

## INTERLINGUAL WORD TABOOS AMONG ARAB STUDENTS

The rather large contingent of Arab students on the Bloomington campus offers an easily accessible source of data on numerous subjects, including Gestures, attitudes, and word taboos. Indeed, they offer opinions quite readily without hesitation, and oftentimes one can get a great deal out of their differences of opinion among themselves, albeit somewhat confused at times.

Of particular interest is the determination of the degree of acculturation they achieve while here in the States; that is, what modifications do they make in their otherwise Arabic cultural traits to better fit into American society and culture? As regards gestures, there is every indication that they do modify or alter in some way their gesture patterns. For example, there is less handshaking or kissing among men, otherwise quite normal and acceptable gestures for Arabs. Since these, particularly the latter one, are not always approved means for greeting here in the States, it would seem quite obvious that they would alter the pattern, at least temporarily. However, there is also some evidence to indicate that these modifications are carried back to their homelands where they are perpetuated to some degree, very likely as affectations.

If modifications of gesture patterns do take place, one wonders to what extent do modifications in language occur. Moreover, one might also ask to what extent are these perpetuated upon their return to their respective countries. During a recent "coffee break" with them, I was able to observe that they utilized words that would not ordinarily be used when only in the company of Arabs. Since I was not the only American present, I assumed that they were using alternate words in certain cases because they did not want to embarrass us. Such words, I later learned, are taboo words that have become such simply because they sound like English "four-letter" words. Whether all of the students interviewed observe these taboos is at present unknown.

On the day when they were interviewed, the rain was falling quite heavily. Ordinarily some would use the word tsette for rain but the alternate word tmattr was used. I inquired further and found that sitte (winter) was also altered to form sita, a slightly more acceptable form, at least among Arabs who might in turn be among Americans. Other word taboos observed were: fatah (open) for fak; qatta (male cat) for bis; and the almost complete avoidance of fakkaroni (remind me). Probably there are others, ones that are less obvious than those noted here.

Of interest also is the fact that the taboos are not just Arabic; they also avoid the use of English words that sound like Arabic obscenities. Two examples are kiss and zipper (zip). The former is akin to the Arabic word for vagina (kuss or kiss) while the latter one is similar to the Arabic word for penis (zib or zub). Again, as with the Arabic word taboos, there are doubtless other English word taboos. I offer these only to stimulate any interested students of the subject to pursue a research project not only among the Arabs but also among other foreign students who must operate, so to speak, in a bi-lingual environment.

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