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Key to Mass Literacy or Professor's Hobby? Fiske's Project to Write Egyptian Arabic with the Latin Alphabet

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Abstract

The subject of this essay is the alphabetization project of Daniel Willard Fiske (1831–1904). Fiske's project would allow the Egyptians to adopt a new alphabet based on the Latin one, and to adopt Egyptian Arabic as their official written language. The project was inspired by Fiske's discussions with the German Orientalist Wilhelm Spitta-Bey. Fiske called in the help of his Arabic teacher, Socrates Spiro, to translate into Arabic the texts he wrote for this project. Together they produced various alphabetization materials, such as alphabet posters, reading exercises, and short stories to be used in schools as well as other publications on the Arabic language and script. These materials were distributed all over Egypt, in the hope of making the new alphabet the standard in schools as well as in the government. This essay explores Fiske's project and its reception in Egyptian society.

Introduction

The second half of the nineteenth century saw a great interest from foreign scholars in Egyptian Arabic, which was reflected in the publication of several grammars, conversation guides, collections of stories and proverbs, and so on.¹ One of the reasons for this interest was the renewal of Egypt's connections with Europe under Khedive Ismā'īl,

culminating in the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 (Vatikiotis 1998). Another reason was that in 1882, the British had taken over the Egyptian administration following Egypt's bankruptcy. British government employees stationed in Egypt needed to communicate with both Egyptian officials and citizens, and therefore needed language guides.

However, some publications came forth from a more active interference with Egyptian language policies. The project of Fiske can be seen in this light. His aim was to let the Egyptians write in Egyptian Arabic, rather than in Classical Arabic, and in the Latin script, which he adapted for the purpose. This essay examines Fiske's ideas concerning the relation between Classical Arabic and dialect, and between language and script. It further analyzes his output of promotional materials, his collaboration with other scholars, and the reception of his project in Egyptian society.

Daniel Willard Fiske and Wilhelm Spitta

Daniel Willard Fiske (1831–1904) was an American scholar from Ellisburg, New York, who specialized in Scandinavian languages, especially Icelandic.² In 1868, he became professor of Northern European languages and librarian at Cornell University, which was inaugurated that year (White 1925, v and 51). In 1880, Fiske married Jennie McGraw, a rich heiress who died the following year of tuberculosis.³ During his honeymoon in Egypt in 1880, Fiske met the German Orientalist Wilhelm Spitta, who was to have a great impact on the direction Fiske's interests were to take in the years to come. After his wife's death, Fiske resigned from Cornell University and moved to Italy, where he bought the Villa Landor in Florence. He died in 1904 in Frankfurt am Main. His books, valued at more than half a million dollars, were bequeathed to Cornell University Library (White, preface to Fiske 1920–22, 1:x).

Wilhelm Spitta (1853–1883) was born in Wittingen (Lower Saxony, Germany). He studied Arabic in Göttingen and in Leipzig with the famous Orientalist Heinrich Fleischer. In 1875, Spitta succeeded Ludwig Stern as director of the Khedival Library in Cairo. Under the rule of Khedive Tawfiq, Spitta was honored with the title of bey. His most important work for the Khedival Library was the composition of a catalogue of the manuscript collection and expanding said collection. He spent most of his leisure time making notes of Egyptian Arabic vocabulary, popular sayings, folk tales, proverbs, and so on, which resulted in two publications: *Grammatik des arabischen Vulgärdialektes von Aegypten* (1880) and *Contes arabes modernes: Recueillis et traduits* (1883). In 1882, Spitta left Egypt for Germany, after being dismissed from his post.⁴ He died in September of the following year of tuberculosis (Meyer 1884, 105–12).

Fiske and Spitta in Egypt

When Fiske met Spitta in Egypt in 1880–81, he became enthusiastic about his work on the Egyptian dialect (Spiro 1922, 159). Fiske asserts that Spitta's *Grammatik* was

considered to be “the first scientific treatment of a modern Arabic dialect” (Fiske 1904a, 5). One of Spitta’s main achievements was the development of a transcription system that uses one sign per phoneme. Spitta’s *Grammatik* is a veritable treasure trove of nineteenth-century Cairene Arabic. As Spitta (1880, v) tells in the introduction, he considered himself a near-native speaker of Egyptian Arabic after his long stay in the country. He spent all his free time with Egyptians and lived the life of an Egyptian in an Arab quarter. He gathered most of the information in his works directly from spontaneous speech. He took notes in pencil on his cuffs, to hide the fact that he was doing research (Spitta 1880, viii). The *Grammatik* not only contains a grammar but also a collection of stories, *mawāwīl* (songs), and proverbs. Spitta’s *Contes arabes modernes : Recueillis et traduits* (1883) contains an additional twelve stories.

Spitta attributed the high level of illiteracy in Egypt to two factors: the difficult Arabic script and the fact that Classical Arabic, rather than the Egyptian dialect, was used for writing. He compared this situation to that of Italian and Latin, or of Greek and Old Greek. He therefore expressed his wish for the Egyptians to use their dialect as the written language (Spitta 1880, xiv–xv). Fiske, who was greatly impressed by this idea, used it as the basis for his future project.

The Project

Fiske’s talks with Spitta had convinced him that the language situation in Egypt, with written Classical Arabic and the spoken dialects, was detrimental to the education of the masses. Fiske further believed that the Arabic alphabet was too complicated.⁵ From 1881, he increasingly focused his efforts on his Arabic studies, taking Arabic lessons with a young Egyptian government official, Socrates Spiro.

Socrates Spiro (1868–?) was an Egyptian of Syrian and Greek descent. He was educated at the American Mission College in Cairo. His first post was as a private secretary of the undersecretary of state for finance, and later he became director of Egyptian ports and lighthouses (White 1925, 159; and Danovaro 1901, 269). In 1907, Spiro went to work in Geneva as a lecturer of Arabic at the university there. He returned to Egypt in 1912, where he first worked for the *Egyptian Gazette* and then was appointed Arabic editor of the *Egyptian Mail* (White 1925, 159). In 1932, he published a book titled *The Moslem Pilgrimage*. After that, all traces of Socrates Spiro seem to vanish, which is strange for a man who held such high public functions.

Fiske and Spiro met in 1880–81, when Fiske’s talks with Spitta made him want to learn Arabic. Fiske came back to Egypt in 1888 and took some additional Arabic lessons. When Spiro visited Fiske in his villa in Italy in 1892, the idea of the project was born (Spiro 1922, 159–160). Spiro gives a very detailed account of the work he and Fiske did from 1892 onward in order to promote the Egyptian dialect, written in Latin characters. Spiro (1922, 160), however, “did not hide from him the fact that it would be almost impossible to induce the Arabs to give up writing their language in their own alphabet.”⁶ Spiro (1922, 162) describes the campaign as follows: “Professor Fiske undertook a double task each of which was difficult in itself. He wanted the Arabs to give up their

alphabet and use the Latin, and to give up the classical language and use the modern.” The truth is that Fiske did not intend the Egyptians to give up their alphabet or Classical Arabic completely. He envisaged that the Arabic alphabet would still be used for the Qur’ān and for Arabic cultural heritage. The new alphabet he intended for “*el ḥagât el gedyye*,” “the new things,” such as commerce, newspapers, and other subjects that had no relation to religion (Fiske 1898d, 19).

Fiske spent some winters in Egypt, and Spiro spent some summer holidays in Florence, in order to work on the project. Fiske’s last trip to Egypt was in the spring of 1898 (White 1925, 157). He issued his Egyptian Arabic publications during three periods: 1893, 1897–98, and 1904. Each period will be discussed in the following.

Overview of Fiske’s Publications on Egyptian Arabic⁷

1. Books and Booklets:⁸

- 1893. *kilmât ‘araby merattibe ‘ala ḥasab tartyb alifbê ma’ agrûmyje muḥtaşara*.
- 1897. *An Egyptian Alphabet for the Egyptian People*.
- 1898a. *An Egyptian Post Office List in the Egyptian Language*.
- 1898b. *asâmy makâtib el bôşta fy maşr bil lisân el maşry*.
- 1898c. *All about Postal Matters in Egypt*.
- 1898d. *eş şaijâd we ibnoh. ḥikâje maşryje bil lisân el maşry*.
- 1904a. *An Egyptian Alphabet for the Egyptian People*, 2nd ed.
- 1904b. *agrûmyja maşry maktûba bil lisân el maşry, we ma’ha amsila*.

2. Publications for Use in Schools, 1897–98:⁹

A. Short Stories and Letters:

- *abû ibn adham. maşr li aulâdha. maşr tibqa qawyye*.
- *el ḥarâmy el mazlûm. murgêhet en naggâr. mâ ti’rafş ana myn?*
- *el luğa el maşryje. ḥurûf ‘ala şân ek kitâbe. gawâb min muḥammed li ‘aly. niûjork 1315/1897. [Placed in an envelope titled] waṭan wâḥid we lisân wâḥid li kull ahl maşr.*
- *gawâb min walad li abuh we amsâl we suâlât we agwibe. niûjork 1315/1897; felôrensa 1316/1898.*
- *ḥylet abu en nauwâs. [Poster.]*
- *ibrâhym ibn adham. el ‘askary el ‘araby. maşr el maḥbûbe. li wilâd maşr. maşr tibqa qawyye. 1316/1898. ṭab’a tânje.*
- *lamma inwalad kamađêva. ḥasan li faṭme. li gebel kilmangâro. alfrêd el kebyr.*

B. Pamphlets, Alphabet Cards, Posters, and Other Teaching Materials:

- *asâmy maşryje—riggâle. [List of male names.]*
- *el alifbê el maşryja. [Alphabet; sample sentences.]*
- *el alifbê el maşryje. [Alphabet; sample words.]*
- *el alifbê el maşryje; alifbê ahl maşr. [Alphabet.]*
- *el lisân el maşry—el alifbê. [Alphabet poster.]*
- *el lisân el maşry—el alifbê. [Alphabet; verb conjugations; short reading fragments.]*
- *el lisân elly nitkallimoh. [Verb conjugations; example sentences.]*

- *el luğa el maşryje—alifbê*. [Alphabet; sample words.]
- *‘inwânât gawâbât*. [Sample addresses.]
- *kilmât min guz wâhid I*. [List of one-syllable words.]
- *kilmât min guz wâhid II*. [Idem.]
- *kilmât min guzên*. [List of two-syllable words.]
- *lisân waţanna*. [Conjugation of verbs; example sentences.]
- *The Egyptian Alphabet*. [Alphabet, with the pronunciation explained in English, and English sample words.]

3. Concerning the Society and Its Publications:

- *el margu tauzy‘ el maţbû‘ât di ‘ala me‘allimyn we talâmzet el madrase* [“Please distribute to the teachers and pupils of the school”]. [Small card.]
- *Publications of the Society for the Education of Every Egyptian Youth*.
- *maţbû‘ât gam‘yjet ta‘lym kull wilâd maşr*. [List of the publications issued by the Society.]¹⁰

Fiske’s Publications, 1893

kilmât ‘araby merattibe ‘ala ḥasab tartyb alifbê ma‘ agrûmyje muḥtaşara (“Arabic words arranged according to the alphabet, with a short grammar”) was the first product of Fiske and Spiro’s joint efforts, published at Fiske’s Landi Press (*maţba‘et landy*) in Florence. Spiro wrote a long letter in 1922 to White, Fiske’s biographer, describing Fiske’s project. About *kilmât ‘araby* Spiro (1922, 161) wrote that “that work was perhaps more mine than his, for the simple reason that his knowledge of Arabic was not sufficiently advanced to enable him to undertake it alone.”¹¹ *kilmât ‘araby* opens with: “*el ‘araby ed dâriğ maktûb bi ḥurûf basîte we sahle*” (“colloquial Arabic written with simple and easy letters”). Then follows the alphabet that formed the basis of all Fiske’s other publications (Fiske 1893, 7), as shown in table 1.1.

This alphabet is a rearranged and simplified version of Spitta’s transcription system. Fiske (1897, 25–44) explains that he placed similarly shaped letters together and simplified the alphabet by narrowing the short vowels down to *a, e, i, o,* and *u,* where Spitta used a complementary collection of semivowels: *ê, â, î, û*.¹² Fiske also got rid of the schwa, which leads to phrases with clusters of three consonants, such as “*er ruzz we es sukkar*” (rice and sugar) (Fiske 1893, 105). The alphabet lacks the letter *z,* the emphatic counterpart of *z.* Spitta (1880, 1) believed that Cairene Arabic did not have an emphatic *z* and used *z* to transcribe Classical Arabic *ز, ظ, ذ* and *ض,* for example, *zâhir* ظاهر (“clear”) (Spitta 1880, 9). He did not take into account the emphatic pronunciation of the *z*.¹³ Fiske took over this idea from Spitta, and so did Spiro in his two dictionaries.¹⁴

The next chapter consists of an Egyptian Arabic word list aimed at demonstrating the spelling of these words rather than the meaning. This is followed by a section titled *agrûmyje* (grammar), which contains lists of grammatical features such as the article, possessive suffixes, and the conjugations of the verbs, with short example sentences. The last part, titled *gumal* (sentences), contains various subjects such as proverbs and the

history and geography of Egypt. The volume ends with two pages with the punctuation marks and a sample of handwriting in the new alphabet.¹⁵

Table 1 Fiske's Egyptian Alphabet

<i>alifbê</i>				
a	<i>alif</i>	<i>ah</i>	ḥ	<i>ḥâ</i>
â	<i>alif</i>	<i>â</i>	d	<i>dâl</i>
e	<i>alif</i>	<i>eh</i>	ḍ	<i>ḍâd</i>
ê	<i>alif</i>	<i>ê</i>	r	<i>râ</i>
i	<i>alif</i>	<i>ih</i>	z	<i>zê</i>
y	<i>alif</i>	<i>y</i>	s	<i>syn</i>
o	<i>alif</i>	<i>oh</i>	ś	<i>śyn</i>
ô	<i>alif</i>	<i>ô</i>	ş	<i>şâd</i>
u	<i>alif</i>	<i>uh</i>	‘	<i>‘ên</i>
û	<i>alif</i>	<i>û</i>	f	<i>fê</i>
b		<i>bê</i>	q	<i>qâf</i>
t		<i>tê</i>	k	<i>kâf</i>
ṭ		<i>tâ</i>	l	<i>lâm</i>
g		<i>gym</i>	m	<i>mym</i>
ġ		<i>ġên</i>	n	<i>nûn</i>
h		<i>hê</i>	w	<i>wau</i>
ḥ		<i>ḥâ</i>	j	<i>jê</i>

1897–98

An Egyptian Alphabet for the Egyptian People starts with the following three short statements (Fiske 1897, 2):

fyh alifbê ingyzyje, we alifbê rûmyje, we alifbê ‘arabyje. jâtara muś mumkin jekûn fyh alifbê maşryje kemân? (There is an English alphabet, and a Greek one, and an Arabic one. Can't there be an Egyptian alphabet as well?)

wâgib ‘ala kull wâhid jeḥibb maşr, in jisâ‘id ‘ala migy el jôm, elly fyh kull en nâs es sâkinyn ‘alal nyl jimkinhum jiqru we jiktibu el lisân elly jitkallimuh we jifhamuh. (It is a duty for everybody who loves Egypt to help to bring the day in which all the people who live on the Nile can read and write the language which they speak and understand.)

el alifbê es sahle li et ta‘lym we lil kitâbe tig‘al es sa‘b nabyh; we en nabâha tig‘al es sa‘b qawy we mabsût. (The easy alphabet for education and writing makes the people intelligent; and intelligence makes the people strong and happy.)

The book contains a detailed pronunciation guide in English and therefore seems to be aimed at English learners of the language rather than at Egyptians. The most important

part of *An Egyptian Alphabet* is the section titled “The Story of the Alphabet.” Fiske (1897, 25) describes the purpose of the alphabet as follows:

It may be generally described as a modification of the Latin letters, devised with no little ingenuity, and adapted with no little skill to the vocabulary in use, at the present day, by the inhabitants of the Nile valley. Properly speaking, it is not to be regarded as a system of transcribing, or transliterating, the elements of any other alphabet, but rather as an independent ABC, specially elaborated to express, in the clearest and most convenient manner, the vocal and consonantal articulations of this newest Egyptian tongue.

He expressly states that it was created only for Egyptian Arabic, and not for any other language, especially not for Classical Arabic. He discusses Spitta’s approach to the question of transcribing Egyptian Arabic, and the use of *j* for /y/ and *y* for /ī/.¹⁶ Fiske (1897, 40–41) justifies the use of *j* for /y/ by pointing out that in many European languages, the *j* is pronounced /y/, and the use of *y* for /ī/ by pointing out that the letter *î* is not suitable for printing, because of its tendency to break off quickly.¹⁷ He also cites a more poetic reason, explaining why a series of long vowels formed only by adding the circumflex $\hat{}$ would be less desirable from both an aesthetic and a pedagogical point of view (Fiske 1897, 48): “This view of the matter has reference to that subtle law of orderly beauty, which makes a too symmetrical symmetry, so to speak, repulsive; and to that other law, which proves an unbroken series of things to be less striking, and therefore less easily fixed in the memory, than an interrupted series.”

Another distinctive feature of the new alphabet is that, like the Arabic alphabet, it has no capitals. About the employment of the *q*, Fiske (1897, 51) mentions that in Egypt, there are regional differences in the pronunciation of this letter. However, these, in his opinion, do not warrant the use of more than one character. He ends this account of the new alphabet with the wish that the Egyptian government will support his effort for language reform. The publication concludes with a page titled *ḥasan li faṭme*, containing three short declarations of love (Fiske 1897, 54–56).

Somewhere around 1897, Fiske founded the *gam‘yjet ta‘lym kull wilâd maṣr* (Society for the Education of Every Egyptian Youth). The motto of the society, printed on some of its publications, is “*eg gam‘yje di mâ tibatṭâls šuġlaha illa lamma kull walad maṣry ji‘rafjiqra we jiktib el lisân elly jitkallimoh*” (this society will not stop its work until every Egyptian boy can read and write the language he speaks).¹⁸ The society published materials for schools, with the intention to distribute them “as widely as possible in Egypt in order to familiarize the people with the Roman transliteration of their own speech” (Austen 1916). The years 1897–88 were Fiske’s most productive, as can be seen in the list of publications.

Simplification of Texts

Some of the texts were taken from other books and simplified,—for example *murgêhet en naggâr*, which was taken from Spitta (1880, 441). Comparing the first lines clarifies to what extent the text was simplified for the use of primary school children:

Spitta's version:

Kân râgil rúziq biwâläd wêfirih-boh. kân bíddoh jístery-loh máhd. râh liwâhid naggâr wadâ-loh másalan rijâl wêqâl-loh i'míl-ly máhd. qâl-loh 'nnaggâr ÷ajjib nahâr elgúm'a ta'âla wêhód elmáhd. . . .

(There was a man who was blessed with a son, and rejoiced in him. He wanted to buy him a cradle. He went to a carpenter and gave him for instance a *riyâl* and said to him: "make a cradle for me." The carpenter said: "agreed, come on Friday to take the cradle. . . .")

Fiske's version:

kân râgil ga loh walad we firih boh. kân biddoh jístery loh murgêha. râh li wâhid naggâr, we idda loh rijâl, we qâl loh: "i'mil ly murgêha!" qâl loh en naggâr: "÷ajjib! nahâr eg gum'a ta'âla we ÷od el murgêha. . . ."

The most notable difference is the absence of the short semivowels and the signs indicating stress in Fiske's text. This indication of stress would be useful for foreigners learning the language with Spitta's book but was unnecessary for Egyptian school children who already knew the language. On a semantic level, the avoidance of the passive verb "*rúziq*," which is Classical Arabic rather than Egyptian, is noticeable. Another difference is the replacement of the word "*mahd*" (cradle) with "*murgêha*," which originally means "swing." This was probably done because the Classical Arabic word "*mahd*" was unknown to most Egyptians.

Short Propagandist Texts

Some of the materials for schools described earlier contain short texts meant to explain the importance of Egyptian Arabic. For instance, *el luğa el maşryje—alifbê* contains the following short text:

agdâdna itkallimu fil auwil el lisân el maşry el qadym, we ba'dên er rûmy, we ba'dên el qibty, we ba'dên el 'araby. lâkin ihna binitkallim el lisân el maşry eg gedyd. da el lisân elly nitkallimuh fil bêt we fil gêt. (Our grandfathers spoke at first the Ancient Egyptian language, and then Greek, and then Coptic, and then Arabic. But we speak the new Egyptian language. This is the language we speak at home and in the fields.)

It is interesting that Fiske apparently saw the Egyptian dialect as something other than "Arabic." It is likely that with Arabic he meant Classical Arabic, and that he was under the (false) impression that the Egyptians once spoke this language in daily life. Another example of a propagandist text can be found on *el alifbê el maşryja*:

in mâ kuntis it'allimt el alifbê el maşryja ÷ajjib, iqra el waraqa di li ÷add mâ tiqdar tiktib kull el ÷urûf qawâm. el alifbê di hyja 'asân el fallâh we el bâsa, el faqyr we el gany—ja'ny 'asân kull maşry.

*lamma kull râgil min iskandaryja li ħadd el ħartûm jiqdar jiqra el lisân el maşry
el maktûb bil alifbê el maşryja, bilâdna el ‘azyma tibqa kebyra we qawyja. insâlla el jôm
da mâ jekûns be‘yd!*

(If you haven’t learned the Egyptian alphabet well, then read this paper until you can write all the letters quickly. This alphabet is for the peasant and for the pasha, for the poor and for the rich—that is, for every Egyptian.

When every man from Alexandria to Khartoum can read the Egyptian language written in the Egyptian alphabet, our great country will be big and strong. God willing, this day will not be far away!)

Another example, from *el ħarâmy el mazlûm*:

*fy maşr 10 fil 100 jî‘rafu jiqru we jiktibu, lâkin fy almânje 95 fil 100 jî‘rafu jiqru we
jiktibu, ma‘ inn el alifbê el almânyje atqal min el alifbê el maşryje.*

*ħallu el wilâd el maşrijyn jit‘allimu alifbê basyṭa zai el alifbê el maşryje di, we
entu teşûfu in mâ kanus ba‘d šuwaije jibqu riggâle ‘uzâm jistâhilu bilâdhum el ‘azyme.*

(In Egypt, 10% can read and write, while in Germany 95% can read and write, even though the German alphabet is harder than the Egyptian alphabet.

Let the Egyptian boys learn an easy alphabet like this Egyptian alphabet, and you will see that after a while they will become great men worthy of their great country.)

From *lamma inwalad kamadêva*:

el lisân el ħai aħsan min el lisân el majjit.

(A living language is better than a dead language.)¹⁹

The messages that Fiske tried to convey with these short propagandist texts, are that all Egyptians have equal rights to learn to read and write; that Egypt is a great country and will be even stronger when illiteracy has been dealt with; and that Egyptian Arabic is prestigious, just like Classical Arabic. The reason why Fiske insisted so much on the last point is because he must have realized that Classical Arabic had high prestige and that the Egyptians therefore were attached to the Arabic alphabet. In order to make his project succeed, he would need to make Egyptian Arabic more prestigious, and promote the idea of the new alphabet being easy and accessible for Egyptians of all classes.

eş şaijâd we ibnoħ

This booklet contains the short story *eş şaijâd we ibnoħ* (the fisherman and his son), which was first published in Spitta’s *Contes arabes modernes* (1883, 43–60). The two texts are the same except for the adjustments of Spitta’s text to Fiske’s simplified alphabet and some minor corrections. The story is followed by a section called *qîṭa‘ mitfarraqa*

(miscellaneous fragments), about various topics. Then there is a section titled “*gûwa maşr el qâhira*” (inside Cairo), which lists the names of streets, mosques, churches, and so on. This is followed by a section titled “*ḥadyt ‘an alifbê ahl maşr*” (a dialogue about the alphabet of the Egyptians), in which two persons discuss the advantages of the new alphabet.

Postal Matters

In 1898, Fiske published three works about postal matters in Egypt: *An Egyptian Post Office List in the Egyptian Language, asâmy makâtib el bôşta fy maşr bil lisân el maşry* (a translation of the first work), and *All about Postal Matters in Egypt*. The first two works list all the post offices in Egypt, alphabetically and arranged by province. The third not only lists the post offices but also deals with topics such as Egyptian names of foreign places and personal names in Egypt. It concludes with a short history of the postal services in Egypt and describes the role played by the Italians, especially Giacomo Muzzi, who did a good deal to expand the postal services in Egypt, and who died in Florence in 1898 (Fiske 1898c, 21). It is therefore possible that Fiske knew him personally, and perhaps this inspired him to write the booklet.²⁰ However, it is clear that the main intention for writing these works was to spread the use of the new alphabet through the postal services as well as to standardize the writing of place names. In *eş şaijâd we ibnoh*, Fiske (1898d, 17) mentions an Egyptian postal clerk who told him that he had seen sixteen different ways to write the place name *Asyûṭ* in Latin characters. This was one of the problems Fiske wanted to solve with his new alphabet.

1904

In 1904, a second edition of *An Egyptian Alphabet for the Egyptian People* was published. The new edition included a “grammatical accident,” which was absent in the 1897 edition. This uses, except for some minor changes, the same text as the *agrûmyje in kilmât ‘araby* (1893). Another publication appeared in 1904, titled *agrûmyja maşry maktûba bil lisân el maşry, we ma‘ha amsila*. This contains the alphabet followed by the mysteriously named chapter *tagyjirât el kilmât*, again the same as the *agrûmyja in kilmât ‘araby*.

Spiro’s Contribution to the Project

Spiro contributed to the project with his own publications. In 1895 he published *An Arabic-English Vocabulary of the Colloquial Arabic of Egypt*, and in 1897 *An English-Arabic Vocabulary of the Modern and Colloquial Arabic of Egypt*. The first remained the standard dictionary for Egyptian Arabic until the publication of Hinds and Badawi’s monumental work in 1986. Hinds and Badawi (1986, xi) pay tribute to Spiro, calling him a “pioneer in the field.” Interestingly, Spiro did not mention the name of Fiske at all in the preface to the 1895 publication. He described how he started to collect the material for a small vocabulary in 1891 but soon began to include “a large number of administrative, financial, engineering, mechanical and military words” as well as “slang phrases” (Spiro 1895, ♣). He mentioned that he adopted Spitta’s transcription system, which was “simplified

by a distinguished American scholar” (Spiro 1895, ٩). This is the only mention of Fiske in the preface. In the 1897 publication, Spiro made one change to the transcription system: he used *y* instead of *j*. “This change was made in deference to the severe criticism passed on the method of transliteration in the earlier volume by almost all those in Egypt who used my book,” Spiro wrote. This time, Spiro thanked Fiske for his “valuable assistance” (1897, vi).

These are the only two works Spiro published under his own name during his collaboration with Fiske. In 1903, during a visit to Fiske in Florence, Spiro showed him a translation he made “of a part of Dante’s ‘Inferno’ in Modern Arabic and in Latin characters, which he promised to have printed by Landi at his expense when ready to be published” (Spiro 1922, 162). However, this never happened, as Fiske died soon after this visit. After Fiske’s demise, Spiro published some more works on Egyptian Arabic, as will be discussed later in this essay.

Language Matters

The language used in Fiske’s texts is very simple and is clearly aimed at the primary school level. The language shows some traits of Cairene Arabic that have since disappeared, such as the pausal *imāla* (Blanc 1973–74), where the final *a* in pausal position is pronounced as *e*, for example, *el luġa el maşryje. ħurûf ‘ala šân ek kitâbe*.²¹

It is unclear if Fiske ever gave the matter of writing Egyptian Arabic more thought than only devising a new alphabet and writing pamphlets and school materials. He commented upon the pronunciation of the *q, therewith indicating that he had some idea of dialect variation in Egypt. However, he did not comment on the different pronunciations of the *ğ. The questions of whether he had Cairene Arabic in mind as the new standard writing language, or if he expected every school child to write in his or her own dialect using the alphabet provided, are never answered.²² Since the materials in Cairene Arabic were distributed to schools all over Egypt, and since the alphabet did not include all the sounds used in Egyptian Arabic (such as the interdental), it can be reasonably concluded that Fiske either wanted to promote Cairene Arabic as the standard language or that he simply was not aware of the great variety in dialects found in Egypt.

The Reception of the Project

According to Spiro (1922, 163), Fiske’s proposal for alphabet and language reform did not get an enthusiastic response from the Egyptians:

The Moslems, and I may say the Christians here, looked upon the suggestion of Professor Fiske as academic, not practical. They recognized the facility with which a boy would be able to learn to read his own language, admired the new alphabet, but beyond this not one of them dared go, publicly at any rate. It is impossible for an impartial man not to agree with Professor Fiske in his defense

of the proposal he made, but in the East the question of religion finds its way into almost every change proposed in the life of the nation. It was therefore not a question of the advantages of such a change, but of its relation to religion. The proposal was thus doomed to failure from the very beginning, and those who received the pamphlets of Professor Fiske looked upon them as pieces of curiosity, as the hobby of an American Professor.

Spiro was of the opinion that the idea of using Egyptian Arabic as the written language, but written with the Arabic alphabet, could have been successful. He also believed it was a mistake to call Egyptian Arabic “the Egyptian language,” which was associated with the language of ancient Egypt (Spiro 1922, 164).

In 1898, a review was published in *Mağallat al-Hilāl* on a project of some foreigners to replace the Arabic alphabet with a foreign (*ifranġiyya*) one. Although neither Fiske nor his society is mentioned, it is clear from the subject matter and the timing that his project is the object of discussion. The author calls the project *ġayr ṭabīī* (unnatural) because he finds it illogical that a nation who speaks a language with a widespread alphabet should leave this alphabet and write with a foreign one (*Mağallat al-Hilāl* 1898, 785). Fiske’s project is criticized in *Al-Muqtaṭaf* (Şarrūf 1904, 269) as well, where it is stated that the educated Egyptians have an aversion to the language Fiske is promoting and that the nation has no wish for it.²³

Similar Projects and Ideas

Fiske did not stand alone in his idea that Egyptians would benefit from using Egyptian Arabic as the written language, even though he apparently did not team up with other initiatives promoting the same goal. These ideas were not only promoted by foreigners. There were also native speakers of Arabic, both in Egypt and in other Arab countries, who occupied themselves with the reform of the Arabic alphabet and language, and some of these proposed alternative alphabets.²⁴

Most well known are the initiatives for language reform taken by British government officials. The hydraulic engineer William Willcocks (1852–1932) believed that the Egyptians suffered from a lack of creativity caused by their use of Classical Arabic for writing.²⁵ He presented this idea in 1892 in a lecture titled *Lima lam tūġad quwwat al-iḥtirā’ ladā al-miṣriyyin?* (Why don’t the Egyptians have the power of invention?). In the 1920s, after his retirement, he published a number of Bible translations in Egyptian Arabic. However, he never intended the Arabic script to be replaced by the Latin one.²⁶

Another employee of the British government in Egypt, Judge J. Selden Willmore, had ideas similar to Fiske’s and Willcocks’s, which he expressed in his Egyptian Arabic grammar. Willmore (1901, xii) proposed to use the dialect “at least for secular purposes, as the only language of the country.” As a postscript to his introduction, he quoted from the work of Fiske, who he only referred to as an “American philologist” (1901, xiii–xvi). In the second edition of his grammar, Willmore wrote about the (negative) reactions of the Egyptian press to his ideas. It is beyond the scope of this essay to mention them

here; readers interested in the subject are referred to the introduction of the second edition of Willmore's grammar (1905, xii–xvii).²⁷ It is important to note that these projects by Orientalists and foreign government officials were (and still are) often perceived by Egyptians as attempts to weaken the links between the Arab nations.²⁸

After Fiske's Death

Although Fiske spent much time promoting his ideas, it all came to an end with his death in 1904. The promotional materials were offered to Egypt in order to continue the project, but this offer was rejected. The materials were then deposited in the Cornell University Library (White 1925, 167). Willard Austen, librarian at Cornell University in 1916, sent a letter to a number of American and European libraries asking them if they would be interested in receiving a complete package of publications for their institutions, "not only as a record of an altruistic and generous attempt to educate and benefit the common people of Egypt, but also as illustrating an interesting and illustrative experiment in the transcription of a spoken tongue" (Austen 1916).²⁹ It appears that many libraries were interested.³⁰

So how successful had Fiske's project been? Alfonso Nallino, an Italian Arabist, described Fiske's project in the introduction of his Egyptian Arabic grammar *L'Arabo parlato in Egitto*. Nallino (1900, xiii–xiv) mentioned that the propaganda was somewhat fruitful, even though it met with resistance from the Egyptians:

Tuttavia l'attiva propaganda di questi ultimi tre anni ha già recato qualche frutto; tutti gli impiegati della posta egiziana, molti di quelli delle ferrovie, parecchi maestri conoscono ormai bene l'alfabeto propugnato dal Fiske per il dialetto locale.

(Nevertheless, the active propaganda of the past three years has already borne some fruit; all employees of the Egyptian postal service, many of the railways, and quite a few teachers know now the alphabet propagated by Fiske for the local dialect well.)

The question is whether they "knew" the alphabet in the sense that they had heard of it or in the sense that they knew how to use it. It is likely that the former is the case. It is not surprising that employees of the Egyptian postal service and teachers were familiar with the alphabet, considering the number of publications sent by Fiske to these two groups of professionals. However, the claim that employees of the railways also knew it is somewhat surprising. It is possible that the publications about the post offices were also distributed to railway employees to familiarize them with the new spelling of the place names.

Nallino (1900, xiv) did see a use for Fiske's alphabet, albeit not quite as all-encompassing as Fiske had intended it to be: to be used to standardize the spelling of proper names and places in the Latin alphabet. This would have been a good idea because

until today no such standardized transcription system for rendering Arabic street and place names in Latin script exists in Egypt. Although Fiske's alphabet was never adopted by the authorities, they did decide sometime in the 1910s on standardizing the transcription system on maps and street plans. This is mentioned by Gairdner (1917, xiii) in his conversation grammar, when he explains why he chose to use the transcription of the International Phonetic Alphabet: "It is unfortunate that all who have written on Arabic have employed [transcription] systems more or less different from each other; so that the introduction of yet another system—and so different a one—needs an apology, especially seeing that the Egyptian Government's recent adoption of one of the others (Willmore's) for the place names in its maps and plans might seem to have gone some way to standardizing that system."

Comparing Willmore's (1901, 1) transcription system to Fiske's, we find considerable differences: Willmore uses *gh*, *sh*, and *kh* for غ , ش , and خ where Fiske uses *ġ*, *ś* and *ḥ*,³¹ and uses *î* and *y* for Fiske's *y* and *j*. Comparison of Willmore's transcription system with some maps from the first half of the twentieth century confirms Gairdner's statement. Two maps titled *General Map of Cairo* issued by the Ordnance Survey in 1920 and 1924 display the transcription as used by Willmore—for example, *El-Gâmi' el Aḥmar*, *Wag-h El Birka*, *Sh. El Madâbigh*, *Khân Ga'far*. Here, too, Fiske's project had failed to impress.

As for Spiro, he did not lose his interest in Egyptian Arabic, but he took a more scholarly and less propagandist turn after Fiske's death. In 1904, he published *Note on the Italian Words in the Modern Spoken Arabic of Egypt*. In the preface he mentions that "the system of transliteration here adopted is what is generally known as the Spitta system, the best ever adopted for writing modern Egyptian Arabic. . . . See 'The Story of the Alphabet' printed anonymously in Florence" (Spiro 1904, 5). Although correct, it is nevertheless remarkable that this is all he mentions of the project in which he invested so much time. Had it become an embarrassment to him?

In 1912, Spiro published *A New Practical Grammar of the Modern Arabic of Egypt*. This grammar is interesting in that it presents Egyptian Arabic in transcription and in Arabic characters. Again, no reference is made to Fiske's project. Spiro published *A Pocket Grammar and Vocabulary of the Modern Arabic of Egypt* in 1919. The transcription used is slightly different than in his previous works. Spiro had finally included the *z* but also used three cases of double letters for one sound (*gh*, *kh*, *sh*), due to "the absence of type" (Spiro 1919, iii). Besides these three publications, Spiro also published some articles on Egyptian Arabic, from 1912: a series of sixteen or seventeen articles in the *Egyptian Mail* on the street cries of Cairo; and a series of articles in the *Egyptian Gazette* on the renaissance of Arabic.³² This seems to have been the end of his publications on the topic of Egyptian Arabic. In 1924, Spiro wrote to Horatio White: "I suppose you read in the papers that the Turks propose to give up the use of the Arabic characters and to write in the future their language in Latin characters. . . . How poor Professor Fiske would have been overjoyed to learn this news! I wonder how long it will take the Egyptians to come to a similar decision?" (Spiro 1924, 176).

Conclusion

Fiske's alphabetization project can be seen in the light of a larger trend of promoting the Egyptian dialect as a written language at the end of the nineteenth century. Being a rich heir, Fiske had both money and time on his hands to produce and distribute a large number of publications promoting his project. However, his efforts were seen by most Egyptians as a somewhat eccentric hobby of an American professor rather than as a serious attempt to rightly understand and thus be able to change the writing system. Despite the familiarity of many school teachers and government employees with his alphabet, it never gained a foothold in Egyptian society. After Fiske's death in 1904, the project came to an end, and his publications were distributed among American and European libraries as curiosities.

Notes

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¹ A small sample of the works on Egyptian Arabic that were published in this period: Spitta-Bey (1880) and (1883), Plunkett (1886), Vollers (1890) and Burkitt's translation thereof (Vollers and Burkitt 1895), Haggenmacher (1892), Nallino (1900), and Willmore (1901).

² He studied Scandinavian languages in Copenhagen and Uppsala between 1849 and 1852 (Hermannsson 1918, 98). One of Fiske's (many) other interests was chess, on which he wrote extensively; see his collection of writings (Fiske 1920–22).

³ Her demise led to the infamous McGraw–Fiske Will Case, in which Fiske contested the part of his wife's bequest left to Cornell University (amounting to more than \$1 million). Fiske eventually won the case after seven years, but the conflict caused a permanent rupture with Cornell University. See Cornell University Library, *The Passionate Collector: Willard Fiske and His Libraries* (2005, sections *Jennie McGraw* and *The Will Case*). Accessed June 19, 2013. <http://rnc.library.cornell.edu/collector/index.html>; and "Cornell Loses a Legacy," *New York Times*, May 20, 1890.

⁴ The reason was the nationalist 'Urābī movement, which removed foreign officials from their posts (Mangold 2007, 61–62).

⁵ Fiske (1897, 46) claimed that the Arabic alphabet has over 130 characters. He likely meant the 28 letters, multiplied by the four shapes the letters take according to their position—that is, word initial, medial, final, and isolated—as well as the vowel signs. He mentioned the difficulty this causes for printers as well as for learners of the alphabet.

⁶ Harrell (1956, 311) calls it a "one-man crusade."

⁷ All of Fisk's publications were published anonymously. Scans (albeit of very poor quality) are available on www.bookprep.com/read/mdp.39015027524209. High quality scans of 1893, 1897, 1904a, and 1904b are available on www.archive.org.

⁸ See the references for full bibliographical details.

⁹ Most of these publications have no year, place of publication, or publisher. Because some items are dated 1897 or 1898, and all items were distributed as packages, it is assumed that all items were published in 1897–98.

¹⁰ This list also mentions “*aṭlas maṣr*” (“Atlas of Egypt”), which I unfortunately have been unable to find. Perhaps it has never appeared because it is advertised as “*râjiḥa tekûn melauwine*” (“it will be in color”), which suggests it had not been published yet at the time.

¹¹ Although Spiro refers to *An Egyptian Alphabet for the Egyptian People* here, this cannot be correct, and he must be referring to *kilmât ‘araby*. The reason is that he mentions a word list, which appeared in *kilmât ‘araby*, not in *An Egyptian Alphabet*.

¹² Spitta used these vowels not only to designate the schwa for solving clusters of three consonants between words (such as *essab ‘ê jiḡlib* “the lion will conquer”) but also within words (e.g., *qal-lûhum* “he told them”) (Spitta-Bey 1880, 53–54). Fiske realized that these vowels would be impractical in an alphabet meant for general use.

¹³ Willmore (1901, xv) also wondered about Spitta’s failure to recognize the existence of the *z* in Egyptian Arabic.

¹⁴ Fiske (1897, 47): “In the pronunciation three sounds, once expressed by the Old-Arabic letters ت [sic], ð and ظ, have disappeared, and, of course, require no written or printed representatives.” In his *Arabic-English Vocabulary* (1895), Spiro does not have a section for the letter ظ. All words beginning with ظ are listed under ج.

¹⁵ A short review of *kilmât ‘araby* appeared in *The Academy*, “Review of *Kilmât Araby*.” *The Academy* 44, no. 1110 (August 12, 1893): 136.

¹⁶ This usage was criticized by Willmore (1901, xv), among others.

¹⁷ In the time of letterpress printing, the metal “sorts” with the letters were subjected to wear and tear, especially the less sturdy letters like the *i*.

¹⁸ This was printed, for instance, on *asâmy maṣryje—riggâle*.

¹⁹ These texts, and many more (in English), can be found in Fiske (1920–22, 3:360–70). They include such gems as “One alphabet! one language! one country!” (361), “Do you talk Old-Arabic to your lady-love?” (367), and “The mummies in the museum at Gizeh speak a dead language” (365).

²⁰ Fiske had worked briefly as a postal clerk in Syracuse (White 1925, v). This could be another explanation for his interest in the subject.

²¹ The disappearance of pausal *imāla* is also reflected in Fiske’s publications. Comparing the first page of the *agrûmije* (1893, 105) and the *agrûmija* (1904b, 3), we note that in the 1893 edition we have *el hedyje* (“the present”), *eś sâmśyje* [sic] (“the parasol”), *ḥamse* (“five”), *el kenyse* (“the church”), *el birke* (“the lake”), and *ez zibde* (“the butter”), while in the 1904 edition we find *el hedyja*, *eś sâmśyja*, *ḥamsa*, *el kenysa*, *el birka*, and *ez zibda*. See also the masculine and feminine nouns in Fiske (1893, 109–10) and (1904b, 6–7).

²² Hartmann (1898, 283–84) expected that, should the project succeed, Cairene Arabic would be elevated to be the new standardized writing language.

²³ See also Gully (1997, 89–90).

²⁴ See an overview in Glaß (2004, 2:479–495) and Gully (1997, 90).

²⁵ Willcocks was the designer of the first Aswan Dam, which was completed in 1902.

²⁶ Willcocks’s efforts and their effect on Egyptian society have been described in detail in Saïd (1980). See also Diem (1974, 131–2); Shraybom Shvitiel (1999, 133) (who erroneously refers to him as Wilcox); Suleiman (2004, 66–8, 225); Gully (1997, 88–9); and Elshakry (2008, 723–4).

²⁷ See also Diem (1974, 132–3).

²⁸ See, for instance, Diem (1974, 131) for the reactions to Lord Dufferin’s statement that Egyptian children should learn the dialect instead of the Qur’ân. See also Woidich (2010, 65–66 and 72n45); and Saïd (1980).

²⁹ See also the letter of G. W. Harris, librarian of Cornell University at the time of Fiske's death, in White (1925, 168).

³⁰ White (1918, 83) mentions that around four hundred sets were distributed. Today, parts of the collection of publications can be found in the University of Toronto Library, New York Public Library, Harvard University Library, Cambridge University Library, Thüringer Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Jena, Leiden University Library, and other institutions.

³¹ Fiske used the more sound principle of one transcription symbol for one phoneme. Willmore proposed to use a hyphen when two letters represent two separate sounds, such as *ag-har*.

³² See the reference in Spiro (1922, 166).

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