

An update on studies of loanwords from the Arabic language in France.

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This topic is part of the conference section on the “forms, trends, and methodologies of Neo-Orientalism”.

The Society for French and Arabic Lexicographical and Etymological Studies (الجماعة العلمية للدراسات المعجمية والتأصيلية اللغوية / SELEFA), created in 2002, started from an observation : the weakness of lexicographical and etymological studies of loanwords from the Arabic language in France. Few studies have been carried out since those of Marcel Devic in 1876. The dictionary *Trésor de la langue française*, a remarkable work for its etymological data, still ignores the works done in neighbouring countries, those of Federico Corriente (Spain), Giovan Battista Pellegrini (Italy), Paul Kunizsch and Raja Tazi (Germany), or Garland Canon (England), to whom we must all pay homage.

It is in order to fill that scientific gap that SELEFA has sought to make up in the 17 issues of its *Bulletin* from 2022 to 2012, followed by the 10 issues of its

Lettre from 2012 to 2021, as well as in its websites, conferences and books.

Loanwords (اقتراضات) from Arabic and words bearing the mark of the Arabic language

If we want to assess the population of words bearing the mark of the Arabic language, which allows us to measure their social impact, it is not enough to limit ourselves to loanwords, direct or indirect, whether Arabic has coined them or simply transmitted them. We must also take into account several categories of words.

1. Derived and compound words (الكلمات المشتقة والمركبة)

Let us limit ourselves, for the sake of illustration, to the example of the word *algebra*, given for as a branch of mathematics, which comes from the title of al-Ḥwārizmī's treatise, *al-Kitāb al-muḥtaṣar fī ḥisāb al-ğabr wal-muqābala*, to a few terms: for example, in English *algebraic*, *algebraically*, etc., which increases the number of 500 loanwords to about 800 bearing the mark of Arabic in the common French lexicon.

2. Semantic calques

These are *a priori* invisible because they are translations that are lost in the target language. This is the case of the Latin *sinus*, a mathematical term that renders the Arabic *ğība*, itself a transcription of the Sanskrit *ğīvā*, and which the Latins confused with the

Arabic *ğayba*. A systematic study of semantic calques whose number studied remains low remains, has yet to be done in order to better evaluate, as the linguist Maxime Rodinson recommended, the real impact of Arab civilization on European societies.

3. Proper nouns.

They are generally excluded from studies on loanwords. In this category, Arabic toponyms are rare, unlike Spanish, are quite rare. On the other hand, anthroponyms are numerous. The large population of immigrant origin indeed bears Arabic names or first names. Consider that, in the French department of Seine-Saint-Denis, near Paris, the most common first name given in the civil registry is Mohammed... Each member of European societies thus hears and reads daily in their work, their travels and the media, a quantity of proper nouns which are names of people, places or human groups which, with common loanword words, form a single lexicon in the collective psyche.

Loanwords & filtering / reconstruction of cultural heritage

In the various fields of thought and science, SELEFA has relied on linguistic data to highlight the cultural contributions of which words are the vehicles. Thus, in its works on the stars (nearly 500 names):

1. emphasis was placed on the fact that Arab astronomy not only worked to transmit Greek

science, but also gave a rich contribution, constituting a basis of the European Renaissance;

2. Arab civilization was also shown as the heir and relay of ancient Mesopotamian civilization.

I have shown this in my last book on Arabic names of stars and constellations, *500 noms hérités de l'arabe*. 500 names of stars inherited from Arabic.

In the study on “the words of Islam”, SELEFA has emphasized the wide gap between certain terms of the Islamic religion, in particular the most burning ones in the political news, such as الإسلام *al-islām*, الشريعة *al-šarīʿa*, الجهاد *al-ġihād*, الفتوى *al-fatwā*, or also الشهيد *al-šahīd* in Arab and Islamic societies and European and North American ones, this by focusing on the following protocol:

1. the term in the Quran, then in the Islamic religion and its different juridical schools;
2. in Arabic dictionaries since the *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, then in the contemporary Arab press;
3. in European and North American Islamological studies and their history;
4. in the contemporary European and North American press. The accent put of the thickness of prejudices against Islam and Muslims that results from it served as valuable material for a critique of Islamophobia.

It was important to show, for example, that spiritual *ġihād* is the original Quranic idea, which leads to warrior *ġihād*, and not the other way around.

It is also useful to show that the term *islām* derives from the same Semitic root Š/SLM, which corresponds, in Indo-European languages, to the English to the parallel words *salve*, *salute* and *salvation*; this allows us to define the word *islām* not as "submission" – a term which Christians use only on a mystical point of view –, but rather as "salvation". This is a way of fighting the constant prejudice, instilled since the Middle Ages, that Islam would be a religion which does not distinguish between politics and religion and would necessarily, by nature, be violent and warmonger.

Outside of the common lexicon, SELEFA has established, in the specialized lexicon of popular and slang language, a list of nearly 500 loanwords from the Arabic language:

L'arabe dans le français décoinçé (Arabic in liberated French – العربية في اللغة الفرنسية المتحررة)

I was able to show, in the lexicon from the colonial period, the devaluing role of loanwords for the colonized society, while loanwords due to Maghrebi immigration in the postcolonial period have, on the contrary, often translated valorizing traits of Maghrebi people, contrasting with the Islamophobic discourses prevailing in the political-media sphere.

SELEFA's activity and my own work thus constitute a contribution to a neo-orientalism, more focused on its scientific object, and we hope, freed from the prejudices which have tainted certain works of the two previous periods.