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Book review

Colloquial Arabic of Egypt – The complete course for beginners, Jane Wightwick and Mahmoud Gaafar. Routledge, 2004 (Revised Edition; first edition 1986). ISBN 0-415-27691-8. Price: £27.99.

Product at a glance:

- Language learning course pack.
- Arabic (spoken, Egyptian dialect).
- Beginners.
- Reading, writing, speaking and listening activities, e.g. matching, reordering, completion/gapfill, transformation, substitution, translation, repetition exercises, etc.
- Book + 2 CDs and 2 cassettes (same).

General description

The description on the back cover of the coursebook asserts that this completely revised edition makes learning Egyptian Arabic "easier and more enjoyable than ever before". The claim is impossible to substantiate, but does not however detract from what seems to be an effective and efficient course. It goes on to say that the course has been "specially developed by experienced teachers for self-study and class use" and that "No prior knowledge of the language is required". The clarity and level of support in the materials and exercises justify these claims and this reviewer at least would add that it is also an effective book for learners who already have elementary Arabic which they would like to render more literate (a view supported by at least one Amazon reviewer who used the first edition of the course).

The revised edition of Colloquial Arabic of Egypt by Jane Wightwick and Mahmoud Gaafar takes the complete or near beginner briskly from essential greetings and social and cultural survival skills, potentially to basic literacy (for those who persist), gaining on the way some grammar, functional numeracy (appropriately introduced early in Chapter 1, the numbers are central to the language in various ways) and all in 300 pages (this includes the grammar section, glossary, transcripts and answer keys), in fourteen units incorporating 118 exercises, and a total of 32 native speaker dialogues and/or model answers on two CDs or cassettes.

Evaluation

Of the 300 pages, daunting at first encounter, slightly over half (184) are the 'substance' you have to get through, while the rest comprises the supporting grammar, glossary and

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transcripts. The language work pages are spiced with 48 images – a mixture of black and white photos, authentic examples of posters, bills, tickets, headlines, captions and purpose-designed illustrations. It is a pity that cost (presumably) prevents full colour being used – the glossy cover tantalisingly suggests an opulent Pharaonic interior. The fonts and spacing are considerate, although complex in places as phonetic transcriptions, accents, diacritics and Arabic script (introduced gently from Chapter 1) do not let the mind's eye become complacent. The font size of the Arabic transcripts however, is on the small side and this presents a challenge unless one is already familiar with the formation of the characters.

The functions and notions (or speech acts to borrow Andrew Cohen's more appropriate term) focus on greetings, family, invitations, requests, accommodation, appearances, comparisons, daily activities and leisure, travel directions, talking about the past and other aspects of life one would expect. So much interaction and daily activity in the Arab world centres on polite and formalised exchanges, with considerable demands on intercultural competencies, that these topics are inescapable and vital however banal they may appear.

One advantage of self-study is of course the possibility of self-pacing: this is probably a vital consideration for complete beginners who use this course as it is fairly dense and moves forward at a pace that does not tolerate hanging around in the *mata'am* (restaurant, chapter 9) or loitering in the *mahal* (shop, chapter 11). The support given in the activities and on the recordings is generally thoughtful and recognises the needs of distance and independent learners.

Hassan, Gaabir, and Umm Gaabir (his mother) have a chat in Unit 1 where the basic greetings provide the access point to the language (oh so true to life – where endless versions of 'How are you' on doorsteps and at bus stops can easily occupy ten minutes). This allows the basic and common structure of sentence without verb to be introduced, followed by a useful amount of varied practice and consolidation. The choice of generative language is appropriate.

By Unit 7 they are discussing household pets including the three German Sheperd (sic) dogs that Gaabir's father has. They manage to get onto Siamese cats (although *otta siyaami* is probably not an indispensable vocabulary item) which are described as being 'as clean as jasmine' (*nadiifa zeyy al fol*) in a fanciful but not uncommon expression. While simple and clear, the language available to the learner by this point in the course is still generative and transferable across multiple situations. Notwithstanding Siamese cats, in general the language situations are relevant and contemporary – how different from those in, say, the 1958 Modern Literary Arabic volume, where such delights are imparted as 'The judge decreed that the robbers should be beaten so that they should know that people's property is sacred'!

Chapters 12 and 13 are challenging ones that cover the past tenses (difficult not least because the verb *to be* which conveniently is not used much in the present in Arabic suddenly becomes unavoidable and indispensable). Use of grammar explanations may test all but the most committed beginner at this point, and the course which so far is oriented toward the ear-minded, integrative, communicative learner now inclines steeply towards the more eye-minded, academic learner. Overall, however, the course generally does not overburden the communicatively-minded beginner who may or may not be at ease with linguistic and pedagogic meta-language (completed actions, past stem, defec-

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tive, hollow and weak verbs and passive participles). This said, any non-linguistically literate learners tempted to follow the course in preparation for a trip to the Middle East may just think twice at this point.

Then to round things off in Unit 14 Widaad, Samira, Gaabir, Hassan and Jane are firmly back in the real world and sampling the pride of Egypt in one of Cairo's restaurants – molokheya with rabbit, stuffed vine leaves, kebab, lady's finger (*okra, bamya*) and the only thing missing is perhaps the bottle of Omar Khayyam. Not for the faint-hearted…. By this point, quite complex language is being introduced (and again linguistic terms like transitive and non-transitive may put off all but Latin, Russian and other case language learners), and includes modals (*laazim* = must), and the future tense.

Most of the time, new language is accompanied by useful cultural backup that will prevent some of the faux pas and social gaffes that inevitably happen. One understatement however is the reference in Unit 2 to '*insha'allah*' which is noted as 'a phrase universally used when talking about future events'. While this is true, it would have been precautionary to add that it is regularly used as a response, often by officials and providers of services, to avoid making a commitment that one could be held to – by giving the Almighty responsibility for whether the train arrives, the food is cooked, the weather will be good or the horse will survive long enough to get to the station on time, one may avoid liability.

Summary

This revised edition of the Routledge *Beginners' Arabic* course is pedagogically sound, sympathetic to the learner's needs, and likely to deserve its claim of rendering the task of learning Arabic 'easier and more enjoyable … than before'. The accompanying audio material, conveniently provided in both CD and cassette format is very clear, authentic though slightly stilted, and appropriately illustrative. At the end of the course there are some suggestions for further study, though interestingly no internet resources are indicated: a quick search using the keywords "egyptian colloquial arabic course free language resources online" yields 730 hits, some of which have accompanying audio files.

Less confident or linguistically literate learners may struggle with the latter part of the course, and the probability of completion will depend partly on the reasons for starting it. The introduction would benefit from a caution to users that as learners of Egyptian Arabic, while they may be understood in much of the Levant and Arab Peninsula, it is not so in North Africa. Likewise, to depend too much on the Egyptian dialect may engender comprehension difficulties for them elsewhere in the Arab world – including anywhere south of Cairo where 80% of the population lives, and where the dialect shift is noticeable. Given these complexities of interplay between language, culture, social status and identity, it is wise to bear in mind the saying from Gibran Khalil Gibran "Your claim not to understand me is praise I do not merit and an insult you do not deserve" (*Sabbagh*). Overall though, a good course if a bit expensive.

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