

Why are you studying Arabic?

Maria Grazia Imperiale – University of Glasgow

28 August 2014

It has been a month I am in Alexandria (Egypt), or *al-Iskandaryah* in Arabic, or *Alex* in the slang used by young cool people (that's what I have been told). I am doing an intensive individual Arabic course.

Arabic is complicated. It is common to say that it requires patience, practice, perseverance. I'd add it also requires the serenity to accept that you will not be able to write, that you will take a long time to copy from the whiteboard, that you will stumble and mumble when you read. And you will not understand what people say in the streets. And you will get lost, and at the beginning it will not be easy to find your way around.



Arab people are multilingual speakers as they live in *diglossia*: they have a language for news, books, academic writing, the Coran and the prayers, which is *Fusha*. But they speak in dialect, or as they say, *bil-3amyya*, which is the language of love, struggle, movies, jokes. The language of relationships.

Byl-3amyya la.

Nahnu natakallamu al-Fusha.

نحن نتكلم ألفصحى

“In dialect no. We speak in standard” my teacher reminds me when I use words in dialect.

So I find myself asking my new few Egyptian friends to teach me words, but please, teach me in *Fusha*. Sometimes they giggle, while using this *foreign language*. “How do you say xxx in Fusha?” They ask each other.

Other friends instead feel more confident, and they tell me that *Fusha* is not a foreign language for them because they studied it at school, but they are aware that they are more fluent in English than in Fusha, and they probably make more mistakes in this non-foreign language.

In the end, they teach me words in *3amyya* as well but I know I will not use them in class.

I feel I am learning the formal language of books, of academic articles. But not the one to build relationships.

“Why do you study Arabic *Fusha*?” Someone asks me.

“Mainly for my PhD”, I reply. “And also because I love Arab countries, and people. And *Fusha* is the basis to be able to communicate in Lebanon, in Palestine, in Egypt, in Morocco and elsewhere.”

I know I am not satisfied with this answer, but my interlocutor is, so at this stage I am not required to investigate more in depth into the reasons that brought me to Egypt to learn Arabic *Fusha*.

My reasons to learn... I love learning. I am a PhD student and I am used to learning. Every learning experience brings me joy and happiness. During this month I have been very porous, with the result of having been learning at every corner, from everyone. From very young guys, old men, my beautiful and patient teacher, my Italian friends. I have listened carefully to the opinions of supporters of the Egyptian revolution, of the Muslim Brotherhood, to Christian Copts and to very convinced Muslim. I listened to the frustration of women who told me about the sexual dreams they cannot fulfill since they are not married. I listened to people who tried to convince me that marrying 4 women is totally fine. I listened to people who want to escape because they are afraid of the military service.

I learned to appreciate Arabic and its taste.

Arabic tastes as *qahwa* (the Turkish or Lebanese coffee), smells as *shisha*, sounds as the incessant horns honks. It is the view of the sea and the lightly touching of clothes of people in the streets. It is delicate and strong at the same time, as the Palestinians. A mix of heartbreaking struggle and hopeful resilience.

I can write openly that I am quite proud with my learning attitude. I experimented deeply my own language of/for humility, as a poet once said in a seminar.

On the other hand, I am not used anymore to struggle for reading, or writing a few sentences. My brain, after three hours of class, invokes me to take a break and it switches from Arabic into English or Italian. I stubbornly continue to pathetically attempt to express myself in a sort of Arabic.

I am not used anymore to making such an effort. It is frustrating. I am not used anymore to being almost illiterate. And therefore to be so vulnerable.



My vulnerability disappears at night, when I find linguistic (and not only) relief and solace among a group of artists who welcomed me. They established an NGO for Art and Development about 15 years ago (www.gudran.com). Their activities range from workshops, to exhibitions, to film screening, discussions, poetry night, literature night. Their underlying philosophy is that Art could potentially reach all the people in the society and work as a common language to create bonds, ultimately to develop their own society.

They faced many obstacles because the society was not ready to open its doors to art. Still they stand proudly and strongly, with an irreducible determination and welcoming smile which I have come to distinguish as typically Arab. The Art centre became a crucial spot for gathering people together without

being scared of showing who you really are. It is a life saving for the Egyptian people who are at the border between the respect of their own society and their dreams and needs which have already crossed the line.

We go to a bar to share some beers and chat. They apologize because they cannot speak Italian fluently (well, in fact they do speak it..), so at our table we use Italian, English, French, Spanish and Arabic. Other foreigners are with us, Spaniards, Moroccans, Germans, French.. an international table.

“How many languages do you speak?”, I ask to one of them.

“Mah, not many..” (He speaks perfectly Italian, French, English, Arabic; then he also speaks Spanish and German..)

“Wow, it’s amazing.”

“No, no it’s not amazing.. It’s normal to live as and with human beings.”

The simplicity, humility, honesty of his answer let me speechless.

Here I found my answer to the question why I am learning Arabic...

My silence is broken by their favourite language, the language of art.

One of the best violinists of the Middle East takes his violin and starts to pluck its strings. Silence and music. Only his melody echoes in the bar. We accompany him clapping, and someone starts singing a popular song. We, the foreigners, clap and smile, without chanting. I observe them all. My eyes cross someone else’s ones. I feel observed as well.

I remember Edward Said’s words in the conclusions of his book *After the last sky* (I do not have the reference with me, so my apologies for not being precise): *every one dealing with Palestinians should remember that they too are watching. It’s not only the researcher that watches, represents them and creates them through his representation. They have their own voice which is strong and irreducible.*



I feel observed. An observed participant observer.

I close my eyes and just listen to the music, to rub in my mind this moment, as one of the best ones I have lived in Alexandria.

Stop. Electricity is cut off. Again. Today it’s the fourth time. Every cut lasts approximately 2 hours. I close my laptop, whose battery is almost flat. I reach some friends to enjoy my last night here.

Maa Salama, ya Iskandaryah.