Why Arabs Hate Reading

by Colin Wells (June 2015)

Though little reliable research has been done on Arabic literacy, the little that has been done is quite clear in one regard. As Johns Hopkins researcher Niloofar Haeri concludes in her contribution to *The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy* (2009), throughout the Arab world educated people find reading very difficult, don't like to do it, and do as little of it as possible—even the librarians.

Why this uniformly strong dislike of reading?

Haeri's answer is that Arabic literature is written in "classical Arabic," the archaic language of the Quran, which is stilted, difficult, and often unfamiliar to speakers of the many modern dialects of spoken or "street Arabic."

This may be true as far as it goes, but the argument that it's the underlying obstacle to Arabic literacy is not persuasive. Similar gaps between written and spoken language (which are called "diglossias") didn't stop literacy from spreading in alphabetic cultures like that of Italy, where—to take a single example of this common historical process—written Latin was eventually replaced by written Italian.

Diglossia, then, doesn't explain why spoken Arabic dialects haven't become written languages in their own right, with robust literary traditions and wide readerships of their own, the way spoken Italian did after authors such as Dante helped establish it.

If you look up "writing" in the current *Encyclopedia Britannica* online, you'll find an article by David Olson, a leading scholar of writing systems at the University of Toronto, where much of the most important research on literacy has been done over the past half century. Among the entry's many interesting bits of information, one brief observation is easily overlooked: writing that has only consonants must be understood before it can be read, while writing that has both consonants and vowels reverses that process.

With consonants alone, the consonants act as hints, but the reader has to fill in the missing vowel sounds, as in "Ll mn r crtd ql" or "Nc pn tm thr ws lttl prncss." This seems easy enough, at first glance. With both consonants and vowels, on the other hand, you read it first and then go on to figure out what it means, as in "Look out the window and bring me the nail file." In Olson's academese, with consonantal writing "interpretation precedes decipherment,"

while with alphabetic writing “decipherment precedes interpretation.”

With a fine-tuned academic alertness to thin ideological ice, Olson deftly skates away from exploring the implications of this well-known fact. Nor is he alone in doing so. Only two kinds of consonantal writing are widely used today, Hebrew and Arabic, and both are considered sacred by their practitioners. So among scholars, there’s an unspoken and perhaps understandable reluctance to look closely at how—and at how well—they work when it comes to reading them, and especially to countenance that alphabetic writing might be easier to read.

Hebrew writing is a special case, a consonantal script for a dead language that was brought back to life by European Zionists for use in Israel, where alphabetic script is also commonly used. But it’s no secret that the Arab world has a huge literacy problem, though most of us in the West are unaware of just how severe it is. Not only are very few books published in Arabic overall, virtually none are translated into Arabic from other languages. This intellectual starvation and isolation contrasts with the many millions of books published in, and the hundreds of thousands translated into, alphabetic languages each year.

Like Olson, Haeri acknowledges the dynamics of reading Arabic’s consonantal script, though her reluctance to consider the possibility that Arabic reading might be linked to Arabic writing is more open—more nakedly jarring, one might say—than Olson’s smooth avoidance. “Were it not for the truth of the famous saying that Arab readers have to first understand what they are reading before they actually read it,” she writes, “…the script does not pose any more special problems for Arab children than other scripts like that of English.”

Note the flavor of cognitive dissonance that lingers over this sentence like an obscuring mist, with its opening conditional clause in the subjunctive mood so inharmoniously followed by the flat declaration in the indicative. This is like saying, “Were it not for the fact that this desert lacks water, it is a lake.”

Yet it does, and it isn’t. Psychology has a word for this sort of maneuver, and that word is denial. But this is not one scholar’s denial alone.

Politically correct academics insist that one kind of writing is as easy to read as another, as Haeri does in the quotation above. Yet they frequently acknowledge, sometimes in the same breath, as Haeri also does, that readers of consonantal scripts like Arabic must figure out the message before they can read it. This forces them either to pretend, absurdly, that all messages are uniformly challenging—in other words, that grasping a passage from “Finnegans Wake” is no harder than grasping a shopping list—or, more often, to avoid the question altogether, as Olson and Haeri both do.

Because if one message can be harder to grasp than another—as is clearly the case—then reading that message in consonantal writing like Arabic, which relies on readers grasping it first, is harder by definition. In practice, also by definition, such writing will not only discourage reading, it will also inevitably favor messages that are simple and familiar over those that are complex and challenging (which might explain why the yardstick of literacy in the Arab world is rote memorization of the Quran).

In other words, consonantal writing by definition is a recipe for poor literacy.

By definition. That means the logic is not escapable. Yet the psychological consequences of accepting this harsh but inescapable fact are truly daunting, even terrifying, for many. Hence the flavor of cognitive dissonance, and hence also the resort to psychological avoidance and denial, common—but unfortunately not exclusive—to most scholarship on writing.

I’m in the process of exploring this complex subject at greater length elsewhere and can only briefly sketch a few of its implications here. But their broad outlines should be plain enough to anyone familiar with the extraordinary cultural obscurantism and despair roiling not only the Arab world, but also non-Arab cultures from Africa to Afghanistan and Pakistan that have historically relied on Arabic script. Or to anyone who knows that consonantal writing, unlike the free-floating alphabet, has always been closely anchored to ancient religious scriptures. Or that those scriptures retailed not new, challenging, and explicitly articulated ideas, but stories and sayings that were already familiar in the oral cultures from which they sprang. Or that, because passages in those scriptures can so often be read in different ways, they have always been accompanied by group study, intensive linguistic commentary, and rigid interpretation by old men with beards, whose grim determination to control the message never seems to flag.

Or that, over thousands of miles and two continents, the very same controlling male anger that has spilt so much blood through the centuries even now strives to retain its “traditional” iron grip on cultural authority through the kidnap, rape, and murder of young girls who insist on learning to read for themselves. *Boko Haram* means “Western education forbidden.” *Haram* in Arabic is used to denote Islamic religious prohibition, and the word *boko* is thought to be a corruption of “book.”

Tragically, there is more than one way to hate reading.

Colin Wells is the author of *Sailing from Byzantium* and *A Brief History of History*. His article “The Coming Classics Revolution,” based on his current book project about the Greek invention of the alphabet, is being published in two parts in the Winter and Spring/Summer 2015 issues of *Arion*, Boston University’s journal of humanities and the classics. He lives in Westport, NY.

To comment on this article, please click