةً لِلنَّاسِ بَشِيرًا وَنَذِيرًا

We have not sent you but as a messenger of good tidings and a warner unto all mankind (Qur'an 34:28).

Various small linguistic communities have been merging together in modern times. The frequent contact and large-scale interaction among various nationalities has created a need for a world language. Attempts have been made to devise artificial languages, such as Esperanto. But there is no motivation for learning such languages on a large scale. Besides, their structure is designed on the basis of European languages and thus the speakers of European languages have an advantage over others in mastering them. The vacuum is filled by the languages of the great world powers, English and Russian. People learn these languages because these are the languages of advanced nations. But there can always be a shift from one international language to another depending on the political or material prestige of the speakers of those languages. Thus during the glorious period of the Greeks, other nations learned Greek, and with the rise of the Roman empire there was a shift toward Latin. In recent history many colonial countries have changed from the languages

of their erstwhile masters, French, Italian, Dutch, and others, to English.

Since Islam wants to build a stable international community, it has identified one language for the unification of various speech communities. While the Qur'an recognizes the variation of languages as a natural process, it also stresses the importance of preserving the Qur'an as the "Qur'an in the Arabic language," thus encouraging Muslims to learn a common language shared by all as the language used by Allah for revealing His last message.

Arabic is to provide a cementing bond to Muslims belonging to various linguistic groups and nationalities. The ideal Islamic language situation would be one in which the language of the people is allowed to be used as the medium of mutual communication and Arabic is learned as the common language of Muslims of all times and of all linguistic backgrounds.⁷

Every time this Islamic bilingual formula has been violated, it has resulted either in the weakening of the international bonds of the Muslim *um-mah* and in making the original sources of Islamic teachings inaccessible to the common Muslims, or in lowering the understanding of Islam and promoting syncretism and superstitions. The lack of emphasis on Arabic in a particular Muslim linguistic group decreases mutual understanding and appreciation of the common Islamic bonds and Islamic cultural heritage. By ignoring the language of the people, the process of Islamization of their language is hampered and the growth of Islamic literature and creative application of Islamic genius to the local tradition is blocked.

Since Muslims believe in the potential capability of every language to be an effective medium of Islamic communication, there is no justification in imposing an intermediary language between Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, and the language of the people. It would be unwise and Islamically unwarranted, if in the United States, for example, Muslims were to propose to teach Urdu and Persian to their communities under the pretext that English is not Islamicized to the extent that Urdu and Persian have been. This would impose an unnecessary language load and relegate Arabic to a secondary position and make Islamic teachings more difficult to understand. The teaching of Arabic and a speedy Islamization of English would be the right answer.⁸

⁷The learning of the languages of non-Muslims was very much encouraged by the Prophet (PBUH). The purpose was to learn the skills and other achievements of the speakers of those languages or to convey the Islamic message to the people in their own language. The learning of foreign languages in order to have access to the scientific and technological literature available in those languages would be an Islamically rewarding act. But this is different from adopting a foreign language to replace the language of a Muslim linguistic group.

⁸On Islamization of a language, see Allamah 'Abdul Rahman Jalal-ud-Din al-Suyuti, *Al-Muzhir*, vol. 1 chapter 20, discussing early Islamization of Arabic, and this writer, "Psychology of Dialect Differentiation, The Emergence of Muslim English in America,"

The imposition of intermediary languages, negligence of the languages of the people, and the deemphasizing of Arabic have been some of the linguistic problems of the Muslim world in the past. For example, in India, Islam was introduced by Muslim warriors, scholars, sufis, businessmen, and tourists, the majority of whom used Persian as their medium. Persian stayed as the official language of the Muslim rulers of India and as their language of culture and education. Very little was done to use the local languages as the medium of Islamic thought. The Qur'an was not translated into Urdu until 1826.⁹ Other major languages with millions of speakers did not have even this much of good luck. Persian, the language of the rulers for more than 600 years, was recognized as the only medium worthy of Islam in a country where less than 1 percent spoke it as their mother tongue. To give it a religious sanction in displacing the local languages, a feeling was created that Persian, too, was a divine language. While regional languages suffered an irreparable loss by this un-Islamic language policy, Arabic fared no better. To give an idea how this must have been achieved, we quote from the Persian dictionary *Burhan-e-Qate'* قاطع برهان written around 1641 C.E. in Hyderabad, India¹⁰:

و بعضی گویند که دری زبان اهل بهشت است. در اصل الله صلعم فرموده اند
که زبان اصل الله در زبان دری - و ملائکه اند

Some people say that Dari (Persian) is the language of the people of paradise because the Prophet (PBUH) has said that the languages of the people of paradise are Arabic and Persian (Dari).

بعضی از عربی زبانی بهتر از فارسی نیست. چه در احادیث نیز مذکور است
که حضرت رسالت بنام ولایت الرضین و ایامه ائمه صلوات الله علیهم
بر پارسی شکر شده اند.

After Arabic there is no language that can be considered better than Persian, as is also mentioned in the *Ahadith* that the Prophet (PBUH), *Ameerul Mumineen* and the *A'imma ma'sun* (May Allah's Peace be on them all) have spoken in Persian.

We have historical evidence that during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556 – 1605) in India the propagation of Arabic was discouraged.¹¹

Islamic Culture (Oct. 1977), discussing Islamization of English as a contemporary process in a Muslim community in the United States.

⁹This was done much later than the translation of the Bible by European missionaries.

¹⁰*Burhan-e-Qate'* by Muhammad Hussain bin Khalif Tabrizi (died 1951), ed. Muhammad Mu'in, Tehran. An idea of the popularity of this book can be had from its wide circulation in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Iran. Its translation into Turkish and a series of books written against and in defense of it over the centuries should give an idea of its impact on the people.

¹¹*Muntakhib al Tawarih*, Mulla Abdul Qadir Ibn Muluk Shah Badayuni, translated from Persian, 1973, Vol. II, p. 306, 356 and 363. (Patna: Academica Asiatica).

That this language policy blocked the communication of Islamic teachings among the masses is evident from the low percentage of Muslims in India and the lack of literature in the regional languages despite more than 600 years of Muslim rule in India. Soon after the Muslims lost their power, Persian also fell from grace, and it is only now that the Indian languages, previously considered unworthy of serious thought, are developing into modern languages with more functional efficiency than the medieval Persian ever had. But what these languages lack lamentably is any serious Islamic literature, because the patrons of Persians did not realize that an intermediary foreign transplanted language could not be imposed for long and that the best media for Islamic knowledge were the languages of the people alongside the language of the Qur'an.

In the same manner, Islam was introduced in Albania by Turkish Muslims through the Turkish language. During the Turkish rule, the Albanian language was completely banned from schools and official use.¹² No Islamic literature could be produced in this "language of the people" for the five centuries of Turkish Muslim rule. No wonder that the Albanian language, which was condemned as a cursed language during the Muslim period, emerged Islamically bankrupt when it replaced Turkish as the official language.

III. TASKS AHEAD FOR THE MUSLIM LINGUISTS

A. LINGUISTIC SURVEY OF THE MUSLIM WORLD

It is time that a linguistic survey of the Muslim world be conducted to study the number of languages and their speakers, the percentage of literacy, the hidden literacy,¹³ the attitudes of the various linguistic groups toward Arabic (which may often be far more positive than what may be reflected in the official language planning of the country), the policies of the different governments toward coining new technical terminology, the possibility of developing a common policy about certain terminology, and the role of minority languages.

¹²Constantine Chekrenzi, *Albania Past and Present*, 1919.

¹³Barbara Harrel-Bond, *Local Languages and Literacy in West Africa*. (The American Universities Field Staff, 1977. Harrel-Bond was surprised to discover the "hidden literacy" of Muslims in West Africa. She found that the people who were officially considered illiterate could in fact write more than one language in Arabic script and maintain proper records.

B. *THE PROMOTION OF ARABIC AS AN EFFECTIVE MEDIUM OF RELIGIOUS, SCIENTIFIC, AND TECHNICAL LITERATURE ON A PAN-ISLAMIC BASIS*

We will have to develop standards adequate not only for the requirements of the Arab Muslim world but for the entire Muslim world. Just as Islam has the potential to unite the Muslim world ideologically, Qur'anic Arabic has the potential to untie the linguistically divided Muslim world. The present academies in the Arab world, with their internal dissensions, mutual conflicts, and inadequate linguistic know-how, and without faith in the role of Arabic beyond the Arabic-speaking world, can play no role in this Islamic-linguistic revolution and unification of the Muslim countries. Their counterparts in most of the non-Arab Muslim countries, engaged in promoting officially patronized dialects as the standard national languages, purifying their languages from the Arabic-Islamic influence, and thus inducing an artificial divergence, enjoy no popular support. If the Muslim linguist, equipped with superior linguistic expertise, does not enter the fray at this stage, language differentiation promoted by these academies may make his job next to impossible at a later stage.

C. *A UNIFIED ADAPTATION AND STANDARDIZATION OF ARABIC ORTHOGRAPHY*

Arabic orthography has been used for writing various Muslim languages at different periods in history. The alphabet of one language cannot sufficiently represent the sounds of another language without devising appropriate additional symbols. Arabic script has been a great cementing force for Muslims across linguistic and geographical boundaries. Muslims have shown great creativity in inventing additional alphabets and adopting existing ones to suit the requirements of the non-Arab languages. On the international level, no scientific attempts have been made to devise uniform and consistent symbols for non-Arab Muslim languages. For example, the retroflex *r* sound is found in some non-Arab Muslim languages and the arbitrary way in which the Arabic alphabet has been adopted by them is evident by the different shapes given below:

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Kurdish	ر
Pashtu	ر
Sindhi	ر
Urdu	ر

The inadequate and arbitrary graphemes have made this script cumbersome in certain cases. The availability of a scientific analysis of the sound system of Muslim languages and a firm faith in the use of one standard pan-Islamic script to strengthen our cultural ties can help us reform the orthographic systems on the Muslim languages toward a better functional efficiency.

D. INTERNATIONALLY COORDINATED LANGUAGE CONVERGENCE THROUGH BORROWING AND LANGUAGE EXTENSION

Modern languages in the world of Islam face a serious challenge in coining new words and technical terminology to discuss new concepts and new objects. Every language has a specific source language from which it draws its new words. Greek and Latin have provided a common source of borrowing and innovation for the European languages. The languages of India have an officially recognized source language in Sanskrit. The technical terminology drawn from Sanskrit is shared by all languages except Kashmiri and Urdu.

Muslim languages will have to look to classical Arabic as a source language for coining new words. But there should be a generally accepted policy for this process so that a uniform standard is achieved universally. Islam has been instrumental in bringing closer together languages of distant parentage and of remote regions by encouraging liberal borrowing from Arabic for religio-cultural terminology and other important concepts and objects. Muslim linguists will be doing a great service if they apply their expertise in exploring better and more efficient ways for planned convergence of Muslim languages.