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# Book Review of Arabic Language Handbook by Mary Catherine Bateson

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‘Ubayd Zakani was a poet and author of immense skill and originality, and thus the *Kulliyât* should be considered essential for any Persian language library collection, particularly in an academic setting. It has been the poet’s fate that he should be heretofore overlooked (receiving little mention even in the traditional *tazkirahs*, or biographies of prominent poets) or misconstrued as a mere scribbler of obscene verse. Dr. Mahjub’s efforts go a long way towards rectifying that error and remind us that classical Persian literature encompassed a great deal more than flowery panegyrics and mystical musings.

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*Arabic Language Handbook*. By Mary Catherine Bateson. Georgetown Classics in Arabic Language and Linguistics. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003. Pp. 127. Bibliography pp. 117–127.

Originally published in 1967, Bateson’s *Arabic Language Handbook*, according to the foreword by editor Karin C. Ryding, has been reissued to “serve the growing national and international need for reference works on Arabic language and culture” (p. v) in response to the renewed focus on the Arabic speaking world in recent years. The handbook was, in 1967, a new kind of publication in the area of applied linguistics meant to appeal to the linguistic or area specialist as well as the student desiring a concise review of the language. Two brief updates to the original publication are provided. First, in the preface, the mid-sixties estimate of eighty million Arabic speakers is revised upward to two hundred million. The second change is in the bibliography. The first bibliography, which remains intact, has been supplemented with citations of works published since 1964 that include references, language learning texts, works on literature, and titles devoted to particular colloquial dialects.

As Bateson’s preface explains, this work is not meant as a text to help a reader learn how to speak, read or write the language, but rather as a guide informing students and scholars how Arabic functions and is used for speech and writing. The first of three chapters, ‘An outline of Arabic structure,’ reviews the structure of Classical Arabic, defined in terms of being the “vehicle of Islam,” and as the literate language used today as the chief written and formal spoken form in all parts of the

Arabic speaking world. Colloquial Arabic is the vehicle for usual daily social communication. Moreover, the colloquial language reflects the particular geography, society and religion of its speakers. The resulting “diglossia” where the two forms, one primarily literate and broadly used versus the other chiefly oral and local or regional, is a distinctive characteristic of Arabic. Bateson describes diglossia, as a situation that, “presents problems both for description and the Arabs themselves.” (p. xiii)

In this opening chapter, the features of the phonology, morphology, nouns, verbs, parts of speech and their characteristics, and syntax are economically addressed. One obvious strength, or drawback, is Bateson’s system of symbols and abbreviations used for transcribing Arabic. Particularly in the section on verbs, this system appears cumbersome, and the Arabic transliterations are a relief. While there is the requisite table of the phonology system of Arabic script consonants, the inexplicably incorrect display<sup>†</sup> may well cause confusion for the nascent scholar of Arabic, which the original edition did not.

The second chapter succinctly reviews the history of Classical Arabic. The initial discussion of Arabic’s place in the Semitic language family and the development of its writing system offers interesting historical background to the review. The remainder of the chapter sprints through the famous names and themes of Classical Arabic’s literary history from Pre-Islamic times up to the 1960’s.

The final chapter, “The linguistic practice of the Arabs,” highlights the origins of the Classical from Pre-Islamic Arabic until its present day evolution into Modern Standard Arabic and the factors influencing current usage. Here one must question whether Bateson’s views on the impact of diglossia on illiterate Arabic speakers are still accurate. Do speakers really not understand news broadcasts and political speeches, for example, and is the level of illiteracy as high today as forty years ago? The work comes to an end with an illuminating discussion of Colloquial Arabic’s origins, phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon providing brief descriptions of the regional variations such as Iraqi, Egyptian, and North African Arabic.

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<sup>†</sup> For example, Table 1, p. 4: “d” is paired with *zāy*—it should read “d” / *dāl*; “t” with *tāʾ*—it should read “t” / *tāʾ*; “d” again with *rāʾ*—it should read “d” / *dāl*; “s” with the IPA symbol for glottal stop—it should read “s” / *sin*.

What Bateson has written in this volume may still be accurate for the most part, is informative, especially on Colloquial Arabic, and accomplishes its handbook purpose. However, since it in no significant way reexamines or revises the original text, if your library holds the original edition, it is not necessary to acquire this one, however more polished the printing is in comparison to the type(writer) face production of the 1967 edition. More current publications devoted to describing the Arabic language are now available, such as Kees Versteegh's *The Arabic Language* ([most recently:] Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

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*The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*. By Alberto Elena; translated from Spanish by Belinda Coombes. London : Saqi in association with the Iranian Heritage Foundation, 2005. Pp. 297. Includes bibliography, filmography and index. Paperback \$24.50. ISBN 0-86356-594-8

Despite Abbas Kiarostami's position as the arguably most influential and controversial film director of post-revolutionary Iran, there are woefully few monographs in English to which the Western student can turn to satisfy her curiosity. Thankfully, this new study by noted Spanish cinema historian, Alberto Elena, covers the topic in such an admirable way that it is destined to become the standard work in English on the subject. It is a fine introduction to Kiarostami, in particular, and the modern Iranian cinema in general.

Elena deals with Kiarostami's career and prolific output of films, short and long, in a chronological manner from 1970 to 2004. The last films discussed are 2002's "Ten" and its companion documentary "10 on Ten", and 2003's "Five". Starting with the pieces Kiarostami made under the Shah's regime for the Centre for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults and for each film following, Elena reviews, discusses and synthesizes seemingly all of the criticism on each work. He is particularly strong on his discussion of the European criticism. If anything, Elena takes a too Eurocentric view. He seems to ignore much American criticism, especially of a negative bent. Indeed, he never mentions critic Roger Ebert's remark that "I am unable to grasp the greatness of Abbas Kiarostami. His critical reputation is unmatched. The shame is that more accessible Iranian directors are being