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Multilingual poetics in premodern
Islamic worlds

Multilingualism from the perspective of the medieval Islamic vision of language

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Abstract Arabic holds a cardinal position within Islamic civilisation, where it enjoys the status of sacred language for its direct connection to the Revelation and for the role attributed to it by the Revelation itself. However, not only does the Qur'an mention the existence of other languages and put them in relation with different divine messages, but also the providential nature of language diversity is explicitly maintained by the Holy Book of Islam. This *theology of multilingualism* represented the theoretical and symbolic framework within which the premodern Islamic world conceptualized language diversity. By looking at the works of philosophers, historians, poets, and religious masters from different parts of the Islamic world, we will try to understand how premodern authors viewed multilingualism, explained the existence of different languages, and accordingly engaged in plurilingual practices. Plurilingual practices provided the fertile ground on which various vernaculars, often bereft of any former written tradition (let alone literary prestige), could be transformed into full-fledged literary languages and become part of the wide *Islamic language family*. This process of incorporation of the multiple languages, encountered by the Islamic civilisation in its expansion, gave rise, throughout the Islamic world, to complex multilingual societies where individuals were frequently plurilingual and able to accommodate language diversity in flexible, creative, and, as reflected in literary productions, even aesthetic ways. In some cases, like the Andalusian context, such linguistic incorporation even involved romance

vernaculars with significant consequences for their destiny as future modern European literary languages.

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Introduction

Just a few days after Columbus had set sail from the Iberian coast, on his supposed way to the Indies, the first printed grammar of a modern European language was published in Salamanca. It is the famous *Gramática sobre la lengua castellana* (Grammar of the Castilian Language) by the Spanish polymath Antonio de Nebrija (d. 1522).¹ In its *Prólogo* (Prologue), the author presents his grammar to Queen Isabella I of Castile (to whom the work is dedicated) as a ‘new weapon’ for her renewed empire (Illich 1981, 33). Now that the Christian religion has been ‘purified’ and the enemies of the Christian faith eventually defeated, Nebrija explains, by means of this new grammar, the Crown will be able to impose, on the ‘many barbarous peoples and nations of alien languages’ under Her Majesty’s yoke, a *single* language: the Castilian language:

Quando bien conmigo pienso, mui esclarecida reina, [...] una cosa hallo i saco por conclusión mui cierta: que siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio [...]. Assí que, después de repurgada la cristiana religion, por la cual somos amigos de Dios o reconciliados con Él; después delos enemigos de nuestra fe vencidos por guerra i fuerça de armas [...]; no queda ia otra cosa sino que florezcan las artes dela paz. Entre las primeras es aquella que nos enseña la lengua [...]. I por que mi pensamiento i gana siempre fue engrandecer las cosas de nuestra nación [...] acordé ante todas las otras cosas reduzir en artificio este nuestro lenguaje castellano, [...] después que Vuestra Alteza metiesse debaxo de su iugo muchos pueblos bárbaros i naciones de peregrinas lenguas, i conel vencimiento aquéllos ternían necesidad de recibir las leies quel vencedor pone al vencido i con ellas nuestra lengua, entonces por esta mi *Arte* podrían venir enel conocimiento della.

[When I place before me and ponder, my most illustrious Queen, [...] I find one thing and can conclude with certainty: that language was always the companion of empire [...]. So that, with the Christian religion—through which we are friends of God or reconciled with Him—newly purified; with the enemies of our faith defeated by war

1 Besides Castilian, Nebrija also knew Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. He studied these languages at the universities of Salamanca and Bologna. He is also well known for his grammar of Latin *Introductiones Latinae* (Krauss-Sánchez 2010, 1138).



and the force of arms [...]; nothing is left but for the arts of peace to flourish. Amongst the first of these is that which teaches us language [...]. And because my thoughts and desires were always to exalt the things of our nation [...] I decided before all else to order into an art our Castilian language, [...] after your Highness has put under her yoke many barbarous peoples and nations of alien languages, with defeat they would have to receive the laws that the conqueror imposes on the conquered, and with them our language; then, through this my art they would be able to come into the knowledge of it.] (Nebrija 2014, 3–10; translation by Armillas-Tiseyra 2016, 202–4)

The year of the publication of Nebrija's grammar is, of course, 1492 and the enemies of faith he refers to are the Arabs and the Jews that, after the fall of Granada and the following events, had been eventually expelled from the Iberian Peninsula (or forced to conversion) completing the centuries-old process that would be referred to as the *Reconquista* in Spanish sources from the eighteenth century onward (Vanoli 2008). The year 1492 is also, and this is particularly relevant to our topic, the conventional watershed (or rather one among the many proposed) between the Middle Ages and the Modern era (Scott 2015, 1–2). Quite symbolically, the new language policy, suggested by Nebrija, not only paved the way for the development of the *monolingual* ideology of *one nation, one language* that would become a distinctive trait of modern Western civilisation, but, at the same time, also marked a rupture with the *multilingual* (and multireligious) model that had distinguished, for centuries, life in al-Andalus and elsewhere in the Islamic and premodern world.

Paradoxically enough, it was precisely within such a multilingual milieu that Castilian, the language that would be used as a weapon against the 'alien languages' (Arabic and Hebrew), took its first steps (alongside other Iberian vernaculars) as a language of literature and science within the poems, works, and translations of plurilingual authors, who, in addition to Romance languages, were also proficient in Arabic and/or Hebrew—we shall discuss this further below. Even Nebrija acknowledges the positive impact that, a few centuries before him during the reign of King Alfonso the Wise (d. 1284), translations from Arabic had in strengthening the Castilian language, a language that, after spending 'its infancy in the time of the judges and kings of Castile and of Leon':

començó a mostrar sus fuerças en tiempo del mui esclarecido i digno de toda la eternidad el rei don Alonso el Sabio, por cuió mandado se escriuieron las *Siete Partidas*, la *General Istoria* i fueron trasladados muchos libros de latín i aráuigo en nuestra lengua castellana.

[began to show its strengths in the time of the very illustrious and eternally worthy King Alfonso the Wise, under whose mandate were written the *Siete partidas*, the *General Istoria*, and many works in Latin and Arabic were transferred into our Castilian language.] (Nebrija 2014, 7; translation by Armillas-Tiseyra 2016, 203)²

2 'The *Siete partidas* (Seven-Part Code) is a compilation of statutory codes aimed at establishing a uniform system of regulation; the *General Estoria* (General History) is a universal history, beginning with the Old Testament creation of the world' (Armillas-Tiseyra 2016, 203).

In order to understand the theoretical bases of that multilingual model (and the epistemological consequences of the rupture with it), in what follows we will try to illustrate the linguistic and symbolic principles that governed the vision of language in the premodern Islamic world. In so doing, we will attempt to shed light on how, before the emergence of the modern ideas of nation-state and national language (and before their reception in the Muslim world), the Islamic civilisation understood language diversity, perceived multilingualism, and consequently engaged in plurilingual practices.

Such a conceptual framework provided the ground on which the various vernacular languages (in some cases bereft of any former written tradition), encountered by the Islamic civilisation in its expansion, could be firstly employed for the composition of religious works (often poetry and songs related to mystical themes) and then eventually flourish as full-fledged literary languages, thus becoming part of the vast *Islamic language family*, which we shall discuss further below. This process of vernacularisation of Islamic knowledge gave rise, throughout the Islamic world, to complex multilingual societies where individuals were frequently plurilingual (at both the popular and elite levels) and able to accommodate language diversity in flexible, creative, and, as reflected in literary productions, even aesthetic ways.

***Confusio linguarum*: curse or blessing in disguise?**

The theme of language diversity and speculations about its primaevial *raison d'être* were a major concern for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. The myth of the Tower of Babel and the consequent *confusio linguarum* (confusion of tongues) engaged their minds in an attempt to establish what was the original language of humankind and what was left of it in the post-Babelic world; sometimes even via empirical and cruel methods like the ones attributed to the emperors Frederick II (d. 1250) and Akbar the Great (d. 1605) (Campbell and Grieve, 1982). Various scholars from different religious backgrounds diverged on the identification of the Adamic language. The prevalent opinion among Jewish scholars was that Adam spoke Hebrew, whereas the Christians mainly believed that Adam's language was either



Hebrew or Syriac, and the Muslims mostly opted for Arabic, but sometimes also for Syriac (Rubin 1998, 330–32).³

It is noteworthy that whereas several Islamic scholars arguably used the term ‘Syriac’ (*suryāniyya*) to refer to historical Syriac (or Aramaic in general), others undoubtedly employed it to indicate a language that had nothing to do with Syriac or Aramaic. In fact, their *suryāniyya* is portrayed as having distinctive linguistic features that make it absolutely different from any known human historical language—Arabic included (Patrizi 2014, 89–94). One of the first accounts of the traits of that primaevial tongue is provided by the famous and influential medieval Islamic encyclopaedia *Rasā'il 'Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* (*Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*), which was most likely composed in the tenth century by an anonymous group of scholars.⁴ After creating Adam and subjugating all things to him, the mysterious authors say, God united for him all those things:

في تسع علامات بأشكال مختلفة مسماة بأسماء قد جمعت أسماء جميع الموجودات، انعقدت [...] بها المعاني كلها في التسعة الأعداد التي من واحد إلى تسعة [...] وهذه الحروف هي التي علمها الله، سبحانه وتعالى، آدم عليه السلام، وهي التي يستعملها أهل الهند على هذه الصفة (٩٨٧٦٥٤٣٢١). وقد كان بهذه الحروف يعرف أسماء الأشياء كلها وصفاتها على ما عليه وبه موجودة من أشكالها وهيئاتها

[in nine signs through different, designated shapes that combined the names of all existing things. The significations of them all were contracted [...] into nine units which go from one to nine. [...] These nine letters which God—He is Exalted—taught Adam—upon him be peace!—are those which the people of Hind employ, according to this form: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9. Through these letters all things, and their specific characteristics by which they exist in their shapes and forms, are known.] (*'Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* 1985, 141–42; translation by Ormsby 2021, 172–73)

Thus, for the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, the Adamic language was made up of nine signs, by which all existing things could be identified and all meanings condensed. These nine signs corresponded to the numbers from 1 to 9 and functioned as ‘one-letter’ independent polysemous words.

A further point of divergence among the learned men of the three Abrahamic faiths was the perception of the ultimate sense of the *confusio linguarum*: was it to be considered a punishment or a providential event? In the Jewish tradition either perspective would have been acceptable and they are even barely distinguished from each other:

[Therefore, it will hardly be possible, as has been attempted, to tear apart the separation of peoples as a blessing, the division of

3 The idea that Arabic is ‘the oldest language on earth’ was even echoed by popular Egyptian TV programs during the 1980s and 1990s (Rashwan 2023, 4).

4 The appellation ‘*Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* (Brethren of Purity) refers to an esoteric and philosophical fraternity from Iraq, most likely based in Basra and possibly belonging to the Ismaili milieu (El-Bizri 2008). On the European circulation of their encyclopaedia in 52 treatises, see Cordonnier (2012).

languages as God’s punishment or curse [...]. Whether the separation is a blessing or a curse [Segen oder Fluch] at all is something the Jahwist did not say; God’s punishment can always turn out to be a blessing, which is none of the Jahwist’s business.] (Borst 1957, 119)⁵

5 Translation from German is my own. Unless otherwise stated all translations to English are my own.

As for Christianity, the punishment of the *confusio linguarum*, received through the Old Testament, was somehow counterbalanced by the blessing of the miracle of Pentecost, the *donum linguarum* (gift of tongues) narrated in the New Testament, which thus represented a sort of:

[deliberate counterpart to the narrative of the Babylonian confusion of languages [...]. The Holy Spirit descends on the apostles in the form of fiery tongues, and they begin to speak in other tongues; each of those present hears the apostles speaking in his own language [...]. Through the descent of the Holy Spirit, through a miracle, the unfortunate separation of languages was overcome [...]. The languages had been sanctified in their diversity and could henceforth serve the unanimous proclamation of God’s deeds throughout the world.] (Borst 1957, 224)

In the case of Islam, it should first be noted that while the Qur’an never mentions the episode of the Tower of Babel, several Qur’anic passages directly deal with the issue of language diversity and present the key elements of what could be described as an explicit ‘theology of multilingualism.’ Within such a perspective, as remarked among others by the Italian medievalist, semiotician, and novelist Umberto Eco (d. 2016), the existence of different languages (and peoples) is represented as a sign of divine will and wisdom (on which humankind should meditate) and is ‘regarded not as a curse but as a natural event’ (Eco 1995, 352; see also Borst 1957, 326). Had God willed otherwise, states the Qur’an, He could have easily made a single linguistic and ethnic group of the entire humanity, and certainly one day He will inform the distinct nations about the real meaning hidden behind their differences:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا

[O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you *races and tribes*, that you may know one another.] (Qur’an 49, 13, 682; italics are my own)⁶

6 The translation of Qur’anic passages, unless otherwise stated, is that of Arberry (2003).

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَالاخْتِلَافُ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَأَلْوَانِكُمْ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

[And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth and *the variety of your tongues and hues*. Surely in that are signs for all living beings.] (Qur’an 30, 22, 533–4; italics are my own)



وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَكِنْ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِي مَا آتَاكُمْ فَاسْتَشِيرُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا
فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ

[If God had willed, He would have made you *one nation*; but that He may try you in what has come to you. So be you forward in good works; unto God shall you return, all together; and He will tell you of that whereon you were *at variance*.] (Qur'an 5, 48, 153; italics are my own)

With such premises it is not difficult to understand how, within Islam, the *ikhtilāf al-alsina* (the variety of tongues) came to be conceived of as part of God's providential design and a mere fact of life, rather than a punishment or a curse. But in order to fully understand the medieval Islamic perception of multilingualism another essential question needs to be raised: what was the place assigned to Arabic within this providential design and amidst other languages?

As the sacred language of Islam, the Arabic language indisputably enjoyed in the premodern Islamic world (as it still does today)⁷ a unique form of linguistic prestige among both Arab and non-Arab Muslims. According to Islamic beliefs, Arabic is the language chosen by God, among all the others in the world, for the Qur'anic revelation, the conclusive and all-inclusive revelation sent to humankind. The intimate connection between the message and its linguistic expression is reiterated by the Qur'an itself in several passages where the Arabic language is mentioned by its own name (Qur'an 12, 2; 16, 103; 26, 192–95; 39, 28; 41, 3, 44; 43, 3).

وَإِنَّهُ لَتَنْزِيلُ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ نَزَلَ بِهِ الرُّوحُ الْأَمِينُ عَلَى قَلْبِكَ لِتَكُونَ مِنَ الْمُنذِرِينَ بِلِسَانٍ عَرَبِيٍّ مُبِينٍ

[Truly it is the *revelation* of the Lord of all Being, brought down by the Faithful Spirit upon thy heart, that thou mayest be one of the warners, in a *clear, Arabic tongue*.] (Qur'an 26, 192–95, 493; italics are my own)

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

[We have sent it down as an *Arabic Koran*; haply you will understand.] (Qur'an 12, 2, 306; italics are my own)

كِتَابٌ فَصَّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ

[A Book whose signs have been distinguished as an *Arabic Koran* for a people having knowledge.] (Qur'an 41, 3, 627; italics are my own)

Despite the centrality of Arabic within Islamic civilisation, some scholars countered that Arabic was not the original language of humanity and

7 Answering to a recent survey conducted among 5,268 university students from 16 different Arab countries, 93% of the interviewed students strongly agreed (65%) or agreed (28%) with the statement that the Arabic language is a sacred language (al-Baṭāl, Qanawāfi and al-Dīrāni 2020, 294).

further argued that it was not the only sacred language. The Qur'an itself vocally supports this by maintaining that all the prophets sent to humankind spoke to their respective peoples in their own language:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانٍ قَوْمِهِ لِئُبَيِّنَ لَهُمْ

[And We have sent no Messenger save with the *tongue of his people*, that he might make all clear to them.] (Qur'an 14, 4, 333; italics are my own)

In addition to that, it is important to note that although the sacred text of Islam makes explicit reference to just twenty-five messengers, it also states that there were other messengers whose stories have not been told and that every nation has its own messenger.

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلًا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ مِنْهُمْ مَنْ قَصَصْنَا عَلَيْكَ وَمِنْهُمْ مَنْ لَمْ نَقْصُصْ عَلَيْكَ

[We sent Messengers before thee; of some We have related to thee, and some We have not related to thee.] (Qur'an 40, 78, 626)

وَلَقَدْ بَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَسُولًا

[We sent forth among every nation a Messenger.] (Qur'an 16, 36, 353)

If every nation in the history of humanity had its own messenger and if every messenger brought a message to that nation in the language of its people, one is led to conclude that virtually every human language 'might have been a vehicle of God's message sometime in the history of the speakers of that language' (Syed 1986, 79). Therefore, the status of sacred language is a privilege that Arabic has to share with a great many other languages. In fact, according to *'ahādīth* sources, like the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Ibn Ḥibbān (d. 965), the total number of messengers (and relative divine messages) sent to humankind amounts to not less than 313 (or 314 in other versions) (al-Fārsī 2014, 453; *ḥadīth* 361).

But scholars asked why are there so many different divine messages conveyed through multiple sacred languages if God is one? Islamic thought tried to answer this crucial question by relating the diversity of languages (and of religious creeds) to the specific features and conditions that set apart the different human groups making up humanity. In the Epistle 31 on the origin of language diversification (*fī 'ilal ikhtilāf al-lughāt*), the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* linked the emergence of any difference not only in human languages but also in human beliefs, opinions, and religions to one common cause:



إن معرفة علل اختلاف اللغات والكلام والأصوات، ورسوم الخطوط والكتابات، وكيفية مبادئ المذاهب، واعتقادات الأراء والديانات، وأصل تكوينها ومبدئها وظهورها ومنشئها وتزيينها ونموها وكثرتها [...] لا تكون إلا بعد البيان والإيضاح عن الأصل الذي تفرعت عنه هذه الأمور التي ذكرناها

[The knowledge of the causes of the diversity of languages, speech, sounds, forms of scripts and writings, of the nature of the different schools of thought, systems of belief and religions, and of the origin of their formation, foundation, appearance, emergence, enrichment, development, and multiplication [can only be attained] by the clarification and identification of the root from which all the matters that we have mentioned have ramified.] ('Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' 1985, 84–85)

Such a root or original cause, for the mysterious brotherhood, is found in the process of adaptation to the distinct astrological and environmental conditions encountered by different human groups when they started spreading throughout the earth:

لما كثرت أولاد بني آدم، وانتشروا في جهات الأرض، ونزلت كل طائفة منهم إقليمًا من أقاليمها وقطرا من أقطارها من الربع المسكون، تولى كل قوم، في وقت نزولهم ذلك الإقليم، كوكب من الكواكب السبعة المدبرات، فعقد لهم عقداً

[When the children of Adam's sons increased in number and spread out in all directions over the earth, and each group settled in a different region and zone of inhabitable land, each people that had settled in a given region was put under the influence of one of the seven controlling stars and bound to it.] ('Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' 1985, 115)

Then, the language (*al-lughā*) and sacred legislation (*al-minhāj al-shar'ī*) of each people (*qawm*) in each region (*'iqlīm*)⁸ evolved and adapted to the specific features of that human group and of its new habitat on the basis of:

مزاج طبائعهم، وأهوية بلدانهم، وأغذيتهم، وما أوجبت لهم دلائل مواليدهم، وما تولاهم من الكواكب في وضع أصل تلك اللغة في الابتداء الوضعي والمنهاج الشرعي

[the mixture of their natures, the climate in their countries, their food, and what was required by the signs at their births and the influence of the stars when their language and sacred legislation were originally established and laid down.] ('Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' 1985, 114–15)

It is noteworthy that from the perspective of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* there seemed to be no implication at all of a divine punishment behind the emergence of different languages. Rather, language diversity, as well as religious diversity, was portrayed as being triggered by 'natural' differences in human conditions. This fascinating connection between languages and religions acquires a further symbolic dimension in the following

8 A loanword from Ancient Greek κλίμα 'slope, inclination, latitude, region, climate.'

passage from the *Kitāb mukhtār al-ḥikam wa-maḥāsini al-kalim* (*Selected Maxims and Aphorisms*), by the philosopher and historian al-Mubashshir (d. 1097),⁹ where the ability of prophet 'Idrīs to *speak in tongues* is associated with the establishment of different religious rules:

ودعا الخلاق من أهل سائر الأرض إلى الباري عز وجل باثنين وسبعين لساناً، وأتاه الله الحكمة وأقام لكل إقليم سنة تليق بهم وتقارب آراءهم [...] فكلّمهم بلغاتهم المختلفة وعلمهم وأدبهم

[In seventy-two languages he called the people of the entire earth's population to worship the Creator, the Mighty and High. God granted him wisdom (*al-ḥikma*) so that he spoke to them in their different languages, taught them and educated them [...] he established for each region (*iqḷīm*) a model of religious practice (*sunna*) for them to follow which corresponded to their views.] (al-Mubashshir 2018, 12; translation by van Bladel 2009, 186)

According to al-Mubashshir, Idrīs established in each region a religious norm that fitted the necessities and conditions of the people living in that area and that was articulated in the language of that human group. Moreover, it should be remarked that, for the Islamic tradition, while Idrīs could speak in the seventy-two languages of humanity, his actual language was none of those. In fact, he was considered the last prophet to have spoken the *suryāniyya* (the *Ursprache* described above by the 'Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', not historical Syriac) in its original form. The following is an excerpt from the book *al-Dhahab al-Ibrīz min Kalām Sayyidī 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Dabbāgh* (Pure gold from the words of Sayyidī 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Dabbāgh) relating the opinion on the matter of the famous Moroccan Sufi scholar al-Dabbāgh (d. 1719)¹⁰ as reported by his disciple al-Lamaṭī (d. 1743):

إن سيدنا آدم على نبينا وعليه الصلاة والسلام لما نزل إلى الأرض كان يتكلم بالسريانية [...] فبقيت السريانية في أولاده على أصلها من غير تبديل ولا تغيير إلى أن ذهب سيدنا إدريس على نبينا وعليه الصلاة والسلام فدخلها التبديل والتغيير

[When our master Adam—peace and blessings be upon our Prophet and upon him—descended to earth, he spoke in *suryāniyya* [...] and the *suryāniyya* kept its original form among his sons without change or modification until the time when our master Idrīs passed away—peace and blessings be upon our Prophet and upon him—then change and modification altered it.] (al-Lamaṭī 2002, 184)

Therefore, although his own language was the *suryāniyya*, Idrīs would speak to each people in its language. Likewise, whilst, as far as his religion is concerned, he is said to have been a follower of the *ḥanīfiyya* or *dīn al-qayyima*, the primordial religion of humanity (al-Mubashshir 2018, 14),¹¹ this did not prevent him from giving every people a religious norm that

9 Said to have been of Syrian descent, 'Abū al-Wafā' Al-Mubashshir ibn Fātik was a scholar of the Fatimid court in Cairo (Cottrell 2020). On the multiple European medieval and modern translations of his *Kitāb mukhtār al-ḥikam wa-maḥāsini al-kalim*, see Khalaf (2017).

10 'Abū Fāris 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Mas'ūd al-Dabbāgh al-Idrīsī al-Ḥasanī was a major Sufi master whose teachings had great influence on some of the most important Sufi masters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Thibon 2022, 246–49).

11 A Qur'anic reference to the passage: 'They were commanded only to serve God, making the religion His sincerely, men of pure faith, and to perform the prayer, and pay the alms—that is *the religion of the True* [*dīn al-qayyima*]' (Qur'an 98, 5, 807; italics are my own).



suited the specific needs of that specific human group and the peculiarities of its environment (*'iqlīm*). This parallel between the different religious practices assigned to different peoples and the seventy-two languages in which the prophet Idrīs spoke to those peoples is particularly striking and extremely significant in the context of the relation between language diversity and religious diversity.

In addition to that, it should be also observed that in al-Mubashshir's account Idrīs is described as an antediluvian prophet (*kāna qabla al-tūfān al-kabīr alladhī gharraqa al-dunyā*) (al-Mubashshir 2018, 12). Consequently, according to what he relates, different languages already existed even before the Great Flood and consequently, if we are to trust Biblical chronology, long before the construction of the Tower of Babel. The antediluvian language diversification, described above, rather than a chastisement, was again presented as the result of a divinely inspired adaptation. Furthermore, this providential adjustment was regarded as an act of translation of the same original and eternal divine content into different linguistic forms matching the natures and conditions of the various nations inhabiting the earth.

Such an essential symbolic connection between languages and religions had been already expressed by philosophers like al-Fārābī (d. 950) for whom language diversity became a metaphor of religious unity despite and behind multiplicity. As described by Richard Walzer, for al-Fārābī religions 'differ just as languages vary, although they all reproduce, in symbolic form, one and the same metaphysical truth' (Walzer 1985, 477). The same linguistic metaphor lies at the core of a well-known story found in Rūmī's (d. 1273) *Masnavi*. The famous Sufi master and poet relates the tale of four poor men from different countries who argue about how to spend a coin they have received. As it happens, they all want to buy the same thing, a bunch of grapes, but because they are referring to that same thing by using different names in their respective languages (*angūr* in Persian, *'inab* in Arabic, *üzüm* in Turkish, *stafyli* in Greek) they keep on quarrelling. Only a wise man knowing all their languages, points out Rūmī, could immediately end their disagreement simply by showing them the one and only reality concealed behind the different linguistic expressions they are using:

چار کس را داد مردی یک درم
 آن یکی گفت این به انگوری دهم
 آن یکی دیگر عرب بد گفت لا
 من عنب خواهم نه انگور ای دغا
 آن یکی ترکی بدو گفت این بنم
 من نمی خواهم عنب خواهم ازم
 آن یکی رومی بگفت این قیل را
 ترک کن خواهیم استاقیل را
 در تنازع آن نفر جنگی شدند

که ز سر نامها غافل بدند
مشت بر هم میزدند از ابلهی
پر بدند از جهل و از دانش تهی
صاحب سری عزیزی صد زبان
گر بدی آنجا بدادی صلحشاد
پس بگفتی او که من زین یک درم
آرزوی جملتان را می دهم

[Four men received a coin and they were poor;
One of them said, 'Let's spend it on *angur*!'
The second man, an Arab, screamed out, 'Stop!
Don't buy *angur*, but '*enab* from the shop!'
The third, a Turk, said, 'Just ignore the rest!
Don't buy '*enab*, for *uzum* tastes the best.'
'Stop all this talk!' the fourth, a Greek, then said,
'Because I want some *estafil* instead.'
They started quarrelling, each unaware
Of what the other names meant, what they share;
They punched each other out of ignorance—
Empty of knowledge, each of them a dunce.
A mystic knowing all their languages
Could have united these four savages;
He would have said, 'With this coin I will buy
Some grapes, which will each of you satisfy.]
(Rūmī 1933, 374–75; translation by Mojaddedi 2007, 216–17)

Vernaculars as vehicles of Islamic knowledge

As seen above, Arabic enjoys, within Islamic civilisation, a very distinctive form of linguistic prestige. This notwithstanding, the Qur'an not only denies the idea that the Arabic language is the only sacred language in the history of humankind, but explicitly maintains the providential nature of language diversity. Virtually any human language could have functioned in the past as a means for divine revelation and could consequently claim the status of sacred language. Moreover, language diversity, as already mentioned, became a metaphor for religious diversity and several authors explored the symbolic relation between different languages and different systems of beliefs. Each language was consequently considered the quintessence of the peculiarities of a specific human group (and of its environment) and the embodiment of the particular *Weltanschauung* of that group. As in the famous poem *Kull lisān 'insān* ('Every language is a



human being') by the Arab poet Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī (d. c.1348)¹² every *lisān*, language, ultimately identifies with an *insān*, a human being or rather a particular portion of humanity:

بِقَدْرِ لُغَاتِ الْمَرءِ يَكْتَبُ نَفْعُهُ
فَتِلْكَ لَهُ عِنْدَ الْمَلِكَاتِ أَعْوَانُ
تَهَافَّتْ عَلَى حِفْظِ اللُّغَاتِ مُجَاهِدًا
فَكُلَّ لِسَانٍ فِي الْحَقِيقَةِ إِنْسَانٌ

[Man's benefit increases by virtue of the languages he knows
and these are for him an aid in adversities
hence strive hard to learn languages
for every tongue, in essence, is a human being.] (al-Ḥillī, 1962, 669)

But if each human group and its specific vision of reality are so tightly and intrinsically connected to a particular language, would it have been possible to teach Islam in a language other than Arabic? The case of Persian was perhaps the least problematic. After an initial period of three or four centuries, during which 'we do not know to what extent people actually shifted to Arabic,' from the tenth century onwards, the language started to function as a fundamental medium for literary expression within Islamic civilisation and a powerful vehicle of Islamisation (Versteegh 2001, 490–91). In fact, Persian was 'the first important language deeply influenced by the cultural/linguistic superstratum of Arabic, the first to accept the Arabic script,' and 'the first to produce great cultural Islamic masterpieces' (Bausani 1975, 113). But scholars also asked about the various vernaculars, sometimes bereft of any former written tradition, let alone literary prestige, encountered by Islamic civilisation in its expansion and consolidation eastward and elsewhere—were they also suited to serve as vehicles of Islamic knowledge?

The Islamic preachers, and Sufis in particular, who in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries had reached remote and rural areas where the masses did not know Arabic, or Persian, asked themselves this very question.¹³ The answer was generally positive, although with some occasional hesitations or resistances (see below). Quite suggestively, in roughly the same years when Dante (d. 1321) was elaborating his theory of the eloquence of vernacular (*De vulgari eloquentia*) and encouraging the usage of vernacular for literary purposes, those Sufi preachers turned to local vulgar languages to convey, usually in form of poetry and songs related to mystical themes, their teachings to a public residing far from the main urban centres (Schimmel 1982, 135–69). Such a process, generally referred to as *vernacularisation of Islam*, involved, among many others, languages like Turkish, so-called Hindavi, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, and Balochi. Some of those languages not only had not been previously used

12 See Heinrichs (2012).

13 In those centuries Persian had already become a well-respected literary language within the Islamic world, see Green (2019, 17–29).

for literary works, but were actually written for the first time using a script elaborated by the same Sufi masters who wrote those earliest compositions (Anjum 2017, 219). Paradoxically, the fact of being devoid of any former written or literary tradition (and of any explicit connection to a prior religious tradition) might have even simplified the conversion of some of those vernaculars into literary Islamic languages.

Conversely, the resort to a language too closely associated with a religion other than Islam, in some cases, was met with some reservations. For instance, a few centuries later, in the seventeenth century to be precise, an author like Ābdul Hākīm (d. ca. 1670) still felt the need to justify his preference, over Arabic and Persian, for the Bengali language; a language that at the time was also used by the Brahmins as a means, alongside Sanskrit, to illustrate Hindu doctrines (Abdul Mannan 1964, 231–35).¹⁴ In the introduction to his Bengali version of the Persian text *Nur-nama*,¹⁵ as a final and incontestable argument to validate his choice of Bengali, Ābdul Hākīm invoked the already mentioned Qur’anic concept that God’s message was never exclusively associated with a single language:

14 Ābdul Hākīm ‘was a rural scholar who lived in the small kingdom of Bhuluya, between the expanding Mughal province of Bengal and the Arakanese kingdom, which was then home to a rich Bengali literary tradition’ (d’Hubert 2018, 668).

15 *Nur-nama* is ‘a cosmogony dealing with the creation of the universe by the Light of Muhammad’ and was ‘a ritual Persian text that was part of the daily environment of the Bengali Muslims from at least the seventeenth century on’ (d’Hubert 2019, 102–3).

আরবী ফারসী হিন্দে নাই দুই মত
যদি বা লিখএ আল্লা নবীর সিফাত
আরবী ফারসী শাস্ত্র কিবা হিন্দুয়ানী
সর্ব শাস্ত্রে লিখে আল্লা নবীর কাহিনী
আরব্য শহরে প্রভু মোহাম্মদ স্থান
নিযুজে আরবী বাক্য মুসাফ ফোরকান
উরিয়ান শহরেত বাক্য উরিয়ান
পাঠায় তৌরাত প্রভু মুসা নবী স্থান
ইউনান শহরেত ইউনান ভারতী
নিযুজে জব্বুর প্রভু দাউদের প্রতি
সুরিয়ান শহরেত বাক্য সুরিয়ান
পাঠাত ইঞ্জিল প্রভু ঈসা নবী স্থান
যেহি দেশে যেহি বাক্য কহে নরগণ
সর্ব বাক্য বুঝে প্রভু কিবা হিন্দুয়ানী
বঙ্গ দেশী বাক্য কিবা যথ ইতি বাণী
যার যেবা নিজ বাক্য প্রভু আরাধএ
পদুত্তর দেস্ত প্রভু আপনে লক্ষ্যত্র
যত ইতি বাক্য হস্তে প্রভু নহে দূর
যে যে রাজ্যে সে সে বাক্য বচন প্রভুর



[It makes no difference if God writes about the Prophet's qualities in Arabic, Persian, or in the language of Hind. Whether in Arabic, Persian, or Hinduyani, God wrote the Prophet's story in treatises. In the Arab country, the Lord provided Muhammad with a Quran (*musapha phorkana*) in Arabic language. In the country of the Uryan, he sent the Torah to the prophet Musa in Uryani. In Greece, he sent the Psalms (*jabbura*) to David in Greek. In the country of Syria, it is in the Syriac language that he sent the Gospel to Jesus. In all countries, whatever the language people speak, the Lord understands all of them, be it Hinduyani, the language of the country of Banga, or any other idiom. Whoever worships the Lord in his own tongue, he will address him accordingly. The lord does not ignore any language; whatever the kingdom, he knows its language.] (Ābdul Hākīm 2010, 8–9; translation by d'Hubert 2019, 104)

If, within the premodern Islamic world, non-Arabic vernaculars were generally accepted for literary purposes (and in even some cases transformed into full-fledge literary languages), one might wonder about the position of Arabic vernaculars with respect to *fushḥā* Arabic (the 'classical,' 'high' or 'standard' variety of Arabic used in literary compositions) and their role, if any, in written productions. We know that a diglossic linguistic situation had already emerged in the premodern Islamic world and that, through so-called 'Middle Arabic' texts, diglossia found its way 'in the domain of literary and semi-literary products' (Versteegh 2014, 80). However, the intrusion of vernacular into the literary realm was fundamentally unintentional and due to uncontrolled linguistic interference, and thus *fushḥā* remained the uncontested vehicle for literary, scientific, and religious works.

This notwithstanding, in the Andalusian context, the situation was quite different. The *kharajāt* (final verses) of the *muwashshahāt* compositions and the *zajal* poems often included lines in Romance as well as in Arabic vernaculars (Zwartjes 1997, 1–3). This use of Arabic (and Romance) vernaculars for poetic purposes was undoubtedly deliberate and arguably played a role in the ennoblement of vulgar languages, for literary ends, vis-à-vis prestigious languages like *fushḥā* Arabic (or Latin). For instance, *al-shaykh al-'akbar*, the 'Greatest Master' of Sufism, Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240) did not see any inconvenience in using the local Arabic dialect (he was a native of Murcia) for the composition of *zajal* poetry conveying elevated metaphysics teachings. The following is an excerpt from Ibn 'Arabī's *zajal* included in a collection of twenty-seven *muwashshahāt* and one *zajal* composed by the Andalusian master. Among other typical traits of Andalusian Arabic, we can notice the verbal forms *nazīd-ak* (I give you more) and *nirīd-ak* (I want you) beginning with the *n-* prefix (for the first

singular person of the imperfective tense) which is still common in today's Maghrebi dialects (Institute of Islamic Studies of the University of Zaragoza 2013, 88–89).

ارمات لى فالحين مع درا كهب
 فقلت اوفينى عنبرك الاشهب
 قالت نعم ان كان تعمل لى مركب
 من عودك الفواح وخذ نزيدك
 زبرجدان اخضر ومسكا اذفر
 والدرياق الاكبر الله اكبر
 فانا هو المطلوب وقال وعزر
 لمن تردنى قل اليك نريدك

[At that point there were cast up to me grey pearls,
 And I said: 'Grant to me your grey ambergris.'
 He said: 'Yes, if you can make a boat for me
 From your fragrant aloe. Take, and I shall give you more.
 Green chrysolis and perfumed musk,
 And the greater theriaca, which is "God is great!"
 Because I am what is sought.' And he said, reprimanding:
 'When you seek for me, say: "It is You that I want."'] (Arabic text
 and translation from Corriente and Emery 2004, 118–19)

The aesthetic appeal of similar compositions did not escape the attention of the historian of Andalusian descent, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) who praised 'the beauty of vernacular poetry' and challenged 'the chauvinism of Arab litterateurs, who held that vernacular poetry is by definition inferior to the classical tradition' (Mallette 2005, 123). Like Dante in his *De vulgari eloquentia*, he acknowledged the *balāghat al-‘āmmiyya* (eloquence of vernacular) that distinguished Andalusian Arabic. In his famous *Muqaddima*, in the last section, dedicated to *muwashshah* and *zajal* compositions, discussing the literary endeavours of 'ahl al-Andalus (the people of al-Andalus), Ibn Khaldūn affirmed:

ونظموا في طريقته بلغتهم الحضريّة من غير أن يلتزموا فيها إعرابا، واستحدثوه فنا سموه بالزجل،
 والتزموا النظم فيه على مناحيهم إلى هذا العهد، فجاوزوا فيه بالغرائب، واتسع فيه للبلاغة مجال
 بحسب لغتهم المستعجمة

[They made poems of the (*muwashshah*) type in their sedentary dialect, without employing vowel endings. They thus invented a new form, which they called *zajal*. They have continued to compose poems of this type down to this time. They achieved remarkable things in it. The (*zajal*) opened a wide field for eloquent (poetry) in the (Spanish-Arabic) dialect, which is influenced by non-Arab



(speech habits).] (Ibn Khaldūn 2004, 433; translation by Rosenthal 1958, 454, italics in the original)

The section also includes some final remarks which relativise the concept of eloquence by stating that the ability to recognize the eloquence of a given composition in a given language (or dialect) is culture-bound and depends on the linguistic habits of those who judge the work and on their familiarity with the linguistic vehicle employed. Very significantly for our discussion, such a diversity of perspectives is related by Ibn Khaldūn to the providential ‘variety of tongues,’ *ikhṭilāf al-ʿalsina*, expressed in the already illustrated Qur’anic passage from *sūrat al-Rūm* (Qur’an 30, 22) by whose verses the *Muqaddima* actually ends:

واعلم أن الأذواق كلها في معرفة البلاغة إنما تحصل لمن خالط تلك اللغة وكثر استعماله لها ومخاطبته بين أجيالها [...] وكل واحد منهم مدرك لبلاغة لغته، ذائق محاسن الشعر من أهل جلدته وفي {خلق السماوات والأرض واختلاف ألسنتكم وألوانكم} [الروم: ٢٢] آيات

[It should be known that taste as to what constitutes eloquence in connection with such poetry is possessed only by those who have contact with the dialect in which (a particular poem) is composed, and who have had much practice in using it among the people who speak it. [...] Everybody understands eloquence in his own dialect and has a taste for the beauties of the poetry of his own people. ‘In the creation of the heavens and earth and the difference of your tongues and colours, there are, indeed, signs for those who know’.] (Ibn Khaldūn 2004, 446; translation by Rosenthal 1958, 479–80)

This process of vernacularisation of Islamic knowledge thus resulted in the transformation of the multiple vernaculars encountered by the Islamic civilisation in its expansion into cultured literary languages. Those languages, in some cases lacking any previous writing system (and occasionally even including vernacular Arabic), thus ended up composing what some scholars refer to as the wide *Islamic language family*, which we discuss further below.

As dialects of a common literary and cultured language

The practice of mixing Arabic in literary works with different languages was not confined to the Andalusian context. In fact, it was quite common in the East too and especially in the form of a peculiar genre known as *macaronic* or *mulammaʿ* poetry¹⁶ encountered in areas like the Persian and Turkish regions, the Balkans, the Indian subcontinent, and others.¹⁷ In the Persian area, within such compositions, Arabic would normally be

16 For a problematisation of the use of such terminology see Virani (2008, 299–301).

17 On the use of term *macaronic* in relation to Hausa poetry, see Brigaglia (2018, 278–79).

mixed with Persian (and Persian dialects like Shīrāzī), Turkish, Greek, or Armenian (Virani 2008, 296). In the Indian subcontinent a usual combination would have been that of Arabic with Persian and Hindavi (Virani 2008, 297), while in the Balkan area macaronic poetry would encompass the use, alongside Arabic, of Bosnian, Ottoman Turkish, and Persian (Virani 2008, 297). Leaving aside the judgment of the aesthetic value of those works, similar multilingual productions are illustrative of the ease with which their plurilingual authors switched from one language to another. The extent of this familiarity with multiple languages and its symbolic and ideological implications caught the attention of some contemporary scholars of Islam. Thus, for the Italian orientalist Alessandro Bausani, by premodern Islamic authors ‘Turkish, Persian, Urdu *et similia* are perceived as dialects of a common literary and cultured language, stylistic forms assumed by a *quid* that in reality is a *single language*’ (Bausani 1981, 14; italics in the original).¹⁸

For Bausani, languages like Turkish, Persian, Urdu, and the other languages of the historical Muslim populations, despite their different genealogical affiliation, were considered as members of the culture-based linguistic family of *Islamic languages*. In Bausani’s view such a family comprised all the languages ‘deeply influenced’, especially on the graphic and lexical level, ‘by the great cultural languages of Islam: Arabic and Persian’ (Bausani 1975, 113). The Italian author is aware of the disputable nature of his argumentation and, to corroborate his point, adds ‘the concept of Islamic language is acceptable, especially, of course, if one adopts a definition of *Islām* that is not strictly religious in the conventional sense, but “cultural” [in a broad sense]’ (Bausani 1981, 3; italics in the original).

The explicit (or implicit) recognition of the common linguistic (and cultural) *superstratum*, acquired by Islamic languages from Arabic (and Persian), for Bausani, influenced the way the speakers of the various Islamic languages perceived their mutual connections not only in religious terms, but also from a cultural and linguistic point of view. The presence of this shared Islamic vocabulary, in his opinion, led to a widespread conception, among premodern Muslim peoples, of ‘the basic, cultural, non-ethnic “unity” of all Muslim languages’ that ‘though not clearly expressed’ was ‘certainly present in the consciousness of Muslim peoples’ (Bausani 1975, 112).¹⁹

In a similar vein, the Malaysian philosopher Syed Al-Attas emphasises the role played by the infusion of Islamically connoted Arabic loanwords, in the languages of the historical Muslim communities around the globe, in giving rise to a wide Islamic language family.²⁰ Those imported key terms, argues Al-Attas:

18 Alessandro Bausani (d. 1988) was a ‘prolific Italian Orientalist in several fields: Persian Literature, Islam, linguistics, the history of Islamic science, Urdu, Indonesian, and other Islamic literatures’ (Scarcia Amoretti 2008).

19 For a recent discussion and reappraisal of Bausani’s notion of Islamic languages, see Olivieri, Lancioni and Bernardini (2020).

20 Syed Muhammad al-Naqib bin Ali al-Attas (b. 1931) is one of the pioneers of the concept of *Islamisation of knowledge*. His numerous works deal with various aspects of Islamic thought and civilisation with a particular focus on Sufism, cosmology, metaphysics, philosophy, and Malay language and literature (Abaza 1999).



govern the interpretation of the Islamic vision of reality and truth, and which project the worldview of Islam in correct perspective. Because the words that comprise this basic vocabulary have their origin in the Holy Qur'ān these words are naturally in Arabic, and are deployed uniformly in all Muslim languages, reflecting the intellectual and the spiritual unity of the Muslims throughout the world. [...] In this way, each language of a Muslim people with every other has in common this Islamic basic vocabulary as its own basic vocabulary; and as such all languages of Muslim peoples indeed belong to *the same family of Islamic languages* (Al-Attas 2005, 34–35; italics are my own).

This process of infusion of Qur'anic terms is defined by Louis Gardet²¹ as an 'arabisation spirituelle' (Gardet 1977, 61) i.e. a process through which even those peoples:

[for whom Arabic remained a foreign, imported language, for whom the Arabic expression is the translation of an originally non-Arab thought, could not help but become Arabised in spite of everything, through liturgical prayer and meditation on the Qur'an, and above all perhaps through the contribution of the vocabulary.] (Gardet 1977, 63)

As with other ancient and premodern linguistic conceptions, such as that of Aeolism (the theory that Latin was a dialect of Greek), so also in the case of the Islamic language family, the speakers' own perception of belonging to a particular language family seems to count more than external linguistic objective factors; in other words, 'languages are similar because and to the extent the speakers are' (Stevens 2006/7, 116). Conversely, even closely related languages with remarkable genealogical affinities, could be considered, by their respective speakers, alien to each other for cultural and religious reasons.²²

One might agree or not with Bausani (or Al-Attas) on the idea that the various Islamic languages were perceived 'as dialects of a common literary and cultured language' (Bausani 1981, 14). Nevertheless, one is perhaps more disposed to admit that the recognition by the authors of macaronic poetry (be it explicit or implicit) that the various languages they mastered shared innumerable lexico-semantic convergences (fundamentally related to the expression of core Islamic values) must have ultimately affected the way they conceptualised language affinity and diversity and must have had an impact on their engagement in plurilingual practices.

21 Louis Gardet (d. 1986) was a French Catholic specialist of Islamic philosophy, theology, mysticism, sociology, and culture (Avon 2009).

22 An illustrative case in this sense, in the recent past, is that of the perception of the mutual affinities and differences between Urdu, Hindi, and Bengali in the post-Partition Pakistani debate about the choice of a national language for the newly founded state (Salvaggio 2020).

Conclusions

By looking at relevant Qur'anic passages and at the works of philosophers, historians, poets, and religious masters from different parts of the Islamic world (in whose writings those Qur'anic passages are frequently and quite systematically echoed) we have attempted to reconstruct the contours of the theoretical and symbolic background that governed the Islamic vision of multilingualism in the premodern world. In these conversations we can detect the emergence of a fascinating theory not only of language diversity but also of religious diversity within which the existence of various languages (and religious paths) is seen, rather than as a punishment or curse, as the consequence of the natural differences among distinct human groups and as a providential adaptation of a primordial and universal language (and truth) to the specific needs and conditions of those groups. As rightly pointed out by the German historian and medievalist Arno Borst (d. 2007) in his monumental *Der Turmbau von Babel* (The Tower of Babel), within Islam:

[Differentiation is not a punishment. The nations, too, are seen as a divided unity that is in God's hands. All are 'children of Adam'; [...] probably just like the diversity in nature, the division of peoples is also God's good work, not the result of quarrelling and strife.] (Borst 1957, 326)

To use Borst's expression, this 'Sprachen- und Völker- theologie' (Borst 1957, 328), that we could, perhaps, render as *theology of multilingualism and multiculturalism*, represented the conceptual (explicit or implicit) framework that justified the adoption of the multiple languages encountered by the Islamic civilisation in its expansion, as vehicles of Islamic knowledge. Moreover, it provided the fertile ground on which various vernaculars, regardless of their former written use or linguistic prestige, could be transformed into literary languages and become part of what has been defined by some as the *Islamic language family*. Before the emergence of the modern monolingual ideology of *one nation, one language*, such a multilingual model informed the way that premodern Islamic populations understood the linguistic and cultural connections between their respective languages. This model also produced generations of plurilingual authors with a full mastery of multiple languages that they consequently deployed in their multilingual literary and translation practices. Multilingual practices that, as in the case of Al-Andalus, even involved romance vernaculars with significant consequences for their destiny as future modern European literary languages.



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