Insha Arabi Or Power, Knowledge, And Language

JEAN SAID MAKDISI

I should like at the outset of this paper to make it clear that the ideas expounded here are a direct and practical result of my experience in Lebanon as a university teacher of many years standing, as a mother who followed her children's academic careers from primary school through university and into the professional world, as a consumer of cultural products--i.e. novels, films, plays, television, ...etc. and as a citizen with critical faculties who, like so many others in the modern world, is frustrated with the political discourse of our time.

I make this point to dissociate what I have to say from the ideological quarrels within the western academy concerning language and its use arising from the history of European thought. Nor do I mean to suggest universal truths: I am writing about a particular moment in a particular place.

This essay was also drawn up in response to the question to which this volume is dedicated: namely, what is the state of scientific research... that is research not only in the pure sciences, but also the scientific investigation of social, economic, political, historical and artistic problems... in Lebanon?

In order to understand the progress of scientific investigation, it seems to me that we need before anything else to examine closely the use of the primary instrument of research - language - in its wider context. We need to ask ourselves several questions: What is the state of language here? What is the general attitude towards language? How

is it used by politicians and political writers? How is it taught to students?

Generally speaking, and based on the experiences listed above, it is my contention that we are, in the public realm as well as in schools and universities, abusing language, often deliberately, and that there is an urgent need here in Lebanon to develop clear, precise language, and a new method of teaching our children to write which will encourage them as future scholars and citizens to make meaningful cultural contributions. In addition, the language which we should encourage should be fearless, honest, and sincere. Indeed, the kind of precision which I am talking about requires sincerity and truth, and visa versa. I might add here that clarity and sincerity should by no means preclude grace or beauty of expression.

There are two major and related characteristics of the way we misuse language here:

a) vagueness, or absence of precision, which can be either deliberate or careless; and,

b) enormous and quite unnecessary length. Both of these qualities are taught and learned; and both of them are associated with power and its use.

It has been my observation that we often cover up what we have not thought clearly about with enormous length, as though drowning our uncertainties and our intellectual laziness in an ocean of words. Often, too, we cover up our fear of saying something by drowning it, as well, in an ocean of words. Words themselves are not taken seriously enough by us as containing a clear and necessary meaning: it sometimes seems as though we deliberately try to separate language from its meaning, and writing, especially student writing, often ends up in a linguistic fog.

I have often had to exhort my students to treat words with the same respect with which they treat numbers: it always comes as a great shock to them to think of words in this manner. I have repeatedly demonstrated to them that, while they would not dream of adding, subtracting or changing a digit in a telephone number or a commercial statement or a sum of money, they regularly add, subtract or change words in a sentence, without being in the least aware of, or troubled by, the consequent alteration in its meaning.

But if imprecision is often a result of carelessness, it can also be a result of careful calcultion. In either case, those who exercise power benefit. There seems to be a tacit arrangement between the successive governments and the people that certain verbal formulae are accepted, on both sides of the power divide, as a necessary disguise for political realities which remain unarticulated. Thus, on the one hand those in power avoid accountability by not say-

ing exactly what they mean; on the other hand, those not in power avoid offending the powerful by covering up their words with a mist of vagueness. The actual words exchanged between them in public are secondary to the true communication, which bypasses words altogether. Using language to say what is not being said is at once an abuse of language and an abuse of power.

Nowhere is power exercised more directly than in the educational system, which is, after all, an essential part of the power structure. It is from the educational system that new thinkers arise; and it is into it that new ideas flow. If, therefore, the entire system is flooded by a sea of meaningless words, we cannot except much in the way of inventiveness, creativity, and deep thought.

In saying all this, I have been deeply influenced by what the English essayist and novelist George Orwell said in 1946 in his essay, «Politics and the English Language». In this essay, and also in his novels *Animal Farm* and *1984*, Orwell explores the connection between language and power.

The English language, wrote Orwell in 1946, was in serious trouble. It suffered from cliches, including what he called dead or dying metaphors, from the use of obscure professional jargon, and from political dishonesty. As an example of the latter, he offered some key words used...or rather misused... especially in political writing.

Thus, if, as the British army tried to quell revolutionary forces in India, they destroyed an Indian village, the process was called «pacification». This nice word was used deliberately to protect the British soldiers from fully recognizing what they were doing, the British public from the true knowledge of what was being done in their name; in general, it was used to allow the brutal process to continue without too many embarrassing questions. Similarly, writes Orwell, the phrases «transfer of population» or «rectification of borders» were used as euphemisms for the brutal displacement of refugees[1].

(The word «pacification» by the way, was to re-emerge in the 1960' s as a key element in the American military vocabulary about Vietnam, and was always used in military briefings about the assaults on Vietnamese villages. More recently, the American official press releases during the Gulf War made widespread the use of the term «collateral damage» to indicate civilian casualties).

(1) Sonai Orwell and Ian Angus [eds.], «Politics and the English Language,» *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, vol.IV, *In Front of your Nose: 1945-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), pp.127-140.

Orwell complained also of the careless and inexact use of political words, which rendered them utterly meaningless. Among the examples he offered were the words «fascism» and «democracy». These wrods, he accuses, stripped of their historical and actual meaning, were used simply to define political alliances: those countries or people we like are called «democrats»; those we don't like are called «fascists». Among other words used «more or less dishonestly» are patriotic, progressive, reactionay, bourgeois, equality. Thus was language, in Orwelll's view, deliberately manipulated by political dishonesty or brought into disrepair by intellectual sloppiness.

No contemporary Arab needs to be instructed in the political use of language; only one example is required to illustrate this point. For decades we have fought against the words «terrorist» and «terrorism» as they have been used against us. We have spoken and written endlessly, and with deep emotion, about these potent words; we have seen what terrible harm has come from their use, and how they have armed our enemies. There is no need to say more on this.

Perhaps we have not thought enough, though, of our own misuse of language. Surely it is true to say that our political discourse is full of inaccuracy, hypocrisy, half-truths, and sometimes even downright lies. In today's Lebanese political vocabulary, for instance, the words «democracy» (*al demoqrattiyyah*), «freedom» (*al hurriyat*), and «civiliberties» (*al hurriyat al maddanniyah*), are used constantly; yet enormous damage has been done in their names. We have justly fought against those who, over-using the phrase «human rights» to disguise their own moral and political contempt for humanity, do not grant these rights to us and ours. Yet, have we not misused the phrase ourselves? What, in fact, do we mean by the phrase? Has it been legally and publicly defined? Do we really believe *in huquq al insan*, «humain rights»? for everyone? even the lowest, poorest memebers of our society? or the most problematic? With all our talk of «human rights», how many serious battles have we fought internally on behalf of prisoners, (especially those condemned to death), Palestinian refugees, the mad, the sick, the handicapped, the poor, the very young or the very old...just to mention a few categories? Is using the phrase just an easy way out, a useful way of painting over the cracks and holes in our political structures, making us feel better about ourselves and our society without having to bother to take the kind of political risks which might be unpopular or even dangerous? How many real lives have been improved, *really*, by all the fine words in our political vocabulary? Not many, I fear. And the more we throw these words around, the less meaningful they become.

A whole political vocabulary was used during the war with a great deal of venom but without much accuracy. One need only remember such words as *al wattaniyyah*, *al khiyana*, *al in'izaliyyah*, *al hurriyah*, *al karama*, *al'amalla*, and of course always, *al demoqratiyya*, to remember the most vicious days of the war.

But even if words are not deliberatly used for telling lies, or for covering up agrression or inaction, are they not abused by sheer intellectual sloppiness, laziness, what we would call in colloquial dialect *qillit khassiyya*? In the political dialogue, for instance, I have heard endless reference to something called «the modern state» (*al dawla al haditha*) to which so many politicians and political thinkers wish us to aspire; and, though I have heard this phrase a thousand times, I do not know precisely what is meant by it, or whether everyone who refers to this «modern state» means the same thing. Have those who carelessly bandy this phrase really thought about it?

And what about *al duwal al mutamadina* (civilized countries), so often offered in public by apologists for this or that project as their model? Usually, if not invariably, Europe and North America are implied by the phrase: but what does that make of all the countries of Asia, Africa, South America, the Arab world: what about us? Are all these not civilized? And if they are not, then what on earth does the speaker mean by «civilization»? Does he or she believe that the very areas that invented civilization are not «civilized»? or something else? Then why not use another word? Why not find the right word?

What about the oft-used phrase, *huquq al mar'a*, (the rights of women)? Or, worse, *al mara'al arabiyya*, (the Arab women)? Which *mar'a* does the speaker have in mind, and therefore which rights? the Saudi? the Lebanese? the Sudanese? the rich? the poor? the urban? the rural? the bedouin? the married? the single? the old? the young? the doctor? the illiterate? Why is there so much talk about *al mara'a al arabiyya* as though we were all the same, as though there were only one of us? Does this term not indicate a general absence of careful thought on the subject?

Little can be more revealing of the nature of the political or public language in this country than the excrutiatingly long and empty speeches to which we are regularly subjected by politicians, academics, and others wielding some sort of power. If, after one of these marathon speeches, someone asks: «What did he or she say»? the answer is often: «Nothing. Nothing at all». The worst speechers of all earn the devastating title: «*insha 'arabi*».

There is, I think, something terribly important in this contemptuous reference to what we teach our children in school about language, honesty, and

intellectual achievement. But before we examine *insha arabi* let us continue to look at some of Orwell's ideas.

If fear can cause language to become impenetrable through enormous length, terror can co-opt language into an equally impenetrable brevity. In *1984*, Orwell draws his terrible vision of the world of the future, in which the state has total and absolute control over the indivual's mind, body and soul. At least part of the control is exercised through the manipulation of language, in what the rulers call «Newspeak», an abbreviated from of English which limits the possiblity of philosophical inquiry and therefore political action, and from which concepts such as truth, freedom, ...etc have been purged, while the words have been maintained. In *1984*, science, or the quest for truth, is a forbidden activity, and has been abolished.

In *1984*, linguistic illogic is granted legitimacy through terror. The Ministry of Truth is where lies...which become the truth...are created, and where history is re-written to make the past conform with the present. Behind the doors of the Ministry of Love are the torture centers. The slogans of the state are War is Peace; Ignorance is Knowledge; Weakness is Strength. (Pierre Gemayel's old formula: «Lebanon's strength lies in its weakness», could have come straight out of the pages of *1984*! So could the fact that Israel's latest war on Lebanon, in April 1996, has been called part of «The Peace Process»: War, you see, is peace).

To ensure the working of Newspeak, «doublethink» is essential. "*Doublethink*," writes Orwell, means

"...[using] conscious deception while retaining the firmness of purpose that goes with complete honesty..."(2).

«Doublethink» has become an orthodox, standard, English word, and is accepted in dictionaries. It has become a way of life with many modern politicians and political writers. One has only to call to mind American comments, both official and unofficial, on the Israeli attack of April, 1996, with its massive bombardments, blockades, massacres, ...etc.: these actions were called, and presumably believed to be, «defensive».

But once again, it is easy to see how others handle language: it is not so easy, or pleasant, to see this in ourselves. In all the years of my adult life, for instance, I have never heard one single person say outright that he or she supports sectarianism, *al ta'iffiyyah*. Indeed, was not everyone in Lebanon making speeches during the war about *al ta'ayush at ta'iffii*? Who, then,

(2) George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Signet Classics, 1984), p.176.

fought a war- a war that was at least in part sectarian...for almost twenty years? And against whom are all those disclaimers, all those attacks on *al ta'iffiyya* directed, if nobody is for it?

The last example of Orwell's ideas on language to which I wish to refer is found in his political satire, *Animal Farm*, and in particular the famous dictum, *all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others*[3]. Because of the terror to which they are subjected, the animals submit to the distortion of logic in this sentence; but their acquiescence leads directly to further betrayals and to the deeply pessimistic conclusion of the book.

How many times have we ourselves heard politicians or others saying things that we *know* are untrue? How many times have we permitted them to twist logic, history, and reality, without challenging them? Often, it seems to me, personal courtesy, friendliness, and politeness, as well as respect for the office, is involved in this acquiescence. *Thus tajamul* (courtesy, flattery), replaces truth, and with every accepted distortion of truth and language, we become a party to further deception.

Earlier in this essay, I referred to our propensity to dismiss long and boring speeches with the contemptuous phrase: *«insha arabi»*. Also, I have heard such speeches dismissed as *«saf kalam»*, *«shi'r»*, ...etc. In all these references lies a contempt for our language and for its use which no one who has read Orwell can lightly pass over as harmless.

What precisely is meant by the phrase *«insha arabi»*? Empty words, no meaning, great length; using many words to say nothing at all; disguising what you really think by saying something else that you neither think nor believe; saying this in elaborate and flowery words and phrases borrowed from masters of poetry or prose but robbed of all meaning by extraction, imitation, and repetition.

And this is how we teach our children to write in school?

From my almost twenty-five years of university teaching, many experiences having to do with language remain fixed in my memory. All of them have to do with the degree to which empty words and meaningless phrases; ungrammatical sentences; absence of structure in essays which had neither development, argument, or rational conclusion; inconsisteny; illegible handwriting; endless repetition; illogical sequences; and a length totally disproportionate to the substance, characterized the work of many students. And my experience is not unique: I have discussed the issue with many colleagues, not only at this university but at others in Lebanon. The complaints are almost universal.

(3) George Orwell, *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story* (London: Penguin, 1989), p.95.

In answer to an examination question, the best trained students write clear, exact prose. Having read, thought, and analyzed the material, having though carefully about the question, they have something to say, and they say it, directly, and to the point.

For the majority of students, however, this is not true. On a regular basis I have had to scold: If you have nothing to say, please do not say it. Amazingly, and repeatedly, I discovered that my admonition was going exactly against everything they had been taught about language, about how to write, in short, against how they had been taught *insha arabi*.

Often students respond with indignation to low marks received on an examination, and ask: «Why are you counting poor language if the essay is otherwise good?»

«How I ask in exasperation, «can it be'otherwise good' if the language is not? How can you distinguish between language and its grammar, between ideas and the form they are given, between words and their meaning?» But this is precisely what they have been taught.

Allow me to recall an example from my memory as a mother which might shed light on this kind of writing.

I have been called down to the primary school for a meeting with my young son's Arabic teacher. Worried, I ask her politely: What is wrong? What has he done? The answer is angry. The boy had been asked to write an *insha*. The subject was: Which season of the year do you like best and why? The boy has written a very short essay, very short indeed. «I like summer best», he has written. I like summer best, because there is no school, we go to the beach, and we eat watermelon, *batikh*. The teacher is incensed. Is this an *insha*? she asks furiously. He should have written that he likes the spring, because the birds sing, the flowers bloom, the sweet wind blows. Look at this pile of copy books: see how all these children have written about the spring? That is what they were supposed to do.

Though I do not want to make too much of this example...it is, after all, a single experience...I do think that it reveals some grave truths about language, power, and knowledge as they appear in our educational practice.

The teacher has asked a question to which she does not want an answer. Or, to put it another way, she is undertaking, though perhaps in good faith, an elaborate hoax, of which she is not entirely aware, but of which the child is the quite innocent victim. She is pretending she wants the child to answer the question: in fact, however, she does *not* want him to answer the question she has asked, but to write a composition on another subject which she has in mind, but which she has not communicated to him.

Furthermore, in expecting that all the children should write about birds, flowers, and sweet winds, the teacher was clearly expecting that their parents do the writing or at least tell them what to write, in other words that the child - and his mother - cheat. Thus, she was clearly demanding orthodoxy, not truth; conformity, not invention; insincerity, not honesty. My boy had answered the question sincerely and honestly. But this was «wrong». He «should have» written what was in the teacher's mind.

I should like to make it clear here that had she indeed expected the child to *look* at the flowers as they bloom, *watch* the birds fly, and really *feel* the spring breeze, and then write about them, I should have been delighted: he would have learned something about nature and his place in it. But this is not what she wanted: she was expecting purely second-hand literary devices of no relevance whatever to him. In the teacher's judgement, the little boy's essay, or *insha*, should have been full of fanciful phrases, which he should have memorized from the lessons in *ta'abir*. If he had said he liked the spring best because the birds do this and the flowers do that, he would have been lying. In fact, she wanted him to lie.

My memories of my children's Arabic lessons are haunted especially by the lessons of *ta'abir*. Phrases were extracted from the poets and taught the children. These phrases had to be memorized and then used in the composition:

Kharir al myyah, zaq zaq at al asafeer, safa'al sama', naqiq al dafade'e, ...etc.

Instead of showing the children the images used by the great poets and masters of the language, and encouraging them then to find their own alternatives by observing nature closely, listening carefully to it, smelling it, and then searching their minds for the sounds and words that capture what *they* see in their individual imagination, they were required to memorize, to imitate, and to use second hand language. Nor were students encouraged to search for their own metaphors and images, any more than they were allowed to create their own thoughts. Even the way they saw the sky, the earth, the water, the birds, had to be dictated, or at least organized, by the teacher. And thus not only were they deprived of a true knowledge of their natural environment, but thus also was creativity nipped in the bud, intelligent critical thought stopped, the path to expanding intellectual horizons barricaded. And thus was *insha arabi* a deliberate exercise in boredom, in emptiness, in the mechanical use of language.

Alow me a final but essential comment on my son's essay. The essay was extremely short because he had exhausted his meaning. He had nothing more

to say than what he said. Though it was short, it was clear, because he said exactly what he had to say, no more and no less. To my mind, that is, in this particular context, the ideal student essay.

But the teacher was incensed at the brevity. She thought the *insha* should have been much longer. The fact that the child had nothing more to add did not deter her from believing that he should have added more.

I do not mean to suggest by the above analysis that all writing, regardless of its purpose, should necessarily be short, terse, or telegraphic in style. I remind the reader here that I have been discussing the work of an eight-year-old boy, not a philosophical inquiry by a graduate student, requiring depth and amplitude of references, or a work of poetry requiring dense layers of superimposed and sometimes even contradictory meanings. Nor does clarity, precision, and sincerity necessarily mean dry and unattractive language: no one selects words more carefully than the great poets.

How often have I, the teacher of English, been told that «it is in the nature of Arabic to be long and flowery». My answer has been and remains: Nonsense. It is in the nature only of decadence to be over-long, unnecessarily-flowery. Many of my colleagues among Arabic teachers agree with me. The masterpieces of Arabic, like the masterpieces of any language, are precisely as long as they need to be: neither longer nor shorter. While they express the most profound thoughts, create the most vibrant imagery, in the most rhythmic and beautiful language, they do not use unnecessary words, do not add flab to the muscles of their thoughts. They do not waste energey by adding useless words or images. The beauty of Arabic, its vast vocabulary and versatile forms, is bent by the best writers, including those living today, into the brilliant images, wisdoms, philosophical and rational ideas, and even the playful and witty puns which generations of students have studied and admired.

There is today, however, it is true, a special quality of brevity, musculariy, and angularity to modern English which, no doubt along with the military and political power of the English-speaking world, has helped make it the scientific language of our time. This quality is clearly seen even in literary writing. Furthernmore, students and writers of English are subjected to a rigorous editing process which is largely dedicated to examining their words carefully, to finding shorter, or at least more efficient, alternatives. And no student of English can be unaware that T.S. Eliot's poem, *The Wasteland*, was edited by the poet's friend Ezra Pound who hepled make it the world masterpiece it is by cutting it down drastically.

Editing seems to me a concept and an activity badly needed here in Lebanon. Much of what we read would be vastly improved by considerable

cutting down. Scracely a play or a film, no matter how good, but the audience feels should have been half an hour shorter. Rigorous editing would exchange quantity for quality. It would necessarily force students and writers to concentrate on their meaning.

Why, I often ask my students, in accordance with Orwell, should you use ten words if you can use five to express the same meaning? And often they have admitted to me that ten is better than five because ten will cover up their own insecurity, their lack of confidence in their own thoughts. Precision means knowing precisely what you have to say, and saying it with assurance. Our educational system is designed to teach many things, but not, I fear, confidence in individual thought, nor confidence in the individual student's power to think for him or herself, or to say something new and original.

Orwell writes:

«The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms...»[4].

The trick is to say what you think.

As a teacher who has struggled with student writing year in, year out, I have come to the sad conclusion that most often students do not want to say what *they* think. They want to say what *I* think. They want to be on the right side of the power. And the power is on the teacher's side, as the Brazilian writer, Paolo Freire, has amply demonstrated in his enormously important book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*[5].

Freire describes what he calls «The Banking System of Education», in which the teacher deposits what he/she wants into the student, and then collects it again on the examination. According to Freire, the teaching system, as it exists now in most of the world, and certainly the third world, is symbolic of the social set-up of power: the one (the teacher) versus the many (the students). The teacher (who wields the power) speaks; the students listen. Most teachers, he says, mistake the power of their knowledge for the power of their position, and what the teacher says is often interpreted to be true because of the power of the teacher, not because it is true. But more than this, Freire writes that because all the power is with the teacher, the student becomes passive: the teacher is the subject, the student the object of whatever passes between them. And this «knowledge» that passes between them in

(4) Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus [eds.], «Politics and the English language,» ibid, p.137.

(5) Paolo Freire, translated by Myra Bergman Romas, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin Books, 1972).

the present system, remains fixed and immutable: what the teacher says is what the student will learn to say. Thus the student grows up with the idea that the object of his study, i.e. the world and everything in it, including history, society, and his or her place in both, are similarly fixed and immutable. He or she is overwhelmed from the beginning with the sense of powerlessness.

Our school methods, it seems to me, have precisely that kind of rigidity in them that Freire describes, and that prevents students, that indeed forbids them, from saying what they have to say, from being masters of their world, and utlimately therefore from participating in it.

It is not the subject of my essay to examine the place of the teacher in the production of social life, but this important topic seems to me essential to uderstanding our intellectual production too. It seems clear that some children, perhaps because of their class and the social position of their parents, as well as of their personalities, are overindulged, while others are severely repressed. The teacher has almost total power over the child and over his or her future; often parents teach their children to flatter the teacher, and thus stay on his or her good side. Too often, it seems to me, humiliation is used as a disciplining device, in order to produce conformity and orthodoxy. Too often, on the other hand, school children are given license to indulge themselves. Thus *self-* discipline and civic sense are entirely lacking, while at the same time students learn not so much to disobey authority courgeously, but to circumvent it. Most children soon learn to give the teacher what he or she wants, not only in their social behaviour, but in thoughts as well. And if what the teacher wants is not the same as what the student wants, or if the student is uncertain about what is expected of him or her, he or she resorts to ambiguity, vagueness, or even downright dishonesty, and thus, of course, *insha arabi*.

No discusson of language in Lebanese intellectual production can be complete without a consideration of what has come to be known as *ta'rib*, or the teaching of science and mathematics in Arabic. This thorny and deeply emotional question has often seemed to me to be blown quite out of proportion: the question we should raise about science education is how well science is taught, rather than in what language. Still, it is important to note that Arabic is represented in our culture as the language of poetry, of religion, and of common communication, but not the language of modern knowledge, of modern science. If, after all, we regard our language as inconsistent with scientific knowledge and accuracy, then how can we regard ourselves as capable of adding anything of value to modern culture?

One of the ways that students have been encouraged to think of their language as alien to science and modernity has, I am sure, to do with some of the readings imposed on children in school. Often, I have seen schoolchildren reading innane, mindless, boring, books: sometimes these books even go quite contrary to sense and truth. When my husband and I returned to Beirut in 1972 after several years residence in the United States, our eldest son was eight. He was already then a sophisticated and critical reader, and had also been immersed in the blow-by-blow television coverage of the journeys to space, then in their early and most exciting phase. Weightlessness and absence of gravity; oxygen helmets; the variouys tubes attached to the astronauts space suits; dehydrated food; rockets and retrorockets; the sophisticated navigation and communication systems used during space travels...all this and much more were a familiar part of his consciousness.

Imagine my boy's dismay when he was offered an illustratead book in Arabic about a voyage into space by two young children wearing ordinary clothes - I distinctly remember that the girl had long braided hair tied with white *fionkas*, and that the boy was wearing shorts and a crisp white shirt--and eating lordinary food - I believe they ate *Lahm mishwi*! - as their rocket whisked them to the moon. So full of contempt for this and similar books was he that our struggle to make his Arabic lessons more enjoyable was thwarted.

This is only one of many examples I could offer on the subject of foolish and entirely alienating texts designed for children. These can only increase their sense of the ridiculous, and the vast space between themselves and their culture, on the one hand, and modern science on the other.

Rather than the deeply emotional manner in which the subject of *ta'rib* is usually broached, a frank public debate on this, as well as other delicate subjects, it seems to me, is an essential step towards renewed vigour in our own academic output. Hidden in its vast folds are questions about religion, colonialism, and power, which need to be brought out into the open, along with so many other national issues. We need a true and honest discussion on the subject, in which everyone says out loud what they are afraid of, and why, and in which everyone listens to everyone else. We need to discuss methods, alternatives, advantages, disadvantages on both sides of the coin. The language dilemma is not limited to Arabs: non-English speaking Europeans too have had to struggle with it. Germany, for instance, resolved the issue by teaching science and mathematics in German while at the same time strengthening studens' fluency in English to the point where they could read and contribute to the scientific journals.

Can a debate in fact be held? Do we, with all our talk of freedom, democracy, and *al hurriyat*, really believe in our own freedom enough to be brave about this ticklish issue, and dozens of others even more ticklish, in order to say what we have to say? Or is it inevitable that the debate should be covered up in a politeness and conciliation that people do not feel in their hearts.

Our best writers, whether their work is literary or academic in nature, are used to dealing honestly and courageously with language and thought, saying what they have to say. But calling things by their names, telling the truth, being direct and honest, should become not an individual but a national habit. For this to happen, we need a new kind of teaching in our schools and universities which will encourage individual students to think for themselves and to say what they have to say, directly and clearly. We need to rehabilitate *insha arabi*, retrieving it from the intellectual trashcan into which we have deliberately thrown it. Our students have to be taught that language is an instrument of expression, not of coercion; an instrument of freedom, not repression; an instrument of individuality, not of orthodoxy. Only when all this is accomplished will we be able to pursue on a national scale the kind and extent of scientific study which we are capable of undertaking.