

## Language and Culture Show and Tell: Arabic

### Zeina Frangie-Eyres

#### Transcript

##### Slide 1

Welcome to this language taster which I have entitled 'Crossroads of Flight'.

##### Slide 2

This taster will serve as an introduction to the Arabic language viewed through the prism of the word 'flight'. I will explore how this word resonates throughout Arabic culture, from the beginnings of the Islamic empire to the modern age, while also giving you a short introduction to the Arabic language focusing on its alphabet and writing.

##### Slide 3

We begin our journey with two art pieces housed in UCL Art Museum. The image on the right, *Rest on the Flight to Egypt* (c.1500), is attributed to Albrecht Altdorfer a German painter, engraver and architect of the Renaissance working in Bavaria. He is regarded to be the main representative of the Danube School, setting biblical and historical subjects against landscape backgrounds of expressive colours.

The image on the left *The Flight into Egypt* (c.1470), is an engraving by Martin Schongauer (c.1430-1491), an Alsatian engraver and painter and one of the most important printmakers north of the Alps.

##### Slide 4

The major theme that is treated in Schongauer and Altdorfer's works is the final episode of the Nativity of Jesus in art, a common component in cycles of the Life of the Virgin as well as the Life of Christ. Several iconic representations of the 'Rest on the Flight into Egypt' developed after the 14th century and Schongauer and Altdorfer's works are representative of this trend.

The event that inspired this theme is recounted in the New Testament in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 2:13–23) where, soon after the Magi (more commonly known as the three wise men) visit the new-born Jesus, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream telling him to flee to Egypt with Mary and the infant Jesus as King Herod sought the infant to kill him.

Here the impetus for fleeing to Egypt is provided but the art theme 'rest on the flight to Egypt' is elaborated in the infancy gospel of Matthew also known as the Gospel of Pseudo Matthew. This was part of Christian apocryphal, non-canonical writings that sought to provide details of the life of Jesus of Nazereth up to the age of 12 in Egypt and though not accepted by roman catholic, eastern orthodox or protestant churches as being canonical were of particular importance to the Coptic Church.

In the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew the Christ-Child commands the date palm Mary is resting beneath to bend down so that she can eat the fruit while a spring is released from its roots to provide her with water. This can be seen clearly represented in Schongauer's *The Flight into Egypt*.

## Slide 5

Though the Qur'ān does not include the account of the Flight into Egypt, sūra XXIII The Believers, verse 50 could conceivably refer to it where it says 'And we made the son of Maryam and his mother a sign; and we made them abide in an elevated place, full of quiet and watered with springs'. Here it is the account of the birth of Jesus that is alluded to, bearing a striking similarity to the account of the Flight to Egypt in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew.

The miraculous birth of Jesus, also thought to be born of a virgin Qur'ān III: 47, Mary gives birth leaning against the trunk of a date-palm, which miraculously provides her with dates and a stream to drink from (Qur'ān IX: 23-25).

Numerous polymaths and scholars from the Islamic empire went on to transmit accounts of the Flight into Egypt. Among these, two stand out: The Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk, an Arabic-language historical chronicle completed in 915 AD by the historian Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (838–923 AD), and the 11<sup>th</sup> century Abū Ishāq al-Tha'labī whose 'Arā'is al-madjālis fī kīṣaṣ al-anbiyā', an account of the lives of the prophets, reports the Flight, followed by a stay of the holy family in Egypt of twelve years.

## Slide 6

Nothing measures the impact of the word 'flight' in Arabic culture, as much as the formation of the Islamic calendar. Unlike its Gregorian counterpart, this calendar is lunar consisting of 12 lunar months in a year of 354 or 355 days. It is used to determine the proper days of Islamic holidays and rituals, such as the annual fast of Ramadan and the yearly season for the great pilgrimage of Hajj.

This calendar enumerates the Hijri era, whose epoch was established as the Islamic New Year in 622 AD. During that year, Muhammad and his followers, who were being persecuted, took flight, secretly leaving their homes in Mecca in migration to Medina, thus establishing the first Muslim community (ummah), an event commemorated as the Hijrah.

Muhammad's arrival at Medina was warmly welcomed as not merely a religious leader but as a, prophet and political arbitrator of disputes between the constantly warring tribes of Aws and Khazraj.

This transformation from 'flight' to 'emigration' is encapsulated in the renaming of the city from its original name of Yathrib to المدينة المنورة al-Madīna al-Munawwarah, which means 'The Enlightened City', commonly simplified as Madīna which simply means 'City'.

In the West, dates in this era are usually denoted as AH for the Latin Anno Hegirae, 'in the year of the Hijrah', while years prior to the Hijra are denoted as BH, 'before the Hijrah'.

In Muslim countries, it is also sometimes denoted as H from its Arabic form سنة هجرية, and abbreviated as هـ.

## Slide 7

But let's now focus a little more on the Arabic language itself.

### **Slide 8**

Arabic, alongside Hebrew and Aramaic, is a Semitic language, these languages are written from right to left. It emerged in the 1<sup>st</sup> century spoken by the Arab people of the Arabian peninsula. With the spread of Islam from the 7<sup>th</sup> century it became characterized by diglossia, which means that two languages are used: a prestige or standard version *al-arabiyya al-fusHa* which differs from 33 vernacular or colloquial versions of spoken Arabic.

### **Slide 9**

Arabic is also the liturgical language of Islam, further uniting Muslims from all over the world. The area that the Arab world encompasses has given us the monotheistic religions of the world, what is referred to in Islam as 'ahl al-kitab', the word God Allah would be same whether spoken by a Jew, a Christian or a Muslim.

### **Slide 10**

Standard Arabic is acquired through formal education and is not spoken natively but is the language of literature, official documents and formal written media. It is also used in formal contexts, news bulletins and anything that is announced such as flight information at airports. It the pan-Arab language that unites 26 countries and 1 disputed territory where it is the official language. It is the third most widely used language after English and French and is one of the six official languages of the United Nations.

How do Arabs then communicate with one another? The chart here indicates in very simplified terms the highest register of Arabic through to the lowest. When Arabs from different countries want to converse together, or when what is being discussed is more sophisticated in terms of discourse a combination of both registers is used. This register in Arabic is called *lughat al-mutanawwirin*  
The Language of the Enlightened Ones.

### **Slide 11**

Let us now look at the Arabic language itself.

### **Slide 12**

22 of the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet are fully joining which means that they have four different positions depending on where they fall in a word. So how a letter looks in its isolate shape will differ to the way it is written at the start, in the middle or at the end of a word.

The way in which Arabic is printed is different to the way that it is handwritten as exemplified by the letter ا

### **Slide 13**

One of the characteristic features of Arabic is the existence of pairs of heavy/light emphatic/non-emphatic consonant sounds.

### **Slide 14**

The former is represented in transliteration (Arabic written in English) by either capitals or a dot underneath the letter. In real terms these heavy consonants affect the vowel quality of the vowels that surround it. So, when paired with an 'a' sound the heavy consonant turns it from a frontal a to a deep a.

The vowel palette is restricted to 3 vowel sounds that have corresponding long vowel sounds (often represented in transliteration by a dash above the vowel), syllables with long vowels always carry the primary stress of a word.

### **Slide 15**

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the Arabic language is morphological derivation.

### **Slide 16**

This is where for the most part a trio of consonants (roots) kept always in the same order are put into pre-existing templates which have vowel patterns that denote different parts of speech (such as adjectives, active participles and gerunds).

### **Slide 17**

Have a look at the roots for Hijrah (the letters ha, jim and ra') look like when morphologically derived.

### **Slide 18**

This is a highly formulaic system where roots (consonants) interact with patterns (vowels/ syllables) to create meaning that is extended but closely related to the original meaning of the roots as seen in trio of roots for 'write'. It is no surprise that Algebra was invented in the Arabic language.

### **Slide 19**

So when learning to read Arabic, the brain is being trained to see the second word when looking at the first especially as an Ab Initio learner. A heritage learner who has encountered Arabic through reciting the Quran, will train to drop the noun declension on the third word in favour for the second as the register there is more useable conversationally.

### **Slide 20**

Let us now move on to Arabic in its historical context.

### **Slide 21**

The image on the right is one of the oldest surviving fragments c.8<sup>th</sup> century that we have of the Qur'ān. Though it was codified under the third Caliph, the Uthman bin Affan 650-656, it is notable for its lack of vocalization, diacritical marks and dots that distinguish similar letters from one another. Arabic emerged as a highly poetical oral language steeped in rhythm and rhyme that further aided memorization. As Arabic articulated from oral tradition spoken in the Arabian desert to an imperial language that covered a great swathe of the world the system of vocalization was articulated so that the correct pronunciation of the Qur'ān was in place as the empire grew.

### **Slide 22**

Though Mohammed died in 632 AD not having named his successor, his companions went on to conquer outwards, with the seat of power moving from the Arabian peninsula to the Damascus in Syria culminating in the Golden Age of Islam under the Abbasid dynasty who ruled from Bagdad in modern day Iraq.

### **Slide 23**

The early caliphate was characterized by religious tolerance and pluralism where peoples of all ethnicities and religions were blended in public life.

This combined with the concerted effort to pool, collate and translate classical wisdom and learning from these new land acquisitions with the establishment of a library, academy and translation movement Bayt al-Hikma (The House of Wisdom) ushered in the Golden Age of Islam where Science and Learning flourished in the lingua franca of the time, the Arabic Language.

### **Slide 24**

The Islamic world at its cultural peak, supplied information and ideas to Europe, via Al-Andalus, Sicily and the Crusader kingdoms in the Levant.

These included Latin translations of the Greek Classics and of Arabic texts in astronomy, mathematics, science, medicine and engineering. Translation of Arabic philosophical texts into Latin 'led to the transformation of almost all philosophical disciplines in the medieval Latin world', with a particularly strong influence of Muslim philosophers in natural philosophy, psychology and metaphysics. Other contributions included technological and scientific innovations via the Silk Road, including Chinese inventions such as paper and gunpowder as well as the influence felt on other aspects of medieval European culture such as the arts, agriculture, music, pottery

Fibonacci presented the first complete European account of Arabic numerals and the Hindu-Arabic numeral system in his Liber Abaci (1202) which have the West is numerical system. It would not be an understatement to say that this exchange revitalized western Europe with strong philosophical and scientific roots paving the way for the movement of the Italian Renaissance in the 15th century and the scientific developments of the 17th century.

Many Arabic loanwords in Western European languages, including English, mostly via Old French, date from this period such as traditional star like Aldebaran, scientific terms like alchemy/ chemistry algebra, algorithm, etc. and names of commodities such as sugar, camphor, cotton, coffee, to name but a few.

### **Slide 25**

It is interesting to note that in Arabic the only difference between the word for 'Arabs' and the word for 'The West' is a single dot, signifying how the East and the West have contributed to each other's respective intellectual progress. The Nahda Movement meaning 'The Awakening' was a cultural movement that flourished in Arabic-speaking regions of the Ottoman Empire, notably in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria, during the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century. It marked a pivotal shift as, during this period, the East adopted Western ideas and values, starkly contrasting the West's prior heavy adoption of Eastern ideas. The East and West's large cultural differences caused Nahda's impact to go beyond just the ideas themselves. The Nahda strengthened acceptance of the West, thus establishing a new, broadened identity for the Arab World and the Middle East.

### **Slide 26**

The Nahda was partly a reaction to European colonial encroachment brought on by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798.

### **Slide 27**

The Nahda emphasized the need for political social and cultural reform in the face of European military superiority and the stagnation of the late Ottoman empire.

### **Slide 28**

Throughout the centuries, the East and the West have continued to influence each other. A more recent example of this is the Mahjar which translates as 'the Arab diaspora'. The Mahjar was a literary movement started by Arabic-speaking writers who had emigrated to America from Ottoman-ruled Lebanon, Syria and Palestine at the turn of the 20th century. Like their predecessors in the Nahda movement, writers of the Mahjar movement were stimulated by their personal encounter with the Western world and participated in the renewal of Arabic literature hence their proponents being sometimes referred to as writers of the 'late Nahda'. These writers, in South America as well as the United States, contributed indeed to the development of the Nahda in the early 20th century. Kahlil Gibran is considered to have been the most influential of the 'Mahjar poets' or 'Mahjari poets' and his most famous work '*The Prophet*' was originally written in English and had a profound impact on American Counterculture and the New Age movement of the 1960s.

### **Slide 29**

Finally, to return to the theme of 'flight', the Mahjar is not the only modern-day example of diaspora and displacement. Conflict has become a hallmark of the contemporary Arab World often subsumed under the Middle East. Of the 60 million displaced people worldwide, close to 40 percent originate from the Arab region, mainly Syria and Palestine. Amid vicious and increasingly intractable conflicts, individuals and entire communities have fled their homes in Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Most of those seeking refuge come from Syria where approximately 5.6 million have been forced across the border into Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey while another 6.6 million have been displaced within Syria. They are not alone. In the last three decades, Iraqis have also witnessed massive displacement where close to 4.4 million fled their homes in the first and second Gulf wars in 1990 and 2003 and close to 3.4 million individuals were forced to leave following the emergence of the Islamic State in 2014. Today, almost 2 million remain displaced within the country, while tens of thousands more are in Syria and Jordan. In Yemen and Libya, a similar story has unfolded, although displacement has remained, for the most part, within national borders. Meanwhile, more than 2.4 million Sudanese have fled into neighboring countries, mainly Uganda.

In the absence of regional frameworks to address these crises most countries in the region have responded with a non-integration paradigm that seeks to return refugees to their country or place of origin. By the same token, for many of the 1.2 million Palestinians who fled their homes in 1948 and 1967, in opposition to 'flight', return has become an important ideal.

As we have seen, the Arabic Language and its peoples have always been under the influence of flight.