

Critical Issues of Arabic Learning and Teaching, An interview with Michael Cooperson.

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Michael Cooperson is a professor of Arabic language and literature in the Department of Near Eastern Language and Cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is a graduate of Harvard University and of the Center for Arabic Study Abroad (CASA) at the American University in Cairo. He is specialized in the early literature and culture of the Abbasid Period but his general interests include classical Arabic literature, biography, literary theory and time travel literature. Professor Cooperson has wide publications in the field of Arabic literature and translations; some of his publications are *Classical Arabic Biography* (2000), and *Al-Ma'mun* (2005).

In addition, he has translated Abdelfattah Kilito's *L'Auteur et Ses Doubles* [The Author and His Doubles, 2001], and recently translated Khayri Shalabi's *Rihalat al-Turshagi al-Halwagi* (*in press*). He is a co-author, with the RRAALL group (Radical Reassessment of Arabic Arts, Language, and Literature: an academic alliance dedicated to collaborative research), of *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic literary tradition* (2001); and co-editor of *The Dictionary of Literary Biography: Arabic Literary Culture, 500-915* (2005). Dr. Cooperson has numerous articles and chapter books in the field of Arabic literature. He is a recurrent professor of Arabic at the Middlebury School of Arabic and was a Visiting Professor in the Abbasid Program in Islamic Studies at Stanford University in 2009-2010.

Having a profound love for languages, Michael speaks Arabic, Persian, Greek, French and Spanish at a high proficiency level, and currently he is teaching himself Chinese and Maltese. His proficiency level at Arabic is at a superior level that many of his students and colleagues were under the impression that Michael learned Arabic at childhood.

IAL met with Dr. Cooperson in his office at the Humanities Building at UCLA and had a conversation on issues of language acquisition and language teaching taking his perspective as a language learner as well as a language professor, especially as it relates to the Arabic language.

Afaf: *First of all, knowing how busy your schedule, I would like to thank you dearly for taking the time to meet with us. I would like to start the story from the beginning and ask you why did you decide to learn Arabic?*

Michael: I wanted to learn as many difficult languages as possible, and Arabic began with A, so it was on the top of the list. And I was going to do Chinese and Japanese and Russian, but I never got to those. I just stuck with Arabic.

Afaf: *Was that your first foreign language?*

Michael: No. I grew up speaking Greek because my mother's family is *Greek*. I was *basically* a heritage speaker of Greek. I heard it all the time from my grandmother and my mother. And I could read and write, but not very well in Greek because I just hadn't really worked on it very much.

Then I had French and Spanish at school. I had several good French teachers, so I was good in French. And I had a little bit of Spanish. I was probably intermediate in Spanish.

Afaf: *Can you take us back to your early experience with Arabic, when and how did you start learning the language?*

Michael: I started learning Arabic when I was in my first year of college, which took place in my last year of high school because I left my high school early and went to the University of Delaware for my senior year. And they had just started an Arabic program. So when I started taking Arabic, I was about eighteen years old.

The teacher was a very nice Palestinian guy who had never done it before. So he wasn't really a language teaching professionally. He was just trying to do his best. We used the old book, the orange book from Michigan, Elementary Modern Standard Arabic and I basically taught myself the grammar

What I remember is that the method of teaching was giving us texts that were maybe harder than our level and sometimes in dialect. The first text was a song by Fairouz [famous Lebanese singer].

The first thing we did was to learn the song by Fairouze in transliteration. After we learned how to say it, he told us its meaning. Then we had some vocabulary and introduction to the sounds. Gradually we did the letters and then moved to FusHa. I think even without knowing what he was doing, it actually was maybe a smart thing to do in some ways.

The book we used had a lot of grammar explanation but he didn't really know how to explain that to foreigners. So I essentially just sat and read the book. Then one time his aunt came to visit from Palestine and she was a grammar expert. So I sat with her for an hour and she answered all my questions. So you can say I did

learn independently from the classroom, sort of had done it myself, but not really. I had some help.

Afaf: *Your experience with your first Arabic teacher brings us to an important issue in language teaching in general and maybe Arabic in some specific way. Since 9/11 event the interest in Arabic language has increased year after year which created a sudden demand for Arabic teachers. Do you think being a native speaker is a necessity or a good enough qualification for a language teacher?*

Michael: That is a good question, not sure if I have a complete answer for it. I think that the most important thing is to be trained in applied linguistics and language teaching. Being a native speaker by itself is not enough. So if you're a native speaker who is not trained or you are trained, but not a native speaker, then I suppose there are problems both ways. But I don't really believe that there is such a thing as "Arabic". It's not one language.

There is classical Arabic and there is modern Arabic and there is dialect. Nobody is a native speaker of classical Arabic anyway. I'm teaching a course now in classical Arabic. There is no native speaker for that. I mean, Imru' Al-Qais [6th century poet, author of one of the Muallaqet, pre-Islamic poetry] has been dead for about 1500 years. So any teacher is going to be a non-native speaker.

I think in schools where there are many teachers, for example Middlebury, there's a very good system, which is that most of the teachers are natives, but several of them are not. And that way the students see that it is possible to learn this language. They see it's not just something that you have to be a native speaker to know. That it's possible for people of every background to learn it. And I think it's important for students to see that.

Afaf: *What about issues of phonology or accent? Some believes that the native norm is important at least for the students at the beginner's level.*

Michael: Yes, I suppose I must have some American accent, right? Other teachers might have an Egyptian accent or an Iraqi accent. Palestinians don't want to say "qaaf" [stop voiceless uvular], for example. They say "kaaf". So I don't know. Is my accent worse than theirs? Therefore, I don't think there is the perfect Arab. There isn't an ideal. If you have Lebanese teachers, then usually they don't use Sukun. If you have an Iraqi teacher, they say "aah", where Egyptians say "ah". You're always going to learn something different.

Arabic is an international historical language. Most of the people who wrote in Arabic in the Abbasid Period, which is what I studied, were Persian speakers. So if you could go back in time to Evicenna, and ask him how he is, he would speak

with a Persian accent. That's probably how he would say it, and he's one of the most important writers in Arabic in history.

So I think you can say that teachers should be native speakers, but in reality, everybody has some kind of non-normative pronunciation. So as long as it's not wrong in some egregious way, I think it's okay. And by wrong I mean it does not interfere with comprehension. For example, minimal pairs have to be distinguished. So if you can't distinguish "taa" and "Taa", if you can't distinguish between "fatHa" [short vowel] and "alif" [long vowel], then there is a problem. These are really important.

Afaf: *It seems most of the foreign language learners who advanced to a high proficiency level in a target language, had the experience of traveling or living abroad at some point of learning. While you were learning Arabic, did you have the chance to travel to an Arabic country?*

Michael: I traveled to Jordan when I was an undergraduate. I think it was my second year in college, and I stayed for about two months. I wanted to go to an Arabic-speaking country and the only way to go was to join an archeological dig. I didn't know anything about archeology. I can't dig at all, but I went.

It was a place called Jabal abu al-Tuab, which is a Neolithic site. I have no understanding of these things. I wanted to do Islamic archeology, but that is what was available at that time and I went. The dig was with the University of Yarmouk, so most of the students were Jordanian. And all I knew at the time was FusHa, probably at intermediate level.

Afaf: *So you were faced with the issue of diglossia in Arabic. Were you able to communicate with the locals in their native dialect when all the instruction you received at that time was in standard and classic Arabic?*

Michael: I found it frustrating that I couldn't understand them when they spoke to each other. I used to ask them what did you say? And they would translate in FusHa. I ask them why don't you speak to me in your dialect, and they'd say no foreigners shouldn't learn it, it's bad.

I could tell right away that there was some issue that they had about what foreigners should learn and what's normative and all that. But they were very generous about speaking with me in FusHa, which I know it takes some effort. It's not normal. But what frustrated me was that when they would talk to each other, it was suddenly Chinese.

With time and exposure, I got better at it. I think it was the speed and the fact that I never had any training prior to my trip. I had just learned FusHa and then I went

to Jordan. I remember the first time I spoke Arabic in my life I was at a bus stop and there was a little boy there, and I asked him about the bus in FusHa “ain al Hafilla?” [Where is the bus?]. He looked at me funny, and then the bus came and he said “hai bus” [that is the bus]. So then my first Arabic sentence from a native speaker was “hai bus”.

And that is the problem when people say native speaker, native speaker of what? My level was I say “matta ta'ti al-Hafila” [When will the bus come?], and they say “hai bus”. I guess, I would be a native speaker of a language invented by Butros al-Bustani, [a notable Lebanese writer and scholar 1819- 1883].

Afaf: *Some of your students are under the impression that you learned the language as a young child. I can hardly trace an accent now as we speak. So even with your reservation with the term “native”, would you say that you have a native speaker competence in Arabic?*

Michael: No because I didn't grow up speaking a dialect. There are things that I can say in other languages that I have to really think about in Arabic or ask someone. Native means that it's what you learn first and it's the most natural. So, no, Arabic is an acquired language for me, but I spent all of my time working on it, so I know a lot about it, and I know a lot of words that native speakers don't know. And I can't read as fast as the native speakers.

I read English extremely fast. I can read English faster than just about anybody I know. If I get on a plane with a book in English, no matter how big, I'm finished in a few hours. But in Arabic, no, I'm still on page twenty or something because I think harder about it. So I remember it better, which is very good. I can read a big book in English fast and then not remember it maybe, but with Arabic I remember it better because it's slower.

Afaf: *But I don't think reading competence is a good measure for native-like fluency. It is hard to define what a native competence is. Is it a competence of someone who can converse with the language freely, can understand different forms of it, and has a cultural and historical background of it? We can look at the question this way, what do you think is still accessible to a native speaker, and not to you after all these years of specializing in Arabic?*

Michael: Well, what you're describing sounds to me like fluency rather than native ability. It sounds to me like an educated fluent speaker. My field is Medieval Arabic, So I know a lot of obscure words that nobody knows, but if you wake me up in the middle of the night and say the house is on fire, I'll understand it faster in English. That is to me is a native speaker. If I have to count something, it's faster in English for me to count. That's what I mean by a native speaker. It's the default.

It's whatever is there at the bottom. I'm not being very scientific, but that is how it feels to me to be a native speaker.

Afaf: *So in your learning experience you found that dialect knowledge and learning is an important part of Arabic learning. I know you speak the Egyptian dialect, but what other dialects you are familiar with? If I speak to you in Iraqi dialect would you understand me even if you answer back in FuseHa or in Egyptian?*

Michael: Well, let's try it and see.

(I spoke to Professor Cooperson in the Iraqi dialect, trying to speak fast and very local. He understood everything and answered in the Egyptian dialect, so I failed to win)

Well, I'll tell you that honestly, I think what happens is this: if native speakers from any country want me to understand and they say simple things slowly, I understand any dialect. But if they don't want me to understand or they're not thinking about me or if I'm watching TV and they don't know I'm there, then I don't. I can have conversations with Moroccans when they speak slowly and they use simple words and they try to avoid the Moroccan words, right? But if two Moroccans talk to each other, I really don't know what they're talking about. So it depends on the willingness of the person I'm talking to.

Afaf: *Let's go back to your experience in learning Arabic? As you were acquiring the language, what language skills or linguistic features were harder to acquire than others?*

Michael: When you're eighteen, nothing is difficult. I don't remember anything in particular. The difficulty came when I went to study in Egypt and I had to switch from FusHa to Egyptian dialect. So I had to learn not to say "qaaf" for example.

I went to Egypt after four years in college. Well, five really because I took one year at the University of Delaware. Then I transferred to Harvard and I took first year Arabic again. This was before there was any talk about proficiency. So the teacher just lectured to us in English about grammar. He could have been a native speaker of Chinese. It didn't make any difference. So I had two years of modern Arabic. Then I decided I didn't want to be modern. I wanted to be medieval. So I switched and did first year and second year in classic Arabic. This is why I don't remember it as being difficult: I had the first year twice, the second year twice and then I finally did third year. By then I had everything drilled into my head many times.

Afaf: *You mentioned some phonological features that you gave special attention such as the Egyptian “qaaf”. Would you say, then, that phonology more than other linguistics features that stood out in your experience of learning Arabic?*

Michael: Well, no. “thaa” [fricative voiceless plain] in Egyptian sometimes comes as “taa” and sometime as a “siin”, same with the letter “ dhal”, [fricative voiced plain], sometimes it is “daal” and sometimes it is “zaa”. If you take out the short vowel in some places, then the stress moves. Then I have the compounding suffixes. I remember the hardest word I had to learn was “maza’a’tulhumish” [I didn’t yell at them]. Here you have “ma”, the negative marker, a fricative that comes as a glottal stop, a pronoun suffix and an object suffix, and then the negative marker at the end. So I had to practice that all the time and I finally got it. That was hard.

The verbal syntax of Egyptian is difficult but it’s also really interesting. To mark the subjunctive, you have to basically drop something rather than add it. And that’s hard to learn if you’ve spent five years learning different cases markers.

I really focus on features of Arabic phonology when I teach because I think that it’s disrespectful to another person’s language if you pronounce it wrong. This is something I learned from Kristen Brustad and Mahmoud Al-Batal, [the authors of al-Kitaab, the most used Arabic textbook], who really helped me a lot with all these things. I taught at Middlebury, and they really essentially taught me how to do all that. For example, for “’ayn” [the fricative voiced pharyngeal], you say ah, and then you look down, and that’s the right place. And so I just show the students the right place and go from there.

As far as language skills, I think speaking always comes last for me. I think the passive skills come at first. I have a visual way of learning; so recognizing the words maybe was first then hearing. Probably both came at the same time, hearing and reading. In some way, speaking is the least important to me, I am just not interested in it that much. I want to hear what other people have to say. Writing was not my interest. I mean before Facebook became a big thing, I never had to write in Arabic. I wrote an editorial one time in Arabic in al-Ahram newspaper. That was maybe ten years ago. Now I write all the time because of Facebook.

Afaf: *It is good to know that you are a Facebook user like the rest of us. So would you say modern technology and chat networks are used at the service of foreign language learning or teaching?*

Michael: Well, it’s very useful. I mean, I just translated a novel by Khayri Shalabi, and it’s full of mistakes and misprints. I don’t think he’s on Facebook, but his son-in-law is. So I had to write all of my questions to him on Facebook and he answered me back.

Afaf: *Speaking of writing, do you find your students have a difficulty in recognizing handwriting? It seems to me that the variable handwriting styles add an unaccounted for stress for the beginning learners of Arabic.*

Michael: Yes, I noticed this because the students learn from a printed book and when you write it, it looks very different. For example if they see two dots and you write it as a short line on the board, it freaks them out. They don't know what happen. It is different for them. It looks like completely different thing. So I realized it is not intuitive. It is not natural. They have to learn it.

Ideally, we should all be writing like a colleague of mine in Middlebury, who was a calligrapher and I had a class with him, but I always forget and write whatever. The book we use, Alif Baa with DVD, shows the printed form and the handwriting form. It takes a lot of thoughts and self-awareness, discipline and preparation, and I admit that this is an area that I am not so good at.

Afaf: *All these difficulties that you faced, as it face many new learners of Arabic, relate back to your motivation to learn difficult languages as you mentioned earlier. But what kept you with the Arabic language? Especially since you had background in other languages like Spanish, French, and Greek, but what did you find in Arabic that kept you going and eventually specialized in it?*

Michael: It's hard to remember, at my age, (I am old), why I did things at eighteen. Well, I think when you grow up in a family where there are different languages, you become – well, for me it just – the fact that there's one way to be in English and then you can just change it and it's in Greek and it's kind of the same and kind of not the same, to have two spaces that you can stand in somehow – I've never really tried to say this before, so I don't know how to say it.

But when you can just like switch to another person, it's kind of addictive, and you realize that there are thousands of languages in the world, so there are potentially thousands of different subject positions.

All of these people have something to say. And it's really not that hard to learn to understand them. I mean, to think that you can study a grammar for three years and suddenly you understand what a billion people have to say for themselves or eight hundred million or three hundred million, depending which language it is, it's kind of addictive. I just love the feeling of hearing people talk and knowing what they're saying.

Afaf: *Do you think then a language exposes its people to a certain worldview?*

Michael: Well, I'm not a Whorfian. I think Whorf is wrong. I don't believe that syntax or vocabulary imposes a certain kind of cognition. In fact, what I find fascinating is that all languages convey the same ideas in different ways. You can see this with physical things. For example, in English if an apple is old, it's called mealy because it's like meal. In Egyptian you say, it's "miramilla", which is like sand. And the feeling of sand is exactly the same as the feeling of meal, right? So in English you say it one way, in Arabic you say it another way. We get the same idea, yet we reach it in a different way. So I'm actually kind of an anti-Whorfian. I think that we're all saying the same thing, but in different ways.

I think that there's another whole question, which is peoples' history and culture. And that is very different. This is the mistake of the Whorfians. They think that language makes it different. I think history makes it different. When you know the language, obviously you see a whole different world, but I don't think that's because they have whatever VSO word order or because they use a certain consonant. It's just because they have a different history.

Afaf: *What about the question of time. It seems that languages have a specific way of expressing time.*

Michael: Yes, and Arabic has an amazingly interesting way of expressing time. I think that tense and aspect are fascinating, really interesting but I don't think people feel differently about time because of their language. I don't know, I haven't thought of these questions, so I might not have a good answer. These are good linguistic questions and I haven't thought about them as much as linguists do, but I really don't think so.

Afaf: *With that being said, then what is the role of culture in language learning? Can you teach language without its culture?*

Michael: I think you can't. I think culture should be introduced from day one. If you are talking about performing in a way that is satisfactory, then learning culture really helps you. For example, I've been learning Persian; if you say just few certain phrases, you would be considered a polite well-educated person. So in this sense, culture is telling you how to learn the language. I tell my students who are going to study in Egypt to learn how to say "Rabina Ya khaliik", [May God bless you], and fifty percent of your interaction will be satisfactory. You will be repetitive, but you won't offend anybody, you won't make mistakes, because it means "please" and "thank you". It means a lot of things. So, I think culture essentially saves you a lot of things, because you won't learn a language by reconstructing everything from the beginning. You learn it by saying the one sentence that the situation calls for.

Afaf: *This talk about the importance of culture awareness and language learning takes us back to your study abroad experience. Besides Jordan, you said you visited Egypt as well at some point.*

Michael: I went there in 1987 the first time to study Arabic. And I was on the CASA Program, which is for advanced American students of Arabic. And then after the CASA program I got a job and I stayed in Egypt. Since then I've been back maybe five or six, seven times. So I never lived there for more than about a year and a half continuously, but I went back a lot.

After CASA was over, I got a job as a translator, and I had another job as a tour guide. I was working for the university. They had a program where American professors and high school students would come to Egypt. They had official tour guides who really knew what they were talking about, and then there was me who was kind of just helping them out.

Afaf: *Do you think study abroad in the target country is essential in advancing proficiency level? There has been some recent studies that display not so positive pictures on the outcomes of study abroad programs.*

Michael: That is interesting. Well, Yes, I think it is very important, but I think they have to be a certain length to be effective. I think a student, first, has to have a lot of background before they can go. And I think for Arabic, going before you've had two years I think doesn't help. And, of course, Arabic has the problem of dialect and FusHa. So I think it is better for them to have some introduction to the dialect before they go because then you just spend six months realizing that these people don't have a "qaaf" or whatever and by the time you learn that, it is too late and you have to go home.

I think there are students who when they get there, they kind of shrink and they withdraw. Gradually they get better. They get more comfortable and get out. But most of these are only for the summer, only for two months or one month. So by the time they get enough courage to go outside, it is over. So I think that there has to be preparation. The program has to be of a real – of a significant length. But I guess there is really no substitute for going abroad.

I'm surprised to hear that there are studies that say that. And I would suspect – I don't know. I mean, this is not in my area, but I would suspect that maybe it's the number – those students who don't go out and don't interact and have cultural shock, those are the ones dragging down the scores. They'll probably find in every group some percentage that are doing really well, right? So I guess if you do it by average performance, maybe it looks as if it's not helping, but I know myself, if I

hadn't gone to Egypt, I'd still be in alf baa stage or whatever. There's no way to do it except to go, I don't think.

Afaf: *As a language teacher, how do you spot or define a good language learner?*

Michael: I think students who come expecting that I will teach them the language are not necessarily going to be successful. The ones who want to learn the language and are willing to have me help them, those will learn. So they can't come in with such a passive attitude that they sit and their head is empty and I pour Arabic in it. It doesn't work that way. If they come to me and they say "oh, I was listening to this song by Nancy Ajram and what does that word mean?" It means that maybe they weren't doing homework. They wanted to hear a song by Nancy Ajram, but they were doing it for themselves by themselves. Or they say, "you know, my friend says this word to me all the time and what does it mean". It means that they have some life in Arabic, some real-life connection to the language that's not just the classroom.

Afaf: *As a literature professor, how do you incorporate literature in the language classroom? Do you depend on translation?*

Michael: I should say first I've actually taught first year, second year, and a third year literature. I've taught every variety, different varieties at some point or other, but in the past two or three years I've only done literature. For literature, I give different things. Sometimes I'll give them broad reading comprehension exercises where they have to read a lot of material quickly. I give them exercises to break the habit of looking each word up. There is a whole range of things, the most basic is morphology. I use drills to ask them to give me past tense, present tense, different grammar rules and this can work at any level.

First, you have to pick something that they can read. So I give them some morphology exercises on particular words, then we'll look at the structure of a sentence, and then narrative structure. For example, we're reading now an autobiography by a Sufi from the Ninth Century. And every time he tells a new story, he says "thuma" [then]. I just get the students to look at those things; there are the micro-level things and the macro-level things, and all of that happens before we do translation.

Last summer I taught a course on the Abbasid Period at the Middlebury School of Arabic where everything has to be in Arabic. So we did the whole thing in Arabic. And that's one way to do it. I've done it at UCLA too, but not as many students can do that. And right now I've got a class with twenty students, some of whom have never been to the Arab world, some of whom can't speak at all, so I have to do it in English.

Afaf: *It seems like you are differentiating between making it a literature class, or learning language through literature, right?*

Michael: Oh, that's a good point. I guess at Middlebury, they didn't come saying we want to study that Abbasid Period, but I was hired to teach the advanced class. I was a co-teacher. I had a colleague who does the modern stuff. And so I said, okay. I'll just give them the Abbasid Period. The students didn't choose it.

I was more like a language teacher. For example, one of the things that we did is watched a TV series called "al amiin wa al ma'mon". We were reading about Abna' al Rashid fii Tariikh al Tabarii and Al Masudi. I said, okay, we'll give them the series, we'll give them books so that they can compare them. And that's what we did. So yes, I can take these medieval texts and I can use them for language teaching. Or we can do it as literature. It just depends on the student.

Afaf: *How do you balance between accuracy and fluency? I often see students with advanced fluency, but still making basic mistakes.*

Michael: I've heard many Arabic teachers say that the students now are more fluent, I have a colleague who calls it "abominably fluent". It is an improvement over the old way, but I think it can be a problem too. I think there are two kinds of learners. The ones who take a lot in, in the beginning and they don't digest it. And then the ones who eat like a bird, you know, they just take a little bit, right? You can't judge either one until they've been doing it for five years. At the end of five years hopefully they will end up in the same place. But if you take the one who takes in a lot in the beginning and you stop them half way through, your ears will hurt listening to them. It's painful. It's horrible. I know.

And if you take the other one, you stop them after two years and you think they don't know anything. They can't talk. They can't say anything. They get scared. But at the end of five years they should both be at the same place.

So I don't think it's fair to the students to say after two years they don't know this or after two years they don't know that. The real test – because Arabic is a five-year program, let's say this, I'm just making that up, right? It could be a three-year. It could be ten. I don't know, but it's some number, right?

Afaf: *But that creates a problem for assessment. How are you going to evaluate? In the end, students need grades.*

Michael: That's true. I try to do class activities and tests that cater to both. For example I might have one exercise where they're supposed to read one page of something difficult and just tell me the general idea. And the big gulp students

they like that. And then I have another exercise with just little tiny details. I try to have activities that cater to both. It's true. It's always frustrating for somebody, and I'm not sure if there is a right answer.

Afaf: *What is your opinion on the different assessments that are available to the Arabic language including OPI?*

Michael: Well, again, I guess it goes back to something we talked about in the beginning, which is that I don't believe that there's such a thing as "Arabic". The OPI is very effective for assessing the ability to answer the kind of questions that are on the OPI. I think that it's very effective for assessing a lot of things: quick thinking, paraphrase, context, all these great language skills. But if you're a student who doesn't care and want to read the pre-Islamic poetry, then it's an irrelevant assessment. So I guess it just depends on what the student's objectives

Afaf: *Besides literature, what other tools do you incorporate in your language teaching classroom?*

Michael: I don't know of a complete system for Arabic that does everything. Somebody has done a site for one thing and another has done a site for something else, but there's no complete integrated program that I know from beginning to end that works with everybody's computer and there's all kinds of issues with the font and the script and all of that.

I use a lot of Arabic Web materials that are already there for some other purpose. I have a translation course and students have their own projects. I send them to YouTube to translate things. I had somebody translate Nancy Ajrum. I had somebody translate a Moroccan comedian. She's really funny. I didn't understand a word that she said, but the student did.

In the summer program, we have an intensive summer program. We use field trips. We have students that come from different places. We take them to the Arabic area in Anaheim. We take them to a restaurant, an Islamic center, a church.

So yes, I think it's great to integrate different methods. It's logistically difficult at UCLA to do that all the time, and we do it in the summer because we have support from the summer sessions. But I don't do it, unfortunately, during the year because we don't have the resources. We don't have the structure set up to get the busses and all that.

Afaf: *Lastly, how do you see the future interest in the Arabic language, will it continue to be on the raise, or have we reached the top?*

Michael: I think we have another ten years, maybe ten years, if we're lucky, and then Chinese is going to be next. I think people are already talking about Chinese as the next big thing because of the economy and global politics and all that.

Afaf: *I found diverse opinions on this golden area of interest in the Arabic language. Some see it that, thought now we have a bigger number of students studying Arabic, but it might not be a very positive situation. They believe that before there were more serious scholars. How do you view this issue?*

Michael: It's an opportunity. More people are interested. More people are teaching Arabic, more universities are adding it, so necessarily, because it's developing, a lot of the quality is going to slip.

When you do something on a bigger scale, you can't control the quality so much. But it's also an opportunity to reach people that we couldn't reach before. I had students who are in the army who said that when they went to Iraq, they didn't know what they were getting into. And then they decided that they really like this language and they wanted to learn it. So if you look at it from the beginning of the story, it doesn't look good, but at the end of the story, hopefully, something good happens.

I think that's where it is. Yes, we're succeeding right now, we're popular, people love us for all the wrong reasons, but this is a chance to teach them something.

Afaf: *We've learned a lot about Dr. Cooperson,, the professor of Arabic language and literature. We would like to know a little about Michael Cooperson, the person. What is your hobby besides literature and learning new languages?*

Michael: I started life wanting to be a cartoonist and I've done some illustrations for things I just never continued with it. I try to lift weights and run and swim and so on. I play chess but I'm not very good at it. I play against the computer sometimes, and the computer usually wins.

Afaf: *What about backgammon? It is a popular Arabic board game, especially in the Egyptian local coffee shops.*

Michael: No, I never learned. My friends in Egypt played it and they looked so serious, and so engaged. So much enthusiasm when they play that scared me to try it. So I thought I am not getting into this, I will just watch

I read poetry, of course, I like Abu-l-Aatahiyya, [748-828, from modern day Iraq]. He's the easiest one to pick up and read in a sense that with poetry it's difficult. He is from the period I'm interested in.

Al Mutanaby (an Iraqi poet, 915-965) is from that period, but he is late for me. He was practically two weeks ago. If you like just the very beginning part of the Abbasid Period, I think abu-l-Aatahiyya is the easiest. So it's – he's nice to read because of that. But medieval critics didn't have favorite poets. They had favorite lines in favorite poems. My favorite poem, well, there's so many. I don't know where to start. But there is a poem by Saleh Al Randi [an Andalusian poet, 1204 – 1285] called "In the Fall of Grenada" in which he says that everything when it becomes perfect, it falls. He goes through all of the history. He uses rhetorical device.

Afaf: *And your favorite writer?*

Michael: al-Masudi [born in Bagdad 896, died in Egypt 956]. He's curious about the world, and he describes things in a way that's very powerful, very well observed.

Afaf: *How about singing, who is your favorite Arabic singer?*

Michael: Well, when you go to Egypt and you're a youth, you have to be a fan of Umm Kalthom. I mean, there's no way. To this day, there is a contest, I don't know if it is on TV or radio, for the greatest Arab singer. She still wins it every year.

Afaf: *Thank you so much, Professor Cooperson, for your time and for giving IAL the chance to conduct this interview.*

Michael: My pleasure.

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