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Teaching an Arabic Dialect to Non-Native Learner in the Mid-Fifteenth Century Case Study: Al-Balāṭī Manuscript

Abstract Teaching a form of Syrian dialect is documented in a manuscript by Ottoman poet and writer Ḥassān ibn Naṣūḥ ar-Rūmī al-Balāṭī dating back to around 1445. He aimed to instruct individuals interested in travelling to Arab countries in spoken Arabic. In his introduction, al-Balāṭī explains his motivation for writing this book, emphasizing his intention to move away from the traditional grammatical approach commonly used in Arabic language instruction. Instead, he employed communicative strategies; his work demonstrates his recognition of the contextual requirements for second language learners within an immersive setting. Additionally, al-Balāṭī utilised Ottoman Turkish as a medium language in teaching the Arabic dialects. The manuscript sheds light on the author's methodology for teaching the dialects spoken in northern Syria some 600 years ago. Furthermore, this paper will delve into his approach to grammar presentation, incorporation of cultural nuances and values, topic selection, and other aspects highlighted within the text.

Keywords Arabic dialects, Syrian Arabic, communicative approach, history of teaching Arabic, medium language, teaching culture

1 Introduction

The manuscript *Tercüme-i Hediyye-i Hassân* (*The Interpretation of Ḥassān's Gift*) is considered to be the earliest educational source with complete methodological foundations in the field of Teaching Arabic as a Second Language (henceforth TASL), as it nears its 600th year since it was written. This paper presents the re-

search team's conclusions after analysing the manuscript (El-Balâtî 2024) and its preliminary study from various linguistic and pedagogical aspects.

Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the manuscript is that it was developed to teach spoken Arabic to those wishing to travel to Arab regions, in addition to the conscious communicative approach in the manuscript's structure.

The writing of this work dates back to the middle of the fifteenth century, perhaps even to an earlier date, as evidenced by the Arabic-Persian version of the book dated to 1445–1446 and the copying record found at the end of the approved copy, which indicates that it was written in the year 956/1549–1550 in Aleppo.

The author of the manuscript is, as he states in the introduction to his book, just 'a person who loves the Arabic language'; he left his own country and lived among the Arabs for many years and with this work wished to help those who seek to develop their speaking abilities. In the manuscript he uses Ottoman Turkish as the medium language.

This paper relies on the Ottoman Turkish version of the manuscript found in libraries in Turkey (henceforth Text#1), but there is another version of the manuscript in which the medium language is Persian (henceforth Text#2). However, careful comparison between the two versions revealed a clear discrepancy between them, as discussed below.

The paper aims to offer a detailed presentation of the manuscript: the development of TASL, the didactic approach used in the book, teaching Arabic dialects, and the intertwining of the Syrian, Egyptian, and Iraqi dialects with *Fuṣḥā* Arabic (henceforth *Fuṣḥā*) in the manuscript, in addition to some other linguistic phenomena.

2 The author

The author refers to himself as 'the poor Ḥassān ar-Rūmī, brother of Muṣṭafā Šāʕir al-Balāṭī ibn Naṣūḫ' (Text#1, 1/b) and as 'Ḥassān ar-Rūmī al-Balāṭī al-Mantašāwī' (Text#2). Ottoman historian and bibliographer Kātib Celebī (d. 1067/1657) (a.k.a. Ḥaǧ Ḥalīfa) mentions him as 'Ḥassān ibn Naṣūḫ Faqīh ar-Rūmī' (1941: 2:2042). He originated from al-Balāṭ, an ancient district in the Didim region of Aydın, Western Turkey (Emecen 1992: 5–7), while 'Menteşe' refers to a region in south-western Anatolia during the Ottoman era (Mete 2004: 29:150–152). The term 'Rūm' refers to Anatolia in a general sense.

In his book, the author provides very little information about himself, but he states that he was just a person interested in learning the language and not one of the scholars and notables of his time. Perhaps this was due to his humility; if we assume that, he was the 'Poet of the Palace'. He also mentions that he left his country and his people for 10 years to settle in an Arab land to learn the Arabic language. It is interesting that he names one of the characters in his book after himself. He says

about him: 'He made it to eighty and that he was ten years old during the Timurid era (1370–1405)' (Text#2, 1/b). If we assume that this character refers to himself and that he is giving factual information, based on the dates given in Text#2 (850/1445–1446) we can say that the author was born in the second half of the fourteenth century and lived until the mid-fifteenth century.

In writing this book, the author aimed to seek the pleasure of God, guided by the advice of his teacher who stated, 'Whoever imparts knowledge to others will receive a significant reward' (Text#1, 2/a–b).

3 A comparison between the Persian and Ottoman versions

Three copies of the manuscript were discovered, two of them in the Turkish Ottoman language as a medium language; they are similar despite one of them missing a few pages. The first copy was found in the National Library in Ankara (Ref. A4870, i.e. Text#1). The second one is an incomplete copy in the Ankara University Library Mustafa Cön Section, reference number A349.

Figure 1. Hadiyya-i Ḥassān, 1b–2a. National Library in Ankara (Ref. A4870)

As for the third copy, it is written in Persian and is in the Istanbul University Library's Rare Books Section, reference number FY 01153 (Text#2 in this paper). It is not possible to verify which one of the three copies appeared first and is the original copy, as Text#2 is dated in its introduction to the year 1445–1446. How-

ever, the general assumption is that the original is Text#1 because of the origin and story behind the writing of the manuscript in the introduction, although this cannot be definitively proved.

This paper, therefore, is an investigation of Text#1, as the findings of the initial comparison between the two manuscripts exceeded 2000 observations and comments, something that from a practical point of view cannot be fairly dealt with here. It is hoped to publish these findings sometime in the near future.

Each of the two copies adapted the text by changing some place names and words, whether in the introduction or in the body of the text, for example: 'I followed the advice of this teacher and translated some words and sentences from the Arabic to the Turkish' (Text#1, 2/a); while the word 'Turkish' is replaced by 'Persian' (Text#2, 2/a); or omitting/adding a localised specific statement representing one's culture: '… as an example of this is a Bedouin Turk who grew up in the mountains, if he attends the judge's council … this Bedouin Turk remains confused' (Text#1, 2/b); 'Bedouin Turk' is replaced with 'a man' (Text#2, 3/a–b).

The characteristics of Text#1 is that it is presented in 43 leaflets, each with two pages without a cover or binding. It is also written in the Naskh script with great care and precision; the Arabic phrases in it are written in red, while the Turkish phrases are in black, rendering the reading visually easier for the learner. For easier transition, the first word of the first line on the left-hand page (B) of each leaflet is written at the bottom of the right-hand page (A). The manuscript itself is also well preserved from damage, be it fungal, human negligence or abuse, or signs of decomposition, and was not exposed, in whole or in part, to burning or moisture. It can be said that this manuscript is free of blemishes and defects almost to the point of perfection.

4 The significance of the manuscript

The manuscript begins with an introduction in which the author explains his aim and his method of authorship. He also points to some important issues (Text#1, 2/a–4/b), such as:

- the importance of learning languages,
- the role of translators in society,
- the varying levels of language mastery between intellectuals and non-intellectuals,
- among non-Arabs, some learners' inability to speak Arabic language,
- the need for 'language immersion' to develop speaking skills,
- the reason for his use of the spoken Arabic in his book rather than *Fuṣḥā*, and the difference between this and the rules of grammar and morphology.

The organisation of the manuscript is based on teaching vocabulary or phrases in contextual dialogues and translating them into Turkish. The author provides conjugations listed one word after the other and separated with the meaning of each one given in Turkish.

The reader may find some similarities between this manuscript approach and the 'spaced repetition approach', which is essentially based on the theory of the 'forgetting curve' developed by the German scientist Herman Ebbinghaus in 1885. However, it is important to note that we are not presenting this approach as a precedent to the theory of teaching a second language in the modern era of linguistic communication. In fact, it is primitive and incomplete as far as teaching SL theory is concerned, although it gave rise to the awareness of the needs of learners and a search for effective pedagogical answers.

In addition, the author is keen to address various contextual linguistic topics. The book includes many phrases and much vocabulary that can be used in the main areas of daily and practical life, indicating the author's representation of the learner's needs. Al-Balāṭī ends his book with a glossary grouped by topic in an attempt to enhance the learner's mental word-capacity.

The importance of the manuscript from al-Balāṭī's point of view lies in his conscious interpretations of his methodology and the style that he created and followed. He is creative in the presentation of his methodology, which reflects both his full awareness and his personal experience and first-hand observations of the results and outcomes, which were based on the methods of learning and linguistic teaching and their approach in his time. He illustrates this by avoiding the common 'grammatical approach' prevalent in his era, which Versteegh (2006: 4) describes as a consequence of the approach to foreign languages: 'The lack of material for learning the language as opposed to studying grammar also tallies with the Arabs' almost complete disinterest in other languages'.

In his short but detailed introduction, al-Balāṭī explains a number of factors affecting language learning and teaching, including language context, language transfer, immersive environment, dialectical dimension, and the effect of social disparity on linguistic performance. He thus states the importance of learning, especially the learning of languages: 'Every tongue is a human being' (Text#1, 2/a).

The manuscript explores various fields, with special emphasis on it serving as a teaching tool for colloquial Arabic in its communicative context, often referred to as 'intermediary Arabic.' It also acts as a valuable source that helps researchers to provide new perspectives to understand the development of Arabic dialects. Given the manuscript's inclusion of dialectal confusion and linguistic errors, an examination of these elements may reveal whether their occurrence 'reflects a diachronic development in the spoken language' (Versteegh 2014: 156). The majority of the manuscript emphasises Syrian dialects as the earliest forms of Arabic, with the analysis concentrating on phonological and morphological phenomena,

as well as other aspects explored by scholars, whose influence remains visible in modern colloquial Arabic (Zwartjes and Woidich 2012).

Ibn Fāris (941–1004) divides the levels of Arabic into three shifts: 'Speech is of three shifts: one shared between the elite and the commoners, and that would be the lowest level of speech, another shift is "wild", which disappeared when those who spoke it disappeared' (in Maʕtūq 2005: 110). In light of this, al-Balāṭī's text shows a general understanding of the linguistic context, and therefore divides society according to their linguistic use (e.g. farmer, Bedouin, judge).

On examining the manuscript, several linguistic characteristics come to light. Notably, there is a presence of diverse dialectal influences extending beyond the contemporary Syrian geographical context and incorporating elements from other neighbouring dialects. Additionally, the text reveals a few instances of language transfer, particularly from Turkish into Arabic. It prompts an examination of how *Fuṣḥā* has influenced the author's expression in the colloquial Syrian Arabic. The manuscript reveals an overlap between the Syrian Aleppo dialects, associated with the people of the Euphrates and elements of Iraqi dialect. Furthermore, it enables the tracing of the evolution of the Syrian dialect from the time the book was written up to the present day. Lastly, Text#1 stands as a valuable historical record for scholars interested in the evolution of the Turkish language, offering abundant material on the Turkish spoken in Anatolia during the fifteenth century, including unique linguistic features and phenomena of that period.

The contribution of the manuscript does not stop at the linguistic aspects that can directly impact linguists, but the information it contains can be studied anthropologically in the various social contexts of that period, as it exposes various aspects of social life such as travel, eating, drinking, bathing, marriage, singing, buying and selling, education, agriculture, etc.

4.1 Intellectual and historical context

The Islamic conquests helped to give Arabic prestige because of its connection with learning Islam and Quranic studies (Al-Hassani 2012: 64; Boyacioğlu 2015: 651), until it became 'a subject for learning a foreign language, and then it became a second language, then a mother tongue for later generations. In other regions, conditions gave the Arabs heightened status and prestige in a social context, but it did not give them a numerical majority' (aš-Šarqāwī 2013: 174).

In this context, during the Middle Ages non-Arabs in general, and Turks in particular, learned Arabic in schools by studying grammar and language books. The introduction of the basics of grammar and vocabulary aimed to enable learners to reach a linguistic proficiency appropriate for understanding religious and scientific texts, and to be productive in this language.

The terms 'school' and 'college' in Ottoman culture were an institutional evolution from the 'circles system' in mosques, scholars' homes, or informal Quranic

Madrassas, which found its financial backing in the endowment system (*waqf*) (Al-Hassani 2012: 66; Naǧm 2021: 25–30; Boyacioğlu 2015: 652). Al-Balāṭī witnessed the evolution of scientific and intellectual movement and the Ottoman educational system, and its transition to 'professionalism' during the reign of Sultan Murad II, continuing into the seventeenth century (İpşirli 2015: 129–32). Al-Hassani (2012: 66) confirms:

> By the 15th century, the Ottomans have revolutionized schools by setting up learning complexes in towns like Istanbul and Edirne in Turkey. Their school system was called Kulliye, and constituted a campuslike education.

The 'Arabic' in the Ottoman school system was *Fuṣḥā*, where dialects had no place in the programmes of these institutions, which explains the lack of any communicative goals and functional language. Turkish, on the other hand, was used as a medium language in the educational process and the student relied on memorisation of the rules of morphology and grammar, reading religious texts with the teacher, parsing and analysing them (Hazer 2002: 281–282).

The communicative aspect of Arabic was not a common phenomenon before the establishment of modern schools under the influence of Western curricula in the nineteenth century. There was no room for colloquial language in the programme of the ancient classical schools. However, some appeared before this period presenting contextual dialogues in dialects in forms of dictionaries, such as: *Lugat* (dictionary) which contains an appendix showing a dialogue in colloquial Arabic and Turkish; *Mükâleme ve Lugat* (speech and dictionary) which was written to teach the Turkish language to the Arabs through contextual dialogues in colloquial Arabic and their translation; and a four-language dictionary (Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Greek) which includes dialogues in these languages (Topuz 2019).

However, during the Islamic conquests 'Arabs provided a reasonable Arabic introduction to non-Arabs for the functional purpose of facilitating communication between people of the target language, which is Arabic, and other linguistic groups that do not speak that language' (aš-Šarqāwī 2013: 19). Naǧm states that the language of communication between non-Ottoman scholars, Arabs, and Iranians, was Arabic, in addition to being the language of instruction, 'however, a number of Ottoman teachers who were fluent in the Turkish language used to give their lessons in Turkish in those schools' (2021: 51–52).

5 Principles of the communicative approach

The struggles of learners of Arabic and their inability to communicate inspired al-Balāṭī to write his work: 'I authored this book in this style because I saw students of knowledge unable to speak when they wanted to communicate and converse with the illiterate in the Bilād aš-Šām and Egypt using [eloquent] words' (Text#1,

2/a). He also points out the difference between *Fuṣḥā* and colloquial language from the point of view of communication: 'Although the people of knowledge are able to understand the speech of the illiterate, the illiterate do not understand their eloquent speech' (Text#1, 2/a). His clarity of purpose is reflected in the approach he adopted in his book, categorising and presenting the priorities of communication over a grammatical approach.

Although the writer describes his book as a dictionary—'and I arranged this dictionary in this manner so that the elite and the common people can understand it'—he also qualifies this statement: 'many scholars have written dictionaries of Arabic and non-Arabic languages, but most of these works were arranged around single words'. He chose a different style, being aware that a word outside its abstract and syntactic context loses much of its communicative value and does not inform the learner of the various linguistic phenomena to which it is exposed:

> He [the learner] may need to postpone what should be advanced; and advance what should postponed, so his speech becomes incoherent. Those who turn to learn the language of the Arabs must know the masculine and feminine forms in this language, and how to use them … (Text#1, 2/b–3/a)

This approach does not constitute a dictionary presentation but rather an educational book formulated on clear didactic foundations, for pedagogical uses that serve the desired learning outcomes and goals, directed at a specific target group.

The following few paragraphs discuss the issues that directly affect the philosophy of the book and its methodology. Among the issues to be examined are the writer's didactic approach, the style of the writer's study of different linguistic skills, and how to treat them. It is necessary to understand the importance of the impact of the communicative context and the immersive environment, as well as the writer's approach to teaching grammar, including the treatment of the dialectal dimension of Arabic and its impact on the writer's educational approach and the language he uses.

The author sets a goal to teach Arabic in 'three or four months', appreciating it is a difficult task when children need up to seven years to learn their native language, but as he states, 'Let people learn quickly …' and 'I wrote it so that a person can learn quickly' (Text#1, 3/a). He responds to the criticism that may be raised about the length of the explanations and dialogues in the book, by saying that his aim to teach many rules and customs in a short time has forced him to do so.

5.1 The 'QaraÞa' as a target group

The manuscript begins directly with contextual examples, without an introduction to the phonological and orthographical control of the Arabic alphabet for beginners; these must be known to the target learners at an earlier stage while

learning to read the Qurʔān. This group of Qaraʔa will have learned how to recite the Qurʔān separately from learning Arabic for communication purposes (al-Hamad 2020).

While schools in Morocco tended to teach reading, writing, and sometimes memorization using the board-writing method (Abdellah and Haridy 2017: 65), schools in the Levant tended to teach reading the Qurʔān without writing (Osman 2003: 52). The learners' knowledge of the Uthmanic script in which the manuscript is written, must have made it easier for them to hone good orthographic skills.

Phonological control should not pose many challenges to the Qaraʔa despite their inability to articulate some phonemes accurately (al-Hamad 2020: 37). Al-Ǧāḥiḍ commented on this phenomenon: '[s]ome nations confuse similar sounds and mispronounce them, borrowing features from their own language' (2013: 1:53) and detailed the phonological challenges faced by different nations.

In general, errors can occur in L2 production for different reasons, including over-generalization, simplification, underuse, and a lack of knowledge of the rules (al-Ḥamad and ʕAlawī 2016). Al-Balāṭī demonstrated his awareness of language transfer effect on learners' competence when he designed his book: 'Every group when it is taught a new language relies on its native language and transfers the use of their language in the new language' (Text#1, 2/b). Therefore, neglecting to make provision to rectify these errors may lead to the acceptance of fossilised errors: 'some became accustomed to hearing the errors and the way non-Arabs talk to the point that they began to understand it' (al-Ǧāḥiḍ 1 :2013:105–106).

Al-Balāṭī draws attention to the effect of language transfer on a syntactical level: 'If you want to say *ʔibn Muḥammad* (son of Muhammad), you put the word *Muḥammad* first [in Turkish] but the Arabs use the word *ʔibn* in this structure, and if they want to say *Gel tuz ekmek yiyelim* (come, let's eat bread and salt), they say *taʕal tanaʔkul ḫubzu milḥ* (تَعَل تَنْأَكُل خُبْزُ مِلْح) [i.e. they change the order of the words in the sentence]'. He continues: 'He [the learner] may want to postpone what should be advanced; and advance what should be postponed, therefore his speech becomes incoherent' (Text#1, 2/b).

One of the common errors at a morphological level among Turkish learners of Arabic is the confusion of genders. Al-Balāṭī explains:

> [You should] know that there is no masculinity and femininity in the languages of seventy-two nations. Those who decide to learn the language of the Arabs must know the masculinity and femininity in this language. And how to use it. (Text#1, 3/a)

5.2 Al-Balāṭī's remarks on communicative language and immersion

Since the communicative school's supremacy over FL/L2 research and practice, there has been a rise in the importance of sociolinguistic and practical skills for the teaching of language communicatively (Baddūḫ 2018: 66; European Council 2020: 136–142), which will 'reconstruct a realistic model of Arabic language use and language users' (Wahba 2006: 139). Al-Balāṭī responded to the imminent need—as he saw it—to avoid the grammatical approach, which in his opinion did not meet the desired language skills, as mentioned above.

However, the shift to *Fuṣḥā* cannot be appropriate for everyday use as a communicative language in an immersive situation, and Wilmsen (2006: 131) therefore determined that 'Communicative Arabic is largely vernacular Arabic', which, according to him, calls for teaching colloquial Arabic, as classical Arabic alone is not sufficient for communication. While it is commonly claimed without empirical scientific support that 'It is so clear that speaking fuṣḥā in informal situations is problematic' (Ryding 2013: 178), Arabs using *Fuṣḥā* or their dialects when travelling to other Arab countries find friendly welcome, understanding, and even greater respect; we assume, therefore, that there is a degree of generalisation of negative experiences or making fun of some stories to prove a point rather than relying on scientific evidence.

This is indeed what al-Balāṭī refers to in his introduction, justifying his choice of the dialect over *Fuṣḥā*, when he states:

> Although the learned people are able to understand illiterate people's speech, these people do not understand their [learned people's] high variety. An example of this is that of a Turkish Bedouin who grew up in the mountains; if he comes to the judge's court and speaks in informal words the judge would understand him, but if the judge speaks in formal linguistic and idiomatic words, this Turkish Bedouin remains confused and does not understand what the judge is saying to him. (Text#1, 2/a–2/b)

In this statement, al-Balāṭī tries to offer a justification for choosing to teach colloquial language in response to what he sees as an urgent need in his society.

Linguistic immersion represents an ideal communicative environment in daily contexts, such as the market, work, and family, among others. Al-Balāṭī believed that the immersive language experience develops a learner's skills, 'But my desire was to learn the language. For that reason, I lived in the land of the Arabs for ten years and left my tribe and family' (Text#1, 2/a).

The learner's motive contributes to defining the language shift, as aš-Šarqāwī (2013: 218) explains: 'The type of Arabic that is supposed to be learned by an administrative employee who wants to maintain his job is different from the type of Arabic spoken by a worker, farmer, or simple merchant with the target language people in contexts of buying and selling'.

If the purpose of the communicative approach were 'to make the analysis of the learner's linguistic needs the basic starting point in every linguistic lesson aimed at teaching and learning the language' (ʔArsalān 2016: 478), this is because the purpose of the language is to serve as a tool for social interaction; as Simon Dick said, 'and this tool is not achieved in and of itself, but rather is achieved through the effectiveness of the specific use of social interaction between members of society' (quoted in Baddūḥ 2018: 66).

Al-Balāṭī organised the book on the basis of contextual dialogues in various fields and activities, e.g. greetings and getting to know each other as in *ʔaṣluka min ʔayn… ʔibni man ʔanta… ʕumruka kam sanah* (اَصْلُكَ مِنْ اَيْن... اِبْنِ مَنْ اَنْتَ... عُمْرُكَ كَمْ سَنَه) 'where are you originally from? … son of whom you are? … how old are you?' (Text#1, 8/b and 9/a), food *hāti al-miʕlaqah, taʕal ta-naʔkul ḫubzu milḥ* (هاتِ المِغْلَقَه... تَعَل تَنَاكُّل خُبْزُ مِلْح) 'give me the spoon, come so we would eat bread [and] salt' (Text#1, 37/a), bathing *ʔiġsilnī bi-ṣ-ṣābūni… ǧib lī fūṭah… sarraḥtu ḏaqnī* (اِغْسِلْنِي بالصَّابُونِ... جِبْ لِى فُوطَه... سَرَّحْتُ دَقْنِى) 'wash me with soap … get me the towel … I combed my beard' (Text#1, 27/a), praying and ablution *ʔanta ʕalā wuḍū… taʕal nuṣallī… ʔanā ṣallaytu ṣalāta aṣ-ṣubḥ* (اَنْتَ عَلَى وُضُو... تَعَلْ نُصَلِّى... اَنَا صَلَّيْتُ صَلوةَ الصُّبْح) 'do you have ablution? … come let's pray … I have prayed the morning prayer' (Text#1, 38/a), travelling *ʔayimta tusāfir ʔanta… al-musāfir dāyim ʕalā safar… hawni qāfilah šayʔ tarūḥ li-š-šām* (اَيِمْتَ تُسَافِرْ اَنْتَ... المُسَافِرِ دَايِمْ عَلَى سَفَرْ... هَوْنِ قَافِلَه شَئ تَرُوحْ لِلشَّامْ) 'when will you travel? … the traveller is always travelling … is there a caravan here going to Damascus?' (Text#1, 10/a), shopping *man yaǧī minkum maʕī ʔilā as-sūqi… kam faras tarīd tastakrī* (مَنْ يَجِى مِنْكُمْ مَعِى اِلَى السُّوقِ... كَمْ فَرَسْ تَرِيدْ تَسْتَكْرِى) 'who of you would come with me to the market? … how many horses do you want to rent?' (Text#1, 10/a), among many others. The author sought to expand the material with dialogues to encompass different aspects of life in addition to their interconnection so that it leads you to think of it as one story.

The events of these dialogues generally took place around the Anatolia-Damascus-Egypt axis. The main characters in the dialogue, Ḥassān and his friend Qāsim, who left Karaman and wanted to rent a vehicle to go from Aleppo to Damascus, searched for a convoy to take them from Damascus to Egypt, as well as to other cities mentioned in the dialogues.

The author added lists of words he thought would be useful to the reader. These lists were classified according to the following topics: family and relatives, organs, clothing, birds, animals, writing tools, food, minerals, vegetables and fruits, agriculture, work tools, oven tools, nature, drawing, dimensions, words with similar sounds, and similar numbers.

5.3 Al-Balāṭī's approach to grammar

Among the things that characterise this manuscript is the methodology that al-Balāṭī followed to teach Arabic to non-Arabs by avoiding the common approach of 'grammatical classification' in teaching the language. He insists on this: 'The reader will not reprove me because I have not arranged this book according to the rules of grammar and morphology' (Text#1, 2/a). Nonetheless, his experience in learning Arabic and his observations of learners' abilities and skills made him realise that the approach the learner needs to follow in order to communicate with Arabs in daily life contexts and situations may differ from the approach that he might need for the purposes of translation, research, and reading texts (Text#1, 2/a–b). Many researchers and linguists tend to agree with the focus on communication and on the functionality of the language without being preoccupied with learning grammatical rules (Maʕtūq 2005: 178; Osman 2003: 52, 56; aš-Šarqāwī 2013: 218, among others).

When Ibn Ḫaldūn spoke about the importance of listening as 'the father of linguistic faculties', he emphasised that grammatical rules developed as a result of a referential need that arose from the erosion of tongues and was not a method or reason for production (Ibn Ḫaldūn 2013: 546); he therefore declared that communicative skills are not achieved by learning the rules rather than by using them (Osman 2003: 56), as 'communicative competence is the set of rules that allows an individual to use natural language appropriately in a specific communicative situation, and without knowledge of those rules, grammar rules lose their importance' (ʔArsalān 2016: 478–480).

This understanding is reflected in the style of al-Balāṭī's book in most of its aspects, in which he chose to balance linguistic, sociolinguistic, and practical skills. Yet, grammar was reflected occasionally in the book, where verb conjugation is often represented as in *ʕaraftu… ʕarafnā… ʕarafta… ʕaraftum… ʕarafa… ʕarafū* (عَرَفْتُ... عَرَفْنَا... عَرَفْتَ... عَرَفْتُمْ... عَرَفَ... عَرَفُوا) 'I knew, we knew, you (m.sg.) knew, you (m.pl.) knew, he knew, they (m.) know' (Text#1, 13/a), or as in *ʔaš taḍḥak… yaḍḥak… lā taḍḥak ʕalaynā… ḍaḥika* (آشْ تَضْحَكْ... يَضْحَكْ... لاَ تَضْحَكْ عَلَيْنَا... ضَحِكَ) 'why do you (m.sg.) laugh, he laughs, do not (m.sg.) laugh, he laughed' (Text#1, 23/b), the author may introduce different forms of a verb as in *ʔaʕʕil… ʔinšaʕal… šaʕaltu… ištaʕaltu* (اَشْعِل... إِنْشَعَلْ... شَعَلْتُ... اشْتَعَلْتُ) 'sit a flame, he/it was sat on flame, I sat something/someone on flame, I was sat on flame' (Text#1 30/a).

However, the author did not restrict himself to the grammatical structure appear in *Fuṣḥā* but used forms that might be exclusively dialectical as in *ʕatawkum šay?* (عَطَوْكُم شَيئ) 'have they given you anything?', *naḥnā ʕaṭaynāhum šay?* (نَحْنَا عَطَيْنَاهُمْ شَيئ) 'we have given them something' (Text#1, 11/b), it is noticeable that the word šī meaning 'thing' is written in *Fuṣḥā* form (i.e. *šay?*).

5.4 Al-Balāṭī's approach to dialect

As mentioned above, al-Balāṭī's experience must have influenced the approach he followed in the book which he designed to be a practical communicative resource in an immersive environment, and in view of this he chose the Syrian dialect.

The dialectal use in most of the examples is inconsistent, whether it is in the interrogative *ʔaš ʔismuka* (أَشْ اِسْمُكَ) 'what is your (m.) name?' (Text#1, 4/a) and *ʔayimta tusāfir ʔanta* (اَيِمْتَ تُسَافِرْ أَنْتَ) 'when are you (m.sg.) travelling?' (Text#1, 10/a); the articles *qul lū tā yaʔkul* (قُلْ لُو تَا يَاْكُلْ) 'tell (m.sg.) him to eat!' (Text#1, 6/b); the adverbs *kāna hawni qāfilah* (كَانَ هَوْنِ قَافِلَه) 'there was a caravan here' (Text#1, 10/a); the verb conjugation *kunt baʕrif* (كُنْتُ بَعْرِف) 'I used to know' (Text#1, 7/a), *ʕaš bi-taʕmal yawma al-qiyāmah* (أَشْ بِتَعْمَلْ يَوْمَ القِيَامَه) 'what would you (m.sg.) do in the Day of Resurrection?' (Text#1, 34/a), and *ʔaǧī mina ar-rūmi* (أَجِى مِنَ الرُّومِ) 'I came from the Romans' [lands]' (Text#1, 8/b); or replacing the letter *wāw* in place of a *damma fī ḥālū* (فِى حَالُوا) 'minding his business' (Text#1, 16/b). In the last example the scribe mistakenly added *ʔalif fāriqah* (the differential *ʔalif*) which marks the end of conjugated verbs to a 3rd person m.pl., despite the same word appearing correctly written in three examples in the manuscript as in *ḥalli yarūḥ fī ḥālū* (خَلِّ يَرُوحُ فِى حَالُو) 'let him alone' (Text#1, 23/b).

At the same time, we find dialect confusion in the manuscript, and this may be due to the writer not distinguishing dialect overlap in a socially active multi-dialect environment. Despite the fact that book is in Syrian dialect as expressed in the above examples, a few Egyptian words such as *waḥš* (وَحْش) 'unkind/bad' (Text#1, 33/a) are attested.

Writing the dialect in Arabic poses various challenges, which may lead to orthographic, phonologically based errors (al-Hamad and Mohamed 2020; Ryding 2013: 177). The levels of education and illiteracy in societies affect linguistic production in general, whether spoken or written; according to Versteegh (2014: 153):

> In every linguistic community, there is a certain distance between the colloquial language and the written norm, in spelling, lexicon and even in structure. But in those communities in which there is an institutionalised relationship between a high and low variety (called: diglossia …), the distance between the written standards and normal everyday speech is very large.

It is possible that al-Balāṭī devised his own system by using Arabic letters to represent colloquial Arabic sounds that do not exist in *Fuṣḥa*. An example of this is replacing the third person singular masculine pronoun *hu* with the letter *wāw* as in *ruḥ lū* (رُخْ لُو) 'go to him' (Text#1, 18/b). Sometimes, he tends to add the letter *ʔalif* at the end of the jussive verb as in *lā tansā rabbak* (لاَ تَنْسَا رَبَّكَ) 'do not forget (m.sg.) your Lord' (Text#1, 34/a), even though it appears in another example with a *fatḥa* instead of the letter *ʔalif* as in *lā tansa…* (لا تَنْسَ...) 'do not

forget (m.sg.) …' (Text#1, 33-b). There is a tendency to drop the letter *nūn* in all masculine plural present verbs without placing *ʔalif fāriqah* as in *yuḥarriqū ǧisma-ka* (يُحَرِّقُو جِسْمَكَ) 'they burn your body' (Text#1, 34/a). Or he may connect words that may appear differently in *Fuṣḥā* as in (أَقُلُوهُمْ) *ʔaqulūhum* 'I tell them' (Text#1, 11/b) instead of (أَقُّولُ لَهُمْ).

However, the author himself repeatedly makes language transfer errors: *hāḏā aṯ-ṯulūǧu* (هٰذَا الثُّلُوجُ) 'this piles of snow' (Text#1, 8/a) instead of using the singular feminine demonstrative *hāḏihi* denoting non-human plural; and *fī ʔayn ḥārā taskun* (فِى أَيْنَ حَارَا تَسْكُنْ) 'in where quarter do you live?' (Text#1, 9/b) instead of (أَيّ) meaning 'which'.

In the numbers section in his manuscript, it is noteworthy that he prefers to use them as they are in *Fuṣḥā* and does not choose the colloquial. One could claim that learners tend to refer to numbers in *Fuṣḥā* in order not to make any mistakes in financial dealing, which is a fundamental use of digits and numbers, and they therefore choose the safest option. Alternatively, it may be an unintentional influence of *Fuṣḥā*; Versteegh (2014: 153) describes this phenomenon:

> Anyone wishing to write in Arabic does so with the Classical norm in mind. The amount of deviation or the distance from the colloquial varies with the degree of education of the author of the text.

5.5 The integration of culture: A pedagogical perspective

It is clear that al-Balāṭī chose to teach a 'middle language' to promote linguistic communication, which helped to develop his didactic methodology described in the introduction. This balance is later found in Al-Ḥuṣrī's demand for a middle moderate standard language that is far removed both from the jargon of the common people and the pedantry of the scholars (Maʕtūq 2005: 117). This was later manifested by the formation of the communicative approach in language teaching, as Baddūḥ (2018: 67) explains:

> The transition from linguistic competence to communicative competence contributed to the emergence of a new approach in language didactics, which is 'communicative language teaching'; where the focus is on oral communication, in authentic communicative situations, while grammar is learned implicitly. This increases the effectiveness of communicative competence.

The lexical repertoire introduced in this book should align with the nature of the target language shift the author is aiming for. Yet in order to avoid the assumption that the book is a vocabulary list, al-Balāṭī attempted to highlight their practical value by placing them in context.

The author illustrates his cultural proficiency when addressing a range of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic challenges. This is evident in the dialogues, topics, examples, vocabulary choices, and the adaptation of different versions of the book. The author introduced expressions with cultural nuances in Arabic, such as *ʔana ʔakaltu maʕak ḫubuz milḥ* (اَنَا اَكَلْتُ مَعَكْ خُبُزْ مِلْح) 'I ate bread and salt with you' (Text#1, 20/a), implying 'we're no longer strangers; we've broken bread together'. Another example is *ʔanā ʔawlādu al-madīna* (اَنا اَوْلَادُ الْمَدِينَه) 'I'm of city kids' (Text#1, 8/b), which can convey 'spoiled or affluent' depending on the context. The author gives the following advice to an angry man to calm down: *ṣalli ʕalā Muḥammad… qul ʔastaġfiru Allāh* (صَلِّ عَلَى مُحَمَّدْ... قُلْ اَسْتَغْفِرُ الله) 'bless [the prophet] Muhammad … Say: I ask forgiveness from God!' (Text#1, 8/b).

He also mentions expressions with a negative connotation, whether in the form of supplications, actions, or cursing and swearing. Of the supplications, *rūḥ fī laʕnati Allāhi* (رُوحْ فِي لَعْنَةِ اللهِ) '[God] damn you' (Text#1, 14/b) and *Allāh lā yašbaʕuk ʔabadan* (اللهُ لَا يَشْبَعُكْ اَبَدًا) 'may God never satisfy you' (Text#1, 17/b). Surprisingly for a language-teaching book, there are numerous instances of profanity and offensive language. Examples include phrases such as: *ʔanta qalīlu al-ʔadab, mā laka ḥayā ?* (اَنْتَ قَلِيلُ الْاَدَبْ مَا لَكَ حَيَا) 'you (m.sg.) have no manners, do you not feel (m.sg.) ashamed?' (Text#1, 16/a), *rabbayta ğismak bi-l-ḥarām* (رَبَّيْتَ جِسْمَكَ بِالْحَرَام) 'your (m.sg.) flesh grew unlawfully' (Text#1, 34/a), *ʔanta waladu az-zinā* (اَنْتَ وَلَدُ الزِّنَا) 'you are a bastard' (Text#1, 16/b), and *yā taʕīs ruḥ min ʕindinā* (يَا تَعِيسْ رُحْ مِنْ عِنْدِنَا) 'O wretch! Go away from us' (Text#1, 18/b).

Once again, the author shows courage by breaking free from the taboos prevalent in his era and within the Muslim society in which he lived. This allowed him openly to discuss certain verbs that were traditionally avoided, including the verb conjugation of the verb *nāka* 'to fuck'. Examples of these conjugations include *biyatanāyakūn… maynūk… nik… yanīk… niktu* (بِيَتَنَايَكُون... مَيْنُوكْ... نِكْ... يَنِيكْ... نِكْتُ) (Text#1, 24/a).

Similarly, the author broached subjects with intimate emotional connotations, such as: *ʔaʕniqnī wa-ʔaḥḍinnī… taʕal tā naḥḍunk… yaʕniq… taʕal nabūsak… taʕal busnī… muṣṣu šafatū… ʔin kān ʔanta tuḥibunī* (اِعْنِقْنِى وَاَحْضِنِّى... تَعَلْ تَا نَحْضُنْك... يَعْنِق... تَعَلْ نَبُوسَكْ... تَعَلْ بُسْنِى... مُصُّ شَفَتُو... اِنْ كَانْ اَنْتَ تُحِبُّنِى) 'embrace me, and hug me, come let us hug you (m.sg.), come let us kiss you (m.sg.), come kiss me, suck his lips … if you (m.sg.) love me' (Text#1, 24/a). This may be perceived as a deliberate choice to address what is considered inappropriate language, aiming to raise awareness and teach expressions that might not be suitable for general use.

Conclusion

This manuscript adds to the extensive body of literature highlighting the beneficial impact of the Ottomans on education overall, with a particular emphasis on language instruction (Boyacioğlu 2015: 656; Nağm 2021).

Dating back to the mid-fifteenth century, al-Balāṭī's manuscript represents a significant milestone attesting the earliest comprehensive dedicated work in Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language (TAFL), teaching Arabic dialects, and pedagogical methodologies for language instruction.

Al-Balāṭī's profound appreciation of the significance of communication ability in an immersive setting is a recurring theme throughout his book. This underscores his recognition of the importance of teaching dialects. In his depiction of the dialects, he adeptly tailored the language to learners by incorporating a localised lexicon and cultural cues. Despite trying to avoid the typical didactic approach of structuring his text according to the reference grammar style, he opted to include verb paradigms to help learners understand the formation of different tenses before contextualising them.

It is hoped that scholars will regard this manuscript as significant for the advancement of future studies. This will allow us to enhance our comprehension of: a) the history of the Arabic language and the Syrian-Lebanese dialect spoken at the time; b) the history of Ottoman language usage during that period, which serves as the medium language throughout the book; c) a rudimentary concept of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, focusing on its structure and its relationship with other pedagogical approaches and methodologies to aid in understanding linguistic concepts; and d) the historical context of socio-economic dynamics within fifteenth-century Ottoman Empire societies.

The publication of the manuscript will, we hope, lead to further studies and suggestions.

# Appendix

Reference	Facsimile	Text in Arabic	Transliteration
Text#1, 4/a		أَشْ اِسْمُكَ	*ʔaš ʔismuka*
Text#1, 6/b		قُلْ لُو تَا يَأْكُلْ	*qul lū tā yaʔkul*
Text#1, 7/a		كُنْتُ بَعْرِفْ	*kuntu baʕrif*
Text#1, 8/a		هٰذَا الثُّلُوجُ	*hāḏā aṯ-ṯulūğu*
Text#1, 8/b		آجِى مِنَ الرُّومِ	*ʔağī mina ar-rūmi*
Text#1, 8/b		آنا أَوْلَادُ الْمَدِينَه	*ʔanā ʔawlādu al-madīnah*
Text#1, 8/b		صَلِّ عَلَى مُحَمَّدْ	*ṣalli ʕalā Muḥammad*
Text#1, 8/b		قُلْ اَسْتَغْفِرُ الله	*qul ʔastaġfiru Allāh*
Text#1, 8/b		اَصُلْكَ مِنْ اَيْن	*ʔaṣluka min ʔayn*
Text#1, 8/b		اِبْنِ مَنْ اَنْتَ	*ibni man ʔanta*
Text#1, 9/a		عُمْرُكَ كَمْ سَنَه	*ʕumruka kam sanah*
Text#1, 9/b		فِى اَيْنَ حَازَا تَسْكُنْ	*fī ʔayna ḥārā taskun*
Text#1, 10/a		كَانَ هَوْنِ قَافِلَه	*kāna hawni qāfilah*
Text#1, 10/a		اَيِمْتَ تُسَافِرْ اَنْتَ	*ʔayimta tusāfir ʔanta*
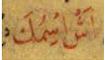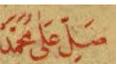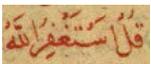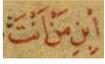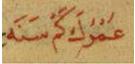
Reference	Facsimile	Text in Arabic	Transliteration
Text#1, 10/a		المُسَافِرُ دَايِمْ عَلَى سَفَرْ	*al-musāfir dāyim ʕalā safar*
Text#1, 10/a		هَوْنْ قَافِلَه شَيْ تَرُوحْ لِلشَّامْ	*hawni qāfilah šayʔ tarūḥ li-š-šām*
Text#1, 10/a		مَنْ يَجِي مِنْكُمْ مَعِى اِلَى السُّوقِ	*man yaǧī minkum maʕī ʔilā as-sūq*
Text#1, 10/a		كَمْ فَرَسْ تَرِيدْ تَسْتَكْرِى	*kam faras tarīd tastakrī*
Text#1, 11/b		اَقُلُوهُمْ	*ʔaqulūhum*
Text#1, 11/b		عَطَوْكُمْ شَيْئ	*ʕatawkum šayʔ*
Text#1, 11/b		نْحْنَا عَطَيْنَاهُمْ شَيْئ	*naḥnā ʕaṭaynāhum šayʔ*
Text#1, 13/a		عَرَفْتُ	*ʕaraftu*
Text#1, 13/a		عَرَفْنَا	*ʕarafnā*
Text#1, 13/a		عَرَفْتَ	*ʕarafta*
Text#1, 13/a		عَرَفْتُمْ	*ʕaraftum*
Text#1, 13/a		عَرَفَ	*ʕarafa*
Text#1, 13/a		عَرَفُوا	*ʕarafū*
Text#1, 14/b		رُوحْ فِى لَعْنَةِ اللهِ	*rūḥ fī laʕnati Allāhi*
Text#1, 16/a		اَنْتَ قَلِيلُ الأَدَبْ مَا لَكَ حَيَا	*ʔanta qalīlu al-ʔadab mā laka ḥayā*
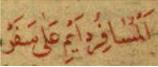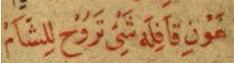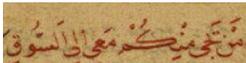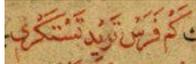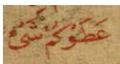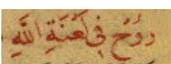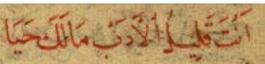
Reference	Facsimile	Text in Arabic	Transliteration
Text#1, 16/b		اَنْتَ وَلَدُ الزِّنَا	*ʔanta waladu az-zinā*
Text#1, 16/b		فِي حَالُوا	*fī ḥālū*
Text#1, 17/b		الله لاَ يَشْبَعُك اَبَّدًا	*Allāh lā yašbaʕuk ʔabadan*
Text#1, 18/b		رُحْ لُو	*ruḥ lū*
Text#1, 18/b		يَا تَعِيسْ رُحْ مِنْ عِنْدِنَا	*yā taʕīs ruḥ min ʕindinā*
Text#1, 20/a		اَنَا اَكَلْتُ مَعَك خُبُزْ مِلْح	*ʔana akaltu maʕak ḥubuz milḥ*
Text#1, 23/b		خَلِّ يَرُوحْ فِي حَالُو	*ḫalli yarūḥ fī ḥālū*
Text#1, 23/b		اَشْ تَضْحَك	*ʔaš taḍḥak*
Text#1, 23/b		يَضْحَك	*yaḍḥak*
Text#1, 23/b		لاَ تَضْحَك عَلَيْنَا	*lā taḍḥak ʕalaynā*
Text#1, 23/b		ضَحِك	*ḍaḥika*
Text#1, 24/a		بِيَتَنَايَكُونَ	*biyatanāyakūna*
Text#1, 24/a		مَيْنُوك	*maynūk*
Text#1, 24/a		نِك	*nik*
Text#1, 24/a		يَنِيك	*yanīk*
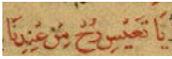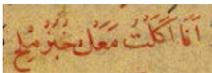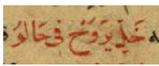
Reference	Facsimile	Text in Arabic	Transliteration
Text#1, 24/a		نِكْتُ	*niktu*
Text#1, 24/a		اِعْنِقني وَاَحْضِنّى	*ʔiʕniqnī wa-ʔaḥḍinnī*
Text#1, 24/a		تَعَلْ تَا نَحْضُنْك	*taʕal tā naḥḍunk*
Text#1, 24/a		يَعْنِق	*yaʕniq*
Text#1, 24/a		تَعَلْ نَبُوسَكْ	*taʕal nabūsak*
Text#1, 24/a		تَعَلْ بُسْنى	*taʕal busnī*
Text#1, 24/a		مُصُّ شَفَتُو	*muṣṣu šafatū*
Text#1, 24/a		اِنْ كَانْ اَنْتَ تُحِبُّنى	*ʔin kān ʔanta tuḥibbunī*
Text#1, 27/a		اِغْسِلْنى بالصَّابُونِ	*ʔiġsilnī bi-ṣ-ṣābūni*
Text#1, 27/a		جِبْ لى فُوطَه	*ǧib lī fūṭah*
Text#1, 27/a		سَرَّحْتُ دَقْنِى	*sarraḥtu ḏaqnī*
Text#1, 30/a		اشِعِل	*ʔašiʕil*
Text#1, 30/a		اِنْشَعَلْ	*ʔinšaʕal*
Text#1, 30/a		شَعَلْتُ	*šaʕaltu*
Text#1, 30/a		اشْتَعَلْتُ	*ʔišitaʕaltu*
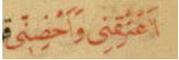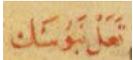
Reference	Facsimile	Text in Arabic	Transliteration
Text#1, 33/a		وَحْش	*waḥš*
Text#1, 33/b		لا تَنْسَ حَقَّ الخُبْزُ وَالْمِلح	*lā tansa ḥaqqa al-ḫubzu wa al-milḥ*
Text#1, 34/a		أَشْ بِتَعْمَلْ يَوْمَ القِيَامَه	*ʕaš bi-taʕmal yawma al-qiyāmah*
Text#1, 34/a		لأ تَنْسا رَبَّكْ	*lā tansā rabbak*
Text#1, 34/a		يُحَرِّقُو جِسْمَكَ	*yuḥarriqū ǧismaka*
Text#1, 34/a		رَبَّيْتَ جِسْمَكْ بِالْحَرَامْ	*rabbayt ǧismak bi-l-ḥarām*
Text#1, 37/a		هاتِ المِعْلَقَه	*hāti al-miʕlaqah*
Text#1, 37/a		تَعَل تَنَأْكُل خُبْزُ مِلْح	*taʕal ta-naʔkul ḫubzu milḥ*
Text#1, 38/a		أَنْتَ عَلَى وُضُو	*ʔanta ʕalā wuḍū*
Text#1, 38/a		تَعَلْ نُصَلِّى	*taʕal nuṣallī*
Text#1, 38/a		أَنَا صَلَّيْتُ صَلوةَ الصُّبْح	*ʔanā ṣallaytu ṣalāta aṣ-ṣubḥ*
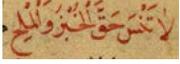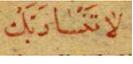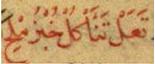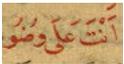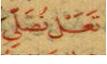
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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