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Writing and publishing language studies in the Arab region [Khitabaat Journal]

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Abstract: This article investigates both universal and relative aspects of socio-linguistic academic writing and reading. It engages with Wolfgang Klein's (1989. Schreiben oder Lesen, aber nicht beides, oder: Vorschlag zur Wieder-einführung der Keilschrift mittels Hammer und Meißel. *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 74. 116–119) article. Klein starts from an implicit assumption that writing and reading are individual activities and suggests that (individual) writers must decrease their production to enable their (individual) readers to read it. I argue that the contemporary world transformed reading and writing from individual to institutional activities. This means that the importance and feasibility of contemporary academic research are not linked to the individualistic reading but rather to the institutional reading that transforms its results into policies, procedures, applications, and laws. Despite worldwide shared academic writing, reading, and publishing practices, the politics of writing and reading vary over time, disciplines and cultures. I argue that Arab knowledge production on sociolinguistics is highly affected by sociopolitical peculiarities, such as academic freedom restrictions, lack of resources and loose academic practices.

Keywords: Arabic sociolinguistics; institutional writing; institutional reading; Wolfgang Klein; academic writing; journal publishing

This article addresses the politics of writing, reading, and publishing language studies in the Arab region by commenting on Klein (1989) article. I will comment on Klein's article from two perspectives that are usually perceived as opposites: universalist and relativist. Despite worldwide shared academic writing, reading, and publishing practices, each research community has its own peculiarities. The Arab research community, where the *Khitabaat Journal* is published, enjoys many.

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1 The universalist: institutional writing and reading

Klein's article starts from an implicit assumption that writing and reading are individual activities. An individual writer writes for an individual reader, governed by their capacities and limitations. He suggests that (individual) writers must decrease their research production to enable their (individual) readers to read their writing. However, decades before his article, a movement had emerged to institutionalise reading and writing as activities, and what might be called institutional writing and reading has since flourished. In the past, researchers often chose their research based on personal interests and motives. While some researchers can still research in line with their preferences, a more significant number of researchers are forced to adjust their research interests to align with the agenda of their institutions and the requirements of funding programs. For example, a researcher must adopt their institution's research plan to maintain support for their research and perhaps keep their job. In this same vein, the chances of research publication for sponsored teams are greater as some journals publish research based on large data and interdisciplinary approaches. This gives support and grant institutions more control over the research and publishing market.

Institutional writing leads to a kind of institutional reading. In many cases, the institutions that control research function as the "ideal reader" of the outcome of that research. For example, the "ideal reader" for research into hate speech, racism, or discrimination is the political and legal institutions responsible for regulating speech in the public sphere. These institutions will transform research results into policies, laws, and instructions. The relevant institutions may be the same as the targeted reader and the actual research of language policies and planning, language acquisition, language disorders, etc. This means that the importance and feasibility of contemporary academic research are not linked to the individualistic reading but rather to the institutional reading that transforms its results into policies, procedures, applications, and laws.

2 The relativist: does the Arabian Alma Mater produce enough good butter?

Klein argues that knowledge is a commodity that follows market laws. Hence, if production exceeds demand, one of them must be adjusted to achieve balance. This claim is the core of Klein's article. He believes there is an overproduction of

knowledge in the West, stating with an interesting analogy that “It is not enough that the Alma Mater produces mountains of butter; someone has to eat it up” (Klein 1989: 116). I argue that the Arab language studies market gives different indications and stats.

According to Scimago, the Arab countries published 7,099 out of 505,475 papers on Language and Linguistics in Scopus-indexed journals from 1998 to 2022 (Scimago 2023). Those numbers show that the Arab contribution to the international market of language studies is very marginal and does not correspond to its population and income capacities. With a total of 464 million inhabitants and a GDP (PPP) of 7.8 trillion USD in 2023, the countries of the Arab League published fewer language and linguistics articles than Belgium, which has only 11 million inhabitants and a GDP (PPP) of 65 billion USD in 2023. This discrepancy could be seen as a result of local publishing or a sign of a production crisis.

Arab linguists perceive themselves as a homogeneous research community. Apart from those who work in foreign institutions, they write almost solemnly in Arabic and publish in Arab journals, most of which are not included in the Scopus database. For example, Qatar University, where I work, has a list of 203 approved journals on Arabic studies. Only nine are indexed in Scopus, proving that tens of thousands of articles published by the other 194 Arab journals have been excluded from Scopus statistics. There are other side effects for local publishing practices in linguistics. Most articles published in the Arab region are not accessible to non-Arabic-speaking audiences. As a result, some of the most important contributions of Arab linguists are not internationally recognised based solely on their language and journal of publication. For Arab linguistics journals, it is essential to understand that while you may publish important, original works, you will likely have little chance of being internationally recognised or even seen internationally.

Surprisingly, few Arabists recognise Arab linguistics journals as sources for their research. A few reasons may explain this. The first seems absurd but true. Some Arabists who work on Arabic linguistics could be better readers of the Arabic language. The second is the existence of a prior negative connotation of the value of Arab research in linguistics. Moreover, dealing with Arab-published local articles might be challenging in some cases due to the lack of essential information that is considered shared basic knowledge between Arabs and is consequently absent from the text. Similarly, the unfamiliar body structure of some Arab articles adds further challenges to non-Arab readers. These factors have led to weak communication between Arab linguists and Arabists, each treating what the other party achieves as irrelevant and thus creating the absence of enormous possibilities for mutual enrichment and necessary knowledge accumulation.

However, a production crisis can also be seen in terms of research quality rather than quantity. There are many “reviewed” articles but few original ones, meaning

there have been floods of introductory theoretical articles that do nothing but rephrase and repeat what others have written. This discrepancy affects both the writing and reading practices in the Arab region. Furthermore, due to the lack of scientific rigor, plagiarism, ghostwriting, and guest authoring are common practices that editors face. A considerable amount of time, effort, and paper are wasted periodically because of the lack of an actual reviewing process. Almost every submission will be accepted, with the acceptance ratio surpass 80 % in some journals!

The main concern is not to reduce the quantity, as Klein suggests, but to improve the quality. In this context, the primary concern of an Arab journal editor is to protect their journal's reputation through harsh measures against research disintegration. This mission is challenging in an academic environment that is not wholly concerned with academic integrity. That results in floods of junk journals that publish junk articles!

The politics of reading in this context is a little more complicated. A good reader has to do both editorial and reviewing work before citing papers published in some outlets, as they have to investigate paper authenticity, integrity, and actual contributions. Ironically, many journals that adopt lenient publishing policies are open-accessed. Hence, their unreviewed articles are more accessible to readers and get a higher chance of being cited!

Academic freedom restrictions cause another aspect of the production crisis in the Arab world. Linguists in almost all Arab countries usually avoid studying critically “sensitive” research topics such as political discourses of their current regimes, dominant religious discourses, controversial language policies, minority languages, societal discursive wars, social and political aspects of dialects and similar. Furthermore, tremendous obstacles may be faced when collecting or studying live language data. Failure to avoid critical “sensitive” linguistic topics may lead, in particular cases, to grave consequences such as job loss, imprisonment, or exile.

In this context, publishing a journal on critical discourse studies, such as *Khitabaat Journal*, is an act of academic struggle in various arenas. Arab researchers exercise either strict self-censorship over what they write, publish, and perhaps think or struggle to resist restrictions imposed on their academic freedom and bear many consequent risks. Editors struggle to produce a journal that many publishers and research institutions cannot host or support. Publishers struggle to publish and distribute their production without harassment or restrictions. Readers struggle with the fear of citing or quoting disturbing articles that may be unsafe in some contexts. In this sick environment, it is not surprising that some publishers of academic journals use them as a propaganda tool, publishing pseudo “research” that glorifies illegitimate, unjust powers due to fear or greed.

Publishing and editing a free-access unpaid journal, with individual volunteer efforts and limited resources, is difficult. The shortage of resources makes rationalising their investment a necessity. The principle that should govern editorial and publishing practices in independent Arab journals is to publish original research that is not usually easy to publish. Based on this responsibility, the *Khitabaat Journal* adopted a policy of limiting itself to publishing dedicated special issues on topics and approaches other journals may not address, such as racism, occupation, resistance, manipulation, hunger and massacres discourses in the Arab region. If academic freedom is constantly negotiated with hegemonic powers, we can expand its space by continuing the struggle regardless of the sacrifices. This requires raising awareness of the importance of academic freedom for knowledge and society and exposing the agents who restrict it.

Emad Abdul-latif is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Khitabaat Journal*.

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