

# *Empty Talk*



CAIRO'S TRAFFIC WAS worse than ever. My taxi ride from the airport, well after midnight, was stop-and-go. The smell of burning fields, marking the end of the growing season, lent a faintly apocalyptic air to our halting progress. An accident blocked two lanes, and volunteers in sports jackets and ragged T-shirts directed us around the wreckage, lit by sputtering flares.

How was Cairo doing now, eight months after the January 25 revolution? I asked my driver. (We spoke English, as the only foreign words that had popped into my head on arrival were, perversely, Spanish ones.) Did he feel safe? American newspapers had been reporting a “crime wave” of muggings and black-market gun sales. This had worried my friends and family as I planned my trip, but I knew this was statistically nothing compared with America’s crime rates. Besides, I simply couldn’t imagine Cairo turning dangerous—the crowds left little room for criminal behavior. Whereas New Yorkers, I had found in my life there, coped with crowding by ignoring everyone around them, Cairenes took the opposite tack: Get involved in your neighbors’ business, or that of your fellow metro passengers, fellow shop-

pers, fellow walkers-wading-into-traffic. Pull people close and bind them to you.

The city was still safe, my driver said as we sailed down an exit ramp into Ramses Square, though he didn't take his family out too late anymore, just in case. They usually came home by midnight or one. Now it was past two in the morning, and we plunged into the square in front of the train station as if into breaking waves. People bustled, dashed, or simply stood nibbling sunflower seeds. Vendors' carts lit by dangling fluorescent bulbs displayed packages of socks and bootleg CDs.

I rolled down my window. Horns blared and tinny synthesizer music snaked from distant speakers. Everywhere — in greetings, imprecations, opinions — was the hum and snap of Arabic.

"*Ya gamoosa!*" the taxi driver yelled affectionately at a slow-crossing pedestrian. Move it, you water buffalo!

I sat back, letting the sound-surf wash over me, and laughed.

In September 1990, on my first day of Arabic class, the professor, tall and stern, marched in and picked up a piece of chalk. Her straight hair, parted in the middle, swung as she wrote:

باب

"*Bab,*" she enunciated. She pointed to the door. "*Bab,*" she repeated, almost as a challenge. There was the door — we could use it right now, if any of us wanted.

The Arabic I studied for the next two years was the very serious kind, what most American teachers refer to as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), a slightly streamlined version of the medieval language. Arabs call it *al-'arabiya al-fusha*, literally "eloquent Arabic." Fusha (pronounced *FUS-ha*, with a heavy *s* and a whispery *h*) struck my ear as lovely but formal — the language of beseeching bureaucrats, or at its liveliest, florid poets. The only jokes I heard were based on grammar.

"How are you?" goes one.

“Accusative!”

I suppose it does lose something in the translation.

When I went to Cairo to study in the summer of 1992, I encountered an entirely different kind of Arabic, a more flexible one that lent itself far better to jokes and gibes. Across the Arab world, Egyptians were known for their good humor, their wit, and their skill in *kalam farigh* – empty talk, but with a positive spin, the back-and-forth of an aimless afternoon.

Not that I could tell at first. The city was an undifferentiated din. Nothing, not even “Hi” and “How are you?,” sounded anything like what I’d been taught. My stern professor had failed to mention that no one speaks Fusha aloud except newscasters and particularly cliquish Islamic fundamentalists. The former are reading from scripts, and the latter are inspired by God.

What Egyptians speak is *al-’ammiya al-masriya* – literally “Egyptian dialect,” but it struck me almost as a new language. The basic vocabulary of Ammiya, as Egyptians call it, differs from Fusha, as does its pronunciation and word order, and most of Fusha’s more intricate grammar rules are chucked right out the window.

That summer, I started Arabic again from scratch, in a beginner Ammiya class. Day by day, I learned to pick out words amid the street noise. First was the rhyming salutation I heard each morning from the newspaper seller: “*Ahlan wa-sahlan!*” Then I recognized song refrains as they trailed out of taxis and from cassette sellers’ kiosks; it was the summer of heartthrob pop star Amr Diab pleading, *Habeebi* (my darling), *khudni ma’ak* (take me with you), over handclaps and a synthesized beat. Before long, I could recognize the sentence “You speak Arabic very well” – which every Egyptian was kind enough to tell me, though it wasn’t true.

Speaking my limited and old-fashioned Fusha, I sounded as if I had arrived from the tenth century – or, really, a tenth-century home for not-very-bright children. Egyptians often laughed when I talked, though not unkindly. Even after I had learned a bit of Ammiya, shop-

keepers and taxi drivers still grinned whenever I opened my mouth. This, I eventually understood, was because I was American, and foreigners studying Arabic, especially colloquial Arabic, were so rare that people could not quite believe their ears.

Ammiya struck me as a bit funny-sounding too. Egyptians spoke in the present participle, always going and wanting and waiting, and like overwrought heroines clutching their bosoms in shock, they tacked their question words on at the end: “The bus stops *where?*”

The melodramatic effect was heightened by the influence of one of my teachers, a plump matron in her sixties. Her chief pedagogical tool was video clips from Egyptian soap operas. From her, I learned to purse my lips and say, “Azzzzdak eih bizzzzzabt?” — You mean *what*, exaaaaactly? — in imitation of the neighborhood busybody, the one whose gossip invariably provokes a television hour of dramatic misunderstandings. My teacher encouraged us to mimic the actress’s moves too, shaking shoulders and slapping hand over hand at the waist, the gesture for “Tell me everything.” Reenacting this on the street, I was a one-two punchline: a twenty-year-old American squawking like an Egyptian lady of a certain age.

Eventually I learned to work with the aging-soap-queen diction, hamming it up for maximum effect. When it was clear I was intentionally contributing to the comedy, Egyptians began to let me in on their jokes. “*Gibna gibna wa-hatinaha fi-gibna . . .*” a shopkeeper once chanted to me while I was fishing for cash. He had to explain, in pantomime, the series of homonyms, a tongue twister: “We brought cheese and put it in our pocket . . .” It made no literal sense, but the flash of understanding between us — the I-get-it moment, which really means “I get *you*” — was gratifying enough to fuel me for a week.

Now, as I arrived in September 2011, Egypt was still basking in the afterglow of a brief period of exceptionally good humor, the January 25 revolution that deposed President Hosni Mubarak. With clever signs, absurdist tableaux, and running gags, the demonstrators had worked together to maintain a largely positive and peaceful atmos-

phere during an eighteen-day sit-in on Tahrir Square. The uprising had inspired Americans too. Labor organizers in Wisconsin had marched to protest the governor, bearing signs that read *Walk Like an Egyptian* and *Egypt = 18 Days, Wisconsin = ??* Occupy Wall Street, another movement with a sense of humor, was gathering momentum every week.

More than a decade had passed since I had used a textbook. My vocabulary was primitive; grammar, only a ghost. So much had been lost, and I couldn't retrieve it all. I needed to focus. My goal, I decided that night, as my taxi driver parted the crowds to deliver me into the noisy heart of Cairo, would be to interact with Egyptians in the way they treasured: to laugh with them, to understand their jokes, and to tell some myself.

Some days later, I presented myself at the school where I would be taking classes for a month. My oral placement exam started easily enough. What was my name, asked the teacher, where was I from, and how had I learned Arabic?

These answers I knew cold. I had been repeating them for two decades. Zora O'Nile — I applied the twangy Ammiya diphthong — was my name. I came from the state of New Mexico, and I had learned Arabic in college in America and here in Egypt. But that was *min zamaaaaaan* — a very long time ago — I added, and I had forgotten a lot.

From there, we moved on to the typical Egyptian conversation.

How did I like this country?

The only right answer was to love it.

And how did I find Cairo?

This question gave more room for nuance, though even here, I found myself digging for some of the first words I had learned, almost twenty years earlier. That first summer in Cairo, I had learned to greet people with “morning of light” (*sabah an-noor*) or “morning of jasmine” (*sabah al-full*). I had learned the word for officer: *zabit*,