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Introduction

'He cannot speak Arabic unless he has a book in his hands'

Scholarly command of a language and the ability to function in it in day-to-day life are two very different things. An encounter between two famous scholars in Paris in the late 1820s makes this abundantly clear. The Egyptian Rifā'a Rāfi' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1801–1873) was in France as *imām* (religious leader) to an educational mission sent by the ruler of Egypt, Muḥammad 'Alī.¹ Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, who had been educated at the ancient university of al-Azhar in Cairo and was a protégé of the renowned scholar Ḥasan al-'Aṭṭār, had shown an aptitude for French, and combined his spiritual duties with studying alongside the Egyptian students. Antoine-Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838) was the doyen of European academic Orientalism, author of numerous works on Arabic, who regretted never having had the opportunity to travel in the Middle East himself (Messaoudi 2015, 46).

Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's impressions of Silvestre de Sacy, recorded in his memoir, are frequently quoted in works on both men, and on nineteenth-century encounters between Europe and the Arab world:²

In spite of appearances, the idea that foreigners do not understand Arabic when they do not speak it as well as the Arabs is without any foundation. Proof of this is my encounter in Paris with a distinguished French personality, famous among the Franks for his knowledge of Oriental languages, especially Arabic and Persian, whose name is Baron Silvestre de Sacy. He is one of the notables of Paris and a member of several scholarly societies of France as well as

of other countries. His translations are widely distributed in Paris, whereas his proficiency at Arabic is such that he summarized a commentary of the *maqāmāt* by al-Ḥarīrī under the title *Mukbtār al-shurūḥ* ('Selection of Commentaries'). He learned Arabic, so it is said, by his powers of understanding, his keen intelligence and wide erudition – and without the help of a teacher, except at the beginning. He did not have instruction on, for instance, Shaykh Khālid – not to mention *al-Mughnī*, which he can read. Indeed, he several times taught classes on al-Bayḍāwī. However, when he reads, he has a foreign accent and he cannot speak Arabic unless he has a book in his hands. If he wants to explain an expression, he uses strange words, which he is unable to pronounce properly. [... His style] is eloquent, even though it has slight weaknesses owing to his familiarity with the rules of European languages, as a result of which he tends to use expressions [from those languages] in Arabic.

(al-Ṭaḥṭāwī 1834 III.2, trans. Newman)

Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī is impressed at the knowledge of Arabic grammar and literature that Sacy has managed to acquire without the benefits of a traditional Azharian education, where he would have listened to the explication of a text as part of the *ḥalqa* ('circle') of a qualified teacher. Despite their differences in training, the Classical Arabic texts studied and esteemed by both men, whether in Egypt or in France, are the same, giving them a sense of intellectual connection. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī does not specify the language in which he and Sacy spoke to one another, but it seems probable that this was French, because Sacy was unable to speak Arabic 'without a book in his hands'. The Indian traveller Mirza Abu Taleb, who had met Sacy in 1802, likewise found his spoken Persian weak (Abu Taleb Khan, trans. Stewart, 1810, Vol. II, 144). Sacy's Arabic pronunciation, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī wrote, was poor and his expression unidiomatic, with linguistic interference from his native French. Although al-Ṭaḥṭāwī makes it clear that these failings do not detract from the value of his scholarship, Sacy was unable to communicate effectively in spoken Arabic.

It is important to bear in mind al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's own recent experience of language learning when reading this passage. On their arrival in France in 1826, he and the other members of the Egyptian mission had received intensive training in French, to prepare them to move on to specialised study of other academic subjects in the target language. There is no doubt that the training they received made them capable readers and writers of French, but an oral command of the language seems to have been more difficult for them to achieve. Edme-François Jomard, director of the

specially established school at which they were taught, regretted that the Egyptian government had not sent younger students (Jomard 1828, 105); the older members of the mission, in their twenties and even thirties, were less malleable and less quick to pick up a new language and new ideas. The mission students were also kept relatively isolated from French society, with their movements strictly controlled, giving them little opportunity to practise the language in its social context. It seems that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī had trouble pronouncing French well (Heyworth-Dunne 1939a, 265), just as Sacy had difficulty pronouncing Arabic.

Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's description of Sacy's Arabic, then, is the assessment of someone who had himself recently become very aware – perhaps painfully aware – of the distinction between reading and writing a language on the one hand, and speaking it on the other. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī praises Sacy's textual command of Arabic, just as contemporaries praised al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's skill in translating from French into Arabic (Jomard 1828, 104). It is the oral aspect of their encounter that represents the missed opportunity.

For a long time I assumed that Edward Said had discussed al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's meeting with Silvestre de Sacy; Sacy certainly occupies an important place in Said's *Orientalism* (especially Said 1978, 123–130). But when I came to look through Said's works for the relevant passage, I found that he does not. I made the assumption I did because al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's account of their acquaintance, in his 1834 book *Takblīṣ al-ibrīz fī talkhīṣ bārīz aw al-dīwān al-naḥīs bi-īwān Bārīs*, can be subjected to such a classically Saidian analysis. Silvestre de Sacy, the venerable Orientalist who has never himself experienced the Orient, displays his textual knowledge, his command over the Arabic language, to a young Egyptian scholar with whom he is unable to converse in Arabic. Sacy's response to *Takblīṣ al-ibrīz* reinforces this impression. In a letter which al-Ṭaḥṭāwī quotes in the published version of his book, Sacy is highly complimentary about the work, but notes that 'it does not always comply with the rules of Arabic grammar. This may be due to the fact that the author wrote things down in a hurry, and he will probably correct the mistakes in the fair copy' (al-Ṭaḥṭāwī 1834, 286, trans. Newman). We could dissect the role of knowledge and power in the al-Ṭaḥṭāwī–Sacy relationship, as I have done here rather clumsily, at length. What I would emphasise is the critical yet neglected role that *spoken* language, in addition to written language, has in encounters of this sort. Spoken language represents a fundamental challenge to the Orientalist's mastery of his domain.

This book is about communication between Arabic speakers and speakers of other languages outside the Orientalist's study. Silvestre de Sacy's concern – and to a slightly lesser extent, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's – was mastery

of the written word, the ability to study and translate texts. But the primary, original mode of linguistic communication is speech. While an increasing body of scholarly research, which I will discuss presently, examines the history of the learning and teaching of written language, less emphasis has hitherto been placed on the learning of spoken language. One of the principal reasons for this relative neglect is, of course, that our historical evidence for language learning in the past is almost entirely written evidence. Only in isolated cases, such as the meeting between Silvestre de Sacy and al-Ṭaḥṭāwī recounted above, do we find helpful allusions to the spoken communication that accompanied acquisition of written languages. This makes phrasebooks and other instruction books all the more valuable as testimony on spoken language use. For Arabic, moreover, the problem is more acute than for European languages: spoken varieties of Arabic are very different from the written language. Historically, they have seldom been written down, and thus most of the textual tools developed for teaching 'Arabic' to speakers of foreign languages have been directed towards written Arabic, not the spoken language of the streets.

In the following chapters, I will examine how Arabic speakers and speakers of European languages found ways of communicating with one another, between Napoleon's *Expédition d'Égypte* and the Second World War. My primary source of evidence for this spoken linguistic encounter consists of a body of material – phrasebooks for colloquial Arabic – that has rarely been discussed in the academic literature. The teaching of spoken Arabic was a field adjacent to, though frequently interconnecting with, academic Orientalism. Many of the figures I will discuss were trained or taught in institutions which also, or primarily, taught written Arabic. But a larger proportion of the learners and teachers considered in this book were not university students or academics, but people – often of little formal education in their own language – who needed spoken Arabic in order to live and work in the Middle East. This book is about their lives, personalities, careers and networks, and those of the people who tried to teach them Arabic.

The research questions I bring to this subject matter are many and varied, but my most fundamental concern has been to document this little-known body of material – instruction books for colloquial Arabic; to retrieve information about the people (themselves usually little known) who wrote and employed these books; and to reconstruct the processes by which the books were composed and put to use. This constitutes the primary research contribution of the present book, and has been hard won from a wide variety of historical sources, discussed in the following sections. Few of the works I analyse have ever been subject to scholarly

analysis before, and nor, for the most part, has any research ever been undertaken into their authors. My analysis – addressing my ‘research questions’ proper – centres on how teachers and learners dealt with the considerable challenge of teaching and learning colloquial, dialectal Arabic, and moreover of doing so through an unpromising medium for instruction in a spoken language: a book. Readers who are particularly interested in the overall picture of how many books were published for colloquial Arabic, when and in what languages, and in broad trends within the corpus as a whole, may wish to turn immediately to the graphs provided in the online materials accompanying this book, and to the discussion in [Chapter 7](#). The approach I take over the following chapters is, however, a microhistorical and biographical one, concerned with small-scale, incremental developments in Arabic pedagogy over a long period of time, and with the place these books and the Arabic language occupied in the lives of individual people.

Context and parameters

Historians of the Middle East will have noticed immediately that my periodisation is a very traditional one: from Napoleon to the Second World War or, to frame it in Arab terms, roughly from Nahḍa (the Arab ‘Renaissance’ of the nineteenth century) to Nakba (the dispossession of the Palestinian people in 1948). The use of this specific period as a unit of analysis dates to not long after its conclusion. Albert Hourani’s classic study of *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, for example, covers the years 1798–1939 (Hourani 1962). The Second World War and its immediate aftermath can plausibly be argued to act as a historical watershed in the Middle East: the war itself, with European military occupation of the region; the independence of Syria, Lebanon and Jordan immediately after the war; the 1947–1949 war in Palestine, with the Nakba and creation of the state of Israel; and the Egyptian Free Officers’ coup of 1952.

It is becoming less plausible, on the other hand, to treat 1798 as a watershed. Many historical studies, particularly in the mid-twentieth century, regarded the brief French occupation of Egypt in 1798–1801 as a decisive turning point in Middle Eastern history: an encounter that brought the countries of Europe and the Middle East into sustained contact, and fundamentally changed the political, economic, technological and cultural landscape of the Middle East. Many of the works of scholarship that I will discuss in [Chapter 1](#), for example, adopt this perspective. But to treat 1798 as a turning point in Middle Eastern history is also to take a Eurocentric

attitude, one that prioritises interaction with Europe over internal developments within the Middle East itself. As scholars, most notably Peter Gran, have pointed out more recently, there has been too much emphasis on 1798 as a break, and this neglects important continuities before and after the French invasion (Gran 2020, 110–111; see also Gran 1979).

The burgeoning field of Nahḍa studies (with a flood of important publications since the 2010s, for example Bou Ali 2012; Patel 2013; Hanssen and Weiss 2016; El-Ariss 2018; Hill 2020) has also served to show how crucial it is to examine this period from within, not from outside, the Middle East. Many of the works and authors considered in this volume are products of the Nahḍa, the Arab intellectual ‘Awakening’ of the second half of the nineteenth century, through into the early twentieth century. Important innovations of the Nahḍa included the production of Arabic translations of seminal European works of scholarship and literature; emergence of Arabic journalism; and the development of *al-lughā al-‘Arabiyya al-fuṣḥā* (‘the eloquent Arabic language’, on which see further below) as a modern and flexible vehicle for the expression of thought on every topic under the sun. All of these important developments intersect in numerous places with my discussion of language learning and phrasebooks.

The reason why I have adopted the periodisation I have is that my topic is precisely the intense period of interaction between Arabs and Europeans that resulted from the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, and everything that came after it. European impressions of the Middle East have been the object of study for a long time, and continue to be, for example in the publications of the Association for the Study of Travel in Egypt and the Near East (<https://www.astene.org.uk/>). The converse – Arab and Middle Eastern impressions of the West – have begun to be more intensely scrutinised (see e.g. Sabry 2019; Dabashi 2020), and a number of key nineteenth- and early twentieth-century accounts of travels to Europe and America have been translated into European languages (e.g. Newman 2004; Abdel-Malek and Kaḥlah 2011; Zakī et al. 2015). Reading such accounts – of Europeans in the Middle East and Arabs in Europe – in counterpoint to one another can grant many insights.

Take, for example, the linguistic experiences of Aḥmad Zakī Pasha (1867–1934) during his trip to Europe for the International Congress of Orientalists in 1892, recounted in *al-Safar ilā al-mu’tamar* (‘The Journey to the Congress’). In Liverpool, Zakī tells an English acquaintance that he plans to visit Wales (Zakī 1894, 187–188). The Englishman warns him that his English is too weak, and that even were it perfect it would not do him much good, since Welsh is a completely separate language. Zakī points out that plenty of Europeans visit Egypt – and write about

it – without knowing anything of its people’s language (*lisān*) or mores (*akhlāq*). His English friend counters that these visitors can use works written by previous (European) travellers, that English is widely known in Egypt, and that they can hire interpreters (*tarājima*). Zakī tells him that he can do exactly the same in Wales, and moreover that he has already travelled through Spain and Portugal without knowing the language. As the argument continues, Zakī is clearly beginning to have fun at the expense of his companion. He shocks him by saying that he also wants to go down a coal mine and, promising to write, hops on the train to Wales. Zakī sees his experience in visiting and writing about Europe as equivalent to that of Europeans visiting and writing about the Middle East – and language is an important part of both these encounters. In this book, I will move frequently between individual Arab and European perspectives on the teaching and learning of Arabic.

The first printed phrasebook for Arabic in a European language was published during the *Expédition d’Égypte* (1798–1801), and so this is where I begin (Chapter 1). The choice to end this study in around 1945 is a historiographical one, but also one that fits my source material. In the period after the end of the Second World War and direct European colonisation of Egypt and the Levant, one of the most important markets for Arabic phrasebooks (soldiers, colonists and administrators) dried up. Because I include Yiddish and Hebrew Arabic-learning materials in my study, the mid-1940s also represents an appropriate conclusion date. With the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, there were no more Yiddish-language materials for learning Arabic, and Hebrew-language materials changed dramatically in nature, as will be discussed in Chapter 6. In 1945, we find the first Arabic phrasebook specifically for American oil workers in Saudi Arabia, who became one of the genre’s new audiences (Smeaton 1945). British and American security interests in the Middle East also led to new (and much improved) initiatives in teaching Arabic, from 1947 at the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies (MECAS) school at Shemlan in Lebanon (Chapter 4), and the various American programmes discussed by Fava Thomas (2016). Shortly after the appearance of the first modern ‘Teach Yourself’ Arabic book (Tritton 1943), too, seems an appropriate place to end.

The post-war period is also when the first scholarship on historical language learning and translation in the Middle East emerged. Jacques Tagher’s *Harakat al-tarjama bi-Miṣr khilāl al-qarn al-tāsi‘ ‘ashar* (‘The Translation Movement in Egypt During the Nineteenth Century’; Tājir 1945) reviewed the ‘translation movement’ that began after the first Egyptian educational missions to Europe in the 1820s. In the same year,

Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl published his study of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (al-Shayyāl 1945), which was followed by works on the history of translation in the period of the French occupation of Egypt (al-Shayyāl 1950) and the reign of Muḥammad ‘Alī (al-Shayyāl 1951). These are foundational works in the history of translation in the Middle East, and are still essential reading on the subject. In [Chapter 1](#), I will explore further how the learning of European languages by people from the Middle East influenced the later learning of Arabic by Europeans. The timing of the publication of these works on the history of translation is significant: the immediate post-war and postcolonial period was a suitable one for reflection on the Arab world’s relations with the West.

Although so far I have been using the words ‘Arab’ and ‘Middle East’ in quite a vague sense, this book has a specific geographical remit: Egypt, Sudan and the Red Sea littoral; Syria–Palestine (the historical ‘Greater Syria’); and Iraq. It does not venture further west into North Africa, for the very good reason that there already exists a rich body of scholarship on Arabic learning in the French colonial Maghreb. I hope that my debt to this scholarship will become clear: in particular to Alain Messaoudi’s *Les arabisants et la France coloniale* (Messaoudi 2015), and to Sylvette Larzul and Alain Messaoudi’s edited collection *Manuels d’arabe d’hier et d’aujourd’hui* (Larzul and Messaoudi 2013). The nature of the European colonial presence in the Maghreb (the western Arab world) differed significantly from that in the Mashriq (the eastern Arab world, in which I include Egypt and Sudan). The French territories in North Africa were settler colonies in a way that British Egypt, under the polite fiction of the ‘Veiled Protectorate’, never was. This means that we find plentiful published learning materials for use in French schools, universities and other sites in the Maghreb itself, where the teaching and learning of French and Arabic took place within colonial institutions, and was subject to French colonial policy and supervision. In [Chapter 4](#) and [Chapter 5](#), I will explore several institutional or semi-institutional loci of Arabic learning in British-ruled Egypt and Palestine, but there was never anything like the same official British interest in teaching Arabic in the Mashriq as there was French interest in the Maghreb.

In both regions, of course, far more language learning took place outside institutional contexts than within any organised educational system. In Algeria, Messaoudi notes that ‘les Européens apprennent la langue arabe le plus souvent en dehors du cadre scolaire des chaires publiques, avec l’aide de ces nouveaux ouvrages pratiques, ou sans l’aide d’aucun manuel’ (Messaoudi 2015, 184). It is this language learning, by ‘ordinary people’ outside schools and universities, with which I too am

principally concerned. I had initially imagined, when I first conceived of this project, that it would be challenging to differentiate clearly between scholarly works for studying Classical or literary Arabic, and less academic works for the spoken, colloquial language. In fact, this divide turned out to be much starker than I had envisaged. My focus is on books that value teaching a person to speak above teaching them to read and write Arabic; that aim to teach a colloquial form of the language that can be used for everyday communication, not a high literary register; and whose intended audience are not students in school or university. Relatively few Arabic instruction books for the period and regions with which I am concerned blurred these categories. Books for universities or other formal training programmes generally tended to be concerned with the literary language, and with reading and writing. This is true even of military training programmes (discussed in [Chapters 4 and 5](#)), which rarely actually taught the spoken colloquial language that their students really needed. Scholarly grammars of literary Arabic were most often issued by established publishers, including university presses, and books on colloquial Arabic by smaller, commercial publishers, or private printing (the publishing industry is discussed further in [Chapter 3](#)).

There was also a socioeconomic divide between the intended audiences of Arabic instruction books. Academic grammars tended to be expensive, and to assume that their user had had an expensive education; colloquial phrasebooks were cheaper, and did not assume that the user, for example, knew Latin (cf. Messaoudi 2015, 230, on Algerian works of the 1840s and 1850s). Colloquial Arabic teacher Anton Hassan, whom we will meet in [Chapter 1](#), was driven to write his own textbooks because his students at a technical college in Austria could not afford the existing ones. I will return to the question of literary versus colloquial Arabic below.

Phrasebooks and histories of language learning and teaching

There are two important scholarly contexts within which I would like to situate this book. The first, as noted above, is Nahḍa studies, and in particular the rich body of work which explores how Arabs and Europeans regarded one another and came to terms with one another's differences, in the period of European colonial encroachment on the Middle East. The second scholarly context is that of the history of language learning and teaching, which has begun to coalesce as an international academic discipline only within the past 10 years or so (see, for example, McLelland

2015a; McLelland 2017; McLelland and Smith 2018; Offord et al. 2018; Mairs and Smith 2019; Coffey 2021). Some of the most important contributions of the emerging discipline of the history of language learning and teaching (the name adopted by the HoLLT network: <http://www.hollt.net/>) have been to restore agency to teachers as historical actors, and to examine how linguistic theories translated into classroom practice. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for example, the teaching of modern languages in European schools and universities changed dramatically, as teachers moved from prioritising grammar–translation methods to variations on the ‘direct method’, which aimed to teach a language, in that language, through communication (see e.g. Klippel and Kemmler 2021).

Like many other scholars engaged in history of language learning and teaching research, I am also interested in the authors and users of language textbooks, their methodologies and their expectations of one another. I depart from previous studies in the field in two major ways: in using phrasebooks and self-instruction books as my primary unit of analysis, and in dealing with languages outside Europe.³

The history of learning and teaching Arabic has previously been explored in the works on the colonial Maghreb cited above, as well as in a number of works on specific periods and locations, such as Early Modern Europe (Loop et al. 2017), Malta (Cassar 2011) or among Jewish immigrants to Palestine (Mendel 2016). The journal *Al-‘Arabiyya* (which began in 1967 as *An-Nashra*) is a useful resource on the history of Arabic teaching in the United States over the past few decades. The research that comes closest to my own is Liesbeth Zack’s, in which she analyses many of the same books for learning colloquial Arabic as I do, but as a source of information on the Egyptian dialect (Zack 2001, 2004, 2014a, 2014b, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2020). Sarah Irving also discusses some of the same phrasebooks I do, in her study of how ‘Arabic teaching manuals, tourist guidebooks, nationalist pamphlets, and poetic and theatrical translations’ reveal changing constructions of Palestinian identity in the first half of the twentieth century (Irving 2017, 9). As with Messaoudi’s publications, noted above, I view my work as complementary to Zack’s and Irving’s, since I am not principally concerned with dialectology or identity formation, but with language learning.

The phrasebook genre, despite being a very ancient one (Dickey 2012), has not received much scholarly attention. Works for self-instruction – ‘teach yourself’ books – have likewise been comparatively neglected. There is a great deal of overlap between the two, if we consider phrasebooks as literally that – books of phrases to be read or

memorised – and ‘teach yourself’ books as aimed at teaching a broader competence in the language. Since both were used for the most part outside of formal educational contexts and without teachers, it also makes sense to group them together. Studies to date include Zack’s dialectal analysis of some Arabic phrasebooks, McLelland on self-instruction works for Chinese (McLelland 2015b), and treatments of some individual books or language-contact scenarios (e.g. Considine 2001; Constantine 2013a; Constantine 2013b; Cowman 2014; Koch 2015; Hallett 2017; Kuldkepp 2021; Walker 2021). Louise Munch Sørensen’s short but insightful article ‘Popular Language Works and the Autonomous Language Learner in 19th-Century Scandinavia’ is a rare example of a work that examines what she calls ‘popular language works’ – for use outside the classroom – as a genre in their own right. As Sørensen points out, the structure and content of such books is remarkably consistent across time and space: ‘The method in itself is simple and has changed very little since the 19th century though the way it is packaged and delivered has undergone considerable transformation in recent times’ (Sørensen 2011, 30). In Chapter 3, I will discuss how phrasebooks and self-instruction books for Arabic fit into this genre, as it developed in both Europe and the Ottoman Empire.

Although phrasebooks and ‘teach yourself’ books, as we will see, often billed themselves as useful for the proactive, independent learner and/or traveller, who wished to make their own way in Arabic, the conventions of the genre in fact discouraged improvisation. Phrasebooks make assumptions about their user: about their nationality, gender, race and attitudes towards the people and culture with whom they come into contact. As Nanjala Nyabola has explored in her memoir *Travelling While Black*, phrasebooks and guidebooks still assume a particular – white, privileged, Western, also usually male – traveller, and anticipate their experiences accordingly (Nyabola 2020). In Chapter 7, I will consider users’ annotations on surviving copies of Arabic phrasebooks, which sometimes allow us to see how books could be adapted to other needs: a woman pencilling in feminine grammatical endings, for example, or workers writing down words they needed to do their job. Despite the formulaic nature of phrasebooks and self-instruction books (and Sørensen is correct that the genre is quite a rigid one), there are occasional moments of subversion hidden within them. In some cases, biographical research allows us to see that the author’s motivation is more cynical than an altruistic desire to help with language learning, as in the case of the charlatan Carl Thimm (Chapter 3) or the anti-imperialist campaigner ‘Abd al Ḥamīd Zakī (Chapter 5). We can also see content as more positive reflections of the authors’ personalities and desires. Samar Attar,

novelist and author of *Modern Arabic: An Introductory Course for Foreign Students* (Beirut, 1988), writes of her language textbook as autobiography, recreating the Damascus she had left behind (Fay 2002, 215). The authors whom we will meet in this book both tried to recreate the worlds they were familiar with and imagined others.

Phrasebooks are notorious for equipping their users poorly to communicate in the target language, and have been sent up by humorists from Mark Twain to James Thurber to Monty Python. This is ironic, since many of the phrasebooks I will examine here expressly advertised themselves as much more useful than scholarly grammars in actually helping the user to communicate. The reasons why such books (or their owners) failed are many and varied. In the course of the following chapters, we will encounter phrasebook authors whose knowledge of Arabic was poor (in a few cases, non-existent); works that were too long, too complicated, too boring or simply too heavy; and above all, authors and learners who had overly optimistic ideas about learning to speak a language competently from a book.

Perhaps the greatest failing, however, concerns the social world in which most phrasebooks imagine their user operating: one in which a foreigner gives orders or otherwise makes their wants known, without forming friendships and collegiate relationships with Arabic speakers, of the kind that would encourage active use of the language and feedback from native speakers. In this respect, the most successful phrasebooks are, ironically, those that equip their user with only the very basics, and leave them to proceed by trial and error, living in an Arabic-speaking country. Lucie Duff-Gordon (1821–1869), arriving in Cairo for the first time in 1862, seems to have followed this approach: ‘It would be very easy to learn colloquial Arabic, as they all speak with perfect distinctness that one can follow the sentences and catch the words one knows as they are repeated. I think I know forty or fifty words already’ (Duff-Gordon, ed. Waterfield, 1969, 46). Her letters reveal that she became an effective communicator in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, even if we have no surviving native-speaker testimony on her pronunciation or grammar. Phrasebooks and self-instruction books could actually be barriers to communication, as many foreign visitors to the Middle East found. A tourist named A. P. Walshe had the following encounter with a student at al-Azhar in 1899:

This youth was unmistakably the rising hope of his Alma Mater. You saw it at once in his conceited air and self-satisfied manner. It was further evident that he was regarded by his fellows as a prodigious linguist. With the aid of a few Arabic phrases I had committed to memory, I essayed

conversation with this budding genius. He treated my scanty Arabic with disdain, as if its exiguous nature were beneath his notice, and with a chuckle of delight and a triumphant glance at his companions, dumbfounded me with the poser – ‘Mister, what is the time?’ This elicited a chorus of applause from his fellow pupils, and even the very Shekh who was attending us round the sacred edifice, could not refrain from marks of wonder and astonishment. Without awaiting an answer, the phenomenon, turning to his mates, straightaway launched into what seemed to be an animated discourse on the intricacies of the English idiom. It was clear the boy hadn’t the vaguest idea of the meaning of the phrase he had fired off with such a flourish of trumpets, and further, in that one phrase he had exhausted his whole stock of English.

*(Faringdon Advertiser and Vale of the White Horse Gazette,
Saturday 27 May 1899, 5)*

Unintentionally, and perhaps unperceived by Walshe, the young Azharite was making a good point, revealing his interlocutor’s basic repetition of book-learnt Arabic phrases for what they were. This is another missed connection, of the same nature but different in magnitude to that between Silvestre de Sacy and Rifā’a al-Ṭaḥṭāwī. Both sides were able to recognise deficiencies in the other’s command of the spoken language, but neither was able to remedy them in a way that would encourage mutual understanding. Perhaps we also find hints here of the disorienting, psychologically uncomfortable sensation described by the literary critic Abdelfattah Kilito as arising both from hearing a foreigner speak one’s language and from not understanding theirs (Kilito 2008, 87). How phrasebooks promoted both understanding and misunderstanding will be one of the central themes of this book.

Mastering Arabic

This book is not expressly about the Arabic language and its dialects, but about the history of how people have tried to communicate and aid communication in Arabic. I have not written the book an Arabist would have written (I confess the limitations of my own Arabic in the Acknowledgements to this volume), but have written as a sociolinguist and historian, for a broad audience of linguists and historians, including those who have no knowledge of Arabic. For this reason, an introduction to the challenges of learning spoken Arabic is in order. Arabic speakers may find that some of what follows glosses over complexities or fudges controversial

topics, but my intention is to make this book accessible (and with any luck, interesting) to readers who do not know Arabic.

It is no coincidence that people – including Edward Said (1978, 77–78) – speak of ‘mastering’ languages, or of having a ‘command’ of them. On one level, this is a metaphor for the language learning experience: one of overcoming the challenges of learning a difficult language, making it submissive to the learner, and allowing them to ‘command’ its full repertoire in order to accomplish their goals. On another level, however, this ‘mastery’ of language can be seen as part and parcel of the European colonial domination of the Global South. Languages could be forced into the model of European grammatical traditions, codified into grammar books and ordered into families, by the very same missionaries, soldiers and settlers who colonised the people who spoke these languages. Examples of this will recur frequently in the following chapters, where we will see the mastery of spoken Arabic as part of wider aims to master a country and its people.

From a linguistic point of view, the point needs to be made that ‘command’ and ‘mastery’ are not realistic models for how individuals actually acquire languages. We learn languages by fits and starts, and may be able to buy a train ticket but not have a conversation about the United Nations, or vice versa (the latter reflecting the content of one of the most popular sets of English textbooks for Arabic today, the *al-Kitaab* series: Brustad et al. 2011). These terms are, however, very commonly used in the memoirs, travelogues, letters and diaries which I have searched for evidence of Arabic language learning in the period of this study. It is common to the point of cliché, for example, for biographies of nineteenth-century visitors to the Middle East to say something along the lines of ‘he quickly mastered the local dialect of Arabic’, without providing any evidence at all to support this. The reasons for such statements are both ignorance of the practicalities of language learning, and problems in the perception of people who speak foreign languages by those who do not. ‘Fluency’, likewise, is not a useful index to use when assessing language competence, no matter how often we encounter it in historical descriptions. The word may be in common parlance, but it is not linguistically useful. Multilingualism is best assessed as occurring in specific ‘domains’ of competence, something which we can also access in historical material (see, for example, the influential set of studies on the ancient Mediterranean world in Adams et al. 2002).

Since this is a work of sociolinguistics and social history rather than applied linguistics, I will not have much more to say about effective Arabic second language acquisition (for a good introduction, see Alhawary 2018). Occasionally we will meet figures who did learn good, practical

spoken Arabic. I am interested in those whose use of the language can be verified by the accounts of native speakers, or from the things that they were able to achieve in Arabophone contexts, and not so much in those who developed a reputation as ‘fluent Arabic speakers’ among Europeans, which is usually treated as equivalent to ‘native level’. The key example here is of course T. E. Lawrence (‘of Arabia’), whose Arabic was certainly extremely good. His colloquial, dialectal command of the language was strong enough for him to be made fun of by workers on an archaeological dig in Egypt for speaking like a Syrian (letter of 18 January 1912 to D. G. Hogarth: Bodleian Library, Oxford, MSS. Eng. d. 3335). One of Lawrence’s teachers, Fareedah al-Akle, thought him ‘a good linguist’ (Mack 1976, 78). Lawrence himself, however, was well aware that he could not pass for an Arab, and the historian Suleiman Mousa, who interviewed a number of Arabs who had known Lawrence personally, found that they all ‘unanimously agreed that as soon as Lawrence spoke one sentence of Arabic, it was clear to all concerned that he was a foreigner’ (Mousa 1966, 268; on Lawrence’s Arabic, see also Mairs and Muratov 2015, 50–55).

In English and other foreign-language accounts of Lawrence, nevertheless, his reputation as a native-level Arabic speaker persists. This is a common phenomenon. To someone with no knowledge of a language (or, in the case of many English speakers, no personal experience of successfully learning a language to a high level), competence in a language can be quickly upgraded to ‘fluency’ or ‘native level’. Similarly, in his study of Arabic learning in French colonial Algeria, Messaoudi has found that ‘la légende héroïque de la conquête de l’Algérie, et les enjeux politiques qui opposent civils et militaires à la fin du Second Empire, ont sans doute amené à mythifier l’officier des bureaux arabes, à grossir sa connaissance effective de l’arabe’ (Messaoudi 2015, 181). In the following chapters, I will therefore be sceptical about reports from other foreigners of the Arabic abilities of foreigners, and thus about the level of Arabic they achieved from a particular instruction book, or their qualifications to write one.

What specific challenges did Arabic pose for learners in the period from Napoleon’s expedition to the Second World War? I would like to divide these into two groups: linguistic and pedagogical. ‘Arabic’ is actually a group of varieties, with a ‘high’ variety, used in formal writing and speech, existing in a diglossic relationship with a number of spoken ‘dialects’ (see, for example, Haeri 2003 on the symbiosis of Classical Arabic and Egyptian Arabic in everyday life). This is a vast and complex topic, to which Arabic-speaking readers will require no introduction. For non-speakers of Arabic, I will pick out some aspects which will be of relevance in the following chapters.

In Arabic second-language teaching in the present day, it is usual to distinguish ‘Modern Standard Arabic’ (in English parlance) – a variety used in the press and news media, in most books and on formal occasions – from ‘dialects’, which are what most people speak every day with their family and friends and as they go about their daily life. The dialect is usually referred to as *‘āmmiyya* (‘common’ or ‘popular’) in the regions covered in this book, and the formal variety as *al-luġha al-‘Arabiyya al-fuṣḥā* (‘the eloquent Arabic language’). I use the Arabic term *fuṣḥā* in preference to ‘Modern Standard Arabic’ (*fuṣḥā* should be pronounced with the emphasis on the first syllable, and the ‘s’ and ‘h’ as separate sounds: FUS-ha). Sometimes linguists distinguish *fuṣḥā* from the ‘Classical’ Arabic of the Qur’ān, but native speakers tend not to make a firm distinction. I will occasionally refer to ‘Classical’ Arabic to mean the language of the Qur’ān or of medieval or earlier Arabic texts. *Fuṣḥā* is taught in schools, and can be understood (although not always actively used) throughout the Arab world. Dialects, however, can differ so greatly as to be mutually unintelligible unless users deliberately adapt their speech.

In the nineteenth century, the situation was not quite so rigidly defined. Many of the individuals discussed in the following chapters were actively involved in the creation of a new formal register of written Arabic – what became modern *fuṣḥā* – out of the Classical language of the Qur’ān and historical authors. Both *fuṣḥā* and *‘āmmiyya* were evolving, with changes including the creation of new words for new concepts, both technological and ideological. Liesbeth Zack has used some of the same phrasebooks I discuss in this study to explore the development of modern Arabic vernaculars (e.g. Zack 2017). But some things in Arabic pedagogy have been constant. From the past to the present day, teachers have often had strong opinions on which form of the Arabic language students should learn, and students have also often been disappointed to find that they have learned one ‘Arabic’ when they really need another, or rather multiple varieties.

Differences between what I will, for convenience, call *fuṣḥā* and *‘āmmiyya*, and between regional varieties of *‘āmmiyya*, were (and are) significant enough to cause serious problems for learners. I note just a few examples here, again primarily for non-Arabic-speaking readers. Vocabulary for everyday items could be completely different. Pronunciation also differed. In Egypt, for example, the Arabic letter *jīm* tends and tended to be realised as the equivalent of the English ‘hard g’ sound (as in ‘good’), not as ‘j’ (as in ‘jet’), which is its pronunciation in other varieties of Arabic. *Qāf*, the voiceless uvular plosive in *fuṣḥā*, most often comes out as a glottal stop in Cairene Arabic (*‘ut* instead of *quṭ* for ‘cat’), and as

'hard g' in southern Egypt. There are also morphological and syntactical differences. Egyptian Arabic negates with the particles *mish/mush* or *mā ... sh* (a little like the French *ne ... pas*), which are a distinctive feature of the dialect, instead of *la* or *mā*. In both Egyptian and Levantine Arabic, the preposition *bi* can be added to the beginning of a verb to form the so-called 'bi-imperfect', with slightly different shades in meaning. I will note these features frequently in the phrasebooks considered in the following chapters. Their presence in a phrasebook can be a good indicator of whether the author actually knew the particular dialect well.

Conversely, some features of *fushā* or even more formal Qur'ānic Arabic can indicate that the phrasebook author either is aiming at this formal register of Arabic or is unaware that the dialects do not have these features. These include the Arabic case endings (*'rāb*), which are not used in the spoken dialects. These can appear as short vowels at the end of a word, or as *tanwīn* 'nunation' (endings *-un*, *-in* or *-an*) on an indefinite noun or adjective. Another more indirect piece of evidence that a phrasebook author is familiar with Classical Arabic comes in the choice of vocabulary. The characters Zayd and 'Amr, and the verb *ḍaraba* 'hit', are ubiquitous in the works of the Classical Arabic grammarians, used to illustrate grammatical points. As Yasir Suleiman points out, 'Amr and Zayd 'have been hitting each other for centuries' (Suleiman 1991, 84), but they are no longer a part of modern Arabic language learning (learners who use the popular present-day series *al-Kitaab* have instead Mahā and Khālid). But in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we still occasionally encounter 'Amr and Zayd beating each other up in phrasebooks, and they are a sign that the author was taught Arabic grammar in the traditional manner.

A not dissimilar species of linguistic interference in Arabic instruction books comes from the classical languages of ancient Greece and Rome. European authors of Arabic phrasebooks had often been educated in Greek and Latin, learned through the grammar–translation method and through memorisation of paradigms. Sometimes, we see evidence of them trying to fit Arabic, an Afro-Asiatic language, into the forms of these Indo-European languages. *'rāb*, for example, could be interpreted as the same phenomenon as Greek and Latin noun case endings, even though in Arabic *'rāb* also appears on verbs to indicate grammatical mood. The Arabic verb was amenable to being tabulated like a Greek or Latin verb, with its different stems, prefixes and suffixes to mark number, gender and time of action, but here too forcing Arabic into Indo-European patterns glossed over differences. Because of their familiarity with Latin and Greek, many European learners seem to have been more comfortable with Classical

Arabic than with the dialects. In phrasebooks for *‘āmmiyya*, however, it is important not to dismiss Latin and Greek influence as inappropriate ‘classifying’ of the same nature as *‘Amr*, *Zayd* and *‘i‘rāb*: the use of the same methods and terminology by which they had learnt Latin and Greek in childhood may in fact have aided Europeans in learning *‘āmmiyya*.

Beyond variation in dialect and register, some features of Arabic *tout court* were challenging to learners in the period covered by this book, and continue to be. The Arabic script does not routinely mark short vowels, which are indicated with diacritical marks over and under letters where they do appear. Religious texts and books for young children learning to read are an exception. Most of the phrasebooks I discuss here contain Arabic text transcribed into another script which the learner already knows (Latin, Cyrillic or Hebrew), but some do use Arabic script, and in these the presence or absence of the diacritical marks that indicate short vowels is significant. The phonological inventory of Arabic is different from that of most European languages and can be difficult for learners to acquire (see several of the studies in Alhawary 2018). We will meet many examples in the following chapters of learners who failed altogether. The fricative consonants can be tricky, depending on the native language of the learner. *Fuṣḥā* has /θ/ (*thā*) and /ð/ (*dhāl*), which occur in English (as the ‘th’ sounds in ‘thing’ and ‘that’) but not, for example, in French. In the Arabic dialects, these tend to be ‘simplified’ to /s/ or /t/ and to /z/, respectively. The voiceless velar or uvular fricative *khā* is mentioned in many phrasebooks, and is compared to examples from the European languages in which equivalents occur. Also often mentioned is *‘ayn*, the voiced pharyngeal fricative, of which we will see many creative descriptions by phrasebook authors, since it is not found in European languages. The Arabic emphatic consonants (*ṭā*, *ẓā*, *ḍād* and *ṣād*) are also usually considered difficult by learners, but many phrasebooks in fact omit detailed description of them, seemingly expecting the learners to make do with the equivalent non-emphatic consonant, even though this can completely alter the meaning of a word. I discuss the matter of teaching pronunciation more fully in Mairs (forthcoming-f). In the Catalogue (see the prefatory Note to this book, and further discussion below), I provide excerpts from authors’ descriptions of *khā*, *‘ayn* and *ṣād*, by way of illustration.

The challenges of representing Arabic speech in non-Arabic scripts are legion, and I will discuss the transcription used in many of the individual phrasebooks considered in the following chapters. Some were more systematic than others, with clearly set-out tables of transliteration equivalents, explaining how they rendered each Arabic letter into their

own script, and how it was to be pronounced. Some have no transliteration or pronunciation guide at all, but it is possible to examine the contents of the phrasebook to see how they have chosen to represent Arabic sounds, and to assess these choices. Sometimes, the transliteration system used tells us something about how the author spoke their own language. In English, the difference between rhotic and non-rhotic dialects (whether or not someone articulates the letter ‘r’ in all word positions) can be visible in Arabic phrasebooks whose transcriptions have rogue instances of ‘silent r’. When I quote directly from Arabic phrasebooks, I reproduce words and phrases as they are spelled in the book, with ‘translation’ into a more standard system of transliteration where necessary. Throughout the book, I have used the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* system for the transliteration of Arabic. For Arabic names, I have used the same system, except where the person themselves favoured a particular romanised version of their own name.

The question of pronunciation brings me to my second category of challenge faced by Arabic learners: pedagogical. Although more modern developments in language teaching – the use of audio and video recordings, and even diagrams of points of articulation within the human mouth – can aid in learning pronunciation, there is no substitute for interaction with (and correction by) native speakers. There is plentiful evidence from the period covered by this study that those who attempted to learn Arabic pronunciation from a book alone most often met with failure. We have already seen how Silvestre de Sacy, who had never travelled to an Arabic-speaking country, could not pronounce the language correctly. Reports such as this are common in historical accounts by speakers of Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages who met teachers and students of these languages in Europe and America. The Indian scholar Mirza Abu Taleb Khan (1752–1806) complained that his students in London who had studied from one of John Richardson’s (1740/41–1795) works on Persian required complete retraining: ‘I found it much more difficult to correct the bad pronunciation he had acquired, and the errors he had adopted, than it was to instruct a person who had never before seen the Persian alphabet’ (Abu Taleb Khan, trans. Stewart, 1810, Vol. II, 42). Turkish intellectual Namik Kemal (1840–1888) likewise observed:

Some Europeans who are interested in Islamic languages but haven’t been able to learn them from the standard grammar manuals are putting together their own grammar rulebooks to more easily instruct others in these languages. Some people actually believe they have

learned these languages by reading such manuals. The things being learned and taught are so strange that, when I was in Paris and found myself attending a Turkish lesson open to the public, I could not understand a single word of the teacher's recitation. Had I not heard a few Turkish prepositions here and there, I would have thought the language being taught was one about which I knew nothing.

(*Renan Müdâfaanâmesi*, trans. Aron Aji and Micah A. Hughes, in Çelik 2021, 76)

This problem of book-taught Western Orientalists having weak pronunciation continued well into the twentieth century, as Thomas Naff's fascinating collection of memoirs by scholars of the Middle East reveals. Charles Issawi (1916–2000) recalled of studying with the Oxford Orientalist David Margoliouth (1858–1940) that 'his erudition was fantastic, but I had never heard anything resembling the sounds that issued from his throat when he spoke Arabic – which means that I had never met an Orientalist' (Issawi in Naff 1993, 144). Teaching Arabic in Edinburgh in the period after the Second World War, Pierre Cachia (1921–2017) found himself having to find innovative ways of teaching the pronunciation of *ʾayn* to a student who was keen to learn, but found the available books unhelpful:

The prevalent standard is well illustrated by an incident involving Professor A. S. Tritton – an amiable and lively eccentric who worked assiduously in the British Museum Library long after he had retired and who was invariably kind to me whenever chance took me to the same shelves. Britain still had some toeholds in the Middle East at the time, and a subaltern in Inverness who was being posted to Libya was enterprising enough to buy Tritton's *Teach Yourself Arabic*; but he got as far as the Phonetic Introduction only to be nonplussed by the description of the sound of *ayn*, so he appealed for help from the author. Airily ignoring the title of his own book, Professor Tritton wrote back that one would have to be a genius to teach oneself Arabic, and he then added: 'As for the sound of *ayn*, don't worry about it – it is no sound at all.' The young officer then turned to me and I sent him a tape explaining and illustrating the distinctive Arabic phonemes, but it is surely revealing that a senior Arabist of the day could have completed a long and not undistinguished teaching career without so integral an item in the alphabet having as much as registered in his ear.

(Cachia in Naff 1993, 14)

Cachia's experience of Tritton chimes with that of many other native or near-native speakers encountering Euro-American academic Arabists (Cachia was born in Egypt to Maltese and Russian parents). He liked and respected Tritton (1881–1973), but *Teach Yourself Arabic* (Tritton 1943) was not fit for purpose.

As Tritton freely acknowledged, it is impossible to 'teach yourself Arabic', or any language. Even someone who learns the contents of a book is being taught by its author. A reviewer of Jane Wightwick and Mahmoud Gaafar's popular *Mastering Arabic* (first edition, Macmillan, 1990) looks at the matter from the perspective of both a teacher and a learner:

Like many who travel to the Middle East before studying Arabic, my first exposure to the language was a teach-yourself Arabic book. Also like many in a similar situation, I found the book to be more or less useless. My opinion of this type of book has not been changed much over the years or more recently when new ones appear with great frequency. It was with this in mind that I approached my review of Wightwick and Gaafar's *Mastering Arabic* with some trepidation. I am pleased to report that while no one will actually 'master' Arabic by using this book, it does offer an excellent introduction to Modern Standard Arabic for self-learners.

(Christopher Stone in *MESA Bulletin* 40/1, 2006, 124)

It will be seen repeatedly over the following chapters that books with modest ambitions worked best. While I doubt that any of them ever, on their own, taught a user to speak Arabic, they could provide useful information and encourage good learning habits.

Assembling and dissecting the corpus

The corpus of material analysed in this book consists of phrasebooks and self-instruction manuals for learning colloquial Arabic, in European languages, for use in the Mashriq, in the period from 1798 to around 1945. On the one hand, this corpus is quite clearly defined. I exclude, for example, grammars of Classical Arabic, Ottoman Turkish textbooks of Arabic, and phrasebooks published for the Maghreb. There are, however, a few grey areas. My use of terms like 'phrasebook' and 'instruction book' is not rigid, because the books I describe often incorporated elements of phrasebook, dictionary and grammar. I prefer terminological flexibility to establishing any precise definition of what a 'phrasebook' is and then

having to constantly allow exceptions. Because I look at Yiddish–Arabic phrasebooks for use by Jewish immigrants to Palestine (Chapter 6), I also bring in Hebrew material produced for the same purpose. I make occasional exceptions and discuss books whose primary objective is to teach the written language, where their authors also produced books for the colloquial language, or there is evidence that learners were using them alongside colloquial phrasebooks. There are some gaps in coverage. I have only been able to access copies of a handful of the books for learning colloquial and written Arabic produced for Greeks resident in Egypt and Palestine during the period (see Gorman 2021), although I hope to be able to examine these in a future publication. Altogether, I examine books published in nine languages (English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian) and in the territory of 25 modern countries (Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Israel, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Turkey, India, Pakistan, Malta, Ukraine, Russia, Romania, Germany, Austria, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Poland, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Australia). These works are collected in the Catalogue, which details more than 200 books; I am certain that there are other examples that I have missed. Patterns in the publication of Arabic phrasebooks in these individual languages over time are presented in Graphs 3–5 and discussed further in Chapter 7.

Locating instruction books for colloquial Arabic has not been simply a matter of searching in library catalogues. I have scoured WorldCat (<https://www.worldcat.org>), using keywords in several languages – indeed, sometimes so frequently and rapidly that the website mistook me for a bot. The online catalogues of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, British Library, University of Oxford, Bibliothèque nationale de France and National Library of Israel have also been especially useful. Many of the phrasebooks I discuss, however, fall into the categories of ‘grey literature’ (materials produced for circulation within an organisation, such as an army or police force: Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) or ephemera, and some only ever circulated in manuscript form. These are not systematically collected by scholarly libraries, and it has taken several years of hunting in museum collections, in second-hand bookshops (in several countries) and on eBay and other online auction sites to find the ones I have. Even those phrasebooks that were issued by established publishers sometimes survive in very few library copies worldwide – because they were published in short print runs, because they were published in the Middle East, and/or because they were printed on poor-quality paper in flimsy paper covers and have simply disintegrated.

In taking my search for source material beyond the university library, I am aware of participating in a trend among some historians of the Middle East. Lucie Ryzova's innovative and immensely productive 'Ezbakiyya Methodology' of research involves gathering materials from the Sūr al-Azbakiyya used book and paper market in Cairo (Ryzova 2014, 26–31, cf. Ryzova 2012; I will return to Azbakiyya in [Chapter 1](#)). Tarek Ibrahim has used ephemera such as postcards found on eBay, as well as unpublished architectural drawings, to shed new light on the great Cairo institution Sheppard's Hotel (Ibrahim 2019). The materiality of the books I discuss is important. They were not books to be placed on a library shelf, but tools to be used. As such, they bear the marks of this use (discussed in [Chapter 7](#)), and we should imagine that many more were probably used to the point of destruction than survive.

Many of these materials have not been previously described in scholarship and survive in only a few copies in institutional libraries or private collections. I have tried to strike a balance between description and analysis of the material, including the construction of overarching arguments and narratives. But this is of course challenging. Books must be described before they can be analysed, and if I am essaying the first description of a great number of phrasebooks, then some of the discussion must inevitably become a little repetitive. The benefit of repetition, however, is that it reveals structures and patterns. It will quickly become clear to the reader, for example, that phrasebooks followed a set template, and that deviations from this are significant. These structures and patterns will be revisited in [Chapter 7](#).

Beyond the books themselves, I have used published primary sources and scholarship, but also a great deal of archival material. Individual archives and archivists are named and thanked in the Acknowledgements to this volume. Archival material can pull the historian in a great number of directions, all of them potentially interesting and productive, but the line of enquiry I have always tried to follow is that of the lived linguistic experience of language book authors and users, whether these be pioneers of the Nahḍa, missionaries, dragomans (interpreters and guides), settler colonists or soldiers. A user's experience can be gleaned from sources such as memoirs and letters, but there are more immediate, tangible ways of accessing the experiences of learners of Arabic. Some wrote their names in and annotated their books ([Chapter 7](#)), and oral history recordings from the Imperial War Museum in London allow us to literally hear the voices of some who learnt (or failed to learn) Arabic in the early twentieth century ([Chapter 4](#) and [Chapter 5](#); since I make use of these recordings in only two chapters, I have reserved fuller discussion of them until [Chapter 4](#)).

Authors may seem easier to identify than learners, but in fact there are often ‘hidden authors’ of Arabic phrasebooks. Many books that bear the name of a European ‘author’ on the title page were in fact composed in whole or in part by native Arabic speakers, who are either thanked in passing, or referred to obliquely, without even their name. In cases where substantial contributions can be demonstrated, I have added the names of Arab coauthors in the Catalogue, even if these do not appear on the title page or cover. In other cases, all I can do is make a point of noting where a European author almost certainly had help.

As well as adopting this kind of life-writing approach to phrasebook users and authors on the level of individual biography, I have also found it useful to examine their connections. As well as collecting data on the lives of language book authors and users, and trying to reconstruct how they composed and used these books, I have mapped connections between them. Two Gephi social network graphs accompany this book, which are discussed fully in [Chapter 7](#), and may be downloaded from the University of Reading Research Data Archive (see the prefatory Note). In Graph 1, I show acquaintances between Arabic teachers and learners, as well as a few other significant figures. Arrows indicate teacher–student relationships, with the arrow pointing in the direction of the student. Graph 2 shows influence and plagiarism between Arabic instruction books, which was considerable. These graphs are, of course, imperfect representations of a complex social and intellectual world, but they can be used to illustrate some of the key themes which emerge from this book. For example, the centrality of Silvestre de Sacy in a graph whose focus is on teachers and learners of *colloquial* Arabic shows not just how well connected he was in European Orientalist circles, but also the prestige of studying or associating with him. The authors of surviving written sources are more likely to mention Sacy if they had any passing contact with him than they are, say, his Paris contemporary Michel Sabbagh. Social groupings within the graph also show us something of the geographical reach of Orientalist networks, and the diversity of non-university sites in which the learning of Arabic took place. But these are just some very brief preliminary observations.

Summary

The chapters of this book overlap both chronologically and geographically. Each looks at a particular context or set of circumstances under which foreigners learnt colloquial Arabic. [Chapter 1](#), ‘Cairo and Paris (1798–1869)’, begins by examining how European attitudes to and

practices in teaching the Arabic language were transformed by Napoleon's Expédition d'Égypte. In Paris, the *École spéciale des langues orientales vivantes* increasingly integrated colloquial Arabic, under native-speaking teachers, into the curriculum over the course of the first decades of the nineteenth century. The discipline of Arabic studies in Europe, however, remained dominated by Classical Arabic and by teachers such as Silvestre de Sacy who valued the literary language over the colloquial. In Egypt, the encounter with Napoleon and the French also brought changes to language learning. Muḥammad 'Alī sent educational missions to Europe, and returning students – including Rifā'a al-Ṭaḥṭāwī – introduced the teaching of European languages. Students educated at the School of Languages (*Madrasat al-ʿAlsun*) in Cairo published textbooks for French. The teaching of Arabic to Europeans and of European languages to Arabs stood in a symbiotic relationship, and authors developed textbooks by drawing on both European and Middle Eastern traditions.

Chapter 2, 'Fāris al-Shidyāq, As'ad Ya'qūb al-Khayyāt and Protestant missions (1819–1920)', looks at the role of Christian missionaries in the teaching and learning of languages in the Middle East. I follow the career of two particular individuals, Fāris al-Shidyāq and As'ad Ya'qūb al-Khayyāt, and discuss the role languages played in their own lives, as well as the materials they developed for teaching Arabic to foreigners. The chapter concludes by examining the long reach of missionary activities both in teaching languages in and of the Middle East, and in the cultural landscape of the region.

Two related topics are tackled in **Chapter 3**, 'Tourists' phrasebooks and self-instruction: the business of language book publishing (1830–1935)'. Tourism in the nineteenth-century Middle East developed according to specific technological developments (steamships and railways) and political circumstances (colonialism). Phrasebooks for colloquial Arabic are an excellent way of exploring how foreign visitors conceived of the Middle East (including the ways they denigrated it), and how this changed throughout this period. They also show how an increasingly wider range of authors (not just scholars) understood the project of teaching Arabic to foreigners. The publishing industry must be considered in tandem with the tourist industry. Books for self-instruction, in all fields, became popular in the early nineteenth century, and there are many 'teach yourself' works for languages, including the Arabic language. Arabic phrasebooks for tourists in the Middle East developed in a complex symbiosis with the genres of guidebook, travelogue and (self-)educational textbook, and their users could be at the same time tourists, pilgrims, armchair travellers and those seeking to better themselves.

Chapter 4, ‘Arabic in war and occupation I: the Veiled Protectorate to the First World War (1882–1914)’, and **Chapter 5**, ‘Arabic in war and occupation II: the First and Second World Wars and Mandate Palestine (1914–1945)’, explore military learning of Arabic, mostly by English-speaking forces in the Middle East. They cover the British ‘Veiled Protectorate’ over Egypt of the 1880s, through the First and Second World Wars, including Mandate Palestine. Most phrasebooks and self-instruction books for soldiers were not officially issued by the British military, but published independently by soldiers or by locals. In fact, British official neglect of the need for language learning seems to have caused serious problems in some theatres in the First World War, notably when Indian troops were deployed to Iraq. Cairo during the First and Second World Wars, as a place where soldiers took their leave, saw the publication of a wide selection of informal phrasebooks by Egyptian authors, which taught their users how to drink and whore in often very crude Arabic. In Mandate Palestine, archival documents show how British soldiers and police chafed against official directives that they should learn Arabic. Only in the Second World War do we begin to find British and American armed forces issuing useful and well-thought-out materials for learning Arabic, leading to the institutional Arabic-learning programmes of the post-war period.

In **Chapter 6**, ‘Arabic, Hebrew and Yiddish in Palestine (1839–1948)’, I turn to the question of the learning of Arabic by Jewish immigrants to Palestine. This is an issue that has become clouded by the Nakba, the establishment of the state of Israel and subsequent events. It is clear, however, that some Jewish immigrants to Palestine did learn to speak Arabic in order to communicate with their Palestinian neighbours, and that there was a range of works available, in Yiddish and Hebrew, to help them do so. The authors of some of these were Arabic-speaking Jews (Mizrahim and Sephardim), but in the earlier part of the period they were mostly European Ashkenazim. In the 1940s, the picture changes decisively, and Arabic learning among Jews becomes a matter of security and intelligence, not of neighbourly coexistence.

The Conclusion, **Chapter 7**, attempts to tie all of these threads together, and also examines the networks of language learners and teachers who produced these books. Books, as well as people, are connected, and I show how common plagiarism was between the phrasebooks discussed here, even across languages. I also return to the question of the materiality of phrasebooks, looking at what annotations can tell us about the people who used these books, and how – or whether – they learnt Arabic.

Notes

- 1 I use the Arabic version of Muḥammad ‘Alī’s name for the sake of consistency, because it is how he is referred to in the Arabic primary sources and scholarship which I use in this book. Many scholars in Western languages use the Ottoman ‘Mehmed Ali’, which would probably be more appropriate if I were writing about the man himself, since the dynastic family was, for much of its period of rule over Egypt, primarily Turkish-speaking. On Turks and Turkish culture in Egypt, see İhsanoğlu 2011.
- 2 See, for example, Tageldin 2011, 113–114; Wick 2014, 414; Sabri ad-Dali 2016, 110–111; Irwin 2018, 165. Egyptian writers later in the nineteenth century tried to knock Sacy off his pedestal – usually by questioning the perfection of his written Arabic, rather than pointing out his difficulties in speaking the language (al-Shidyāq, *al-Sāq ‘ala al-Sāq* 5.3.10, to be compared with *Kashf al-mukhabbā ‘an funūn Ūrubbā* 271; ‘Alī Mubārak, *al-Khiṭaṭ al-tawfiqīyya al-jadīda* 11.10).
- 3 Asian, African and American languages have been making increasing inroads into HoLLT.net publications: for example, Mairs 2018; García-Ehrenfeld 2019.

