

**OXFORD WORDPOWER. *Qāmūs Uksfūrd al-ḥadīth li-dars al-luġa l-’inkiliziyya*** [The New Oxford Dictionary for the Study of English]. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press 2006 i-xii + 916 pp. One CD-ROM. ISBN 13: 978 0 19 431712 2 (Arabic edition). ISBN 13: 978 0 19 431735 1 (Saudi Arabia).

In spite of being one of the world’s most important languages Arabic still lacks basic pedagogical tools of good quality. This is a somewhat astonishing fact, considering the importance of the language, the long tradition of studying it in the West, and comparing it to other languages of similar dignity, like e.g. Chinese, which can boast of a plethora of first-class dictionaries, introductory text-books and systematic and exhaustive grammatical descriptions. A person who wants to learn the ‘language of angels’ has to search for useful tools, often in vain. Practically all introductory textbooks are pedagogical and linguistic disasters with frequently unclear, when not incorrect, descriptions of basic grammar, and with texts characterized either by dullness, contents of the strangest kind or both. The modern grammatical descriptions are somewhat better, although suffering from the unsolved problem of how to handle the differences between the strongly normative medieval grammatical system with its obsession with ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ or even ‘good’ or ‘bad’ Arabic, and the numerous new phenomena in Modern Standard Arabic, MSA, the language of modern literature and media.

As far as dictionaries are concerned the situation is critical. There are several dictionaries on the market but only one which is really useful: Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* ed. by J. M. Cowan, originally published in German, the first English edition of which appeared in 1961, since then followed by several revised editions. This work is an Arabic–English dictionary with the lemmata in Arabic script as well as in transliteration. Unlike almost all other works of this kind it gives full information about the vocalisation of the two main tense-forms of the verb, plural forms of nouns and adjectives (necessary since the plural is lexicalized and mostly unpredictable from the singular form) as well as the government of the verb: direct object or prepositional phrase. All these things are basic, belonging to the lexicon rather than to the grammar. Since these phenomena often look different in the different Arabic spoken varieties, even Arabophones need this information if they want to handle MSA correctly.

When it comes to dictionaries from a European language into Arabic the situation is far worse. From English we do have an old work: G. P. Badger: *An English-Arabic Lexicon*, London 1881, surprisingly good and a counterpart to E. E. Lane’s monumental *Arabic-English Lexicon* still indispensable for the study of classical Arabic literature. Unfortunately, unlike Badger’s work it is unfinished. Badger is of course not very useful for students of MSA since the entire modern vocabulary is missing, even if the fact that it is almost unknown today is somewhat unjust. The only modern dictionary from a European language to MSA which is useful

for the beginner as well as for the advanced student is G. Schregle's *Deutsch-Arabisches Wörterbuch* (Wiesbaden 1974). Unfortunately, the Arabs who read German are few and even western Arabists who master this tongue, sometimes called the most important Semitic language, are a diminishing flock. An English-Arabic dictionary reaching basic academic standards is sorely needed.

The OUP published *The Oxford English-Arabic Dictionary of Current Usage* in 1972 edited by N. S. Doniach. This work was aimed at Arabic-speaking readers, which means that it lacks much of the information mentioned above. A revised and abbreviated version was published in 1982 in which the Arabic was updated and improved. The present New Oxford Dictionary, the first version of which was published in 1999 and of which the second edition is an expanded version, follows the former one in being written for Arabic-speaking students. This means that it contains a lot of English but not much Arabic, as a matter of fact, even less than its predecessor even if it, according to the ad on the back cover, contains 31.000 'illustrative examples' and more than 1.500 'cultural comments'. It also has an Appendix with a lot of information about English, such as Modal verbs, Phrasal verbs, Prefixes and suffixes, Word formation, and Punctuation. To this is added a quite elementary description of what a computer is, one page with Arabic words in English followed by some notes on practical matters such as how to write an English letter, geographical names in Arabic and English, English measurements (both metric and non-metric) and a list of irregular English verbs. As a matter of fact, this dictionary is an English-English dictionary with very brief Arabic notes added. It can be used by anyone, not only Arabic-speaking students. The dictionary is probably useful for many Arabic-speaking students but pretty useless for the English-speaking student of Arabic for whom it is obviously not intended. For such students, this dictionary is, in many respects, a step backwards compared to Doniach, which was no remarkable achievement either.

It is worth while to give some evaluation of the Arabic notes anyway. Arabic script, as is well-known, as a rule does not include vowel-signs. The three vowel phonemes (/i/, /a/, /u/) can be indicated by diacritical signs added to the consonantal text but these diacritics are used only in printed poetry, children's books and, of course, the Holy Book of Islam, the Qur'an, where an exact rendering of the reading is considered of crucial importance. In newspapers, modern literature and all kinds of documents, official or private, the vowel signs are not written. The vocalisation of the Arabic words, which Doniach at least tried to give, is to a large extent absent in the New Oxford. The few vowel signs actually found are distributed quite haphazardly and consistency is difficult to discern. As was said above, this is not seen as a major flaw by most Arabophones since their acquaintance with the language enables them to articulate what they at least think are the correct vowels in most places, although this demands a skill in the literary language which is often not there: pointing out mistakes in vocalisation is a popular game in the Arab world, often targeting politicians and

other officials. Deficient vocalisation skill is often seen as a sign of other deficiencies as well.

The Arabic translation of English words is often done by means of paraphrasing, describing the meaning with a whole sentence. It should not be denied that this is quite useful for Arabic-speaking users. E.g. the word 'cafe' is rendered by one of the corresponding Arabic words, *maqḥā*, but also by a paraphrase: 'a small restaurant' since a Western cafe most often is an institution different from the traditional Arab one, serving cakes, drinks and light meals instead of offering water pipes and backgammon playboards. Doniach (1972) gives *maqḥā* and its plural *maqāḥin* together with two borrowings: *kāfīh* and *kāzīnū*. The word 'cafeteria' is explained but not translated: 'a restaurant which is run on individual service' although the word *kāfītīriyā* is well known in modern Arabic. Doniach does not mention *kāfītīriyā* either (it was perhaps not so widespread four decades ago) but he has a better explanation: 'a restaurant in which the customers serve themselves'. The word 'bag' is rendered as follows: 'a container made of paper, plastic, cloth or leather that is open at the top, often with handles, in which you can carry things'. This is followed by the Arabic word *kīs* or *ḥaqība* (of which the latter nowadays often means 'suitcase'). Compare this to Doniach: 'Bag: (receptacle) *ḥaqība*, *miḥfaza*, *kīs*, *jirāb*', thus with less English and more Arabic. In both dictionaries one misses the normal word: *shaṭṭa*.

A general drawback is that the print in the New Oxford is quite small and that the Arabic signs are, in fact, microscopic. Many readers would need a magnifying glass to see what is actually written. Plural forms of Arabic nouns and adjectives are not given. The verbs are given in the imperfect, i.e. the non-past tense, which is unusual but not necessarily wrong. On the contrary, it can be defended, provided that the forms are given a consistent vocalisation. As it stands now, the vocalisation of the verbs is inconsistent even if the compilers have tried to mark the theme vowels of the basic verbal stem where, unlike in the so-called derived stems, the vocalisation is lexicalized. Thus the verb 'bar' is given three translations: the first two *ysdd*, *ymn<sup>c</sup>*, (pronounced *yasudd-* = block up) and *yamna<sup>c</sup>* = prevent, hinder) without vowels, the third with its vowel: *yḥzar* (pronounced *yahzar-* = fence in). In the same manner the two meanings of the verb 'bathe' is translated *ysbh* (= *yasbah-* = swim) and *yghsil* (= *yaghsil-* = wash). This kind of inconsistency goes through the whole work.

The New Oxford English-Arabic dictionary is thus not the work western students of Arabic would have wanted. A non-Arab student may at best get a clue of an Arabic equivalent to an English word but he/she will still have to check the word with Wehr/Cowan in order to get the complete vocalisation, the whole array of meanings, the grammatical construction and the idiomaticity. As a whole this is not only a dictionary where Arabic-speakers can find basic Arabic equivalents to the English vocabulary but also a general encyclopaedia of modern life in the

Anglo-Saxon world. As such it can be used by anyone who knows enough English to handle a monolingual dictionary. It is definitely a rich source of information for Arabic-speaking students of English, although even such users should be informed about what they can find in it – and what they cannot find.

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