

***Yasir Suleiman:
A War of Words: Language and Conflict in the Middle East***

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 286 pages, ISBN: 0521546367.

The repertoire of books dealing with Middle Eastern issues available in Central Europe is generally limited to historical reviews or analyses of Islam. However, the reality of the Arab world and the Jewish state is more complex than the chronology of the events described in these books. This is why I am drawing attention to Yasir Suleiman's "A War of Words", which aspires to offer Central Europe a much broader perspective of the Middle Eastern affairs.

Yasir Suleiman is professor of Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies, and Director of the Edinburgh Institute for the Advanced Study of the Arab World and Islam at the University of Edinburgh. His professional interest lies in the field of politics of identity in the Middle East, particularly in linguistics and nationalism. He is a Palestinian Arab, enabling him to offer an authentic picture of the differences in Arab society, and especially in the Arabic language.

The aim of this book is to show the connection between language (especially Arabic) and conflicts. Suleiman focuses on matters of national identity in relation to language and describes the differences between intra-state linguistic groups. He also deals with intra- and inter-state dissimilarities related to language, and studies the interaction between language and national/ethnic identities in situations of inter- and intra-state conflict. The analyses of these two phenomena, language and conflict, are undertaken from three different perspectives, according to which the book is structured.

In the introductory part "Language, power and conflict in the Middle East" Suleiman puts forward the main theoretical concepts of the study, based on the interaction between language and conflict, as well as between language and power. The key chapters explain the linguistic collisions between (1) a language and its dialects: "When language and dialects collide: Standard Arabic and its 'opponents'", (2) the dialects of a language: "When dialects collide: language and conflict in Jordan" and (3) two languages in contact: "When languages collide: language and conflict in Palestine and Israel".

Suleiman sees language as a link connecting people sharing a common identity, rather than as a means of communication. It is not only a technical instrument of understanding, but also "a referent for loyalties and animosities, an indicator of social statuses and personal relationships".¹ In the beginning Suleiman points out that language remains an inevitable part of every conflict, however, talking about "linguistic conflicts", as he does here, might cause a number of confusions. On the one hand, Suleiman explains, "the linguistic conflict is not to be perceived as a conflict between languages or language varieties *per se*, but between the speakers of a language who compete over resources and values in their milieus in inter- and intra-group situations."² On the other hand, he uses this term for both situations throughout the book. While chapter 2 describes the dispute between defenders and modernizers of Standard Arabic, chapter 3 discusses the political and military con-

REVIEWS

flict in Jordan between Jordanians and Palestinians with respect to language dialects, calling each a “linguistic conflict”.

Suleiman is right in stating in chapter 2 that language is implicated in inter- and intra-group conflicts, but it is hardly ever a cause of a conflict. Language is only an additional part of conflict, never the cause, nor the purpose itself. The aim of bringing this up is not to underestimate the meaning of language as such, since it serves as the most efficient resource for expressing and ideologising conflicts. Nevertheless, language is merely an alternative device for exploring the conflicts in the Middle East, the diversity of people and their viewpoints, as Suleiman correctly maintains later in the chapter: “conflicts are more dependent on how the speakers interpret the facts of their situation than on the objective reality of these facts, although the conflicts always relate to an objective reality.”³

On the one hand, he says that language is only an alternative device for exploring conflicts, but on the other, he actually states that language takes priority in explaining and interpreting conflicts. If language only accompanies conflicts, it contradicts the author’s later statements that conflicts actually depend on the interpretations by means of language (irrespective of what objective realities cause the conflict). The discussion of these issues must take into account the realities of Arab states. Firstly, Arab society is extremely divided into families, clans and tribes using their own specific forms of Arabic and defending their own interests, producing an enormous number of interpretations of conflicts. Language is therefore an unstable factor for explaining conflicts, so we should therefore focus more on the interests of the groups involved in a conflict, their political power, economic strength and military capacities, to give a more detailed picture of conflicts. Language is indeed only an additional tool.

The great importance of the relation between language and power is also discussed in chapter 2. Suleiman states, that “while power may be allocated differentially between competing individuals and groups, it is nevertheless possible to achieve some reordering of this allocation by exploiting the linguistic resources available”.⁴ In order to introduce the interaction between language and power, Suleiman turns to his personal experience. As a Palestinian Arab entering the occupied territories, he refused to use Arabic at the Israeli checkpoints, even though the Israeli soldiers did speak Arabic. Living in the diaspora in Scotland, his professional knowledge of English allowed him to make the soldiers speak the same language. Regardless of who was in charge at these checkpoints, thanks to the Israeli soldiers’ restricted knowledge of English, he had an opportunity to redefine the power relationship between the soldiers and himself. By using advanced English, he managed to tilt balance of power in his favour. Suleiman concludes that language can play an important role in balancing the power between individuals. However, the allocation of power relations between different linguistic groups is subjected to “a state, which can issue a variety of legal instruments to suppress competing languages”⁵ as in the relationships between Turkish and Kurdish, and Turkish and Arabic, in Turkey.

Language represents one of the many elements that build national and ethnic identities, and hence creates an indivisible relation between these two phenomena. This point is illustrated in chapter four, by a case study relating to the situation in Jordan. The different ethnic groups in the Jordanian king-

dom ended up in a conflict, where the collision between the Jordanian and Palestinian dialects of Arabic played a role, albeit a peripheral one. Suleiman claims that the notion of the clashes reflects the warlike situation in Jordan between 1970 and 1971.⁶ Based on this, the author maintains that misunderstandings between two or more different linguistic groups at an intra-state level are the results of political conflicts.

Jordan's demographics show on one side a majority of Palestinians, but on the other the political dominance of Jordanians. The Jordanians' dominance did not prevent them from fearing the quantity of Palestinians in Jordan, and eventually sparked animosity between the groups. Both felt a need to circumscribe their intra-state boundaries. They defined their ethnic identities in accordance with "us vs. them" premises. One of the most marked components of this delimitation was the various local dialects. Palestinian refugees who fled into Jordan in the 1920s and 1930s and people from urban areas used the Madani dialect, whereas those coming after the 1948 and 1967 wars, and those living in rural areas, used the Fallahi dialect. Standard Arabic was ascribed to original population of Jordan, Bedouins. When these two entities confronted each other, as Suleiman explains in chapter 4, they did not use their original dialects, but rather shifted into other ones to avoid inconvenience. Here the author applies a few sociological surveys to show that this situation was visible first after the Black September conflict. These sociological surveys show what patterns these shifts in dialect followed, that is, which groups of the population switched dialect and why. Nevertheless, these surveys lack time specifications, and do not prove that the shifts in dialect were directly caused by Black September, which ultimately undermines the hypothesis.

When approaching the diverse dialects in Jordan, one must understand how the national identity was formed in the monarchy. The differences between Jordanians and Palestinians have always characterised Jordanian society, yet the formation of both groups' identities was affected by an intense effort to unite the two ethnic groups under a common Jordanian identity, a so-called hybrid identity.⁷ These attempts, dating back to the reign of the first King Abdullah (1921–1951), failed. Even then, before the overt eruption of conflict between Jordanians and Palestinians, the differences and animosities between the two ethnic and linguistic groups emerged. The political conflict in the 1970s actually resulted from the enmity between the two groups, and not vice versa as Suleiman asserts, with his argument that misunderstandings between two or more linguistic groups at an intra-state level are the result of political conflicts.

Furthermore, the author relies on sociological studies that illustrate shifts of dialect. Taking into account this discussion of the interaction between language and national/ethnic identity in Jordan in chapter four, the gender-based explanations applied here are objectionable. The author emphasizes that dialectal variables correlate with the gender of speakers, pointing out that the shifts in dialect of women are different to those of men, concluding that the male dialect shifts are more relevant to national/ethnic identity than female ones. Regardless of how strong male dominance is in Arab society, this statement needs stronger evidence.

Suleiman further elaborates his theory of the interaction between language and conflict in chapter 5 by considering the language situation in Israel/Pales-

REVIEWS

tine. The argument that “since language constitutes one of the elements of national identity, the tension of the national conflict may well affect the attitude of each nation toward the language of the other,”⁸ is substantiated by the relations between Palestinians and Israelis. They are antagonistic towards each other’s language. Suleiman repeatedly uses the term “linguistic conflict”, which might be applied here again as a conflict between languages as such, as the author points out that the conflict is actually fought in schools. The educational system in Israel underlines the Palestinians’ subordinate position in the country. The curricula for Arabic and Hebrew in Jewish and Arab schools signals that Hebrew is a compulsory subject in the Arab schools, whereas Arabic is a “semi-compulsory” one in the Jewish schools. Students in the latter can ask for exemptions from Arabic, and can opt to study French instead.⁹ However, claiming that political conflicts are reflected in a war of languages presents only one partial and additional aspect of such conflicts. Researchers must be aware that economic issues, religious matters and the historical context must be included in these studies.

As far as methodology is concerned, Suleiman draws upon an enormous number of analyses, statistics and resources from different sources to support his study. But the author’s habit of referring to references downgrades his work. In addition, the relevancy of information given in the sociological statistics presents a restricted point of view on the reality in the Arab world. Undoubtedly, language has great symbolic meaning for Arabs and Israelis, but the political realities of Arab societies are affected by many more different factors and circumstances.

The questions of conflict, power and national identity posed in this book are analysed through the lens of languages and their differences. Even though Suleiman tries to offer a new interpretation of Middle Eastern realities, the centre of his work is language. His analysis of the Middle East, will therefore be of huge importance to linguists, but for all its flaws of a limited one to IR researchers. However, the book successfully crosses disciplinary boundaries to offer rare insights into both Arabic linguistics and Middle Eastern studies.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Suleiman, Yasir (2004), *A War of Words: Language and Conflict in the Middle East*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 14.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶ These were the years of the civil war in Jordan known as Black September. The war started with clashes between the Jordanian army and Palestinian guerrillas, and ended with the expulsion of the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s representatives. The Headquarters of the Organization later moved to Lebanon.

⁷ Brand, Laurie A. (1995), “Palestinians and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity”, *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4., p. 50.

⁸ Tabory, Mala (1981), *Language Rights in Israel*, cf. Suleiman, Yasir: cit. op., p. 140.

⁹ Suleiman, Yasir: cit. op., p. 150.