

Developments in English Language and Literature in English in West Asia

The publication of this special issue of *Asiatic* takes into consideration the sizable body of research generated in West Asia these past decades, which has increased exponentially with improvements in academic awareness and scholarship at all levels of education. As publication in English and about the English language in the local communities has increased, respect and pride for local languages have also increased, as evidenced by the huge amount of research in the West Asian local languages. West Asia is a region rich with cultures, traditions, art and literature, but rather obscured by the turmoil that appears to have unjustly defined the region. This is slowly changing as authors and researchers find their voice and place in the modern era alongside those in other parts of the world.

The major focus of this issue is on English linguistics and literature in West Asia, as well as research in English in the region. English has been in West Asia as early as the nineteenth century due to British colonisation and the quest for oil. Economic stability within the region grew with the eventual discovery of oil in several countries, which brought the world to their doors. Due to the rapid growth in industrialisation, the English language was quickly adopted as a strategic tool for international communication. As the doors opened to international scholars around the globe, the richness in linguistic diversity and recorded literature of this ancient region intrigued many researchers who have access to it. Arabic remains the major language in West Asia, closely guarded by the Egyptian and Arab peoples and cultures. Efforts to maintain English as the other language, began a while ago with strong support of the governments introducing English in the education curriculum starting from the elementary years. As in all other communities around the world where English has made its mark, the use of the language outside the school has met with plenty of resistance, mainly due to the fear of losing the first language and perceptions of foreign cultural infiltration.

This special number of *Asiatic* explores the diachronic and synchronic issues concerning the English language and literature in West Asia that reflects the dynamicity of resistance, change, acceptance and maintenance of the language among the communities in the region. The issues are reflected in the selected literary and linguistic analyses received from a multitude of contributions from researchers all over the globe, interested in West Asia. It also includes research on the local languages and literature written in the English language. The following paragraphs summarises the content of the issue, beginning with articles on literature followed by those on language and linguistics.

Arwa Hassan analyses two short stories by the Saudi author Umayma Al-Khamis published in an anthology of Arab women writers, edited and translated

by Cohen-Mor and provides a discussion of the societal role of Arab women in the post-modern world. The reader is introduced to the inner life of the Arab women in a rapidly changing environment. This article utilises the Text World Theory and shows that the texts can be read as absurdist due to the shared themes of existentialism and futility of existence, instead of merely as depicting the culture of the Arab world.

Moving on to Iranian literature, Hoda Shabrang provides a refreshing analysis of Reza Ghasemi's first and unique example of Iranian postmodern novel, *The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Orchestra*. The novel was first published in the USA in 1996 and later by Cheshmeh, an Iranian publisher, and went on to receive a few awards. The novel focuses on the life of an immigrant who escapes the post-revolutionary Iran to Paris, but never feels included in the new land and eventually becomes a person without an identity or a homeland. In addition to features of postmodern fiction, Ghasemi's work depicts a world rooted in superstitions, religious beliefs and contradictions in the Iranian mind. The spiritual and superstitious descriptions in the story portray the general confusion of the contemporary man in exile and the turmoil of the world around him.

Muneerah Almahasheer examines the Prufrockian modernist elements in other cultural contexts, namely Arabic, to provide additional insights into the genre and readings of related works and how the modern world has impacted the Arab culture, as seen in the works of contemporary Saudi poets, such as Ghāzī Al-Quṣaybi (1940-2010). Themes and techniques evident in conventional modernist texts are abundant in Al-Quṣaybi's work, within the Arab context. The works of T.S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein are compared and contrasted with Al-Qusaybi's poetry that depicts changes due to the industrialisation in all spheres of life.

Wigati Dyah Prasasti and Putu Suarcaya explore experiences of forced migration in Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, while constructing the characters' view of the American dream, which is essentially spiritual but often misunderstood to be materialistic. However, the dreams of the two main characters, Amir and his father, Baba, diverge: the older character, Baba, continues to pine for his long lost homeland and the son, while successfully adjusting himself to the new land, seeks to rectify a past mistake which persistently weighs upon his mind. The ideologies of the two main characters diverge in many ways yet converge in others, constructed by their individual memories of Afghanistan.

Poetry is the highest form of literary expression and may not be easy for everyone, especially non-native students studying it in a literature classroom. Haifa Almufayrij investigates the use of art to mitigate apprehension among students as they analyse and interpret English poetry. In her poetry class, students use the strategy of visualisation to create paintings for selected poetry to illustrate their experience in the reading and analysis of the poem. This activity becomes a

personal journey for every student, as each produces a different painting or image of the poetry analysed and successfully shows the diversity of their meaning. This strategy works particularly for students who are not as proficient in written English as others, and they work on the basis that there is no right or wrong answer in the interpretation of poetry.

The Islamic culture is central in the West Asia communities, as Islam originated in Saudi Arabia. The first linguistics article by Ahlam Alharbi delves into this issue by analysing fatwa discourse on the role of the English language among the Muslim communities in Saudi Arabia as a source of knowledge, guidance, adaptation and change. Using Goffman's frame analysis, Alharbi analyses the fatwas' role in shaping Saudis' attitude towards the English language. Two ideological overarching frames emerge in Alharbi's analysis: an anti-English frame and a pro-English frame. The anti-English frame serves as a form of resistance/rejection, shaping English through the following sub-frames: necessity, *unArabic*, unIslamic, anti-imitation and consequence/ramification, while the pro-English frame is necessity and permissibility.

Education is key to Saudi Arabia and every citizen in the country now has access to all levels of education, to ensure their future in the workplace. To see whether implementations and expectations are synchronised, Amal Mohammed Alhamid evaluates a project undertaken in Saudi Arabia to prepare students for university study. The focus is on the female section of an intensive English programme at the pre-university level and how it relates to the eventual university programme. Alhamid's findings show that the programme enhances students' self-confidence and educational skills and establishes positive relationships between students and international instructors. Other issues analysed are the suitability of the textbooks to the Saudi context, the programme's tolerance towards plagiarism, students' poor attendance and the instructors feeling over-controlled and unappreciated.

Using the appraisal concept of James Martin and Peter White which is based on Halliday's Systematic Functional Linguistics, Mona Bani Alkahtani examines *Attitude* in Hosni Mubarak's speeches during the Arab Spring Uprising in 2012. Political discourse is a popular focus of research, due to the constant conflicts in the region, in understanding strategies used by political leaders to maintain stability in their respective countries. *Attitude* in the appraisal framework is divided into three domains: *affect*, *judgment* and *appreciation*, manifested in the linguistic devices found in Mubarak's three speeches in 2012, the year he was ousted from the presidency. Alkahtani shows how Mubarak's attitude changes throughout his speeches, in his last stance to appeal to the people to accept him as their leader.

Technology is now accessible to everyone and highly used in the classroom. Thus, it can also be a beneficial tool for language learning. Awatif Katib Alruwaili investigates the use of corpora in the classroom for learning verb-noun

collocations. Data were collected from fifty-one intermediate level participants studying general English in the foundation year at a university in Saudi Arabia. Three training sessions and two test sessions were given to learners on how to use a corpus resource (AntConc), and to read and analyse concordance lines over a five-week period. The participants were tracked via a software tracker in both the training and testing sessions. Tracking logs and activity sheets were used to collect the data. Alruwaili found that the participants were able to apply the direct learning approach independently in the same way as they had been trained, which indicates that the training was successful. Through the use of concordance lines, they were also able to identify the general verb patterns.

From a psycholinguistic point of view, Faten Ahmed Alarjani tested the Involvement Load Hypothesis on Saudi university students' retention of word meaning. Two tasks were developed for the participants who were female learners of English as a foreign language enrolled in a Saudi university. The participants were randomly divided into two groups: experimental group and control group and were given tests before and after the treatment. All results were validated quantitatively by using a paired sample *t*-test and an independent *t*-test to support the qualitative analysis.

Arif Ahmed Mohammed Hassan Al-Ahdal analyses the relationship between Ebook Interaction Logs and the reading performance of Saudi EFL learners, and offers a learning approach that emphasises independent learning for the students. The study took twelve weeks, and during this time the BookRoll system was used and EFL teachers were asked to upload all textbook materials online. This allowed learners free access to the material anytime, anywhere and in complete privacy. The participants could reread relevant sections marked by the teacher, check out the notes and engaged in other reading-related activities that the teacher incorporated into the ebook. The logs were analysed for prevalent reading patterns to predict reading behaviours in participants. Al-Ahdal found that the BookRoll could be used to predict learners' reading behaviours with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

Research on the effects of the first language on English as a second language is extensive. In this respect, May Mahdi Alramadan compares and contrasts the academic writing of three different groups: published English-speaking academics, published Saudi academics and Saudi EFL Master's degree students. The focus is on how the writers project authorial stances and build convincing arguments based on Martin and White's Appraisal resources of Affect, Judgment and Appreciation. Alramadan reports two main findings: firstly, writers preferred different Attitude options in presenting their arguments, and secondly, the stance construed by the EFL writers' writing showed a blend of features different from both English and Arabic. The study has implications for EFL writers since quality of English writing strictly follows the English standards, particularly at the tertiary level.

Finally, Wafa Aljuaythin employs Fairclough's seminal three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis in her analysis of roles assigned to women in detergent commercials across Saudi Arabia and the USA. Both relatively represent the two ends of the liberal continuum in society. Aljuaythin's findings show that the commercials in both societies rely on a limited number of stereotypical female roles, as though they are pre-assigned and conform to conventional societal perceptions. The continuous representations of these roles may have further naturalised them and accepted as common sense.

The issue is a mixed collection of various topics in linguistics and literature in the western part of Asia, particularly in the Arab-speaking regions. The topics reflect the changing views of society as well as advances in digital technology. It is my hope that research in the region will continue given the rising interest in publication among scholars and support provided by their respective institutions. This will allow others outside the region, particularly those in the academia, to be continuously updated on the dynamics and changes that redefine the region's languages and communities.

Works Cited

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