

Note on English Borrowing from Arabic

Dr. Abdulhafeth KHRISAT*

The English language has taken material from various linguistic sources around the world and assimilated a great deal of vocabulary. Through competition with the Portuguese, the Spanish and the French, the British established settlements and colonies all over the world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. English has borrowed freely from Arabic as well as from many other languages, so that there is a stock of about 1,000 Arabic words that are currently in use in English. Like English¹, Arabic also has borrowed from other languages during both the classical and the modern periods².

It was through the Arabs of Spain and of Arabic speaking great medieval centers of science and culture in the Islamic world that important technical terms in the later Middle Ages came to English. This contribution is described by C.L.Wrenn as follows:

Through Spain and through contacts brought about by the Crusades, the Islamic culture and the Arabic rediscovery of much of ancient Greek science and learning, served as an enlightening and revitalizing influence on European civilization. But on closer examination it would be found that almost all of the technical vocabulary brought from the Arabs-words like algebra, cipher, zenith, saffron, admiral, cotton, amber, arsenal, assasin, magazine, -in the same sense of 'store', alcohol, and zero-' are merely part of the common European vocabulary so often referred to³.

The Arabic words introduced into English cover a wide variety of topics and concepts but most of them can safely be categorized as "learned" terms or otherwise related to specific trades or fields. Words like "alchemy", "algebra", "arsenal", "lute", "tariff", and "benzine", belong to this group. Other words, "coffee", "cotton", "mattress", "giraffe", "ghoul", "ginger", "sirup", "myrrh" and "saffron", refer to items (mainly foodstuff, clothing, and household furniture) that had their origins in the Arab World, or are otherwise the names of animals (real or imaginary) and plants found in the Arab World but not in Europe.

This paper involves an attempt to comment, mainly with the help of the Oxford English Dictionary (hereafter cited OED), second Edition on English borrowings from Arabic and to examine the reasons behind such borrowings. Languages borrow from each other for a number of reasons, cultural, religious, military, and social.

One distinctive feature of Arabic is the use of the definite article al- which is retained in one form or another in "almanac", "alchemy", "alembic", "algorism", and

* Mu'tah University, Jordan.

"alkali". In the word "admiral" which occurred first in Middle English, the Arabic article occurs in the final

أمير البحر

syllable. The word is an abbreviation of amir-al-bahr ('Commander of the sea').

An Arabic word might be modified in the process of passing through a series of languages before reaching English. The word "chess" borrowed from old French (plural eschés, singular, echec) was a normal development of the Medieval Latin from "scaccus" borrowed from Arabic, which had earlier borrowed it from Persian shah "king."

Therefore the etymology of the word can be traced back to Persia through Arabic, Latin, and old French, then English⁴ There is not much done by scholars to comment on Arabic words in English. Many foreign experts interested in English loan words have pointed to the words that are borrowed from Arabic without making a thorough examination of the reasons behind such loans.

The study of this such phenomenon would help us gain insight into the development of English. Further the study would be of some interest to people dealing in anthropological linguistics in the sense that it would familiarize them with the close relationship existing not only between various languages belonging to various genetic groups, but also between language, culture and societal needs. Finally, a study of this sort would hopefully open an avenue for further future research dealing with the influence of Arabic on other languages including English. At the expense of alphabetical convenience, I shall try, where possible, to make use of any organic relatedness between two or more words. I shall start with terms that deal with more or less scholarly subjects (mathematics, chemistry, medicine, and architecture) discuss a few words that still retain some sort of exotic flavor in the middle, and conclude with those whose borrowing may at first seem incidental but that actually refer to objects, articles, plants, and animals which, as has been stated earlier, are native to the Arab world.

The famous word 'algebra' has had a long and fascinating history that, in a sense, is typical of many, if not most, of the Arabic words that have entered the English Language. By way of illustration and at the risk of being dull, I have given below a rather long quotation from the OED definition of the word:

Algebra (ældzībrā). Also algeber, algiebar. [a. It. algebra (also Sp. And med. L.), ad. Arab الجبر aljebara the redintegration or reunion of broken parts, f. jabara to reunite, redintegrate, consolidate, restore; hence, the surgical treatment of fracture, bone-setting. Also in phr. "ilm - al-jabr wa'l Muqbalah علم الجبر والمقابلة i.e. 'the science of redintegration and equation (opposition, comparison, collation)', the Arabic name for algebraic computation. In this sense the first part of the Arabic title was taken into it. In 1202, as algebra; the second part, almucabala, was used by some med. L. writers in the same sense. The 16th c. Eng. algeber (fancifully identified by early writers with the name of the Arabic chemist Geber) was either taken directly from Arab, or from Fr. al-qebre by 1663).]⁵

The OED thus gives the current meanings of the word, the first which is quite unfamiliar but may have been guessed at; 1. The surgical treatment of fractures; bonesetting. (A popular sense which probably survived from Arabs in Spain, still in Sp.)... 2. The branch of mathematics which investigates the relations and properties of numbers by means of general symbols; and, in a more abstract sense, a calculus of symbols combining according to certain definite law.

The above definition is more than self-explanatory. It is, however, perhaps necessary to make a few relevant comments and observations for the same circumstances surrounding the etymological development of individual terms. The Arabs conquered Spain in 711 and ruled it nearly 400 years, leaving a lasting imprint on the country's culture. During the same period and for a long time afterwards, there were clashes between Christendom in the Mediterranean basin and Islam. Despite these conflicts and the painful memories they have left in both cultures, and despite the distortions and stereotypical images they have helped create, there was also an undercurrent of peaceful and mutually beneficial contact going on at almost all times, through trade, travel, and later on, diplomacy. A more important factor, however, was the energetic drive of the young Islam and its capacity not only to absorb old and established, yet somewhat stagnant, civilizations, but also to expand on them, to preserve and build on them, not to destroy them, as Genghis Khan and his hordes were to do in later centuries.

The fact explains why Arabic word al-jabr ended up undergoing so many mutations in pronunciation and spelling? why the earliest English writers confused algebr with Geber, an eminent Arab scientist who nonetheless, had nothing to do with the term under discussion? and finally, and perhaps most importantly, why the Europeans found themselves not only acquiring two new fundamental mathematical and medical concepts from the Arabs, but also adopting the Arabic term that signified both of them into the bargain. This is a pattern that underlies many, if not most, of the borrowings discussed here, and it would thus be useful to bear in mind.

Below are related entries from the such scholarly and scientific words and a brief discussion of each in terms of semantics, etymology, and pronunciation.

First, let's consider Alchemy (æ'lkemi) This term is the same root of the related and now more respected word 'chemistry'. This term, whose roots go back to ancient Greece or Egypt (scholars disagree, providing evidence for both sides of the argument), came to Medieval Europe in the form- of the Arabic word *alkimia* (الكيمياء) and passed through many spelling modifications (as many as twenty) in European languages. For a long time, it had rather negative associations, since it basically signified the dubious practice of transmuting baser metals into gold. The term continued to be used until the 16th century, when the more formal study of substances started seriously (the word 'chemistry' actually came to be used in the 17th century in England). It is the English need for such technical vocabulary in their culture which led them to borrow 'alchemy'.

Another term is Alcohol (ælköhol) which is a word that has three different variants in European language - *alcohol*, *alcho(h)ol*, and *alcolhole* - and that was recorded in Medieval Latin as *alcohol*. It comes from the Arabic word *al-Kohl* (الكحل) which originally referred to collyrium, the fine powder used to stain the eyelids. Incidentally the English derivative 'kohl' expresses that meaning, and the Arabic Word *alkohl* still retains the original meaning, as do related words in Hebrew and Amharic. The familiar meaning that is known now refers to spirits of one sort or another, an idea arrived at in early chemistry through the assumption that certain metallic powders could be distilled to produce their essential quality. The word also refers to

pure, undiluted substance. Other words such as "alcove", "myrrh", and "ghoul" are borrowed for cultural reasons.

The term Alcove (ælkouv) has the Arabic origin al-qobbah (القبة) before it was transformed into the Spanish and Portuguese alcove (or alcoba) and finally changed into the French version, alcove, which is the form adopted into English. (It was first recorded in English in 1676). The original meaning in Arabic, which is still by and large retained in English, referred to some sort of "vaulted recess".

Besides these above scholarly or scientific terms, there are a number of words which have retained some of the original flavor and seem to attract attention mainly because of their foreignness. A part of the reason is that they are rarely used (even though they may be known to most English speakers) and another part is that they refer to phenomena mainly associated with" a particular region (for example, a mummy can be found only in Egypt). Here are a few such terms:

Myrrh (m̄iλ). Perhaps the most outstanding feature of this short word is its spelling (outstanding even in language in which discrepancies between spelling and pronunciation are commonplace). The word has as many as 25 different recorded forms (including murra, murrha, mirre, and mir) in European languages and has its roots in the Arabic word murr (مر), which is related to Hebrew mor. It retains its exotic quality mainly because it has associations of Arabia Felix, the Arabia, not of the petrodollar, but of the somewhat romantic, somewhat, mysterious desert, the Arabia of flutes, of frankincense, of kohled, gazelle-eyed damsels. The term has its ultimate historical origins in pre-Islamic times when scents and aromatic gums came to Roman Europe from South Arabia, (which was then known as the Regio Cinnamomifera). But another aspect of the same mysterious Oriental Arabia is expressed by the word ghoul (gul), which comes from the Arabic word ghul (غول). Derived from the verb qhala ("to seize"), the term refers to an "evil spirit supposed to rob graves and prey on human corpses" and has other spelling forms. It was first recorded in an English text (in Beckford's Vathek) in 1786.

Mufti (mufti). This is one of very few words that have retained their original Arabic pronunciation. The original meaning of a Muslim religious scholar is also retained. It is actually based on the verbal root afṭa (which itself is conjugation of fata) meaning "to give a FETWA or decision on a point of law". It has fourteen different spelling variants in European languages and was first introduced into English in 1585. It. was borrowed for a religious reason.

Coffee (kofi) comes from qahwah (قهوة), a word it bears very little resemblance to. The discrepancy in pronunciation between the English and Arabic names for this plant and the drink derived from it was first introduced into Europe in the 16th century by the Turks, who had already modified the Arabic word to kahveh. Upon entering the European languages, it underwent further pronunciation changes (ultimately appearing in 23 different spelling forms, including caroua, kauhi, cauwa, and cahu). Originally, the Arabic word meant "wine" a sense one often comes across in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry (for some curious reason, the verbal root qahia meant "to have no appetite").

Cotton (Kot'n) is another word, having 18 different spelling variants in European languages, and is derived from qutn or qutun (قطن) which was first recorded in an English text in 1400. The two related words crimson (krimz'n) and carmine (karmin) both come from Arabic qirmazi or qermazu (قرمزي) which in turn has its

roots in KERMES, ALKERMES; the scarlet grain insect. The two words, though basically referring to the same type of color, have acquired different semantic shades. Crimson is usually used as the name of a deep red somewhat inclining to purple, whereas carmine normally signifies the same type of color as a "pigment obtained from conchineal".

Arsenal (arsenal) is another word that has been changed beyond recognition. The original Arabic phrase was dar accina?h (دار الصناعة), meaning "workshop, factory (i.e. dar house, place of, al the cina?ah, art, mechanical industry. Sana?a to make, fabricate). Some of the many forms that have appeared in European languages (Romance taracena is one of them) are close enough to the original to be recognized by native Arabic speakers, but the English adopted the term from Italians who had already reduced it to arsenale or arzenale. The original meaning is kept only in Spanish, other languages having "narrowed it to dock or armoury". It is borrowed for a military reason.

Finally there is the word admiral (admiral), which has also a cousin (emir) that retains the original meaning and approximates the original pronunciation in English (both go back to amir or commander). The word has over twenty spelling forms recorded in European languages (including amyrayl, amerl, admerayl and admerall), and the discrepancy between the Arabic and European forms (specifically the addition of al at the end of the latter) seems to have resulted from the fact that the word amir very often occurred in such phrases as amir-al'umara, ruler ' of rulers, amir-al-ma, commander of the water, amir-al-bahr commander of the sea, and the contraction of the phrases to amir and al-bahr which in this case means "of") easily produces something close to "admiral". But it is necessary to say that the phrasal components in this word are not related to the real structure of the word. It is borrowed for a military reason. This, then, is a very limited selection from the stock of words that have their roots in Arabic and the concepts they introduced into Europe, concepts that to a great degree have contributed to the explosion of knowledge in the western world during the last four hundred years. There are obvious ironies here, but they may not be so obvious to the average westerner. The average westerner can ultimately see beyond the ironies and strike a note of appreciation. The morphology of these words can be the subject of another paper.

NOTES

1-This estimate is from Paynes (1959). The Holy Sword.

2- Chejne's (1969) has made a contrast between the two borrowings: -The Arabic-Muslim of medieval times was in ascendance and possessed the self-assurance required to borrow at will in order to meet his linguistic needs. But his counterpart in modern times has been increasingly dependent on the skill and progress of the West. This dependency has been accompanied by social, political, and psychological problems which led to the selectivity into borrowing from the West, and ultimately to the outright rejection of all Western institutions- (pp. 171-2).

Like any language, Arabic was influenced by other languages and enriched with new words and modes of expression. In particular, influences on the Arabic language came from Arab immigrants to the Americas and from missionaries who brought western education to many areas of the Middle East. On the aspects of modernisation in Arabic during the first half of the twentieth century, see Abu Absi, (1986).

3- Wrenn, (1990).

4- Barnhart, C., Steinmetz, S., Barnhart R. K. (1980) reports that during the 15-year period 1961-1976, 273 Loan words entered the

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