The Impact of Language in the Formation of an Islamic Identity: 'Arabī and A'jamī

Anke Iman Bouzenita[1]

Abstrak

Makalah ini menganalisis kesan Bahasa Arab ke atas identiti individu dan masyarakat Islām. Ia mengemukakan suatu perspektif tekstual berdasarkan al-Qur'ān, Sunnah Rasulullah (*Sunnah*) dan riwayat para Sahabat (*Ṣahabāh*) tentang peranan dan kepentingan bahasa Arab dan tentang penilaian terhadap bahasa lain. Ini diikuti dengan perspektif sejarah yang merangkumi pelbagai wajah sejarah Islām serta peranan bahasa Arab dan selainnya dalam pelbagai perkembangan, dari zaman pembentukan awal Ummah, era perkembangan dan keruntuhan intelektual dan budaya sehinggalah ke zaman penjajahan asing. Seterusnya aspek psycholinguistik dan kebudayaan menjelaskan antara lain tentang peranan bahasa Arab dalam pembentukan rangkaian makna, tentang isu kesulitan penterjemahan dan tentang pengaruh bahasa asing ke atas pembentukan

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[1] Anke Iman Bouzenita is Assistant Professor at the Department of Fiqh and Usul al-Fiqh, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). E-mail: bouzenita@iiu.edu.my

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identiti Islām. Makalah ini menyimpulkan bahawa tidak terdapat suatu hubungan sebab-musabab yang langsung di antara penguasaan bahasa Arab dan pembentukan identiti Islām di mana setiap satunya akan mempengaruhi yang lain, namun ia adalah suatu alat yang penting dalam pembentukan identiti individu dan masyarakat Islām.

Katakunci: Bahasa Arab, Islām, Pengajian Islām, identity Islām, sosiolinguistik, psycholinguistik, kajian kebudayaan

Abstract
This article analyses the impact of Arabic on the individual and communal Islamic identity. It offers a textual perspective based on the Qur'ān, Prophetic Tradition (*Sunnah*) and narrations of the Companions (*Ṣahabāh*) on the role and importance of the Arabic language and the evaluation of Non-Arabic languages. This is followed by a historical perspective, encompassing chosen facets of Islamic history and the role of Arabic as well as Non-Arabic languages in various stages of development, during the formative period of the Ummah, the intellectual and cultural rise and decline as well as colonialism and its aftermath. The perspective of psycholinguistics and cultural linguistics leads the reader, among other aspects, to the mechanism of the Arabic language in setting up networks of meanings, the difficulty of translation and the impact of foreign languages on Islamic identity building. The article concludes that there is no direct cause-and-effect relationship between the mastery of Arabic and an Islamic identity in that one automatically leads to the other, but that it is a vital tool in the formation of an Islamic individual and communal identity.

Keywords: Arabic, Islām, Islamic studies, Islamic

identity, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, cultural studies

Introduction

For 1.5 billion Muslims around the world, the Arabic language has a special importance. The Qur´ān, final and universal revelation sent by Allah SWT[2] to mankind through the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h)[3] , is recited by every Muslim regardless of his native tongue in the Arabic original in prayer. The call to prayer can be heard in Arabic all over the world. However, only about 300 million people are considered to be native speakers of Arabic, among them a number of Non-Muslims. From these very basic observations, we may conclude that the Arabic language is part of the Muslims' lives all over the world, even if they are not native speakers of this language.

This paper tries to evaluate the impact of Arabic as a factor in the formation of an Islamic identity on an individual as well as communal level. The term identity is used in a twofold meaning, encompassing the individual identity of Muslims as well as the communal identity of the Islamic Ummah. On an individual level, the term is used as self-identification as being a person with a set of concepts and ideas on life, a belief system, values and speaking a particular language to express these concepts. Other factors, such as social and ethnic background, experience and socialisation may be merged under the header of concepts and ideas on life. The communal identity, however, is more that just the sum of individual identities. It is the shared reference framework made up of prevalent belief system, concepts about life, history and language which have an impact on the formation of communal identity. If we speak of an Islamic identity, we mean an identity decisively shaped by Islamic belief system, concepts and practice, with an Islamic value

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2 SWT = Subḥānahu wa Taʻālā, May He be exalted.
3 Peace be upon him, translation of the eulogy sallallahu ʻalayhi wa sallam.

system and ethics on an individual and communal scale. A person may have a distinctive Islamic identity even while living among Non-Muslims, while a community may be distinctively Islamic even with the presence of Non-Muslim individuals in it, or distinctively un-Islamic albeit being made up of a majority of Muslims. Muslim scholars from the earliest times have mentioned the *sha'ā'ir* or insignia of an Islamic community as the practical implementation of Islamic rules, the establishment of communal prayers and *adhān* and other outward signs. Ibn Taymiyyah also mentioned the Arabic language among these insignia which distinguished a community as being Islamic[4] .

The paper will identify the importance of Arabic as a unifying bond among the Islamic *Ummah*, the worldwide community of Muslims. It will also relate to the implications of mastering or not mastering Arabic on an individual and communal level and the approach towards learning and using languages other than Arabic. The reader will be guided to these aspects through three different lenses, debarking from a textual and historical perspective to aspects of cultural linguistics and psycholinguistics.

The Textual Perspective

The Qur'ān clearly emphasizes that it is a revelation in a pure Arabic language. Allah SWT says in Sūrat Yūsuf, 12: 2: "*We have verily revealed it as an Arabic Qur'ān, that you may understand*". In Surat al-Zumar, 39: 28, Allah SWT says: "*An Arabic Qur'ān without any distortion, so that they may fear Allah*". In Sūrat al-Naḥl, 16: 103, the text states: "*And this is a clear Arabic language*". There are about ten verses in the Qur'ān emphasizing the fact that it has been revealed in Arabic.[5] We can conclude from this emphasis, as the majority of Muslim scholars have done, that a translation of

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4   Ibn Taymiyyah (1993), *Iqtidā᾽ al-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm*, Beirut: Dār al-Jayl, p. 221.
5   *Sūrat Yūsuf*, 12: 2; *al-Ra'd*, 13: 37; *al-Naḥl*, 16: 103; *Ṭāhā*, 20: 113; *al-Shu'arā᾽*, 26: 195; *al-Zuma*r, 39: 28; *Fuṣṣilat*, 41: 3; *Fuṣṣilat*, 41: 44; *al-Shūrā*, 42: 7; *al-Zukhruf*, 43: 3; *al-Aḥqāf*, 46: 12.

the Qur'ān into any other language can only be considered as an explanation or interpretation of the text, but not as the original Qur'ān. As any explanation to the text, be it in Arabic (like the *tafsīr*) or non-Arabic (translation), is not the original text, it cannot be recited in prayer. The linguistic miracle (*al-I'jāz*) only exists in the original Arabic form.

The scholars of the Qur'anic sciences have, from the existence of this branch of knowledge, listed a number of reasons why the final message has been revealed in Arabic.[6] However, the definitive reason for choosing this region and this language for the revelation of the final message, in the end, is in the knowledge of Allāh SWT alone.[7]

The Qur'an is the miracle, *al-i'jāz*, which was given to the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) as an evidence for his prophethood. The miracle itself consists in the inimitable language of revelation. The disbelievers of his time and all times to follow have been challenged to produce only ten sections or surahs like it, if they do not believe in its divine origin (*Sūrat Hūd*, 11: 13). Being unable to meet this first challenge, they were later asked to produce only one sūrah like it (*Sūrat Yūnus*, 10: 38). For the Arabs at the time,

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[6] First and foremost, it was the language of the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula, and as every message was sent in a language intelligible to the immediate audience, so was this last and final one. The region was not under direct influence of the Roman and Persian superpowers during the time of revelation, which might be added as an advantage for the formation of the state built on the foundation of the message. Furthermore, the Arabs of the time were obviously characterized by a number of qualities, which enabled them to carry the call to Islam in the way that they did. A particular bravery and virtue are mentioned as well as a capacity for memorization, which was needed for the preservation of the message. On the level of the language and its characteristics, it is emphasized that the Arabic language is known to be very precise. It also has the advantage to be constituted by a combination of phonemes not existent in other languages. Qaddūrī, Ghānim al-Ḥamd (2001): *Muḥāḍarāt fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 'Ammān: Dār 'Ammār, p.40ff.

[7] For the sake of completeness, we should mention that the revelation also had the effect to standardise and unify the different dialects of the Arabic tribes at the time. The codification of the Qur'ān under Caliph 'Uthmān emphasized to refer to the dialect of Quraysh in case of divergent readings, i.e. within the "seven letters" (*al-aḥruf al-sab'ah*), or the different dialects of the Arabic tribes, in which the Qur'ān had been revealed. For an explanation in English see Ahmad v. Denffer (1988): *Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'ān*, Leicester: Islamic Foundation.

who were masters of their language, this was the ultimate intellectual challenge and the rational proof that the Qur'ān is revelation: A text in a language used by humans who are masters of the same language, but still not able to imitate the smallest section of it[8] , can only have a divine source. Still, the disbelievers never answered the challenge intellectually, but rather preferred to respond to it with the force of arms, as history shows.

The message of Islam is directed to all of mankind. Allāh says: "*We sent you to all of mankind as a bringer of good tidings and a warner, but most people do not know*" (*Sūrat Saba'*, 34: 28) The very fact that the Qur'ān, albeit in Arabic, is a universal and the final revelation to mankind, leads us to ascertain that its basic message of *tawḥīd*, the Oneness of Allāh, Who alone deserves to be worshipped, as well as the legal injunctions of the Qur'ān (and the Prophetic Sunnah) can be translated and understood in any language. As there is no universal common language used by all of mankind, Allāh SWT in His omniscience did choose one particular language for His last revelation to mankind: Arabic.

The Arabic language as the linguistic expression of this miracle clearly has a very special standing. How does this translate with regard to the person who masters – or does not master – the language? Can this special position of the language be extended to the speaker of Arabic in the sense of a positive discrimination?

The Qur'ān clearly prohibits any kind of nationalism, and this refers to discriminating the native speakers of different languages as well as ethnically based racism. Allāh says:

Verily, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may get to know each other. Verily the most honoured among you in the sight of Allāh is the most God fearing (*Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt*, 49: 13)

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[8] The shortest section or surah of the Qur'ān, *Sūrat al-Kawthar* (108), consists of only ten words (articles not counted as independent words).

The unity of the Islamic *Ummah*, the worldwide community of Muslims, has been emphasized in the Qur'ān: Allāh SWT has mentioned this unity in one line with worship (*'ibādah*) and piety (*taqwā*), two concepts of fundamental importance in Islam: "*And this Ummah of yours is one Ummah, and I am your Lord, so worship Me*" (*Sūrat al-Anbiyā´*, 21: 92); "*And this Ummah of yours is one Ummah, and I am your Lord, so fear Me.*"(*Sūrat al-Mu'minūn*, 23: 42). The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) clearly expresses this:

> O you people! Your Lord is one, and your father is one, and there is no priority of an Arab over a non-Arab, or of a non-Arab over an Arab, nor of a red person over a black person or a black person over a red except in taqwā.[9]

He also compared calling to any kind of nationalism to the odor of decay, saying: "*Leave it, as it stinks of decay*"[10] .

Islām does not recognize the affiliation to a particular ethnic group, colour, place of origin or social background as an identity creating trait serving to distinguish from "the other" in terms of an alleged superiority or inferiority. This clearly includes a prohibition of linguistic nationalism and dividing people into those who do and those who do not speak Arabic. We can further observe that the non-discrimination on these grounds is extended to a very open concept of "being an Arab". This is rather linked to mastering the language than to being an offspring of Arabic parents. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) said:

> Being Arabic does not come from the father or the mother, but being Arabic comes from the language.

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[9] Al-Zayn, Ḥamzah Aḥmad (ed) (1995), *Al-Musnad li l-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, Al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥadīth, vol. 17, p. 244. The term *taqwā* means fearing Allāh, piety.

[10] Two men of Muhājirīn and Anṣār got into a fight, with their respective groups inciting them. When the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) heard about this, he expressed his dismay in these words and compared their behaviour with the behaviour of the people of Jāhiliya, the time of ignorance before his prophethood. Al-Zayn, *Al-Musnad li l-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, vol.11, p.500.

Whoever speaks Arabic is an Arab[11] .
Even here, there are no fixed ethnic boundaries of an
"Arabic nationhood"

that the human being is not able to overcome out of
his own efforts, i.e. there is no hereditary exclusivity. This
attitude had a very important impact from the earliest times
of Islam with regard to individual and communal identity.
The religious discourse based on the injunctions of Qur'ān
and Sunnah did not permit to permanently categorize
people into Arabs and Non-Arabs, but rather imposed the
dynamics of the *dīn*, the Islamic way of life. At the same time,
it gave a high incentive to master the linguistic tool which
is the key to the Islamic culture and affiliated sciences, by
declaring everybody an Arab who spoke the language.

It may be useful to turn to those narrations in the
Prophetic Tradition (*Sunnah*) and the practice of his
Companions (*Ṣahabāh*) which deal with other than Arabic
languages. It has been narrated in the tradition that the
Prophet (p.b.u.h.) asked Zayd b. Thabit, who acted as
his secretary and is therefore also known to be the scribe
of revelation (*waḥī*) to learn Hebrew, "the writing of the
Jews", because the Prophet did not trust the Jews and their
translation. Zayd is reported to have learned it in about 15
days, upon which he wrote letters in Hebrew on behalf of
the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and translated the Jews' letters for
him.[12] Aḥmad also narrates that the Prophet asked Zayd
whether he mastered Syrian, as they received letters in this
language. Upon his negative response, he ordered Zayd to
learn it. Zayd accomplished the task within 17 days.[13]

It seems that these quotations have already testified
to an important function of learning foreign languages:

[11]   Al-Muttaqī al-Hindī, 'Alī (1990): *Kanz al-Ummāl fī sunan al-aqwāl wa l-af'āl*,
         Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, vol.5, p.171f.
[12]   Al-Zayn, *al-Musnad*, vol.16, p.40f; Ibn al-'Arabī al-Mālikī, Abū Bakr (1997),
         '*Āridat al-Aḥwadhī bi-sharḥ Tirmidhī*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, vol.10,
         p.132.
[13]   Al-Zayn, *al-Musnad*, vol.16, p.30f.

To make sure that the message that is to be conveyed is encoded in the foreign language without any distortion. It ought to be noted here that Zayd had an official function as a state secretary to the state leader, the Messenger of Allāh (p.b.u.h.).

The often quoted saying "*Whoever learns the language of a people is safe from their evil*" seems to be a summary of basic concepts laid down by the tradition of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and his companions (may Allāh be pleased with them). Although it is not a testified *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, it seems to be reflective of a particular attitude towards foreign language learning.

We may concede from the Prophetic tradition that learning a foreign language is permissible or even recommended (*mandūb*). According to the degree of its necessity and the circumstances, it may even reach the level of an obligation (*farḍ*) to acquire knowledge on a foreign language and the cultural background it expresses.

It has also been reported that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) made use of Abyssinian words when he spoke to Umm Khālid bint Khālid Ibn Saʿīd Ibn al-ʿĀs. She had been born during the first Migration (*Ḥijrah*) to Abyssinia and was still small, when the Prophet gave her a shirt and said to her: "Umm Khālid, this is sanā (nice)."[14] However, as Ibn Taymiyyah has pointed out, there is a difference between using non-Arabic words to address somebody who does not understand Arabic and between using non-Arabic languages in the family, with friends and in public life (provided that you master Arabic). This, according to him, is discouraged (*makrūh*).[15] The reason to this statement may be that speaking another than the language of revelation means to move in the non-Islamic concepts and culture it comports, particularly if this language has not assimilated Islamic concepts yet and cannot be considered to be an "Islamic language". On a communal level, this may have

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[14]   Ibn Taymiyyah, *Iqtidā'*, p.184.
[15]   *Ibid.*

an impact on the formation of society. It seems to be in this context that the caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (may Allah be pleased with him), said: "Do not learn the gibberish of the Non-Arabs, and do not enter upon them in their churches on the day of their festivities, as the wrath of Allah descends on them."[16] Given the historical context of the formation of an Islamic society and the integration of non-Arabic peoples, the Arabic language as linguistic carrier of the Islamic way of life needed to be upheld. The statement, however, cannot be understood as a prohibition to learn foreign languages. The prohibition rather seems to refer to a particular way of speaking which does not befit a Muslim personality and which 'Umar may have perceived in Non-Arabic speakers who were, most likely, Non-Muslims.

We may also concede from this that if speaking a foreign language, we ought to abstain from a way of communicating which contradicts Islamic manners (*adab*) and should not absorb the non-verbal communication and concepts affiliated with and carried by that language. This is in agreement with our perception that *language* is more than just a set of words and grammatical rules, but rather extends to non-verbal communication, too. In addition, this complex is organically linked to the concepts and shared ideas as expressed in this particular language.

The Historical Perspective

Starting from the era of *futūḥāt*, the opening of wide territories to Islam, which started in the time of *Khilāfah Rāshidah*[17] , a process of Islamic identity formation on an individual and communal level started in which Arabic accounted for being the carrier and medium of the new way of life as well as a unifying bond between the different ethnicities. It

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[16]   Al-Ṣan'ānī, 'Abd al-Razzāq (1983), *al-Muṣannaf*, Beirut: Maktab Islāmī, vol.1, p.411, no.1609.

[17]   The rightly guided caliphate, i.e. the first period of the caliphate after the death of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), including the governance of Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān and 'Alī, may Allāh be pleased with them.

became the language of the Islamic State and *lingua franca* of science and scientists, with a cultural radiance spreading far into other parts of the world, as the non-Islamic part of Europe. All those different peoples who became part of the State, from the Amazigh and Nouba to the Romans, Slavs and Persians, soon mastered Arabic while keeping their own languages. Their integration largely contributed to the making of what is today referred to as the 'classical' Islamic culture. A number of outstanding scientists actually were of non-Arabic origin or had learned Arabic as a second language. Would anyone think today that Sibawayh, the master of Arabic grammar and author of the first standard Arabic grammar, was Persian? What about the *ḥadīth* collectors, al-Bukhārī, or al-Tirmidhī, or the famous scholars of Islamic law, Abū Ḥanīfah and al-Māwardī, and their non-Arabic roots? Arabic was the language of Islamic culture and the Islamic State for centuries and thereby became a medium of integration and unification.

In spite of the Islamic teachings, nationalist pro-Arabic as well as anti-Arabic tendencies did emerge from the second century of the Hijrah onwards. During the Prophet's (p.b.u.h.) time, there was obviously no distinction between Arabs and Non-Arabs. Who does not remember the story of Salmān al-Fārisī, the famous companion of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), whose search for the truth led him from his country of origin, Persia, via the Byzantine Empire to Medina, and whom the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) referred to with the words: "Salmān belongs to us, the family of the Prophet"? Who would not remember the story of Suhayb, nicknamed al-Rūmī, the Roman, because, albeit being of Arabic origin, he spoke Arabic with a thick Roman accent?[18] Both held important positions in the newly formed Islamic society. Insignia of a community built on the basis of the Islamic creed.

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[18]   Suḥayb ibn Sinān was abducted from his home town in today's Iraq to the Roman Empire as a child, sold into slavery and only managed to escape after long years of captivity.

The Umayyads, in contradiction with the Prophetic example, had introduced certain aspects that were alien to Islām, as dynastic rule and a court life which was alienated and alienating from the commonality of people. Among these non-Islamic traits were an exclusivist Arab ethnical policy and a non-participation of non-Arabic peoples in power. However, tribalism occurred even amongst the ruling elite, and is has to be seen as a clear deviation from the texts and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet and the Rightly Guided Caliphs after him. The *Shu'ūbiyyah* movement, a collective name for endeavors to overcome this nationalist attitude and call for more participation of non-Arabic Muslims (*Mawāli*), is a result of this phase. Again, it is to be observed that the movement was not a particularly Islamic one: Parts of it resorted to anti-Arabic nationalism, some ended up in the intellectual confusion of merging their reactions to the disillusionment vis-à-vis a nationalist pro-Arabic Umayyad policy with the anti-Islamic Zandaqah movement.[19]

It seems that Arabic as well as non-Arabic languages were taken hostage as representing and symbolising a particular ethnic group rather than the larger cultural framework they stood for. Later generations discussed questions bearing the traces of nationalism, as whether Arabic will be the language of Paradise, and Persian the language of Hell? There is no information in the Qur'ān or in the authentic tradition to the effect that the people of Paradise will speak Arabic, as Ibn Taymiyyah (died in 728AH/ 1328 AD) has pointed out generations later. He despised the discussion of this topic as senseless talk devoid of evidences in the authentic texts.[20] And even if there were evidences, it surely does not mean that whoever speaks Arabic will enter paradise on that account only.

The impact of the integration of the "new Muslims", or *Mawāli*, of non-Arabic descent, was one of the most

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[19] Qaddūrah, Zāhiyah (1972), *al-Shu'ūbiyyah wa atharuhā al-ijtimā'ī wa l-Siyāsī fī l-Ḥayāt al-Islāmiyyah fī l-'Aṣr al-'Abbāsī al-Awwal*, Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, pp. 27ff.

[20] Ibn Taymiyyah (1978): *Majmū` al-Fatāwā*, Beirut: al-Dār al-'Arabiyyah, vol. 4, p.299.

distinctive features of the Abbasid caliphate, leading to the formation of what we now refer to as 'classical' Islamic culture. Arabic certainly was the medium of integration. Although Arabic remained the official language of the state, this does not mean that all the other languages of origin were suppressed or fell into oblivion. Rather, it is to be observed that the languages of origin were kept, resulting in a bi- or even multilingualism of large parts of the Islamic *Ummah* and the non-Muslims living amongst it[21] , while Arabic represented the means of communication between the different language groups and remained the common linguistic reference framework.

It was with the weakening and decentralization of the Abbasid caliphate and finally the disintegration of the Islamic State and the advent of colonialism, that nationalism between different Muslim peoples, and also between Muslims and non-Muslim citizens or *Dhimmis*, gained prominence again. The formation of nation states on the territory of the multi-ethnic Islamic Ottoman caliphate ingrained the nationalist distinction and institutionalized it to date. In spite of this fragmentalisation of the *Ummah* along nationality, ethnicity and others, Islām and Arabic as its carrier still represent a unifying bond across the borders, a common reference framework and paradigm.

Among the factors of the disintegration of the Islamic state and the beginning of intellectual decline, the negligence of Arabic plays a pivotal role. The dimension is simply explained: Given that the language of Qur'ān and *Sunnah* is Arabic, its thorough study is indispensable for understanding these texts of revelation and actualizing their relationship to reality. The main importance of the Arabic language with regard to the message lies in the very fact that it is the tool to acquire deep or specialist knowledge on the

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[21]　Within the framework of this paper, I can only allude to the fact that multilingualism is often associated with a high amount of intellectual dynamism and versatility on an individual level. The impact of multilingualism on a communal scale with regard to the Islamic Ummah definitely deserves an independent research.

Islamic sciences. The sciences of Qur'ān and *Ḥadīth*, Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh*) and its theoretical foundations (*Uṣūl al-fiqh*) and theology (*'Ilm al-kalām*) cannot be acquired without an understanding of Arabic and its linguistic structures. To be familiar with the linguistic means characterizing the way in which the language communicates ideas (*al-balāghah*) is essential to understand the implications of the texts of revelation.

Given that the body of Islamic legal rules, the *sharī'ah*, is the guarantor to apply Islām as a way of life, *ijtihād* or the process of deriving legal rules from these sources, has a special importance for the individual as well as communal aspect of Islamic identity. This vital procedure draws to a fundamental extent on the knowledge of Arabic. No Arabic, no *ijtihād*. No *ijtihād*, no process of intellectual activity, no derivation of legal rules for new cases, intellectual stagnation.

The early era of Islamic society saw a large number of highly qualified *mujtahids* who are known as founders of legal schools (*madhāhib*). This juridical vitality corresponded to a general flourishing of all sciences, a social and political stability and a special importance given to the Arabic language. Unfortunately, starting from the 4th century of the Hijrah, the period of *taqlīd* or imitation[22] started, which was characterized by a lack of new *ijtihādāt* and an emphasis on following the *ijtihādāt* of preceding scholars, usually without knowing their specific evidences. With the passage of time, *ijtihād* was discouraged, and in some periods even criticized as an affront against established legal thought. 'Closing the door of ijtihad' had been pronounced in the 4th century AH, although this does not mean ijtihad was not practiced at all.[23] The decline in the understanding and usage of Arabic, again, may be mentioned as a reflection or even a factor contributing to this phenomenon. There is

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[22] As a technical term in *fiqh*, *taqlīd* stands for the imitation of a legal rule derived by one of the *mujtahids* without knowing the specific evidences for it.

[23] Al-Ashqār, 'Umar Sulaymān (1990): *Tarīkh al-Fiqh al-Islāmī*, Algiers: Dār al-Bi'thah, p.160ff.

no better example to describe the impact of this approach on the development of the *Ummah* than the fact that, when the printing press was invented – in the non-Islamic part of Europe – the writers' guilds opposed it and some Muftis in the Ottoman State attributed it as devil's work; a perception that delayed its introduction to the Islamic world for another 100 years.[24] Intellectual defeatism and a deep reverence for the earlier legal thought prevailed, while those detailed legal questions open to difference of legal thought[25] gained a status of the absolute and unchangeable.

We may conclude that with the secret behind the dynamism of the Muslim *Ummah* being *ijtihād*, and Arabic being the most important tool for it, its mastery or non-mastery is a decisive factor of intellectual rise or decline. In other words, Arabic is important as a tool to actualise the relationship between the texts of revelation and reality by incorporating any new situation into the realm of *sharī'ah*. This is done by categorizing it as obligational (*wājib*), recommended (*mandūb*), permissible (*mubāḥ*), discouraged (*makrūh*), or prohibited (*ḥarām*).[26]

Interestingly enough, secularizing and nationalist tendencies throughout history have always, in an initial stage, attempted to undermine this natural link between Islam, the Arabic language and the *Ummah's* unity. As is widely known, the prime attack against Islam after the demolition of the Ottoman Islamic Caliphate included latinising the formerly Arabic script of the Ottoman language, next to prohibiting Islamic dress code, under the pretense of modernization. From 1938-1950, the call to prayer

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[24] To do justice to the Ottoman writers and copyists, we ought to annotate that a printed text, in their view, bears the possibility of disseminating printing mistakes to an unknown extent. There was also an economic and aesthetic dimension in rejecting the new technology. It was only after some endeavours that Ibrahim Mütefferika obtained the permission of the Ottoman Sultan to print books in 1729, all of them with non-religious contents. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottoman_Empire; www.literaturca. de/html/mueteferrika.html retrieved on 24/03/2008.

[25] In *fiqh* terminology, they are referred to as *zhannī* or non-decisive.

[26] Categories of the legal rule

was carried out in Turkish, and there were serious official attempts at changing the language of Qur'anic recitation in prayer to Turkish.[27] In the aftermath of the breaking up of Soviet hegemony, a number of newly independent states with a majority Muslim population saw discussions on the script to be used for their national languages: Arabic, Latin or Cyrillic? The decision on the script system to be used was an indicator to the cultural affiliation that was sought – pro-Islamic, pro-Western or pro-Russian?

"Cleansing" the influenced languages from politically unwanted Arabic influences proved impossible, though. History records Turkish as well as Persian and other nationalist attempts to de-arabise and westernise language. Still, even modern standard Turkish (as well as Persian and a number of other "purified" languages) feed on Arabic lexis to a very large extent.

The incorporation of foreign language learning on a large and organized scale is a product of modernity. It may be worth looking at the factors which have led to the organized foreign language learning as part of the syllabus in the Islamic world and its implications for an Islamic identity.

Learning European foreign languages was a privilege to the ruling and wealthy classes and a limited number of scholars in the 18th and 19th centuries. The first delegations which were sent to the Western world to study European sciences, especially the military science, in the time of the Egyptian Khedive Muhammad Alī in the beginning 19th century were sent off with the intention to make up the information and development gap that had obviously arisen between the Islamic world and Europe. Studying European languages was seen to be a means to overcome

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[27] Aydar, Hidayet (2006): 'Muḥāwalāt al-atrāk iqāmat shā'ā'ir al-'ibādah bi l-lughat al-turkiyyah fī ḍaw' *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah' in Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah and its realization in contemporary societies*, Conference organized by the Dep. of Fiqh and Usūl al-Fiqh, IIUM, August 2006. (Conference Proceedings), Kuala Lumpur, vol. 2, pp.481-528, p.493. Anyway, none of these have been ingrained in the population and their religious practice.

this gap. The Khedive consequently founded an institute for translation and foreign languages, headed by al-Ṭahṭāwī.[28] Christian missionary schools soon spread in Egypt, Lebanon and elsewhere in the Islamic world. Characteristically, the exposure to the European culture and civilization in a time where the backwardness of the Islamic world was striking left an admiring impact in a large part of that generation, and instead of technology and weaponry as planned, European ideas found their ways into the Islamic world, too. Gradually, Arabic came to be seen as a stale medium of even staler Islamic sciences, while European foreign languages seemed to be surrounded by the aura of modernity, a perception which influenced the way of accessing and using the different languages psychologically. The cultural affiliation this phenomenon produced in the societal elite of the Islamic world is notorious. An anecdote of history tells us that the last Ottoman Sultan, Abdul Mejid, was taken in surprise by the abolishment of Khilāfah as pronounced by Kemal Atatürk on March 23rd, 1924, while lying on his bed reading Montaigne.[29]

In spite of the described nationalist and secularizing endeavours, Arabic is still a strong unifying bond. The number of those who have learnt Arabic as a foreign language is not statistically traceable, but the status of Arabic in primary, secondary and tertiary education throughout the Islamic world gives an idea on the language's contemporary importance and people's efforts to learn it. Even today, with the political disunity of the Islamic world, the Islamic scholar from Malaysia is still able to converse with his colleagues in Bukhara or Medina or Bosnia or Istanbul – in Arabic. They do share the same educational background, refer to the same books and discuss shared concepts. On a more basic level, apart from the scholarly, wherever you travel in the Islamic world, you will be familiar with the new environment with

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[28]   http://www.dur.ac.uk/daniel.newman/al-Tahtawi.html, retrieved on 16-01-2008.
[29]   Reiss, Tom (2005): *The Orientalist. Solving the Mystery of a Strange and Dangerous Life*. New York: Random House, p.118.

the *adhān* being called out in Arabic, Qur'ān being recited in Arabic and prayers being led in Arabic.

The Perspective of Cultural Linguistics and Psycholinguistics

We may start this paragraph with the most obvious cognitive component; the script system. The script system individuals grew up with or were educated in will always stay their preferred door to acquire information. A person primarily educated in Arabic, or an Arabic script system, will choose this access, whereas one educated in any other language, even if able to read Arabic, will most likely prefer that access for cultivation purposes or even leisure reading. As language is an expression of a cultural framework of reference, in which language you read may decide over what you read and which information will preoccupy and form your way of thinking. The decision about foreign languages to be learned is definitely way-giving to the cultural orientation of generations. If, to give a simplified example, any Ministry of Education in any one of the Islamic countries decides to have French as a second foreign language instead of Arabic, generations of students will have access to Balzac, but not to Shāfiʿiʾs *Risalāh*, their individual and communal reference framework and part of identity thus being shaped, we may even say artificially produced in a way that alienates them from Islamic culture and a holistic Islamic identity.

Familiarity with and knowledge of the Arabic language comes automatically with memorizing and studying the Qur'ān, even at a basic level. Certain words are always recognized by every reader, even if he manages to read the script, but does not understand or speak the language itself. As long as Islām was the basis of life, and the Qur'ān the basis of intellectual activity, the preoccupation and mastery of the Arabic language came about naturally. Ibn Khaldūn mentions the continuous instruction of children in the Qur'ān in the Islamic countries as one of the insignia of Islam and

emphasises its importance as a basis for all knowledge.[30] This instruction, no doubt, is bound to the Arabic language. It is worthwhile to look at another quotation from Ibn Taymiyyah:

> Know that the frequent use of the language influences the mind, ethics and religion in a strong and clear way, and it also leads to the resemblance of this generation of the *Ummah* to the companions (*Ṣaḥābah*) and the generation following them (*Tabiʿūn*). Resembling them, in turn, accounts for the increase of intellect, religion and ethics[31] .

What he obviously had in mind is the difference between the concepts which are carried by Arabic, as the linguistic tool of Islamic culture, and those ideas and concepts carried by other languages as signifiers of different cultures.

The question of the most original way to acquire authentic Islamic knowledge as a factor of identity formation deserves discussion, too. Any translation from one language to another resembles a process of sieving, part of information being – though involuntarily – held back, or encoded in ways that direct the reader's understanding to some aspects to the exclusion of others. Every translation is the encoding of a decoded text into another language, with a different cultural and historical reference framework. Aspects of the original code, even if not activated or not understood at a particular time and in particular circumstances, but existent and carried on through the times, will be cut off. To illustrate this, we might refer to one example in *Sūrat al-ʿAlaq* (96: 1-3). Allāh says:

> Read, in the name of your Lord Who created, Who created the human being from an *'alaq*. Read, and your Lord will be the most generous.

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30   Ibn Khaldūn (2003), *Al-Muqaddimah*, Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm. Book Six, Chapter 39, p.448.
31   Ibn Taymiyyah, *Iqtidā'*, p.224.

The root word *'allaqa* means to stick to, or to cling or adhere to. The meaning of *'alaq* is also used to designate clotted blood, *'alaqa* may refer to a leech.[32] However, any translation fixes one meaning to the exclusion of the others. Should you translate it as a clot of blood, or a leech-like creature, the more scientifically appropriate translation of the embryo in the blastocyst stage which might look like a clot, or resemble a leech in later phases of development, and which actually clings to the womb; this interrelation is lost. As people in the time of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) did not have any information on the stages of embryonic development, they may or may not have grasped the relation between the probable meanings of the word and the described reality, and it was only for our generations to fully understand the implication of the text. Still, there may be details to this and to other texts that only the following generations will be able to discern.

All the same, the word *al-Raḥīm*, The Merciful, one of the 99 names of Allāh SWT, has the same root as the word *raḥmah*, mercy, and *raḥīm*, the womb. All these associations are lost in translation, which leads to a disruption of the inherent cognitive dynamism. The existence of this dynamism, or rather the existence of the tools which allow for it, will have a greater impact on the communal than on the individual level, where associations may be shared and act as a common reference.

Arabic has quite a unique way of forming words from a basic root of three (sometimes four) letters. In this way, whole word groups are formed belonging to the same associative network. The result of this is a network of meanings (*shabakat al-dalālāt*) which is carried on with the term itself. As long as this network is accessible – which is the case for the Arabic speaker – the affiliated meanings are accessible in all their dimensions, too. As this network gets lost in translation to other languages, or is not naturally part of them, a lot of these dimensions of possible meanings

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[32]   Larousse (1988), *Al-Mu'jam al-'Arabī al-Asāsī,* n.p., p.859.

and inherent links are not accessible. This requires some examples for illustration:

The word pattern, vocalization and inserted letters, enable to designate different concepts belonging to one associative group. For the original root $k-t-b$, you can form *kātib* (writer), *kitāb* (book), *maktab* (office), *maktabah* (library), *maktūb* (letter), also used to designate destiny or what "has already been written down" and so on. In other words, associated things and concepts are generally verbalized by the same group of consonant radicals. Any newly arriving concept or thing can be given its term according to the associative group of radicals.[33]

Being aware that the linguistic structure provides the speaker with the tools of categorizing the world around him and expressing these categories and concepts, we may infer that a speaker of Arabic does organize the world around him in logically structured associative word groups. This inherent ability qualifies Arabic as a model scientific language, i.e. as language of science, per *definitonem*.

Allah SWT says: "*And He taught Adam all the names*". (*Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2: 31) Generations of scholars have discussed the implication of this *āyah*, and whether language is created, in other words, whether Allah SWT has communicated the names for things and concepts to humankind (*tawfīqī*) or whether they are based on agreement of the community of speakers (*tawqīfī*).[34] The origin of language has been subject to scholarly research as well as the parts of speech and different kinds of *khiṭāb* or communication in Islamic thought. As is well known, Aristotle's teachings have been widely absorbed and discussed by Muslim philosophers. His particular view on language and mental representation (it is the thought which generates language)[35] , has been

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[33] For the sake of completeness, we should annotate here that foreign words may also be assimilated into Arabic ("arabicised") by adapting them to the word pattern.

[34] 'Abd al-Salām, Aḥmad Shaykh (2006), *Al-Lughawiyāṭ al-'Āmmah: Madkhal Islāmī wa mawdhū'āt mukhtārah*, Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Research Centre, 2nd edition 2006, p.160ff.

[35] "Spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul", Ackrill, John L. (transl) (1963): *Aristotle's Categories and De Interpretatione*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.43.

countered, in modern linguistic studies, by the Whorf-Sapir thesis that it is rather the linguistic categories which coin our categories of thought. The divergent points of view are widely known to linguists. Without going into the details of the linguistic scholarly discussion, we may concede that the language we use does have an impact on the way we perceive and categorize reality, while there may be influences of this reality on our language to a certain extent. The way of categorization will definitely have an impact on the individual and communal identity of the community of speakers. Arabic, as a distinctive signifier, provides a model of categorization which is flexible to incorporate changes in the described reality around us while preserving its particular network of meanings and the inherent link to revelation. This flexibility is innate in its mechanism of word formation.

We cannot pass by the complex of psycholinguistics in this regard without mentioning the emotional or subconscious component. It has already been mentioned that the Qur'ān is considered to be a miracle, and that this I'*jāz* mainly consists of the inimitability of its language. Upon listening to a sound recitation or reciting the Qur'ān properly, observing the rules of *tajwīd*, other psychological factors come to bear. The psychologically soothing function is well known. A lot of the expressions of the Qur'ān are onomatopoeic, creating a unique relationship between the pronounced word and its meaning. Even a non-Arabic speaker may discern the general content of a *sūrah* by the sound of it, which may be threatening as in Surah *al-Ḥāqqah*, soothing, informative and repetitive as in Surah *al-Rahmān*. The implication of this aspect includes the speaker of Arabic as well as others. Reciting the Qur'ān and listening to its recitation fulfills a very important function in Muslim society at large, and needless to say that this unique combination of sound and meaning is totally lost in any translation.

The cultural radiance of the Arabic language within the Islamic world is permeating linguistics. Arabic loan words are to be found in any language of any one of the majority

Muslim peoples all over the world, starting from Malay, to Turkish, Persian, Hindi, Swahili, Urdu and many others. The influence in vocabulary is such a vast one that, as an Arabic speaker, you will recognize and understand large parts of speech in any of these languages, and as a native speaker of any of these, you will feel a cultural proximity by language. A proximity that works on a secondary level across other languages, too: A speaker of Persian who learns Turkish, or a speaker of Turkish who learns Malay, will come across a number of *déjà vus*. Across the Islamic world, the cultural radiance of Arabic as the language of Islām and the sciences has influenced the European languages to a great extent, most of them, obviously, Spanish, but loan words like chemistry, alcohol, sugar, geography, algebra, algorithm, zenith and many more can be found in variations in English, German, French, Italian and numerous other languages.

Having the reference framework in mind, we ought to introduce an additional distinction among non-Arabic languages which have, as a means of expression of majority Muslim peoples, become linguistic tools and carriers of Islamic culture themselves (like Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Malay etc) and those languages traditionally expressing a different cultural reference system like English, German, Russian and the likes. As a means of Islamic cultivation, we might state that the originality of concepts will naturally be best accessible in Arabic, while it will loose clarity in any other Islamic *koine* and be more difficult to access in languages characterized as a means of expression of mainly Non-Muslim speakers. The impact of Arabic loan words in a non-Arabic mother tongue on Islamic identity formation may be found in the affiliated concepts they stand for as well as in the proximity it creates to the Arabic language as main medium of Islam. However, as is the case with Arabic itself, the usage of Arabic loan words is not a guarantee for an Islamic identity, be it communal or individual.

As has been mentioned, a large scale exposure to foreign language learning and usage in the Islamic world took place

during colonialism, and this background seems to bear an impact on the psychology of dealing with foreign languages as opposed to the native tongue until today, as well as it had an impact on the Muslims' individual and communal identity. French colonialism, for instance, was to a large extent language colonialism. Native languages being banned from organized colonial education, generations of children in the French colonies around the world had to memorize the famous sentence "*Nos ancêtres les Gaulois étaient blonds*" (Our ancestors, the Gauls, were blond). The cultural confusion of the elite, as, mind you, school education in the colonies was only accessible to a chosen few 'natives', to be able to express themselves only in the colonialist language, led to a cultural disaster and intellectual dependence which is persistent until today. As a very dramatic reaction to this, we may tell the story of Edmond Laforest, a famous Haitian writer, who committed suicide by tying a French Larousse dictionary (insignium and symbol of the French language) to his neck and throwing himself off a bridge[36] . Colonization has had a huge impact in the field of language and identity to date. Less dramatic than our suicide example, but persistently, we may observe urban elites in the former colonized regions of the world who would prefer speaking the former colonialist language to their native one and thereby distinguish themselves from the 'uneducated', and large parts of the populations of Islamic (and other) regions who are unable to express themselves properly in their native tongue.

We need to understand the role language has played in the process of cultural alienation and secularization during the last two centuries of political dependence of the Islamic world in order to build our own theories of the importance of language instructions with regard to Arabic as a language for special purposes, foreign languages and define our demands. In this context, there is another problem which deserves discussion: We have already stated that there is no evidence whatsoever for any ethnic or nationalistic preference, and that the advantage of knowing Arabic is

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[36]   Kramsch, Claire (1998), *Language and Culture, Oxford Introduction to Language Study,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.65.

rather to be seen as the mastery of a tool which enables a deeper study and understanding of the texts, which in turn is dearly needed to incorporate newly arising situations into the *fiqhī* model. Can we conclude from this that a non-Arabic speaking Muslim is defective in his *Dīn*, as he is not in possession of this tool?

In order to answer this question, we should come back to the Arabic (native) speaker and his access to the texts. As is widely known, there is a dichotomy between spoken Arabic, which differs from region to region, the language of Qur'anic revelation, and the modern standard Arabic used in writing and media. Without indulging into this phenomenon sometimes referred to as *triglossia*, we can summarize for the sake of this paper that speaking an everyday version of Arabic alone does not automatically qualify the speaker to understand the texts of revelation, as does the knowledge of modern standard Arabic not immediately make one an expert in Qur'anic expressions. Basically, even the native Arabic speaker is in need of language instruction both in standard Arabic as well as Qur'anic Arabic. The language of Quraysh is not part of everyday speech today. Spoken language since the time of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) has been subject to change, the Qur'ān, however, has been preserved in the very form and expression it was revealed in.

Still, we may say that the native speaker of Arabic has half a tool in his hand, but it is up to him to complete it and, first and foremost, enact it, i.e. accomplish the link between knowledge and action. Still, on the road to understanding, he has an edge over a non-Arabic speaker, as he can, figuratively speaking, take the shortcut on the road to knowledge.

What is expected of the non-Arabic speaking Muslim with regard to this tool? Imam al-Shāfi'ī has expressed the view that every Muslim who is capable to do so ought to learn Arabic, as Allah SWT has chosen this language for revelation, but that it is not forbidden to use non-Arabic languages[37] .

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[37]   Ibn Taymiyyah, *Iqtidā'*, p. 219

When we understand gaining knowledge as one of the demands of the Islamic religion, then learning Arabic surely is part of it. Memorizing some surahs to recite in prayer is the most basic demand and an obligation, learning the Arabic script to be able to recite the Qur'ān is a more qualified demand, whereas learning (classical) Arabic is highly recommended, but not compulsory. It is rather the *enactment* of knowledge, its translation into actions that counts and will be rewarded, not the knowledge in its own right. If we understand the comprehension of the texts of revelation as a religious obligation (*wājib*), so surely is learning Arabic, based on the *fiqhī* guideline that whatever is necessary to implement an obligation is in itself obligatory.[38] Still, there is a difference between an individual obligation (*wājib 'ayn*) and a communal obligation (*wājib kifa'i*) here.[39] In other words, learning and mastering Arabic to the extent which enables an understanding of the texts and can be considered as meeting one of the qualifications for *ijtihād* must be taken care of by parts of the *Ummah*, but is not obligatory upon every single individual. However, it is highly recommended (*mandūb*) for any individual to strive and acquire at least a basic knowledge of Arabic.

Islām being a universal message addressing all of mankind, the call to it needs to be conveyed to diverse peoples in diverse languages. If we understand that conveying the message of Islam is an obligation (*wajīb*), then whatever is necessary to fulfill this obligation becomes obligatory in its own right. In other words, there is an obligation of acquiring foreign languages with the purpose of fulfilling the demand of delivering the message of Islām worldwide. This obligation may be individual (*farḍ 'ayn*) or communal (*farḍ kifāyah*), depending on the circumstances.

The aspect of power of interpretation has implicitly been answered in the preceding paragraphs. We have concluded that the profound knowledge of Arabic is essential for the

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38   The *fiqhī* principle in question is "*mā lā yutimmu al-wājib illā bihi, fahuwa wājib*" (Whatever is necessary to perform an obligation is obligatory).
39   Ibn Taymiyyah, *Iqtidā'*, p.224

interpretation of texts and the derivation of legal rules from the sources, or *ijtihād*. Mastery of this tool is indispensable for this purpose, and whoever attempts at doing so without this sound foundation falls prey to deluding himself and others. Still, acquiring the tool, mastery of the language, is not bound by the ethnic or national origin of a person; and those who do master it need to be aware that the dissemination of knowledge is an entrusted good, an *amānah*, and a blessing which Allah SWT has bestowed on them, not a means of power over those who do not possess it.

Conclusion

This paper tried to outline some facts and mechanisms with regard to the Arabic language as an identity creating tool within the Islamic world, incorporating textual and historical perspectives as well as elements of psycho - and cultural linguistics. The Arabic language is the original signifier of Islamic culture with its own inherent dynamics. As such, it is one of the insignia of Islamic culture, a strong unifying bond across the Islamic *Ummah* and its mastery – as a tool – is important for a deep study and understanding of the Islamic sciences. In this sense, to further the knowledge of Arabic would clearly be a step towards a general intellectual improvement.

We may concede that intellectual movement and the aptitude for change is to be expected where the linguistic key to understand revelation in the original and to link the contents to reality is available, whereas it may be slower or less dynamic without this tool. This is true with regard to the individual in terms of his personal development, but more so with regard to the community of Muslims. However, the existence of the tool without activation does not contribute to or account for an Islamic identity.

The relationship between language and Islamic identity should not be taken as a clear cause and effect linkage, where Arabic automatically leads to an Islamic identity and its absence automatically causes the absence of an Islamic

identity. Not every native speaker or scholar of Arabic is a Muslim in the first place, and not every Muslim with a distinct Islamic individual identity living in a distinct Islamic community bearing all the insignia of Islām masters Arabic. We should rather consider the Arabic language as an important tool in constructing this identity, bearing in mind that the tool itself is in need of intellectual, political and practical investment to trigger it into efficiency.

With the preceding analysis and description of the importance of Arabic as a tool in the formation of an Islamic identity, the implications for the educational systems in the Islamic world are quite obvious. It has become clear that Arabic cannot be considered as a foreign language with regard to the Muslim, even if it is not his native tongue. All the necessary steps ought to be taken to introduce Arabic as soon as possible into the syllabus of primary education, so that the existing natural affiliation to the language is being built up during the educational process. Also and quite clearly, it should be given first priority over any foreign language like English, French, Spanish or Chinese. It is indeed the responsibility of decision and policy makers in the Islamic world to provide the next generations with the most important tool of individual as well as communal identity: To understand their own culture.