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Arab Cultural Semantics in Transition
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Principal Investigator: Dr Kirill Dmitriev
Research Fellow 1: Christian June
Research Fellow 2: Dirk Hartwig
Research Fellow 3: N.N.
Research Assistant 1: Dr Rawand Osman
Research Assistant 2: David Kiltz
Host Institution: University of St Andrews, Scotland
Grant: EUR 1,499,507.40
Web: https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/arsem/
Contact: kd25@st-andrews.ac.uk
Summary

The project “Language-Philology-Culture. Arab Cultural Semantics in Transition” addresses the pivotal role that language plays in various aspects of Arab culture and Arab cultural history. It introduces the notion of language consciousness as a key concept for understanding the Arab cultural history.

The significance of language consciousness has to be explored:
- by analysing the semantic development of the Arabic language,
- by mapping-out philological discourses on the semantic changes,
- and by studying the impact of philology in cross-cultural context.

For the theoretical and methodological framework of the project it is essential that philology is not limited to linguistics, but has to be understood in a much wider sense. Philology is “the critical self-reflection of language”. In other words, philology is that arena in which language most consciously calls attention to itself. As Sheldon Pollock puts it: “Philology is and has always been a global knowledge practice, as global as textualized language itself, albeit no such global account of its history has ever been written. Thus, both in theory and in practice across time and space, philology merits the same centrality among the disciplines as philosophy or mathematics.”

In the intellectual and cultural history of the Arabs philology has always been of a crucial significance. Therefore, a philological approach is fundamental for understanding the cultural history of the Arabs. And at the same time, philologically focused Arabic studies can provide an inspiring and fruitful example for other philological disciplines and help overcome the current decline of philology in general.

objectives

Reading cultural history through the history of the language and language consciousness the project has three main objectives:

1. it seeks to document and examine the semantic development of Arabic as a dynamic process of negotiating meaning,
2. it aims to study philological discourses on the semantic change of the language in classical Arabic philological tradition, and
3. it explores the impact of this culturally constitutive reflection upon Arabic language in a wider historical and cultural context of Judaeo-Arabic and Christian-Arabic lore during the neo-classical and early modern periods.
structure

The project follows two main lines of enquiry.

On the one hand, it concentrates on the analysis of the vocabulary of classical Arabic and for this purpose develops an **Analytical Database of Arabic Poetry** as a digital research tool on the semantics of the Arabic language.

On the other hand, the project aims at producing four **key studies** on central aspects of the historical manifestation of language consciousness.

**key topics**

The studies will be undertaken in the historical context of the development of Arab culture from the period before the advent of Islam up to the crucial transformation of the Arab society in modern times, the so called Nahda period.

The monographs written by the Principal Investigator and three Research Fellows will illuminate four key topics:
1. the relation between language and the transformation of society on the example of the social transition of the Arab society from the pre-Islamic to early Islamic times from 6 to 8 centuries,
2. the development of philological reflection on language in the context of the transmission of knowledge in early Muslim exegetical tradition from 8 to 10 centuries, 
3. the role of Arabic language in the formation of non-Muslim cultural identity using the example Judaeo-Arabic heritage in the neo-classical period, 12-13 centuries,
4. and the philological implications in negotiating cultural transition on the example of Christian-Arab intellectual history in the 19th century.

Conducting these four case studies under one research agenda will enable the project to show the relevance of language consciousness in an overarching historical context.

**semantics in transition**

The classical Arabic language has a very rich vocabulary with an extraordinary semantic diversity. Until now, however, only very few attempts have been made to document the semantic development of Arabic. Today, with digital technologies we can advance in challenging, yet very important research on the semantics of Arabic on a new level.
Analytical Database of Arabic Poetry

For this purpose the project will establish a network in digital Arabic philology and create the Analytical Database of Arabic Poetry. The database will provide an innovative tool for the systematic documentation of, and research into the semantic development of the classical Arabic language.

The database will combine lexical data on the vocabulary of the poetical texts. Since a complete dictionary of Classical Arabic is unavailable in any European language, the database has the potential to achieve a break-through in Arabic philology and will have a strong and lasting impact on its various domains.

Additional analytical tools implemented in the database will make it possible to trace back not only the meaning of a particular lexeme, but also the contexts in which it has been used. We include not only the textual references and the meanings of the lexemes, but also the information on the author of the text, her or his tribal and religious affiliation, the literary genre of the text, its geographic and chronological distribution as well as the reason for its quotation in secondary Arabic sources. This information will enable us to implement additional searching criteria and thus, allow the user to analyse the semantics of a lexeme within the historical contexts of its usage.

The database will serve as a reference tool, which will bridge together lexicography and research on Arabic literature, history and culture. For reasons of feasibility, the database will be limited to the works of Arabic poetry dating from before 750 and attested in Arabic sources up to the end of the 10th century, when the process of collecting early Arabic poetry was completed.

This means that the database will include all data, which was used as the reference corpus for classical Arabic lexicography and philology. Later on the data portfolio can be further extended. The database will be accessible as an online platform and will offer other researchers a tool to contribute to it.

The project will initiate a new start for the research in Arabic lexicography and it is its long vision to create a comprehensive digital resource on classical Arabic language.

The comprehensive approach will be implemented in the project through cross-references to other online resources on the earliest Arabic texts such as inscriptions, papyri and the Qur’ān.

team and support

The work will be conducted in a team consisting of the Principal investigator, three Research fellows, two Research Assistants and one IT specialist. The project is financially supported by the Starting Grant of the European Research Council over the period of five years.