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Decolonising Arabic Language Teaching: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 2000s Arabic has become an increasingly popular language at academic level across Europe and North America, with high numbers of students enrolling on a variety of programmes offering Modern Standard Arabic – as well as local varieties of Arabic, commonly known as *‘ammiyya* – as the target language (Dickins and Watson 2006, 108; Ryding 2006, 13; Mohamed 2021b, 59). The increasingly high demand for this language has resulted in unprecedented progress in the variety of learning materials available for both teachers and learners. Such developments have largely taken place in the United States, where most textbooks such as the *Al-Kitaab* series are designed and printed. This paper employs decolonisation and post-colonial theory to look at the ideological implications of the political agendas implicit in popular and widely adopted textbooks and their proposed content for teaching Arabic as a foreign language. Relevant examples from the *Al-Kitaab* series – one of the most successful and widely adopted textbooks at university level in the UK – show the role of Arabic language teaching materials in perpetuating patterns of European and North American cultural hegemony, making the case for rethinking Arabic language teaching at academic level.

Keywords: Arabic; decoloniality; neoliberalism; orientalism; teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

As Mariam Aboezez argues in *The Arabic Language and Political Ideology*, drawing on Yasir Suleiman’s work, any language serves two main functions in society: an instrumental function and a symbolic one. The former refers to language as an effective means of communication, while

the latter concerns “the capacity of language to act both as a symbol and an index through the associations it invokes within the speech community” (Aboeizz 2018, 1). In addition, suggesting that language can frequently serve as a proxy for ideology, therefore linking the instrumental and symbolic functions of language, Aboeizz and Suleiman speak of language as a means “to express extra-linguistic views and anxieties, as well as to hint at the political orientations of a group or individual” (Suleiman 2013, 16).

In this sense the concept of language ideology as defined by Michael Silverstein, and of political language ideology, in Aboeizz’s definition – originally conceived and employed to deconstruct the ideology of standardised languages –, inform this analysis. The former refers to ideas and beliefs about language which rationalise and justify its structure and use (Silverstein 1979, 193); the latter concerns when language becomes politicised and is used as a proxy to maintain or challenge power relations, group identity, and (a particular) social order in society (Aboeizz 2018, 1). Arabic is no exception, and particularly since the 19th century this language has been associated with multiple agendas or purposes: the preservation of Islamic identity, the establishment of a pan-Arab supranational koine, colonisation, modernisation, and national independence. Based on these different purposes and the choices that they engender, the capital value of language changes and can be manipulated, organised, and presented through content and materials to serve specific worldviews.

The aim in this article is to expand these definitions to explore the politicised nature of Arabic language teaching materials within the framework of decolonisation, and to shed light on the Western approach to the Arabic language broadly speaking both as a medium as well as a symbol. In this vein, this paper addresses the underlying political vision of Arabic-language textbooks widely employed in anglophone higher education contexts, namely the UK and North America.

Since the early 1990s, a series of Arabic language textbooks such as *Al-Kitaab fii Ta’allum al-‘Arabiyya*, *Mastering Arabic*, *Ahlan wa Sablan* and *‘Arabiyyat al-Naas* have brought a significant degree of novelty to a field that had hitherto remained virtually unaffected by the rise of communicative language learning (Block 2010). The most popular and widely used of this new current in Arabic language teaching textbooks, the *Al-Kitaab fii Ta’allum al-‘Arabiyya* series (from now on *Al-Kitaab*) was first published in 1996, followed by a second edition in the early 2000s and a third edition in 2011. This paper examines this book’s first

part (total beginners' level), drawing on an increasingly widespread approach to research/teaching to propose a decolonisation of Arabic language teaching, employing a broad definition of decolonisation as liberation from a colonial approach to knowledge, as avoiding and resisting the perpetuation of colonial or neo-colonial practices, as well as recognising and surpassing the living legacy of the colonial mindset particularly with regards to the Arab-Muslim universe. This also draws inspiration from Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), to explore how and why the Arabic language is studied and the political significance of Arabic-language teaching materials originally designed and produced in the United States, and subsequently distributed and adopted in the rest of the world.

2. DECOLONISATION OF THE CURRICULUM

Triggered by the calls for the removal of Cecil Rhodes's statue from the Cape Town University campus, the movements for the decolonisation of universities which started in 2015 in South Africa have now spread to most parts of the English-speaking world and beyond. Apart from symbolic actions such as the felling of a coloniser's statue, the decolonisation of universities and their curricula has become a crucial and controversial point of discussion in the United Kingdom, particularly within the field of Middle Eastern studies. A growing number of universities have decolonising collectives or networks, and the 2020 annual conference of the British Society of Middle Eastern Studies BRISMES explicitly invited applicants to address the implications of this movement for the field of Middle Eastern Studies as well as "to reflect on the concept of decoloniality and practice of decolonization of knowledge and pedagogy in relation to the study and teaching of the Middle East" (BRISMES 2020). Such calls for the decolonisation of universities, their curricula and their symbols, emerged with the objective of working to address and make visible the legacies of colonialism, empire, racism in academic and knowledge production more broadly. This article brings Arabic-language teaching into this debate by illustrating the political significance of Arabic-language teaching materials and making the case for rethinking how Arabic language curricula are envisaged and prepared.

As Heller and McElhinny point out, positionality forms part of the wider approach to thinking about standpoint and represents a key aspect

for the decolonisation of research and university curricula (Heller and McElhinny 2017, 7). This involves reflecting on and exploring where the core ideas of our discipline come from and what kinds of conflicts they might flag, questioning the relationship between the location and the identity of the writer, what and where they write. In the same way as gender studies cannot be the exclusive realm of heterosexual White men, or the analysis of current global affairs that is funded and produced only in the United States and Europe is no longer credible, I argue that a process of questioning the positionality and hegemonic role of US-produced Arabic textbooks reveals an underlying political agenda that reinforces existing power relations. This relegates Arabic to perform a role that serves the interests of a specific profile of students, one that has an interest in language because it has value, and it has value because it is tied to how resources are produced, circulated, consumed, including how they are identified as resources at all.

In the past twenty years, Arabic language textbooks designed in the United States have played a significant role in shaping the profile of Arabic language graduates as well as in many ways the future of our field, or at least the challenges ahead. While this article's preamble on the symbolic role of language can be applied to a variety of contexts, its application to Arabic in particular seems appropriate and necessary. The reason for situating the innovation of the Arabic language curriculum within the framework of decolonisation, then, goes back to the colonial past and neo-colonial present that have traversed the Arab world, as well as to the political implications linked to knowledge of the Middle East and the Arab World produced in the West. This experience of colonialism – having involved most parts of the Arabic-speaking world – was built on assumptions that informed and justified colonial expansion in the 19th and 20th centuries and continues to inform neo-colonial practices. Such assumptions gave rise to a form of cultural and political hegemony that has shaped the past and present of the field of Middle Eastern studies (Said 1978). Therefore, decolonising the content and methodologies of the disciplines that make up what has crystallised as Middle Eastern studies, necessarily involves questioning these assumptions in order to change the future of the field.

After all, Arabic language programmes at university level represent a key part of degrees in Middle Eastern studies. Teaching Arabic plays a crucial role in introducing students often for the first time to a language and a variety of cultures whose importance to develop empathy as well as

a good understanding of the nuances of a different culture can hardly be overstated. So central is the role of this language in what is known as the Middle East, that for anyone curious about this part of the world receiving at least an introduction to this language is essential. This responsibility is particularly relevant today, as we are reminded of the work of Palestinian-American thinker Edward W. Said. As Said explained in *Orientalism*, Middle Eastern studies in the West has hardly been a field that produces value-free knowledge. In fact, Said argues, both at the time of the British and French Empires as well as in post WWII area studies in the United States, the study of the Middle East – and therefore of the Arabic language too – has frequently been policy oriented and imbued with colonial culture and attitudes (Keskin 2018, 1). This has contributed to crystallising the hegemonic role of a Eurocentric/American view of Arabic speaking countries, on the one hand, and their subordinate role on a global scale, on the other. Such a balance of power engenders a widespread perception of Arabs and Arabic speakers in the minds of the general population. Arabic language teachers have a choice, and a responsibility, to either reinforce or counter this perception, balancing this against the desires and ambitions that motivate students to learn Arabic.

As Heller and McElhinny have shown, quoting Bruce Cummings, the development of the field of Middle Eastern studies in the United States emerged in the Cold War period as a direct consequence of CIA involvement in driving academic research to serve specific US geopolitical interests (2017, 178). While Arabic and Middle Eastern studies during the Cold War were merely considered part of the efforts to study various areas of the world where “communists were perceived to be a threat” (Heller and McElhinny 2017, 178), after 1991 and particularly after the 9/11 attacks its role and its capital value has evolved dramatically. As Keskin (2018, 2) explains, in the post 9/11 era the tendency to establish closer relationships between universities and state institutions has increased as US academics have established closer links with government agencies, think tanks, and non-governmental organizations and institutions in order to receive funding for their research. After all, this process of commodification of knowledge to serve national security interests had already begun in the 1980s, with the emergence of neoliberalism as the dominant global ideology (*ibid.*, 11). In this sense, the next sections demonstrate how Arabic language textbooks and courses have not represented a change to a tradition of state-department-driven area studies.

3. THE AL-KITAAB “REVOLUTION”

Contemporary textbooks have represented an innovation for Arabic pedagogy that surpassed the traditionally Eurocentric approaches to Arabic language teaching, in that they attempt to foster the integrated approach, i.e. a style of teaching that “does not consider *fushḥā* and the vernaculars as mutually exclusive” (Giolfo and Sinatora 2018, 96). This confirms how over the last several decades the study of Arabic has grown exponentially and dramatically – as Devin J. Stewart (2016) argues – offering a wider variety of pedagogical materials and making the situation for learners of Arabic much easier. However, again as Stewart, as well as Giolfo and Sinatora explain, Arabic pedagogy has retained a focus on politics and the language of newspapers reflecting a Western interest in Arabic dictated for the most part by political and economic agendas. This is perpetuated also by books whose aim and ambition is to surpass a traditional and outdated style of teaching in favour of teaching the spoken and written variety (i.e. *‘āmmiyya* and *fushḥā*) as one and integrated. As Ryding, Badawi and Ben Amor have revealed, the apparent progress in the designing of materials that these textbooks have achieved, has not resulted in higher levels of proficiency for Arabic students, due mostly to the nature of the content proposed (Ryding 2006; Badawi 2011; Ben Amor 2017, 97-99). In the case of the *Al-Kitaab* series specifically, vocabulary lists are varied but consistently introduce terms from the realm of political and public affairs since the very first pages. The reading materials presented usually bring together pieces from various sources, including outdated media articles with little or no relevance to the core vocabulary of each learning unit. As for the grammar lessons, English is the main language employed, which has resulted in foreign language terminology becoming a barrier between the (Arabic) language and the learners. Such practice turns books into talking *about* the language rather than talking *in* it (Badawi 2011, ix). The content of these textbooks and the developments that they have supposedly brought about is even more controversial if we consider the impact they have on the practical knowledge of the language and potential employability of Arabic-language graduates. As Ben Amor (2017, 99) argues, making the case for literary texts to be employed extensively in Arabic language teaching programmes, the diminished linguistic and cultural proficiency for the students is a product of the political pressure that area studies have exerted on Arabic language provision.

Published for the first time in the 1990s the *Al-Kitaab* series came out at a crucial time for Middle Eastern studies, when key US government agencies and institutions – such as the National Endowments for the Humanities, which funded the *Al-Kitaab* series (Brustad *et al.* 2011, xxix) – were being restructured to support area studies, including Middle Eastern studies, as fields that in turn served the dominant market-oriented, neo-orientalist American vision (Keskin 2018, 12). The following three sections provide relevant examples of the content proposed to total beginners in the first volume of the *Al-Kitaab* series. The examples presented are taken from vocabulary lists, reading texts, grammar explanations, as well as speaking activities and exercises. As these examples will show, the vocabulary proposed at beginners' level consistently introduces a great deal of terms from the domain of public life and current affairs in the vocabulary lists presented at the beginning of each unit, as well as in the reading-for-scanning and fill-in-the-gaps exercises throughout. This not only limits the capacity of young learners to use the language effectively regardless of their political orientations and personal ambitions, but it also results in a limited number of career choices. This is not incidental, and as the content will illustrate, it achieves the purpose of perpetuating a predominantly American vision of Arabic and the Arabic-speaking world, as the domain of news networks, government agencies, think tanks and NGOs (Keskin 2018, 2).

4. VOCABULARY LISTS

The nature of the vocabulary proposed by the *Al-Kitaab* series to students who are still often in the process of approaching the language at a very basic level shows that their focus is wide but inarticulate, as the terms at the beginning of each unit do not belong to a common and consistent domain. Particularly in the very first units, vocabulary lists provide students with useful Arabic terms to talk about themselves (always alongside their English equivalent)¹, but draw frequently from the language of politics, governmental agencies, international organisations, current affairs, alongside other more mundane topics. In the space of the very first two units in the first volume the *Al-Kitaab* series learners are exposed to terms such as:

¹ In the 3rd edition vocabulary lists also provide the colloquial (Egyptian and Levantine) equivalent of terms.

ARABIC	ENGLISH
الأمم المتحدة	the United Nations
جنسية	nationality
مترجم	translator
مُتخصّص	expert
الشرق الأوسط	the Middle East
منطقة	region
موظف	employee
جيش	army
ضابط	officer
حقوق	law
دين	religion
العلوم السياسية	political science

By the last of the thirteen units that make up the first volume of the series in its 3rd edition, which is meant for total beginners with no prior knowledge of the language, such terms have been added.

ARABIC	ENGLISH
التجارة	commerce
إدارة الأعمال	business administration
الخارجية	foreign affairs
وزارة	ministry
الاقتصاد	economy
حكومة	government
دولة	nation-state
دولي	international
رئيس	president
رئيس الوزراء	prime minister
التحق	to join or enter (school, army, political party)
عُيِّنَت	I was appointed
السياسة المقارنة	comparative politics

Students are expected to engage in ask-your-colleague activities to practice this vocabulary through questions given in English, which the students have to then reformulate in Arabic. Speaking activities include a great variety of situations among which we find questions such as “Do you want to work for the United Nations?”, “Are you majoring in Middle Eastern studies?”, “Are you busy with your job?”, “Do you have a relative in the army? Is he or she an officer? Does he or she like working in the army?”, “Do you like politics? Do you watch the news every day?”, “How is the US economy doing as far as you are concerned?”, “Would you like to work for the State Department?”, “In your opinion who should be able to join the army?”, “What does a prime minister do? Do you know any governments that have a prime minister?”.

As they progress into the first eight units, in addition to such speaking activities, at the beginning of each unit students are expected to complete a series of fill-in-the-gaps exercises to practice this vocabulary in the context of sentences among which we find the following:

ARABIC	ENGLISH
ما رأيك في السياسية الاقتصادية للحكومة العراقية الجديدة؟	What do you think about the economic policies of the new Iraqi government?
ماذا تعمل والد مها؟ يعمل مترجم في الأمم المتحدة	What does Mahā's father do? He works as a translator for the United Nations
والدها من القاهرة، وهو يعمل في قسم الترجمة في الأمم المتحدة	Her father is from Cairo, he works in the translation department at the United Nations
في الحقيقة، أحمد ابن عم والد مها، وهو متخصص في العلوم السياسية	Actually, Aḥmad is Mahā's father's cousin. He is a political science specialist
في الولايات المتحدة هناك وظيفة الرئيس وهناك الوزراء، ولكن ليس هناك وظيفة رئيس الوزراء كما في دول مثل بريطانيا وفرنسا	In the United States there is a president and ministers, however there isn't a prime minister like in countries (nation-states) such as Britain and France
حصلت على البكالوريوس في العلوم السياسية منذ سنتين، أدرس الآن للحصول على الماجستير في الدراسات الدولية في SIAS في جامعة جون هوبكنز	I obtained a BA in political science two years ago. Now I'm studying for my master's in international studies at SAIS, John Hopkins University
بعد التخرج أريد العمل في الحكومة أو في واحدة من الشركات الأمريكية من منطقة الخليج	After I graduate I want to work for the government or for an American company in the Gulf
جورج واشنطن كان الرئيس الأول للولايات المتحدة	George Washington was the first president of the United States

ARABIC	ENGLISH
زميلتي التحقت بالجيش منذ ٤ سنوات وأصبحت ضابطة، وهي سعيدة بحياتها لأن عندها وظيفة ممتازة ومرتب ممتاز	My colleague joined the army four years ago and became an officer, she's very happy with her life because she has a great job and a great salary
الصيف الماضي عملت متدربة في قسم العلاقات الدولية في وزارة الخارجية في واشنطن، وكانت هذه تجربة ممتازة لأنني تعرفت على موظفين كثيرين في الحكومة.	Last summer I worked as an intern in the IR section of the State Department. This was an amazing experience because I got to know a lot of government employees
انقطعت العلاقات الدبلوماسية بين إيران والولايات المتحدة لسنوات طويلة	Diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States were cut off for a long time
الدكتورة سعاد متخصصة في السياسة المقارنة وتدرس السياسة العربية-الأوروبية. وهي تتكلم باللغتين الإنكليزية والفرنسية إضافة إلى اللغة العربية. قبل سنتين حصلت على منحة فولبرايت للدراسة في الولايات المتحدة. وبعد عودتها عينت رئيسة لقسم العلوم السياسية في الجامعة	Dr Su'ād is a specialist in comparative politics. She studies Arab-European politics. She speaks English and French, as well as Arabic. Two years ago, she obtained a Fulbright scholarship to study in the United States and after coming back she was appointed as head of the department of political science at university

تمرين ١: كلمات جديدة وقواعد قديمة (في البيت)

اكتبوا كلمة من الكلمات الجديدة في كل جملة.

١. زميلتي التحقت بالجيش منذ ٤ سنوات
و ضابطة ، وهي سعيدة بحياتها لأن
عندها وظيفة ممتازة و ممتاز.

٢. أصحو في الساعة السادسة صباحاً ،
ولكن اليوم صحت في الساعة والنصف
لأنني ليلة أمس الى الساعة الواحدة
بسبب ورقة صف علم الإنسان.

٣. ما رأيكم أن كلكم الى بيتي للعشاء



Figure 1. – A fill-in-the-gaps exercise from *Al-Kitaab* part 1, p. 204.

The choice of vocabulary, the themes, and the organisation of the contents in this series reveals how it is designed to direct the students towards specific career paths, effectively limiting the choices for Arabic graduates to a few: political analyst, news editor, foreign correspondent,

NGOs and governmental agencies, depriving a broader spectrum of students of the opportunity to receive an introduction to more rudimentary aspects of this language. This also reveals how, despite the progress it has witnessed, the field of Arabic language teaching still seems to suffer from what Karin Ryding defines as reverse privileging. Originally proposed by Heidi Byrnes (2002, 34-58), reverse privileging is useful to classify and differentiate between different discourse types that teaching materials employ. According to Ryding, the content of Arabic language teaching materials, unlike that of most commonly taught languages, privileges “secondary discourses of public life involving the professions, the academy, and civil society” over “primary discourses of familiarity”, leading to high drop-out rates among Arabic language students at university level (Ryding 2006, 16). In other words, whereas most language programmes at academic level build the foundations of interactional skills by focussing on familiar or at least highly predictable settings, the most widely adopted Arabic-language textbooks give prominence to the language of media and current affairs.

5. READING TEXTS

Reading texts are generally considered a crucial component of language course books for developing proficiency and among the most challenging for learners, especially of Arabic (Mohamed 2021b, 61). Unlike vocabulary lists, which remain to a very large degree consistent across the different editions, the reading texts proposed in the *Al-Kitaab* series vary depending on the edition. Yet, all editions consistently lack normative texts, i.e. texts which present the learners with the linguistic and communicative aspects which include the appropriate range of vocabulary and grammar that they are gradually expected to incorporate and reproduce at different proficiency levels (Natova 2019). Texts from the 2nd edition, published in 2004, present a significantly greater focus on the language of politics and current affairs if compared with the third and latest edition. The first fifteen units (the 2nd edition consists of twenty units) present numerous excerpts from Arabic newspapers such as the Saudi *Okaz*, with a focus on aspects of current affairs such as the Saudi health minister meeting with the Chinese ambassador, the Egyptian president’s visit to Ankara, PhD positions being advertised in a Saudi university, two French army officers gone missing in Kuwait, a female student obtaining a master’s degree in Islamic jurisprudence, the

Filipino president's visit to Abu Dhabi. In the 3rd edition, other texts include obituaries, job advertisements, a tv guide, the curriculum vitae of the newly appointed ministers in the Jordanian government and an excerpt from the biography of King Fuad of Egypt (which is included in the 2nd edition as well). Students are required to scan these texts to guess the meaning of specific terms and to identify specific grammatical structures, developing only a superficial and passive understanding of their content. An exception to this appears in the third and last edition of the series which was published in 2011, where at the end of each unit the authors have added short (but gradually longer in each chapter) reading passages about the everyday life of the units' protagonists and their friends. These texts however are again not correlated with comprehension exercises, and they are meant to be read aloud by the students, recorded and their recordings submitted to the teachers for feedback. Texts about local social and cultural aspects such as popular Arab musicians, secondary and higher education, familial relations and the Arabic dictionary are in English. In addition, the few literary texts (songs and short stories) the *Al-Kitaab* series proposes are never the main reading on which the grammar and lexical skills of the students are built, giving significantly more prominence to the secondary discourses of public life mentioned by Ryding. Such choices also reinforce an orientalisising and mainstream depiction of Arab cultures in European and North American terms (Ben Amor 2017, 97). Other reading texts – which are again mostly authentic and meant for native speakers – include a list of Middle East studies centres in Arabic and English that students are asked to match, a list of faculties and departments at the universities of Beirut and Aleppo, the weather in New York City, a list of randomly grouped names with their respective hobbies, and obituaries. Some of these texts' focus on American and generally Western places is truly striking for a textbook meant to introduce students to Arabic. The setting of events is New York City, where the protagonist of the first few units as well as most of her friends and relatives live. The United States, with its most representative city and political institution (the UN), remain at the centre of the first five units as the protagonists of the reading texts in this part of 3rd edition live there. Cultural aspects that a wider range of students can more easily relate to and engage with, such as food or music, are presented in English. In the remaining seven units of the first book, as the location transitions from the United States to Egypt, elements of American culture remain ingrained in the various exercises and activities illustrated above.

6. GRAMMAR

In both the 2nd and the 3rd edition, from the very first units, long explanations in English – which begin by pointing to a similar aspect of English grammar – illustrate essential elements of Arabic grammar such as the definite article, plural nouns, plural agreement rules, the *idāfa*, object pronouns, the *maṣḍar* and, later on, basic connectors such as *anna* (أَنَّ). By way of illustration, the lesson on sentence complements (*anna* أَ and *inna* إِنَّ) – a fundamental syntactic tool employed in both standard and spoken Arabic to articulate even the most basic sentence – begins with a long explanation about the different functions of the word “that” as it is used in English (as a demonstrative, a relative pronoun, or a conjunction), which have several different equivalents in Arabic. Through a list of sentences in English that only later transitions to illustrating relevant examples in Arabic, the lesson proceeds to explain the similarity between one of the meanings of the word “that” in English on one hand and *anna* and *inna* on the other. The lesson on the *maṣḍar* – a verbal noun employed widely in Modern Standard Arabic and similar in its frequency, as well as its usage, to the infinitive in Romance languages such as French, Spanish and Italian – also involves a detailed explanation of the different ways in which such a concept can be expressed in English using the gerund and the infinitive. Therefore, through this textbook, students cannot approach Arabic for the first time without prior knowledge of English and, more relevantly, of English grammar, because indispensable syntactic tools, crucial to build the learners’ confidence in achieving communicative proficiency and fluency in reading, are consistently presented through the medium of English. In addition to the explanations, relevant examples employed to provide students with a basic understanding of the structure in question are presented in English first, then in Arabic. In a manner similar to that of reading texts and vocabulary lists, the way grammar is presented and explained to students in the *Al-Kitaab* series creates “a barrier between the learners and their target” (Badawi 2006, xii), forcing Arabic structures into a foreign linguistic framework.

7. PASSIVE VS. ACTIVE SKILLS

Such content that the series presents to students is consistent with the career paths towards which this series pushes them. The choice of vocabulary in the very first units is designed to make Arabic “market-

able” to students and to direct them towards specific fields in which their Arabic skills can be “sold”, but hardly to develop linguistic and cultural proficiency in the language. Significantly, this is achieved by presenting content *about* Arabic but *in English*, focusing on passive rather than active skills, through exercises designed to enhance the students’ passive understanding of the language, rather than their capacity to articulate their thoughts. The whole series has virtually no dialogues in Modern Standard Arabic, therefore students do not receive an exposure to the language in context and the content proposed does not seem to consider Modern Standard Arabic a language for interaction. The sophisticated, outdated vocabulary the series introduces as well as the barren language register it privileges, seems consistent with careers that have become particularly sought after in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks (Keskin 2018, 2). Each unit revolves around a listening exercise – a story, or *qissa* in Arabic – where one of the protagonists illustrates an aspect of their life through a monologue. The content of these monologues is varied, the protagonists address aspects of their personal lives such as living in New York, having few friends, family and sentimental relationships, the feeling of estrangement and nostalgia for their homeland. The vocabulary of these monologues however returns in the abovementioned speaking activities and fill-in-the-gaps exercises to address topics such as career ambitions and political relations between different countries. By way of illustration, in the 11th unit of both the 2nd and 3rd edition some of the vocabulary proposed revolves around aspects of personal life and love relationships, yet its meaning and usages are expanded to address international relations between different countries. While in the listening monologue the protagonist Khalid speaks of a love relationship with an Egyptian girl that was cut off (انقطعت العلاقة), the speaking exercises in the same unit prompt students to ask each other questions (provided in English) such as “are the relations between Iran and the US better than last year? Do you think the relations between the US and any other country will be cut off?”.

8. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, despite its seemingly neutral and communicative attitude, situating the *Al-Kitaab* series within the framework of decoloniality reveals that it remains largely consistent with a career-oriented and Americentric system of beliefs and values. The content this series pre-

sents to beginner students shapes the users' perception of Arabic and of the domain to which it pertains. Its manner of perceiving the Arabic language and its value is deeply influenced by a market-oriented view of language learning and consistent with the "shopping list" orientation, to borrow El Said Badawi's definition, towards which Arabic language teaching is heading. This suggests that the vocabulary proposed is designed to either respond to the career ambitions of a specific student profile, one that conceives Arabic and the Arab World as a career, or to specifically direct students – regardless of their class, ethnicity, and gender – towards those same career paths. A process of decolonisation in this sense is imperative in a society marked by a variety of structural inequalities. If we are to provide students with equal opportunities to flourish and succeed, then such a narrow view of what one can or wishes to achieve by learning Arabic cannot be appropriate. The decolonising argument proposed in this paper highlights how the limited content of Arabic language textbooks, and their explicit insistence on specific career paths toward which to guide the students are some of the most crucial challenges that Arabic language teaching faces today. This is truer in universities with a varied student population – as is the case in most UK universities – and the decolonising process that Arabic language teaching must undergo passes through a process of aligning our field with common international standards – such as the one proposed by Soliman (2018) and Mohamed (2021a, 2021b). This will inevitably involve surpassing the commodification of Arabic that the success of the *Al-Kitaab* series has crystallised, as well as the narrow and US-centred view of this language as a marketable skill for a career in restricted sectors, which are often inaccessible for students from minority and lower-income groups (James 2020).

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