

Review

Learning a Language through Creeping into Its Culture

Al-Absi, M. & Al-Absiová, E. (2014). *K dejinám kultúry Blízkeho východu: Fusūl min tāriḥ taḥqāfāt ash-sharq al-awsat*. Nitra : FF UKF, 102p. ISBN 978-80-558-0542-9.

The bilingual Slovak-Arabic textbook, written by Al-Absi and Al-Absiová, is intended mainly for university students whose primary focus is on Middle East Studies, Arabic Language and Culture as well as Cultural Studies, Tourism and History. Since the book is written in two languages, it not only offers its prospective recipients a sensible background to the Arab culture but it also accommodates them with solid Arabic vocabulary from the respective field. Thus, the book enables the reader to learn a language by “creeping” into its culture.

The textbook is divided into two major parts. The initial Slovak part discusses Arabic language from various perspectives. First, the authors locate the Arabic language within the linguistic scope of the Middle East region by looking at variable language groups that affected the contemporary form of this Semitic language. The writers confront Arabic with other languages subsistent in the Arab-Islamic culture. The second chapter focuses on the historical development of the Arabic language and Arabic script. The accentuation shifts from the predecessors of Arabic to the Arabic language in its contemporary, diglossic form. At the same time, the classical language of the Holy Quran is compared with contemporary modern standard Arabic (*fushā*) as distinct from the colloquial (*amīya*) varieties and their categorisations (Syro-Palestinian, Iraqi, Egyptian and Sudanese dialects in addition to the colloquial varieties of the Arab Peninsula and North Africa). The third chapter familiarises the reader with *al-chatt al-arabī* (*Arabic calligraphy*) as an artistic practice of handwriting without which any discussion of the Arabic language could be viewed as incomplete. The description of various calligraphic styles and techniques is accompanied with attractive visual samples demonstrating the styles under discussion. In the last Slovak chapter, the authors manage to bring another perspective of the Arabic language. Discussing the traditional Arab translation schools, they view Arabic through the prism of inter-cultural dialogue. For it is primarily by means of translation that a culture and its cultural heritage are retained.

The following three chapters, written in Arabic, are not direct, word-for-word renderings of the initial part of the textbook. Despite the fact that they

concentrate on the same topics (*al-khatt al-arabī*/Arabic calligraphy, *al-lughā al-arabiya*/Arabic language, and *targama aında al-arab*/Arab translation schools), they are not literal translations of the Slovak texts. Their main aim is to provide the reader with the crucial vocabulary related to the topic. The texts are written in a relatively simple language appropriate for intermediate and advanced students who have managed to master the crucial issues related to Arabic morphology and syntax. Since the textbook is aimed at university students, I would appreciate a bilingual dictionary at the end of each chapter which would make it easier for less advanced students to comprehend the Arabic chapters.

All in all, the aim of the book is not to dissect every single topic in detail. From methodological perspective, the publication aims to provide a general, essential but still comprehensive overview of the topic. Drawing on Arabic, English, Czech, and Slovak sources, the authors succeeded in creating a full-ranging, straightforward and intelligible perspective of the Arabic culture with the Arabic language as its solid foundation. The book may thus serve as an introduction to the study of the historical and cultural perspectives of the Middle East region (focusing, of course, mainly on Arab-Islamic culture). As the authors draw the attention of the reader to other relevant sources related to the topic, the book may prove a useful resource of miscellaneous material for the readers interested in conducting more research into the problem. Moreover, the unique bilingual form of the book might be of interest for all students of Arabic language who want to learn about the Arab culture through authentic, comprehensible and lucid materials. After all, learning a language without “creeping” into its culture is virtually impossible.

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