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Teachers of Arabic in Britain, 1870–1939

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Teachers of Arabic in Britain, 1870-1939

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Abstract

Histories of Arabic studies in Europe have focussed to date on formal educational institutions such as universities, in part because of the close connections between academic Orientalism and European politics and imperialism, but also because of the availability of primary sources. This article instead examines what we can discover about private teachers of Arabic in Britain from the Victorian period to the Second World War. As well as shedding light on a hitherto under-investigated group of Arabic teachers and learners, this allows us to look at the teaching of spoken, dialectal Arabic in contrast to the written, Classical language more commonly taught in universities. It uses Census documents and newspapers from the period to identify individual teachers and learners of Arabic, and attempts to reconstruct their wider lives and career trajectories.

Keywords
Arabic language; teaching; social history; Census; British history; colonialism.

Introduction

Visiting London in 1800, the Indian traveller Mirza Abu Taleb Khan observed that "many individuals were so desirous of learning the Oriental languages, that they attended self-taught masters, ignorant of every principle of the science, and paid them half-a-guinea a lesson".[1] The main reason why Britons were so keen to learn 'Oriental languages' – by which Abu Taleb principally means Hindustani, Persian and Arabic - at this period was the opportunity they offered to prosper in the service of the East India Company. Commerce and diplomatic service in the Mughal, Ottoman and Qajar Empires, too, offered opportunities for young men to enrich themselves and advance in society. This new drive by individuals to acquire a practical command of an Asian language for personal advancement stands in contrast to the already well-established scholarly tradition of learning Arabic and other languages of the 'East', and the methods of learning, too, were different.

This article explores how a private market emerged for the teaching of Arabic in Britain from the years immediately preceding the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 until the Second World War. This period was one when existing British commercial interests in Arabic-speaking regions intensified, a phenomenon intimately connected to British colonial exploitation and occupation of these same lands. Although the study of the Arabic language did have institutional homes in Britain at this period – notably in the universities – a university education in Arabic was not within the reach of the majority of people who sought a knowledge of the language, nor would the type of Arabic taught there have helped them to, for example, conduct business dealings with trading partners in Lebanon. In the following discussion, I survey the niche occupied by private teaching of Arabic by using newspaper advertisements and Census documents to identify Arabic teachers in Britain, and to ascertain how the teaching of Arabic formed part of their lives and careers.

[1] Abu Taleb Khan, trans. Stewart, *Travels*, p. 164. Abu Taleb's original memoir was written in Persian

Private and Institutional Teaching of Arabic in Britain

The study of Arabic was not new in Britain at the turn of the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, but Abu Taleb was correct in noting that it left much to be desired. In the 1600s, would-be British scholars of Arabic had difficulty finding both books and teachers, and study of the language was marked by "its subservience to the interests of theology".[2] Arabic was, for many scholars of the day, a means to better understand Biblical Hebrew, not necessarily a subject of interest in its own right. In 1632, the first Sir Thomas Adams's Professor of Arabic was appointed at the University of Cambridge: Abraham Wheelocke, who had never visited an Arabic-speaking country. Oxford acquired its Laudian Professorship of Arabic in 1636, first held by Edward Pococke, who had studied in Aleppo during his time as chaplain to the English factor there. Other such appointments at British universities followed over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although the study of Arabic continued to lag behind other European countries, such as the Netherlands and France. Just because a university had a Chair in Arabic, however, did not mean that elementary instruction in the language was offered to students. This, students were expected to acquire for themselves through private tuition and solo study from books.[3]

The kind of Arabic with which Early Modern British universities were principally concerned was Classical and written. Spoken and dialectal Arabic was not within the purview of the universities, and the goal of learning Arabic was to read manuscripts – especially religious – not to converse. The majority of teachers of Arabic in or attached to British universities in the Early Modern period were non-Arabs, and may never have spoken the language actively themselves. Later Arab visitors to Europe, in the first half of the nineteenth century, consistently noted that even excellent academic scholars of Arabic texts were unable to hold a conversation in the language.[4] We do know of some native speakers of Arabic who taught privately in Britain as early as the seventeenth century, although there are few whose lives we can follow in any detail. An exception is Solomon Negri, a Christian from Damascus, who came to London in about 1700 and found a position teaching Arabic at St. Paul's School.[5] Ghobrial's study of Negri's precarious, itinerant and often impecunious career draws attention to the importance of teachers of Arabic outside and "on the margins of universities", whose lives it is often difficult to document.[6] Something of Negri's teaching practice can be gleaned from the surviving notebooks of his pupils, which show that he was keen to introduce dialogues and conversational Arabic alongside the reading of texts.[7]

As trade and diplomacy increased the demand for competence in modern Asian languages in Britain during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, universities did not keep pace. Those who wanted to acquire a good practical command of a language such as Arabic needed to turn to alternative institutional sites of learning and to the private sector. Mills' study of Arabic learning in English overseas 'factories' (commercial establishments) from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries reveals the East India Company as a catalyst for increased study of practical, communicative Arabic from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards. Factors such as the use of Italian as a Mediterranean and Levantine lingua franca, and the availability of multilingual interpreters, made the study of Arabic by British residents at trading posts in, for example, Aleppo in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

[2] Feingold, "Learning Arabic", p. 34.
[3] *Ibid*. pp. 38-39, quoting an account from 1815.
[4] See Mairs, *Arabic Dialogues*, pp. 1-2, on Rifāʿa Rāfiʿ al-Ṭahṭāwī and pp. 130-138 on Fāris al-Shidyāq.
[5] Ghobrial, "Life and Hard Times", p. 319.
[6] *Ibid*. p. 320.
[7] *Ibid*.

less common than might be expected.[8] Pococke, who as noted above went on to become the first Laudian Professor of Arabic at Oxford, was among the exceptions, and is known to have employed native-speaker teachers during his time in Aleppo.[9] As the East India Company expanded ever more aggressively into the Indian Subcontinent in the latter part of the eighteenth century, there is a marked increase in production of works designed to help employees of the company learn Indian languages: Hindustani, Persian and (as an aide to Persian) Arabic. John Richardson (1740/41–1795), for example, produced works on Persian and Arabic expressly for the use of the East India Company.[10] How much use such works were in allowing students to become proficient in the spoken language is debatable. Abu Taleb found that English students of Persian who had previously studied from Richardson's books required complete retraining: "I found it much more difficult to correct the bad pronunciation he had acquired, and the errors he had adopted, than it was to instruct a person who had never before seen the Persian alphabet".[11] But books such as this were nevertheless fairly novel in their stated intent to allow practical communication over the reading of Classical texts. Arabic would later be taught at Fort William College in Calcutta (established 1800) and the East India Company College at Haileybury (established 1806), but only ever as a very minor component of a curriculum that emphasised Indian languages.

Arabic had a slightly more prominent role at another East India Company school, the London Oriental Institution, which was established in 1804 specifically to teach Indian languages to East India Company recruits. The Oriental Institution is of particular interest to us here because of its emphasis on highly-qualified teachers, including of Arabic. An advertisement in 1829 boasted that: "The oriental languages are taught here exclusively as spoken and written in India, and on the system of Haileybury and Addiscombe, by persons who have studied them among the learned natives of the east ; the modern Arabic is by a native of Grand Cairo ; the classical department by a graduate of Oxford ; that of the fine arts by an able artist, draughtsman to one of the royal family".[12] Moreover, "the Oriental Languages are taught with their true pronunciation and in their proper characters, by persons who have acquired them among the learned Natives of the East".[13] This was in marked contrast to the position and teaching of Arabic in contemporary British universities.

The 'native of Grand Cairo' employed at the London Oriental Institution was almost certainly Nicholas Giarue, whose story was reported in the London papers in 1829, in his own words:

> I am a native of Grand Cairo, a Member of the Syrian Church. My uncle, Peter Giarue, Archbishop of Jerusalem, who visited this country in 1820, and is now Patriarch of Antioch and Jerusalem, is known to many here. My father engaged in trade with a Turkish Pacha, and in consequence most of his wealth was captured by the Greek Corsairs. The Pacha then seized upon myself and a younger brother, and subjected us to close confinement and other persecutions, in order to extort money from our parent, or force us to change our religion. My father at last succeeded in ransoming us, by borrowing money, and sacrificing all his property. Driven by these means to seek our fortune abroad, we proceeded to Europe, and having left my father in an hospital at Paris, weighed down by years, sickness, and misfortune, I came to this country in the hope of being able to gain the means of relieving our family's distress, by teaching the Oriental languages.

[8] Mills, "Learning Arabic", pp. 275-276.
[9] *Ibid*. pp. 279-280.
[10] Arabic: Richardson *Grammar of the Arabick Language*.
[11] Abu Taleb Khan, trans. Stewart, *Travels*, Vol. II, p. 42.
[12] *The Atlas*, 21 June 1829, p. 16.
[13] *Globe*, 8 February 1830, p. 1.

> Finding myself unable to earn a subsistence, and having no means of support in this country, I am under the necessity of appealing to the generosity of the British public to enable me to join my father and convey him back, if possible, before the winter sets in, to end his days in his own country. The smallest assistance will be gratefully accepted from such humane and generous persons as may be pleased to extend a helping hand to a fellow-Christian and a foreigner, whom persecution has cast upon their shores. I have testimonials, proving the above facts, from the Patriarch of Constantinople, the French Ambassador, Mr. Salame. Oriental Interpreter to the Government, John Scott, Esq., M.D., 12, Bedford-square, and many other distinguished persons ; and I beg to add here the following certificate of two Gentlemen who have charitably given me the asylum of their roof till I obtain the means of proceeding to my country.
> (Signed) NICHOLAS GIARUE ; 2, South-crescent, Bedford square, Aug. 27, 1829.
> We, the undersigned, having examined the Certificates and enquired into the case of Nicholas Giarue are thereby satisfied that he deserves the charitable aid and commiseration of such as are able to contribute to the relief of those who have been persecuted and distressed for conscience's sake.
> (Signed) DUNCAN FORBES, SAM. ARNOT. London Oriental Institution, 2, South-crescent, Bedford-square, Aug. 24, 1829.
> P.S. Subscriptions for Mr. Giarue will be received at the London Oriental Institution, 2, South-crescent, Bedford-square, and by the Rev. Mr. Meldola, No. 47, Mansell-street, Goodman's-fields. Benevolent persons, who may not have the means of assisting the above Petitioner, are requested to make his case known to others among their friends.[14]

This letter reveals a lot about networks among teachers of Arabic and other Middle Eastern and Asian languages in Europe in the period – as well as about the dire financial straits in which Arabic teachers could find themselves. Duncan Forbes had spent three years in India in the early 1820s, and no time at all in the Middle East. He was the author of works on Gujarati and Hindustani, but also on Arabic for East India Company recruits;[15] his lack of exposure to the language suggests that the latter work was written from previously published sources and/or with heavy authorial input from a native speaker such as Giarue. Sandford Arnot ran the London Oriental Institution with Forbes and was author of *A New Self-Instructing Grammar of the Hindustani Tongue* (1831). David Meldola (c. 1797-1853) was Rabbi to the Sephardic Jewish community in London. 'Mr Salame' is Abraham Salamé, who as a child interpreted for his father during the French occupation of Egypt.[16] John Scott was a physician who collected manuscripts in Oriental languages, including Arabic.[17] He was a member of the Royal Asiatic Society.[18] Giarue's acquaintance with many of the names mentioned in his letter may have come from the visit of his uncle the Patriarch Ignatius Peter VII Jarwah (known in the English papers as Gregory Peter Giarve; 1777–1851) to England some years earlier. Georges Giarvé (c. 1770-1830), an interpreter who was killed during the Expédition d'Alger, was probably his father.[19] Teachers, language book authors, Orientalist scholars and colonial officials in both the British and the French empires are thus linked together.

For the East India Company and later the British Raj in India, Arabic was only ever of minor interest. Greater official, institutional emphasis on practical spoken Arabic came only after Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882. This new demand for Arabic is reflected in the

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[14] *Morning Post*, 5 September 1829, p. 1.
[15] Forbes, *Grammar of the Arabic Language*.
[16] Mairs, *Arabic Dialogues*, pp. 51-52
[17] His collection was sold by Sotheby's in 1850: De Morgan, *Catalogue*.
[18] See e.g. JRAS 1835, p. lxxiii.
[19] Féraud, *Les interprètes*, pp. 161-165; Messaoudi, *Les arabisants*, pp. 152-153 and Annexes, pp. 180-181.

great increase in the publication of British grammars and phrasebooks of Arabic in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.[20] The increase in production of such works also shows, indirectly, that would-be learners were turning to these resources in the absence of much institutional support for Arabic study. It was not until the early 1900s that an attempt was made to support the study of communicative Arabic, integrated into existing university frameworks. The Government of Egypt appointed a 'shaykh' to teach Arabic at Cambridge alongside the Professor of Arabic, to candidates for the Foreign Office and for civil service jobs in Egypt. These candidates were required to pass an examination at the end of their probationary year, and although "ability to converse in Arabic" is listed as one of the requirements, the emphasis is still very much on reading and writing, albeit evidently of a form of 'Middle Arabic' rather than the Classical.[21] Despite these efforts, the evidence indicates that the command of spoken, colloquial Arabic among British soldiers and civil servants in Egypt was never high. A similar situation prevailed in Mandate Palestine, where, despite the introduction of Arabic (and Hebrew) examinations for recruits to the civil service and Palestine Police, language learning was never given the necessary institutional support to succeed.[22]

Finding Arabic Teachers in the Historical Record

Published and archival sources allow us to outline the history of Arabic studies in Britain from a top-down, institutional perspective, one that moreover privileges British students and educators. Gaining information on Arab teachers and, furthermore, their teaching practices, is more difficult. Two principal sources of information – newspapers and the British Census – allow us to do so. The reason why we are able to access the testimony of Nicholas Giarue, above, in his own words is because it was published in a newspaper. 'Official' publications associated with the London Oriental Institution, in contrast, do not name him, mentioning him only as an anonymous "native of Grand Cairo". And any contribution he may have made to his employer Duncan Forbes' *Grammar of the Arabic Language* is of course completely anonymous and uncredited.

A similar situation prevails for the Arabic 'shaykhs' employed to teach recruits to the Egyptian civil service at Cambridge in the early twentieth century. University of Cambridge publications state that Shaykh Muḥammad 'Asal was employed as a teacher of Arabic from 1904-1911, and that he was awarded an honorary diploma in agriculture by Pembroke College in 1911.[23] The *Homeward Mail from India, China and the East* contains a short notice on his appointment in 1904, seconded from the Egyptian Ministry of Public Instruction (October 22, 1904, 1517). The census data rounds out our picture of 'Asal a little. He appears only in the 1911 Census, as 'Mohammad Assal', indicating that he left England at least by 1921, but perhaps as early as the end of his appointment in 1911. At the time of the Census, he was living at 120 Tenison Road, a terraced house of seven rooms, about 25 minutes' walk from the centre of Cambridge, near the railway station. He was aged 31 (making him just 24 at the time of his appointment) and lived with his wife, Bamba (29) and sons Abdul Azeez (6) and Hassan (5). Muḥammad and Bamba had been married for eleven years. They had a live-in English 'general servant', Harriet Adams, aged 36. 'Asal's occupation is given as "Lecturer in Arabic" and it is stated that he is "employed by the Egyptian Government" at the University of Cambridge. This information does not bring us much closer to knowing 'Asal as a person and tells us nothing about his teaching practice, but it does round out our picture of the circumstances in which the

[20] Discussed by Mairs, *Arabic Dialogues*, pp. 261-279.
[21] These examinations and the teaching system at Cambridge are discussed by Mairs, *Arabic Dialogues*, pp. 256-259.
[22] *Ibid*. pp. 355-360.
[23] See, for example, Tanner, *Historical Register*.

'shaykhs' attached to the University of Cambridge lived in the early twentieth century. 'Asal was a young man, who cannot have had much teaching experience before coming to Britain. He travelled with his family. And he lived in relative comfort, in his own house and with a servant, albeit slightly geographically detached from the university and its colleges.

The following sections aim to build on the insight offered by newspapers and census returns on Giarue and 'Asal by adopting a more systematic approach to trawling these sources, with the goal of identifying native-speaker teachers of Arabic outside institutional contexts in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The resources I have used are the online British Newspaper Archive (https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) and, for the Census, Ancestry.co.uk. Both are commercial services, but some university libraries have subscriptions. Searching with the query word 'Arabic' in UK Census returns on Ancestry yielded 91 documents, a small enough corpus to read through individually to find Arab names and determine whether these were teachers. Conducting online searches of the census returns is, however, by no means an exact science: people are recorded only if physically present in Britain on the date of the Census, and are recorded at the address where they were present, not necessarily where they usually resided; names and other terms may be misspelt or mistranscribed; and each person is only listed with one profession, even if they had several, and this may not be described in much detail. The British Newspaper Archive required a finer-grained search, since 'Arabic' alone yielded far too many hits. I therefore performed individual searches with the additional words 'instructor', 'instruction', 'lessons', 'teacher', 'professor', 'learn' and 'teach'. Neither of these search methodologies were foolproof, and I am sure that I have missed many Arabic teachers, but I found enough to build a few instructive case studies, and to say something very broad about the career trajectories, personal circumstances and geographical spread of private Arabic language teachers in Britain.

Before moving on to my analysis of this archival evidence, however, it is necessary to say something about the presence and position of Arabs more generally in Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although there is now an ample scholarly literature on Muslim immigrants and converts in Britain over the past few centuries,[24] much of this concentrates on the period after the Second World War and on the (numerically larger) South Asian communities, not on people from Arabic speaking lands. We are fortunate to have a few personal accounts by educated Arab visitors to Britain. The Lebanon-born litterateur Fāris al-Shidyāq (1805/6-1887) came to Britain under the auspices of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge to assist on a project to translate the Bible into Arabic at the University of Cambridge, a period in his life satirised in his semi-autobiographical novel *al-Sāq 'ala al-Sāq*.[25] In his 1857 application for naturalisation as a British citizen, al-Shidyāq describes himself as a "Professor or Teacher of the Arabic Language".[26] Assaad Yakoob Kayat (As'ad Ya'qūb al-Khayyāṭ, 1811–1865), who was also from Lebanon, first visited Britain in the 1830s as guide and interpreter to a Persian diplomatic mission, and then returned to live there. His autobiography was published in London in 1847.[27] Later in the century, the Egyptian Aḥmad Zakī Pasha (1867–1934) attended the International Congress of Orientalists in London in 1892, and wrote a travelogue containing his impressions of Europe.[28]

We are fortunate to have the accounts of relatively privileged Arab visitors such as these, but it is more difficult to access the perspectives of less well-off, well-connected and/or highly-educated Arabs in Britain. A thorough survey of the Census records is beyond the scope of this paper, but we find individuals born in Arabic-speaking countries recorded in all the extant

[24] For example, Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain*; Ansari, *'The infidel Within'*.
[25] 'Leg Over Leg': al-Shidyāq, *Leg over Leg*, trans. Davies.
[26] UK National Archives, HO 1/41/1278a.
[27] al-Khayyāṭ, *Voice from Lebanon*.
[28] Zakī, *Al-safar*.

censuses since 1841, which was the first census to name all the individuals resident in a given household. Two individual Arab communities in Britain are slightly better documented and more thoroughly researched than others: Yemeni sailors in the ports of south Wales and Tyneside, and merchants, mostly Syrian-Lebanese Christians, in Manchester.

Although there was a smaller Moroccan Muslim commercial community in Manchester, the majority of the Arabs there were from 'Greater Syria', and were Christian or Jewish.[29] A Syrian presence in Manchester dates to at least the early 1860s. The Manchester Arab community were for the most part involved in the cotton and textile trade and, while maintaining connections with their country of origin, became settled in Manchester over several generations. The historian Albert Hourani (1915-1993[30]) and linguist Haim Nahmad (1910-1983[31]) were both second-generation Arab Mancunian. A court case discussed below sheds light on the market for Arabic teaching in Manchester, and the position of Arabic teachers, in the 1980s-1900s.

The majority of Yemenis in Cardiff and South Shields were temporary sojourners, between jobs on the seas, with little contact with British society.[32] A smaller number had closer contacts with local populations, as boarding house managers, café owners and employment agents, all catering to fellow Arabs.[33] There were Arab seamen running boarding houses in South Shields since at least the 1890s; these men and their boarders usually claimed to have been born in Aden, and thus to be British subjects, even if they were from the inland towns of Yemen.[34] Yemeni sailors were vulnerable to racism from locals and to unemployment: there were a number of riots against non-white sailors in British port towns, and campaigns to hire white British over Arab and foreign sailors.[35] One of the teachers considered below was a boarding house master from Cardiff, who seems to have attempted to break out of this profession into Arabic teaching.

Newspaper Advertisements Offering and Seeking Arabic Instruction

Using the rough tool of search queries on the British Newspaper Archive I was able to assemble a small corpus of ten advertisements seeking instruction in Arabic and twelve advertisements offering it for the period 1870-1939. It should go without saying that these numbers cannot represent anything close to all the teachers and learners of Arabic in this period, since newspaper advertisements were just one way in which they might find one another: but newspapers do happen to offer convenient surviving, written testimony of these educational transactions. There are some significant patterns within even this small sample. Much of the demand for private Arabic instruction in Britain appears to have been from businesspeople trading with the Middle East, and only to a lesser extent from recreational travellers or armchair learners. Teachers and would-be learners of Arabic placed newspaper advertisements across Britain, from the south coast of England to northern Scotland, with notable concentrations in Manchester and London: both major centres of population, commerce and newspaper publishing.

Some advertisements seeking Arabic lessons are fairly brief and uninformative, for example:

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[29] Halliday, "Millet of Manchester".
[30] Hanssen, "Albert's World".
[31] Co-author of a 1940 textbook of Arabic: Nahmad and Rabin, *Everyday Arabic*.
[32] For a summary of Yememi immigration to British port cities, see Halliday, *Arabs in Exile*, pp. 17-59; second edition Halliday, *Britain's First Muslims*.
[33] See Lawless, *Taʿizz to Tyneside*, pp. 47-73 on Arab boarding houses and their masters in South Shields.
[34] *Ibid*. p. 2.
[35] Halliday, *Arabs in Exile*, pp. 24-27 on the 1919 Cardiff riots.

> "Arabic. Lessons wanted, state terms and full particulars."
>
> (*Manchester Evening News*, 16 June 1887, 1.)
>
> "Private Arabic Conversational Lessons: 5s. per hour."
>
> (*Manchester Evening News*, 16 June 1902, 1.)
>
> "Arabic lessons could be given privately by an advanced scholar."
>
> (*Liverpool Echo*, 16 January 1916, 1).
>
> "University graduate gives private Arabic lessons. Very moderate terms; books obtainable."
>
> (*Birmingham Post*, 4 November 1939, 4.)

In such cases, we do not know the identity of teacher or pupil, or whether the teacher was a native speaker. 'Advanced scholar' and 'university graduate' in the latter two advertisements could apply equally well to a British university student of Arabic, or an Arab student or graduate of a British university, in another subject, teaching his own language.

In other cases, the commercial drive for Arabic instruction is very clear:

> "Cyprus and Africa – An Arabic class, for preliminary instruction, is in formation, by Mons. Rouvez, 60 Princess street."
>
> (*Manchester Evening News*, 2 November 1878, 1.)
>
> "Commercial Arabic Class. To assist enterprising gentlemen starting for the East and West Coast of Africa, the Class will be opened on September 1st next, at my place of Translation and Instruction, 32, John Street, Sunderland. K. Rouvez. 34, North Road, Durham."
>
> (*Durham Country Advertiser*, 19 August 1881, 1.)
>
> "Languages (Spanish, French, and Arabic). Lessons given by experienced teacher; conversational, commercial, and literary; distance no object; terms moderate. Further particulars on application to Mohamed, care of Deacon's, Leadenhall street."
>
> (*Morning Post*, 20 November 1900, 1.)

Rouvez appears in the 1879 edition of *Slater's Directory of Manchester & Salford* under the category 'professors and teachers' as "Rouvez Korolos (languages), 60 Princess st". Another advertisement by Rouvez, in the *City Jackdaw* (5 September 1879) offers "Translation, Tuition, Schools, Private Classes, of and in EUROPEAN AND ASIATIC LANGUAGES (Chinese included), by Monsr. K. ROUVEZ" at the Commercial Instruction Rooms at 60 Princess Street, a Manchester city centre address that was presumably his business premises. Rouvez, unfortunately, does not show up in the Census, so we know little more about him, other than that his name and use of 'Monsieur' suggest that he was from a Francophone country. It seems likely – given the range of 'European and Asiatic languages' offered - that Rouvez ran a language school and employed teachers of these languages, including Arabic. Other such operations in Manchester at this period included that of Henry John Hemm (1817-1874) who appears as a 'schoolmaster' in the 1861 and 1871 Censuses, but specialised in languages:

> "Private Lessons in French, Italian, Spanish, German; Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic. Lessons in English to foreigners through the above spoken languages; or less perfectly, through Portuguese, Dutch, Modern Greek, and Modern Arabic, by H. J. Hemm, M.C.P., 121 Grosvenor st."
>
> (*Manchester Evening News*, 4 September 1872, 1.)

Like Rouvez, Hemm seems likely either to have had a basic, self-taught knowledge of Arabic, or to have subcontracted to another teacher.

'Mohamed' of the 1900 London advertisement above claimed to offer lessons in all three of his languages – Spanish, French and Arabic – himself. Deacon's was an advertising office, where he must have arranged to collect his post. Although the name 'Mohamed' on its own seems like an unpromising lead in the search for its identity, there is in fact a plausible candidate: Mohamed Barakatullah Bhopali (1854-1927), better known as a campaigner for Indian independence. In 1900, according to the Post Office's *London Street Directory* for that year, Barakatullah lived in Chancery Lane, where he is listed as a 'teacher of languages'. Barakatullah had taught languages at the Oriental College (Abdullah Quilliam's Liverpool Muslim Institute) between 1895 and 1899 and he later became Professor of Hindustani in Tokyo. He had a wide linguistic repertoire which certainly included Arabic, although I have found no explicit evidence of him knowing French and Spanish. He certainly fits the bill of the 'experienced teacher' offering language lessons in London in 1900.

Teaching of Arabic might offer career opportunities for Arab merchants or seamen in Britain. An advertisement from Cardiff in 1924 suggests someone who is trying to make a career change and a change of location from Wales to London:

> "Native teacher of Arabic is open for engagement immediately in London Boroughs; any subject. Apply Haig, A.B., 16, Maria-street, Cardiff."
>
> (*Western Mail*, 9 October 1924, 2.)

The 1921 Census shows that a single 36-year-old man from Aden named Ismail Hassan kept a boarding house at 16 Maria Street, which at the time was occupied by fifteen sailors from Aden, temporarily on shore between voyages. The house had just seven rooms. 'Haig' may refer to the Haig Housing Trust, which provided housing to military veterans. The neighbouring house, too, was occupied by sailors from Aden, and there were also many Somali sailors staying in the street at the time of the Census.[36] Presuming he was still resident there in 1924, Hassan or one of his tenants may have been looking to make a transition from sailing to on-shore work teaching Arabic.

Other advertisements also hint at a professional (commercial, military or colonial) motivation for learning Arabic with their emphasis on acquisition of the spoken, colloquial language or the language of a particular region (although this might of course also apply to tourist learners):

> "Wanted, Arabic lessons from a native of Syria, or to board in house where Arabic is spoken. – Stevenson, 11. Westover-villas, Bournemouth."
>
> (*The Standard*, 2 January 1896, 7.)
>
> "Arabic lessons wanted, speaking only."
>
> (*Manchester Evening* News, 9 September 1901, 1.)
>
> "Arabic lessons wanted, elementary conversation and written character."
>
> (*The Scotsman*, 23 January 1911, 11.)
>
> "Lessons (oral) wanted in North African Arabic."
>
> (*Dundee Courier and Argus*, 26 July 1912, 1.)
>
> "Colloquial Arabic lessons required. Apply Rogers, Collinson House, Mill Hill, N.W. 7."
>
> (*The Times and Guardian*, 11 February 1938, 22; Mill Hill is a school, suggesting the poster was a teacher or student.)

In some cases connections with the British military occupation and government of Egypt, Palestine and other regions of the Middle East are likely:

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[36] On the history of Yemenis and other Muslims in Cardiff, see Gilliat-Ray and Mellor, "Bilād al-Welsh".

> "Egyptian gives Arabic lessons. – Address Roufeila, Box 6, 115, Postal Department, Daily Telegraph."
>
> (*Daily Telegraph*, 24 January 1900, 2.)
>
> "Officer requires Arabic lessons daily for three weeks."
>
> (*Sussex Express*, 18 April, 1919, 6.)

The latter may be someone cramming for an official examination, or who has suddenly found out that he is to be posted to an Arabic-speaking country. The timing of the following advertisement may also be significant:

> "Elementary Arabic. A class for the study of this will shortly be formed in the Free Church College. Gentlemen who may wish to join are invited to send their names to the Librarian at the College."
>
> (*Aberdeen Journal*, 12 November 1881, 1.)

This was during the 'Urabi Revolt in Egypt, in which Britain and France were shortly to intervene, leading to the British occupation of Egypt.

Recreational or touristic motivations for learning Arabic are specified in some of the advertisements:

> "Arabic Lessons, or Interpreter to a party going to Syria and Egypt. – Address G 61, at the printers."
>
> (*Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 18 January 1869.)
>
> "French, Arabic – Conversational and grammatical; piano – Miss Johnston is prepared to teach the above branches."
>
> (*Dundee Courier and Argus*, 5 September 1900, 1).
>
> "Tourists to Egypt – Arabic lessons given by Anglo-Egyptian official; long experience lecturing students in colloquial Arabic. Apply Misr, Overseas House."
>
> (*The Scotsman*, 7 December 1932, 2.)

Posts which state that the would-be learner is a woman or a child also suggest that the motivations were general interest or travel rather than professional. (Although connections to relatives who worked in the Middle East may also be a factor: the 1901 Census allows us to identify that Miss Johnston of Dundee was Margaret Dawson Johnston, born 1846, whose father was a ship owner and brother a merchant.)

> "Wanted, Arabic Lessons. – Apply, stating terms, to Miss Butlin, Grange, Stoke Bishop."
>
> (*Western Daily Press*, 16 October 1895, 2.)
>
> "Wanted, teacher of Arabic for a boy of nine. Apply Dr. Mason, 9 Royal crescent, Cheltenham."
>
> (*Gloucestershire Echo*, 28 August 1909, 2.)

The Census reveals little suggesting connections with the Middle East for either of the above: Miss Butlin was the daughter of a solicitor, and no child of the right age appears associated with Dr Mason of Cheltenham: if children were away at school, they would be listed at their school, not at their home address, so this situation is not uncommon.

Census Data and the Economics of Teaching Arabic

Very few of the above advertisements given any indication of what rates were charged for Arabic lessons, with the exception of the 'very moderate terms' promised by the university graduate in Birmingham in 1939, and the five shillings charged by the private teacher in Manchester in 1902. Looking at the career trajectories of Arabic teachers, as evidenced by Census and other contemporary data, may offer an insight into the extent to which Arabic teaching was a financially viable occupation in Britain at this period. A court case in Manchester in 1892, reported in the press, also allows us to examine the economics of Arabic teaching from both a teacher and a client perspective.

With the exception of university teachers, I have been unable to find any examples in the period under discussion of individuals who were able to sustain Arabic teaching as a full-time job in the long term. From the Census data, university teachers of Arabic – at least by the early twentieth century - seem to have lived in fairly comfortable circumstances, like Muḥammad 'Asal at Cambridge, discussed above. Mohamed Abd El Razek, a thirty-five-year-old Egyptian Lecturer in Arabic at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, appears in the 1921 Census living alone in a six-room flat at 100 Addison Road. In the private sector, things were rather harder for Arabic teachers. This is best demonstrated by the fact that Arabic teaching usually formed only part of a portfolio of jobs by which teachers supported themselves and their families.

Djemmal Eddine Djeneid (1893-1966) appears in the 1911 Census as a boarder at a house in Islington, North London; he was born in the same borough. He is described as a 'Professor of Arabic', rather a grand title for a nineteen year-old. Other occupants of the boarding house were English, Greek (from Smyrna) and Persian. Under the spelling 'Janaliah-Deen Jeneid' we find him in a list of passengers arriving at New York from Liverpool on 2 January 1928. Djeneid, now thirty-five, is listed as a courier for the travel company Thomas Cook, with his 'race' given as 'Syrian' despite his birth in England. He appears dozens more times in ship passenger lists as a Thomas Cook courier or a 'cruise manager'. From teaching Arabic as a young man, he therefore branched out into working in the travel business. This may initially have been in the Middle East, but by the late 1920s he seems to have principally worked on transatlantic routes. In the late 1930s he still worked for Thomas Cook, as a tour manager for the Canaries and West Africa. The British Film Archive contains footage taken by Jeneid in 1938 on a trip to Tenerife, Ghana and Nigeria.[37] For Jeneid, Arabic teaching was only a minor part of a longer and apparently much more successful career in travel management.

Other records show us teachers of Arabic who taught concurrently with other pursuits, before again moving on to higher status and better paid roles. Mohamed Yehia (1899-) was a perennial student, supporting his studies with Arabic teaching. He appears as a student at the University of Sheffield in passenger lists sailing from Port Said to London in 1926 and 1931. In the 1939 England and Wales Register he is living in Hampstead with his wife Florence, whom he had married in 1922. Yehia is described as 'Arabic English Tutor and Student of Political Science' and Florence worked as a typist. In 1938, Yehia tried to get the support of the Foreign Office in a scheme to start an 'Anglo-Muslim Society', which generated a file of papers now in the British Library India Office Records.[38] The Foreign Office made enquiries into Yehia's background, and were unimpressed that he had been registered for a BSc in Engineering for such a long period without ever completing his degree. He may have chosen to extend his student registration for such a long period in order to continue to live on a student visa. By 1950, Yehia had graduated to a career in diplomacy. He is listed on a shipping manifest from London to New York with an address at the Egyptian Embassy in London, as a member of a delegation to the United Nations. The following year he was Secretary General

[37] http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/459, accessed 23 January 2025.
[38] PZ 2174/37 'Mr. Mohamed Yehia:– Activities. Scheme for formation of Anglo-Moslem Society'.

of Anglo-Egyptian Union. He and Florence seem to have moved to Egypt in the mid 1950s. A 1955 passenger list shows that he was still 'dining out on' his visit to the United Nations, since he is listed as "Former Member Delegation U.N." As with Jeneid, Arabic teaching was only a small part of Yehia's career, done as a means of supporting himself when he was a student.

We find independent confirmation that the five shillings charged by the Manchester teacher in 1902 was a fair rate for Arabic instruction in a case involving two Arabic teachers, Shaker Geohamy (1838-1908) and John Nahum Farage (1857-1924). In 1892, Baghdad-born Farage took a client to court over non-payment of fees. J. Crossley, a salesman who had hired Farage to teach his son, had agreed to pay two shillings and sixpence a lesson. In court, Geohamy, originally from Mount Lebanon, testified that "his usual charge was 10s a lesson when he went to the pupil, and 5s a lesson when the pupil came to him".[39] Farage was shown to have been charging a more than fair fee, and won his case.

Farage was not a full-time teacher. In the 1911 Census, he is described as 'Shipping Merchant's Manager'. He, his English wife Sarah and their three daughters lived in a nine-room house in Moss Side in Manchester, along with Sarah's sister and a lodger, an 'Interpreter of Languages' from Denmark. This suggests that Farage had wider connections in the language teaching community in Manchester, perhaps connected with one of the larger commercial language schools discussed above. In the 1911 Census Farage appears as a 'Shipping Clerk'. He and Sarah now had a son in addition to their three daughters, and they had three lodgers, two English women and a Brazilian medical student. At the time of the 1921 Census Farage was still listed as a shipping clerk, and the family had expanded into the third generation. For the first time, he is described as 'Armenian' in addition to having been born in Baghdad, giving us his ethnicity. In 1924, Farage passed away, leaving Sarah the sum of £634 and ten shillings, which at the time was equivalent to about six years' wages for a skilled tradesman, or the cost of buying two horses.[40] Farage's suing of Crossley in 1892 therefore strikes one not as the desperate attempt of a full-time language teacher to recover a three pounds and ten shillings of unpaid fees, but the actions of a more financially-secure white collar professional making it clear that he is not to be taken advantage of.

Geohamy seems to have led a similar career to Farage in many ways. In 1871, aged thirty-two, he was naturalised as a British citizen. At the time of that year's Census he was a commission agent, living as the lodger in the home of a widow in Stretford, Manchester. The next Census, 1881, found him lodging at a different address in Stretford in the house of the widow's daughter. He is described as an unemployed 'commercial clerk' and 'Arabic correspondent'. Ten years later he was still lodging at the same address, and was a 'Teacher of Arabic Language - School'. In 1901 he was a 'Commercial foreign correspondent' and lodging at the home of another widow. Alongside his mercantile work and language teaching, Geohamy also found time to study Hebrew, for which he won a prize at Owens College in 1888.[41] Geohamy played chess, drawing in a simultaneous play exhibition against the French Champion M. Rosenthal.[42] The overall picture that emerges of Geohamy is of a respectable, rather intellectual, confirmed bachelor.

In fitting with this image of reliability and respectability, Geohamy shows up as a witness in several Manchester court cases, in addition to Farage's. In 1871 he testified as to the accuracy of a translation of an Arabic document in a case about two Beirut merchants

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[39] "What is a Reasonable Fee for Teaching Arabic?", *Manchester Courier*, 13 October 1892, p. 7.
[40] Calculated using the National Archives currency converter: https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/
[41] *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 23 June 1888.
[42] *Manchester Evening News*, Monday 27 October 1884, p. 2.

establishing a business in Manchester.[43] In 1888, two Manchester firms got into a dispute about counterfeiting of a type of cloth made for export to Syria, a case which depended on whether the Arabic trademarks of the two businesses could be confused with one another: "Mr. Shaker Geohamy said there was no similarity between the sign for Robert Brown, Manchester, and Messrs. Robert McClure and Sons, and there would be no difficulty on the part of anyone who could read Arabic in distinguishing between the two designs. As great a percentage of people in Syria could read as in England".[44] Another paper, the *Wigan Observer and District Advertiser* (28 April 1888, p. 2), found Geohamy's testimony on doing business in Syria interesting enough to report it at greater length:

> Mr. Shaker Geohamy, 49, Shrewbury-street, Old Trafford, said he was a teacher of Arabic, but was formerly in business as a Syrian merchant. He was a native of Syria, and knew all about the way in which business was conducted there. The natives there took a very long time to make their bargains. They went round and round the markets, and generally spent all the money they had except that which they intended to spend on cloths before they made their purchases. The names and writing on the cloth went a long way with them, but they knew what they wanted to buy, and always asked for the cloth by name. They always examined the marks on the cloth. In his opinion it was not possible for a native to take one cloth for the other.

As in his comments on literacy rates, Geohamy speaks in defence of the intelligence and business acumen of Syrians.

Geohamy may have found teaching Hebrew ultimately more rewarding than teaching Arabic. There is a strong chance that he is the teacher referred to in a 1901 report of the Educational Committee of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce on commercial language classes offered through Owens College. The number of students learning French and German was thought "satisfactory", with more disappointing enrolment levels for Arabic and Spanish. Geohamy's Hebrew teacher at Owens College some years earlier was Rev. L. M. Simmons, who taught Hebrew and Arabic there until his death in 1900. In 1889, the year after Geohamy won his prize for Advanced Hebrew, Simmons concluded a scholarly article by thanking "Mr. Shâker Geohamy, of Mount Lebanon, from whom I have received invaluable aid in the editing of the Arabic text".[45] It seems likely that Geohamy took over Simmons' classes after his death. The *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser* (18 May 1901, 5) reported that Owens College had introduced Arabic classes, taught by "the Hebrew professor at the College, whose native tongue was Arabic." The opportunity, however, "had not been well availed of."

Conclusions

In Britain in the last decades of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth, there existed both supply and demand for Arabic teaching, in a private market that operated for the most part independently of established institutions of learning. We are not in a position to assess this market quantitatively: the newspaper advertisements and Census records that I have discussed give us only part of the picture. But they do allow us an insight into some of the socioeconomic contexts in which Arabic was taught and learnt, and into how Arabic teaching and learning fit into individual life trajectories.

As the Census declarations make clear, some parts of Britain at this period were participating in global networks for the movement of people and ideas – and languages. Think,

[43] *Leicester Guardian*, 13 September 1871, p. 6.
[44] *Manchester Times*, 14 April 1888.
[45] Simmons, "Letter of Consolation", p. 101.

for example, of the dozens of Yemenis and Somalis living in one small street in 1920s Cardiff. Speakers and teachers of Arabic were widely dispersed across Britain, although with some notable concentrations. Manchester was a centre of industry and was linked to maritime networks by railways and, from 1894, a shipping canal. It received Arab visitors on business, and Arabs worked for Manchester enterprises to market and transport their products. It was a place where the skills of a man like Shaker Geohamy could be put to good use.

Even in Manchester or London, where a knowledge of Arabic could be a useful asset, it is nevertheless clear that teaching Arabic was not sustainable as a full-time job. We find individuals teaching Arabic at different stages in their lives, but especially when they are still quite young, before establishing themselves in a more permanent and lucrative career. Others might teach around another full-time job, presumably in evenings and at weekends. In some cases, newspaper advertisements may reflect a failed attempt at becoming or finding an Arabic teacher. In 1946, the *Evening Telegraph* reported that "A London engineer, who advertised for Arabic lessons as he was going to the Middle East, has received 30 replies – offering to rent his flat" (12 September 1946, p. 4). If Ismail Hassan of Cardiff was the one who placed the advertisement seeking a job teaching Arabic and a move to London, then this seems not to have been successful, since later electoral registers find him still living in Cardiff.

As well as the historical interest of identifying people who taught and learnt Arabic in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain, and discovering something of their lives, the case studies I have examined also contribute to an understanding of changing attitudes to the Arabic language. Until the early nineteenth century, Arabic was almost exclusively studied in Britain as a language of scholarship, and primarily for its interest in matters of theology and religious history. Trade and colonialism – two deeply intertwined factors – encouraged the emerge of new attitudes to Arabic, as a global language of commerce, useful for doing business rather than for any academic or religious purpose. For Arabs teaching their own language in Britain – whether to future colonial administrators in a Cambridge college or in a Manchester evening class – it must have been difficult to strike a balance between delivering what their pupils and employers required and communicating what they themselves thought was important to know about their language and culture. We are not in a position to access their teaching materials or methodologies, but we can at least draw attention to their presence, and the previously unappreciated role they played in Arabic studies in Britain.

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