Toward an Understanding of Arabic Persuasion

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Introduction

Arabic is the official language of 26 countries that stretch from north-western Africa to the Middle East. Approximately 300 million people speak Arabic as their primary language and about 250 million as a secondary language. Clearly, the Arabic language, its close connections with Islam, and the unique ways of thinking this Arabic-Islam dynamic engenders play a dominant role in almost all Middle-East interactions.

This region is crucial to U.S. and western political and economic interests. Middle-East nation and state-building is a key socio-political project that the U.S., UN, and various partners are engaged in. Furthermore, mitigating active conflicts—religious, ethnic, and political-- that have been endemic of Middle-East political culture over the last 70 years is essential to regional stability and global security. Our continued dependence on Middle-East oil also makes regional stability essential. Finally, the growing importance of financial and business centers such as Dubai and Amman provides markets for products and services.

Despite the importance of this region, we have limited research-based knowledge—aside from anecdotal information describing cultural "do's and don'ts"---about how Arabic culture and language shape communication practices, particularly negotiation and persuasion. More specifically, business and managerial intercultural communication researchers have yet to examine the unique rhetorical characteristics of Arabic—both written and spoken--to provide business people, public sector leaders, workers in non-government organizations, and the military with the knowledge and skills to facilitate interaction with Arabic audiences in the public and private sectors.

This paper has three goals:

1. to describe the unique and often paradoxical characteristics of written and spoken Arabic that shape Arabic thinking and help define some of its primary cultural values

2. to describe key characteristics of Arabic persuasion by reviewing the cultural linguistics, Mid-East studies, linguistic anthropology, and intercultural communication literature

3. to use a brief case study to describe and analyze the persuasion dynamics between two public sector service organizations—one located in Jordan and the other in the U.S.—attempting to establish a partnership.

What follows is an overview of what it means to be literate in Arabic, a discussion of the relationship between Arabic and Islam, a description of key characteristics of Arabic persuasion strategies based on the limited research published in English, a description and analysis of Arabic persuasion strategies based on an ongoing negotiation between a U.S. and Jordanian organization attempting to form a partnership, and finally a listing of key research questions that require future examination.

Being Literate in Arabic: The Complex Dynamic between Spoken and Written Arabic

The Arabic a child learns at home is significantly different from the Arabic taught in religious, state, private, and foreign-run private schools. In other words, there are very significant linguistic differences between spoken and written Arabic (Said, 2002). For example, an Egyptian child learns at home "Egyptian Arabic," one of over 26 Arabic vernaculars that exist in the Pan-Arabic region. However, when children attend middle school (the 6th or 7th grade), they begin the often painful and complex process of learning to read and write in Classical Arabic (Haeri, 2003). This instruction, which is provided in the vernacular, continues until the child graduates from high school and often into college. In a sense, this student is becoming bilingual.

Linguists call this condition diglossia—the co-existence of two languages in everyday communicative interactions. Ferguson (1996, 1991) defines diglossia as a relatively stable language situation where in addition to the primary spoken dialects of the language there also exists a very different, highly codified (often linguistically and grammatically more complex) language contained in written literature, particularly canonical texts, which is learned through formal education. Ferguson observes that the school-taught written language is almost always viewed as "high" because it is more structurally complex than primary dialects; is connected with a revered past (a golden age); and is used by people of status, power, and wealth in writing, literature, political speeches, and, most importantly, religious texts. In contrast, "low" Arabic is almost always the medium of oral communication, though literature in genres of poetry and the epic does exist in many of these dialects. Said (2002) points out that among the educated, high Arabic (Classical Arabic) is viewed as so superior to "low" (the vernacular) that one who only knows "low" Arabic (though the person may be very skilled in the dialect) is thought to not know Arabic at all. One reason for this severe judgment is that these dialects have been modified by the languages of former colonial powers (the French, English, Germans, and Turks). Furthermore, many intellectuals and religious leaders view these dialects infused with colonial words and phrases and new "western" terms as inferior because they carry the seeds of a destructive kind of modernism (Haeri, 2000).

Written Arabic is classified as classical and classical-modern. Scholars writing in English sometimes use the term modern standard Arabic; however, that term can't be translated into Arabic and thus is not used in the Middle East. Grammatical, syntactic, and lexical differences exist between Classical Arabic, which reflects the form and style of the Qur'an and other sacred texts, and classical-modern Arabic, which is linked with business, science, and the technology of contemporary life (Haeri, 2003). The differences between these types of written Arabic are complex and require a working knowledge of Arabic grammar and syntax. Identifying those differences is beyond my expertise and the scope of this study. Written Arabic receives constant attention in the region because it is seen as a vehicle for Pan-Arabism. Pan-Arabism, though, remains controversial because of belief that a standard language will undermine regional identities.

In contrast, Arabic dialects vary widely by region; in fact, a number of them are so different that speakers are unable to understand each other though both are speaking "Arabic." The primary Arabic dialects include Egyptian—the most widely understood due to the large number of Egyptian movies and television programs that flooded Arabic speaking countries in the 1970s and 80s—the Gulf region, Iraq, Levantine (Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine), and Maghrebi (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya). These significant differences became apparent when I was attending a dinner party in Amman Jordan. A Moroccan businessman artfully shifted and even combined dialects when speaking with Palestinians, Egyptians, Saudis, and Jordanians in an attempt to find common language and syntax.

What adds to this vernacular complexity is the emergence of a new, distinctive form of spoken Arabic called "educated spoken Arabic (Haeri, 2000). Neither colloquial nor classical, this form of Arabic may eventually serve as a linguistic bridge for the larger Arabic community. However, this attempt to create a common spoken Arabic is controversial. Among Arab nations there exists a close connection between the country's vernacular and its identity. For example, the people of Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt strongly believe that their vernacular or dialect connects them with their history and defines who they are, and, just as importantly, who they are not. A shift to "educated spoken Arabic" would blur national identities (Suleiman, 2006).

What further complicates understanding how these forms of Arabic operate in different parts of Arabic life is that researchers, professionals, and the average citizens either use interchangeably the terms classical and classical-modern or use Classical Arabic to describe all forms. However, as mentioned earlier, there are important, significant differences between these forms of Arabic that are important to keep in mind. It is useful to view these differences as a continuum with Classical Arabic anchoring on one axis (language conservatism) and classical-modern on the other (language change and modernization).

Arab Perceptions of Classical Arabic

Because Classical Arabic is the language of the Qur'an, other sacred texts, and the most important legal, philosophical, literary, and scientific works of Islamic civilization, its form is normative: most contemporary writers try to follow the syntactic and grammatical norms established by classical grammarians and use to varying degrees the vocabulary found in classical dictionaries. However, Arabs are "two-minded" about Classical Arabic: they simultaneously revere and intensely dislike it (Haeri, 2003). On the one hand, Classical Arabic is called the "eloquent Arabic language" (*al-lugha al-arabiyya al-fusha* or *fusha* for short) because of its structural and metaphoric beauty—the language is melodic due to its built-in alliteration and assonance —and its connections with God's word through the Qur'an . On the other hand, the language is grammatically and syntactically complex (four cases with diacritical marks indicating case and words' relationship with each other), thus making it very difficult to learn. Egyptians, for example, have such painful memories of learning Classical Arabic that they avoid reading novels, non-fiction, and even magazines (Haeri, 2003; Said, 2002).

Many business people, intellectuals, and political figures believe a simpler, more modern form of written Arabic is needed that looks and sounds like Classical Arabic but is responsive to and reflective of the contemporary world. Classical-modern Arabic is that language, which is based on Classical Arabic but at the same time is removed from it because of its uncomplicated syntax--simplified word order and no cases--and modern concepts that have been "Arabizied" (e.g. "diblumasyya" for diplomacy). Not surprisingly, this push to establish Classical-modern Arabic as a "lingua franca", which started in the 1920s but gained significant momentum in the 1970s, remains controversial because this modified language suggests that secularization has become a major force within the cultural and political life of the region (Suleiman, 2006).

It is difficult to determine how these various forms of spoken and written Arabic shape communicators' language strategies when they use English. The numerous Arabic dialects, the significant differences between these dialects, and the differences between Classical and Classical-modern Arabic make it very difficult to gauge the persuasion and negotiation norms that result from the interplay of language and culture. Because of the dearth of research published in English about Arabic persuasion strategies, let alone the differences in spoken and written Arabic that I've just described, we may need to incrementally build our understanding of how Arabic persuasion norms influence persuasion strategies used when speaking and writing in English, focusing on one Arabic country or region at a time.

Despite these complex language differences and research challenges, one fact that virtually all researchers, intellectuals, and Arabic people agree on is the close connection between Arabic and Islam (Haeri, 2003; Johnstone, 1991; Lundgren, 1998; Said, 2002).

The Sacred Nature of Arabic: Language and Truth

Basan, my driver while I was traveling in Jordan, uttered in English after early evening prayer--performed in Classical Arabic--the following words that well describe the relationship between Arabic and Islam: "Arabic sings the truth." That Arabic is seen as the conveyor of truth significantly influences Arabic persuasion strategies.

Islam and Classical Arabic are mutually constitutive (Haeri, 2000). As mentioned earlier what helps support this reinforcing relationship is that the central, canonical texts—religious, philosophical, scientific, and artistic-- that many believe define Islamic civilization are written in classical Arabic. Furthermore, the prevalent view among virtually all classes is that Classical Arabic" is the most "correct," "powerful," and "beautiful" of languages that carry God's "pure" truths to all believers (Gershoni & Jankowski, 1986). The beauty of the language is a reflection of the beauty of God and his word.

The most important and influential canonical text among Arabs is the Qur'an. Understanding the relationship between Arabs' view of this book as the authoritative voice of God and the Classical Arabic in which it is written is essential to understand the power and authority that Classical Arabic has in the contemporary Arab world. The Qur'an was one of the first books written in Arabic (652 AD); it served for centuries as the exemplum of style and structure for nearly all poetry and prose that followed it (Atiyeh, 1995).

Muslims believe the Qur'an is God's words revealed through the prophet Mohammed. This belief makes Arabic the language of *revelation*. All that we need to know and understand can be found in the words of the Qur'an since its words came directly from God. This truth is so profoundly believed that the Qur'an has not been translated into any of the numerous Arabic vernaculars (Haeri, 2003). In contrast, there are numerous translation of the Qur'an into Farsi, Turkish and other non-Arabic languages. Many Arab-speaking Muslims strongly believe that a translation cannot be done without gravely distorting God's truths which passed directly to Mohammed. They argue that the form and meaning of the Qur'an are inseparable; form is part of the meaning and since form can't be translated, meaning would be distorted by a translation (Haeri, 2000, 2003; Said, 2002). Simply put, the Qur'an's language is God's language; consequently, one must read his word, not a translation of it.

This unique relationship between Classical Arabic and the Qur'an results in an Arabic mental model that Arabic is a sacred language that serves as a container for truth. This perception, coupled with the hierarchical structure of Arabic families, tribes and nation states and the locus of power residing in males with social, political, and religious authority (fathers, uncles, sheiks, imams, and monarchs) influences Arabic reasoning processes. The Western tradition, heavily influenced by the Greeks, assumes that truth is searched for or sought after through a variety of means: dialectic reasoning, dialogue, hypothesis testing, and so on (Perloff, 2003). We "hunt" for truth and knowledge, believing that we can track it down, capture it, and put it to good use (Lackoff & Johnson, 1980). In contrast, the earliest forms of Arab philosophy focused on analyzing the content, structure, and style of the truth found in the Qur'an. The search for truth and the desire to know meant understanding the meaning encoded in the language of the Qur'an through philological and grammatical exegesis. Striving to obtain large reservoirs of knowledge outside of the sacred was both fruitless and foolish because the essence of what needs to be known is contained in the Qur'an and other sacred texts (Rosenthal, 1995).

Consequently, the "voice" of the Qur'an is both sacred and authoritative. God's authoritative voice mirrors the authoritative structures of hierarchical tribal, religious, and national governments that exist in many Arabic countries. As will be discussed in the next section, this combination of Classical Arabic being the source of sacred truths coming directly from the authoritative voice of God and the hierarchical Arabic social and political structures has a significant impact on Arabic reasoning and persuasion strategies.

What the Literature States about Arabic Persuasion Strategies

In English speaking cultures, merely making an assertion and paraphrasing it in a number of different ways is usually not convincing. Although circumstances exist when a person's power and credibility may give claims persuasive force (e.g. Alan Greenspan's obtuse claims about the economy while he was Chairman of the Federal Reserve or Steve Jobs' assertions about the future of personal computing), we generally expect people to support claims by providing evidence in the form of facts, research results, highly credible sources, best practices, historical experiences, and even personal anecdotes and stories. This process of systematic inquiry that leads to persuasive arguments is deeply rooted in a Greco-European philosophical tradition that celebrates the active pursuit of knowledge through various forms of reasoning. What follows from this tradition is that people have agency; they can influence others and in the process shape their own identity by presenting their viewpoints convincingly (Nisbett, 2003).

Another legacy of this Greco-European philosophical tradition is dialectical reasoning. Through each party's claims and counterclaims, the substance of an argument is developed. This process, which can take the form in oral discourse of posed questions and answers (Socratic dialogue), assumes a degree of equality between both parties. In written persuasive communication, dialectical reasoning takes the form of anticipating opposition to one's claims and offering rebuttals to counteract them (Booth, 2004).

Barry Eckhouse (1999) argues that all communication, particularly persuasive communication, is competitive. Writers and speakers must first compete for their audience's attention and secondly win them over. This language of competition and winning over the audience through skilled argumentation—careful framing of ideas, anticipating opposition and providing counter-arguments--implies that persuasion is a form of "war." Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point out we commonly use "war" metaphors to describe argument:

- He *shot down* my arguments
- She *attacked* my position

- His argument was *indefensible*.
- Her criticism of my claims was *right on target.*
- I need to better *defend* the points I want to make
- I *demolished* his arguments during the meeting
- I need to better *buttress* my points if I'm going to *win* this argument.
- We *battled hard* to make our points.

What is important is that we merely don't talk about argument as war, but we think and act as if we can win or lose an argument, that we have opponents, that we use strategies, and that we take new lines of attack. In fact, much of what we do when influencing, arguing, and persuading in the United States is structured by the argument as war language. However, this metaphor can crowd out other ways of thinking about persuasion that may be more productive, useful, or interesting when interacting with people from different cultures, particularly those of the Middle East. Finally, we are generally not aware of how our language has shaped our thinking about persuasion and the limitations as well as strengths of our approach. This lack of awareness can contribute to failure when trying to influence others from different cultures, particularly in the Middle East.

Characteristics of Arabic Rhetoric

The philosophical and intellectual antecedents of Middle-East concepts of persuasion are fundamentally different from our current western tradition. The starting point for those differences is the effect that Classical Arabic and Islam have had on knowing and reasoning. As mentioned earlier, for many Islamic Arabs all knowledge starts with and ends with God. Since God's knowledge is revealed in the Qur'an's *language* and *form*, the pursuit of *revealed* knowledge focused on understanding the structure and language of the Qur'an and other sacred texts (Haeri, 2003). The results are numerous concordances dating back many centuries that still interpret for believers the language and content of Qur'anic passages. Consequently, intellectual curiosity took a path different from the Greco-European tradition of actively inquiring into the truth of nature, the animal world, and man. In the Arab world, the wise man focused on those essential truths contained in the Qur'an, the concordances that interpreted those truths, and other sacred books; a quest for knowledge outside God's revealed truths could only lead to error or knowledge that was insignificant (Shehu, 2008). To put it another way, the Qur'an and other sacred texts possessed both authoritative and expert power as well as grace. A person who obtained those truths communicated them in an authoritative voice because the access to that truth was from God, through Mohammed, and learned religious men who devoted their lives to explaining that truth.

Furthermore, a primary Islamic belief is that the role of people is to serve God, to pursue his wisdom with the help of imams so as to honor him, and to "serve" that knowledge to others (Dawood, 1990). This notion of being a "servant" to God and the collective is fundamentally different from the western, democratic concept that the pursuit of knowledge gives one individuality and an identity. In U.S. and western culture knowledge is "out there;" we search for it, discover, it or create it, and use reasoning and argument to convince others' of that knowledge's validity. We are comfortable seeing new knowledge as something to be contested and battled over. In contrast, the Arabic view implies that the wise person merely conveys knowledge that is already revealed and should be acknowledged by others. This role makes some Arabs rather passive when pursuing new ideas and somewhat fatalistic about the future (Hofstede, 2001). This perception of a person's relationship to knowledge and its role in the culture shapes Arabic methods of persuasion.

Arabic Perceptions of Persuasion

The Power of Repetition and Paraphrasing. Koch (1983) and Johnstone (1991) have carefully analyzed the texts of Arabic writers viewed as lucid and convincing to determine the persuasion strategies these authors use. The analysis revealed that these writers often persuade by repeating, paraphrasing, reverse paraphrasing (the same action or event described from two opposing perspectives), and rephrasing one's request or claim. This repetition occurs at the phonological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic levels. To put it another way, there is repetition in both form and content. Koch calls this rhetorical strategy presentation.

Koch and Johnstone argue this repetition stems from the Arab perception that argument or persuasion rests on stating established truths. In the Arabic worldview many truths are self-evident, accepted, and thus are "in" the language that is communicating them. The presenter expects the audience *to identify* with his point of view as a result of the accumulated details: the same point made in a number of different ways. The role of the persuader is *to present* the truth, to proclaim it, to make it available to the audience so that they can identify it as the truth. Consequently, presentation of ideas is proof.

Koch and Johnstone focus primarily on written Arabic (i.e. Classical Arabic); however, they offer a number of personal examples of persuasive strategies used in telephone conversations and face-to-face meetings. In these oral exchanges, persuaders used the same presentation and proof approach as in written communication. The researchers, though, fail to explain why this persuasive approach is used in the vernacular. In other words, it remains unclear whether the numerous Arabic vernaculars are also perceived to be "containers of truth."

In contrast, current western assumptions about argumentation indicate that the truth of a claim is not clear or universal: it is in doubt or can be contested. The argumentative and reasoning process is designed to demonstrate that an individual's interpretation of information leads one logically and/or emotionally to accept the person's claim as accurate or truthful. In short, argument is proof. However, this type of thinking can be counterproductive in theological or even moral arguments (abortion, capital punishment, gun control) where audiences believe there is no possibility of doubt about an issue; persuaders merely proclaim their assertions because true argument would suggest that the truth may be unknown or relative—a frightening possibility to one's belief system. Since language, religion, and politics are so tightly intertwined in most Arabic countries, particularly in the Middle East, assuming that *as a given* truth can be contested, that it is open to individual interpretation, and that argument is a means of proving the truth of an assertion would not only alter fundamental Islamic beliefs and God's relationship to his "servants" but also impact the stability of the political structure where power is centralized and hierarchy determines who has access to truth and the power to speak it. Consequently, the Arabic mental model that the presentation of an idea—the linguistic forms and the words used to describe it—makes it persuasive reinforces the power of the Qur'an and Islam in general as well as the authoritarian political structures (Johnstone, 1991).

Researchers, though, have yet to untangle to what extent various forms of the Arabic language (classical, classical-modern, and the spoken vernaculars) contain this persuasive power. Furthermore, in Arabic countries such as Bahrain, Dubai, and Qatar English is becoming as common as the spoken vernaculars. What remains unclear is to what extent will use of English alter the perception that language contains the truth

Use of Highly Ornate Language. Arabic people generally love language and use it exuberantly when speaking (Hitti, 2002). For example, the Saudi Arabian version of *American Idol* involves Saudis (including women) reciting ornate, highly metaphoric, and very emotional poetry they have composed to win the top prize of approximately $800,000.

Arabic *writers* and in special circumstances speakers use what Westerners would call hyperbole, overstatement, and exaggeration to persuade. In fact, most westerners would view this language as overly rhetorical and emotionally manipulative. However, a significant part of the Arabic audience would see this language choice in writing as elegance, an indication of mastery of thought, a clear indication of being a "literate" Arab who has not been influenced by the language of former colonial powers, and a symbol of connections with God and a past golden age alluded to through metaphors connected with the Qur'an and other sacred texts (Haeri, 2003; Said, 2002). Furthermore, this heightened language complements the previously discussed notion of argument as presentation. Presenting claims (the "truth") in elegant language and within an ornate style "dresses" the idea to make it more presentable and its truth more obvious.

There exists, though, a paradox. In most *speaking* situations an Arab would use the vernacular to communicate—for example, Egyptian Arabic or Levantine Arabic in Jordan—rather than Classical Arabic. Classical Arabic, almost exclusively used for writing, would be seen as too formal, ornate, and stilted. However, in ceremonial or formal speaking occasions—a guest speaker at a university or a speech at an awards ceremony--Classical Arabic is expected to be used (Said, 2002). On these occasions, the audience expects eloquence and "language that sings." Vernacular languages are too crude or "vulgar;" only Classical Arabic has the lexical, grammatical, and syntactic qualities to meet those expectations.

The following Arabic proverbs provide another interesting insight into of how Arabs view language and its role in persuading others:

- Your tongue is your horse; if you take care of it, it'll take care of you, and if you offend it, it will offend you.
- Kissing hands is fooling beards.
- Kiss the dog on his mouth until you get what you need out of him.
- Raise your voice; otherwise their arguments will beat you.

These proverbs suggest that language we would perceive as manipulative is a key to persuasion. For example, the "kiss the dog on the mouth" proverb instructs that "sweet-talk" is key to getting one's needs met. The "the kissing hands is fooling beards" saying indicates that flattery and indirect communication approaches can be successful with elders (beards) and by implication people of greater power and status. Because of this highly rhetorical use of language, ways of talking—viewing your tongue as your horse-- may include self-congratulation, self-praise, describing one's accomplishments in detail, the superiority of one's abilities, and the high-status of one's friends (Haeri, 2003). These rhetorical strategies provide important clues to the values and identity of the speaker. They indicate one's place in the hierarchy through connections; one's education, knowledge, and social status through clever, skillful ways of speaking; and ironically (from a Western perspective) the sincerity and emotion a speaker brings to the communication situation.

These proverbs, written in the formal, ornate style of Classical Arabic, describe clever and by implication elegant ways of speaking. However, as we have seen, oral communication is almost always in the region's vernacular which is widely seen as vulgar, unsophisticated, and not being true Arabic. Consequently, there exists a tension, perhaps even a contradiction, between the heightened language that helps define Classical Arabic and the colloquial language and simplified grammatical structures that characterize the numerous Arabic dialects. In short, can Arabs be perceived as using ornate, metaphorically rich language when using the vernacular? The research is silent concerning this question.

The Role of Emotion. Emotion is key when Arabs persuade. In the U.S. and the west in general, we highly value facts, particularly if they can be quantified and measured. Also, we often believe facts have an independent existence; they reside outside the communicator, the group, or organization the person represents. Because of the importance placed on facts frequently perceived as value-neutral, we often believe that emotion may indicate bias and cloud judgment. As a result, we generally assign higher credibility to communicators who appear to present facts objectively, using tightly structured cause and effect arguments as scaffolding for those facts. This perception is particularly true in business interactions which we tend to see as transactional. In Arabic cultures, though, facts alone will seem cold, impersonal, and unpersuasive. Emotional language and non-verbal signs appropriate for one's position and that of the message receiver signal genuine involvement, conviction, and heart. Heart through emotion indicates involvement and commitment to a claim one makes.

Additionally, in Arabic cultures, facts, words, and arguments are directly connected to the writer and speaker who express them. It's inconceivable to stand outside of one's ideas or, for example, to make opposing claims--the Arabic equivalent of arguing both sides of a point (Haeri, 20000). Furthermore, each person is deeply embedded, indeed inseparable, from the web and context of relationships and obligations that make up his/her social grouping (Said, 2002). Consequently, persuasive arguments do not merely represent the ideas and credibility of one person but that of an entire network. Representing a network of people and the historical associations that are a part of that network carries significant emotional impact.

In the U.S. and the west we view managerial and business communication as pragmatic and instrumental: a tool to creating a "win-win" situation that will enable negotiators or those in conflict to forget the past and move on. As a result we attempt "to speak plainly," rely on personal experience, and focus on the present and future. If we reference the religious or sacred, they are often mere allusions. In contrast, when writing and speaking, Middle Eastern people often make specific references during ordinary conversation to religious ideals, sacred texts, stories, and moral exemplars and link those references to local tribal history and custom. These associations trigger deep feelings in the writer/speaker and the audience. As in the west, there are no clear distinctions between sacred and secular language. Consequently, communication, particularly in writing, isn't merely instrumental but more importantly a way of preserving and reinforcing the established wisdom of the family, community, tribe, and, most importantly Islam and its cultural values. In short, these references to the moral and the sacred provide simultaneously continuity, guidance, and lessons for shaping a future that is true to the past. Furthermore, the language of these stories and sacred texts triggers rich sets of associations that go far beyond the "literal" meaning of the text. These associations provide people with identity and a specific place in the material and the spiritual worlds.

Case Study: Establishing a Partnership between U.S. and Jordanian Organizations

This case discusses the persuasive interactions between a U.S. (Far West) and a Jordanian (Jaresh) public sector organization attempting to form a partnership to provide Gulf region clients with high quality services. Since negotiations are ongoing, the names of the organizations and the principle players in the discussions have been changed. Because this analysis focuses primarily on Jaresh members' persuasion strategies, I provide only enough details about organizational context to inform the discussion about persuasion. What follows is brief background about both organizations.

The initial meetings were held in Amman, Jordan at the Jaresh headquarters. The Far West team was composed of 5 members, 3 of whom held senior leadership positions. Far West is a relatively flat organization with power and credibility based on expertise rather than position. Furthermore, interactions are very informal with people at all levels addressing each other by their first names rather than by job title. All Far West team members participated actively in the meeting with Jaresh.

The Jaresh team was composed of 14 members. Jaresh is a hierarchical, bureaucratic organization with power centralized near the apex of the organization. Interactions are very formal with titles used as means of address. Because of hierarchy and Jaresh-Arabic cultural norms, only the most senior people had the right to speak at these meetings.

Discussions were conducted in English without translators. Jaresh senior leaders had good command of English. These leaders were very well educated and, as I learned later, skilled writers of Classical Arabic. It was unclear whether they could speak Classical Arabic well. Side bar discussions among Jaresh leaders were conducted primarily in Levantine Arabic with bits and pieces of Classical Arabic included. These discussions were numerous, particularly when misunderstandings or disagreements occurred over the nature of the partnership. One member of the Far West group, a native of Palestine fluent in Levantine Arabic, provided, when possible, a summary of the sidebar conversations.

This use of English raises an important question: To what extent does the mental model about persuasion that Jaresh leaders developed as a result of their training in Classical Arabic, the relationship between Arabic and Islam, and the overarching cultural belief systems influence the persuasive strategies they use in English? Whorf (1956) theorizes there is a relationship between the language people speak and their mental models (see also Kameda, 1996; Hunt & Agnoli, 1991). According to this theory, often called the linguistic relativity principle, speakers of different languages necessarily construe the world differently and are to a large extent constrained by the worldview given to them by the language that they use. As a result, the languages that speakers know and use will structure their understanding of the world. However, Whorf and most researchers doing follow-up studies don't address the question of the impact that a person's native language has on a person's strategic choices in the second language.

The Sumptuous Breakfast

The meeting started with a sumptuous breakfast at Jaresh headquarters. This breakfast took the Far West team by surprise. There were numerous hot and cold dishes that represented the best Jordanian cuisine. Jaresh leaders explained the dishes, urged the Far West team to try them all, and briefly alluded to the importance of hospitality in a country that has its roots in nomadic Bedouin tribes. Although there was a brief welcoming speech by the senior leader, the breakfast was not overly formal. Jaresh senior leaders did not give ceremonial speeches and gifts were not exchanged. In fact, the breakfast conversation was very informal focusing on travel, family, football (soccer and U.S. football), leadership and management books that were in vogue, and other non-controversial topics. This breakfast created in Far West members the expectation that the upcoming meetings would be informal, low-key, and relatively conflict free.

The Meeting

The meeting started with the Jaresh second in command giving a PowerPoint briefing in English about the Jaresh organization and its capabilities. The briefing's purpose seemed to be merely descriptive, a way of providing context for the discussion about forming a partnership. The structure of the briefing was elliptical and repetitive. Similar points about Jaresh's organizational strengths were made in a number of different ways. A number of Far West members started losing interest in the briefing because of this repetitive structure. Very few questions were asked.

The Far West team misinterpreted the purpose of the briefing and the symbolic importance of a PowerPoint presentation in the Jaresh-Arabic cultural context. Jaresh's goal was not to provide context for discussion but to present a strong argument for the organization to take the lead in the partnership and to be its primary voice in interactions with other Gulf-region stakeholders. That goal was implied by the repetitive emphasis on Jaresh's organizational strengths. Furthermore, the writing in general and the PowerPoint brief in particular had symbolic importance. Ideas put in writing have weight and finality to them; a briefing is not merely a starting point for discussion but represents a position that the organization has taken. Far West did not understand the weight and seriousness given to information in PowerPoint presentations.

The Far West team then provided a PowerPoint presentation that was designed as a catalyst for discussion about the nature and terms of the partnership. In Far West organizational culture, virtually every meeting—informal or formal—includes PowerPoint slides to provide background and help shape the conversation. Jaresh leaders had a different interpretation of the PowerPoint material. They saw this information as the position that Far West was taking about the partnership. Despite repeated tries to disavow Jaresh leaders of this notion, they continued to act as if the slides represented a Far West position rather than some notional ideas for discussion.

Far West covered about five or six slides before two of Jaresh's senior leaders interrupted and began making claims that echoed the ideas in their earlier PowerPoint presentation. The Far West team was initially perplexed because they weren't sure what question was being asked about material on the slide. The Jaresh leaders were confused by Far West members' repeated requests to clarify the question they were asking or the difficulty they were having with the information being presented. What also confused Jaresh was Far West's request to dialogue about ideas presented in an effort to begin to work out the nature of the partnership. At this point, numerous sidebar conversations in Arabic broke out among Jaresh members. The Far West member fluent in Levantine Arabic was able to translate bits and pieces of these sidebar conversations. In essence, Jaresh leaders were puzzled by what Far West was trying to accomplish in their presentation because its content appeared to question Jaresh service expertise. Also, Far West was Jaresh's guest, but Far West was not acting like a guest because of these perceived challenges.

After the sidebar conversations ended, Jaresh's senior leader attempted to take control of the meeting. He asserted, for example, that the Jaresh organization had significant expertise in providing financial management and logistics services. When a Far West member asked to describe the reason for that assertion, the Jaresh leader basically paraphrased what he just said; Jaresh works hard to develop and maintain its expertise in financial management and logistics. Puzzled by the response, the Far West member asked what specific actions Jaresh was taking to develop and maintain that expertise. The Jaresh leader replied that the organization employs people with expertise in financial management and logistics. The Jaresh leader believed he was convincingly supporting his claim. The Far West team was puzzled by the claim because they believed Jaresh lacked that expertise. Moreover, one of Far West's major contributions to a partnership was its expertise in supply chain management, material logistics, and financial management.

Throughout the lengthy meeting, this pattern of a Jaresh senior leader making a claim, paraphrasing it, and restating it recurred. Far West members' requests to support claims by providing facts, details, and explanations proved confusing even when the Far West member of Palestinian descent made the requests in Arabic and tried to explain Far West team members' confusion. This pattern of repetition also occurred during follow-up video teleconferencing meetings. Clearly, this method of argument as presentation, discussed earlier, was both a pattern of thinking and a dominant persuasive strategy during these partnership negotiations. However, Far West did not realize it was experiencing a method of persuasion based on the uniqueness of Classical Arabic and Islamic-Arabic culture until the second or third video teleconference.

This experience, albeit a limited one, suggests that the patterns of thinking and action created by a person's primary language and culture strongly influence the strategies that person uses in a second language. Although Jaresh senior leaders were thinking in English when interacting with the Far West team, they were acting based on the mental model developed as a result of the Classical Arabic language, Islam, and Arabic-Jordanian culture.

Another characteristic of the Jaresh-Far West meeting was what the U.S. team described as "over the top" language. During the briefing, the Jaresh speaker used superlatives to describe his organization, people, and their capabilities. For example, the organization was described as "the best," "the most efficient," the "most knowledgeable" in the Gulf region. Its people had "motivation that surpasses all others," "training that others want to have," and "education of the highest caliber." What took aback the Far West team was not that Jaresh leaders used superlatives but the frequency of their use and the rather formal syntactic structures that contained them.

Initially, Far West attributed this language use to Jaresh's inability to understand the nuances of English and to the borrowing of catchphrases from popular U.S. management and leadership books that Jaresh leaders spoke highly of during breakfast. However, these explanations do not seem valid. Jaresh senior leaders were educated in British and U.S. schools; their command of English was quite proficient. A more likely explanation is provided by the characteristics of Classical Arabic and the meeting context. As stated earlier, Classical Arabic uses language that sounds exaggerated and ornate to a U.S. and western audience. This mental model about appropriate Arabic language use may have carried over into English. Furthermore, Far West team members were not known to Jaresh, though the organization had an excellent reputation in the region. Initial contact with Jaresh was established through an intermediary. Consequently, the constantly repeated superlatives may have been a way of establishing the importance and value of Jaresh and insuring it was not in a "one-down" position during the negotiations. Finally, senior leaders' use of hyperbolic language may reflect hierarchy—organizational and religious--and the need to project the power, authority, and capability of the Jaresh organization. The influence of religious hierarchy on language use is indirect; it is embedded with Classical Arabic that constantly reflects God's power over man and his obligation to serve him.

The final characteristic of Jaresh persuasion strategies was the strong use of emotion. Jaresh senior leaders sounded overly passionate when they spoke about the terms of the partnership, the capabilities of the organization, and the qualities of its people. That passion was exhibited in tone of voice, body language, and eye contact. For example, when the Jaresh senior leader broke into the Far West briefing after the fifth or sixth slide, he did so by raising his voice, gesturing grandly to call attention to himself, and continuing to speak with seemingly exaggerated shifts in voice pitch and intonation. This method of interruption and emotional speaking style initially stunned Far West members. As this method of interruption and emotional speaking style continued throughout the meeting, Far West viewed this senior leader as bombastic, out of control, and insensitive. Eventually Far West abandoned its briefing and attempted to respond to the emotionally driven concerns of Jaresh senior leaders. Most Far West members believed that Jaresh had "hijacked" the meeting.

Obviously Far West was unprepared to interpret and respond appropriately to Jaresh leaders' emotions. The tone of the breakfast meeting had caused Far West to expect a low-key, non-confrontational, fact and analysis driven conversation about partnership possibilities. Furthermore, Far West's organizational culture values and expects cool-headed, polite discussion where claims are carefully backed with detailed analysis. In fact, Far West has devised specific criteria they deliberately use when negotiating partnerships that serve as the framework for their briefings and informal and formal discussions. Far West viewed emotion through a narrow lens. The belief was that heightened emotion was unprofessional and clouded judgment. That lens was not adjusted to account for patterns of thinking about emotion endemic to the Arabic language and Jaresh-Arabic culture.

Final Observations

Determining the factors that influence Arabic persuasion strategies is complex. The fundamental differences between spoken and written Arabic—what linguists call diglossia—suggest that persuasion strategies may vary significantly depending on the medium used. In addition, the differences between written Classical and Classical-Modern Arabic may result in different persuasion strategies. Unfortunately, the research literature doesn't address these differences in any meaningful way.

What the literature does indicate is that Arabic communicators rely on repetition, hyperbolic language, and emotion to persuade when writing or speaking. The importance of repetition stems from the close connections between Classical Arab, the Qur'an, and other sacred texts. The language of these sacred texts is truth revealed to man. Consequently, persuasion entails presenting ideas that the writer/speaker knows to be true. The proof is in the presentation and contained in the language and form (grammar and syntax) of the idea. As Haeri (2000,2003), Johnstone (1991), and Said (2002) have pointed out, the Western mental model of actively pursuing the truth and using cause-effect reasoning, careful framing of evidence to meet audience's needs, and evidence appropriate for the situation to argue the validity of a claim are not part of the Arabic mental model for persuasion.

The literature is unclear concerning the origins and use of hyperbole and emotion. The use of this language may echo the ornate, florid language and style characteristic of Classical Arabic. Furthermore, many scholars and commentators observe that Arabs love their language and use it in a "showy," exuberant manner. Finally, this bold, highly charged language may reflect the hierarchies deeply embedded in all aspects of Arabic culture. Senior leaders may use grand, bold language to reflect the power and authority that come with their social role and occupational status. Finally, language and emotion are closely connected. Emotion indicates commitment to an idea or position. Also, it can be used to intimidate and reinforce one's power in a relationship.

These descriptions of Arabic persuasion strategies primarily focus on their use in the Arabic language. Will these same strategies persist when Arabs use English? The Far West-Jaresh case study indicates that they do. This finding is surprising because it runs counter to research conducted by Du-Babcock (2006) and Kameda (1996). As we have seen, Jaresh leaders constantly used repetition, paraphrase, restatement, and elaboration to support their points, even when speaking in English. Furthermore, these leaders used superlatives and bold, showy language when speaking. Finally, leadership exhibited high-levels of emotion in their body language and voice intonation when communicating their major points and their concerns. Anecdotal evidence based on interactions with a handful of Saudi Arabian and Bahraini students supports the observations from the Far West-Jaresh case. When challenging a grade or requesting an extension on a project, these students used repetition, paraphrase, and restatement to make their argument. However, they did not use bold, over-the-top language or high levels of emotion because of the power distance and differences in social and organizational roles between a professor and student. This question of whether Arabic persuasion strategies carry over into English requires additional study.

The Far West team was unprepared for their initial interactions with Jaresh. Team members viewed themselves not as Jaresh's guests but primarily as their potential business partners. Consequently, the team did not adopt the role guests are to play in a culture whose origins are nomadic. Rather than building a relationship and taking care to insure that ideas did not cause Jaresh to "lose face," most Far West members expected Jaresh to be task focused and exhibit western modes of analysis and reasoning. In fact, some members of the team dismissed the Jaresh interactions as peculiar, odd, unreasonable, and "un-business like" rather than actively trying to understand the language and cultural factors that caused these interactions. That reaction is not surprising. We often have the tendency to dismiss forms of logic, reasoning, and expression fundamentally different from our own, particularly when we wish to be efficient and do business. Not surprisingly, this lack of awareness and understanding of Arabic modes of knowing and the logic to support claims or generalizations made it extremely difficult to take the coordinated organizational action necessary to establish the partnership. After a number of follow-up meetings, mutual adjustments were made by both parties and the partnership is close to completion. However, the process has been unnecessarily rocky and very time consuming.

In all likelihood, this study raises more questions than it answers. Fundamental differences between spoken and written Arabic as well as differences in forms of written Arabic create a complex set of language variables that are challenging to understand. Furthermore, the close connection between Classical Arabic and Islam and the pervasive influence of both Classical Arabic and Islam on every aspect of written and spoken Arabic add another challenge to understanding how Arabs think about and practice persuasion. Listed below are a number of questions that surfaced while researching and writing this paper, that, I believe, require careful examination. These questions can be extended to negotiation, managing conflict, building consensus, and several other communication interactions.

- Do differences in Arabic dialects--such as Egyptian, Levantine, Peninsular, and Iraqi--influence differences in persuasion and negotiation strategies?

- If persuasion and negotiation take place in English—the most common second language among urban educated--will Arabic thinking about persuasion change because of the unique structure and properties of English?
- How does the Middle East's polychronic perception of time affect persuasive interactions, particularly relationship building and task completion?
- What influence do the collectivist values of Middle Eastern people have on persuasive strategies, particularly the degree of personal and organizational risk that people and the group are willing to take in persuasive interactions?
- What constitutes communicative formality among various Middle-Eastern groups? Is that formality significantly different if persuasive interactions are carried out in English, written Classical-Modern or Classical Arabic, or one of the vernaculars?
- What specific impact does this formality have on influence style, communication style (forceful versus an ameliorative style), and communication organization (degree of directness) when English is used?
- What impact does fatalism (If God wills, as God pleases) have on people's willingness to take responsibility for the persuasion process and the negotiated outcomes?
- Are there fundamental stories, moral exemplars, and sacred texts that westerners should be aware of during persuasive interactions?
- Are there expectations as to how westerners should respond to these stories and texts?

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