Contacts in the MENA region: a brief introduction

Evgeniya Prusskaya, Vera Tsukanova

The nature of contacts between people that have populated the Middle East and Northern Africa since prehistoric time covers all the degrees on an imaginary scale of relationships: wars, conquests, dominance, slavery, oppression, but also trade, neighborhood, coexistence, tolerance, cross-cultural exchange and multiculturalism. All these contact types affected various aspects of people's life and culture: language and architecture, literature and economy, religion and scholarship. For good or for ill, they became intertwined together, sometimes taking unexpected and whimsical shape.

Hence, the articles of the 13th issue of the online journal *Middle East – Topics & Arguments* are written by specialists in different fields, such as linguistics, anthropology, sociology, literature, and history. This variety of disciplines reveals not only the interdisciplinarity of the journal but also our broad interpretation of what constitutes the contacts and cross-cultural exchange and how they simultaneously influence multiple layers of human (co-) existence.

Such a broad topic of the issue brought us to the idea of making the editorial in a form of a short introduction to the question of what forms constitutes the contacts

in the region and which factors have determined it.

Historical overview

The MENA region has always been an area of intercultural contacts. As a cradle of civilizations, born in Egypt and Mesopotamia, the region has seen the rise and fall of different states and empires, invasions and migrations of various peoples. Three world religions appeared in the Middle East at various points in time. Different ethnicities, languages, and cultures interacted in this area and engaged in various forms of contacts. Since the medieval epoch several factors can be distinguished which influenced the connections and shaped the forms of human interaction in the Middle Eastern region:

a. Islam

Since the seventh century Islam has spread throughout the region and has become the dominant religion. *Dār al-Islām*, a specific concept of the Muslim cultural sphere, appeared in the Middle Ages and although its meaning and historical context has changed overtime, it organized the structure of society and connected people in the region (see the book by S. Albrecht on that question). The other religions were integrated into the *dār al-Islām* system in a subordinate position, with

Christianity and Judaism having their own autonomous hierarchies. *Ḥajj (Hadj)* united people of different ethnicities and languages, stimulating the exchange of goods and cultural practices in the world of Islam.

The *dār al-Islām* faced the Christian Crusades in the Middle Ages and European colonialism and modernity in later periods, and this resulted in a set of complicated encounters in the MENA region. The emergence of Pan-Islamism and Muslim reformism at the end of the nineteenth century became one of the answers to the challenges of European expansion. Islam was an important factor in the politics and social life of the MENA region in the twentieth century, despite secular rule in many of its states. The Muslim Brotherhood, the revolution of 1979 in Iran and the rise of the different Islamic movements in the subsequent years became essential factors in regional politics and international relations.

b. Arabic language and linguistic diversity

Arabic dominated as the language of sacred texts in the medieval caliphates, but Persian was language of science and literature on a par with Arabic in the Abbasid state. Turkish has become yet another major language in the region. Linguistic diversity in the region sparked

various forms of language contact (see below). But the role of the Arabic language as the *lingua franca* of the Muslim world has always been very significant. The dominance of Arabic resulted in various forms of language shift among Berbers, Copts, Arameans and other population groups, as well as intensive linguistic, cultural and literary contacts within the region, although with the fragmentation into dialects Arabic lost its uniform character.

c. (Multi)cultural background

The MENA region is steeped in rich cultural and historical heritage, and this background influenced and shaped the cultures of the MENA states. The medieval caliphates absorbed the legacies of Antiquity and integrated the local traditions and cultures of the subjugated territories. Culturally diverse regions coexisted and interacted within the multiethnic Ottoman Empire, which united both Turkish and Byzantine legacies. Berber and Arab cultural components mixed and entangled in the Maghreb. References to rich historical past were deployed in the nation and state building of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the MENA countries.

The MENA region, opulent in ethnicities, cultures, languages, geographical fea-

tures and trade routes, has always seen cross-cultural exchange both within and among its sub-regions, and as well with the other world regions and civilizations. Thus, the basin of the Arabian Sea became the area of diverse contacts between Africa's eastern shore, the Middle East and South Asia; the Mediterranean became a contact zone[1] between the world of Islam and Europe, revealing a panoply of interwoven relations and transculturation.

d. Imperialism and globalization challenges

Over the long nineteenth century, the MENA region faced a variety of challenges provoked by European imperialism and the spread of new political and social ideas. One of the answers to these challenges became large-scale socio-economic reforms, accompanied by the adaptation of certain western institutions to the regional peculiarities. Inaugurated by Mehmet Ali in Egypt, the reforms soon spread to the Ottoman Empire, where they came to be known as *Tanzimat*. They led to the painful destruction of traditional society, but also encouraged cultural revival and stimulated the emergence of new intellectual currents. One of them was nationalism, which became an answer to the challenges of imperialism and an instrument of the struggle against it.

As postcolonial studies have shown (D. Chakrabarty; H. Bhabha and others), the encounters between European powers and the conquered territories extended far beyond the dichotomy of the colonizers and the colonized, revealing a variety of contact forms and complicated relationships among them. In the colonial and post-colonial epochs, the attitude towards the West as well as the identity of the people in the MENA region was ambiguous. In particular, the case of Algeria is interesting. The latter country became a de-facto part of France in the mid-nineteenth century. By the end of that century, a range of politicians of different backgrounds espoused various views on the future of Algeria. These included European settlers, colonial and metropolitan administration, including *indigenophiles*, Muslim religious authorities and a generation of secular-educated Algerians. Their contradictory discourses became entangled into a kind of Gordian Knot, which not only influenced later Algerian history but, to a great extent, also shaped modern France (see works of J. Sessions and G. Murray-Miller). Similar processes of entanglement are traced in the other countries in the colonial context as well.

In a more general sense, the nation and state-building in the MENA region developed in complicated conditions of coloni-

zation and then decolonization, two world wars, a Cold War, numerous revolutions, the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as other regional and trans-regional conflicts. All these factors and the world becoming more and more global shaped the variety of interaction forms and encounters within and beyond the region. Language contacts felt the impact of all these factors, but they should be considered separately, because their study has a research methodology of its own.

Language contacts in the region: an overview

There are very few types of contacts between individuals or groups of people that can dispense with language. Language is a natural part of human communication, which appeared far earlier in oral than in written form. The emergence of script first took place in our region of interest, namely in Egypt and Mesopotamia, in the late fourth millennium BCE. The state of affairs we can observe in the MENA region from the earliest days of literacy is the adjacency of languages belonging to different families and groups.

In the North, on the territory of modern Turkey, people used to speak ancient Indo-European languages of the Anatolian group, as well as language isolates, which

have no known relatives in the second millennium BCE. These languages were later gradually replaced by Greek and then by Turkish, which belongs to the Altaic language family. The first language attested on the territory of modern Iran was Elamite, of uncertain affiliation, but later it gave way to the Indo-European languages of the Iranian group. The Semitic family was spread over a large territory, including Mesopotamia, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. The Egyptian language was spoken on the territory of Egypt until the first millennium BCE, while its daughter, the Coptic language, was the primary means of communication in Egypt in the first millennium CE and continued to be used as a vernacular until the seventeenth century. Both of these languages belong together with Semitic to the Afro-Asiatic macro-family. Farther to the west, another branch of Afro-Asiatic, Berber languages, have long been in use, interacting in later times with Arabic. The Sumerian language-isolate was spoken in the third millennium BCE in southern Mesopotamia, while the territory of present-day Kurdistan was home to the Hurro-Urartian group of languages before the Iranian migrations. Besides these, newcomers from Europe brought the Indo-European languages of Romance

and Germanic groups to the Middle East over the last several centuries.

Languages of different origin normally vary to a considerable extent in their grammatical structure and have absolutely distinct lexica. Nevertheless, even in the instance of the earliest attested languages we see traces of convergence that led to grammatical and lexical change. The contacts in the situation of language maintenance commonly result in lexical interference, while language shift is frequently accompanied by substrate-driven grammatical restructuring. "In stable bilingual situations, lexical borrowing can act as a conduit for structural innovations in the minority language (...). But the affected language remains highly resistant to foreign structural interference" (Winford 99). As an example of the first contact situation one can cite Ottoman Turkish, which incorporated a huge number of Persian and Arabic words but kept its core Turkic grammar. To illustrate the second case, one can mention modern Ethiosemitic languages, such as Amharic, whose phonology, morphology, and syntax underwent extensive restructuring under the impact of the Cushitic substrate: in (Thomason 111–113) one can find a list of features borrowed by Ethiosemitic languages from Cushitic. Another well-known case is the dialects of Arabic, which emerged when the speak-

ers of Aramaic, Coptic, Old South Arabian and Berber varieties shifted to Arabic (Versteegh 96–99).

A typical synchronic manifestation of language contact is multilingualism, which has always been typical for the MENA region. It can be defined as coexistence of two or more languages simultaneously on the same territory. This can be a temporary situation, which leads to language shift, or more or less stable one. Bilingualism is characteristic for Berbers in Maghreb, Arameans in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey, Arabs in Israel, Kurds in Northern Syria and Turkey, Azeris and Arabs in Iran etc. Minorities that live together or in one another's vicinity are often trilingual, as they speak one other's vernaculars in addition to the official language of the country. Another variant of bilingualism emerges when people use a variant of their own language as a high standard (acrolect), as is the case in the Arab countries where the *fusḥa* normative language is used alongside various dialects. Some countries of the region still deploy former colonial languages for official purposes. Switching between languages is called code-switching in sociolinguistics. The most frequent case is situational code-switching, when people alternate between codes depending on a situation or environment: e.g. an Aramean from Syria

Evgeniya Prusskaya

is a researcher at the Institute of World history of Russian Academy of Sciences and an assistant professor at the Faculty of History of the State Academic University for the Humanities (Moscow, Russia). Her PhD dissertation was dedicated to the mutual perceptions of the French and the local population in the times of the Napoleon's invasion to Egypt. Currently she works on French colonialism in North Africa, particularly on French Algeria in the nineteenth century.
email: e.a.prusskaya@gmail.com

would speak his modern Aramaic vernacular within his family, Syrian Arabic in town and write a formal letter in *fusḥa*. Metaphorical code-switching appears in situations when a speaker or writer repeats the same phrase in different languages, showing them respect. Here fall, e.g., the official inscriptions in Morocco written in three languages, see the article by Dris Soulaimani in this volume. Interlanguage is a result of code-switching among speakers that have not fully mastered the languages they target or do not pay much attention to speaking a "pure" language when everyone around understands what they say. Thus, in Algerian speech, Arabic and French phrases may freely interchange.

Throughout the centuries, the MENA region has been an area of manifold contacts and cross-cultural interactions, which were determined by various factors mentioned above. Some types of contact provoked the rise of others. Huge and multicultural polities, such as Caliphates of the Ummayads and Abbasids or Ottoman Empire, united different territories and ethnicities under their rule and stimulated the cultural, linguistic, and literary contacts within its borders. Islam spread from this region all over the world, connecting the Muslims into one religious community. Complicated relationships with the West in the modern period and intensive cross-cultural exchanges with Africa and Asia added to the cornucopia of contacts and connections within the MENA region.

Introducing the issue

The diversity of contact forms in the MENA region is treated in this issue from different perspectives.

The article in the META Section is dedicated to the correlation of the language and writing, on the one hand, and national and self-identification, on the other hand. **Dris Sulaimani** presents a typological overview of script reforms and their reasons and consequences, and then concentrates on his research in the current sociolinguistics situation in Morocco. While a large number of scholars are dealing with issues in language contact in modern Middle East, the author of this paper goes one step further, comparing the impact of social factors on primary and secondary sign systems, namely language and writing. The broad correlation between the outcomes of contact in these two areas fleshes out the relative status of French, Arab and Berber cultural traditions in modern the modern Maghreb.

The FOCUS section consists of four articles, written by specialists in different disciplines and highlighting a variety of contact forms in the region.

Gavin Murray-Miller addresses the Mediterranean region in the late ninteenth – early twentieth centuries as a contact zone, but beyond the colonial perspective. By analyzing the networks of the émigré communities from the Ottoman Empire to Europe, Murray-Miller argues that imperial and trans-imperial networks triggered convergence in the Mediterranean, facilitating different forms of cultural exchange and social interaction. This approach allows one to consider the Mediterranean in the Age of Empires in a global context and to conceptualize the contact zone in a more general sense.

Jonathan Kriener analyses how the fragmentation of the Lebanese University, which occurred during the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1990, reflected a split in society and influenced the reformation of university structure and administration. He finds that communal influences still play a major role in the organization of the educational process and student life, while contacts between different players "follow a logic of proximity rather than of anonymity".

The longest article of this volume belongs to **Chiara Fontana**, who presents a lengthy historical overview of the quatrains in Arabic and Persian poetry within a more general context of cultural and linguistic setting. She raises several questions

Vera Tsukanova

is a PhD student and research assistant at the Department of Semitic Studies of the University of Marburg, CNMS. She graduated from Russian State University for the Humanities (Moscow) with a specialization in Theoretical and Applied Linguistics and the Arabic language. Her doctoral dissertation project is concerned with the evolution of the derivational verbal system of Arabic in its Semitic context.

email: vera.tsukanova@uni-marburg.de

neglected in the previous studies and reveals episodes of borrowing and exchanges inside these two literary traditions. The author's reluctance to argue in terms of unidirectional influence squares well with the interwoven history of Arab and Persian civilizations and cultural traditions, which went through a long period of the mutual give-and-take.

The paper written by **Hanan Natour** considers another type of poetic contacts. By analyzing the verses of two modern Arab poets, Adonis and Fuad Rifka, both emigrants to Europe, the author tries to show the interaction between their fate, language, and literary output. Here again, like in the article by Sulaimani, there arises a question of self-identity and its reflection in the choice of language, but this time it is the language of poetry.

The CLOSE UP section consists of the article by **Mina Ibrahim**. This paper touches upon the main problem of the issue from a totally new perspective – the lack of contacts, or rather the unwillingness /inability to form such. Mina Ibrahim focuses on the Coptic community in Egypt and the ties inside and outside it based on a lifestory of a young Copt in the Shubra neighborhood. The author is trying to trace the reasons for the loss of contact between his protagonist and the Coptic community, and then to follow up its consequences.

The ANTITHESIS section is devoted to the question whether the Arabic language can connect scholars working in the field, being used as the metalanguage of academic discourse. **Christian Junge** highlights the advantages of deploying Arabic in academic discussion and university teaching, focusing in particular on its role in the academic setting in Germany in the recent years. In contrast, **Vera Tsukanova** and **Michael Waltisberg** doubt that the use of Arabic in academic discussions represents the optimal solution for the time being. They provide typological arguments for their claim, comparing the situation in other countries featuring multiple languages of scholarly tradition.

The original idea in designing this issue was to show how contacts between people affect several aspects of their life at the same time. Several more articles in other academic fields were planned, but unfortunately, not all of them could be included in the final collection. We have succeeded in gathering papers in history, sociology, linguistics, comparative literature, anthropology, as well as the metalanguage of scholarship. The contributions to this volume cover the entire MENA region, from Iran in the east, through Lebanon and Egypt, to Morocco in the west. Most of the articles show the interconnection of self-identification and language in various senses, be it writing, poetry, or the language of science.

We understand that only a small part of this broad topic is covered by our issue, but we hope that we made a meaningful contribution to the relevant academic discourse.

Notes

¹ Mary Pratt uses this term for the space of encounters and interaction between the local and colonial cultures (Pratt 6).

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