

Årsrapport fra programmsensor

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Lutz Edzard
Professor i semittiske språk
IKOS, Universitetet i Oslo
P.O. Box 1010 Blindern
0315 Oslo

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Programmsensor for the Arabic program at Bergen University

This is the fifth report of the programmsensor, Lutz Edzard, covering the spring and fall term 2010. On November 19, 2010 I had extensive conversations at the University of Bergen with the following people:

- Førsteamanuensis Ludmila Torlakova
- Lektor Pernille Myrvold
- Graduate Janne Kvale
- Students Abdullahi Elmi Ibrahim and Martin Valde (both on the BA level)

Introduction

As in the previous year, the Arabic staff of Bergen University provided me with graded exams (including the exam texts proper) covering the whole study plan, i.e. bachelor and master level (for the “studieopplegg” and exam regulations, I could rely on the material I received last year regarding the exam regulations). Also, I received statistical material showing the distribution of grades, also with respect to gender. The net portal “Mi Side” is also a very useful resource of information in this context. In order to avoid redundancy, the following remarks cover either specific change in the past year or reflect comments on specific points that were made by individual members of the teaching staff. Also, I shall only comment on selected courses that actually took place in 2010. This time, I could also be take part an organizational staff meeting, during

which adjustments in the study plan were discussed (“endret studieplan”). Among other things, it was suggested to refer the introduction of Classical Arabic to the third semester (i.e. to the 200-level), where students already (should) have a working command of Modern Standard Arabic. Also, it was suggested to relegate the dialect part (ARA105) to a later stage, but no consensus was reached on these points. Another suggestion concerned the introduction of an optional third year of Arabic at the bachelor level, comparable with the situation at Oslo University.

Before going into details I would like again to refer briefly to the general teaching situation in the Arabic section. With professor Bell being phased out as a vikar for himself, the teaching continues to rest on permanent staff members førsteamanuensis Ludmila Torlakova and lektor Pernille Myrvold, assisted by temporarily employed teachers and teaching assistants (hjelpelærere) like John Erik Sætren, Assia Bortne, and (in the future) Linda Kjosaa.

The year 2011 will bring about quite an amount of organizational “reshuffling”. The successor of professor Bell, professor Shabo Talay from Erlangen, will thus have the opportunity, if need be, to readjust the present pensum for some of the courses listed in the following.

Once again to reiterate an impression voiced in the previous reports, the current “eclectic” approach in compiling course curricula has many interesting and stimulating aspects, but it may not work for each and every student. The real issue is the definition of a university’s task in this context: to find a balance between practical vocational training aimed at the “average student” and a “humanistic” training aimed at students with academic ambitions. At any rate: it is the sensor’s impression that students get exposed to a broad spectrum of texts from various periods and literary genres and thus are provided with plentiful inspiration. As is well known, “intertextuality”, i.e. the recourse to classical quotations from religious and literary texts, is a pervasive feature of modern Arabic literature and even media discourse. Therefore it is important to keep up the historical perspective embedded in the present Arabic curriculum at Bergen.

All sides express satisfaction with the teaching at the beginners’ level. At an early level, teaching material is drawn from a broad variety of sources, which enhances a lively atmosphere in class. Students found the various glossaries provided during the course work at the beginners’ level quite useful. The students also stress the competence and commitment of the teaching staff on the intermediate and advanced levels, but, not surprisingly, differences of

opinion exist as to the appropriateness or relevance of individual text excerpts. As in any language course curriculum, it presents a challenge to tie together the texts chosen on the different levels, especially as longer text excerpts can contain both easier and more challenging passages in an “inorganic” way.

A number of students wish more opportunity to read aloud and to converse in the standard language on an early level, a suggestion also supported by part of the teaching staff. One suggestion to achieve this goal administratively would be to postpone the (laudably mandatory) introduction to the Egyptian dialect to the third semester, when the teaching of the essential grammar and vocabulary of Modern Standard Arabic is completed and less risk for the students of mixing up the different linguistic registers.

It is noteworthy that one of the doctoral students, John Erik Sætren is about to finish his Ph.D. thesis “Two Narratives of Islamic Revival Islamic Television Preaching in Egypt” in relatively short time after his completed MA, and this in spite of his teaching work load. In an international perspective, it is laudable that the department affords a doctoral student extensive teaching experience.

Another point to be repeated: the student library is seen by all parties involved in a positive light and deserves to be kept up and expanded. The sensor has seen the benefit of good departmental libraries at other places (e.g., Uppsala University) and encourages the Institutt for fremmedspråk at Bergen to follow suit in this respect.

1. Pensum – studieopplegg – prøveordning/eksamen

1.1 ARA 101

The remarks from the previous reports still have validity, and the importance of having regular oral training cannot be over-estimated. A very positive feature is the didactic weight placed on grammatical terminology, in a comparative perspective involving both Arabic and Norwegian. A calligraphy manual has recently been added to the already broad base of instructing material. The teaching material is impressive in itself in its depth and complexity. Much weight is justifiably placed on audio-material.

In the spring of 2010, 24 students registered for introductory Arabic took the final exam, again an absolutely satisfactory number. Only one student failed, and the results of the rest were again pretty much corresponding to a “Gauss curve” – “A” (3), “B” (7), “C” (6), “D” (5), and “E” (2). In itself, this result testifies to a normal “gjennomstrøming” in a difficult-to-learn language.

1.2 ARA103

In the fall of 2010, 9 students took the examination in this course. The grade distribution was: "A" (0), "B" (1), "C" (2), "D" (4), "E" (1), and "F" (1). As in the previous year, the exam made quite a challenging impression in terms of both quality and quantity, thus reflecting a high level of scholarly training in both written Arabic (supported to a certain degree by oral exercises). As stated in previous years, it is positive in principle, that students get exposed early on to different literary genres, including poetry, provided that the excerpts are not too difficult. This time, however, the overall results were worse (with an average of "D").

As in the previous years, the course elicited very positive response from the students, as the comments in the studentevaluating on the netportal Mi side clearly demonstrate.

1.3 ARA105

In the fall of 2010, an impressive number of eight students finished this challenging course. The grade distribution was: "A" (1), "B" (2), "C" (1), "D" (3), and "E" (1). As stated earlier, the programmsensor thinks that it is a good idea to confront students early in their career dialectal data and with crucial theoretical issues (such as the issue of diglossia/polyglossia in Arabic), but this might better be deferred to the third semester.

The quasi-native fluency of professor Bell in Egyptian (Cairene) Arabic proved again to be valuable context. Some students seem to experience difficulties with this course. The teaching syllabus and material is good, but some students expressed dissatisfaction with the different transcription systems encountered in the course, and also with the distribution of written assignments and oral training.

1.4 ARA201

In the spring of 2010, ARA201 (30-40% klassiske og 60-70% moderne arabiske tekster) yielded results ranging from "A" to "F" (one student for each grade). As in the previous years, students had to translate texts in both prose and poetry (and also had to analyze metrum) in ARA201. The optical appearance of the exam text itself could be slightly enhanced in the programmsensor's view.

The courses constitute a natural and logical follow-up to ARA103. The only set of answers submitted to "Mi side" expressed general satisfaction with the course.

1.5 ARA252

A new course, "Arabisk språk og samfunn: Veiledet semesteroppgave" was offered in spring 2010. Out of nine enrolled students, only five delivered a thesis, on average of mediocre quality: "B" (1), "C" (2), and "D" (2).

1.6 ARA301 and ARA302

No one took an exam in these courses in 2010.

1.7 ARA303 and ARA304

No one took an exam in these courses in 2010.

1.8 ARA350 (MA-theses)

An impressive number of four master students passed their master examination (delivered master's thesis and oral examination) in 2010: "A" (1), "B" (1), and "C" (2). This testifies to a more than satisfactory "gjennomstrøming" in the study course of the students (indeed, three of them achieved this result in "normert tid", i.e. the expected time frame). The topics of the theses defended in 2010 also testify highly to the present relevance of Arabic as an academic subject:

- "Social Effects of the Educational Revolution in Qatar: A Gender Perspective" (Maria Jacobsen);
- "Blogs of an Occupied Nation. Sahrawi Bloggers in a Pan-Arab Public Sphere" (Janne Marie Heitun Kvale);
- "Saudi-Arabia: byråkrati og muligheter for reform" (Sindre Aziz-Saltnes);
- "A Peaceful Resolution is a Victory for the Resistance. The Relationship between Hizbullah Rhetoric and Possible Peaceful Resolutions in Lebanon" (Natalia Antonia Golis).

The supervision (veiledning) and grading of this impressive number of candidates presented a considerable challenge for the staff in charge.

2. Studie- og eksamenskrav

In principle, I can only repeat my impressions from previous years, with the caveats mentioned initially. The study plan continues to be challenging, even if a reduction of pensum lists has been suggested for a number of advanced courses.

As I already said, the condensation of undergraduate Arabic within three semesters of instruction continues to pose challenges to both teachers and

students. Ideally, it should not be an alternative to take ARA103 and ARA105 at home in Bergen or to spend this semester abroad. Rather, four full semesters of Arabic, thereof one (ideally the third) abroad, would allow students to benefit from both the experience abroad and the course curriculum at Bergen University. At present, many students at Bergen University who already choose to spend their second semester abroad encounter difficulties when returning to the Norwegian academic context in that they have forgotten about grammatical basics. At the University of Oslo, it has proven to be successful to send out the students in their third semester. Various sources over and over again stress the importance of plenty of oral training, especially in the light of the challenges of Arabic diglossia/polyglossia.

3. Vurderingsprosessen

The grading process continues to be fair and in congruence with the requirements of the grading system from "A" (excellent) to "F" (failed). It is only natural that the results of a rather large beginner's group reflect more or less a "normal distribution", whereas smaller groups on an intermediate or advanced level may either have a tendency to produce better results on average, due to a selection process which almost automatically creates a "pyramid" scenario in the overall student body, or worse results. Based on my background information, those students who could (or chose to) study abroad already during their second semester attained slightly worse results this time on the 200-level than those who had participated in ARA103 and ARA105. This circumstance should be taken into consideration in further planning.

4. I kva grad har du som programmsensor deltatt i drøftingar

As already stated above, it was serendipitous that I could be present in 2010 during an inner-departmental discussion to adjust the study program in the future. Some of the suggestions made at this meeting are reflected in the report. The appointment of a new professor of Arabic, hopefully Shabo Talay, may present such an opportunity.

5. Ev. særlege forhold

As I said, I have been faced with a more or less transparent situation. It is positive to see that functioning mechanisms appear to be in place in the Arabic unit to discuss any subject-related differences of opinion. The advent of the successor of professor Bell will certainly give new impulses.

6. Rolla og oppgåvene som programmsensor

Again, I received clear guidelines – both in writing and orally – regarding my responsibilities in connection with the preparation of this report. As I already said, the teaching staff at Bergen University provided me with all the material I requested and willingly answered all my questions. I consider it to be my duty to be fair and impartial and not to try to superimpose any given system upon another one.

7. Conclusions drawn

Discussion with the Arabic teaching staff at Bergen University (Ludmila Torlakova, Pernille Myrvold) revolved again on questions of subject matter (teaching manuals, syllabi, structure of the study plan) as well as logistical questions. The integration in a modern language department, without losing, however, its institutional and factual connections to Midtaustenkunnskap, religionsvitskap and other relevant fields, continues to meet a positive response.

As most of the courses are taught on an intensive level (six hours per week; twelve hours per week in the case of ARA101), it is impressive to see how a relatively small staff (supplemented on occasion by hjelpelærere) manages to keep up with teaching a constantly sizeable number of students on different levels.

8. Recommendations of the programmsensor

The first paragraph repeats what I said in my previous report: while I continue to be impressed with the structure of the Arabic program on the whole, a rethinking of the teaching strategy on the beginners' level might be in order. In the view of this sensor, it may be problematic for *some* students that the course work that is covered over the period of four semesters at the University of Oslo has to be covered over the period of three semesters at the University of Bergen. On the other hand, it is an interesting perspective for eager and qualified students to be able to spend already one's second semester of Arabic in Cairo,

an opportunity offered at Bergen (see also my comments above). A positive administrative feature is the circumstance that qualified students on the intermediate level can seek permission to take courses on the 300-level. It might also be interesting to explore further possibilities of vocational training (“praktikanttjenester” etc.)

According to my background information, professor Shabo Talay will arrive in the course of the spring semester of 2011, a circumstance that will certainly allow for a smooth transition in the teaching administration.

Oslo, February 28, 2011

Lutz Edzard