

Yasir Suleiman

*Arabic, Self and Identity:*

*A Study in Conflict and Displacement*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 271 pp.

*Arabic, Self and Identity* is Yasir Suleiman's third book on the politics of language and the role of language in constructing modern identities in the Arabic-speaking world. In his earlier books,<sup>1</sup> Suleiman focused on language as a marker of national identity in conflict zones, while here he emphasizes the self, subject production processes, and the symbolic significations of language. All three books provide an indispensable corpus on the inner workings of identity in relation to Arabic languages today. Suleiman draws attention to how language becomes a resource for the solidification of identities, marks the boundaries of a group, constructs "friend or foe" binaries, and bestows a strong sense of solidarity and belonging. At the same time, language is anxiety-ridden and a source for fragmented and hyphenated identities. Suleiman navigates elegantly through these inherent contradictions and shows how identity is anchored in language yet expressed in counter-intuitive, often surprising alliances.

*Arabic, Self and Identity* is based on autobiographies and personal reports, including the author's own report, and centers on "language anxieties" in one's "own language." As Chapter 1 shows, these anxieties not only manifest complex language situations, they also allow us to create an epistemological fulcrum to examine sociolinguistics in contradictory settings. In Chapter 2, Suleiman strongly critiques the assumptions underlying the study of Arabic sociolinguistics and points to the weaknesses of variation-based quantitative research—research that, although important, tends to mask and depoliticize power and ideology. Suleiman lays out seven "fault zones" (rather than lines) that fail to account for the political nature of language. These fault zones are developed in the core of the study of Arabic, and stem from knowledge structure, compartmentalization of disciplines, different terminologies and positivist epistemologies. Suleiman points to the obstacles to "rhizomatic" identity created by the axiomatization of knowledge. At the same time, Suleiman is skeptical about the anarchic nature of the rhizome, which may assume that identities tend to grow in a

chaotic, unorganized, and infinitely hybrid manner. His skepticism is apparent in his discussion of “diglossia,” referring to the “linguistic duality” between standard and spoken Arabic. While for others the relationship between standard Arabic and spoken Arabic is not necessarily hierarchical, Suleiman defends this hierarchy, arguing that it is ingrained in the phenomenology of Arabic speakers and writers.

Suleiman presents a personal autoethnography in Chapter 3 in order to examine two linguistic practices he employed while conducting Arabic-language teacher training in Qatar: the imposed use of Modern Standard Arabic (فصحى) and the avoidance of code-switching between Arabic and English. Courageously, he reveals his own “linguistic anxieties.” Apparently, he insisted on using فصحى during the training, knowing that it would elicit criticism and generate linguistic anxieties for him and for the trainees. He was equally strict regarding language code-switching, in this case the mixing of Arabic with English in spoken discourse, but concludes that his negative response may stem from the fear of blurring the boundaries between “self” and “other.” Apparently, the hybridity of code-switching threatened his sense of self as an Arab, while the exclusive use of English did not.

In Chapter 4, Suleiman examines the “language anxieties” manifested in the relationship between Arabic and identity as portrayed in two autobiographies of exilic Arab figures. The first autobiography, Edward Said’s *Out of Place* (published in 1999), illustrates how the Arabic language generates a set of identifications, some of them contradictory: pride and embarrassment, rebellion and resistance, joy, playfulness, belonging, alienation, and motherly intimacy. The second autobiography, Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage* (published in 2000), shows how she perceives فصحى in Egypt as the location of state hegemony, internal colonization, and false national consciousness. Suleiman adds further insights to these phenomena with Moustapha Safouan’s and Amin Maalouf’s writings on language. His comparison of Ahmed and Safouan is fascinating. He shows that they both criticize, though for different reasons, the hegemony of فصحى and believe, also for different reasons, that Arabs should speak in their mother tongue. Safouan believes that Arab colloquial dialectics should serve as national vernaculars; he even proposes to elevate Arabic mother tongues to the status of a written language.

In Chapter 5, Suleiman delves into personal names, place names, and code names. From my point of view, the discussion of Israeli Palestinians who adopt Hebrew-sounding names—such as Rami and Adam for boys, or Amira, Yasmin, and Layla for girls—is fascinating. This is typical of minority groups’ “passing” tendencies in hegemonic cultures and is an ironic mirror image of the state’s Hebrew renaming of Palestinian villages and territories after 1948 (for example: Bar‘am rather

than Bir‘am; Agur rather than Ajour). Suleiman provides an insightful observation: these personal names are not only selected because of their similarity to names in Hebrew, but also because they can pass as Arabic names. This double passing, an “in-between-ness,” preserves symbolic capital in both linguistic locations. They are Hebrew-sounding Arabic names and also Arabic-sounding Hebrew names. The Druze, however, sometimes use names which are typically Israeli, not Arab. A Jewish Israeli, on the other hand, would rarely adopt an Arabic-sounding name. Suleiman also provides evidence about Palestinians who resist Hebrew names bestowed upon them in the workplace. All these phenomena attest to the in-between-ness of Israeli Palestinians (also called Arabs of ‘48) and the power relations between Arabic and Hebrew, in the form of cooperation, resistance, or complex identity games.

Suleiman highlights the personal aspects of language identity. His insightful view into the politics of language resonates well with my own personal biography, as a Jew of Arab origin (my family is from Iraq) in Israel. Arabic was a source of ambivalence and contradictions ranging from agony to joy. As a child who grew up in the Zionist educational system, I had to reject Arabic (which I heard at home throughout my childhood) and adopt a “proper” standard Hebrew that was constructed in negation of Arabic. In this period, Arabic, for me, was a source of inferiority and shame. It was only later in life that I returned to Arabic to reclaim my mother tongue. This was somewhat paradoxical since a mother tongue is acquired firsthand, without the mediation of another language. Reading Said’s autobiography, Suleiman urges us to make a distinction between the concept of a mother tongue and a “first” language.

In my case I had to use Hebrew, my first language, to reclaim and retrieve my mother tongue, Arabic. Yet, the Arabic language I reclaimed was not my Jewish-Iraqi mother tongue, but rather the standard written Arabic (فصحى) and the spoken Arabic of Palestinian dialect mixed with an Iraqi glossary. I became aware of this paradox when my mother, rather than welcoming my return to Arabic, rejected my efforts, claiming that “this is not our real Arabic.”

My mother’s resistance was not the only obstacle on my journey to Arabic. As a Jew, I found it difficult to speak Arabic in Israel, where the politics of the Arab language is paramount. Speaking Arabic with Palestinians is a sensitive matter, since Arabic spoken by a Jew is met with suspicion. If they don’t know you, most Palestinians will respond in Hebrew—either because their Hebrew is better than your Arabic, or because they do not want to share their mother tongue with you. Or they assume that your Arabic was very possibly learned in the Israeli security services. This experience attests to the Arab Jew’s limited opportunities to speak Arabic in Israel. These deep binary oppositions pose obstacles to the construction of

a zone of identity's in-between-ness. On my last visit to London, my experience was completely different. Arabs on Edgware Road did not question my peculiar Arabic and engaged with me freely in Lebanese, Egyptian, Syrian, and Palestinian Arabic. I was often mistaken for an Arab.

This tension between polarity and in-between-ness is most apparent in the translation of Arabic texts into Hebrew. Suleiman has pointed out that the relationships between the two languages are dialectical. In the beginning of Zionism, Arabic was a reservoir for the revival of the dormant Hebrew language but was also perceived as the language of the enemy. The Israeli institutions of language (such as the Academy for the Hebrew Language), incorporated words in Arabic but masked their origin. These are major considerations when one translates from Arabic to Hebrew, or more precisely, attempts to inscribe Arabic in Hebrew. Suleiman's "fault zones" resonate well with this effort, as he employs an epistemology and methodology of in-between-ness.

This in-between-ness epitomizes Suleiman's theoretical position which rejects the essentialist and poststructuralist definitions of identity that insist on fracture, fragmentation and incoherence. His in-between-ness approach is part and parcel of being an Arab in exile, although Suleiman declares that he "feels uncomfortable with banal cultural in-between-ness and the ambiguity of identity that it signals" (p. 69). He is reflective about his insistence on the use of *فصحى* and his objection to code-switching. He asks: "Why should in-between-ness elicit a negative reaction from me?" (p. 67). One possible answer is that Suleiman pays lip service to in-between-ness without being willing to bear the consequences. Another possibility, which is potentially the more interesting one, lies in the deceptive nature of the relationship between language and identity. Unlike Ahmed and Safouan, who reject standard Arabic as oppressive, Suleiman sticks to *فصحى* as a bridge between his exilic and pre-exilic selves. We have come full circle. Arabic and identities are indeed linked to each other in counter-intuitive, surprising alliances.

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### Notes

- 1 See: Yasir Suleiman, *The Arab Language and National Identity: A Study of Ideology*, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003); Yasir Suleiman, *A War of Words: Language and Conflict in the Middle East* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).