ONOMÁZEIN
Journal of linguistics, philology and translation
PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA DE CHILE
FACULTAD DE LETRAS

Arabic language learning anxiety in Chinese social media: a study of discursive habitus and language symbolism

Chaoqun Lian
Peking University
China

Special Issue – IX –
Foreign Languages Education in China: Current Situation and Future Prospects
2021

ONOMÁZEIN | Special Issue IX
Foreign Languages Education in China: Current Situation and Future Prospects: 88-104
DOI: 10.7764/onomazein.ne9.06
ISSN: 0718-5758

Chaoqun Lian: Department of Arabic, School of Foreign Languages, Peking University, China.
| E-mail: lian@pku.edu.cn

Received: June 2021
Accepted: August 2021

Abstract

Arabic language learning anxiety (AA) is common among Arabic learners in China. Its causes lie beyond the language and its structural features per se but elsewhere in the sociopolitical world. Analyzing discussions on Arabic learning on the Chinese social media site *Zhihu* and identifying the discursive habitus, i.e., statements recurrently made and strategies recurrently used in these discussions, this paper shows that AA is both a symptom of and a reaction to the entanglement of Arabic via language symbolism in three *longue dureé* sociopolitical circumstances: the building of the modern Chinese nation, the redefining of the Muslim constituents of the Chinese national identity, and power negotiation in the modern world-system of knowledge.

Keywords: Arabic; language learning anxiety; language symbolism; discursive habitus.

1. Language anxiety, language symbolism, and discursive habitus

"One needs three minutes to learn Korean, three hours English, three days French, three years German, and three hundred years Arabic". This is a folk-linguistic maxim widely circulated in Chinese social media discussions on foreign language learning, suggesting a popular conviction that Arabic is a, or probably the most, difficult language to learn. The maxim is used for a variety of illocutionary purposes, including, for example, to justify slow progress of current learners of Arabic, to pressure new learners of Arabic into hard work, or to dissuade potential learners of Arabic with insufficient commitment. A major perlocutionary effect of these illocutionary acts is to express and alleviate "Arabic language learning anxiety" (henceforth "AA"), referring to a complex psychological status of worry, unease, uncertainty, fear, regret, or loathness about the acquisition of Arabic among (potential) learners of this language. This anxiety, as I will demonstrate in this paper, has less to do with "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz et al., 1986: 128), as is commonly understood in second language acquisition literature, than with "heightened and generalized concerns about language that straddle the linguistic and extralinguistic worlds" (Suleiman, 2014: 59). I will derive the main contents of AA and the patterns of its articulation from the discussions on Arabic language learning on the Chinese social media site *Zhihu*, and contextualize AA within the web of sociopolitical meanings associated with Arabic in contemporary Chinese society. This paper begins with a discussion of the key concepts and methodological considerations concerning the study of AA and a brief outline of the history of Arabic teaching in China, before moving on to a detailed description of AA on *Zhihu* and a sociopolitical analysis of its spread in Chinese social media and beyond.

The concerns about Arabic learning as are reflected in AA are much wider than the language anxiety studied in second language acquisition literature, whose focus is on the acquisition process per se, especially classroom performance (He, 2018). The discussion on *Zhihu* shows that, although AA indeed involves the very difficult and tedious acquisition process (causes for this do not lie in the language structure of Arabic but elsewhere as I will discuss below), it also addresses career prospects and identity stress of (potential) Arabic learners with complaints of an unsupportive sociopolitical environment, perceived to be filled with knowledge gaps, stereotypes, and prejudices. Accordingly, AA is less a language than a sociopolitical phenomenon. It is highly related to the sociopolitical, rather than the denotational and communicative, dimension of language.

This sociopolitical dimension is well captured by the notion of "language symbolism" (Suleiman, 2011 & 2013; Lian, 2020). Here "symbolism can be roughly understood as a 'stand-for' type of projection" and "language symbolism projects what happens in the social world onto language, so languages and language varieties become symbols that stand for social agents, groups and institutions, and intra- and inter-language relations become symbols

that stand for power relations between agents, groups and institutions" (Lian, 2020: 5). Language symbolism consists of two processes: indexication that makes a variant or a variety of a named language to be a seemingly natural correlate of a constituent of the sociopolitical reality in which the language is situated (for discussions of language indexicality, see Silverstein, 2003; Eckert, 2008; Johnstone, 2010) and proxification that exploits indexical meanings of language to use it as a proxy "to do politics through language, in the sense that talk about language becomes talk about the extra-linguistic world" (Suleiman, 2013: 5). Politics here is understood not just in its narrow sense of struggles among interested parties over the right to govern but more in its wide sense that involves all sorts of (re)negotiation of power relations in our social life.

In the case of AA in Chinese social media, as will be detailed below, concerns about Arabic learning are not limited to the structural complexity of the language that is blamed for the checkered experience of language competence development, but extended to the identity and power status of (potential) Arabic learners. AA, therefore, like many other cases of language anxiety, is more sociopolitical than linguistic. What are the sociopolitical causes that induce AA? This is the central question I am going to answer in this paper.

To answer this question, it is required above all to know what AA is about. I chose the discussions on *Zhihu*, seeing them as constituting a discourse through which AA is produced and reproduced (henceforth "AA discourse"). *Zhihu* is a Chinese social media site frequently visited by young, educated professionals and university and high school students. The site follows a Q&A format of communication, where discussions are induced and framed by thematic questions. From all the questions posed on *Zhihu* about Arabic learning, I selected 5 that have been answered the most: Q1—What is the experience of learning Arabic (55 answers)? Q2—How to provoke an Arabic learner (30 answers)? Q3—What are the employment prospects for Arabic learners in the future (14 answers)? Q4—Is it still popular to learn Arabic (10 answers)? Q5—What is the salary of Arabic major graduates (9 answers)? The answers to these questions and follow-up discussions can be seen as representative samples of the AA discourse, as they cover the main issues that concern the majority of Arabic learners in China, i.e., language acquisition, career prospects, and identity. The fact that participants in these Q&As are mostly experienced Arabic learners, especially those who hold or are doing a degree in Arabic, adds to the representativeness of these samples, because they convey, to a large extent, authentic feelings of the insiders of the Arabic learning circle.

In analyzing these samples of the AA discourse, my particular focus is on those recurrent statements and strategies of discourse-making. They combine to form what I call "discursive habitus". Following Bourdieu's notion of habitus that he uses to account for the reproduction of social actions in similar circumstances and seeing discourse as a type of social action, I define discursive habitus as "socially embodied dispositions to habitually perform discursive acts in particular ways under particular circumstances" (Lian, 2020: 8). Identifying

the discursive habitus of the AA discourse is useful, as this habitus does not only reflect the "densest" portion of the discourse in question where AA is the most evident but also hints at those relatively stable extralinguistic circumstances that have nurtured AA among Arabic learners in China. Such hints can then contribute to a more focal search for the sociopolitical causes behind AA.

Before analyzing the AA discourse on *Zhihu* to identify its discursive habitus, a historical survey of Arabic teaching in China is in order here to contextualize this discourse.

2. History of Arabic teaching in China

The Arabic language is known as a *Xiaoyuzhong* "small language" in China. The name indicates the very limited scale of its use and number of its speakers in the country. The language, nonetheless, has become part of the Chinese national life from the mid-twentieth century onwards, turning from a language of Chinese Muslim minorities to a language of vital strategic value to Chinese diplomacy and commercial interests in the Arabic-speaking world. It is against this nationalization of Arabic that Arabic language teaching has been incorporated into a national curriculum, mainly at the tertiary level.

A turning point for the nationalization of Arabic was the establishment of an Arabic program in Peking University in 1946, arguably the first in Chinese universities. Before that, Arabic teaching was exclusively a Muslim specialty, institutionalized with other disciplines of Islamic learning when the Islamic school system was developed in China in the 15th century. In the 1930s and 40s, several missions of committed young Chinese Muslims were sent to Cairo to study at al-Azhar or Dār al-ʿUlūm (a teacher training college for modern education) via official arrangements. These young Muslims, already imbued with a developing sense of belonging to the Chinese nation in its renewed sense, got further inspired by the Islamic modernist ideas of the Egyptian reformist Muḥammad ʿAbdu and the surge of nationalist sentiments in Egyptian society. The fusion of Islamic modernism and nationalism endowed them with a dual identity of being a Muslim devoted to the modern resurgence of Islam and a Chinese committed to the revival and reorganization of the Chinese nation. It was they who became the first cohort of Arabic instructors in Chinese universities, initiating the nationalization of Arabic and Arabic teaching in China.

Arabic became a strategic language of third-world diplomacy in the 1950s and 60s, when the nascent People's Republic of China developed diplomatic links with Asian, African, and Latin American countries to counteract the block of the Western powers. Additional seven Chinese universities established degree programs in Arabic. Non-Muslim Chinese soon became the majority of the now expanding cohort of Arabic experts and students, who practiced Arabic in diplomacy and cultural exchange, beyond the domain of Islamic liturgies to which Arabic had been confined before.

In the following decades until now, Arabic teaching in China witnessed two further expansions, all in line with the growing engagement of China with the world. In the 1980s and 1990s, the "reform and open-up" policy drove China into the global market. Trade with the Arabic-speaking world developed rapidly, and accordingly demands for professional Arabic speakers working in foreign trade industry increased. The lucrative career prospects attracted potential learners of Arabic, and more students were admitted to the extant Arabic programs in Chinese universities. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, with China becoming more confident in engaging the world on its own initiative and playing a more active and influential role in global trade and international affairs, demands for Arabic graduates further increased. State-owned and private firms created more overseas positions for Arabic-speaking salesmen and project managers, while state departments began to anticipate Arabic-speaking talents with a higher caliber, who are not only competent in doing formal translation but are also knowledgeable about the Arabic-speaking world and can conduct independent, empirical research to support policy making. Consequently, Chinese universities witnessed a surge in Arabic teaching, with the number of universities having an undergraduate degree program in Arabic grow to 50 in the last two decades. Graduate programs also developed to an unprecedented extent, offering training in studying various aspects of the Arabic-speaking world and the Middle East.

More than seven decades have passed since the introduction of Arabic into Chinese universities in the civil system of education, Arabic teaching in China has now exhibited three stable characteristics. First, Arabic teaching programs in Chinese universities continuously cultivate Arabic-speaking talents to work in various domains of diplomatic, commercial, and cultural exchanges between China and the Arabic-speaking world, with a national syllabus for these programs to follow and a national Arabic test to check their quality. Second, Muslim schools and colleges in China run their own Arabic teaching programs to train both imams and laymen, thus creating a dual (civil and religious) system of Arabic teaching in China. Third, both the civil and religious programs focus on Standard Arabic, the high variety of Arabic that is used mainly in formal situations in the Arabic-speaking world, where diglossia of high and low varieties (Colloquial Arabic) is widespread. Excluding Colloquial Arabic from the syllabus leaves Arabic graduates with a competence gap, making them struggle to communicate with native Arabic speakers in a natural and comfortable way. All three characteristics induce and frame the concerns over Arabic learning in the AA discourse on *Zhihu*. It should be noted that, since the majority of participants in producing this discourse belong to the civil system of Arabic teaching in China, the following analysis mainly reflects their anxiety over Arabic learning.

3. Discursive habitus of the AA discourse on *Zhihu*

My description of the discursive habitus of the AA discourse on *Zhihu* attends to both the recurrent statements made in this discourse, which show what AA is about, and the recurrent

strategies of discourse making, which show how AA is conveyed. The following quotes are originally in Chinese, and all English translations of them are mine.

3.1. Recurrent statements

The recurrent statements established from the AA discourse cover concerns over three issues of Arabic learning, i.e., acquisition, career prospects, and identity.

3.1.1. Acquisition

In terms of acquisition, it is frequently stated that, first, the Arabic language taught in the degree programs of Chinese universities is too complicated to learn. Complaints are made about pronunciation: “When I first learned the alphabet: what is it, what is it? Why sound can be articulated from anywhere? My tongue, you have to fight for it! Move! How can I pronounce it deeper?” (Q1); about orthography: “You could never understand why a word [i.e., letter] changes to a completely different sound when an additional dot is added, but sounds almost the same with another letter with completely different appearance” (Q1); about grammar: “The most painful thing is grammar; there are a bunch of things, like marking three cases with two forms, like gender, number, case and definiteness, and like semantic and literal construct states, that are suffocating as hell” (Q1). Statements similar to those above are easily found in the samples of the discourse.

It is also frequently stated that the Arabic language taught in Chinese universities does not match the actual language use in the Arabic-speaking world, referring to the above-mentioned competence gap that fails to cope with diglossia in reality. A representative example of this type of statements is a cartoon reposted several times to depict the first encounter of an Arabic learner with a native Arabic speaker (Q1 & Q4). The former is visiting an Arab country for the first time. He is confident in practicing the greetings in Standard Arabic that he has learnt from the textbook when he sees an Arab peer approach near but fails to understand the colloquial of the latter, leading to bitter frustration.

A third, recurrent type of statements concerning Arabic acquisition complains about the time and energy Arabic learners devote, which are disproportionate to the slow progress they make in learning this language. Typical examples of this are: “Four years of hard work in the undergraduate course will not pass without harvest. Trust me! You will even be able to tell one is speaking Arabic or not” (Q1); “The Arabic major is not so hard to do that you want to leave it for another, but it can definitely make your university life a high-school one” (Q1); “Your university life will be so full that you will feel sleepy during the day, stay up late at night, and even have no time to learn English” (Q1). The last one suggests that devoting time to learn a language not as useful and easy-to-learn as English is making a sacrifice. The claimed complexity of Arabic and the competence gap, as are complained in the previous two types of statements, only augment the feeling of sacrificing time and energy to acquire less beneficial skills and knowledge.

3.1.2. Career prospects

In terms of career prospects, a distinction is commonly made between high- and low-level jobs. Employments at government departments, state media, universities, research institutes, and large enterprises are treated as high-level, while those at small businesses and offices of Arab trade companies are seen as low-level. Both levels are competitive but in a different manner. It is claimed that graduates from universities having an established reputation for Arabic teaching compete for high-level jobs, while graduates from other universities or colleges in the civil system have to compete with those from Muslim colleges for low-level jobs. Below is a typical statement in this regard: "Arabic is a special small language. It is true that the demand for Arabic-speaking talents is not low, but the supply is also high. Other lesser-known languages have almost only one line of talent supply, i.e., colleges of foreign languages. In the case of Arabic, don't forget that there are ten Muslim-majority minorities in China. There are also Islamic schools and colleges and non-government conduits for studying overseas [in Muslim countries], which form an additional line of talent supply... Graduates from third-batch universities have to compete for jobs in Yiwu with those Muslim Chinese who are semi-proficient in Arabic" (Q3).

It is also often mentioned that gender discrimination is common in employment. Affected by the widespread patriarchal stereotype of Arab society, employers prefer to hire male graduates, even if they are outperformed by some of their female peers. Examples of this kind of statements are: "If you are a boy, rank in the top two-thirds of your class and look smart, it would be easy for you to find a job... Of course, if you are a girl, [I would] dissuade you [from doing an Arabic major] without hesitation. Do not ever choose it!" (Q3); "But girls are advised to be cautious, as girls studying this major will be subject to a lot of restrictions when looking for a job" (Q3).

Some recurrent statements are targeted at dissatisfying career experience of Arabic-major graduates, especially being employed overseas as project coordinates tasked with mundane, unskilled translation. Examples are: "The life of Arabic graduates [abroad after employment] is usually boring and short of sustainable development. Some of them are even out of touch with domestic development after returning home" (Q5); "Then your friends who learned French, Russian, Spanish and Japanese have long been integrated into society, hooking up with handsome guys and beauties from all over the world, singing and feasting, shaking hands and posing for photos with local leaders, and negotiating business with managers, while you are still stammering to communicate with vegetable sellers, using your hands and feet and by hinting and guessing" (Q4).

Due to these dimming career prospects, it is stated that many decided to abandon Arabic and compete with graduates from other majors on the general job market: "Talking about those who specialize in Arabic and are willing to pursue an Arabic-related career, as far as my classmates are concerned, less than half of them, or probably only a third, are actually doing so" (Q4).

3.1.3. Identity

A theme recurrent in the AA discourse is that Arabic learners in the civil system of education in China are faced with a dual sense of peripherality. On the one hand, they feel that they are peripheralized by the mainstream of Chinese society, due to some negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims that are also transferred to Arabic and an evident lack of knowledge about the Arabic-speaking world and the peoples living there. It is also common, accordingly, that some of them fail to secure sufficient understanding and support from their non-Muslim peers, friends, and relatives regarding their decision to study Arabic. On the other hand, they feel that they are peripheralized by Muslims in China and the wider Muslim world. Studying Arabic while retaining a distance from the belief in and practice of Islam constitutes a major obstacle for those learners wishing to engage with and gain sympathy from ordinary native Arabic speakers, the majority of whom are Muslims and many of whom regard Arabic indispensable to their Muslim identity. The following statement captures this dual sense of peripherality well (Q2):

> Currently most non-Muslim Arabic speakers in China are tortured by two forces: Han (or other non-Muslim) Chinese who know nothing about Islam and the Arab world, and some Muslims who strongly advise you to convert.
>
> The former's understanding of the Arab world still rests on the magic lamp of Aladdin, the nouveau riche in Dubai, and terrorism. They regard the Arab world as a country, and their impression of Egypt stays at pyramids, mummies, and Sphinx. Some of them think that Egypt still uses hieroglyphs, believe that there are Lebanese, Iraqi, and Syriac languages, and consider the Arabs, Iranians, and Pakistanis as almost the same. Some will unkindly use "green religion" and "little white hat" to refer to the Muslims, giving stupid, hostile remarks that may make Muslims furious.
>
> The Muslims believe that Arabic is a "sacred" language, and it is simply unreasonable for you to learn this language without converting to Islam, reciting the Koran and recognizing some of the customs and values of Islam. If you remain unmoved after several attempts they make to persuade, they will basically treat you coldly, as if you were an infidel entering the Islamic world.

A concomitant of the first peripherality, which is also conveyed in the AA discourse on *Zhihu* several times, is the demonization of the knowledge of Arabic as something useless. Personal experiences of Arabic learners relating to this are reproduced in this discourse. One example is an exchange between an Arabic learner and someone else from the general public (Q2): "What do you study?" "Arabic". "There is no future in learning this. You'd better do something else". "What is promising to learn?" "Anything is better than Arabic anyway".

Another example is a scene where students majoring in Arabic, French, and Russian are reading their own textbooks aloud in a university practice room for students majoring in languages, yet only the one reading Arabic is reminded to lower his or her voice (Q2). Apparently, in this case, features of Arabic phonetics activate negative stereotypes associated with this lan-

guage, making the reading of Arabic aloud abnormal when it should be normal to hear different languages being practiced orally in the room. This example shows that, when a language is granted with extralinguistic significance, even the seemingly ideology-neutral phonetic system of the language is not immune and becomes a trigger of sociopolitical considerations.

In sum, the above concerns over the acquisition, career prospects, and learners' identity of Arabic learning accumulate together and mutually enhance each other to constitute the stable sources of AA. Yet it is how these concerns are recurrently addressed and articulated in the AA discourse, or how the discourse is made and reproduced, that demonstrates the existence and persistence of AA among Chinese learners of Arabic, as I will discuss below.

3.2. Recurrent strategies

In the AA discourse on *Zhihu*, AA is both conveyed directly and indirectly. Among recurrent strategies used to convey AA, there are articulation, authentication, and intertextuality that are direct, and irony, hyperbole, and dissuasion that are indirect.

3.2.1. Articulation

Articulation here is a strategy of discourse making that expresses concerns over the learning of Arabic directly, often with anxiety-related emotional expressions and evaluations: "I become very devastated after taking Arabic. I spent a whole afternoon reciting [Arabic texts] but could not memorize them, while others can do so in a short while. How annoying! The future is worrying" (Q1); "Right! That's how it [Arabic learning] drives people crazy!" (Q1); "All these [tasks of language learning] will be more difficult for an Arabic learner... It is indeed a suffering ... It's really an invisible pressure on you!" (Q1); "It depends. It's good for me to learn Arabic, but for many of my peers, they had been out of their minds to choose Arabic as their major" (Q3). All these feelings of devastation, worry, craziness, suffering, pressure, etc., are directly expressed to show that AA is common and real to Arabic learners in China.

3.2.2. Authentication

Authentication is to "make claims to realness" (Bucholts & Hall, 2005: 601). In the AA discourse, authentication is commonly seen in conclusions or responses to previous posts. It is used to confirm or reassure statements about AA that have been made already. The following examples are selected to illustrate: "All in all, it cannot be more common for Arabic learners to be provoked. These are all from my real experience, and I guess that many of my colleagues have also experienced them" (Q2); "This question really resonates... [T]hose who learn Arabic are a bit more bitter than those who learn other languages" (Q2); "As soon as I read ['beginning a day of Arabic learning at] 7:10', I felt a confirmed look in my eyes" (Q1, "a confirmed look" is a popular phrase on Chinese social media to authenticate shared feelings); "I quite agree with you that the European languages represent a train of thought, Chinese is another, and

Arabic a third" (Q1). The wide use of authentication shows that statements about AA arouse sympathetic confirmation among Arabic learners, which further indicates that AA is indeed real and common.

3.2.3. Intertextuality

Intertextuality refers to "instances of texts linking to other texts" explicitly by "referring to them" or implicitly by "incorporating elements of them" (Farrelly, 2020: 359). In the AA discourse, it is common to find quotations from the largely negative comments and views of relatives and friends of Arabic learners or the wider public on the learning of Arabic. In some cases, quotations are made honestly without modification or mediation. For example, several screenshots of WeChat (the most popular messaging and social media platform in China) exchanges about actual cases of employment seeking are posted and reposted on *Zhihu*, showing how Arabic graduates are struggling in the job market and how a hardworking Arabic learner ends with a job of low added value and modest income (Q2 & Q3). In other cases, quotations are remolded, either in "coding" or "mini-play" formats, to give a more systematic or vivid presentation of the overall unfriendliness towards the learning of Arabic. In the "coding" format, a list of typical comments and views is given. Some of them are direct quotes while others are paraphrases. Each represents a category of comments and views that Arabic learners frequently receive throughout their learning process and beyond after graduation. Doing categorization in this manner is similar to coding data in social science research, thence the name "coding". As for the "mini-play" format, quoted comments and views are given in dialogues, usually between two roles, an Arabic learner and an outsider. The latter is often depicted as mocking or dissuading the former from learning Arabic. The second example in 3.1.3 is an illustration.

Intertextuality in the AA discourse also includes "adducing", presenting graphic evidence to support verbal statements. For example, a number of pictures showing incorrect visualization of Arabic script in public space and on screen are posted in the *Zhihu* discussions to demonstrate how the lack of knowledge in Arabic is common, which frustrates current learners of Arabic and dissuades potential ones.

All the cases of intertextuality above are inter-discursive, that is, quoting words and images from outside the AA discourse. Yet there are also cases of intertextuality that are intra-discursive. Similar elements of this discourse, including statements, evaluations, and graphics that convey concerns over Arabic learning, circulate within this discourse and create a chorus-like effect on all the participants, makers, and receivers alike, making them converge around an enhanced common identity of being insiders of the Arabic learning circle in China against the misunderstanding, bias, mockery, or even enmity of the outside other. Intertextuality in both its inter- and intradiscursive forms, therefore, contributes to constructing "alterity" (Suleiman, 2013) between Arabic learners and the wider society they are in, discursively reproducing the sense of peripherality they have already had.

3.2.4. Irony

Irony is traditionally understood as "a trope, consisting of saying the opposite of what one means" (Attardo, 2006: 26). On a more general, cognitive level, it is defined as "an intense and made-apparent contradiction between pairs of schemas tightly juxtaposed, intertwined or overlapping, found in a situation or invoked between a comment and a situation" (Colston, 2017: 35). In the AA discourse, irony is the most widely used strategy that indirectly conveys AA by hinting at a somewhat bizarre, awkward reality that Arabic learners face within China by presenting apparent contradictions.

Irony is commonly used to articulate concerns over the acquisition of Arabic. For example, describing the discrepancy between Standard Arabic learnt in class and Colloquial Arabic used in actual oral communication, a statement from the AA discourse says: "Don't panic when you find an Arab make a long speech in colloquial so fast that you don't understand a word". Reading this, one would normally anticipate a way out of this panic situation. However, contradictorily to this anticipation, the statement continues: "You still can't understand him if he lowers his speed and says it again" (Q1). Making up ironic contradiction in this way highlights the competence gap that troubles the majority of the Arabic learners who begin to study or work overseas in an Arabic-speaking country. Evidently, underlying such use of irony is a strong sense of AA.

Within the AA discourse, irony is recurrently seen in the discussions on career prospects. An example of this is the statement "You say that you are a male student and must be more welcomed than a female in the job market. All right! Come on! Come abroad and move bricks" (Q4). The irony lies in the contradiction between an anticipated good overseas job for the male student and the tedious, boring content of the job in reality. Inherent in this irony is the anxiety over unsatisfying career prospects of Arabic learners.

Similarly, irony is also frequently used to address concerns over the peripherality of Arabic learners. One example suffices here to illustrate. A comment on the common scenario where an Arabic learner is asked the question "How could you learn Arabic without embracing Islam?" advised the learner to respond with the following statement: "Those who learn the C language or programming would not transform themselves into a computer" (Q2). The logic of this statement is in parallel to that of the question, but the ironic contradiction apparently embedded in the former powerfully reveals the inherent absurdity of the seemingly rational argument the latter conveys. The irony used in this case vividly reflects the anxiety of Arabic learners over their identity of belonging to a peripheral minority, who are poorly understood by the mainstream of the public.

3.2.5. Hyperbole

Hyperbole is similar to irony in that both are intended to create apparent contradiction, yet hyperbole resorts to exaggeration while irony relies on contrast. Hyperbole is widely used

in the AA discourse to convey a sense of powerlessness and helplessness in facing enduring challenges and pressure throughout the learning of Arabic and beyond. A typical example of hyperbole in this discourse is a graphic reposted several times in the *Zhihu* samples, listing all the aspects of Arabic that are supposed for a learner to know and command (Q1). These encompass grammatical rules, varieties, registers, and styles of Arabic, skills of listing, speaking, reading, and writing, and various genres of Arabic texts. The format of the long list is itself intimidating. Added to this is the title of this graphic, "The abyss of Arabic", which metaphorically reaffirms and enhances the intimidating effect of the format. Surely one does not need to command all those listed on the graphic to hold a degree in Arabic, so the graphic is an exaggeration apparently contradictory to the actual process of Arabic learning, thus a hyperbole. However, this hyperbole fits in with a common sense of challenge, pressure, worry, and anxiety among Arabic learners when studying a language commonly perceived to be more complex and difficult to learn. In this way, hyperbole also serves as an indirect conduit through which AA is conveyed.

3.2.6. Dissuasion

A third strategy of conveying anxiety indirectly is dissuasion: current learners or graduates of Arabic warn potential learners of the challenges and difficulties they are going to face and persuade them not to learn this language. For example, concerning gender discrimination, a statement is made that "But girls are advised to be cautious, as girls choosing this major will be subject to a lot of restrictions when looking for a job" (Q3). It appears that, when performing persuasion, those insiders of the Arabic learning circle are addressing the outsiders. However, in doing so, the insiders are in fact releasing the AA they bear, making dissuasion an indirect but effective way of conveying AA.

The statements recurrently made and the strategies recurrently used, as summarized above together constitute the habitus of the AA discourse. For the Arabic learners who participated in the *Zhihu* discussion on Arabic learning, these statements reflect their most common concerns that induce AA, and these strategies are the conduits they resort the most to convey and tackle AA. The very existence of this discursive habitus suggests that AA indeed permeates the civil circle of Arabic learning in China. Identifying and decomposing this habitus, as I have done in this section, reveals the sources and features of AA, which pave the way for the following search for the causes behind AA.

4. Sociopolitical causes behind AA

AA is induced by the various concerns over Arabic learning, but ultimately these concerns are driven by the entanglements between Arabic and the sociopolitical world in the Chinese contexts. But for the nationalization of Arabic to be a strategic language of diplomacy, the syllabus of Arabic teaching would not have stuck to the high, formal variety of Arabic (Stan-

dard Arabic) and grammatical accuracy, causing the competence gap in Colloquial Arabic that constitutes a key source of AA. But for the deep-rooted belief that Arabic is the language of Islam, learners of Arabic would not have been faced with the many stereotypical (mis-)perceptions of Islam that are associated with Arabic, which constitute another key source of AA.

Such entanglements are better to be explained by language symbolism, as Arabic is not only indexically related to but also participates as a proxy in the building of the modern Chinese nation, the redefining of the Muslim constituents of the Chinese national identity, and power negotiation in the modern world-system of knowledge—three *longue dureé* sociopolitical circumstances I am going to address below. When these circumstances endure, the indexication and proxification of Arabic will continue to become mundane and habitual, thus providing stable and similar sources of AA. The habitus of the AA discourse is but a secondary concomitant of the habitual indexication and proxification of Arabic in Chinese society.

During the building of the modern Chinese nation from the early twentieth century onwards, Arabic has been endowed with two indexicalities. On the one hand, Arabic is the language of the Muslim identity of Chinese Muslims, who are part of the Chinese nation defined as multiethnic with the Han people being the predominant majority. On the other, Arabic is one of the languages that link China with the Global South to negotiate with the norm-setters of the modern international order. These two indexicalities have been reified as two orders of Arabic, one Muslim and one national. In the former order, Arabic retains its association with the Islamic belief and practice that connect Chinese Muslims to the wider Islamic world. In the latter order, a de facto de-link between Arabic and Islam is intended, and a Chinese-style register of Arabic has been developed to mediate formal diplomatic, political, economic, and cultural exchanges with the Arabic-speaking world, which is widely used in state departments and national media. The development of these two orders of Arabic can be seen as using Arabic as a proxy to coordinate and balance two kinds of the constituents of the identity of the modern Chinese nation: those of Muslim minorities and those towards the Global South.

The dual orders of Arabic have left two main ramifications on Arabic learning in China. The first is the separation between Arabic teaching in the civil system of education and that in the Muslim one, with a lack of integration between students in the two systems and with high-level employment opportunities mostly available only to graduates in the first. Second, both orders attend to formal language use based on Standard Arabic without paying due attention to informal, mundane, and popular language use based on Colloquial Arabic. Moreover, the national order has developed its own register of Standard Arabic, especially at the phrasal level, to convey political and economic concepts and ideas from the Chinese context to the Arabic-speaking world. Accordingly, what is chosen to teach is the high level of language use that constitutes only one pole of the diglossia of Arabic in reality. Grammatical accuracy is also in order to support this choice, which requires significant time and energy

devoted to grammatical teaching and drilling. All these ramifications become sources of AA, and can be found in the habitus of the AA discourse.

The redefining of the Muslim constituents of the Chinese national identity is a second sociopolitical circumstance behind AA. This is somehow evident in and driven by a strand of mistrust towards Islam in the Chinese public, especially among some Chinese netizens, which is largely due to the widespread demonization of Islam on the media of Western countries and the Internet when the Global War on Terror was initiated after the terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda on the United States on September 11, 2001. This led to a reconsideration of the role of Islam and Muslims in China. Arabic, with a deep-rooted indexicality of being the language of Islam, naturally becomes a proxy of such mistrust towards Islam and such redefining of the Muslim constituents of the Chinese national identity. It is in this context that some Arabic learners in the civil system of education begin to feel the dual sense of peripherality, as is complained in the AA discourse.

Power negotiation in the modern world-system of knowledge constitutes a third sociopolitical circumstance behind AA. The "world-system" is a unit of sociohistorical analysis developed by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) to refer to "all the people of the earth and all their cultural, economic, and political institutions and the interactions and connections among them" (Chase-Dunn, 2007: 1060). A key premise of the world-system theory is a core-periphery hierarchy emerging out of the convergence of the globe into the overarching world-system. In terms of political economy, the core areas control worldwide allocation of economic resources, international division of labor, and appropriation of the surplus of world economy (Wallerstein, 1974: 401). In terms of knowledge and epistemology, the world-views, value systems, and epistemic patterns developed in the core areas challenge and replace those in the periphery.

Among humanities and social sciences in China, the study of Arabic is on the periphery, due to the influence of the world-system of knowledge and epistemology. On the one hand, the study of Arabic is not on a par with the studies of the modern languages of the core areas such as English, French, German, Spanish, and Japanese. On the other, the study of the Arabic-speaking world as a natural extension of the study of Arabic is seen as theoretically and methodologically inferior to such disciplines as political science, international relations, economics, and sociology, whose theoretical paradigms are mainly established from the experiences of Western society. This latter core-periphery relationship is largely in parallel to that between disciplines and area studies in Western academia (Mitchell, 2003). Here, Arabic becomes a proxy for power negotiation in the modern world-system of knowledge. The enduring peripheral status of the study of Arabic becomes a key source of AA among Arabic learners in China.

AA, therefore, is both a symptom of and a reaction to the entanglement of Arabic via language symbolism in the three sociopolitical circumstances discussed above. When these circum-

stances endure without significant changes, the symbolism of Arabic tends to be stable and habitual, continuing feeding AA among Arabic learners in China in line with the discursive habitus established from the *Zhihu* discussions on the learning of Arabic.

5. References

5.1. Primary sources

Zhihu, "How to provoke an Arabic learner?" [https://www.zhihu.com/question/345395498, date of retrieval: January 22, 2021].

Zhihu, "Is it still popular to learn Arabic?" [https://www.zhihu.com/question/271383808, date of retrieval: January 22, 2021].

Zhihu, "What are the employment prospects for Arabic learners in the future?" [https://www.zhihu.com/question/337336782, date of retrieval: January 22, 2021].

Zhihu, "What is the experience of learning Arabic?" [https://www.zhihu.com/question/57502795, date of retrieval: January 22, 2021].

Zhihu, "What is the salary of Arabic major graduates?" [https://www.zhihu.com/question/27635020, date of retrieval: January 22, 2021].

5.2. Books and papers

Attardo, Salvatore, 2006: "Irony" in Keith Brown (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics* (second edition), Oxford: Elsevier, 26-28.

Bucholts, Mary, and Kira Hall, 2005: "Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach", *Discourse Studies* 7 (4-5), 585-614.

Chase-Dunn, Christopher K., 2007: "Dependency and world-systems theories" in George Ritzer (ed.): *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, vol. III, Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1060-1062.

Colston, Herbert L., 2017, "Irony performance and perception" in Angeliki Athanasiadou and Herbert L. Colston (eds.): *Irony in Language Use and Communication*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 19-42.

Eckert, Penelope, 2008: "Variation and the indexical field", *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 12, 453-476.

Farrelly, Michael, 2020: "Rethinking intertextuality in CDA", *Critical Discourse Studies*, 17 (4), 359-376.

HE, Deyuan, 2018: *Foreign Language Learning Anxiety in China*, Singapore: Springer.

HORWITZ, E. K., M. B. HORWITZ, and J. COPE, 1986: “Foreign language classroom anxiety”, *The Modern Language Journal* 70 (2), 125-132.

JOHNSTONE, Barbara, 2010: “Locating language in identity” in Carmen LLAMAS and Dominic WATT (eds.): *Language and Identities*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 29-36.

LIAN, Chaoqun, 2020: *Language, Ideology and Sociopolitical Change in the Arabic-speaking World*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

MITCHELL, Timothy, 2003, “Deterritorialization and the crisis of social science” in Ali MIRSEPASSI, Amrita BASU, and Frederick WEAVER (eds.): *Localizing Knowledge in a Globalizing World*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 148-170.

SILVERSTEIN, Michael, 2003: “Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life”, *Language and Communication* 23, 193-229.

SULEIMAN, Yasir, 2011: *Arabic, Self and Identity: A Study in Conflict and Displacement*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

SULEIMAN, Yasir, 2013: *Arabic in the Fray: Language Ideology and Cultural Politics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

SULEIMAN, Yasir, 2014: “Arab(ic) language anxiety”, *al-ʿArabiyya* 47, 57-81.

WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel Maurice, 1974: *The Modern World-System*, vol. I, New York and London: Academic Press.