

**Arabic, Islam, and the Allah Lexicon: How Language
Shapes Our Conception of God**

John A. Morrow, ed.

USA: Edwin Melton Press, 2006. 317 pages.

Divided into five chapters plus a bibliography and an index, *Arabic, Islam, and the Allah Lexicon* explores Allah-centric expressions in Arabic and their far-reaching influence on the linguistic behavior of native Arabic speakers in particular and Muslims speaking their own languages in general. It clearly demonstrates how Islam's advent constituted a turning point in the history of the Arabic language by introducing numerous theocentric expressions reflecting God's oneness, as opposed to the practice of polytheism in the pre-Islamic era. These expressions have successfully become the banner of day-to-day communication in Arab communities and, to a lesser extent, in non-Arab Muslim cultures. The Allah lexicon in Arabic has indeed shaped the concept of God in Arab and/or Muslim culture; hence Allah's omnipres-

ence, omnipotence, and omniscience are linguistically felt in times of prosperity and adversity alike.

Falling back on available statistics from word frequency databases involving a mixed bag of texts/discourses, in chapter 1, Morrow establishes the interesting fact that *Allah* is the most frequent content lexeme in Arabic. This unusually high frequency far surpasses existing frequencies of corresponding religious terms in other languages, the closest being the English word “God,” which ranks as the ninety-seventh most common word in a 17 million word corpus. Surprisingly, such languages as Persian and Urdu, which are spoken by non-Arab Muslim communities, noticeably lag behind in the employment of the Allah lexicon, as they favor the use of the native word *khuda* (God) instead of *Allah*.

The spread of Islam to non-Arab communities, Morrow rightly argues, led to a deep Islamization of their cultures but only a superficial Islamization of their languages. However, I would not go as far as Morrow in claiming that the use of the lexicon is more of a conscious than a ritualistic act. True, some Allah-related expressions may indicate the general degree of a person’s religiosity, yet one should submit to the fact that the bulk of the lexicon is employed ritualistically, with little significance to piety. In this way, Morrow’s argument that the “regular” meaningful recitation of the Qur’an among Arabs (as opposed to the merely “meaningless” phonetic recitation by non-Arab Muslims) is the driving force behind the lexicon’s preponderance in Arab communities (but not in non-Arab Muslim communities) can hardly be accepted. The acquisition of this lexicon by Arab children is part and parcel of the socialization process – at home, in the neighborhood, and at school. It is an indispensable component of their linguistic repertoire, which develops over the years.

In chapter 2, Barbara Castleton rightly notes that the lexicon pervades Arab Muslims’ speech acts in that they view daily events not only in terms of their reality, but also in terms of Allah’s relationship to them, thus interactionally communicating that individual effort is not the ultimate determiner of success. For example, the familiar expression *’inšaa’ ’allaah* (If Allah wills it) is generally employed as a *de facto* future marker in conversation, among many other functions such as *questioning* and *threatening*. Castleton also demonstrates that the lexicon can perform both transactional and interactional functions in day-to-day communication. Her empirical study on the frequency of using Allah-featuring expressions by informants from different Arab countries shows striking similarities in the heavy use of such familiar pan-Arab expressions as *bismillaah* (in the name of Allah), *’al-*

ḥamdu lillaah (Praise be to Allah), *'inšaa' 'allaah*, and *wallaah* (By Allah), regardless of whether they live in an Arab or a foreign country.

In chapter 3, Morrow discusses the lexicon's origin by elaborately addressing its religious backgrounds in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. While nobody can deny the seminal role played by these primary sources in introducing Arabic theocentric expressions, Morrow fails to bring out the fact that, in the general spoken Arabic register, most of these expressions have drifted in the direction of grammatical or pragmatic use. For instance, *yaa 'allaah* (originally an invocation for Allah's help) is familiarly used as an enhancer of *admiring* and *complaining*. Not only does the drift stop there, but it also penetrates the grammars of most Arabic vernaculars by becoming (in disguise) a "let-imperative" marker *yalla* (let's) that, in turn, can function as an enhancer of such other illocutions as *challenging* and *dismissing*. In point of fact, the pragmatics of the lexicon in vernacular Arabic poses a serious challenge to foreign language learners; however, I would not subscribe to Morrow's claim that embracing Islam and studying the lexicon's sources are the solution. On the contrary, this may complicate rather than facilitate a real understanding of the lexicon, for its language-oriented component is the output of general acculturation rather than Islamization proper.

In chapter 4, Castleton empirically echoes familiar research results about Arabs' loyalty and positive attitudes toward the Arabic language and Islam, regardless of whether they live at home or abroad. Her survey of fifty-four informants clearly points to strong sentiments in this regard. However, the survey results show more transfer instances from the lexicon for those living in Arab countries than for those living in the United States when communicating in English, whether in code-switching or in English translation. Castleton rightly attributes this disparity to the contrasting environments for the two groups in terms of comfort/discomfort. However, driven by the motivation to find socio-cultural explanations, she shyly mentions the level of language competence as a relevant factor. Imaginably, marked religiosity put aside, the informants who reported transfer from the lexicon lacked sufficient competence in English, whereas those who did not had such competence.

In the last chapter, Morrow and Luis A. Vittor discuss the most beautiful names of Allah, the ninety-nine names, which constitute the lexicon's philosophical foundation. Led by the proper noun *'allaah*, these Qur'anic names (which include names of majesty and power, such as *'al-'akbar* [the Greatest] and *'al-qahhaar* [the Compeller], and names of beauty such as *'al-rahmaan* [the Most Compassionate] and *'al-kariim* [the Most Generous]), the authors assert, seek the realization of the Complete Human

Being (Worshipper), whose knowledge of Allah is embodied in his/her knowledge of these divine names. Hence, in order to capture the essence of the all-encompassing name *'allaah*, the authors suggest translating it into English as “the Divine,” rather than “God.” Personally, I would prefer the universally familiar “Allah” in technical material and just “God” in casual mentions.

To sum up, and apart from the several misprints and few small inaccuracies (e.g., describing the Qur'an as *lugatu 'allaah* [Allah's language] for the correct *kalaamu 'allaah* [Allah's speech] and citing *ṣabaāḥ-u 'al-xayr* [a rather recent greeting] as pre-Islamic for the correct *'im ṣabaāḥ-an* [Good morning]), Morrow's book provides invaluable interdisciplinary material that would benefit both students and specialists in many areas, including socio- and psycholinguistics, language acquisition, cultural studies, Islamic studies, and anthropology, among others. In particular, the contributors should be commended for their good understanding of Arab-Islamic culture and, above all, for their unbiased and objective attitudes toward Islam and the Arabic language.

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