Easing Arabic Grammar and Reforming Arabic Writing

Taha Hussein

From the Papers of Dr. Taha Hussein — published in Al-Hilal, June 1, 1988

Among the papers of the late Dean Dr. Taha Hussein is found the copy of an undated letter, addressed to the Minister of Education, or the Minister of Public Instruction as the post was then called, concerning the easing of Arabic grammar and the reform of Arabic writing. In it he says: "These two problematic questions carry a danger so great that it scarcely needs description or explanation." These two subjects preoccupied Taha Hussein and the men of his generation; some among them, such as the late Abd al-Aziz Pasha Fahmi, turned to consider adopting the Latin script instead, a notion Taha Hussein rejected and contested with the fiercest denial and the sharpest dispute. Yet these two problematic questions remain, to this day, unresolved, and continue to preoccupy people of every station, learned and common alike, in Egypt and throughout the Arab countries. Perhaps the publication of this letter today may contribute something toward a resolution of these two problematic questions.

Taha Hussein says in his letter:

Your Excellency, Minister of Public Instruction,

You have graciously done me the honor of discussing with me two questions of the very greatest and most far-reaching consequence for our practical life. The first concerns easing Arabic grammar and making it suited to the nature of the age we live in, and consonant with the temper of the modern mind. The other concerns reforming Arabic writing, so that it may protect readers from error, and enable them to read a text exactly as its author intended it to be written, and exactly as its author wishes it to be read by others.

I have no doubt that these two questions carry a danger so great it scarcely needs description or explanation, and it is enough for me to say that the very soundness of the Arabic language's life hangs upon the resolution of these two problematic questions. We deceive ourselves most grievously, and delude ourselves most shamefully, when we imagine that we are teaching our pupils and students the Arabic language, refining

their command of it, giving them insight into it, and enabling them to express themselves correctly in it, or to understand it correctly when they read it in books and newspapers, or hear it from orators and lecturers — in the way that people express themselves in their own languages, and in the way that people understand their own languages.

In truth, we scarcely achieve any of this at all. Experience has proven beyond doubt or question that our young people fall far, far short of even a middling knowledge of their own language — let alone mastering it, and handling it as one who owns it, understands it, and is versed in its subtleties and its secrets. And yet our young people spend, in the study of Arabic, and their teachers spend alongside them, a great deal of time; they endure, and their teachers endure alongside them, a heavy burden of effort. They study it for four years in primary education, and five years in secondary education, and then they reach university or the higher schools still gravely incapable of expressing their own ideas and thoughts correctly in writing, in speech, or in conversation — let alone of expressing those ideas and thoughts in splendid poetry or genuine literary prose.

The Ministry of Public Instruction has itself acknowledged this truth, once experience had convinced it and events had shown it plainly, and so it put to those concerned with teaching Arabic a recent inquiry, asking them the causes of this evident incapacity, and what means might be adopted to remedy it and clear our young people of it. I received this inquiry from the Ministry some months ago, along with everyone else who received it, and many people responded to it, in private communications addressed to the Ministry, and in articles and essays published in the newspapers and magazines. I, however, chose silence, and elected to read the Ministry's inquiry and not answer it, for I had despaired of any use in answering, confident that it would accomplish nothing, certain that it would reach the Ministry along with all the other answers reaching it — to be read once, and then filed away in some safe place, or else surrendered to the neglect that ends, eventually, in loss.

I was quite certain in my own mind that the Ministry would take up none of the measures I might propose to it, since adopting any or all of these measures requires a boldness that official bodies rarely venture upon except after long hesitation — and this hesitation, I feared, would end only in retreat and in patient submission to what is wrong.

And so I had, for some time now, resolved upon a policy of my own: to refrain from pressing the Ministry on certain aspects of reform that require firmness and resolve, boldness and initiative, and a readiness to confront the difficulties that arise from excessive conservatism. I chose instead to let the course of this reform proceed with the natural march of development, imposing itself upon the generations little by little. I would not have departed from this policy, which I had held to for some while, had I not found, in Your Excellency's own remarks, and in your earnest desire to reform the state of the Arabic language, something that restored to me a measure of hope, and encouraged me to return to thinking about matters I had long since ceased to consider. I am delighted, truly delighted, to observe that the views I have heard from Your Excellency on reforming grammar and writing correspond entirely to what I myself have longed and aspired to for many years now. Let Your Excellency's engagement with this reform be a good omen, then, and a happy prelude to successful steps, God willing.

Some years ago, I observed, in a report I submitted to one of the previous Ministers of Public Instruction, that the grammar we teach our pupils and students in this fourteenth century of the Hijra is the very same grammar that was taught in Basra and Kufa, and the other centers of Islamic culture, in the second and third centuries of the Hijra — that is, we teach grammar today in exactly the manner it was taught more than a thousand years ago. I observed, too, that every field of learning has developed, its foundations, its rules, and its methods of teaching and inquiry all having changed — every field, that is, except the sciences of the Arabic language, which have remained exactly as they were, neither developing nor changing, save through a process of abridgment that smooths nothing difficult, but rather makes the easy difficult, and drives the clear into obscurity.

Nor is it the sciences alone that have developed — or, more precisely, the sciences have developed only because the mind itself has developed and changed, producing knowledge at odds with what it once produced, and losing its taste for the old learning that the old mind once found palatable. There is no doubt that we could never think of teaching physics and medicine today in the manner once taught by al-Razi, or Ptolemy, or Aristotle, or Galen — and yet we remain content to teach grammar and morphology by the very same method once used by al-Kisa'i and Sibawayh.

The source of this strange contradiction is an error of judgment into which people fell long ago, which then settled into their minds, mingled with their convictions, and became difficult to dislodge. They came to imagine that grammar is the language itself, and that changing its rules and foundations is to change, and to corrupt, the language. And since the Arabic language is the language of the Noble Qur'an and the Purified Sunna, it ought, they reasoned, to be raised above all change and alteration, and any interference with it, in whatever form, ought to be resisted as exposing it to change or development.

And what is stranger still is that the language has in fact changed and developed more than once over its long history, without this ever touching the language of the Qur'an and the Hadith, or affecting it in the slightest — yet people never noticed this, or paid it no heed, and went on believing that grammar is the language, and that changing its rules and foundations is a great evil.

And yet grammar is nothing more than a set of rules intended to regulate the use of the language in the nearest and easiest way possible. Grammar was itself an innovation at the very dawn of Islamic civilization; its rules were devised where none had existed before, and the learned imams differed among themselves in how they described, fixed, and presented them — yet this disagreement never corrupted the language, nor exposed it to any danger, great or small.

What danger, indeed, does the language face when the grammarians of Kufa and Basra disagree, for instance, over whether the subject of a nominal sentence is nominative by virtue of its initial position or by virtue of its predicate? Or over whether the six special nouns take the nominative with a wāw and the accusative with an alif and the genitive with a yā', or take the nominative with an implicit ḍamma before the wāw, the accusative with an implicit fatḥa before the alif, and the genitive with an implicit kasra before the yā', or are inflected by vowel and letter together, or by an inflection merely presumed upon that letter? The subject will remain nominative whatever the cause assigned to its being so, and the six nouns will remain inflected in that same well-known way, whatever mark of inflection is said to govern them.

And in just this way, every disagreement among the scholars resembling these two examples has never changed the language, nor exposed it to harm. Were we today to introduce a new doctrine in fixing the rules of grammar, and simply say that the subject is nominative,

saying nothing of what causes it to be so, this new doctrine would have no effect whatsoever on the language as such — for the subject would remain nominative exactly as before, and the language would run its course exactly as it always has. But this new doctrine might well spare the pupil and the student a labor that serves no purpose and yields no benefit — the labor of searching for that abstract governing factor which, for the grammarians of Basra, rendered the subject nominative (namely, "the initial position" itself), or the labor of grasping that curious game by which, for the grammarians of Kufa, the subject was said to render the predicate nominative, and the predicate to render the subject nominative in turn.

And how greatly the pupil and the student, in an age when knowledge has multiplied and the varieties of learning have grown so intricate, need to be spared labor that serves no purpose, and to be given instead only such knowledge as they are able to digest. If we fail to do this, we shall only succeed in making them detest learning itself, and turning them away from it entirely. And I believe we have indeed succeeded, thus far, in making Arabic and its sciences hateful to our pupils and students; I do not think the Egyptian youth detests any subject he studies at school so much as he detests grammar, morphology, semantics, rhetoric, and the science of literary embellishment — and this is because these subjects bear no relation to his own nature, speak nothing to his mind, and suit neither his temperament nor his disposition, but appear to him instead as riddles beyond comprehension, or absurdities he cannot bring himself to take seriously.

And how would you have the pupil understand that when we say "Muhammad has arrived," we must posit a hidden subject for the verb, and that this hidden subject must be a pronoun referring back to Muhammad? And how would you have the student understand that this hidden pronoun may, on one occasion, be hidden by mere permission, and, on another, be hidden by strict necessity, and that in every case it is indeclinable, its position always that of the nominative? All this is talk the modern mind cannot digest, especially not in childhood or youth. When we impose it upon the boy or the young man, we impose it only upon his memory, and we require of the pupil that he memorize what he does not understand, and repeat what makes no sense to him.

I consider the reform of Arabic writing to be no less pressing a need than the reform of grammar — indeed, it may well be more pressing still, and more widely felt; for not everyone is obliged to learn grammar, but

everyone is obliged to read and write, and everyone needs to be safeguarded against error when reading and writing. Your own remarks, broadcast some while ago, have already depicted the people's need for this reform with the utmost fidelity to the truth, and it is my strong belief that the root of the trouble in this matter is the very same root that troubles the matter I have just discussed.

For it has settled into people's minds that writing is a sacred thing which ought never to be touched, nor ever subjected to change — just as grammar is held sacred and beyond touch or change. And people have forgotten that writing itself has been altered and developed, and has been subjected to reform by scholars, without any harm befalling the language, or any corruption afflicting it as a result.

Circumstance decreed that Arabic writing, like the other Semitic scripts, should be deficient: it depicts the fixed consonants but neglects the fluid vowel-sounds. And from this it has followed that writing scarcely serves its purpose at all; it remains, in any case, exceedingly difficult, and can be read properly only by those who already understand a text before they read it.

This might perhaps be tolerable so long as writing remained confined to a narrow class of people who monopolized it and kept it to themselves — just as priests once monopolized learning and kept it for themselves alone in certain ages. But once the constitution requires that all people read and write, and once democracy has abolished this kind of monopoly, we can no longer demand that ordinary people understand a text before they can read it, nor that they possess the intelligence of scholars and specialists; rather, we must make reading a tool that enables understanding, not a goal understanding itself struggles to reach.

And there is no way to achieve this except by making writing as complete as speech itself — depicting in it both the fixed consonants and the fluid vowel-sounds, just as speech itself is complete, depicting both these kinds of sounds. When we pronounce the word munṭaliq, we write it with only the letters kāf, tā', and bā' — yet we never pronounce it without these three short vowels that permeate its pronunciation. Why, then, do we depict them in speech, and fail to depict them in writing? And how are simple readers, seeing only these three fixed consonants, to know how to pronounce them in the very way the writer intended? And if not, then what path remains open to it at all, and how can it ever be made available

to people who are neither scholars nor especially quick of mind?

And if the great imams among the scholars of Islam themselves recognized the danger of this very question with regard to the Noble Qur'an itself, and accordingly attempted to depict these fluid vowel-sounds in the Noble Codex — first through diacritical dots, and later through the well-known vowel signs — then what is to prevent us from continuing along this very path our predecessors paved for us? Are we not permitted to do as well as the imams of the first and second centuries did? How can we be reproached for what they were never reproached for, and how can we be blamed for what they were never blamed for? And which is better: to follow the very path they took, completing what they began and achieving what they intended, or to remain where we are, cutting the Arabic language off from life, fruitfulness, and growth?

It does not occur to me that we should adopt the Latin script, as the Turks have done. As for myself, I have no doubt that undertaking this reform is an obligation from which there is no escape, unless we permit ourselves to neglect the language itself, and leave it at the mercy of shifting circumstance. But achieving this reform is no simple matter; it will likely require a body of specialists, versed in the science of writing systems and calligraphy, and skilled in handling them, to study this question in depth, and then to present whatever practical solutions they arrive at — solutions combining precision, ease, and simplicity. Perhaps an open public competition would prove a fruitful method here, once the scholars' opinion has settled, and they have reached agreement on the necessity of adopting this reform.

In sum, I propose, first, that a small committee be formed to work out the easing of grammar, and to submit whatever it concludes on this simplification to Your Excellency, that you may form your own judgment, and present it, should you wish, to a broader and more varied body than this committee. And second, that on the question of reforming writing, you consult the various circles concerned with the Arabic language and its sciences — that Al-Azhar be consulted, that Dar al-Ulum be consulted, that the University be consulted, and that the Language Academy be consulted. And if all these bodies agree upon the essential principle — namely, that depicting the fluid sounds, or the vowel marks, as part of the words themselves is a genuine necessity, and a good without any harm in it — then let this reform be thrown open to a public competition, not in Egypt alone, nor in the Arab East alone, but in both East and West

together.

I beg that you will graciously accept, along with my fairest thanks and my highest regard, my most sincere greetings and my deepest reverence.