

Essay

Arabic Lessons

By ROBERT F. WORTH

One dark afternoon last winter, after too many hours spent studying Arabic verbs, I found myself staring uncomprehendingly at a video on my computer screen. An Arab man was holding forth tediously, his words half drowned by the rain outside. At first all I could make out was the usual farrago of angry consonants and strangled vowels. No progress there. Then, at last, the letters lighted up at the back of my brain.

“I understand what he’s saying!” I shrieked to the empty apartment, spinning backward in my desk chair. “I understand every word!”

I felt a warm rush of gratitude to the speaker, a bespectacled doctor. It made no difference that he was Ayman al-Zawahri, Al Qaeda’s No. 2 man, or that he was threatening to slaughter large numbers of Americans. He spoke a slow, clear fusha, the formal version of Arabic I had been struggling to decipher on the page for 10 hours a day. Even better, his words matched my limited vocabulary: arsala, “to send”; jaish, “army”; raees, “president.” I was almost drunk with exhilaration.

Moments later the darkness dropped again. The terrorist disappeared, his rarefied language replaced by the clipped, quotidian accents of a political analyst. This was closer to the ordinary Arabic I would need for my work, and I understood precisely nothing. Was I wasting my time?

Learning Arabic has been like that: moments of elation alternating with grim, soul-churning despair. The language is not so much hard as it is vast, with dozens of ways to form the plural and words that vary from region to region, town to town. With every sign of progress it seems to deepen beneath you like a coastal shelf. It is only small comfort to read about the early struggles of distinguished Arabists like Gertrude Bell, who complained that she could pronounce the Arabic “h” only while holding down her tongue with one finger, or Tim Mackintosh-Smith, who writes of years spent in an alternate world called “Dictionary Land.”

But the rigors of study were a small price for the chance to catch up with my surroundings. After spending the better part of two years as a reporter in Baghdad, I was tired of playing the doltish Westerner, eyes always darting blankly between translator and interviewee. The scattered phrases I knew seemed only to underscore my ignorance: Wayn alinfijar? I’d say (“Where’s the explosion?”), or Shaku maku? (“How’s it going?”), and I’d get a condescending pat on the back. When my bosses offered a year of intensive language training, I jumped at the chance.

For anyone who knows only European languages, to wade into Arabic is to discover an endlessly strange and yet oddly ordered lexical universe. Some words have definitions that go on for pages and seem to encompass all possible meanings; others are outlandishly precise. Paging through the dictionary one night, I found a word that means “to cut off the upper end of an okra.” There are lovely verbs like sara, “to set out at night”; comical ones like tabaadawa, “to pose as a Bedouin”; and simply bizarre ones like dabiba, “to abound in lizards.” Dabiba (presumably applied to towns or regions) is medieval, but I wouldn’t put it past Dr. Zawahri to revive it.

The language can also be surprisingly vague to a Western ear. I was always troubled by Arabic’s tendency to elide the distinction between “a lot” and “too much.” I will never forget hearing an Iraqi friend, as we walked down a crowded Brooklyn street together, say loudly in English, “There are too many black people here.”

At the same time, all Arabic words have simple three- or four-letter roots, with systematically derived cognates that allow you to unfold a whole range of meanings from a single word. The word for “to cook,” for instance, is related in a predictable way to the words for “kitchen,” “dish,” “chef,” and so on. Arabic speakers are often dismayed to discover that the same principle is less common in English.

As the months passed, the sounds of the language were gradually transformed. Arabic’s hard “h” letter, so difficult to pronounce at first, began to seem like a lovely breath of air, as if countless tiny parachutes were lifting the

words above their glottal base. The notorious “ayn” sound, which often takes months for English speakers to produce, lost its guttural edge and acquired, to my ear, the throaty rumble of a well-tuned sports car.

Soon I began marching into the Arabic markets on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, near where I live, and testing out my textbook phrases. Generally I was met with a confused look and then a smiling apology: “We don’t hear too much fusha around here.” Linguistically speaking, what I had done was a bit like asking an Italian for directions in Latin. Modern fusha, also known as Modern Standard Arabic, is a modified version of the Classical Arabic in the Koran. It is the language of public address, and of any newscast on Al Jazeera and other Arabic television stations. It also corresponds to the written language, and any educated Arab can understand it. Arabs have enormous respect for fusha (“eloquent” is the word’s literal meaning), especially in its fully inflected Koranic form; that is why Al Qaeda’s leaders, like clerics and most political leaders, place great emphasis on the classical idiom.

But the language of the street is different. The colloquial versions of Arabic are derived from fusha, and they are dialects rather than wholly separate languages. Still, the gulf can be substantial in vocabulary as well as pronunciation, and takes getting used to.

One of the pleasures of learning Arabic is hearing long-familiar words in their natural context, shorn of the poisonous ideological garb they often bear in this country. Once you begin to do that, American attitudes toward the language itself, along with all things Arab and Muslim, can begin to seem jarringly hostile and suspicious.

To take a recent example: Last winter, New York City announced plans for a new Arabic-language public secondary school in Brooklyn. An aggressive campaign against the school soon sprang up, despite the uncontroversial presence of Chinese, Russian, Spanish and other dual-language schools in the city. Opponents and local newspaper columnists began branding the (as yet unopened) school a “jihad recruiting center” and a “madrassa” and demanding it be closed. For Arabic speakers, the very title of the “Stop the Madrassa” campaign — now national in scope — is bound to have an uncomfortable ring. Madrassa is the Arabic word for “school”; it could not be more wholesome. But as the school’s opponents know, in this country it has taken on a far more sinister valence, thanks to press reports about religious schools in Pakistan that are said to teach Taliban-style militancy. The school’s principal was later replaced after a fracas over another Arabic word, intifada, that has taken on a meaning here entirely different from the one it has among Arabs.

One has to wonder whether these attitudes have inhibited our ability to train more Arabic speakers. Although enrollments in postsecondary Arabic study more than doubled from 2002 to 2006, the attrition rate is high, and the number of students who persist and become truly proficient — much harder to measure — is very small. The government and military are still struggling to find the translators they need.

The reasons for this failure are many, and inseparable from the Arab world’s long history of troubled relations with the West. But alongside them is the simple fact that even with the best of teachers — like mine — the language requires a degree of patience and commitment that verges on the absurd. “Don’t worry,” one of my teachers told me half-jokingly. “Arabic is only hard for the first 10 years. After that it gets easier.”

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