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Special Issue: Beyond Arabic:  
Multilingual poetics in premodern  
Islamic worlds

## Editor's introduction: Beyond Arabic in premodern Islamic worlds

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Writing a history of multilingualism in the premodern Islamic world(s)<sup>1</sup> is very challenging; it requires our limited vision and methods to go beyond traditional area studies and overcome long-established prejudices related to race and ethnicity rooted in religious chauvinism. The task also compels us to confront the limitations of national, linguistic, religious, and cultural perspectives produced in both the modern and premodern Islamic world (s). I would argue that a theoretical frame for studying Arab-Islamic multilingualism, even in premodern periods, must draw from the insights of Postcolonial Studies, which takes into account the epistemic and ontological consequences of colonization or imperialism. Though colonizers, in premodernity and modernity alike, have tried to impose certain languages or ideologies on the colonized, the result has always been multilingualism, hybridity, and the co-existence or clashing of languages

1 The plural 'world(s)' throughout the article is used to emphasize the diversity of multilingualism in each premodern Islamic region. It avoids portraying premodern Islamic societies as homogeneous cultures and highlights and respects their internal differences.



and cultures. This special issue of *postmedieval*, ‘Beyond Arabic: Multilingual poetics in premodern Islamic worlds,’ starts from the premise that, despite the obvious dominance of the Arabic language in religious, cultural, and political life, premodern Islamic worlds were fundamentally multilingual and engaged deeply in comparative practices across a range of languages and literary traditions that co-existed for a long time in harmony.

The methodologies adopted in ‘Beyond Arabic’ have enabled scholars to develop effective approaches based on direct and deep engagement with primary sources. These methodologies highlight several overlooked aspects of premodern transculturation rooted in the multilingual heritage of Arab-Islamic poetics, where Arabs and non-Arabs absorbed elements from multiple cultures, creating new, hybrid identities. ‘Beyond Arabic’ demonstrates how both transculturation and multilingualism were deeply rooted in premodern Arab-Islamic societies, which in turn generated significant waves of knowledge production in Arabic and fostered an appreciation for cultural diversity. By placing these premodern multilingual practices in conversation with the broader history of premodern World Literature, this special issue challenges the Euro-American focus and methodologies of the discipline of Comparative Literature.

## Deconstructing modern preconceptions

Nationalistic education and its published scholarship in the modern Arab world often ignore the ethnicity of premodern scholars who produced significant works in Arabic, for various political, nationalistic, and/or religious reasons. The mother tongues of many premodern scholars were intentionally overlooked to serve new goals related to the formation of modern Arab national history after European colonialism, a common practice related to modern nationalism where difference is often ignored.<sup>2</sup> Modern nationalism and other regional collective identity movements tend to ignore internal differences in the interest of avoiding conflicts between identities. Instead, their rhetoric emphasizes similarities in order to construct a unified image of an ‘imagined community that is represented as homogeneous, as composed of alike people’ (Coller 2006, 108). Michiel Leezenberg, a scholar of modern Islamic philosophy, stresses the linguistic dimension of this process, arguing that the creation of unified citizens or cultures happens through universal education provided in the standardized version of the ‘mother tongue’ adopted by any modern governing state:

One of the main aspects of modern nationalism, after all, is that all subjects are to be turned into full-blooded citizens, and into loyal

2 In Arabic, the more commonly used translation for ‘nationalism’ is *watāniyya*, but this translation is conceptually misleading. A more accurate Arabic translation that aligns with the modern Euro-American concept and scholarship of nationalism is *التعصب* *al-taʿaṣb* *لبلد الفرد* *al-layd al-ʿaṣy* which refers to ‘the blind patriotism of one’s country.’



members of the nation, by universal education in a standardised, unified and codified version of what is called ‘the mother tongue’; and that the spread and implementation of this mother tongue through educational systems and institutions is one of the primary responsibilities of the new institution of the nation-state. (2021, 15)

As the concept of a national group within a specific territory evolved, governments endeavoured to shape their populations to be cohesive across various dimensions, including adopting a single, standardized national language (Wright 2004, 19). A manufactured monolingualism is therefore often characteristic of developing modern nation-states. In the modern Arab world, the imposition of a standardized national language has led to a loss of recognition for the diverse linguistic heritages that shaped premodern scholarly works and their multilingual roots. Modern nationalist policies tend to overlook or suppress the multilingual nature and varied mother tongues of premodern scholars to create a cohesive national history. In some cases, modern scholars confuse mastery of the Arabic language with being ethnically Arab. For instance, in his monumental, three-volume *‘Urūbat al-‘ulamā’ al-mansūbīn ilā al-buldān al-a‘jamīyah* (*The Arab Identity of Scholars Attributed to Non-Arab Countries*), Iraqi historian Nājī Ma‘rūf (d. 1974) endeavors to fabricate a paternal lineage connecting each premodern Islamic scholar to one of the Arab tribes, regardless of whether or not historical documents offer authentic geographic indications of these figures’ descent and mother tongues (1974). Such nationalistic scholarship suggests that religious chauvinism is often intertwined with political considerations of Arab ethnicity and its rigid definition, which was adopted later to highlight certain ethnic groups and tribes regardless.<sup>3</sup>

In the premodern Islamic world, the Arabic language served as an imperial language, exerting significant political, economic, and cultural influence over a vast geographic area and diverse population (al-Rahim 2021, 83). The spread of Arabic among non-Arabs was a natural consequence of the conquests.<sup>4</sup> Anyone aspiring to achieve social or political prominence within the Islamic empire needed to master written Arabic. Shawkat Toorawa emphasizes the close connection between learning to write in Arabic and the dissemination of religious, philosophical, and political concepts. He illustrates how written texts served as vehicles for asserting authority, establishing legitimacy, and defining identity within the Islamic empire (Toorawa 2010, 43). In the premodern Islamic world(s), any student with a different mother tongue who learned Arabic and used it in a scholarly context thereby became part of the knowledge production of premodern Arabic culture and its dissemination regardless of their ethnicity.

3 Peter Webb investigates the early history of such nationalistic movements in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry that claim pure ethnicity for political reasons against the ‘other’ who is always constructed as an enemy (2023, 49–52).

4 To comprehend the profound impact of the Islamic conquests during the seventh century on the linguistic landscape of the Middle East, particularly within the Persian-speaking sphere, see Key (2016, 98–104).

This fact is clearly addressed by the renowned sociologist Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) in his masterpiece, *al-Muqaddima (The Introduction)*. Ibn Khaldūn's study included social insights regarding several cultures, including the ancient Greeks, Romans, Persians, and Hebrews, with special attention to nomadic peoples such as the Arabs, Berbers, Mongols, and Turks. In describing the multilingual history of Arab-Islamic knowledge production in various fields over the centuries, Ibn Khaldūn highlighted the prevalence of non-Arab scholars, despite Arabic being the language of their religion:

من الغريب الواقع أن حملة العلم في الملة الإسلامية أكثرهم العجم لا من العلوم الشرعية ولا من العلوم العقلية إلا في القليل النادر. وإن كان منهم العربي في نسبته فهو أعجمي في لغته ومرباه ومشيخته مع أن الملة عربية وصاحب شريعته عربي. والسبب في ذلك أن الملة في أولها لم يكن فيها علم ولا صناعة لمقتضى أحوال السداجة والبداءة وإنما أحكام الشريعة التي هي أوامر الله ونواهيه كان الرجال ينقلونها في صدورهم وقد عرفوا مأخذها من الكتاب والسنة بما تلقوه من صاحب الشرع وأصحابه. والقوم يومئذ عرب لم يعرفوا أمر التعليم والتأليف والتدوين ولا دفعوا إليه ولا دعتهم إليه حاجة.

[It is a strange fact that most of the scholars in the Islamic community (*al-millah*) are non-Arabs (*al-'Ajam*), whether in religious sciences or intellectual sciences, except in very rare cases. Even if an Arab is among them by lineage, he is non-Arab in his language, upbringing, and teachers, although the religion (*al-millah*) is Arabic and the one who brought its law (*shari'atuhā*) is an Arab. The reason for this is that in the early days of the community (*al-millah*), there was neither knowledge (*'Ilm*) nor craft (*ṣinā'at*) due to the simplicity and nomadic nature of their conditions. The rulings of the Sharia, which are God's commands and prohibitions, were carried in the hearts of men who knew their sources from the Qur'an and Sunnah, as they received them from the lawgiver (*ṣāhib al-shar'*) and his companions. At that time, the people were Arabs (*'Arab*) who did not know about education, writing, or compilation, nor were they driven to it by necessity.] (Ibn Khaldūn 2004, 2:361; trans. from Arabic my own)

Ibn Khaldūn highlights the fact that education, writing, and compilation in the early days of the Islamic community were not widespread due to the simple and nomadic lifestyle of the Arab people, which in turn led to a reliance on oral transmission of knowledge related to the Qur'an and Sunnah. He points out that the majority of prominent premodern Islamic scholars may not be considered Arab from the vantage of their mother language, upbringing, and educational influences, although they write and speak Arabic. Writing in Arabic should not lead modern nationalists to automatically assume that these premodern professional writers possessed



an ideology aligned with the Arabs as an ethnic group rooted in the tribes of Najd and Hijaz. Modern scholars should not, therefore, impose the issues generated by modern nationalism on the ways we narrate the history of writing culture in the premodern Islamic world(s).

## Mastering Arabic for non-Arabs

In his book *Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'* (*The Best Accounts of the Classes of Physicians*), the physician and historian Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah (d. 1270) recounts a short story that highlights Ibn Sīnā's (d. 1037) mastery of Arabic language and literature. Known as Avicenna in the Latin West, Ibn Sīnā was a Persian polymath who made significant contributions to philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and science. This story is included in Ibn Sīnā's autobiography narrated by his student Abū 'Ubayd al-Jūzjānī (d. 1070) and sheds light on how Ibn Sīnā's grasp of Arabic was questioned during an oral debate with the renowned Arabic syntax scholar Abū Maṣṣūr al-Jabbān al-Naḥawī (d. 1044) in the presence of the governor and the public. Despite being a renowned philosopher and physician who gained fame through writing in Arabic, Ibn Sīnā did not dismiss the critique of his knowledge of Arabic linguistics. Instead, he dedicated three years to studying Arabic semantics in response to the criticism. This intensive study period included learning how to compose Arabic poems (*qaṣā'id*) with strange vocal forms (*alfāz gharība*) and crafting Arabic epistles in the styles of three prominent figures: 1) Ibn al-'Amīd (d. 970), a famous Persian vizier from the Buyid dynasty; 2) Abū Ishāq al-Ṣābi' (d. 994), a renowned writer and head of the chancery (*diwān al-inshā'*) during the Abbasid sultanate; and 3) al-Ṣāhib ibn 'Abbād (d. 995), another esteemed Persian vizier from the Buyid dynasty.

After completing his rigorous studies, Ibn Sīnā orchestrated a situation where the governor claimed to have discovered writings buried in the desert, going as far as to cover the book in weathered leather to add authenticity. When Abū Maṣṣūr al-Jabbān initially struggled with certain details, Ibn Sīnā was the sole person in the governor's court who could decipher the semantics. It didn't take long for Abū Maṣṣūr to realize that Ibn Sīnā was the actual author and had orchestrated the situation to counter the insult. He apologized to Ibn Sīnā, recognizing that non-native Arabic-speaking scholars, through dedication and hard work, could indeed challenge native Arabic speakers in linguistic matters:

كان الشيخ جالسا يوما من الأيام بين يدي الأمير، وأبو منصور الجبّان حاضر، فجرى في اللغة مسألة تكلم الشيخ فيها بما حضره، فالتفت أبو منصور إلى الشيخ، يقول: إنك فيلسوف وحكيم، ولكن لم تقرأ من اللغة ما يرضي كلامك فيها. فاستنكف الشيخ من هذا الكلام، وتوفر على درس كتب

اللغة ثلاث سنين، واستهدى كتاب تهذيب اللغة من خراسان: من تصنيف أبي منصور الأزهرى، فيبلغ الشيخ في اللغة طبقة قلما يتفق مثلها، وأنشد ثلاث قصائد ضمنها ألفاظا غريبة في اللغة، وكتب ثلاثة كتب: أحدها على طريقة ابن العميد، والآخر على طريقة الصابئ، والآخر على طريقة صاحب، وأمر بتجليدها وإخلاق جلدتها. ثم أوعز الأمير فعرض تلك المجلدة على أبي منصور الجبّان، وذكر إنا ظفرنا بهذه المجلدة بالصحراء وقت الصيد، فيجب أن نتفقدتها ونقول لنا ما فيها، فنظر فيها أبو منصور وأشكل عليه كثير مما فيها، فقال له الشيخ: إن ما تجهله من هذا الكتاب فهو مذكور في الموضوع الفلاني من كتب اللغة. وذكر له كثيراً من الكتب المعروفة في اللغة كان الشيخ حفظ تلك الألفاظ منها. وكان أبو منصور مجزفا فيما يورده من اللغة المعروفة فيها، ففطن أبو منصور أن تلك الرسائل من تصنيف الشيخ، وأن الذي حملة عليه ما جبهه به في ذلك اليوم، فتنصل واعتذر إليه، ثم صنف الشيخ كتابا في اللغة سماه: لسان العرب، لم يصنف في اللغة مثله، ولم ينقله إلى البياض حتى توفي، فبقي على مسودته لا يهتدي أحد إلى ترتيبه.

[One day the Shaykh [Ibn Sīnā] was sitting with the emir, with Abū Maṣṣūr al-Jabbān also present. A point of Arabic language was discussed, and the Shaykh spoke about it according to his knowledge. At this, Abū Maṣṣūr turned to the Shaykh and said, ‘You may be a philosopher and sage, but you are not sufficiently well read in the Arabic language to be able to speak about it.’ The Shaykh recoiled at these words and devoted himself to the study of works on Arabic for three years. He had the book *The Refinement of Language* (K. *Tahdhīb al-lughā*), compiled by Abū Maṣṣūr al-Azharī, sent to him from Khorasan. The Shaykh reached a rarely-attained proficiency in the Arabic language, and composed three longer poems containing obscure words. He also wrote three letters—one in the style of Ibn al-‘Amīd, one in the style of al-Ṣābi’, and one in the style of al-Ṣāhib. He had them bound into a volume, specifying a binding that had been made to look worn. Then he apprised the emir, who showed the volume to Abū Maṣṣūr al-Jabbān and said, ‘We found this volume in the desert during a hunt. You must examine it and tell us what it contains.’ Abū Maṣṣūr looked at it but much of what it contained was difficult for him to understand. The Shaykh said to him, ‘What you do not understand of this book is mentioned in such and such a place in works on the Arabic language.’ Then the Shaykh informed him of many well-known works on the Arabic language from which he had learned these words. Now Abū Maṣṣūr had been talking nonsense in his comments about the well-known words in the epistles, and he now realized that the epistles must have been composed by the Shaykh, instigated by his confrontation with him that day. So Abū Maṣṣūr retracted his comments and apologized to the Shaykh. After that, the Shaykh composed a book on lexicography



that he named *The Language of the Arabs* (*Lisān al-‘Arab*), the like of which had never been composed before. He did not make a fair copy of it before his death, and it remained as a draft—no-one having had the opportunity to put it in order.] (Trans. from Arabic by Savage-Smith, Swain, and Van Gelder 2020, 912–13)

The story highlights Ibn Sīnā’s commitment to improving his Arabic language skills, particularly in linguistics, suggesting that Arabic linguistics was not his primary area of focus. He crafted Arabic poems, which showcased his mastery of the language and its complex vocal forms. By composing epistles in three distinct literary styles, he demonstrated his adaptability and skilfulness in diverse linguistic and stylistic approaches within Arabic. Ibn Sīnā’s learning journey serves as a compelling example of how non-Arab scholars pursued excellence and intellectual integrity in their quest for Arabic mastery, delving into its linguistic complexities and stylistic nuances with a level of achievement rarely matched even by native Arabic speakers of his time.

Several writers and scholars in the premodern Islamic world(s), like Ibn Sīnā, were not ethnically Arab, never needed to be Arab, and never pretended to be Arab in order to write their scholarship in Arabic or receive approval from premodern readers of Arabic. Writing in Arabic was understood as a cultural practice that was not confined to Arabic-speaking people. Several linguistic, lexicographic, medical, philosophical, scientific, and religious manuscripts were composed by non-Arabs. The most striking fact is that several treatises on Arabic *balāgha* (literally eloquence, but roughly speaking rhetoric<sup>5</sup> and poetics<sup>6</sup>) and the inimitability (*i‘jāz*) of the Qur’an were composed by scholars of Persian origin or emerged from communities with a mother tongue other than Arabic.<sup>7</sup> Many of these scholars wrote in Arabic without ever stepping out of the Persian territories,<sup>8</sup> like Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī (d. 1010), the author of *Kitāb al-ṣinā‘atayn* (*The Book of the Two Arts*), one of the most comprehensive treatises on premodern Arabic poetics.<sup>9</sup> ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078), from the town of Jurjān, now located in modern-day Iran, was a bilingual scholar whose mother tongue was Persian. His foundational work on Arabic poetic imagery, *Asrār al-balāghah* (*Secrets of Eloquence*), is a key early work of premodern Arab-Islamic literary theory. It describes a framework for the identification, classification, and analysis of Arabic

5 The term ‘rhetoric’ in modern Euro-American cultures is linked to negative attributes such as deceit, wordiness, meaninglessness, and intentional distortion. It is important to prevent such automatic misconceptions that might result from a presumption of universality regarding the term ‘rhetoric.’ See Rashwan (2020).

6 On the close relationship between premodern Arabic and Persian poetics, see Gelder (2001).

7 For the multilingual Arabic and Persian scholars of *balāgha*, see Smyth (1986, 2–18).

8 The premodern Persian world(s) extended far beyond modern-day Iran, encompassing a vast, multicultural, and multilingual sphere across Central and South Asia, the Caucasus, and parts of Anatolia. On the concept of ‘*ajam*’ in the premodern Islamic world(s), see Gould (2015).

9 For a comprehensive treatment of the life and works of Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī, see Kanazi (2011).



10 Kamal Abu Deeb argues that al-Jurjānī's premodern literary criticism can enrich many twentieth-century Anglophone literary theories, especially regarding al-Jurjānī's treatment of the close relationship between syntax and semantics (Abu Deeb 1979). See also Najafi (2023) and Noy (2018).

metaphor (*isti'āra*), analogy (*tamthīl*), and simile (*tashbīh*).<sup>10</sup> Alexander Key underscores several aspects of 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's comparative approach, rooted in bilingualism and his extensive knowledge of both Arabic and Persian poetics. In his *Asrār al-balāghah* (*The Mysteries of Eloquence*), al-Jurjānī translates two lines of Persian poetry into Arabic to elucidate an Arabic literary device for his readers, without recording the original Persian poetry. This practice illustrates that 'the ability to think in at least two languages was often a default setting when theorizing language' (Key 2018, 160).

Al-Jurjānī's works were adopted and extended by several bilingual literary critics, such as Abū Ya'qūb al-Sakkākī (d. 1229), who authored *Miftāḥ al-'ulūm* (*The Key of Sciences*). Al-Sakkākī grew up and died in Khwarazm, a region corresponding to modern-day Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Heinrichs 2012). He was likely trilingual and able to speak and write in Khwarazmian Turkic, Persian, and Arabic (Marlow 2020, 750). His *Miftāḥ* consists of four sections: morphology ('*ilm al-ṣarf*'), syntax ('*ilm al-naḥw*'), the sciences of meanings and stylistic manifestation ('*ilm al-ma'ānī wa 'l-bayān*'), and the logical sciences of definition (*ḥadd*) and reasoning (*istidlāl*) (Giolfo and Hodges 2017, 242). Similarly, several sources discussed various topics related to Arabic *balāgha* at great length in Persian. For example, in his book titled *Mi'yār-i jamālī va miftāḥ-i abū ishāqī* (*The Standard of Beauty in the Key Book of Abu Ishāq*), Shams al-Dīn Fakhr Ṣfahānī (d. 1348) presents four separate literary 'arts': the disciplines of prosody ('*ilm-i 'arūd*'), end rhyme ('*ilm-i qawāfī*'), innovative literary devices ('*ilm-i badāyi' al-sanāyi'*'), and a glossary of words used by Persian poets ('*ilm-i lughat Furs*'), dedicating the book to the ruler of Fars (Storey 1984, 10).

Because Arabic functioned as a lingua franca in the premodern Islamic world<sup>11</sup>, many scholars who were proficient in Persian preferred to compose their scholarship in Arabic (Yücesoy 2015; Bernards 2005). These non-Arab scholars made significant contributions to Arabic literature, although their non-Arab identities, especially those of Persian origin, have sometimes been ignored for political reasons.<sup>12</sup> Their knowledge production was highly respected, and their manuscripts and dictionaries were copied in several libraries throughout the premodern Islamic world. However, some scholars struggled to fully grasp the meanings and nuances of Arabic words, particularly those in the Qur'an. It is worthwhile to note the motivations of the judge and lexicographer Muḥammad ibn Mukarram ibn 'Alī al-Anṣārī al-Ifriqī al-Miṣrī, commonly known as Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1312), in compiling his dictionary, *Lisān al-'Arab* (*The Tongue of the Arabs*), which encompasses a wide range of vocabulary, meanings, and etymologies. Ibn Manẓūr argued that his dictionary would preserve the fundamentals of the Arabic language, which

11 For new insights into how Arabic, as a lingua franca, and its cultural integration in vast non-Arabic regions were intertwined with Islamic cosmopolitanism, see Borrut (2024, 179–84).

12 For examples of cultural movements that were hostile towards Persians as opposed to Arabs, see Bashear (2021, 24–31) and Cooperson (2015).





he refers to as the prophetic language (*al-lughah al-nabawīyah*). He highlighted the multilingual society of his time, where different tongues (*al-alsina*) and ethnicities (*al-alwān*) coexisted. He documented how many multilingual individuals boasted about their eloquence in non-Arab languages and their skills in reading these languages in their original scripts, which allowed them to classify<sup>13</sup> and evaluate their translations into Arabic:

فإنني لم أقصد سوى حفظ أصول هذه اللغة النبوية وضبط فضلها، إذ عليها مدار أحكام الكتاب العزيز والسنة النبوية؛ ولأن العالم بغوامضها يعلم ما توافق فيه النية اللسان، ويخالف فيه اللسان النية، وذلك لما رأيته قد غلب، في هذا الأوان، من اختلاف الألسنة والألوان، حتى لقد أصبح اللحن في الكلام يعد لحنا مردودا، وصار النطق بالعربية من المعايير معدودا. وتتنافس الناس في تصانيف الترجمات في اللغة الأعجمية، وتفاصحوا في غير اللغة العربية، فجمعت هذا الكتاب في زمن أهله بغير لغته يفخرون، وصنعتة كما صنع نوح الفلك وقومه منه يسخرون، وسميته [لسان العرب].

[For I intended only to preserve (*ḥifẓ*) the fundamentals of this prophetic language (*al-lughah al-nabawīyah*) and to safeguard its excellence, as the legal rulings (*ahkām*) of the Noble Book [Qur'an] and the Prophetic Sunnah depend on it. And because the scholar who understands its ambiguous structures knows how underlying intentions (*al-naīyah*) align with the tongue (*al-lisān*) and how the tongue can contradict underlying intentions. This is due to the prevailing phenomenon in this era of differing people's tongues and colours, to the extent that grammatical errors (*al-laḥn*) in speech have become frequent, and pronouncing clear Arabic is considered a defect (*m'āyab*). People now compete in categorizing translations into foreign languages and strive for eloquent aspects (*tafāṣaḥwā*) rooted in languages other than Arabic. Therefore, I compiled this book at a time when its people boast [of their knowledge] of languages other than their own, just as Noah built the ark while his people mocked him. I named it [*The Tongue of the Arabs*].] (Ibn Manẓūr 1981, 1:13; trans. from Arabic my own)

Ibn Manẓūr laments that he undertook the task of compiling this dictionary during an era when people boasted about their knowledge of foreign languages at the expense of their own. He compares this situation to Noah building the ark while facing ridicule from his people, implying a sense of duty and foresight in preserving Arabic linguistic heritage. However, Ibn Manẓūr also highlights several issues related to the nature of multilingualism, such as the potential for contradictions between underlying intention (*al-niyyah*) and commonly used expressions in each language. He emphasizes to his multilingual readers the need for linguistic clarity and precision when writing and speaking in Arabic. Ibn Manẓūr

13 This may be related to the common practice for early translators like Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq (d. 873) and Yūḥannā al-Rāhib to make a version of the ancient Greek texts in Syriac first and then produce an Arabic version based on the Syriac (King 2010, 39–45).

notes the prevalence of grammatical errors in speech and the diminishing use of clear Arabic pronunciation.

These same multilingual issues are highlighted by Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) when he comments on the ability of non-Arabs to fully master the nuances of Arabic. He emphasizes that individuals who were brought up with a different mother tongue will always have some deficiencies in mastering Arabic. Ibn Khaldūn clearly argues that the habits and cognitive frameworks formed by the mother tongue will always have a deeper impact on the learning process of Arabic. This underscores a common challenge faced by multilingual individuals: the difficulty of achieving native-like proficiency in a second language due to the foundational influence of their mother tongue:

وانظر من تقدم له شيء من العجمة كيف يكون قاصرا في اللسان العربي أبدا. فالأعجمي الذي سبقت له اللغة الفارسية لا يستولي على ملكة اللسان العربي ولا يزال قاصرا فيه ولو تعلمه وعلمه. وكذا البربري والرومي. والإفرنجي قل أن تجد أحدا منهم محكما لملكة اللسان العربي. وما ذلك إلا لما سبق إلى ألسنتهم من ملكة اللسان الآخر، حتى إن طالب العلم من أهل هذه الألسن إذا طلبه بين أهل اللسان العربي جاء مقصرا في معارفه عن الغاية والتحصيل وما أوتي إلا من قبل اللسان. وقد تقدم لك من قبل أن الألسن واللغات شبيهة بالصنائع. وقد تقدم لك أن الصنائع وملكاتهن لا تزدهم وأن من سبقت له إجادة في صناعة فقل أن يجيد في أخرى أو يستولي فيها على الغاية.

[Look how anyone who has previously been influenced by a non-Arabic language (*al-u'jma*) will always be deficient in the Arabic tongue (*al-lisān*). A non-Arab (*al-a'jamī*) who initially spoke Persian will never fully master the faculty (*malaka*) of the Arabic language, remaining limited in it despite learning and teaching it. The same applies to Berbers (*al-Barbarī*), Romans (*al-Rūmī*), and Europeans (*al-'ifranjī*). It is rare to find any of them who fully mastered the faculty of the Arabic tongue (*al-lisān*). This is because their tongues were first accustomed to the faculty of another language. Even a student of knowledge from these tongues, if he studies among native Arabic speakers, will find himself falling short in his understanding and achievements. This is solely due to the tongue. As mentioned earlier, languages and tongues are similar to crafts (*al-sanā'i*). It has also been mentioned that crafts and their skills do not overlap. A person who excels in one craft is unlikely to excel in another or achieve mastery as the ultimate purpose (*al-ghāya*) of possessing it.] (Ibn Khaldūn 2004, 395; trans. from Arabic my own)

Ibn Khaldūn was pessimistic about the ability of non-Arabs to achieve native-like proficiency in Arabic. He suggested that even if a non-Arab individual learns and teaches Arabic, they may still be perceived as limited in their command of the language compared to native speakers. Ibn Khaldūn's likening of language learning to the skills development in crafts



(*al-ṣanā'i'*) places the emphasis not on the difficulty of a new language per se, but on the obstacle constituted by the foundational skill set. Just as a professional craftsman who grew up mastering a certain craft (such as carpentry) cannot expect to become an equal master of another craft (like jewelry making), precisely because hands skilled in woodworking will not be adept at handling metal and precious stones, eloquence in a mother tongue will slow the achievement of fluency and refinement in another language. In other words, just as mastering one craft does not guarantee mastery in another, achieving high proficiency in one language can make it challenging to reach the same level in another.

Premodern writers whose mother tongue was not Arabic possessed multilingual expressions, images, and literary structures that could easily be criticized by native speakers—much like modern multilingual individuals who navigate multiple languages in their daily lives.<sup>14</sup> The cognitive load and interference from a primary language can hinder the ability to fully master additional languages, especially those with significantly different structures and sounds. These different voices and commonly used expressions within the multilingual mindset reflect the continuous negotiation and blending of various linguistic and poetic elements, which can be both a source of creative inspiration and internal conflict related to a hybrid identity and its value in society. For instance, in an article on multilingualism in modern Moroccan culture, Mustapha Kharouach discusses the expression ‘internal rhythm,’ highlighted by the Moroccan poet and writer Mohamed Khair-Eddine (1941–1995). When asked about how he integrates Berber/Amazigh and Arabic poetics and images into his writing in French, Khair-Eddine responds: ‘It is a matter of internal rhythm; the issue is always connected with the mother tongue. I would not have written without it. We cannot be separated from what has made us, what made us good men to live in this world’ (Kharouach 2020, 447). The term ‘internal rhythm’ metaphorically captures the dynamic and sometimes uncontrolled interplay between different languages within the mind of a multilingual individual. This rhythm symbolizes the multilingual writer’s underlying intentions (*al-niyya*, as Ibn Manẓūr terms it) to reconcile their multilingual reality into a cohesive artistic presence, whether in writing or speaking, through hard work and practice (as indicated by the story of Ibn Sīnā’s return to the study of Arabic).

Comparing the problems that premodern multilingual individuals face when writing and reading Arabic to the dilemmas of modern multilingual subjects does not, however, fully capture the role of translation in the premodern Islamic world(s) nor fully explain how multilingual scholars turned Arabic into one of the global communication languages in the premodern Islamic world(s). The early translation movements that

14 On employing Persian words, poetry lines, and proverbs in Arabic texts, see Harb (2019) and Zakeri (2002).

flourished during the Abbasid era, particularly in Baghdad, positioned Arabic as one of the main languages of knowledge production in the premodern world for several centuries. The ‘father of Arabic prose,’ Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr al-Jāhīz (d. 868), whose writings served a crucial role in shaping the intellectual landscape of the so-called ‘Islamic Golden Age,’ confirmed the great value of multilingual writers and their linguistic and cultural richness. He highlighted their role in producing new knowledge based on creativity and innovation. In one of his most famous works, *Kitāb al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn* (*The Book of Elegance and Clarity of Exposition*), al-Jāhīz portrays multilingualism in the ninth century as a crucial element for achieving intellectual and literary excellence. He sheds light on the importance of engaging with multiple languages and cultures, inspiring voracious readers who appreciate the value of multilingualism and integrating the advantages of multilingualism into the Arabic intellectual and scholarly tradition:

قالوا: ومن أحب أن يبلغ في صناعة البلاغة، ويعرف الغريب، ويتبحر في اللغة، فليقرأ كتاب كاروند. ومن احتاج إلى العقل والأدب، والعلم بالمراتب والعيبر والمثالات، والألفاظ الكريمة، والمعاني الشريفة، فلينظر في سبير الملوك. فهذه الفرس ورسائلها وخطبها والفاظها، ومعانيها. وهذه اليونان ورسائلها وخطبها، وعللها وحكمها، وهذه كتبها في المنطق التي قد جعلتها الحكماء بها تعرف السقم من الصحة، والخطأ من الصواب، وهذه كتب الهند في حكمتها وأسرارها، وسيرها وعللها، فمن قرأ هذه الكتب، وعرف غور تلك العقول، وغرائب تلك الحكم، عرف أين البيان والبلاغة، وأين تكاملت تلك الصناعة.

[They said: whoever wishes to reach excellence (*yabluḡha*) in the art of eloquence (*balāgha*), understand the strange (*gharīb*), and become proficient in the language, let him read the book of Kārwand [Persian term meaning the art of praise and commendation]. Whoever needs intellect (*‘aql*) and literature (*adab*), knowledge of ranks, lessons, and rules of punishment and retribution (*mathulāt*), noble expressions, and honourable meanings, let him study the histories of kings. Here are the Persians, with their letters, speeches, expressions, and meanings. And here are the Greeks, with their letters, speeches, causes, and wisdoms, and these are their books on logic (*mantīq*), which the wise men have used to distinguish sickness from health, and error from correctness. And here are the books of the Indians, with their wisdoms, secrets, histories, and causes. Whoever reads these books and understands the depths of those minds and the wonders of those wisdoms, will know where clarity (*bayān*) and eloquence (*balāgha*) are, and where that craft (*ṣinā‘a*) has reached perfection.] (Al-Jāhīz 1965, 3:14; trans. from Arabic my own)

Al-Jāhīz (d. 868) underscores how early Arabic knowledge production and its intellectuals sought wisdom, eloquence, and expertise not only from



their own cultural and linguistic traditions but also from those of other ancient civilizations, particularly the Persians, Greeks, and Indians.<sup>15</sup> By encouraging the careful study of books and methodologies that originated in these cultures, al-Jāhīz highlights the interconnectedness of these civilizations and their contributions to enhancing Arabic scholarship during this time. This exchange was facilitated through translation, interpretation, and the adoption of foreign concepts into the Arabic intellectual tradition. The recommendation to read and study the works of other cultures reflects the educational practices of the time, where scholars were multilingual and engaged in translating and interpreting texts from different languages to generate a new movement of Arabic knowledge production. This multilingual scholarship was essential for the development of various fields of Arabic knowledge in the premodern Islamic world(s).

Al-Jāhīz (d. 868) believed in the value of the cumulative process generated by the translation movements of his time and the ways in which they enriched the knowledge base of Arabic texts and their universality. In his book entitled *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* (*The Book of Animals*), Al-Jāhīz highlights the process of translating works from one language to another and adapting them while retaining their core insights. He demonstrates how knowledge that developed long ago in foreign cultures can be transferred from one nation or language to another, with each culture assuming they are the rightful inheritors or creators of this knowledge. He argues that the timeless nature of ideas and knowledge remains relevant across different eras and societies, regardless of their original roots:

وقد نُقِلَتْ كُتُبُ الهِنْدِ، وَتُرْجِمَتْ حِكْمُ اليُونَانِيَّةِ، وَحَوْلَتْ آدَابُ الفَرَسِ، فَبِعِضِّهَا اِزْدَادَ حُسْنًا، وَبِعِضِّهَا مَا اِنْتَقَصَ شَيْئًا، وَلَوْ حَوْلَتْ حِكْمَةُ العَرَبِ، لِبَطْلِ ذَلِكَ المَعْجَزِ الَّذِي هُوَ الوِزْنُ، مَعَ أَنَّهُمْ لَوْ حَوَّلُوهَا لَمْ يَجِدُوا فِي مَعَانِيهَا شَيْئًا لَمْ تَذْكُرْهُ العِجْمُ فِي كُتُبِهِم، الَّتِي وَضَعَتْ لِمَعَاشِهِمْ وَفِطْنَهُمْ وَجَمَّعَهُمْ، وَقَدْ نُقِلَتْ هَذِهِ الكُتُبُ مِنْ أُمَّةٍ إِلَى أُمَّةٍ، وَمِنْ قَرْنٍ إِلَى قَرْنٍ، وَمِنْ لِسَانٍ إِلَى لِسَانٍ، حَتَّى اِنْتَهَتْ إِلَيْنَا، وَكُنَّا آخِرَ مَنْ وِرْثَهَا وَنَظَرَ فِيهَا. فَقَدْ صَحَّحَ أَنَّ الكُتُبَ أُنْبِغُ فِي تَقْيِيدِ المَائِثِ، مِنَ البُنْيَانِ وَالشَّعْرِ.

[Indeed, the books of India have been transmitted (*nuqlat*), the wisdom of the Greeks has been translated (*turjamat*), and the literature of the Persians has been transformed (*ḥuwwilat*).<sup>16</sup> Some of them became more beautiful, and some did not lose anything. If the wisdom of the Arabs were to be transformed (*ḥuwwilat*), the miraculous aspect, which is the meter, would be lost. Moreover, if they were to transform it, they would find nothing in its meanings that the non-Arabs (*al-‘Ajam*) did not mention in their books, which were written for their means of sustenance, their insights, and their wisdom. These books have been transmitted from one nation to another, from one century to another, and from one tongue to

15 On the revival of the ancient Persian literary heritage and its translation movements into Arabic in the last quarter of the first Muslim century, see Shamma (2009, 65–69) and Zakeri (1994, 89).

16 Al-Jāhīz employs three different terms to describe the act of translation, each potentially encompassing various concepts beyond translation itself. These distinctions have not yet been explored through case studies. See Shamma (2021, 4) and Tageldin (2024, 163–66).



another until they ended up reaching us, and we were the last ones to inherit and look at them. Therefore, it has been confirmed that books are more eloquent (*ablaghu*) in recording achievements than buildings and poetry.] (Al-Jāḥiẓ 1965, 75; trans. from Arabic my own)

Al-Jāḥiẓ highlights how the premodern translation process always maintains the lives, insights, and wisdom of different nations, emphasizing the value of books in preserving the achievements of interrelated cultures.<sup>17</sup>

He argues that books are more lasting and effective in this role compared to physical structures, such as buildings (*bunyān*), and oral traditions, including poetry (*al-shi'r*). This underscores the importance he places on the written word as a means of preserving history and knowledge for future generations. Al-Jāḥiẓ argues for what can be called 'the universality of knowledge roots' when he mentions that if the wisdom of the Arabs had been transformed (*ḥuwwilat*) into any other language, the non-Arabs (*al-'Ajām*) would understand it easily.<sup>18</sup> This highlights the presence of common insights in the wisdom literature of various cultures, which can be considered a shared human experience or even universal.

### The multilingual nature of Arabic as a language

Each language is, in fact, multilingual in nature, whether in terms of its early formation or the integration of foreign concepts<sup>19</sup> and linguistic structures through migration, trade, and cultural exchanges. As the territories of the premodern Islamic empire expanded, Arabic emerged as the administrative language required for communication with central offices located in the capitals. In these newly colonized areas, Arabic initially existed as a minority language for an extended period. Only a few regions adopted Arabic as their primary and sole language, while others continued using their pre-Islamic languages. The text of the Qur'an played a transformative role, turning Arabic into a unifying force that emotionally linked diverse cultures through its consistent use in daily prayers and religious ceremonies. The appearance of the Qur'anic text elevated Arabic writing and its script from the margin to the core, establishing it as the principal language for Islamic religious practices, theology, and scholarly pursuits.<sup>20</sup> However, Arabic was not exclusively a language for religious purposes. For example, while the majority of Arabic literature produced and consumed in Southeast Asia was and remains religious in nature or aimed at aiding Islamic students, such as Arabic grammar books, Arabic also functioned as a language for diplomatic and political affairs more broadly, alongside languages like Malay, Javanese, Portuguese, and

17 On how premodern Islamic multilingualism can be investigated by tracing the circulation of the texts and their translations, see Kinoshita (2008, 371–75) and Gupta (2023).

18 On the concept of *adab* in the premodern Islamic cultures that goes beyond the Euro-American print culture and its modernism, see El Shakry (2024), Kia (2024), and Alshaar (2017).

19 On the ancient Greek terms that were integrated into Arab-Islamic cultures, such as τέχνη (*technē*), συλλογισμός (*syllōgismos*), δόξα (*doxa*), πίστις (*pistis*), and τόπος (*topos*), see Ezzaher (2024, 52–61).

20 On the studies of premodern Qur'anic manuscripts produced in South-Asian and East African cultures, see Ghali (2023, 40–46).



occasionally Persian (Peacock 2016, 188; Ricci 2011) Additionally, various religious minority groups employed Arabic to create manuscripts that were unrelated to the Islamic faith, as confirmed by Jonathan Decker:

In the Arabic-speaking world, Jews had been avid readers of Arabic literature and Islamic disciplines and composed works on philosophy, science, grammar, and biblical exegesis in Arabic, usually in Hebrew characters. Outside of the Arabic-speaking environment, Jews made Hebrew translations of texts by Jews and Muslim authors from philosophical, scientific, ethical, lexicographic, and literary genres. (2006, 336)

Several premodern scholars acknowledge that the Arabic language, since its early origins, incorporated a significant number of 'foreign' words. These words were utilized in the Qur'an and eventually became integral vocabulary in the lexicon of standard Arabic (*fushā*). One of the earliest commentaries of the Qur'an is attributed to the Umayyad scholar Muqātil ibn Sulaymān Al-Balkhī (d. 767), who, as Asma Afsaruddin tells us, 'utilized earlier commentaries extensively without attribution, offering valuable insights into the views of the earliest exegetes from the first and second centuries of Islam' (2012, 48). In his commentary, Al-Balkhī elucidates how the Qur'anic language incorporated various 'foreign' words and argues that understanding the meanings of these Qur'anic words necessitates exploring their semantics in the 'foreign' languages from which they were borrowed. He argues that this process is crucial for grasping the Qur'anic contexts (Rashwan 2023, 4). For instance, the word مقاليد—*maqālīd*—in the Qur'anic verse:

لَهُ مَقَالِيدُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۗ يَنْشُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَاءُ وَيَقْدِرُ

[To him belongs the controls (*maqālīd*) of heaven and earth; He enlarges provision for whom He wills, and straightens [for whom He wills].] (Qur'an 42:12; trans. from Arabic my own)

Al-Balkhī argues that the precise meaning of *maqālīd* can be explored through the Nabataean language, a variety of the Eastern Aramaic languages from which it was adopted. He explains that *maqālīd* originally means 'keys,' and thus the Qur'anic verse refers to the 'keys of heaven, which is rain,' and the 'keys of earth, which is plants' (2002, 3:765). Similarly, he contends that the word *firdaws* (فردوس) is derived from Latin or what he refers to as the 'Roman language' (*lughat al-Rūm*), where it signifies orchards or groves surrounded by walls (2002, 2:604). He argues that this interpretation helps Muslims better understand this Qur'anic verse:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ كَانَتْ لَهُمْ جَنَّاتُ الْفِرْدَوْسِ نُزُلًا





[Indeed, those who have believed and done righteous deeds—they will have the paradises of orchards (*firdaws*) as a lodging.] (Qur'an 18:107; trans. from Arabic my own)

Moreover, Al-Balkhī confirms that the precise meaning of the word *yamm* (يَمّ) is 'sea' according to the Hebrew tongue (*lisān al'brānyyh*) in the Qur'anic verse that describes the divine punishment of the Pharaoh's people (2002, 2:59):

فَأَنْتَقَمْنَا مِنْهُمْ فَأَغْرَقْنَاهُمْ فِي الْيَمِّ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا وَكَانُوا عَنْهَا غَافِلِينَ

[So, We exacted vengeance from them and drowned them in the sea (*Yamm*), as they belied Our revelations and were heedless of them.] (Qur'an 7:136; trans. from Arabic my own)

Another early commentary on the Qur'an adopts a similar approach to Al-Balkhī in exploring the meanings of unfamiliar words. This commentary is attributed to the renowned early Islamic scholar 'Abd Allāh Ibn 'Abbās (d.687) and is entitled *Kitāb al-lughāt fī al-Qur'ān* (*The Book of Languages Inside the Qur'an*). This concise dictionary interprets the meanings of several unfamiliar words in their respective foreign languages. It records Qur'anic words from a range of languages including Persian, Nabataean, Syriac, Amharic (*al-ḥabshīyya*), Hebrew, Coptic, and Latin (*al-rūmmīya*). Additionally, the book examines the meanings of unfamiliar words found in various Arabic dialects. It lists over twenty-two Arabic dialects that were spoken during the Qur'an's revelation, such as Hudhayl (هذيل), Kanānah (كنانة), and Jarhm (جرهم) (Ibn 'Abbās 1972, 17). This linguistic observation contradicts the widespread belief that the Qur'an was exclusively revealed in the Qurayshī Arabic dialect. The author approaches the unfamiliar words from Arabic dialects in a manner similar to how foreign words are handled. Ibn 'Abbās's book suggests that many Arabs during the early Islamic period struggled to grasp the meanings of such 'unfamiliar' words without proper reference to their native language or Arabic dialect. For instance, Ibn 'Abbās explains that the phrase *falā rafth* (فلا رفث) (Qur'an 2:197) means 'no sexual intercourse' in the Madhḥij (منحج) language (1972, 21), while *ḥijāra min sājil* (حجارة من سجيل) (Qur'an 11:82) translates to 'stones [made] from clay' in Persian (31), and *taḥtik saryyā* (تحتك سرياً) (Qur'an 19:24) means 'under you narrow inlet of water on a river bank' in Syriac (36). Similarly, Alexander Key explores the translation of various lines of Arabic poetry originating from Persian idioms, with a specific emphasis on the prominent linguist Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī (d. 902 or 903).<sup>21</sup> Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī is well known for offering etymological interpretations of Persian words that have been assimilated into Arabic, and also utilizes comparative morphology to highlight differences between the Arabic version of Persian words. Key

21 On the early practice of translating the Qur'an into Persian, see Alya and Zadeh (2015, 119–24).



explains that ‘Raghib’s argument here is that the Qur’an uses an Arabized Persian word rather than a pure Persian word, as the *fu‘ālil* form is absent in Persian, a point that carries anecdotal weight’ (2016, 117).

One of the largest dictionaries of the Arabic language is *Tāj al-‘arūs min jawābir al-qāmūs* (*The Bride’s Crown from the Jewelry of Dictionary*), which was compiled by the Indian scholar of Arabic lexicography Al-Murtaḍā al-Husaynī al-Zabīdī (d. 1790), who was also proficient in both Persian and Ottoman Turkish.<sup>22</sup> This dictionary took al-Zabīdī fourteen years to complete and consists of eleven volumes and 11,800 words (Reichmuth 2009, 54). In the dictionary’s preface, al-Zabīdī quotes the Arabic philologist of Persian origin Abū ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām (d. 838), who negotiates the discussions of how hundreds of foreign words were integrated into the Qur’an and became an integral part of the Arabic language:

والصواب عندي مذهب فيه تصديقُ القولين جميعًا، وذلك أنّ هذه الأحرف أصولها أعجميّة، كما قال الفقهاء، إلاّ أنّها سقطت إلى العرب فأعربتها بألسنتها، وحوّلتها عن ألفاظ العجم إلى ألفاظها، ثم نزل القرآن وقد اختلطت هذه الحروف بكلام العرب، فمن قال إنّها عربيّة، فهو صادق، ومن قال إنّها عجميّة فصادق.

[For me, the right approach is to believe (*taṣdīq*) the two opinions. As the experts [of Arabic language] said, these letters [of foreign words] are of foreign origin (*a‘jamiyya*); however, when they have been dropped on the Arabs, their tongues Arabized them. Their tongues turned the vocal forms of these foreign nations and they became like their own words. Then, the Qur’an came down [from heaven] while these letters [of foreign words] were already blended with the speech of Arabs. Therefore, whoever says that these letters [of foreign words] are Arabic, he says the truth; and whoever says that they are foreign, he says the truth.] (al-Zabīdī 1965, 27–28; trans. from Arabic my own)

The quote emphasizes how ‘foreign’ words, once assimilated into Arabic, seamlessly integrated with native Arabic vocabulary thanks to their adaptation to Arabic phonetics and grammar, a process often referred to as ‘Arabization.’ It also underscores the extensive historical exchange and assimilation of foreign languages that Arabic underwent before the Qur’an was transcribed. In his dictionary, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Khafājī (d. 1658) underscores the importance of rediscovering these foreign words to enrich the fields of Arabic etymology/morphology (*al-‘išḥīqāq*) and semantics (*al-m‘ānī*):

أعلم أنّ العرب تكلمت بشئ من الأعجمي والصحيح منه ما وقع في القرآن أو الحديث أو الشعر القديم أو كلام من يوثق بعربيّته، ولا يصح الاشتقاق فيه لأنّه لا يدعي أخذه من مادة الكلام العربيّ،

22 On the history of Arabic in India, see Green (2023) and Qutbuddin (2007). On the Ottoman-Persian premodern literary interactions with Arabic, see Umut Inan (2020, 160–81), Gürbüz (2023), Askari (2018), and Beers (2022).



وهو كاذعاً أنّ الطير ولدت الحوت، فما وقع في بعض التفاسير أنّ إبليس مأخوذ من الأبلّاس ونحوه ممّا عدّ خطأً.

[You should know that the Arabs spoke with some [words] from foreign languages. The words that are more confirmed are the ones that exist in the Qur'an, Hadith, and old poetry or in the speech of one whose Arabic skills are trusted. [These foreign words] cannot be used to produce derivations and it cannot be claimed that their roots originated in Arabic speech. [Whoever says that is] like claiming that the birds gave birth to a whale, [exactly like] what happened in some Qur'anic commentaries saying that the devil's name Iblīs is derived from Al-'blās [meaning simultaneous failure and sadness]. All such [weak hypotheses] are considered wrong.] (al-Khafājī 1865, 3; trans. from Arabic my own)

Al-Khafājī acknowledges the importance of rediscovering Arabic words with foreign roots to prevent the formation of implausible suggestions lacking linguistic grounding and knowledge of other languages. Such ignorance in the field of Arabic etymology is similar to the comical suggestion of birds giving birth to whales. 'Abd al-'Azīm al-Shā'ir, a scholar of Arabic linguistics at Al-Azhar University, delves into the 'foreign' roots and meanings of each place and prophet's name mentioned in the Qur'an. He emphasizes that modern Arabs should not feel embarrassed or attacked by the presence of many 'foreign' roots in the Qur'an, as this process of linguistic interaction is common to all languages throughout history (2004, 7).

## Time and the geographical frame of premodern Islamic poetics

It is important to pause on the temporal and geographic frames adopted for 'Beyond Arabic': when and where was 'the premodern Islamic world (s)'? There is no singular position on when and what constitutes 'modernity.' Several scholars have adopted the argument that 'modernity' was brought to the premodern Middle East when the French emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte (d. 1821) invaded Egypt in 1798. This invasion brought direct contact with French-English modernity and exposed the Arab-Islamic world to new technological and educational advances, most importantly the printing press. The spread of the printing culture, after the French invasion of Egypt, set the stage for the gradual modernization of the Arab-Islamic world(s) (Green 2009, 203), a process that continued into the early twentieth century under the European term *nahḍa*



(Renaissance) (Hill 2018, 171–78; Baarda 2016, 71–75; Pepe 2019, 179–82).

The timeline of Islamic premodernity adopted for ‘Beyond Arabic’ does not follow such positioning; it begins with the classical Arab-Islamic era of the early sixth century and extends to the fall of the Ottoman Sultanate in 1920 in the aftermath of World War I. Tarek Shamma argues that the impact of modernity after this date became evident in the Arabo-Islamic world(s):

The turn of the twentieth century generally marked the end of the Nahda period with the completion of the profound changes that transformed all aspects of Arab communities throughout the nineteenth century: the traditional forms of government under the Ottoman Sultanate were replaced with modern state institutions. Traditional education, based in the early nineteenth century on Qur’anic schools and university mosques, was replaced with modern grade schools and college. The judiciary system based on Shari’a (Islamic law) was replaced with modern legal codes. And finally, Classical Arabic was replaced with Modern Standard Arabic. (2021, 10)

Thus, the ‘Islamic cultures’ of a premodern era so defined include the diverse civilizations developed by Muslims and non-Muslims who lived under the influence of Islamic sultanates before the modern era, covering geographical territories including the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>23</sup> the Persianate world, parts of Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, the Iberian Peninsula, and the Ottoman world, including Anatolia and the Balkans.

The articles collected in ‘Beyond Arabic’ emphasize premodern Islamic multilingual poetics, translation issues, and reassessments of contemporary biases, illustrating the richness and dynamism that emerge from framing these case studies within theoretical frameworks derived from both Postcolonial Studies and World Literature within the context of the premodern Islamic world(s). I recognize that readers may find it challenging to navigate the complex array of overlapping dynastic titles, reign names, and other chronologies within these premodern Islamic cultural worlds. Therefore, I have arranged the essays in chronological order, considering the extensive time scope of each author’s discussion.

‘Beyond Arabic’ begins with an essay by Federico Salvaggio, who provides a theoretical framework for understanding the status of Arabic as a sacred language. Salvaggio explores how the diversity and multilingual nature of the Arab-Islamic world challenged conservative views on the creation of other languages. This is followed by Alaaeldin Mahmoud’s investigation of the nature of early Arabic literary prose in the ninth

23 The series *Arabic Literature of Africa* delineates the history of Muslim writers in the Nile Valley, East Africa, the Horn of Africa, West Africa, and the Western Sahara, from the earliest times of Islam to the present day. See Hunwick and O’Fahey (1994).



century and how its rapid development was mastered by several multilingual figures, using the literary genre of *maqamat*, written in Arabic and Persian, as case studies. Next, Rama Alhabian employs the theory of geopoetics to explore a specific *maqama* set in the Persian world, examining how the trickster's poetic expression was transformed within non-Arabic regions, where he was prevented from using Arabic eloquence to beguile audiences.

Continuing this focus on premodern Persian poetics, Shahrouz Khanjari's essay centres on the prominent Persian scholar Rashīd al-Dīn Vatāvāt (d. 1182) and his Persian book *Ḥadā'iq al-sihr fī daqā'iq al-shi'r* (*The Gardens of Magic in the Minutiae of Poetry*). Khanjari contrasts the unique features of premodern Persian poetics with Arabic, highlighting quotes translated into English for the first time to underscore the rich diversity within both literary traditions. Switching to premodern Hebrew multilingualism in Andalusia, David Torollo investigates the cultural milieu of the medieval Sephardic Jewish community, which was deeply influenced by Arabic customs and poetic traditions. Torollo uses the Hebrew text *Mishle ha-'arav* (*The Saying of the Arabs*), to illustrate how Hebrew scholars, well-versed in Arabic, aimed to bridge cultures and languages through their writings.

Nicola Carpentieri delves into the wealth of Sicilian Arab-Islamic poetry, engaging in a dialogue with Sicilian lyrics written in Italian. Carpentieri presents a groundbreaking comparison of Sicilian Arabic and Romance Italian poetics, highlighting the performative elements of courtly poetry in both languages for the first time. This is followed by Aqsa Ijaz's exploration of the reception of the famous Persian poet Nizāmī Ganjavi (d. 1209) in premodern North India, particularly through his renowned work *Khusrau u Shīrīn*. The focus is on its retellings in Indo-Persian and Punjabi contexts by Amir Khusraw in particular, within a comparative-hermeneutic approach, underscoring the influence of Persian love poetry beyond Persian-speaking regions.

Berat Açı examines the multilingual aspects of Ottoman culture by studying Persian and Turkish rewritings of the famous Arabic poem *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah* (*The Poem of the Mantle*) composed by al-Būsīrī (d. 1294). Açı emphasizes the significance of multilingual translations and commentaries in shaping Ottoman literary and visual cultures. From here, we move to Mahdieh Vali-Zadeh who establishes literary and philosophical connections between the Persian poets Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (d. 1273) and Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. 1221) and the German philosopher Georg Friedrich Hegel (d. 1831). Through analysis of primary sources from both traditions, Vali-Zadeh demonstrates how Persian-Islamic philosophy significantly influenced Hegel's concept of 'the sublime,' representing a heightened form of the aesthetic experience. We continue



with Sufi poetry with Ihsan Ul-Ihthisam and Simi Salim's examination of the impact of Sufi romance literature, which blends romance and mysticism, on the literary history of Southern India. They focus on the Arabi-Malayalam poetics developed by early modern scholars in Tamil Nadu and Malabar, highlighting the ideological and cultural connections of the multilingual romantic tale *Badrulmunir husnuljamal* (*The Tale of Badr ul-Munir and Husn ul-Jamal*), composed by Moyinkutty Vaidyar (d. 1892), in relation to the Hindavi Sufi romances and their Persianate literary cultures in fourteenth- through sixteenth-century North India.

As 'Beyond Arabic' amply demonstrates, to reconstruct the multilingual map of the premodern Islamic world(s), scholars need to recognize its very real linguistic and cultural diversity, rather than imposing a modern, imagined view of ethnic unity and homogeneity, or preconceptions based on a print culture that restricts literary genre (Rashwan 2021, 66). The examples of translation and multilingualism in the premodern Islamic world(s) can enrich and revive the disciplines of Comparative Literature and World Literature,<sup>24</sup> which have long consisted of a Eurocentric conversation between English and a few European languages (Tiwari 2020, 634). This approach can foster a new wave of knowledge production that respects and embraces these differences. However, the complexity of this challenge cannot be fully addressed in a few conferences or in this special issue alone. I hope the articles in this special issue will spark further critical attention and promote an ongoing dialogue on the role of multilingualism in shaping the literary, philosophical, and scientific achievements of premodern Islamic cultures.

24 On how the discipline of Comparative Literature struggles theoretically to engage with premodern Latin-French literary circulations, see Domínguez 2012.

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