LANGUAGE AND THEME
IN THE SHORT STORIES OF YUSUF IDRIS

Yusuf Idris’ earliest short stories were published in 1952. Within a few years he established himself as a leading author—probably the most prominent short story writer in modern Egyptian literature, publishing ten volumes of short stories 1 as well as several novels, novellas and plays in a period of less than twenty years.

His works, especially his short stories, met with a considerable body of literary criticism, some of which is undoubtedly illuminating. 2 Very few critics, however, have tried to tackle the question of his style, 3 although Idris has displayed an unmistakably personal style—lively, witty and simple—since the earliest stages of his writing.

1 Idris’ volumes of short stories are as follows (the list was prepared in 1974):
II. Jumhûrîyat Farâbî (“Farahat’s Republic”), Cairo, 1956.
IV. Al-‘Aabasa kadhâlîk (“Ain’t That So?”), Cairo, 1957.
(re-published under the title ‘Abd al-Mu’allaf, 1970.)
(re-published, with minor variations, in Beirut under the title Musaffa al-kumûm (“Whisper Powder”), 1970.)
(The stories in vols. V, VI, and VIII can also be found in the first volume of Idris’ collected works—al-Mu’allaflî al-kâmîla, Cairo, 1971.)


4 Many of those who have appraised his work have dismissed the stylistic aspects by merely noting that his dialogue is lively and is written in his protagonists’ natural language, namely spoken Arabic (hereafter ‘âmmiya) as opposed to the narrative parts which are written in formal Arabic (fushû), a practice common to many modern Arab writers of prose fiction. Tâhâ Husayn, while highly praising Idris’ talent in his introduction to Idris’ book Jumhûrîyat Farâbî, laments this fact and advises Idris to abandon the use of the ‘âmmiya and adhere in future to a pure literary idiom, or subject his literary talent to degeneration. 4

II

The diglotal question is surely of major importance, but it is far from being the only noteworthy stylistic matter. Moreover it would be untrue to say that in Idris’ stories in general the ‘âmmiya is confined to the dialogue, or that the dialogue is always rendered in purely spoken idiom. For one thing, the narrative parts are heavily permeated with elements of ‘âmmiya—both in matters of vocabulary as well as structure. Firstly, there is a variety of straightforward ‘âmmiya words which do not exist in fushû. Secondly, fushû words and expressions acquire shades of meaning from the ‘âmmiya. Last but not least, sentences presumably written in fushû betray a clear syntactic influence of the dialect. (In passing it might be remarked that Idris’ style shows a greater openness, in comparison to other modern Arabic authors, to the borrowing of syntactic structures from European languages, notably English.)

As far as the dialogue is concerned, here too matters are not as simple as some critics would like them to be. Admittedly the dialogue in Idris’ early works is predominantly ‘âmmiya. Yet at times we find the author dabbling in a mixed dialogue, in a fashion used in the early stages of modern Arabic literature by such authors as Farâh Anînî, Mi’khal Näinî 5 and others, namely a dialogue where illiterate or semi-literate protagonists speak ‘âmmiya while educated ones use modified fushû. This artificial dichotomy can be found in such stories as “al-Nas” 6 (Al-a‘abasa kadhâlîk, 1957, pp. 49-53) in which the students address the villagers by such expressions as:

* See, for example, Näinî’s introduction to his play al-Abâ wa-l-kamîla, 1917. (Fifth edition, Beirut, 1967, pp. 16-17).
The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs

91

Good people, the tamarisk can blind anyone.

 Brothers, the Government has provided hospitals. Make use of them, and leave the tamarisk alone.

There is no harm in taking advantage of the tamarisk. There is a collyrium to be extracted from its leaves.

In the same story the villagers respond by saying:

Forgive us, gentlemen. It's just that we're ignorant.

Never you mind. The eye-drops are cleaner, all the same.

Both these methods, namely a dialogue in pure 'āmmīiya and, on the other hand, a mixed 'āmmīiya/fushā dialogue indicate, of course, Idrīs' loyalty, in his early stages, to what might be termed straightforward realism, a mode of writing in which the protagonists are introduced to the reader in their supposedly unadulterated voices. We shall see that Idrīs' mode of writing underwent a surprising change. In his latest work the dialogue assumed a new function, not merely of an informative-characterizing nature, conveying, as it were, the sense of individual identity, but as a part of a dense language used in the narrative sections too. In point of fact, in his later short stories there is no cut and dry distinction between narration and dialogue. Their fabric is far more complex, and often the dialogue is not presented naturalistically, that is to say, through an "omniscient author." It is a dialogue of a rather symbolic nature, poetically condensing a complex human encounter. Consider the following dialogue in the title story of Bayt min laḥm:

- Marry him yourself, Mother... Marry him!
- Me? What a disgrace! What will people say?
- Let them say what they like. Their scandal is not so dis-
tressing as a house deprived of the reverberations of men's voices.
- Marry before you? Impossible!
- Isn't it better that you should marry before us so that our house should become acquainted with men's footsteps and we marry after you? Marry him, Mother!

It is to be stressed, however, that this kind of language, i.e. modified fushā, is not the only linguistic type employed in Idrīs' latest works. It appears alongside pure 'āmmīiya. However the decisive factor in the choice of linguistic level is not the literacy of the interlocutors, but the mode of writing in a particular context, and the function of the dialogue in the narrative fabric.

III

The question of Idrīs' dialogue definitely deserves more than a passing reference. However, it is touched upon here only as an introductory illustration of the changing function of language in the author's short stories. In the following pages I shall elaborate on some more striking instances of change in language that seem to appear concurrently with thematic changes which gradually dominated Idrīs' later short stories. Therefore it would be useful, before describing some of the new stylistic features, to cast a glance at the main shifts in the themes and moods that occurred in Idrīs' stories in the course of his writing.

In his early stages, throughout the 1950's, Idrīs wrote realistic stories portraying the rural and Cairene scene, and showing a certain bent towards socialist realism. Although these early stories (e.g. those collected in his first book, Arkhās la'āyī, 1954) are by no means naive, they are devoid of the "modern" approach to life as reflected in the works of prominent novelists of our century in the West. There is also a great deal of optimism and joie de vivre in spite of the gloomy social scenes portrayed (impoverished villagers and downtrodden city proletarians).

As from the late fifties, there has been a noticeable drift away from these features so far as thematics and mood are concerned. There is a constant drive toward a more self-reflective, individualized and

9 A succession of roman and arabic numerals hereafter will indicate the volume of Idris' work (as listed in fn. 1, above) and the page number(s) respectively.

8 In the above dialogue from Bayt min laḥm, none of the protagonists belong to the literate class.
esoteric mode of writing, and the mood is becoming far more gloomy
(although Idris never completely loses his sense of humour). Dis-
cernible too, is his slightly diminished interest in the lowest strata
of society and a greater attention to the inner crisis of the intellectual.

In the mid-sixties the cumulative effect of these new elements has
brought about a totally new mode of writing—an absurd world
gradually replaces the old logical one, and existential aspects of life
supersede the social aspects. Sex, for instance, which in the title
story of Ahbāh kādīf, as well as in several other stories of the early
stages, was viewed as part and parcel of the social scene, in the late
sixties becomes an essential component of the human experience
and a main driving force in life. In other words sex is now treated exist-
tentially, as is evident in the last two volumes of Idris' stories (Mash'iq
al-hamz, 1970, and Bāyīt min lahm, 1971). In these volumes sex rules
supreme.9 It is the end of all ends and the way of human salvation.
Likewise death, which in the early works was treated as an evil
power, often emanating from social circumstances, is now viewed
philosophically, sometimes even with affection.

As indicated above, the crucial thematic shifts occurred in the
mid- or late sixties. The volume entitled Lugbat al-ṣāṭir, 1965, contains
the earliest instances of Idris' absurd-oriented stories (e.g. "al-
Lut'a'10 ['The Game'], first published in al-Kāthib in April 1965).
Other stories in that volume which were written in the early 1960's
(e.g., "Ḥalat talabuss" 11 ['Red-Handed'], first written in December
1962), already betray certain elements that foreshadow this change.

IV

On reading the latest volumes of Idris' stories one is immediately
impressed not only by the novelty of theme, but also by new synt-
tactic features which add up to an over-all stylistic revolution. Some
of these new features are not necessarily at variance with the norms
of Arabic grammar; nevertheless, they constitute a clear departure
from the "spirit" of classical Arabic syntax.

It would seem that the most salient feature of the new style is the
constant proliferation of strings of short, pithy sentences in contrast
to the longer and more compound syntactic structures in the past.

9 Cf. Ghālib Halāś, "Masirat Yūsf Idrīs ilā al-ʿuqda al-ṭālībiya", Nādi al-
10 VIII, pp. 103-109.
11 VIII, pp. 9-17.

In other words, para-tactic constructions tend to replace the hypo-
tactic constructions that are so characteristic of the classical Arabic style
and, to a certain extent, of Idris' own style in his earlier works.
There are whole paragraphs in the author's new stories in which the
number of conjunctions is negligible.12 Furthermore, these paragraphs
are virtually devoid of relative, conditional or adverbial clauses. The
following example, which appears at the opening of the title story
of Bāyīt min lahm, will illustrate the phenomenon under consideration:


The ring is by the lamp. Silence pervades, so ears are blinded.
In silence the finger slinks. It puts on the ring. In silence also the lamp is put out. Darkness reigns.
In the darkness, eyes also are blinded. The widow and her three daughters.
The house is a single room. The beginning is silence.

In this paragraph the separate sentences, of course, form a logical
sequence. Yet, there are practically no subordinate constructions.
Neither are there relative clauses, whether syntactic or asyndetic.
Each short sentence is grammatically independent. Even when a
sentence opens with the conjunction wa, it can hardly be regarded
as a part of a longer sentence (the author underlines the independence
of these sentences by using a full stop after each of them). In fact the
language as a whole is very close to the language of poetry in which
conjunctions, among other things, assume a new function—not
necessarily copulative.

The sum total of this segmentation is a vibrant rhythm, at times
creating a dizzying effect, at times a fee of tenseness and anxiety.
This effect is further enhanced by certain rhythmical patterns which
make their appearance in Idris' latest volumes. One such pattern is
the reiteration of a word (mostly a verb) or words derived from the
same root in consecutive sentences, e.g.:


Now we are flying. In the car with you I am flying. I skim
the ground, flying.

al-nāsi min ḥalāfah al-hūm. kallahu kallānah an-nāsi min ḥalāfah al-hūm
al-nāsi min ḥalāfah al-hūm. kallahu kallānah an-nāsi min ḥalāfah al-hūm. (X, 79)

People all round us are fleeing; all living creatures, even the
flies, are fleeing; all round us they are fleeing.

12 For a comparable tendency in Najīb Mahfūz's style cf. S. Somekh, The
This repetition, of course, bears the mark of rhyme, but is by no means reminiscent of the rhyming prose (ṣayr) of classical Arabic prose. Rather, it is more in keeping with repetition in modern poetry, including modern Arabic poetry (e.g. al-Sayyab, al-Bayyati, ‘Abd al-Šābūr).13

Often we find strings of three such sentences, some rhyming, others unrhymed, in which the third is longer than the first two, e.g.:

Out of the car she alighted. Charmingly she alighted.

The amorousness of a hurrying passer-by raised her spirits.14

We have made it. By a giant stroke of luck we have made it. The car at last—with us, with us alone—sets out.

This pattern, incidentally, bears some resemblance to a similar “trio” pattern noticeable in Tāhā Husayn’s prose style,15 and, in a way, to certain Koranic rhythms.

Now in order to demonstrate to what extent this stylistic pattern, i.e., sequences of short rhythmic sentences, constitute an innovation in Idris’ prose, it would be expedient to quote, by way of contrast, a “sentence” from one of his early stories, a sentence whose style is characteristic of that early stage:

Before him spread the abundant darkness, where nestle the low dun houses before which lie mounds of manure like long-neglected graves; nothing remained to indicate that there were living beings roofed up beneath the roofs except a few lamps here and there in the wide dark circle, like the eyes of she-devils lying in wait scattering sparks, their dark red luminescence strutting from afar only to sink into the blackness of the pond.

---


14 An example of this feature in Tāhā Husayn’s prose is:

... بلَّدُ اللَّهَ عَلَى الْمَهَابِرِ أَحْيَا، وَلَبِّنَ الأَلْوَانِ حَيْنَ وَيَعْصِي أَنْ يَعْصِيَهُ، ثُمَّ لَبِّنَ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ النُّورِ أَلْوَانِهِ.


15 Quotations from this volume (al-Nāḍīkā) are taken from the second edition entitled Mudhāj al-hums (Beirut, 1970). Other volumes are quoted according to their respective first editions, as listed in fn. 1.


17 Vincent Monteil, L'arabe moderne, Paris, 1960, p. 228, cites an instance of a similar construction, commenting that, “Ce constructions ne sont pas encore très fréquentes, mais il y a là une tendance qui devait être signalée.”
and they occur only in certain contextual positions. Furthermore, they never appear in such frequency and density as, for instance, in the following paragraph:

On Friday afternoons he comes, with his stick he raps the door, to the outstretched hand he entrusts himself, on the straw mat he squats, and when he has finished he feels round for his sandals, utters a farewell which no one troubles to return, and goes away. Out of habit he comes, out of habit he recites, by dint of habit he goes away, so that no one is aware of him any longer, or pays him any attention.

Because of the great abundance of such sentences in Idris' recent prose, one would be on safe ground if one assumes that there is a definite function in the appearance of such structures, which is probably to amplify the feeling of an absurd world, of an inverted logic. The appearance of whole paragraphs loaded with topsy-turvy sentences hardly fails to produce a rhythm of disharmony and paradox.

VI

Such an interpretation of the function of the non-classical word-order might become more convincing if we now pass on to the next feature which also seems to be characteristic of Idris' recent works. This feature is not necessarily connected with syntax proper, but to what is traditionally grouped under the category of "metaphor" or figurative language.

In Idris' recent stories there is a sharp increase of paradoxical and oxymoron-like collocations. This increase, too, seems to have occurred in the mid-sixties. Truly enough, paradoxical expressions can also be found in Idris' early works. However, both in the quantity of these collocations, i.e. the frequency of their appearance, as well as in their literary function, there is a great difference between the two stages. In the first stage we find, for instance, such oxymorons as الصناديق المنزلة الصادرة عن لا مصدر ("the suppressed clamour originating from no origin") and the suppressed clamour originating from no origin (VIII, 103). But such expressions seem to be few and far between at this stage. In the second stage, the frequency of paradoxical expressions is far greater. We can even find stories so densely loaded with such collocations that the very quantity becomes a new quality. This applies to such stories as "al-Lu'ba" (VIII, 103-109), from which a few examples will be quoted presently.

As for the employment of these collocations, an expression like the "victory of defeat" is of a rather straightforward denotative value. "Defeat" here is "death", and its victory merely refers to the death of the beloved protagonist whose friends had hoped against hope for his recovery. In contradistinction, the paradoxical expressions in the second stage often have an unmistakably connotative value. In other words, the paradox which is conveyed by them is a complex one, loaded with shades of meaning. Most of these incongruous collocations seem to emanate from a background of the absurd and reflect a breakdown of logic. Such paradoxical expressions as the suppressed clamour (X, 85, "your top bottom" or "your bottom that is a top"), or the suppressed clamour originating from no origin (VIII, 103-"the radiations of the invisible light") are hardly an indication of a plain paradoxical situation whose poles can be easily isolated and identified. Rather, the incongruity is deeply rooted in the nature of things, in the core of human existence.

As indicated above, the use of these paradoxical collocations becomes so frequent and so diverse that it seems appropriate to illustrate them in extenso. The following collocations are all taken from Idris' three latest volumes of short stories (Lughat al-ay áy, 1965 18; al-Ndayha, 1970 19; Bayt min lahm, 1971). In order to demonstrate their diversity they are classified according to their grammatical structures. Only the major types are exemplified here:

Type 1: the contrast (or variance) occurs between a noun and its attribute:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>صندوق وور</td>
<td>VIII, 103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>مسمى ما بين</td>
<td>VIII, 104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>معايدة الأمومة الصادرة عن لا مصدر</td>
<td>VIII, 103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الاستماع التشغيل</td>
<td>VIII, 103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

18 Many of these examples are quoted from the story "al-Lu'ba" (VIII, pp. 103-109).
19 See fn. 15 above.
Type 2: the contrast occurs between two attributes or clusters of attributes modifying the same noun:

The sound was low as it reached me, with a fanfare whisper. (X, 133)

The cursed, dear smell
consoling and envying one another, acting clever and foolish
(IX, 83)

The contrast between the same politely impolite smile
(IX, 119)

Type 3: the contrast occurs between the components of a "construct state" (idāfa or idāfa ḥayyir ḥaṣṣāfiyya):

He widened his smile in a way that seemed impolitely polite
(VIII, 105)

the same politely impolite smile
(VIII, 105)

a tree yellowing in its greenness
(IX, 119)

the positivity of absolute negativeness
(IX, 184)

the attraction of repulsion
(IX, 185)

Type 4: the contrast occurs between two consecutive or parallel clauses:

Between them, dividing them completely, uniting them completely, was that cigarette. (VIII, 15)

You with your infinity, 1 with my limitation
(X, 83)

The paradoxical or absurd style sometimes manifests itself through the frequent employment of certain coordinating or subordinating functionals that inherently convey the sense of opposition, exception, restriction, or reservation. The following paragraph, which again comes from the short story "al-Lu’ba", is a good illustration of this phenomenon:

Finally the paradoxical or absurd style sometimes manifests itself through the frequent employment of certain coordinating or subordinating functionals that inherently convey the sense of opposition, exception, restriction, or reservation. The following paragraph, which again comes from the short story "al-Lu’ba", is a good illustration of this phenomenon:

The paradoxical, disharmonious nature of things, which in fact constitutes the gist of this story, as well as many others, is aptly conveyed by the frequent recourse to the functionals etc., and, of course, the contrasting statements that precede and follow these functionals.20

S. Somekh