LINGUISTIC CONSERVATISM AS THE BASIS FOR POLITICAL REVOLUTION? THE FUSHĀ-‘ÂMMĪYAH DEBATE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY OTTOMAN-ARAB MIDDLE EASTERN SOCIETY

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0. Introduction

In this paper, I present a case study of a linguistic debate conducted at the end of the 19th century in the Middle East, in the context of the disintegration of the Ottoman empire. The debate demonstrates that conservative linguistic ideas can form the basis for quite revolutionary political ideas. In the long run, however, these revolutionary political ideas were in turn undermined by this linguistic conservatism. Around the end of the 19th century, Christian intellectuals sought to challenge prevailing confessional identities by promoting a secular Arab identity based on a common language and history. In order to achieve this, they relied heavily on fushā, the codified variety of Arabic that had been in place since the 10th century, which they estimated necessary for maintaining the bond between contemporary speakers of Arabic and their cultural and literary heritage. As a consequence of their revolutionary political position, these intellectuals were strongly opposed to the creation of a new Arabic standard language. However, by doing so, they promoted a religious language to the level of a national standard language (Holt 1996).

I will first describe some general features of variability in Arabic, in particular the difference in linguistic prestige between fushā and non-fushā varieties. This specific situation, it will be argued, is related to the fact that the norms for written language use have remained virtually unchanged and unchallenged since the codification of fushā in the 10th century. I will then focus on the polemical debates that were triggered by the proposals of certain intellectuals to create one (or more) new standard languages. The paper concludes with an analysis of the political implications of the different positions taken in this linguistic debate.
1. The general setting: variability in Arabic and linguistic prestige

Arabic is the official standard language of all the 22 member states of the Arab League. These include, first of all, a group of states that have traditionally been identified as Arab: the countries of the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya), the Middle East (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq), the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen), and last but not least the Palestinian Authority. Less well known members include Sudan, Mauritania, Djibouti, Somalia and the Comoro Islands. All these countries accepted Arabic as their national and official standard language. The Comoros, Somalia and Mauritania also granted an official status to other languages, either as official or as national language. Iraq recognized Kurdish as an official language in the Kurdish Autonomous Region.

In addition, Arabic is also the liturgical language of Islam. The Koran was revealed in Arabic and in a number of Koranic verses this is explicitly referred to. From an orthodox point of view, the Koran is therefore untranslatable. All over the world, Muslims are expected to say their prayers and recite the Koran in Arabic, regardless their actual mastery of the language.

In this context, the term Arabic obviously refers to the codified and standardized variety, which is in Arabic referred to as al-‘arabīyah al-fasīḥah or al-‘arabīyah al-fushā. In English, this term is usually translated as Classical Arabic or Modern Standard Arabic, but literally it means ‘eloquent Arabic’ (the feminine adjective al-fasīḥah) or ‘the most eloquent Arabic’ (fushā, a feminine superlative of fasīḥ).

Apart from al-fushā, a wide gamut of spoken varieties of Arabic is used in a diversity of contexts. In Arabic, all varieties other than fushā are referred to by means of generalizing labels like ‘āmmīyah (literally: ‘the language of the common people’ or ‘the common language’), dāriḡah (lit.: ‘the common or the current language’), or laḥḡah (lit.: ‘dialect’). Depending on the context in which these terms are used, they can either be translated as ‘vernacular’, ‘colloquial’, ‘dialect’, or ‘variety’. The use of such collective labels to describe all varieties other than fushā suggests that their basic common characteristic is precisely the fact that they all deviate from the standard, and thereby these terms draw attention away from the tremendous amount of variability that is actually covered by them. Furthermore, they also suggest that all non-fushā varieties have the same status, that of nonprestigious colloquials. Again, this does not do full justice the actual variability that can be witnessed on the ground. Although many non-fushā varieties may indeed be considered ‘vernaculars’, ‘colloquials’, or ‘dialects’, others actually do enjoy
quite a lot of prestige and may be used in far more speech contexts (and also in more prestigious ones) than would be expected\(^1\). On a local level, many varieties, mostly those of urban origin, also function as local or regional prestige forms. This means that speakers of other varieties will often try to imitate them in contexts where they assume that their own vernacular will not be understood or is not appropriate. Because of the political and cultural dominance of the capital, in many Arab states the variety spoken by the urban classes in the capital functions as the national prestige form.

Cairene Arabic, for instance, is not just a locally prestigious variety, but may also be considered as the Egyptian national standard\(^2\) and furthermore enjoys a lot of prestige on a pan-Arab level. Because of the city’s role as Egypt’s primary political, economic and administrative center, Cairene Arabic has come to represent the ‘Egyptian dialect’ (al-‘āmmīyah al-misrīyah) or ‘Egyptian Arabic’ (al-‘arabīyah al-misrīyah). Language schools for non-native speakers of Arabic that offer the option ‘Egyptian Arabic’ in their curricula, mostly teach Cairene Arabic. It is the variety most widely used in films, soap operas, ‘lighter’ television and radio programs, and broadcasted interviews. For a long time, the Egyptian capital was considered the major cultural and political center of the entire Arab world. Many important newspapers were published in Cairo, and many of the films and soap operas produced there circulated (and still circulate) all over the Arab world. Many Egyptians worked as expatriate teachers in other Arab countries. As a result, Cairene Arabic is nowadays widely understood and is considered a prestigious variety in the entire Arab world. These cultural and socio-political observations explain why most Egyptians stick to their own variety in interactions with other Arabs, while, conversely, non-Egyptian Arabs tend to converge to Egyptian linguistic features in conversations with Egyptians. (Many Maghribians also show a tendency to do so in informal encounters with people from the Middle East who are not Egyptians.) The above also offers an

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\(^1\) For further discussion see Haeri (1996), Holes (1986, 1995), Ibrahim (1986).

\(^2\) The use of the term ‘standard’ should not be confused with ‘standard language’. Cairene Arabic lacks some fundamental characteristics associated with standard languages: it does not have any official status, and even though it is sometimes also used as a written medium (mainly in personal letters, non-fushā poetry, and cartoons), it remains basically used as an oral medium. However, it does share with standard languages a certain degree of codification (because of its limited use as a written medium, and because it is taught to non-native students of Arabic in several language schools), and its high degree of (covert) linguistic prestige due to its association with urbanity and the capital.
explanation for the fact that in Egypt many local non-\textit{fushā} characteristics have made their way to formal speech levels. In news broadcasts, for instance, the alveolar fricative /\textit{ğ}/ (\textit{fushā}) is systematically realized as a velar plosive /\textit{g}/ (Cairene/Egyptian), so that /\textit{g}/ has become part of \textit{fushā} in Egypt (with the exception of recitations of the Koran). In most other Arab countries the use of non-\textit{fushā} tends to be suppressed at formal speech levels.

Other regionally prestigious non-\textit{fushā} varieties include the variety spoken by Sunni Muslims in Bahrain, the Muslim Baghdadi variety in Iraq, and the urban varieties of Aleppo and Damascus in Syria. The linguistic prestige of these varieties is related to the social prestige of dominant (religious, sectarian, socio-economic and/or ethnic) groups in society. Their prestige is therefore very concrete. As it is not overtly recognized, however, it remains ‘covert’.

Because \textit{fushā} is essentially a modernized classical language, it cannot be associated with any particular social or regional group in the Arab world. \textit{Fushā} doubtlessly possesses a lot of prestige, because of its associations with Islam and pan-Arab nationalism and because it is the language of a rich cultural and literary heritage, but its prestige is mostly of an abstract kind. Holes (1995) observes that in most oral and face-to-face interactions, the ‘covert’ prestige of specific non-\textit{fushā} varieties is usually more relevant than the prestige of \textit{fushā}:

\begin{quote}
The linguistic prestige conferred by the oral use of MSA, or something like it, is undeniable, but it is an ‘overt’, non-local type of prestige, inappropriate and irrelevant to most of the speech contexts encountered in daily life. (Holes 1995: 272)
\end{quote}

In fact, two sets of linguistic norms exist side by side, one regulating written and official language use and another for daily conversations. This is a consequence of the fact that the norms for written language use remained basically unchanged since the 10\textsuperscript{th} century. Once these norms of \textit{fushā} had been established, they were preserved by a small elite of religious specialists, the ‘\textit{ulamā}’. The fact that \textit{fushā} was only used by a small group of literates helps to explain why it was used in such a relatively homogenous way (Holt, 1996: 14). It should hence not come as a surprise that the linguistic norms of \textit{fushā}

\footnote{Mazraani remarks that “Egyptians feel confident and proud of their dialect, and rarely change it in making speeches or in cross-dialectal conversations, retaining many Egyptian localisms which are understood outside Egypt” (Mazraani 1997: 194).}

\footnote{For an elaborate discussion of the sociolinguistic situation in Bahrain, see Holes & Ingham (1987), Holes (1995).}
only came to be questioned at the moment when larger segments of the population became involved in the educational process, and when written texts became available to a wider public through printing. The majority of the Arab intellectuals, however, firmly rejected linguistic reform proposals, which nevertheless kept appearing regularly since the middle of the 19th century.

The remainder of this paper deals with the debates triggered by these reform proposals: a number of polemical exchanges in which the desirability of changing the linguistic norms for written language use is discussed. An analysis of this fushā-‘āmmiyah debate can provide us with deeper insights into how the observed discrepancy between overt and covert linguistic norms came about, enhancing our understanding of the linguistic and social, political and religious considerations underlying the majority position that linguistic norms should not be changed.

2. The fushā –‘āmmiyah debate

From the 19th century until the 1960s, there has always been a minority of Arab intellectuals who stood up to defend the idea of adapting linguistic norms to the actual speech situation. This debate is generally known as the fushā-‘āmmiyah debate. Intellectuals, linguists, politicians, journalists, as well as people from the public wrote thousands of pages expressing their opinion on the question. Many lectures were devoted to it, and the theme was the topic of many conversations.

My main point of departure is that all this constitutes a ‘language ideological debate’ (Blommaert 1999). This means that in the debate, much more is at stake than language alone: the social, political, and religious considerations of the participants are as important as the linguistic ones. Such a viewpoint implies that the debate is strongly interrelated with the historical context in which it was conducted, and with other political, social and religious developments in the area. Both the content of the proposal to standardize the spoken language (referred to as al-da‘wah ilā al-‘āmmiyah, litt: ‘propaganda for ‘āmmiyah’) and the arguments put forward to defend al-fushā strongly differed depending on the period in which the discussion took place and the participants in the debate.

In the first debate, which was opened in the Lebanese journal Al-Muqtataf in 1881, the position in favor of the use of ‘āmmiyah boiled down to the unification and standardization of the different spoken varieties into one new standard language that should be used by all the Arabs (see below). A similar position was adopted by the Lebanese Iskandar Ma‘lūf in 1902, and later by the Lebanese linguist Anis Frayhah in the 1950s and 1960s.
In Egypt, British and German orientalists like Willmore, Spitta, and Willcocks got involved in the debate from the 1890s onwards. They defended the idea of standardizing Cairene Arabic into a new Egyptian standard language. From that time on, many Arab intellectuals believe that the *fushā-*‘āmmiyah debate was started by Western imperialists in order to destroy *fushā* Arabic, as part of a larger attempt to undermine Arab identity. Defending *al-fasihah* hence took on an anti-colonialist character. Proposals to replace *fushā* with non-*fushā* varieties are since then generally associated with the promotion of one particular local variety and with colonial ploys against Arab and Muslim identity. These ideas are still very much alive in the Arab world even today.

This association of linguistic reform proposals with localism was further strengthened by other proposals by Egyptian intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s to use standardized Egyptian Arabic as the national language of Egypt. These proposals had strong Egyptian nationalist connotations, and they coincided with the development of a typically Egyptian literature, archaeological discoveries like that of the grave of Tutankhamen, and a general Pharaonist mood which was distinctly anti-Arab.

3. The historical context of the debate

The *fushā-*‘āmmiyah debate began in 1881 with an article which was entitled “Al-luḡah al-‘arabiyah wa al-naḡāḥ” (‘The Arabic language and success’), written by Ya’qūb Sarrūf and Fāris Nimr. The two authors published their article in a periodical Al-Muqtataf, which they edited since 1876 in Beirut.

As far as I know, this was the first time that the linguistic difference between the spoken and written language (*al-luḡah al-mahkiyah wa al-luḡah al-maktūbah*) was presented as a linguistic ‘problem’ in need of a suitable ‘solution’. The difference between the written and the spoken language had been around since the 10th century, when *fushā* was codified, and throughout history Arab intellectuals had always been aware of the existence of these differences. Ibn Khaldun already referred to them in the 14th century. Around the middle of the 19th century, intellectuals like Rifa‘at Al-Tahtawi, Muhammad ‘Abduh, Butrus Al-Bustani, and Ahmad Faris Al-Shidyaq also paid attention to the issue. These differences, however, were not thought of as problematic.

It is not an accident that the debate started precisely at the end of the 19th century, after a number of important, strongly interrelated developments had taken place in the Ottoman Empire, to which the Middle East belonged at that time. These developments can be characterized as modernization, westerniza-
tion and secularization, and must be situated in the political context of the beginning disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. As a result of these developments, the use of fushā was no longer restricted to a small elite of religious specialists, and its number of speakers as well as the number of the domains in which it was used (journals, texts translated from European languages, and so on) drastically increased. This is the context in which the issue of the modernization and the adaptation of the norms of the written language imposed itself and the fushā-‘āmmīyah debate emerged.

Of particular importance were the modernization and secularization of education, the translation movement and the introduction of print technology. New developments in education resulted in the emergence of a new Arabic-speaking intelligentsia, who had received their education in Arabic. They became increasingly aware of recent political and social developments in Europe (the French Revolution, the development of the first constitutions, the rise of nationalist movements, etc.), and also of the major scientific and technical achievements of the time. This was due to direct contacts with Westerners who had settled in the Middle East (missionaries, traders, diplomats, etc.), and to the translation movement, which had started in the middle of the 19th century. Also around the same time, the highlights of classical Arabic literature, as well as important classical scientific, historical and linguistic works, became for the first time available through print. Toward the end of the 19th century, a number of private publishing houses were founded that started publishing periodicals. These periodicals were an important medium for the popularization of scientific knowledge, and they hosted all kinds of debates concerning the relation between modernization, westernization and secularization. This is the context in which the fushā-‘āmmīyah debate should be situated.

4. The debate in Al-Muqtataf 1881–1882

In the remainder of this paper, I will present a micro-analysis of one sub-debate of the larger fushā-‘āmmīyah debate, a sequence of 11 articles which appeared in Al-Muqtataf between November 1881 and July 1882, starting with a contribution by Sarrūf and Nimr. This sequence of articles clearly forms a bound unit: the debate was explicitly ‘opened’ and ‘closed’ by the editors of the journal, Sarrūf and Nimr, and each article constituted an explicit reaction against the one(s) that preceded it. The result is a debate in the most literal sense of the word. (It was also published in the section entitled “Debate and correspondence”.)
In their article, Nimr and Sarruf observe that success and progress are far more widespread in the West than in the Arab world. The main reason for this, they claim, is the fact that in the West there exists no difference between the written and the spoken language. As a consequence, science and science books are accessible to all classes of society. This is contrasted with the language situation in the Arabic world, where a wide discrepancy can be observed between the spoken language and the written language, which is, also called the book language (luqat al-kitābah). If the Arabs want to keep pace with the West, this situation needs to be rectified as soon as possible. Sarrūf and Nimr consider three possible solutions. A first solution would be to replace Arabic with another language, but this is immediately dismissed as totally undesirable. Another option would be to replace the written language with the spoken language. This solution is presented as nearly inevitable, as one is forced to “[follow] the laws of nature that make languages change with the change of time” (Sarrūf and Nimr 1881: 353). It is the third solution, however, the replacement of the spoken language by the written language, which is considered “the noblest, safest and most beneficial solution” (Sarrūf and Nimr 1881: 353). At the end of the article, they invite all Arab intellectuals “who strive for the welfare of the fatherland (al-watan)” (Sarrūf and Nimr 1881: 354) to express their opinion and join the debate.

In the subsequent issues of Al-Muqtataf ten reactions were published. It became a debate of all against one: all the participants except one defended the third solution, the replacement of the spoken language, al-‘āmmiyah, with the written language, al-fasihah. The anonymous defender of the standardization of the spoken language does not reveal his real name, but writes under the pen name Al-Mumkin, which means The Possible. He states that he chose this name because he believes in the feasibility of his proposal, a position which is heavily refuted by the other participants.

5. One standard language for one linguistic community

Before entering into their differences of opinion, I want to point out one issue on which there exists a consensus among the participants to the debate. Notwithstanding their differences of opinion, all the debaters are strongly committed to the idea that there exists something like an Arab community, and they agree that this community is first of all a linguistic community, and hence that it needs one common standard language.

All the participants are strongly committed to this idea of linguistic unity. In the following quote, Al-Yaẓīṯī refuses even to consider the possibility of standardizing more than one folk language (luqāḥ ʿāmmiyah):
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If we deemed [the solution of the standardization of the folk languages] correct and intended [to apply it]: then which of the folk languages would we use, since between every language and its sister there is a difference in accent and lexicon that is not less than the difference between each of them and *al-luḡah al-fasīḥah*. So whichever we chose of these languages to write in, it will lead us to the same [situation] we flee of. As such, in the frame of this pursuit, all the languages of the countries/regions would have to be transformed into one language (*luḡah wāhidah*). (Al-Yāzīgī 1881: 404)

The following statement also indicates the extent to which linguistic unity is taken for granted, because it discusses only the idea of unifying the different folk languages into one new language:

> the folk languages are clearly very different [from each other]. To unify them into one language of them would be very difficult. If we would presume that it is possible, than it would still be much better to revert them to the authentic language [e.g. *fushā*]. (Society 1882: 553)

Another participant, Dāḡir, states that if one of the folk languages would be chosen as the standard language for all the Arabs, it would most likely not be accepted by the speakers of the other folk languages:

> Each of these languages has a different accent and lexicon, in the same way as a foreign language [has them] in comparison to other languages. If it were possible (hypothetically) to write a book in the Syrian language, for instance, would the Iraqi benefit from it? Would the Maghribian not laugh at it? Would the Egyptian not mock it? The dialect of which Syrian province would we have to use? Or rather, which city, which village or even which neighborhood? Since Al-Mumkin surely knows that in Syria itself there are several folk languages that are mutually different in the same way as each of them differs from *al-luḡah al-fasīḥah*. (Dāḡir 1882: 557) [round brackets original]

Like the others, Dāḡir does not even take into account the possibility of standardizing Syrian for the Syrians, Iraqi for the Iraqi’s, and so on. Al-Mumkin, the lonely defender of the standardization of *al-ʾāmmīyah*, also has a single common language in mind, but one which is based on the existing spoken languages:

> Concerning his opinion about using the folk language for [written purposes]: despite the difficulty of the difference between the dialects of the Syrians, the Egyptians, the Iraqis and the Maghribians, and despite the fact that this is a real difficulty, as is asserted by [Al-Yāzīgī], this is what happened to Arabic itself, not to say that it also happened to other languages. Does he not see that correct Arabic (*al-ʾarabīyah al-sahīḥah*) is a collection of the different languages of the tribes of the Arabs, and that the numerous names for the same meaning are a convincing indication that it is a collection of the languages of different tribes? This is obvious for the one who has the slightest knowledge of linguistics. If the scholars of the first centuries of the Hijra were successful in the unification of ancient Arabic (*al-ʾarabīyah al-qadīmah*), despite their limited means, then contemporary scholars should be able to unify and
Despite these authors’ acute awareness of the existing differences between the different spoken languages, the idea of standardizing more than one spoken language into a written language does not occur to them. This clearly illustrates how commonsensical the idea is of one Arab linguistic community with one standard language. Syrians (an ethnonym which includes the present inhabitants of Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon), Iraqis, Egyptians and Moroccans are all considered Arabs. The issue, in this stage of the debate, is not so much whether the Arabs do need one standard language or not, but rather the question which variety of Arabic ought to be selected as the standard language. This was markedly different in the debate that went on in Egypt during the 1920s and 1930s, where the primary issue was the creation Egyptian Arabic standard exclusively for the Egyptians.

6 Language and identity construction

As I already mentioned, all the debaters except one are convinced that al-fasîhah is the only variety of Arabic valuable enough to fulfil the function of common standard language for all the Arabs. Only Al-Mumkin defends the creation of a new standard language out of the existing spoken varieties. His proposal to unify and standardize the spoken language, al-‘ammîyah, encountered strong opposition from the other debaters. I think that this strong opposition was partly caused by genuine linguistic conservatism. On many occasions Al-Mumkin’s opponents praise the linguistic superiority of al-fasîhah, arguing that it has precise grammatical rules and a rich lexicon that can easily be expanded by means of morphological devices. They also mention its adaptability, its rich style, and so on. Al-luğah al-‘ammîyah, in contrast, is considered too diverse and limited to certain domains of society. It is also associated with ignorance.

Linguistic conservatism, however, was not the only reason behind this staunch defense of al-fasîhah. The opponents of the use of ‘ammîyah wanted to construct an Arab identity that was not exclusively based on language, but which also assigned a central place to Arab history. This history was accessible via the rich cultural and literary heritage, which was almost entirely written down in al-fasîhah. Consequently, al-fasîhah had to remain in place to maintain this bond with Arab history. If linguistic norms would be drastically changed, as Al-Mumkin’s had proposed, then the Arab literary heritage would no longer be accessible to contemporary readers. The relevance of this literary and cultural heritage is not called into question, except by Al-
Mumkin, who suggests that it is only of historical interest and that most of
the books in Arabic from the previous centuries could easily be disposed of.
As such, he chose squarely for the future.

Most, maybe all, of these intellectuals were Christians, and so they
wanted to construct an identity that could be shared by Christians and Mus-
lims alike. This may explain another striking characteristic of the debate,
namely the lack of any religious argumentation. In the entire sequence of
articles, religion is hardly ever referred to, and the linguistic argumentation
that is developed is entirely secular. *Al-fasihah* constitutes a bond that unites
all contemporary Arabs around their common past; it is not considered a reli-
gious language that unites Muslims as believers, or unites the individual be-
liever with God. This is all the more significant since the primordial impor-
tance of Arabic as the liturgical language of Islam is usually taken for
granted. On the other hand, the authors undertake no attempts to explicitly
secularize the Arabic language. The bond between *al-fasihah* and Islam is not
discussed and as a result it is also not dismantled. The authors were keenly
aware of the central role *al-fasihah* plays in the religious life of Muslims as
their liturgical language. They probably considered it more appropriate to
defend *al-fasihah* as the common standard language, since they knew that
they would otherwise not be able to rally sufficient support from Muslims.

Authors like Holt (1996), Haddad (1970) and Philipp (1979) suggested
that it was not accidental that Christian intellectuals were the first to focus on
forms of identity other than denominational ones, in particular secular ones,
based for instance on language, culture and/or history. In the beginning po-
litical disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, these Christians saw an oppor-
tunity to shake of the statute of ‘protected minority’ which they had tradition-
al occupied in Islamic society. They tried to achieve this by promoting non-
confessional forms of identity, as an alternative to the confessional ones that
up until then had been the primary forms of identity. They instead tried to
promote a common secular identity that would suit both Muslims and Chris-
tians, and that was based on the common Arabic language and common Arab
history. As said, they needed *al-fasihah* in order to construct such an identity.

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5 Ya’qūb Sarrūf, Fāris Nimr, Khalīl Al-Yāżīgī, As’ad Dāġīr and Mitrī Qandalaft were Chris-
tians. AL-Mumkin, H.H. and the Damascene Literary Society could not be identified.

6 Another reason for this striking absence of religious argumentation is probably the general
secular orientation of Al-Muqtataf, the journal in which the debate took place.
In resorting to *al-fasīhah*, a language that had been kept intact by Islam, as the basis for their secular Arab nationalism, these Christian intellectuals in fact promoted a liturgical language to the level of a state and national language (Holt 1996). In doing so, they quite paradoxically also laid the basis for a form of Arab nationalism in which both Arabism and Islam were closely intertwined, which was to become dominant in the 1940s and 1950s.

Al-Mumkin’s position, in contrast, entailed a complete rupture with the past. He was the first one to explicitly bring up the issue of religion, and from his discussion it appears that he sought to relegate it to a separate domain of society. This can be deduced, for example, from his belief that the study of religious books should exclusively be left to religious specialists. For Al-Mumkin, it is of little importance whether or not nonspecialist believers are able to read and understand their religious books directly, and consequently, there is no need to translate them into the new standard language. He cites the Greek Orthodox, Latin Christians, and non-Arab Muslims as examples of religious communities who do not use their own language(s) for liturgical purposes, but Classical Greek, Latin, and *fushā* Arabic instead. It is as if by citing these examples, he wants to demonstrate that this situation should not be considered dramatic:

> The books on religion remain as they are because the custodians of religion (*'umanā'* al-dīn) have the task to study and to explain them. This is the main part of their science if not all of it. The Muslims have the example of the Latin and the Greek Orthodox Christians, since the Latin Christians read their Gospels in Latin and the Greek Orthodox in Greek and of the Persian and Turkish Muslims since they read the Koran in Arabic. (Al-Mumkin 1882a: 495)

The fact that Al-Mumkin does not propose to translate religious books does not emanate from some kind of religious conservatism, but rather from his refusal to assign to religion a central place in society. This is exemplified by his discussion of jurisprudence books. In his opinion these can easily be disposed of, since modern society should be regulated by secular law (*nizām*) and not by religious jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The importance Al-Mumkin attributes to this secular law is also illustrated by his insistence that it should be written down in the folk language, so that it will be accessible to everybody who needs it to defend himself.

> The jurisprudence books (*kutub al-fiqh*) can be disposed of in favor of the constitution (*nizām*). Nothing prevents us from writing the [modern secular] law in the folk language (*luġat al-'āmmah*) so that [both] the elite and the folk people understand it. In my opinion this is necessary with good cause, and if not, the folk person will not [be able to] claim something he does not fully understand. (Al-Mumkin 1882a: 495)
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The comparison of Al-Mumkin’s position with that of his opponents illustrates the paradoxical nature of the latter. Even if their linguistic conservative position was related to the revolutionary political project of promoting a secular identity in a religiously based society and of encouraging the emancipation and political participation of confessional minorities, in the long run it maintained the relation between Arabic and the Islamic religious heritage. We can only wonder whether this paradox would have been avoided if Al-Mumkin’s proposition would have been accepted, which promoted a linguistic identity for the Arabs that was not related to the past but firmly rooted in modernity. However, his position never gained sufficient support to impose its own logic on the course of events.

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