

## **Afraid of Letters**

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On 27 September, we are presenting ‘Ceci n’est pas une valise’, a literary project by the Brussels-Moroccan poet Taha Adnan, at Bozar. He asked 17 Arabic authors in this country to write about Belgium in their own language, Arabic. Most of these authors are entirely unknown to the general public, because they are published in Casablanca or Beirut and are rarely translated into one or more of our national languages.

This situation raises questions. What position do Belgian-Arabic authors occupy in Belgian literature? And does the native language of many new Belgians in general, and Arabic in particular, deserve a place in our society, with its language laws and language borders?

In a multicultural and polyglot society, what is it that makes a writer part of the literary scene or the canon of a country? Is writing in the country’s official language (or one of them) the only criterion? Can an author from Flanders who writes in Arabic, Turkish or Polish be considered as a Flemish author and can he claim a place in the realm of Flemish literature? Apart from a few separate small-scale initiatives, this issue has so far not come up for discussion in Flanders.

In the United Kingdom, Arab writers are more readily translated into English and are thus more easily integrated into the club of English literature. In Morocco, many writers prefer French (as a former French colony). No one questions their position as essential players in Moroccan literature. In fact the literature produced by the Moroccan diaspora in any language is also considered to be Moroccan literature. So in addition to being respectively Flemish and Dutch authors, Rachida Lambaret and Abdelkader Benali are also Moroccan authors. The language the authors write in is also of no importance to the recently established Arab European Writers Association. A connection with the Arab world is sufficient to be considered an Arabic author.

The acceptance of Arabic or any other foreign language in everyday life is something quite different. It is obvious that a common language, or more than one, is needed in any country so as to be able to communicate and live together. But nothing prevents us from valuing and giving a place to the languages of newcomers. Unfortunately, language has become the object of an ideology. Some politicians react hysterically to any proposal or notion of recognising this language, the fourth most commonly spoken in Brussels, or teaching it in our schools. Arabic was forbidden after the Inquisition in Spain. Atatürk, the founder of secular Turkey following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, replaced the Arabic alphabet by the Roman.

The fact that Arabic still faces so much resistance is due to the identification of this rich and beautiful language solely with the language of the Koran and Islam. In present-day Europe,

being 'caught' in public with a book in Arabic is enough to make you appear suspicious, even if it's the Kama Sutra in Arabic. Identifying Arabic as nothing more than the language of the Koran is evidence of much prejudice and ignorance. In the pre-Islamic period, Arabic was above all the language of poetry. The poetry of that period, the best-known component of which is Al-Mu'allaqāt or suspended poems, is the finest ever produced by Arab writers. In addition to the poetic and artistic worth of Arabic, in the heyday of Islam it was the language of science and philosophy.

Offering Arabic in our education system would be of great social relevance. It would help us all to understand Arab cultures better and to discover the richness and beauty of this language, freed from reductive religious interpretations. And those who are currently afraid of Arabic should be aware that they are still using Arabic figures to count their money and that the Flemish lion is an immigrant from the East.