

# **Arabic: The language of Muslimness in Cape Town**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation is a linguistic ethnography of Arabic language use among Muslims in Cape Town. The study seeks to understand how a group of Arabic learners experience and engage with Arabic as the language of Islam. The teaching of Arabic in South Africa has often been seen as problematic by researchers, many of whom have argued that students do not acquire communicative skills in these learning environments (Mall & Nieman 2002; Dawood 2008; Mohamed 1998, 1997). Such critiques conceive of language ability, or proficiency, in terms of four skills, namely, speaking, reading, writing, and comprehension. These four language skills have been deemed lacking among many Arabic language learners. Even though these researchers have acknowledged that Arabic is a religious language, they have tended to overlook the myriad ways in which Arabic ‘lives’ in the complex semiotic repertoires of Capetonian Muslims who learn the language for religious purposes. This study shows that Arabic language practices and the ideologies surrounding the language are deeply intertwined with participants’ spiritual/religious ideologies about Muslimness. The group of Arabic learners who are at the centre of the research spend hours vocalising Arabic sounds when reciting Quran, performing prayers, and reading religious texts. In other words, their daily religious practices, which form part of their everyday lives, are saturated with Arabic sounds and script. Moreover, they are visually and somatically engaged in writing Arabic script when doing calligraphy and copying Arabic texts by hand. Thus, this study asks, how do Muslim Arabic learners in Cape Town meaningfully engage with Arabic amidst their perceived ‘lack’ of communicative language abilities? In what way do they make meaning with Arabic in their daily practices, and in what ways is the materiality of language involved therein? This study included ten participants: eight were in their twenties, and two were in their fifties. Through in-depth interviews and participant observation, this ethnographic study examines how Muslim learners experience Arabic as the language of Islam; how the characterisation of Arabic as a sacred language opens up different pathways of meaning-making; and how Muslim learners experience the (sonic and written) materiality of Arabic in their daily lives. The data were analysed using the constant comparative method (Merriam & Grenier, 2019: 43) alongside MacLure’s (2013: 661) approach of attuning to “glowing” data – moments in the data that evoke affective or conceptual resonance. The analysis was informed by theories of language materiality (Cavanaugh & Shankar, 2017: 2) and the aesthetics of language (Jakobson, 1960: 356). These frameworks foreground three key concepts – ideologies, indexicality, and iconicity – which shaped the interpretation of the data. This dissertation argues that Muslim learners in

Cape Town meaningfully engage with Arabic as a sacred language by prioritising the aesthetic and affective dimensions of language (Jakobson 1960; Besnier 1990), and in so doing, emphasise the aural and visual materiality of Arabic in their cultivation of Muslimness.

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# Table of Contents

## Declaration

**Abstract** i

**Acknowledgements** iii

**Transcription conventions** vii

**List of Tables and Figures** viii

## Chapter One: Introduction

1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	Origins of the study	3
1.3	The centrality of language materiality	4
1.4	The usefulness of linguistic ethnography	5
1.5	Interviews as a primary source of data?	5
1.6	On the limitations of the academic sources consulted	6
1.7	Organization of the thesis chapters	7

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1	Introduction	9
2.2	The significance of classical Arabic	9
2.3	Establishing the basis for the present study	10
2.4	Muslim learners' experiences of Arabic	11
2.5	Classical Arabic in South Africa	12
2.6	Key theories and concepts	14
2.6.1	Understanding sacred languages	14
2.6.2	Language materiality	15
2.6.3	Aesthetics in sociocultural linguistics	17
2.7	Conclusion	21

## Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1	Introduction	23
3.2	The research design	23
3.3	The research context	24
3.3.1	Location	24
3.3.2	Participants	24
3.4	Positionality	25
3.5	Data collection	26
3.5.1	Fieldnotes	29
3.5.2	Ethnographic interviews	30
3.6	Data analysis procedure	32
3.7	Ethics	34
3.8	Conclusion	35

#### **Chapter Four: Learners' Experiences of Arabic Sounds**

4.1	Introduction	36
4.2	Muslimness: Religion as part of the social world	37
4.2.1	Intimacy: indexicality	37
4.2.2	Piety: iconicity	39
4.3	Ideologies of Arabic	42
4.3.1	Sacredness and correctness in ideologies of Arabic	43
4.3.2	Aesthetics of correctness in learners' experiences of Arabic sounds	47
4.3.3	Aesthetic and affective experiences of listening to Arabic sounds	52
4.4	Conclusion	53

#### **Chapter Five: Meaning-Making with Arabic Script**

5.1	Introduction	54
5.2	Arabic writing: Beautiful and embodied	54
5.3	Arabic script in devotional acts – Quran and calligraphy	56
5.3.1	Doing calligraphy as an act of worship	56
5.3.2	Islamic calligraphy in the home and other spaces	58
5.4	Aesthetic orientations to Arabic script	64
5.5	Conclusion	67

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

6.1	Introduction	69
6.2	Summary of the findings	69
6.3	The study contribution, aims and objectives	71
6.4	Limitations of the study and future research directions	73
6.5	Conclusion	74

<b>References</b>	75
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## **Appendices**

<b>Appendix A: Glossary of Arabic terms</b>	87
---	----

<b>Appendix B: Data, written materials</b>	89
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<b>Appendix C: Detailed biographies of the learners</b>	91
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<b>Appendix D: Interview guide</b>	98
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<b>Appendix E: Consent form</b>	105
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## Transcription conventions

[bracketed text]	Additional information I inserted, including IPA transcriptions, translations of Arabic text, clarifications, and contextual details.
[...]	Ellipses in square brackets indicates part of an utterance that was omitted in the case of repetition of the same phrase.
...	Ellipses indicates a pause.
text-	Words with a minus sign at the end indicates an unfinished utterance.
<i>italics</i>	Arabic phrases appear in italics.
<b>bold</b>	Arabic sounds, consonants or vowels, are highlighted in bold for the purposes of discussion.

A glossary of Arabic terms is provided in Appendix A.

## List of Tables and Figures

**Table 1.** Interview data generated for the study.

**Table 2.** Other materials collected as data for the study.

**Figure 1.** Extract from fieldnotes: Classroom set up (at a *madrassa*).

**Figure 2.** Extract from fieldnotes: The lesson for the day on Arabic pronouns.

**Figure 3.** Extract from fieldnotes: Quran lesson notes.

**Figure 4.** A screenshot of a digital poster advertising a tajweed workshop in Cape Town 2017.

**Figure 5.** Three calligraphic prints in Saadiya's home: the name 'Allah' with the phrase 'the great and majestic' (right), verses from the Quran known as *ayat-ul-Kursi* (centre), and the name 'Muhammad' with the phrase 'may the peace and blessings of God be upon him' (left).

**Figure 6.** Two calligraphic digital prints: (top) the names 'Allah' and 'Muhammad', and (bottom) the greeting/salutation: *as-salaamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuhu* in Arabic text, the Arabic transliteration and translation in English below the Arabic script.

**Figure 7.** An image on Kamila's phone which she saved from Pinterest.

# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1| Introduction

Muslims constitute around two percent of the population in South Africa (Vahed 2021: 3). And like in other countries where Islam is practiced, religious instruction involves learning Classical Arabic (Mohamed 1997; Haron 1998; Jeppie 2007). Classical Arabic is used every day by Muslims in religious practices, individually and within groups. Examples of religious practices are prayers, supplication, liturgy, sermons, chanting, devotional songs, at marriages, funerals, weddings, and more (see Greef 1955: 46). Muslims recite Quran<sup>1</sup> daily during the five obligatory prayers and in their supplementary or voluntary religious practices. Reciting Quranic verses is a spiritually rewarding act and Muslims believe that doing this regularly wins the favour of God. Muslims also use Arabic interactionally in the form of greetings, when making requests, and when expressing gratitude.

This ethnographic study of the Arabic language experiences of a group of Muslim learners in Cape Town was inspired by my curiosity regarding a key question, namely, why is it that most Muslims in Cape Town spend several years learning Arabic, as part of religious instruction, but are rarely able to use Arabic communicatively (apart from formulaic expressions such as greetings)? Arabic language teachers Mall and Nieman (2002: 44), for example, describe the situation negatively as a ‘lack of communicative competence and low proficiency levels in all four language skills’; that is, speaking, reading, writing, and comprehension. What kind of Arabic language practices can one see in such a situation?

Arabic language instruction takes place in several types of institutions in South Africa: Muslim community schools, Muslim private schools, Muslim theological institutions, and universities (Mohamed 1997: 28; Dawood 2008: 5; see also Fataar 2005: 29). The term *madrassa* is used to refer to community-based institutions that offer instruction in Islamic studies (Hefner & Zaman 2007: 5).<sup>2</sup> The religious subjects offered at *madrassa* include ‘Qur’an recitation (*qira’ah*), Arabic grammar (*nahw*), Qur’anic interpretation (*tafsir*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the sources of the law (*usul al-fiqh*), and didactic theology (*kalam*)’ (*ibid.*). Historically, a distinction was

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<sup>1</sup> The word ‘Quran’ is sometimes spelled ‘Qur’an’, with an apostrophe marking the Arabic letter ‘ayn [qur.ʕa:n]. This thesis uses ‘Quran’, but ‘Qur’an’ appears in some direct quotations from scholarly works.

<sup>2</sup> For definitions of Arabic terms, the reader may wish to consult Appendix A: Glossary of Arabic terms.

made between a *madrasa* and a *kuttab* in the Arab world (*ibid.*). The *kuttab* was an institution that ‘provided elementary religious instruction, such as the knowledge required to recite but not understand the Qur’an’, that is, *qira’ah* (recitation), and it excluded the other abovementioned subjects that are part of *madrasa* education (*ibid.*). In Cape Town, however, any type of institute dedicated to the teaching and learning of Islamic studies, both elementary and advanced, may be called a *madrasa*. The term *kuttab* is not used in the local context. What kind of Arabic do Muslim learners learn at *madrasa*, one might wonder? How is it that someone can learn Arabic for many years yet does not learn how to speak it? How do Muslim learners who are engaged in learning Arabic experience the language, and what does this reveal about the way Arabic exists in their repertoires?

As noted above, Muslim Arabic learners are frequently said to lack requisite Arabic linguistic knowledge despite devoting many years to learning the language (Mohamed 1997; Mall & Nieman 2002; Dawood 2008). But most of these studies have not looked at the perspectives of Muslim Arabic learners to find out how they experience Arabic, particularly as a religious language. If, as Muslims, they experience Arabic language learning differently, we need to understand what their experiences are, how they differ from other language learning experiences, and what this means for religious language learning more broadly. Because only then can we understand how the seemingly problematic ‘lack’ of communicative skills among Muslim Arabic learners is perhaps not a problem at all, since for religious practitioners learning a religious language may not necessitate learning communicative skills. In this study, I will explore how learning Arabic as a religious language is influenced by factors that link language ideology and the lived experience of language through attention to the materiality, aesthetics and affects of Arabic sounds and script.

The goal of this study is to investigate religious language and experience by focusing on the experiences of a group of students who have learnt Arabic at *madrasa*. As noted above, I explain their experiences through the theoretical lenses of language materiality, affect and aesthetics, and I represent them by drawing on ethnographic observations as well as conversations with Muslim Arabic learners in Cape Town. In this way, my study contributes to current sociolinguistic discussions of the materiality of religious language (and how this links to affect and aesthetics); the lived experience of religious language, and the ways that Arabic forms part of the linguistic repertoires of Muslim Arabic learners in Cape Town.

This chapter provides the rationale for this research project with section 1.1 outlining the research topic and the questions that informed the research. In the next section (1.2), I introduce the study and my motivation for carrying it out by detailing its origins and relations to other areas of my life and the broader research context. Section 1.3 defines key concepts that have guided the study. Section 1.4 explains the choice of ethnography as the research methodology, and Section 1.5 looks at the usefulness of interviews within this framework. Section 1.6 reflects briefly on the limitations of the academic sources that informed the study. Sections 1.4, 1.5, and 1.6, especially, elaborate on the significance of the research and provide essential context and background for the study. At the end (Section 1.7), I outline the organization of this thesis, briefly summarizing each chapter.

## **1.2| Origins of the study**

The original idea for this study grew out of my interest in Arabic as a religious language in Cape Town Muslim culture. First, it stemmed from my socialization into the practices of Arabic liturgical literacy (Rosowsky 2008) and growing up as a Muslim in Cape Town. More specifically, it is a sustained ethnographic inquiry into the development and practice of Arabic literary skills in this specific local context. Many of my fellow Arabic language students, I found, could certainly read and recite Arabic religious texts, write using Arabic script, identify Arabic in spoken discourse, and ultimately were confident in claiming Arabic as a language they know. However, they often had trouble comprehending the referential or denotational meanings of Arabic in written and spoken discourse. When I initially observed, and spoke to, Arabic learners, paying attention to the way they related to Arabic in multiple contexts, it became clear that an important way Muslim learners relate to Arabic signification is experientially and materially – that is, through the affective and aesthetic engagement with the sonic and visual forms of the language (see also Kølvråa 2015; Dlaske 2017).

This study began, then, when I drew on ideas from my studies in sociolinguistics, anthropology and Arabic literature courses as well as my practical engagement with Arabic historical and liturgical texts. Indeed, I realized that this phenomenon might have the potential to become a ‘researchable question’ (Merriam & Tisdell 2015: 1). Accordingly, I proceed from the premise that all Muslims have a lived experience of Arabic and that many of these experiences involve shared meaning-making and language-relational processes that could help us to understand how Muslim learners relate to Arabic.

### 1.3| The centrality of language materiality

The central theoretical principle that I focus on in this thesis is the concept of *language materiality* which looks at the way that ‘the physical presence of language is an essential part of how it is experienced and made sense of’ (Cavanaugh & Shankar, 2017: 2). In my view, this theoretical framework elucidates Muslim learners’ primary ideological orientation to Arabic. Arabic language learners do more with Arabic than try to comprehend the meanings of texts and speech; they also make meaning by simply using Arabic sound and script.

To better grasp Arabic learners’ orientation to Arabic and its relation to their religious identification as Muslims, I have found this view useful. In other words, the experience of being Muslim is bound up with the experience of the sounds and visuality of Arabic. Moreover, I attempt to illustrate that the senses are acutely involved in the experience of Arabic in the classroom and everyday religious practices—in other words, that it is a somatic and visceral experience; an experience that foregrounds aesthetics and affect (see Kramersch 2009; Ochs 2012; Busch 2012, 2017).

Thus, as I suggest in this thesis, language materiality can make explicit not just Muslim learners’ experiences of the formal aspects of Arabic, its sounds and visual qualities, but their aesthetic and affective experiences of Muslimness that are also infused with Arabic. Since learning a language is a deeply emotional and embodied activity, learners who are engaged with Arabic in terms of its materiality, as explored in this study, cultivate a particular identification as Muslims in their communities. And if I am accurate in my interpretation that religious/liturgical language is always part of a process of relating materially to a sign system (following Keane 2013: 1), then this means that to understand the Arabic language experiences of Muslim learners, it is necessary to identify the processes of language materiality in which these learners are engaged.

Working with language materiality can also help with reflecting on semiotic ideologies (Keane 2018: 67); that is, onto-epistemologies about the sign and signification practices. Onto-epistemology refers to ‘the study of practices of knowing in being’ (Barad 2007: 185). The present study aims to understand how the participants come to ‘know’ Arabic through the practices of ‘being’ Muslim. In the conversations that took place in the context of this research,

learners recount their experiences with Arabic signification not only in statements about sign forms and embodied experiences, but also by expressing their underlying assumptions about the Arabic sign and its signification processes in their communicative practices. In other words, attending to language materiality can aid in making Muslim learners' semiotic ideologies of Arabic comprehensible.

#### **1.4| The usefulness of linguistic ethnography**

Ethnography as a method has a generative quality, prompting researchers to make moves in their research process that they may not otherwise make or even know they could make (Patton 2015: 763). What this particular methodological approach helps researchers do is to take the position of insider-explorer, of looking at phenomena from the perspective of those who are involved in them daily. In so doing, ethnography can bring out aspects of participants' lived experiences that are not easily observable.

While I have used open-ended ethnographic interviews as my primary source of data, other techniques of ethnography have helped me make a host of additional research moves in my data collection and analysis. These included participant observation, impromptu interview conversations, personal reflection, photographing instances of Arabic language use in a diversity of fieldwork contexts, collecting actual and digital objects with Arabic writing on them, as well as reading and authoring ethnographic texts. In prompting researchers to make such moves, ethnographic methods do more than expose ideas for exploration; they help generate those ideas and bring them into existence.

#### **1.5| Interviews as a primary source of data?**

I am aware, of course, that some scholars may have reservations about using interviews as the primary data source. Some, for instance, may object that such semi-formal research situations do not allow one to record forms of communication that are unelicited and free from the observer's gaze. This may lead to 'inauthentic' or 'artificial' data (de Fina & Perrino 2011: 1), or data that lacks 'the richness of information needed for a culturally informed linguistic analysis' (Duranti 1997: 103). This is an understandable contention, I think, to forms of research that have indeed made use of interview data and treated it like it was in-situ speech data leading to claims about the social world that were unwarranted. The call here is for

researchers to attend to the theoretical underpinnings of their chosen methodology, including the techniques employed to generate data. While seasoned researchers develop these practices over time through their research experiences, many emerging researchers, such as postgraduate students, still have difficulty with this. Consequently, I believe, that as researchers we need to make explicit how these data are represented in the research study and how the techniques for generating the data are conceptualized in the study.

The aim of interviews, then, is not to pretend to generate ‘naturalistic speech’ data but to be explicit about the key conceptualizations that come with this methodological technique. Consequently, I have conceptualized interviews as a ‘speech event’, and ‘interactional encounter’ (de Fina & Perrino 2011: 5; Wertheim 2006: 711; Duranti 1997: 104; Briggs 1986: 4). I am also aware that the data generated for this study is not representative of the lived reality of all Muslims in Cape Town (on representation in ethnographic writing, see Abu-Lughod 1993: 2). Thus, by acknowledging these limitations, using interviews as a data-generation tool need not result in research writing and thinking that is extremely limited or misrepresentative. My use of interviews does, however, provide data that have stimulated and shaped thoughts such as: What do participants say about Arabic? What are their experiences of learning to read, write and recite in Arabic? What kind of examples of Arabic do they encounter in their everyday lives? Do they feel Arabic is part of their identities? And in what ways?

In fact, interviews have a long and rich history (Patton 2015: 624). Research interviewing is a systematic activity and a well-established research methodology (Merriam & Tisdell 2015: 107). Books on qualitative research methods, with sections on ethnographic interviews, provide valuable information on the different strategies available to researchers and students (Emerson et al. 2001: 359; Heyl 2001: 369-380; Merriam & Grenier 2019: 14). In many respects, my interview technique and my conceptualization of interviews-as-speech-events echo the critiques of, and advice for using, interviews as data. This is discussed further in the methodology in Chapter 3.

## **1.6| On the limitations of the academic sources consulted**

In this thesis, the reader will find that the sources consulted are mainly Euro-centric and anglophone and the onto-epistemology is informed by scholars from the Global North. Due to the limitations of word length and time, I have made the decision to continue to draw on these

sources to the exclusion of work from Black and Indigenous scholarship which I have only begun to immerse myself in. I feel that this is a huge loss and I sit with the discomfort of knowing that this thesis is, in some ways, a reproduction of the kinds of thinking and epistemological framing that originates in the Eurocentric Global North and that often erases the knowledge and contributions of Africans and the African diaspora. What is more, I sit with the discomfort of knowing that my training has largely been Eurocentric and concentrated on studies and literature from the Global North such that their ways of theorizing and modes of inquiry come very easily to me. There is a lot of unlearning and relearning to be done. And bearing this in mind, I feel the tension and duality that accompanies me as I submit this work for examination and approval.

## **1.7| Organization of the thesis chapters**

I begin Chapter 2 with an outline of the current situation of Arabic in Cape Town, including a discussion of Arabic as a religious language. I then discuss the concept of language materiality and how the materiality of sound and script are a vital part of the way individuals experience religious language. The final section discusses affect and aesthetics, how they relate to language materiality and how I have used them in my analysis.

Chapter 3 details the methodology of the study. I introduce the research context, provide a critical reflection on the data collection process, and outline how the data was analysed. The chapter also discusses ethics, positionality and the implications for the study of Arabic in the local Cape Town context.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I examine participants' experiences of Arabic based on their interview narratives. These two chapters highlight how the use of Arabic is entangled with the phatic and poetic function of language (Jakobson 1960: 356-357). Whereas Chapter 4 has a particular focus on the ideologies informing learners' experiences of Arabic sound, Chapter 5 focuses on learners' meaning-making with regard to the materiality of Arabic script and I draw on photographs of Arabic script to illustrate its visuality. In short, I suggest that the way Arabic learners experience Arabic sounds and script is integral to their cultivation of Muslimness in this context.

The dissertation concludes with a summary and evaluation of the main arguments presented. It then suggests recommendations for further inquiry into this area of study.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### 2.1| Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion of the relevant scholarship on the topic of Arabic and Muslim learners' experiences, locating it in the context of Cape Town, South Africa. It also outlines the main theoretical concepts employed in my analysis. In Section 2.2, I review some of the scholarly literature on Classical Arabic as a religious language among Muslims in Cape Town and South Africa more broadly. In Section 2.3, the study is situated within the field of sociocultural linguistics. To this end, Section 2.4 looks at studies of Muslim learners' experiences of Arabic in various settings globally, and Section 2.5 reviews studies of Arabic in South Africa. Following this, in Section 2.6 I discuss the key concepts that have guided my analysis and discussion of the research data. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main points discussed (Section 2.7).

### 2.2| The significance of classical Arabic

'Classical Arabic' (henceforth CA) is called *fushhā* in the Arabic linguistic tradition (Suleiman 2012: 202). In Arabic sociolinguistics numerous terms are used for CA including Classical Arabic, Literary Arabic, and Quranic Arabic.<sup>3</sup> Benkharafa (2013: 202) explains that these 'mean more or less the same thing' and the diversity of labels seeks to achieve more precision in linguistic and literary analysis. CA and Modern Standard Arabic (henceforth MSA) are both referred to as 'standard Arabic' (van Putten 2020: 2). CA is used in religious and juridical texts, whereas MSA is used in the media and other official contexts. Sociolinguists have termed CA a sacred language as it is the language of the 'revelation of the Qur'an', the Islamic scripture (Haeri 2003: 1). CA originates from 'the language of the Qur'ān, pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry', and is based on select Central Arabian dialects spoken in the early Islamic period (Suleiman 2012: 202-203). MSA can be described as a modernised version of CA in that the same grammatical rules apply. However, the lexicon of MSA includes numerous modern terms and excludes archaic terms. Spoken varieties of Arabic differ from CA and MSA in terms of syntax, morphology, and pronunciation (Haeri 2003: 3). Both CA and MSA are used more frequently in writing than in speech. Even when CA is used in long stretches of speech, such

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<sup>3</sup> In this thesis, I use the terms Arabic, Classical Arabic and Quranic Arabic interchangeably.

as sermons, it will usually be accompanied by a written text. As a result, the practices and ideologies of CA are strongly influenced by these textual sources. Importantly, learning CA is mostly text-based which shapes the practices of Arabic learners.

### **2.3| Establishing the basis for the present study**

South African Muslims, like Muslims globally, receive religious instruction, which includes Arabic lessons, in the local languages. In Cape Town, the local languages are English and Afrikaans for the majority of Muslims (Greef 1955: 1; Dangor 2003: 207; Cochrane & Chellan 2017: 19). It has been claimed that Muslim students, outside of Arabic-speaking countries, learn to pronounce and write Arabic ‘often without really understanding it’ (Versteegh 2014: 314). Indeed, listening to and reciting Arabic ‘without understanding the meaning of the text’ is common to millions of Muslims globally (Bassetti 2024: 17).

Moreover, learning to recite the Quran without the need to comprehend the full meaning of the text is valued in itself (Rosowsky 2019: 3). Knowledge of Arabic varies between individual learners with the majority being able to ‘perform’ Quran recitation only (*ibid.*). Quran recitation involves ‘accurate pronunciation, fluency in blending and combining syllables into words and then into phrases and verses, followed by acquiring the conventions for recitation in an artful and melodious manner [*tajweed*]’ (*ibid.*). Reciting the Quran with *tajweed* – that is with accurate pronunciation – is viewed as the first of several layers of meaning that form part of a developing understanding of the Quran (Moore 2006: 120; Coombes 2013: 8). Crucially, recitation with *tajweed* – which means ‘to improve’ or ‘to beautify’ – is considered especially meaningful by Arabic learners. I will expand on the concept of *tajweed* in Chapter 4.

The emphasis on the aesthetic recitation of the Quran teaches learners to attend closely to Arabic sounds. Moreover, all learners acquire a ‘preferred affective orientation to the sounds of the recited Qur’an, *that of deep and enduring appreciation*, before comprehending the text’ (Coombes 2013: 22, my emphasis). As noted above, in this study, I examine learners’ aesthetic and affective responses to Arabic to better understand this aspect of their lived experiences of language.

## 2.4| Muslim learners' experiences of Arabic

Much of the research on Arabic learning among South African Muslims has been narrowly focused on problems with teaching Arabic for communicative purposes (Mohamed 1997; Mall & Nieman 2002; Dawood 2008). Some studies have been premised on a distinction between learning Arabic to recite the Quran for religious purposes and learning Arabic for communicative purposes. For instance, Mall and Nieman (2002: 44) state their concern about a 'lack of communicative competence and low proficiency levels' among Arabic learners. Further, they observe that learners neither achieve 'communicative competence in Arabic' nor are they able to 'read the Qur'an with comprehension' (*ibid.*: 45). While I acknowledge their point about the different purposes of Arabic learning, I maintain that the overemphasis on communicative competence as a pedagogical goal has led to limited understanding of the role of Arabic in Muslim learners' lived experiences.

It seems, then, that despite several studies, the findings say more about the concerns of Arabic teachers and their aims for students of Arabic than about the experiences of Arabic learners themselves. Many existing qualitative studies have framed their investigations around learners' limited comprehension abilities. However, little attention has been given to Arabic learners' everyday language practices, and there exist few learner-centred studies, exploring their perceptions and experiences of Arabic as part of their everyday lives as Muslims (see, however, Bassetti 2023: 3, and Berglund 2019, for a discussion of Arabic learners' experiences). To date, I am aware of only one study that focuses on learners' experiences of using Arabic in the literacy practices of *hifdh* (Quran memorisation) at a *madrassa* in Cape Town (Coombes 2013). Nonetheless, further research is needed in this area to better understand the lived experiences of Arabic learners.

In this thesis, I adopt a sociolinguistic and ethnographic perspective in examining a group of Arabic learners' experiences and practices of Arabic as a religious language that they use daily. I focus on the role of language materiality in meaning-making (Bal 1994: 20; Donzelli 2020: 168; Cavanaugh & Shankar 2017: 1) and I approach 'understanding' or 'proficiency' as dynamic and multifaceted (Prinsloo 2021: 2). Several influential studies examining the aesthetic and affective aspects of religious language in diverse sociocultural contexts provide a foundation for my study and are discussed in Section 2.6 of this chapter.

## 2.5| Classical Arabic in South Africa

While the pedagogical aspects of learning Arabic in South Africa have attracted attention since the 1990s, it is only in the past decade that there has been a growing interest in ethnographic research on the sociocultural significance of Arabic in the lives of South African Muslims, particularly among Muslims in Cape Town. These studies have discussed the social and cultural importance of Arabic in the everyday life of Muslims as well as its role in cultivating a sense of community (Hendricks 2013; Alhourani 2015, 2018; Baderoon 2018). For example, in a study of Muslim women's fashion in Cape Town, Hendricks (2013: 7) comments briefly that Arabic is 'the sound of the local Islamic sphere'. Hendricks's assessment is echoed by Alhourani (2015: 106) who argues that the Arabic language is indexical of Muslimness in Cape Town.

Alhourani's (*ibid.*) discussion of Arabic firmly links its aesthetic qualities to Muslim identity and community formation locally, and to the Muslim community globally. In a paper titled 'The Aesthetics of Muslim-ness', Alhourani (2018: 197) explains that for the Capetonian Muslim artists, Hasan and Husain Essop, 'the aesthetic of Arabic sound triggers feeling and embodied knowledge of Islam' inducing 'a sense of religious authenticity'. The exhibition Alhourani discusses, called *Remembrance*, was curated by the Essop brothers and features an audio-visual installation of the two brothers reciting Arabic *Inshudah*, 'hymns' (Alhourani 2018: 197).<sup>4</sup> In this case, it is the sound of Arabic that is evoked in the performance of Muslimness. Alhourani's work takes an aesthetic approach to the anthropology of Islam focusing on the making of community and commonality among Muslims from diverse backgrounds residing in Cape Town. While these studies are not about language per se, the references to Arabic sounds that are dispersed throughout these works make it clear that Arabic is central to Muslim identity and religious experience. Importantly, these studies begin a critical conversation about Capetonian Muslims' aesthetic experiences of Arabic.

In the field of Islamic studies, Haron (2003) has explored the religio-cultural significance of Arabic calligraphy in Cape Town. While he focuses on the history of Arabic-Afrikaans, he includes details of 'other uses of Arabic script at the Cape' (Haron 2003: 41). These include using Arabic script to decorate tombs, homes, inscriptions on special occasion cards, name

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<sup>4</sup> The *Remembrance* exhibition can be viewed online at <https://www.goodman-gallery.com/exhibitions/cape-town-gallery-hasan-husain-essop-remembrance-2012> [Accessed: 15 March 2024]

tags, letter heads, and wood engravings. In the final part of the paper, he provides biographies of prominent Arabic calligraphers in Cape Town, offering unique insights into the practices surrounding Arabic script in Muslim culture in the local context. Haron's paper serves as inspiration for this study's focus on Muslim learners' experiences of Arabic script (see Chapter 5).

Historical studies of Arabic-Afrikaans manuscripts (Jappie 2011; Dangor 2008), of Muslim religious texts (Jeppie 2018), and of Muslim religious performances (Desai 1993), offer further discussions on the relevance of Arabic in the lives of Muslims in Cape Town. Jeppie (2018) and Desai (1993) both discuss the *Rātib al-Haddād*, a compilation of prayers that is recited during the religious practice of *dhikr*; the 'remembrance' of God. In Cape Town, *dhikr* is also the word used to refer to the ritual gathering held weekly and on special occasions such as birthdays. During this gathering, Muslims perform prayers, chant, sing poetry and praises for the prophet Muhammad and other well-known Muslim saints, and their predecessors. *Dhikr* is sometimes called *ghadat* [xʌdʌt] in Cape Town. This reflects a local pronunciation of the Arabic name *al-Haddād*, the compiler of this collection of prayers (Jeppie 2018: 30). Jeppie (*ibid.*) further discusses the intriguing history of a prayer book containing the *Rātib al-Haddād* that was produced for practitioners who attend these *dhikr* gatherings. He provides a detailed exploration of the materiality of the prayer book and the associated sociohistorical entanglements and trajectories thereof.

Desai's (1993) thesis explores the trance-linked ritual performance called *ratiep*, a localised pronunciation and shortened form of the name *Rātib al-Haddād*. These performances are rooted in Islamic mystical traditions that have evolved with the recitation of this well-known compilation of prayers, as well as other litanies, in the Western Cape and parts of Kwazulu Natal (1993: vi-xiv). Notably for this thesis, Desai's work points to the significance of the Arabic script on ritual implements and flags (1993: 218).

Even though these studies broaden our understanding of the use of classical Arabic in religious texts and religious performances, their inquiry is less focused on language and sociolinguistic processes. Their disciplinary focus, understandably, is on tracing the local-global relationships and historical continuities that have shaped the creation of manuscripts (Jappie 2011: 4), prayer books (Jeppie 2018: 29) as well as religious ritual (Desai 1993: 1). While these studies have

contributed to our understanding of classical Arabic in the sociocultural context of Cape Town, there is room for further exploration, particularly from a sociolinguistic perspective.

## **2.6| Key theories and concepts**

### **2.6.1| Understanding sacred languages**

As a category of languages (Bennett 2018: 6), sacred languages share some commonalities. One of which is that they are always learned for religious or spiritual purposes. As noted above, Classical Arabic is often learned at *madrasa* and is fundamental to socialization into Muslim ways of life (Moore 2013: 450). Moreover, the use of Classical Arabic is marked by its aesthetic and emotional resonances that are experienced by religious practitioners (Bassetti 2023: 5). The religious language learner attends especially to the sounds and visuality of the language and employs these aspects in meaning-making in associated rituals. This informs how they cultivate their religious identities (Kuipers 2013: 2-3; Moore 2013: 450; Souza 2016: 3; Rosowsky 2019: 8).

As noted above, Classical Arabic is considered a sacred language among Muslims in Cape Town (Haron 1998: 66, 2003: 34; Coombes 2013: 8; Alhourani 2015: 110). Bennett (2018: 9) explains that, from the perspective of religious practitioners, sacred languages like Classical Arabic are unlike other languages because they emanate from the unseen spiritual realm. Furthermore, Arabic is a religious language in the sense that Keane defines such languages (1997: 48, 2013: 2). Keane (1997: 48) characterises religious language in terms of practices and resources. He notes that ‘highly marked and self-conscious uses of linguistic resources’ are involved in religious practice. Moreover, he defines religious language ‘in terms of the perceived distinctiveness of certain interactions, textual practices, or speech situations’ (*ibid.*). Reciting and reading the Quran are infused with religious significance since Muslims understand the Quran as the literal ‘Word of God’ (Mir 2007: 49). Indeed, there are verses in the Quran itself which claim its divine revelation (Mir 2007: 50; Selim 2017: 30). Consequently, among Muslims, the linguistic resources of Classical Arabic are distinguished from other language use.

Religious or sacred language has been discussed in terms of the ‘artistic’ and ‘aesthetic’ aspects of meaning-making (see, for example, Yelle 2013: 2). In the context of Arabic, textual practices

such as calligraphy, play with ‘the aesthetic possibilities of script’, making use of the ‘dual character of language as both form and semantic content’ (Keane 2013: 8). Reflecting on meaning-making in the context of religious languages, Keane (2004: 432) comments as follows:

‘Religious language practices may involve practitioners’ heightened awareness of language (among other things), they offer analysts insight into that awareness and its linguistic and, by extension, conceptual and social consequences.’

This perspective is crucial to understanding Arabic learners’ experiences of using Arabic in their practices as Muslims in the sociocultural context of Cape Town. In analysing Muslim learners’ discourse, I focus on their awareness of the materiality and aesthetics of Arabic sounds and script, as well as on the affects that are created. Thus, I investigate their attentiveness to the materialities of Arabic and the consequences for meaning-making with Arabic as a sacred language (I expand on this in Chapters 4 and 5).

Indexicality, iconicity, and ideologies are key analytical concepts in this study, particularly in examining Muslim learners’ meaning-making practices. These concepts are grounded in the theoretical contributions of Keane (2013), and Gal and Irvine (2019), and are commonly used in the study of language materiality (2.6.2) and the aesthetics of language (2.6.3). Within the context of religious language, their interrelation is crucial for understanding how linguistic forms reflect and construct social and cultural identities. Chapters 4 and 5 provide an in-depth discussion of these concepts.

### **2.6.2| Language materiality**

In the social sciences and humanities, a focus on materiality as a significant dimension of human experience has captured the interest of language researchers, specifically, ‘the material nature of linguistic practice itself – its sounds, shape, and material presences’ (Cavanaugh & Shankar 2017: 2). Studies focusing on sound or writing show how ‘the physical presence of language [is] ... an essential part of how it is experienced and made sense of’ (*ibid.*). Since learners often describe their use of Arabic in terms of its materiality – its sounds and script – I have found this approach to language particularly useful, and it informs my analysis of Arabic learners’ experiences of Arabic.

Drawing on notions of materiality, I engage with scholarship that investigates the sensibilities of religious practitioners in their material interactions with sacred languages. For example, studies of religious language, such as in Protestant Evangelicalism, show that an aesthetic and affective sensibility exists among religious practitioners when they recognise the sacred sonically and visually (Coleman 1996: 108). According to Coleman (*ibid.*), sacred language practices such as ‘prayers, sermons and tongues (glossolalia)’ are transformed into material forms among the Christians he studied. For example, ‘the Word’ of the Bible, such as in the phrase, ‘let there be light!’, is transmuted into the lived experience of church members as ‘better health or even a more prosperous bank account’ (*ibid.*: 109). These are interpreted as material signs of the sacred power of Biblical language.

Similarly, Harkness (2021: 3) asserts that those who practice glossolalia – speaking in tongues – are inspired by the interpretation of biblical passages that link unintelligible human speech with ‘the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit’. The presence of the divine may thus be felt in the aural materiality of the human speaking voice (Keane 2013: 10). Here, the sonic materiality of language is brought to the fore in meaning-making during religious performances. Accordingly, religious language in speech and writing is not used simply to convey the referential meaning of the narratives and parables that are contained in scripture. It is voiced and written and becomes animated in the presence of individual observers – its material presence is felt and has powerful effects on those who interact with it.

My thinking has also been informed by research on the subjective experiences of language and language learning. Kramsch (2009: 2), in particular, has inspired me to think beyond studying language ‘separately from its affective resonances in the bodies of speakers and hearers’, presenting data as if the emotional quotient of an individual’s sentiments was unimportant. Her work also reminded me to avoid the view of language ‘as a transparent and neutral tool’ used in thinking, communication, and interaction (*ibid.*). Importantly, Kramsch (2009: 4) highlights that language learners experience the language they are learning in multiple ways. She notes that learners’ lived experiences of language learning are meaningful ‘no matter what level of proficiency has been attained’ (*ibid.*). Elaborating on how learners make meaning with language, she writes about the ‘the music of language’ and ‘its sounds and rhythms, shapes and syntaxes’; thereby, inviting researchers to attend to these particularities in the experiences of language learners (*ibid.*). To me, this hints at the sonic and visual materiality of language in the

learning experience. In Kramersch's conceptualization of subjectivity, the self is co-constructed in and through experiences with language, and language learning 'is not just an unmotivated formal construct but a lived embodied reality' (*ibid.*, and 53). Thus, her work guided me to focus on the entanglement of language materiality, embodiment and identity (2009: 70).

### **2.6.3| Aesthetics and affect in sociocultural linguistics**

Language researchers have found the concept of aesthetics useful in two main ways. Firstly, focusing on aesthetics requires one to 'focus on form' (Deumert 2014: 158) and brings the poetic function of language to the fore of one's frame of inquiry (Jakobson 1960: 350). Secondly, the everyday aesthetics (Saito 2007: 48) of language invites researchers to explore the aesthetic sensibilities that emerge when people use language in particular ways, and the sociopolitical and ideological implications thereof. Importantly, aesthetics is frequently cited as a significant factor in learning sacred languages, creating complex affects in the speaker/listener. Learners attend to 'its form, its sounds, and its aesthetic or emotional dimensions' (Bassetti 2023: 17). In what follows, I discuss existing studies to illustrate how the concept of aesthetics contributes to understanding the affective dimensions of religious language better.

#### *The poetic function*

When one's attention is focused on the form of language in communicative contexts this means that the poetic function of language has been centred over other functions of language, namely, the emotive, conative, metalingual, referential, and phatic functions. Jakobson (1960: 356) explains that the 'focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language'. It is important to note, following Waugh (1980: 58), that this definition is 'relational' and exists together with the other functions. Thus, when the poetic function is foregrounded in a text, then 'language itself becomes the object' of attention (Deumert 2014: 158). The form of sounds (oral/aural) or script (visual) is what captures people's attention over and above its referent or what the message denotes. Further, our perceptions and experiences of what is heard, seen, and felt, as a result of focusing on the aesthetics of language, are essential for meaning-making in the communicative context.

Jakobson's reflections on the poetic function of language have inspired work that takes the sound of religious language as central. In *Sounding Islam*, Eisenlohr (2018) investigates the

sonic dimensions of religious performances among Muslims in Mauritius. In this study, Eisenlohr draws attention to listeners' sensory experiences of the voice in mediated devotional performances and the affective resonances thereof (2018: 5). While listeners may not have full understanding of the denotational message of the devotional songs, they feel its emotional resonances in the vocal sound patterns – 'the sonic atmosphere' – created and mediated by the technology of recorded performances (Eisenlohr 2018: 82-83).

Eisenlohr further found that Mauritian Muslims perceive the recitation of devotional songs with an aesthetic sensibility that is attuned to the subtle atmosphere that these sounds create. The Mauritian Muslims he spoke to listened to religious performances to attain 'a more direct connection to the divine, an experience they describe as literally being touched and seized by a reciting voice' (Eisenlohr 2018: 4). Listeners are physically and spiritually affected by the subtleties of the sounds (*ibid.*: 116). Through the practice of listening, they develop an aesthetic sensibility that attunes them to the materiality of the mediated voice. Such intricate analyses of the relationship between listener and vocal sounds are integral to studies of individuals' aesthetic and affective experiences of religious language (see further discussion of affect below). Ultimately, Eisenlohr's (2018) study shows how vocal sound is experienced and interpreted in terms of a particular aesthetic sensibility that is informed by an ideology that surrounds the religious performance of devotional songs.

In a similar frame, Hirschkind's (2006) ethnographic study, *The Ethical Soundscape*, argues that capacities of aesthetic appreciation inform the sensory experiences of Muslims listening to cassette tape sermons in Cairo. In both Eisenlohr and Hirschkind's studies, the focus of listeners is on 'the sound shapes' of language (Jakobson & Waugh [1979] 2002: 32-33), and the aesthetic sensibilities at play in the perception and experience of religious performances. The vocalisations of Arabic sounds in religious performances (such as sermons and devotional singing) induces a 'sonic atmosphere' that aligns with specific religious themes (Eisenlohr 2018: 4).

Likewise, in the context of Western non-heritage learners of Sanskrit as a sacred language, 'they attribute special qualities to its sound', and the sound of mantra 'is believed to be perfect and to affect the body and mind' (Bassetti and Reinboldt 2023: 11). These Italian-speaking yoga practitioners in Rome are learning Sanskrit because of their decades-long yoga practice and as part of their spiritual journey. They attribute the deepening of their practice to learning

Sanskrit, and ‘learning the language allows the correct pronunciation of its sounds, as the sound of Sanskrit has special characteristics and effects on body and mind’ (*ibid.*:10).

Along similar lines, Taylor (2015) investigated Sanskrit recitations in sermons at gatherings of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON). These sermons were delivered to an English-speaking audience yet included Sanskrit recitations. Taylor explores how these recitations of Sanskrit verses from the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* created an atmosphere of authenticity in the events. The analysis centres on Austin’s speech act theory and shows how the recitations shaped the desired spiritual effects on attendees (*ibid.*: 532). After all, as Taylor points out, the perlocutionary force of ‘hearing the recitation’ is the “‘creation, identification, and acceptance of oneself... as a Bhāgavata”; that is, one who accepts the redemptive power of the BhP [Bhāgavata-purāṇa]’ (*ibid.*: 533). It is primarily the sounds of Sanskrit that create this spiritual atmosphere because these verses are ‘usually devoid of semantic meaning for the listeners, as it is a language unknown to them’ (*ibid.*: 535). Thus, by attending to ‘affect, poetics, sound, and sentiment’, researchers are able to investigate the aesthetic experience of the material presence of language (Cavanaugh & Shankar 2017: 3).

### *The everyday aesthetics of language*

As the philosopher Saito puts it, ‘the most important factor for the purpose of everyday aesthetics... is not so much an inventory of objects and activities but rather the typical attitude we take toward them’ (Saito 2015, quoted in Deumert 2018: 11). Saito (2007: 8) speaks about why attending to everyday aesthetics is necessary. Firstly, it is important for providing a rich and varied account of our aesthetic life in all its diversity. Also, it raises awareness of the consequences that are invoked by our aesthetic attitudes and experiences. Indeed, according to Saito, the theoretical principles underpinning everyday aesthetics differ from other aesthetic theories. In addition to the emphasis on ‘the contemplative stance toward an object’, Saito (2007: 10) includes reactions that are less spectator-like and passive, and that prompt individuals to act. For Saito (*ibid.*), these reactions are more typical of the ways ‘aesthetics functions in everyday life’. I understand this to mean that individuals are actively engaged in the aesthetic experience of the everyday through the actions they take in response to experiencing life aesthetically. These points add weight to the argument that language is ‘emergent’ from social practice (Pennycook 2010: 219), and that language evokes aesthetic responses that lead to taking specific actions. Aesthetic responses, in turn, involve certain feelings and dispositions toward the aesthetic object.

In this thesis, the term affect is used to refer to these ‘feelings, moods, dispositions, and attitudes associated with persons and/or situations’ (Ochs & Schieffelin 1989: 7, quoted in McEwan-Fujita 2010: 31). Specifically, when I speak about affect in relation to Arabic, I am referring to what Ochs (1996: 410) calls ‘affective stance’, that is ‘a mood, attitude, feeling, and disposition, as well as degrees of emotional intensity vis-à-vis some focus of concern’. The focus of concern in this study is Arabic as well as a sense of Muslimness. Moreover, I follow Webster’s (2010: 187) view that ‘language is affectively charged’, which means that the sounds and the script of a language are experienced in ways that stir/create affects in the individual. In other words, upon hearing Arabic sounds or seeing Arabic script, an individual may experience a feeling or emotional intensity in relation to the Arabic they are witnessing. This, I take as integral to the aesthetic experience of the materiality of Arabic sounds and script.

The materiality of texts is an important aspect of an everyday aesthetics of language. Danet (1997: 6) draws attention to the ‘range of sensuous experience of texts as three-dimensional objects that one can see, touch, hold, manipulate – and even smell’ (*ibid.*). This is ‘particularly critical in the case of religious texts’ (*ibid.*: 11). Danet’s discussion of the practices and ideologies surrounding the materiality of the Torah parallels those associated with the Quran. For example, in both cases, text from the scripture is imbued with special healing and magical properties. Several studies on amulets in Muslim societies show how including certain Quranic verses renders the amulet particularly powerful in warding off evil spirits and in healing the person who wears the amulet (Lambek 1992: 252; McIntosh 2009: 224; Ware 2014: 62; Ventura, Popper-Giveon and Abu Rabia 2014: 34; see also Jappie, 2011: 64-66, for Cape Town Muslim practices).

Importantly, as Keane (2013: 7) explains, ‘writing can be iconic: that is, the very shape of script can itself manifest divine immanence through resemblance’. In Islamic calligraphy, for example, in which constraints are placed on reproducing the forms and figures of creation, calligraphers depict humans and animals in the form of letters (*ibid.*: 8). Bearing this in mind, Arabic calligraphy in Cape Town (Haron 2003; see also Section 2.5), is an invitation to consider how the materiality of Arabic script on everyday objects is indexical of Muslim identity and invokes, through iconicity, the divine presence in writing (on indexicality and iconicity, see Gal & Irvine 2019: 18-21). The relation of iconicity between the visuality of Arabic script and the Quran renders an encounter with Arabic script as an encounter with the divine (Lambek 1995:

265-267; see also Chapter 5). Thus, focusing on the materiality of script offers an interesting frame for exploring the everyday aesthetics of Islamic Arabic among Muslims in Cape Town.

## **2.7| Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the relevant scholarship on the topic of Arabic learners' experiences, locating it in the context of the Muslim community in Cape Town, South Africa. In Section 2.2, I reviewed some of the literature on Classical Arabic as a religious language among Muslims in Cape Town and South Africa more broadly. In Section 2.3, the study was situated within the field of sociocultural linguistics showing the importance of Muslim learners' aesthetic and affective experiences. Following that, Section 2.4 looked at studies of Muslim learners' experiences of Arabic globally, and Section 2.5 reviewed studies of Arabic in South Africa. The main theoretical concepts employed in my analysis were discussed in Section 2.6. The chapter concludes in this section with a summary of the main points discussed.

To summarize, learning Islamic Arabic is important for Muslims in Cape Town. At present, there is a limited understanding of this social practice and its implications for the experience of Muslim Arabic learners. Even though existing research has explored the aesthetics of Islam in Cape Town, little attention has been given to language as a crucial dimension of experience. Indeed, the notion of language as social practice is seldom explored in detail in existing research on Arabic in South Africa.

In this thesis I combine insights from studies on religion, aesthetics, and experience, focusing on the materiality of religious language in terms of Arabic script and sounds in the everyday lives of Muslim learners in Cape Town. I consider the questions of what it means to 'understand' a religious language, and how Islamic Arabic forms part of the repertoire of these language learners. Drawing together the concepts of the poetic function of language and everyday aesthetics to frame my inquiry, I consider how learners' aesthetic responses to Arabic, which are also always affective, inform their lived experiences as Muslims in Cape Town. My reading, and reflection on the literature, has inspired a key question: How do Muslim learners experience Arabic aesthetically and affectively, and what might this reveal about their

referential and non-referential meaning-making practices?<sup>5</sup> This question is what underlines the discussion in the chapters to follow.

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<sup>5</sup> The concepts ‘referential’ and ‘non-referential’ meaning-making are highlighted with reference to Roman Jakobson’s work (1960), discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.6.3, under the heading *The poetic function*. Referential meaning, also known as denotational meaning, refers to language that directly denotes physical or conceptual entities. In contrast, non-referential meaning-making involves the use of language in indexical and iconic ways, reflecting subject positions, cultural symbolism, and other connotations that extend beyond the literal denotation of words.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **3.1| Introduction**

As noted in previous chapters, this ethnographic study explores the experiences of ten Muslim learners in Cape Town with Arabic as a religious language. The research design included three main data collection techniques: field notes, ethnographic interviews, and written, printed, and digital materials collected during the period of fieldwork. The purpose of the study was to explore how Muslim learners engage with Arabic as a religious language – their practices and ideologies – and how Arabic forms part of their linguistic repertoire. This chapter is comprised of eight sections. After the introduction, Section 3.2 discusses the research design and linguistic ethnography as the mode of inquiry. Section 3.3 provides details of the research context. I also introduce the study participants, and describe my relationship with them. In Section 3.4, I discuss my positionality and how this impacted the research study. Section 3.5 details the techniques for collecting data, and Section 3.6 discusses the data analysis process. Finally, in Section 3.7, I examine the ethical considerations at play before and during fieldwork, and while writing this thesis. The chapter is concluded in section 3.8.

### **3.2| The research design**

Inspired by work in sociocultural linguistics and linguistic anthropology that emphasises ‘ethnographies of the particular’ (Abu-Lughod 1993: 28) and ‘the linguistics of particularity’ (Johnstone 2014: 5), I asked how this group of particular individuals experience Arabic in terms of language materiality and aesthetics, as well as the corresponding affective resonances. A linguistic ethnographic approach was woven together with methodological considerations that emerged from my interest in studying the aesthetic experiences of language. Guided by a theory of language materiality that emphasises the aesthetic and corresponding affective dimensions of language (Cavanaugh & Shankar 2017), in what follows, I discuss the tools and techniques that were employed in fieldwork.

The ethnographic approach to researching language and social life is wide-ranging. It acknowledges ‘affect and the body as resources’ that afford analytical insights about fieldwork and implicate the researcher in the research context (Cerwonka & Malkki 2007: 36). It emphasizes a conceptualization of language and society as dynamic and ‘mutually shaping’ (Rampton et al. 2004: 2). Importantly, it requires attending to ‘the definition of language itself’

(Blommaert & Jie 2010: 7) and necessitates cultivating a ‘methodological sensitivity’ (Blackman 2015: 27). These are modes of research that attune to ‘affect, poetics, sound, and sentiment, as well as their underpinning ideologies’ and are necessary when exploring questions about language materiality (Cavanaugh & Shankar 2017: 3), and the lived experiences of language (Kramsch 2009: 52; see also Busch 2017).

### **3.3| The research context**

#### **3.3.1| Location**

This study was done in Cape Town for three main reasons. First, it is my hometown and thus I was able to navigate and conduct the research study with relative ease. Second, the number of Muslims in Cape Town is greater than in other major cities in South Africa. Nearly six percent of Cape Town’s population identify as Muslim (Statistics South Africa 2018: 21), making this city well suited for an examination of Arabic as a religious language among Muslims.<sup>6</sup> And third, the history of Islam and Arabic in Cape Town is rich and well-documented (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5). However, there is still room to explore the current sociolinguistic situation of Arabic among Muslims in Cape Town, making this a suitable location for the research study.

#### **3.3.2| Participants**

I purposively approached the ten Arabic learners because all of them explicitly identified as Muslim and, knowing them personally, I knew their lives were intimately related to Arabic and Islam. The learners were either acquaintances, friends, or family of mine, and were all engaged in studying Arabic prior to and during the fieldwork period. Each of the participants would use Arabic for religious purposes, like praying, using formulaic expressions in everyday speech, and reading aloud set recitations during religious gatherings.

This study focuses on a specific group of Muslim learners who exhibit a strong positive affect toward Arabic, particularly in its religious context (see Appendix C for details). Unlike other Muslim learners who may perceive Arabic as irrelevant or unimportant, the learners in this study express appreciation for learning Classical Arabic, they value its significance and

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<sup>6</sup> The most recent 2011 South African census excluded religion as a ‘low priority’. The 2001 census reported that of the 44.8 million South Africans 1.46% were Muslim (Vahed 2021: 3).

actively engage with it. This highlights the affective dimension and intrinsic motivation present among the participants.

Participants' ages ranged between 22 and 57 years, with two women in their fifties and the rest of the individuals in their twenties. Among the participants seven are female and three are male. Gender was assigned based on the participants' implicit and explicit identification as male or female in social interactions throughout my relationships with them. Two participants were postgraduate students and two were undergraduate students. Of the two older women, one was a clothing factory manager and the other a homemaker. Three participants were primary school teachers, and one participant was an administrative officer. The interview duration ranged between 30 minutes and three hours. Interviews took place in various locations at the University of Cape Town or at the participants' home or workplace.

### **3.4| Positionality**

Arguably the most important principle of ethnography is to recognize that 'the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis' (Merriam & Grenier 2019: 5). In the process of generating data with participants, I was aware of my role as researcher and the effect this had on what kinds of data I was able to acquire, and how I was able to interpret the data. It is important for researchers to ensure that we make explicit the particularities of our research process. To this end, Rampton and colleagues (2004: 2) remark that 'ethnography recognises the ineradicable role that the researcher's personal subjectivity plays throughout the research process'. This includes acknowledgement of how the methodological process we adopt, and the people we are, influences the research we conduct – that is, how it generates specific sets of research contexts, questions, participants, and products. For me, this meant understanding the tools and techniques of ethnography before and during fieldwork while simultaneously learning how the process of gathering this ethnographic information was to become part of my ethnographic account. Moreover, it compels me to make explicit my own subjective experiences with Arabic as these informed the research process throughout.

My own experience of learning Arabic also took place in the context of Cape Town. My personal engagement with Arabic is bound up with its audible and visual materiality. For me, Arabic was not considered on the level of 'a language that I know and can speak' but nevertheless as a language that I used every day when I was a Muslim. There would be

moments in the day where I would call on Arabic to perform religious life, yet back then I often did not have a grasp of what the words actually meant. The pull towards doing this research study was thus borne of my own introspection and investigation into my personal engagement with Arabic. It also emerged from my interactions with Muslims who use Arabic, and the conversations we shared about what Arabic means for them.

I gravitated towards the theories of materiality and aesthetics because those were the concepts that resonated most with my reflections on how I engaged with Arabic, and the affects that the language created for me. To this day, when I hear Arabic, I feel an emotional resonance, feelings of familiarity attached to memories of my childhood and later life experiences. I am affected by the sound of Arabic. When I hear recitations of Quran, it is moving, it makes the tiny hairs on my skin stand on end. When I hear Arabic everything else in the atmosphere gets drowned out by it. When I see Arabic writing I am drawn to it, my attention is pulled to it. With curiosity and an interest to learn more, during my undergraduate studies, I studied Arabic literature to decipher Arabic text and script. The moment of viewing or hearing Arabic is arresting, and this was echoed in many of my participants' narratives when they responded to my questions. Asking people in conversation, they reported that they are constantly drawn to Arabic, so when they see Arabic, their attention goes something like, 'oh, hey! I know that. Let me see what this is all about.' In sum, my experiences and those of my interlocutors were the primary starting point for the research study.

### **3.5| Data collection**

Within a few weeks of starting my fieldwork I decided to focus my attention specifically on my existing networks and relations who were already involved in learning and teaching Arabic. More generally, my fieldwork was guided by work in linguistic anthropology that Cavanaugh and Shankar (2017: 14) suggest shares the imperative of 'attending to features of the material world as informing linguistic practices or emerging from them'. These works take a variety of perspectives; some look at 'language in terms of its sounds, the channels in which it occurs, or its objectifications', others investigate the relation between physical forms and language, and further work explores materiality in the encounter between people and the medium of communication (*ibid.* : 6). Because my research focuses on the materiality and aesthetics of Arabic, and the affects these can create (see also Chapter 2, Section 2.6), I draw on research that aims to grasp these dimensions of experience and I foreground ethnographic methods.

Ethnographic fieldwork practices were informed by my experiences in undergraduate anthropology courses as well as graduate courses in ethnographic methods in linguistics and social anthropology at the University of Cape Town. From these experiences I had been practicing ethnographic methods grounded in a sociocultural approach to studying language and culture (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 586). I attended to material and sensory experiences while observing and participating in Arabic and Islamic studies lessons and while spending time with Arabic learners in their homes and other social spaces. The main observations were focused on any instances of language use (written and spoken in Arabic, English and/or Afrikaans) that formed part of the experiential context.

The data for the study were collected during the period of February to June 2017. I began with observations, noting down how people used Arabic utterances in everyday interactions. Some of my fieldnotes I audio-recorded and later typed up. I took photographs of Arabic writing in everyday contexts in Cape Town, and screenshots of digital instances of Arabic use by the participants. Photographs and screenshots were taken for two purposes. Firstly, to serve as a record of my memory of visiting *madrastas* and people’s homes. And secondly, to document any examples of Arabic used in these spaces or elsewhere. Lastly, I collected written materials such as flyers, pamphlets, plastic bags, and cards with Arabic writing on them. In addition to observing and recording these practices, I asked people about their use of Arabic and recorded this in ethnographic interviews. Nine participants were interviewed once, and one participant (Kashif) was interviewed three times. This was due to time constraints on the participant’s schedule. I discuss the techniques for generating data in more detail below. Table 1 provides an overview of the spoken data that I collected with the consent of participants. Table 2 is a summary of the other materials (depicting Arabic script) that were collected (a full list of these materials is provided in Appendix B).

**Table 1. Interview data generated for the study**

<b>Details of interviewees<sup>7</sup></b>	<b>Location of interview</b>	<b>Duration</b>
Amal (female, aged 22, undergraduate student)	University campus prayer room	1 hour

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<sup>7</sup> All participants were given pseudonyms. The interested reader may wish to see Appendix C: Detailed biographies of the learners for more information about participants.

Kashif (male, aged 29, secondary school teacher)	Café near the <i>madrassa</i> , Salt River (1), Café on university campus, Rondebosch (2), lecture hall on university campus, Rondebosch (3)	2 hours 58 minutes
Umar (male, aged 27, secondary school teacher)	University campus building foyer, Rondebosch	2 hours 4 minutes
Halima (female, aged 57, homemaker)	At her home, Athlone	1 hour
Bushra (female, aged 24, postgraduate student)	Outside & inside university building, Rondebosch	1 hour 8 minutes
Aqilah (female, aged 21, undergraduate student)	Outside university building, Rondebosch	1 hour 23 minutes
Saadiya (female, aged 28, administrative officer)	At her home, Table View	36 minutes
Sameera (female, aged 25, primary school teacher)	At her home, Rylands	41 minutes
Kamila (female, aged 54, clothing factory manager)	At her workplace, Observatory	35 minutes
Laeq (male, aged 26, postgraduate student)	Outside university building, Rondebosch	28 minutes
Interviews: 10 learners (7 female, 3 male)		Total duration: 11 hours and 53 minutes

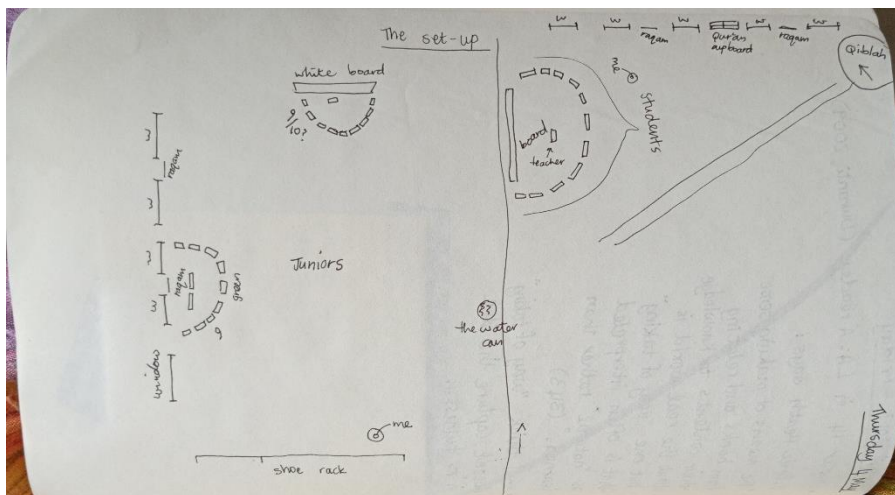
**Table 2. Other materials collected as data for the study**

<b>Data type</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Amount</b>
Posters, flyers, calligraphy artworks - handwritten and	Various locations: in homes, cars, businesses, the university prayer room, the ‘field sites’	33 items

printed, miscellaneous items with Arabic imprinted		
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### 3.5.1| Fieldnotes

As stated above, my fieldnotes mainly consisted of hand-written and digitally typed notes. To get ‘a holistic perspective’ of the setting (Patton 2015: 500), I noted down observations of contexts where Arabic was being taught and practiced by learners. It is important to bear in mind, however, that ‘[f]ieldnotes are a form of representation, that is, a way of reducing just-observed events, persons and places to written accounts’ (Emerson et al. 2001: 353). This reminder keeps in view the constructed nature of research and acknowledges that ethnographic research does not seek to provide an ‘objective’ account of social life. Indeed, many researchers adopt the view that the research context is ‘something we construct, both through the practical transactions and activities of data collection and through the literary activities of writing fieldnotes, analytic memoranda, and the like’ (Atkinson 1992: 5, quoted in Emerson et al. 2001: 354). Even so, or because of this, the fieldnotes provided contextual details for the interview analysis and served as a reminder of the fieldwork conducted for the study. I include some examples of the kinds of hand-written fieldnotes that I created in Figures 1 to 3.



**Figure 1.** Extract from fieldnotes: Classroom set up (at a *madrasa*)

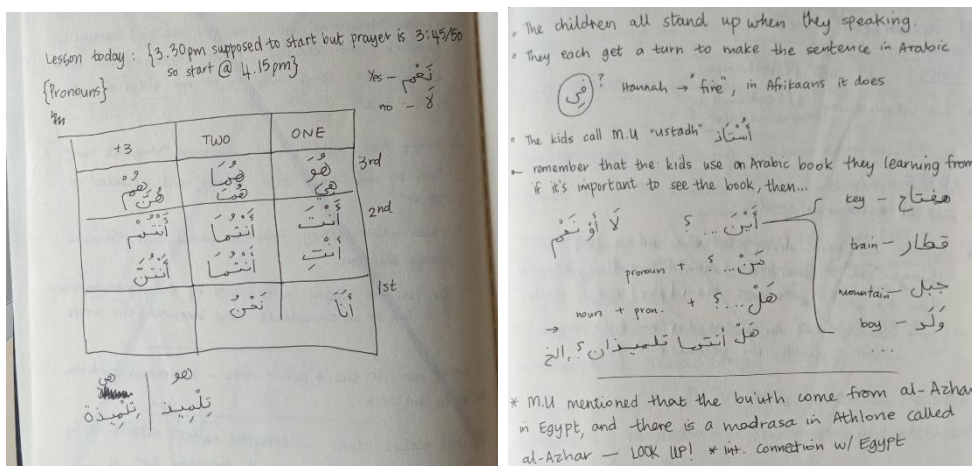


Figure 2. Extract from fieldnotes: The lesson for the day on Arabic pronouns

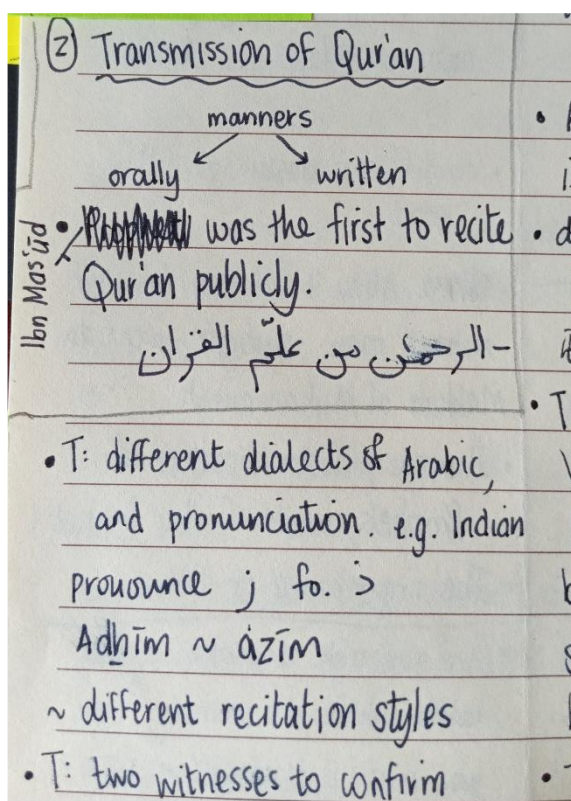


Figure 3. Extract from fieldnotes: Quran lesson notes

### 3.5.2| Ethnographic interviews

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the learners who I invited to participate in interviews were all part of my social network. The interviews were semi-structured, and I had prepared an interview question guide based on my preliminary observations and readings of the literature (see Appendix D: Interview guide). However, the interview was not strictly limited to those

questions, and I was prepared for the conversation to move in a more natural way because ethnographic interviews should ideally resemble conversations more than structured interviews (O'Reilly 2012). Indeed, my previous experience with ethnographic interviews has proven that the best interviews are the ones that feel like conversations, where the interviewer and interviewee are both comfortable and pay little attention to the recording device or to what they are saying. With that in mind, however, I do not equate interviews with ordinary conversations – interactions that are unstructured and unelicited by a research agenda.

I follow Kramsch (2009) in my approach to interviews as data. Kramsch explains her approach to this kind of data – testimonies from learners' journals, discourse completion surveys, oral interviews, transcriptions from classroom discourse, and essays – by clarifying that they are analysed 'like sociolinguistic data within their context of production and reception, taking into account the markers of subjectivity displayed in the discourse and the intertextualities or intersubjectivities that they reveal' (*ibid.*: 6). Importantly, interview narratives 'require new ways of apprehending and accounting for experience—ways...that aim at understanding rather than explanation' (*ibid.*: 5). Thus, with 'understanding' as the intention, I approached interviews as opportunities to learn more about participants' lived experiences of Arabic. The interviews provided the narrative accounts that constitute the main data of this study.

### *The content of the interviews*

Participants commented on their experiences when learning classical Arabic, their perceptions of themselves and others using Arabic, and their perceptions of Arabic in general. For instance, the interview included questions about the way Arabic sounds, the way the Arabic script is written, and how Arabic is used throughout the day in religious and nonreligious contexts. These narratives were transcribed in full, analysed, and will be discussed in the chapters that follow.

For many researchers, semi-structured interviews are interactions that afford a question-and-answer pattern. Simultaneously they allow participants to frame the conversation around those aspects of the topic that they are most interested in, or that they find most relevant to their experience. Nonetheless, interviews begin with questions and due to seeking formal consent there is an air of formality to the event. This means that interviews can inhibit other patterns of interaction. In the interviews, I often found that participants wanted to give a correct answer, and they doubted whether they were the 'right person to be talking to' since they were 'not

experts'. These sentiments were expressed by three participants at the start of their interviews: Halima, Aqilah, and Bushra. Only after I had explained further were they able to remove this idea that they needed to be experts to have something to contribute to the conversation. In contrast, Kashif welcomed the questions and revelled in the fact that he was providing expert knowledge. There is often an expectation that the interviewer is after 'expert knowledge' and that the interviewee needs to provide that knowledge.

### **3.6| Data analysis procedure**

As noted above, the database for analysis comprised of transcriptions of the interviews, fieldnotes, photographs, and literacy artefacts. The interview data were analysed following loosely 'the constant comparative method' (Merriam & Grenier 2019: 43). The authors describe this method as an 'open coding' of interview transcripts for information relevant to research questions. This is followed by 'axial coding'; that is, the coding of the data into themes, and then comparing the results of coding for each interview. Finally, once all interviews are coded and compared to each other, a set of common themes is identified.

I say that I followed this method 'loosely' because my technique departed from the outlined process in a significant way. I was inspired by Maggie MacLure's (2013: 661) critique of qualitative research methodologies, which 'calls into question the very notion of what will count as 'data', and of our relation to those data'. Working within 'a materialist ontology, data cannot be seen as an inert and indifferent mass waiting to be in/formed and calibrated by our analytic acumen or our coding systems. Rather, we are obliged to acknowledge that data have their ways of making themselves intelligible to us' (*ibid.*). Thus, I became attuned to moments where a piece of data became especially interesting to me, what MacLure calls 'the emergence of sense in encounters with data' and moments where the 'data begins to "glow"' (*ibid.*). What I finally arrived at, using this technique of interpretation, was a play between the structured, formulaic procedure of coding transcripts and fieldnotes, and the softness of being receptive in attuning to 'glowing' data.

There were three main stages of the data analysis process: listening with an open curiosity for 'glowing' data, listening again with the purpose of making connections with relevant scholarship, transcribing and final analysis. The procedure was as follows:

Each interview audio file was copied from my mobile phone to my laptop hard drive. I listened to each recording and made notes about moments in the interview that were interesting to me and that resonated with what I had been thinking and reading about at the time. My notes included a time stamp for the moment in the interview as well as a short note about what was discussed and why I found it interesting.

One of the audio recordings has poor sound quality (Kamila), which made it difficult to work with. To compensate for the loss of some parts of the audio, I worked with my fieldnotes taken at the time of the interview as well as those parts of the interview I could hear. This interview was done at Kamila's workplace where there were industrial sewing machines being operated while we were chatting in the adjacent office.

I listened to each interview audio recording again and made notes on comments that resonated with my current thinking on the topic of ideologies, aesthetics, and emotion in relation to Arabic. I also highlighted parts of the interview discourse that were told as narratives as well as those parts that were more interactional. And finally, I noted down uses of Arabic that were embedded within the conversation.

Once the data had been transcribed orthographically, I went through each transcript accompanied by the audio and ensured that everything was indeed transcribed verbatim, and that all Arabic terms were translated/glossed. I also added transcription conventions to represent relevant non-linguistic aspects of speech (see 'Transcription conventions' at the beginning of this dissertation). After editing the transcripts and preparing them in Microsoft Word format, I conducted a thematic analysis of the interviews, using broad codes that were informed by the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter. That is, I used codes such as 'materiality' and 'aesthetics', and the affective responses to these. In other words, I highlighted parts of the interview transcripts and marked them with codes that were broadly resonant with these concepts and the conceptual framework.

The following are the aspects of the interview data I analyse in the subsequent chapters:

- narratives of participants' language experiences
- evaluative expressions in participants' responses

When visiting people at their homes and work and study places, or communicating with them digitally, I collected various print and digital media that displayed Arabic script. I also photographed several instances of Arabic script I encountered. The images were analysed in the same way as the interviews – by simultaneously coding them according to themes as well as viewing them with an openness and curiosity that allowed for any interesting ideas to ‘glow’.

My fieldnotes served as a supplement to the interviews and images of Arabic script. The fieldnotes were consulted throughout the writing process even though no direct quotes were used. My notes thus provided contextual details for the interview analysis and served as a reminder of the fieldwork conducted for the study.

### **3.7| Ethics**

I received ethics clearance from the Linguistics Section at the University of Cape Town (UCT) to undertake this fieldwork. Following this, I obtained permission through formal consent from all participants who agreed to be involved in this study. Consent was recorded verbally and via the consent form created by the UCT Faculty of Humanities which I adapted to suit this study (see Appendix E).

The main ethical concern that I had was that I do not misrepresent participants in the writing up stage of the study. To address this concern, I closely read the literature on the politics of representation in ethnographic texts (such as Clifford & Marcus 1986; Fabian 1983; Hammersley 1991). Paying attention to the way in which our writing as researchers can potentially cause harm to research participants is vital to maintain the integrity of research practice not only individually but as part of a larger scholarly community.

Other considerations were:

- (a) To ensure that participants did not experience harm of any kind (such as emotional or psychological harm) due to the research activities; that they know that they can withdraw from the project at any time; and that they do not feel pressurized in any way to take part in the research;

- (b) To ensure that the identity of participants is protected so that they may not be identified as having participated in the project. Thus, all participants and individuals they mention are referred to by a pseudonym;
- (c) To ensure that participants have access to the research product (the dissertation) and other forms of research dissemination, I will notify them of the availability of the thesis and how to access it on OpenUCT library portal, or if they wish, to have it sent directly to them;
- (d) To ensure that participants are aware of my research activities at each stage of the research project especially where they are directly involved.

### **3.8| Conclusion**

To conclude, this chapter presented my approach to linguistic ethnographic fieldwork (Section 3.2). In Section 3.3 I provided details of the research location and participants, and Section 3.4 reflected on my positionality as the researcher. Section 3.5 outlined the tools for collecting data as well as the techniques of interpretation and analysis accompanying them. I also commented on how I recorded observations in fieldnotes, conducted interviews, took photographs, and collected other materials. Section 3.6 discussed how my analysis was influenced by two different approaches – one based on the constant comparative method and the other based on post-qualitative reflections on data analysis. My technique for interpreting the data blended the structured procedure of coding and comparing transcripts with attuning to ‘glowing’ data (MacLure 2013: 661). The data I analyse in this thesis are participants’ narratives of their experiences, my fieldnotes and personal experiences, and Arabic script in various print and digital media. Lastly, Section 3.7 I discussed the ethical considerations attended to in this study.

In the next two chapters, I offer an account of Muslim learners’ experiences of classical Arabic and its audible and visual materiality in their lives. The chapters also explore the ideological processes involved in learners’ non-referential meaning-making with Arabic and how this relates to Muslimness in Cape Town. Importantly, the focus is on the materiality and aesthetics of Arabic sounds and script as well as their associated affective resonances.

## Chapter Four: Learners' Experiences of Arabic Sounds

### 4.1| Introduction

The *Surah Fatihah* is usually the first Quranic Arabic text that Muslims learn to recite and memorise.<sup>8</sup> It is recited during several religious practices such as the daily prayers (*salaah*), supplications (*du'ah*), during Friday sermons (*khutbah*), and at every religious gathering. Listening to Quranic recitations is a primary way that Muslims engage with Arabic in daily life; listening either to a *qari* ('one who recites the Quran') in the mosque, or on the radio, or on audio recordings. These recitations are invariably done with the required *tajweed* pronunciation (discussed further in Section 4.3 below) and constitute the ideal recitation to be modelled by learners (Nelson 1985: 52). Because their exposure to Arabic is predominantly within the context of religious life, learners' lived experiences of Arabic are infused with Islamic ideologies of Arabic (Suleiman 2012: 202-210). In this chapter, I focus on learners' discourses of Arabic and the ideological work involved in how they make sense of their and others' language practices.

The question addressed in this chapter is: What are the discourses that Muslim learners' share about their lived experiences of Arabic, specifically, how do they discuss their Arabic practices and their beliefs, or ideologies, of Arabic? This has consequences for our understanding of how Arabic exists in Muslim learners' linguistic repertoires. Answering this question may further inform our understanding of the ways in which Muslim learners draw on their knowledge of Arabic in meaning-making practices and how these practices shape, and are shaped by, their cultivation of Muslimness. In Section 4.2, I discuss Muslimness as at once a religious and social identity that is informed by aesthetic and affective orientations to Arabic sonic materiality. Two aspects of Muslim identity are foregrounded, namely, intimacy and piety, and these are discussed in relation to the semiotic processes of indexicality and iconicity. Section 4.3 explores two dominant ideologies of Arabic, sacredness and correctness, focusing on how these are articulated by Muslim learners. The discussion begins with outlining these commonly held ideologies and moves on to showing how these manifest in learners' aesthetic experiences of Arabic sounds. Section 4.4 concludes the chapter.

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<sup>8</sup> Translated as 'The Opening', more information on this chapter is available here: <https://quran.com/surah/1/info> and listen to a recitation of this chapter here: <https://quran.com/en/al-fatihah>.

## 4.2| Muslimness: Religion as part of the social world

This section describes the way that the term ‘Muslimness’ is used in my analysis of learners’ discourses. Scholarship in the field of linguistic anthropology, has noted that people draw on ideological resources in their construction of social identities (Kroskrity 2022: 102). Forms of social organisation such as religious communities are based on shared religious beliefs and practices which, in turn, are ideologically mediated. This is also the case for Muslim communities. The term ‘Muslimness’ captures a shared Islamic identity and community; that is, an ‘individual and collective sensory experience’, and ‘shared social meanings, heritage, and memory’ (Alhourani 2018: 188). Following Woodhead (2011), I do not make a distinction between religious and social: I see ‘religion as social relations’ (Woodhead 2011: 130) and ‘religion as identity’ (*ibid.*: 127). This conceptualisation accounts for the way religion is an inextricable part of society, and our relations with one another (Agbiji & Swart 2015: 2).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Chidester (2017: 74) claims that: ‘materiality – embodiment and the senses, objects and their social lives, exchange and power relations...and all the forces and fluctuations in the production, circulation, and consumption of things’, are to be considered ‘the stuff of religion’. Similarly, Mbiti (1970: 2) states that for Africans, ‘traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life’. Thus, in this thesis religion and society are engaged holistically and are not differentiated (see also Asad 1993). Since Arabic is strongly associated with Islam in Cape Town, in what follows, I interpret ideologies of Arabic as also connecting to notions of Muslimness.

In the following discussion, two aspects of Muslim identity that are specific to learners’ Arabic language experiences are foregrounded. The first concerns intimacy; that is, the level of closeness that is created between interlocutors through practices of relationality and communal being in which Arabic features prominently. The second focuses on piety (religiosity); that is, the fact that using Arabic is essential in observing the Islamic practices that form part of being and becoming Muslim.

### 4.2.1| Intimacy: Indexicality

One way to approach the relation between Arabic and Muslim identity is with Jaffe’s (2016) conceptualisation of indexicality. Drawing on Peircean semiotics, Jaffe defines indexes as signs

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<sup>9</sup> See further, Durkheim’s ‘Elementary Forms of Religious Life’ (2001[1912]: 10.

that ‘point *to* aspects of the social world and point *from* socially situated vantage points’ (*ibid.*: 88 original emphasis). In this context indexicalities are created through processes of socialisation that are ideologically mediated. Through patterns of use, language users learn to assign indexical meanings to linguistic forms. In the case of Muslim learners, there exists an established indexical association between Arabic sounds/script and Muslimness. The relation between Arabic and Muslimness becomes an interesting site of ideological work in a context where Arabic is not a spoken language but a liturgical one (Rosowsky 2008, 2023). For example, Arabic social indexicality may be drawn upon strategically to establish intimacy and community (Alhourani 2015, 2018). In the context of Cape Town, whether a person is Muslim or not, the use of Arabic words and phrases in everyday conversations are seen as indexing Islamic identity; thereby establishing commonalities and thus relations of closeness/intimacy between interlocutors. This is in addition to styles of dress, local cuisine, and other cultural materialities, all of which serve as indexes of Muslimness in the local context (Deumert & Ribbens-Klein 2012).

In the following excerpt, Umar (male, twenties) reflects on the fact that his knowledge of little bits of Arabic – what he calls ‘baby talking Arabic’ – allows him to be recognised by other Arabic speakers (on ‘bits of language’, see also Blommaert & Backus 2013: 19). He remembers an incident where he was with an acquaintance he met in Sudan, and they attended a religious gathering together.

We went to *maqam*<sup>10</sup>, we went to *ghadat* there, and really amazing, like being a part of a Sufi order, yay. But we went there, and he couldn’t speak English and I couldn’t, and I was like baby talking Arabic. Weirdest experience! I’m like, no it was such a hectic experience! Because you realise, how do you- [...] how can I communicate with this person? How can I actually say what I want to say? And I couldn’t! And so that’s when- in these moments you realise, ah shit, the importance of language. The importance of knowing workable languages in order to say what you need to say to people. But even when you’re saying- in

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<sup>10</sup> Literally, “place, location, or position”. In this instance it means “shrine”, the tomb of a Muslim saint. It can also refer to the ritual gathering known as *dhikr*, where Muslims perform prayers, chant, sing poetry and praises for the Muslim saint(s), their predecessors, and the prophet. As Umar mentions next, this is called *ghadat* [خَادَات] in Cape Town. A local pronunciation of the Arabic word *haddād*, in the name *Ratib al-haddād*, see also Jeppie (2018).

doing that [uttering Arabic religious expressions], it's making those connections with those people. And so when people who are Arab, know that you, as a non-Arab, speak this language- it's like, [he snapped his fingers] 'ah, you're one of us!' type of thing. And so this sense of belonging.

Because of its associations with Islamic culture (Suleiman 2012), with which Muslim learners align themselves, Arabic exists within a broader spatio-temporal Muslim context, established through means of shared Islamic ideologies and practices. Thus, Arabic resonates with the meanings that stabilise these connections within historical and contemporary global Muslim communities (Alhourani 2015).

Later in the interview, Umar drew on the metaphor of moving in and out of a house to conceptualise his relationship with Arabic:

So again, it's moving from the one space, into the house, and then being a part of it but still being able to opt out. But even though you're moving in, sometimes you're invited in, because people find out, 'ah, you know Arabic, that's amazing, let's like-' So there's that connection that is created.

Using Arabic religious expressions is a way that Muslims may find acceptance and belonging in relation with fellow Muslims. Moreover, Muslims celebrate their shared linguistic knowledge of Arabic expressions and welcome moments in which they can delight, individually as well as collectively, in the sonic atmosphere of Islamic Arabic. This shows a shared attachment to Arabic that creates intimacy among Muslims in which Arabic indexicality is central.

#### **4.2.2| Piety: iconicity**

Gal and Irvine (2019: 18) suggest that 'indexical and iconic signs operate together'. Following Peircean semiotics, they define icons as 'signs that depict what they represent by some kind of similarity with it' (*ibid.*). They further explain that in relations of iconicity, ideological work involves people equating the qualities of a sign with the qualities of those who typically produce it (see also Bennett 2018: 81). Especially relevant for my discussion is Webster's (2010) use of the concept 'feelingful iconicity' since it captures the aesthetic-emotional connection that learners experience with the sounds of Quranic Arabic (see also Bassetti 2023:

5). Webster (2010: 203) explains that people take pleasure in the use of specific linguistic forms and build ‘felt attachments to aesthetic forms’ of language. Elaborating further, Webster writes:

‘language is pleasurable and sensuous. This is because individuals create language through use, and such uses create felt attachments to linguistic forms ... if reference is meaningful, then iconicity is certainly feelingful’ (*ibid.*: 204).

Similarly, Alhourani (2015: 106) argues that the use of religious Arabic phrases ‘stimulate[s] collective engagement...and reveal[s] the [Muslim] community’s commonality and collective attachment to a shared sacredness’. For Muslim learners, Arabic sounds are strongly linked to Muslimness, and the poetic function of Arabic frequently transcends the referential function, thereby cultivating a particular Islamic atmosphere (Eisenlohr 2018). In other words, for learners, the use of Islamic Arabic in speech represents being Muslim through Arabic sounds.

Mahmood’s (2005) work has been useful for my analysis of piety in Muslim learners’ discourses. She explores the concept of piety in terms of ‘social practices, and forms of bodily comportment considered germane to the cultivation of the ideal virtuous self’ (Mahmood 2005: 2). Further, she elaborates that piety (*da’wa*) in the Egyptian women’s mosque movement manifests as ‘styles of dress and speech’ (*ibid.*: 4). I draw on Mahmood’s writing on piety specifically as it relates to ‘styles of speech’ and interactions between individuals, since there are parallels with the kinds of ideological processes I analyse.

Following Kuipers (2013), I use the term ‘linguistic piety’ to describe the process whereby Muslim learners encounter the persona of an ideal pious Muslim through sociolinguistic practices in which the sounds of Arabic iconically represent the essence of Muslimness. Kuipers notes that ‘Qur’anic Arabic is crucial to this communicative system of piety’ in Islamic Java (*ibid.*: 2), and the use of Arabic in verbal practices signals piety to individuals (*ibid.*: 3). In Indonesia, knowledge of Quranic Arabic indicates authoritative religious knowledge (2013: 6), and having an Arabic name is a sign of closeness to Islam (*ibid.*: 11; see also Kuipers & Askuri 2017: 31). Further, ‘the more definite and specific the Arabic language use, the more marked as pious it is’ (Kuipers 2013: 18). Several parallels are found with Kuipers’ work and my analyses in this study, reminding us ‘that language is not purely an abstract system’ (Webster 2010: 202), but part of countless processes of referential and non-referential meaning-making in which individuals are constantly engaged.

Muslim learners' discourses reveal the ways in which the sounds of Arabic express the beauty and piety that learners attribute to the individuals they discuss. If the articulation of Arabic sounds is deemed aesthetically pleasing and close to God, then the people who articulate those sounds are also beautiful and close to God. The ideological work involves knowledge of *tajweed*; that is, correctness in pronunciation (which is at the centre of *tajweed*) is equated with the qualities of the people who typically produce them. In this way, linguistic forms become 'icons of identity' (Webster 2010: 187). Language is affectively charged, and people build 'feelingful' bonds with linguistic forms (*ibid.*: 188).

In the following excerpt, Kashif (male, twenties) discussed the pronunciation of a religious leader, Shaykh, whose character he admires and whom he deems to be a beautiful person. He also mentioned the slow and proper pronunciation of another Arabic teacher, Moulana, with great appreciation.<sup>11</sup> The following is an extract from our conversation:

Kashif: I heard Shaykh speaking in Arabic, and that just sounded beautiful. I don't know if it's because I know him to just be a beautiful person, like his character, and the way he recites, and then when he spoke Arabic, it was something else.

Fatima: What Arabic did he speak?

Kashif: He spoke *fusha*<sup>12</sup> [fʊsʰħa:]. And then I heard Moulana, he also taught us in Arabic, and his Arabic is also- See, his pronunciation is proper and- but then again, he was also speaking slow.

Halima (female, fifties) also remarked on the beauty of Arabic sounds when discussing Quran recitation. This is an extract from the interview conversation:

Halima: In Ramadan, when they go to *taraweeh*, that is the night prayer, optional prayer during Ramadan where the Muslims all fast and that, and uh,

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<sup>11</sup> The terms *shaykh* (religious leader) and *moulana* (respected scholar) are titles, not proper names. They precede names as marks of respect, e.g., *Shaykh Abdurahman*, where *Shaykh* is the title and *Abdurahman* the name. In this example, I use these titles alone to refer to specific individuals, similar to pseudonyms.

<sup>12</sup> *Fusha*, 'literary Arabic' refers to both Classical and Modern Standard Arabic (Suleiman 2012). It is pronounced as two syllables with two middle consonants: [fʊsʰħa:]

then we stand in prayer for about what two hours and when the *imam* or the people, the *hufadh* [memorizers of Quran], when they read the Quran it's like they- we can understand it, but we don't fully understand it, but we feel it more, and then sometimes when you get to certain verses then you just cry!

Fatima: why do you think that?

Halima: I dunno what is it, maybe Allah [God] created us like that but it's not only me I find it with a lot of people, and um, because some of them [the reciters] read in a very melodious voice, it's just beautiful.

In the excerpts from Kashif and Halima they both discuss instances of Arabic sounding 'beautiful'. Interestingly, the people they are discussing, religious leaders (*shaykh*, *moulana*, *imam*) and memorizers of the Quran (*hufadh*), are considered highly devoted pious Muslims. In addition to their habits and daily ritual performances of Islam, these individuals' Arabic pronunciation and their pious character – their Muslimness – are equated and the sounds of Arabic thus become iconic signs. Their aesthetic pronunciations of Arabic are representative of their piety, and their Muslimness simultaneously evokes positive aesthetic and affective responses to their pronunciation of Arabic. As Halima noted: 'we feel it ... when you get to certain verses then you just cry!'

### **4.3| Ideologies of Arabic**

This section discusses traditional and contemporary ideologies of Arabic in relation to the ideological work of cultivating Muslimness. Following Kroskity (2010: 192), I define language ideologies as 'the beliefs, feelings, and conceptions about language structure and use that often index the political economic interests of individual speakers, ethnic or other interest groups, and nation-states'. The language ideologies of the learners I spoke with are influenced by traditional Islamic scholars and Arab grammarians as well as by the contemporary practices of Arabic learners themselves. As Gal and Irvine (2019: 167) note, ideologies are not fixed but processual, emerging through social activities. Thus, all social activities may be seen as 'sites of ideological work' (*ibid.*: 170). Muslim learners engage in performing and listening to Quran recitations as an everyday activity, and it is one instance where the ideologies emerge and solidify.

#### 4.3.1| Sacredness and correctness in ideologies of Arabic

The Muslim learners, who were part of this study, discussed notions of Arabic that are informed by historical and contemporary views of Arabic as the language of Islam. This idea of Arabic as sacred originates with the emergence of the Quran as a revelation from God, ‘and the recognition of its language as the Word of God (*kalaam allah*)’ (Haeri 2003: 1). At present, this view of Arabic endures with Muslims globally and continues to be a source of religious inspiration. For the learners in this study, Arabic is a sacred language that inscribes their lived experiences as Muslims. Since all Islamic religious practices are infused with the sounds and script of Arabic, Muslims are inspired to learn and use Arabic daily (Haron 1998: 68). However, as learners become exposed to more contexts of Arabic use, their ideologies of Arabic may expand. This is evident in the following interview extract from Samira (female, twenties), who understood the sacredness of Arabic growing up, and was later exposed to the everyday and colloquial use of Arabic in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

I don't think I was brought up with the fact that Arabic is sacred, just as a language itself. But I think it just comes naturally. ‘Cos the only Arabic you know is sacred Arabic. So, like, I appreciate the respect that people have for Arabic because it's a sacred language but then you need to remind yourself it's just a language it's not, like, you know? So, like, if I think of when we went to the UAE, and we were walking outside the one night. It was like one of the first nights that we were there. And there was this car that drove past, but this car was playing music loud, but it was Arabic music! And I was like [gasps] ‘oh my word! how can you be playing Arabic music?’ [laughs] like so loud on top! Like it was loud! Loud music! And I couldn't believe it. ‘Cos for me Arabic was Quran, and I was like, ‘how can you do that?’ Like, ‘how, why, would you disrespect the language like that?’ But then I came to realize it's a language; [laughs] it's not- he wasn't- and even if he was playing Quran now then it's fine. But I mean, it's just a language you know? So, I came to realize after that, that look, it's not sacred in and of itself. It's because of Quran that it's become sacred. So, it's like, depending on context and things.

While all learners identified Arabic as sacred, only few had encounters with other (more secular) uses of Arabic. Unlike Sameera, few learners had travelled outside of South Africa

(but see Umar’s narrative in Section 4.2.1), and local encounters with Arabs were rare (for example, Amal’s account in Section 4.3.2). This dearth of secular/nonreligious encounters with Arabic was a common experience for participants. However, they found that acknowledging the sacredness of Arabic amplified its beauty. After all, sacred languages are ‘extolled by devotees for their beauty, grandeur, and precision compared to everyday spoken languages’ (Bennett 2023: 26). Participants used phrases such as ‘Arabic was created and chosen by Allah’ (Amal), ‘the original language’ (Aqilah), and ‘Allah’s words’ (Halima). The participants thus not only celebrated the aesthetics of sacred Arabic but also affirmed the relation between Arabic and the divine.

Arising from its sacredness, most Muslims tend to have a purist view of Arabic. The idea is that Arabic should be pronounced accurately and anyone who makes mistakes in pronouncing the sounds of Arabic should be corrected. This ideology of correctness and purity in Arabic sounds and script is instilled in learners throughout their lives. *Al-lughat al-‘arabiyyat al-fuṣḥā* or simply *fuṣḥā* /'fosḥa:/ is the Arabic name for Classical Arabic, literally translated as ‘the eloquent Arabic language’. The descriptor *fuṣḥā* is derived from the root *faṣāḥa*, which denotes the concepts ‘pure’, ‘correct’, and ‘eloquent’ (Suleiman 2012:203). The ideology of correctness and purity was fundamental to the standardization process employed by Arab grammarians in the first four centuries of Islam. In the records of early Muslim society, there are traditions attributed to the prophet of Islam which emphasize the importance of accurate and eloquent speech and recitation (*ibid.*: 204). The prophet is reported as having made explicit injunctions on Muslims to recite Quran with the correct *i’rāb*, ‘desinential inflection’; that is, the pronunciation of word-final inflections.<sup>13</sup> This is an important element of *tajweed* – the correct pronunciation of Arabic – and it highlights an ethical as well as spiritual orientation to the sounds of Arabic. Thus, Suleiman’s (*ibid.*) reading of the historical Islamic literature identifies numerous reports that link ‘linguistic purity, correct speech, and morality in society’. He sums this up highlighting the ‘Prophetic notion that incorrect speech represents a deviation from the “right path”’ (*ibid.*: 205).

Learning to recite the Quran with *tajweed*, and without the need to comprehend the referential meaning of the text – is deemed valuable in itself. Recitation with *tajweed* involves “accurate

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<sup>13</sup> In Arabic grammar, this refers to vowel endings or short vowels added to the end of a base morpheme to indicate nominative, genitive, or accusative case.

pronunciation, fluency in blending and combining syllables into words and then into phrases and verses, followed by acquiring the conventions for recitation in an artful and melodious manner” (Rosowsky 2019: 3; Coombes 2013: 8; see also Moore 2006: 120). It is widely held that *tajweed* is the codified sound of the Quran as it was divinely revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (Nelson 1985: 14).

The science of *tajweed* was established in the tenth century (about 300 years after the establishment of the first Muslim community) and there are several key texts from this period onward that detail the methods of *tajweed* (Jarrar 2017: 21). All learners that I spoke to have a solid understanding of the notion that *tajweed* is a set of rules for the correct pronunciation of Arabic sounds. More specifically, learners understood that people who have studied Quran recitation are more likely to have the correct pronunciations of Arabic. In the following excerpt, Kashif expressed this view succinctly. He noted that those who learn *tajweed* can pronounce Arabic sounds properly, and those who have not learned *tajweed* rules often make errors in pronunciation. He commented:

I think maybe, I don't know if we can make this distinction or not, but what I've realised is that people who have studied Quran and *tajweed*, the way they speak Arabic, is much different to the person who hasn't studied Quran or cannot recite properly Quran, and doesn't know the rules of *tajweed* and how to pronounce words and letters and how to form the letters and stuff.

Laeq (male, twenties) expressed a similar view when I asked him about what makes Arabic sound beautiful. He commented:

I don't know, I think [...] if you study the language, it's kind of like [...] things that's built into the language that makes it sound- like certain rules change to make things sound a bit better, so maybe that [studying the language incl. *tajweed*] has a sort of, something to do with it [the pleasant sound of Arabic].

In this excerpt, Laeq mentioned how Arabic sounds better when the rules for pronunciation are applied. He also noted that it was ‘built into the language’, that correctness, and consequently the pleasant sounds, is an intrinsic quality of Arabic. Because of its sacredness, learners adopted a purist ideology of Arabic, emphasizing *tajweed* pronunciation. Within this

view, accurate articulation of Arabic sounds is essential, and those who mispronounce them are expected to be corrected.

**TAJWEED WORKSHOP: SATURDAYS 14TH OCT TO 2ND DEC 2017 – 11.15AM TO 1PM [TW4]**

■ Courses 4th Term 2017

*In the name of Allah. Most Gracious. Most Merciful*

**The Learn Quran Foundation**  
*Presents*

**TAJWEED WORKSHOP**

**WHAT IS TAJWEED?**  
The word “Tajweed” means to improve, make better.

Tajweed of the Holy Qur’an is the knowledge and application of the rules of recitation so the reading of the Qur’an is as the Prophet Mohammed peace and blessings be upon him, recited.

*“He who is skillful in reciting the Qur’an is with the unveiled, honorable, and pious. And he who stutters when reading the Qur’an, (and its recitation) is difficult upon him, will receive two rewards.” (Al-Bukhari)*

Gain in-depth knowledge about the rules of Tajweed; learn the attributes of the Quran sounds; when you should stretch vowels and when you should not; Where you may stop reading And where you may not; and much more.

This workshop is your chance to learn and practice correct recitation of the Holy Qur’an. *In sha Allah*

**Figure 4.** A screenshot of a digital poster advertising a *tajweed* workshop in Cape Town 2017.

The relationship between correct (*tajweed*) pronunciations and Arabic sacredness is exemplified in the following analysis. In 2017, I came across a digital poster (Figure 4) advertising a *Tajweed* workshop in Cape Town. The poster appeared on the Cape Town Muslim Events website (<https://ctme.co.za>). The workshop presumably drew interest from numerous Muslims in Cape Town because it is still offered at present with the most recent workshop

advertisement including several testimonials from attendees.<sup>14</sup> For these students, the workshop served as an important part of their spiritual journey because they learned, or relearned, how to read the Arabic Quran and deepen their faith. One student described their experience saying that they not only learned ‘important Arabic language rules, but to love the Holy Quran.’ Thus, in addition to their religious importance, correct pronunciations were deemed aesthetically pleasing while incorrect pronunciations were not. Indeed, they were a source of frustration, embarrassment, and disapproval for some learners. Thus, socialised within *tajweed* lessons, the ideology regarding correct pronunciations of Arabic informs most learners’ aesthetic orientations to Arabic sounds.

#### 4.3.2| Aesthetics of correctness in learners’ experiences of Arabic sounds

Among learners daily engaged in the recitation of the Arabic Quran, the qualities of sounds involved in the production and reception of Arabic are strongly emphasized. Studies of Quranic literacy have shown that the practice of ‘correcting’ takes special significance in the context of the *madrasa* (Moore 2006: 116-117). In a study which focuses on Quranic schooling for Muslim girls in Cape Town, Coombes (2013: 43) observes as follows: “‘correcting’ is performed by both the student and teacher (or principal) in face-to-face interaction and includes identifying the vowels or *harakat* and accurately producing the vowel sounds’. Through the repeated correction of errors in pronunciation, students are socialised into orienting to the ‘correct’ qualities of Arabic sounds. Thus, the ideology of correctness is part of Arabic language socialization in Quranic schools.

Halima spoke about her experience of learning the pronunciation of the verses of *surah Fatihah* when she was younger. The conversation centred around her memory of a lesson with her *tajweed* teacher. She said: ‘he concentrated on the errors that we made’. The emphasis on errors in the pronunciation of Quranic Arabic draws the attention of learners to the subtle qualities of Arabic sounds, it signals that the correct pronunciation of Arabic sounds – especially Quran – is infused with ethical and spiritual value. The following is an excerpt from the interview.

Like, for instance, I’ll give you an example. When for instance you read *surat-ul-fatiha*, that is the example when they say *bismillahi-rahmani-rahim*

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<sup>14</sup> <https://ctme.co.za/quran-reading-for-beginners/> [Accessed: January 2025]

[ˈbɪsmɪlɑːhɪrːɑħmɑːnɪrːɑħiːm] [in the name of God, the most Gracious, the most Merciful]. Then, okay, we’ll say *alḥamdulillah* [ˈʌħʌmdʊlɪlɑː] [all praises be to God]. Some people [say] *alḡhamdurillahi rabbi* [ˈʌlχʌmdʊrɪlɑːhɪ. rʌbːɪ] [all praises be to God. Lord-]. Where it is *alḥamdulillahi-rabbil ‘ālamīn ar-rahmāni-rahīm* [ˈʌħʌmdʊlɪlɑːhɪ. rabːɪl. ʕʌːlʌmiːn. ˈʌrːɑħmɑːnɪrːɑħiːm] [all praises be to God. Lord of the worlds], they will read *ar-rahmāni-rahīm mālikī-yaumi-* [ˈʌrːɑχmɑːnɪrːɑχɪːm. ˈmɑːlikɪjəʊmɪ] [the most Gracious, the most Merciful. Master of the Day-], like, flat and there is so many mistakes in- not even in a full sentence!

The excerpt illustrates the ideology of correctness in relation to reciting Quranic Arabic in the verses of *Surah Fatihah*. Halima provided the correct pronunciation and then contrasted it with the incorrect pronunciations by highlighting the errors in the articulation of particular sounds. Halima noted the mispronunciation of the Arabic voiceless consonant /h/ [ħ]. When uttering the names of God, *rahmān* [raħmɑːn] (‘Most Gracious’), and *rahīm* [raħiːm] (‘Most Merciful’), the sound /ah/ is correctly pronounced as [aħ], and then the incorrect (local) pronunciation is [ʌχ].<sup>15</sup> She also demonstrated the incorrect pronunciation of the consonant [l] in the phrase *alḥamdulillah*, substituting [r] for [l]. Instead of /lillah/ some people incorrectly pronounce it as /rillah/.<sup>16</sup> She described the mispronounced sounds as ‘flat’ and remarked that ‘some people’ recite these verses with ‘so many mistakes in [them]’. This comment is reflective of the view that there is a correct way to voice the Arabic sounds. Further, in our discussion she stated that ‘a lot of people don’t pronounce the Arabic properly, and that can become very painful because it’s Allah’s words [...] if for instance you say a word and you don’t pronounce it properly, then it can give a different meaning’. This reflects an ideology of correct pronunciation in relation to Arabic as a sacred language. Moreover, by illustrating correct and incorrect pronunciations of Arabic sounds, Halima positioned herself as knowledgeable of *tajweed* and of the moral and spiritual implications thereof.

Akin to Halima’s observations, Aqilah (female, twenties) discussed *tajweed* in relation to the pronunciation of sounds in Arabic proper names. She commented in the interview:

<sup>15</sup> The names *Rahman* (‘Most Gracious’) and *Rahim* (‘Most Merciful’) are two of the 99 names of God that appear in the Quran (see further Alturki 2021: 57).

<sup>16</sup> The phrase *alḥamdulillah* is translated as ‘all praises be to God’. *Alhamdu-* means ‘all praises’, *li-* means ‘to’, and *-llah* [*Allah*] means ‘God’.

If you just think of how we don't actually say our names properly. Like, *Amaarah*, we say *Amaarah* [ʌmʌ:rʌ], but it's actually *Amaarah* [ʌmʌ:rʌ]. Or, you know, something like that. You're supposed to say it there with *tajweed* now in that sense. And *Aqilah*, my name, has a 'ayn in it, you see?'<sup>17</sup>

This extension of the rules of *tajweed* from Quran recitations to other contexts such as proper names is another instance in which the importance of correct pronunciation is evoked. Aqilah remarked that 'we don't actually say our names properly'. In this case, Aqilah applied the rules of *tajweed* to the pronunciation of proper names like *Amaarah* and *Aqilah*. Each of the names has a certain sound that is voiced with particular emphasis according to *tajweed* rules. With the name *Amaarah*, the sound that is emphasised is /ra/ and, according to *tajweed* rules, it is voiced with a high back vowel and slight rounding [rʌ]. Aqilah noted that people do not do this and usually pronounce this sound with a front vowel [rʌ]. Similarly, she used her own name as a second example. Her actual name and the pseudonym I use here both have the same initial letter. The name *Aqilah* has the letter /'ayn/ in the initial position. ʕ /'ayn/ is one of the emphatic letters in Arabic and, like /ra/, when voiced (either pharyngeal [ʕ] or epiglottal [ʕ̤]) is salient and indexes knowledge of Arabic and Muslimness.

In our interview, Amal (female, twenties) spoke about an instance where she was surprised that her cousin's Arabic name was pronounced incorrectly by an Egyptian Arabic speaker. She commented:

There was one Egyptian man who used to come and sell things at our aunt's house, and my cousin's name is *Kauthar* [kəuθʌr], but he would call her *Kausar* [kaʊsʌr], which I found really strange, because *Kauthar* is in the Quran. But it's really, it's a little bit kind of funny, ja.

These examples show how learners draw on their knowledge of *tajweed* rules and Quran recitation and apply it when evaluating practices in which Arabic sounds are vocalised. In their discussion of these practices, they view the rules of *tajweed* as important in the articulation of Arabic sounds when reciting *surah Fatihah* (Quran) and when saying Arabic proper names.

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<sup>17</sup> Both the actual name and the pseudonym for this participant have the letter 'ayn in the initial position.

This resonates with the analysis of liturgical literacy by Coombes (2013:43) in which accurate and melodious pronunciation (*tajweed*) of Arabic as a sacred language is paramount, and correctly vocalising Quranic Arabic is a moral obligation. This also has consequences for learners' lived experiences of Arabic. As they make sense of the Arabic language practices they engage in, they are orienting to the sounds of Arabic in terms of dispositions informed by an ideology of correctness that aligns with their being Muslim, and this has ethical and spiritual implications. Articulating the sounds correctly is a crucial aspect of their cultivation of Muslimness.

In some cases, however, Muslim learners' use of Arabic is interpreted as more secular and when this happens different rules apply. For example, when a Muslim greets, expresses thanks, or utters proper names in Arabic, their language use is rendered as religious in some cases and non-religious/everyday in others. Therefore, not all instances of Arabic use are up for correcting, and this leads to careful shifts in the way learners orient to and experience Arabic in everyday life.

Thus, in the following excerpt, Bushra (female, twenties) offered a different view in relation to the pronunciation of proper names or even religious phrases in the context of everyday life. Bushra commented:

Ja, *alghamdurillah* ['ʌlxʌmdʊrɪʌ], ja. I don't actually worry about it. First, I used to worry about how people say names, but then I realised it's not *tajweed*, you don't have to say it like that. It's just the intention behind it. Do you understand what I mean? Because they know, oh it means like, 'all praise to Allah', like, I'm happy. Whatever they're trying to say, because it can mean a lot of things also. Like, they even know it has a meaning, like a translation, it has a different meaning, depending on context or so. How the person says it, and whatever. But like it doesn't matter, 'cos like *tajweed* isn't applicable.

Bushra explained how her thoughts on the vocalisation of Arabic religious phrases and names have changed over time: She once thought that Arabic should always be pronounced correctly (that is, according to *tajweed* rules), but now her view is less strict and appears to be more open and accommodating. This suggests that ideologies about Arabic sounds are not monolithic; they can emphasize the *tajweed* pronunciation and can also allow for a certain openness in

moments when Arabic is less of a sacred language and more a language of everyday interaction. In the latter instances, what matters, is ‘the intention behind it [the utterance]’. *Niyyah* (‘intention’) in the Islamic tradition is a concept that forms part of Muslims’ everyday practices. *Niyyah* articulates an inner state of being; that is, as one utters the Arabic words, one embodies – mentally and emotionally – a state of being best described as sincerity, humility and piety. Putting aside the theological explanations of *niyyah* for the time being (see Powers 2004), the important point to note here is that it is commonly held knowledge among Muslims that one’s intention is powerful not only in religious acts such as prayers, fasting, and pilgrimage, but in everyday activities such as when leaving the house, when preparing food, when getting dressed, or when speaking. And it seems, that at least for Bushra, in some cases, the speakers’ intention can override the need for pronunciation according to *tajweed*.

Bushra’s comments in the extract above illustrate the interactional complexity that is involved in the everyday use of Arabic among Muslim learners in Cape Town. It shows how such complexity may be prompted by the interlocutors’ orientation to different uses of Arabic, the religious and the less religious. Bushra’s reflections demonstrate an ethics of grace toward fellow Muslims and a form of relationality that flows from seeking closeness in community through the use of a shared religious language. In other words, ascribing sincere intentions to one’s fellow Muslims – even when their pronunciation is not that of *tajweed* – is an act of piety. Here one sees a link between the materiality of Arabic sounds and the cultivation of an ethics of grace in interactions between Muslims.

In sum, when it comes to reciting Quranic verses, there exists a moral obligation to recite with *tajweed* – to vocalise Arabic sounds in accordance with specific rules. When mispronunciations occur during Quran recitations then it is incumbent on a listener to correct the reciter, and in conversations regarding this practice learners would often draw attention to it and offer statements about how it feels bad/wrong, thereby negatively evaluating the recitation. Yet, when Arabic phrases or names are used in everyday conversation, the situation is more complex: for some participants the rules of *tajweed* also apply in these contexts; for others, it is the intention not the rule that matters.

### 4.3.3| Aesthetic and affective experiences of listening to Arabic sounds

The poetics of Arabic were frequently highlighted when Muslim learners described their aesthetic and affective experiences of listening. In the following excerpt, Samira commented on her experience of listening to Quranic recitations and compares this with listening to everyday spoken Arabic. In her view, Quranic recitations are intrinsically beautiful because of the way the verses are composed – their poetic nature and the rhythmic quality of their recitation with *tajweed*. Samira reflected as follows:

And then also just the normal listening, even if you're not really paying attention to the meaning, but just the beauty of the calming nature. I dunno if it's in people's heads, you know it's Quran so you automatically like, 'I'm gonna be calm now', but ja, no, definitely, it is a beautiful language. Though at the same time, I think it depends on if you listening to it, how it's being said or how it's being recited. So with Quran Arabic, I think you'd always find it beautiful no matter who's really saying it, but then if you [are] just listening to someone speaking Arabic for example, it's not the same. Because Quran language is very-like poetic, and it's got certain rhyming- or, like you know, like a lot of the *surahs*, like the end of the verses will sound the same. So, it's got the same ending, so it's easy to listen to.

The feeling of 'calmness' was specific to the experience of listening to Quran recitations. Umar, for example, said that it is 'like listening to water flow.' The experience of reciting the Arabic Quran conjured the imagery of nature and the relaxing feeling of being at home. Umar explained:

Reciting Arabic is honestly like listening to water flow that's what reciting is about. It's about this, it's a very calming. Or even like the imagery of the trees as the wind blows by, and the leaves like, rustling like, *swswswsws*. Or even like the pitter-patter of droplets on a roof top [...] It brings this sense of calmness, so you relax, it brings a sense of at ease to one's existence. It brings you home.

The calming affects created by listening to Quranic Arabic describes an experience that is echoed by other learners. Indeed, the emphasis on aesthetic recitation of the Quran, which is

taught and learned in *madrassa*, requires learners to attend closely to Arabic sounds. Moreover, there is a felt attachment, an emotional resonance with the sounds of Arabic that is profoundly experienced by Muslim learners.

#### **4.4| Conclusion**

To conclude, I will recapitulate the main points of this chapter. Section 4.2 discussed Muslimness as both a religious and social identity that is informed by aesthetic and affective orientations to Arabic sonic materiality. In the discussion, I focused on two aspects of Muslim identity, namely, intimacy and piety, and how these are related to processes of indexicality and iconicity in meaning-making with Arabic sounds. Section 4.3 explored dominant ideologies of Arabic sacredness, and correctness in pronunciation, focusing on how these were articulated in the interviews. The discussion first outlined these commonly held ideologies and then showed how they manifest in learners' aesthetic experiences of Arabic sounds. Learning Arabic as a religious language seems to be influenced by factors that link language ideology and the lived experience of language through attention to the materiality of Arabic sounds. An ideology of correct pronunciation linked to the practice of *tajweed* informs Arabic language use in religious domains. When vocalising the sounds of Arabic during Quran recitations, and sometimes when saying proper names, the rules of *tajweed* (proper pronunciation) apply. Indeed, there is a strong moral motivation tied up with correct pronunciation that manifests as 'linguistic piety' (Kuipers 2013; Chew 2014). Learners' lived experiences of Arabic involve orienting to the sounds of Arabic in terms of a perspective of correctness that aligns ideologically with their being pious Muslims. However, when Arabic is used in everyday life, then *tajweed* does not necessarily apply and some learners show openness to 'incorrect' pronunciations (as long as the intention behind them is sincere). I suggest that this leads to a holistic orientation towards Arabic as both a sacred language and a language of the everyday (see also Atwa 2018). The next chapter discusses the aesthetic and affective dimensions of Muslim learners' experiences with Arabic in more detail by focusing on their engagements with Arabic script.

## Chapter Five: Meaning-Making with Arabic Script

### 5.1| Introduction

In the previous chapter I focused on the sounds of Arabic and showed how the ideology of correctness (linked to *tajweed* pronunciation) figures prominently in the Arabic meaning-making practices of Muslim learners. Further, their Arabic language experiences render Arabic sounds both socially indexical (Jaffe 2016), and ‘feelingfully iconic’ (Webster 2010) of Muslimness. In this chapter I move from sound to writing and ask: How do Muslim learners experience Arabic script aesthetically and affectively, and what might this reveal about their meaning-making practices?

This chapter is comprised of three main sections. In Section 5.2, I analyse examples that show how learners discussed Arabic writing and the materiality of Arabic script. Section 5.3 analyses examples of Arabic script in devotional acts. The first part shows how Arabic calligraphy is considered an act of worship. The second part explores instances of Islamic calligraphy displayed in a learner’s home. I illustrate how the aesthetic and affective resonances of writing Arabic are bound up with its sacredness. Crucially, the comments by a learner who practices calligraphy show that one’s engagement with Arabic script may begin with the aesthetic appreciation of its visual materiality and develop into a desire to improve one’s understanding of Arabic with the aim of fully comprehending the script when reading. Finally, in Section 5.4, I show how making meaning with the materiality of Arabic script emphasises nonreferential meanings of Arabic, such as the social indexicality and feelingful iconicity of Muslimness (as discussed in Chapter 4).

### 5.2| Arabic writing: Beautiful and embodied

As argued by Bennett (2018: 3), ‘the look and feel’ of sacred languages are significant in contexts of use. In the following extract, Amal discussed the beauty of Arabic script connecting this to its sacred status as the language of the Quran. The following comes from her interview:

I feel like Arabic is the most beautiful language ever. And I think I’m fascinated with speaking Arabic, understanding Arabic, and writing Arabic. Because even if you just look at Arabic in written form, it’s beautiful. Like it’s so beautiful. And it’s more than just writing, it’s so precise. I think that’s its connection to

Allah, it's so intrinsically linked to Allah, because Allah chose Arabic as the language of the Quran.

It is the material qualities of Arabic script that – just like its sounds – indexically and iconically link to Islam and Muslim identity. This experience, as argued in Chapter 4, involves the materiality of Arabic: 'its form, its sounds, and its aesthetic or emotional dimensions' (Bassetti 2023: 17). It also involves its script. Amal highlighted the beauty of Arabic script that she experiences when looking at it. In her comments she linked Arabic script iconically to God, representing the essence of her faith.

In the following excerpt, Umar described his experience of writing Arabic script as fundamentally embodied and requiring effort and dedication:

With writing, you're feeling the letters that's coming out of your hands and the wrist movements and everything. And it's creating something, you're getting somewhere, you're conquering something by just writing the word, *hubb* ['love'], or whatever the case may be. And so I see it as like... it's like this toughness, or this like, this effort that you need to put into writing. Because people sometimes have shitty handwritings [laughs], like [some beginners] have shitty handwriting, I have no clue sometimes what they're writing. But it's appreciating the effort that needs to go into, you know, make your *ba*'s [Arabic letter 'ba'] like calligraphy, making your *ba* [hand gesture of the round curve from right to left when writing *ba*]. And it's appreciating that... just, like, the effort that people need to put into writing. And so, it's like rock climbing, it's like, that your hands are going to feel sore. But your hands are going to get this toughness, but it's this idea of like constantly- you're just like getting somewhere, it's like this, ja. And so that's writing Arabic.

Umar's description highlights the difficulty one experiences with writing Arabic as well as his appreciation for the effort that one puts in to learning how to do it well. Importantly, the feeling of writing is described in terms of the sensory experience of the letters 'coming out of your hands'. Also, he mentioned 'the wrist movements' involved, and then gesturing with his hands as he described – and illustrates – writing the Arabic letter *ba* in the word *hubb* ('love'). Thus, for Umar, the practice of Arabic calligraphy is both a sensory and emotional experience;

sensory, because it engages the body, and emotional because it requires effort and commitment. Similarly, Amal and Umar suggest that Muslim learners, experience Arabic writing aesthetically, affectively and physically, emphasising its deeply embodied nature.

### **5.3|Arabic script in devotional acts – Quran and calligraphy**

Muslim learners' discussions of Arabic script are related to the Quran and Islamic practices. As noted above, I have argued that Arabic is both indexical of Muslimness and iconic of Islam in Cape Town, and thus, Muslim learners draw on Arabic sounds and script in meaning-making. For them, reciting the Quran and viewing Quranic script is mostly engaged with aesthetically and affectively – that is, the denotational meaning of the verses is not the primary focus, rather the focus is on the devotional feelings that are created. As part of their devotional practices, Arabic script evokes the presence of the divine facilitating this dimension of their experience.

#### **5.3.1| Doing calligraphy is an act of worship**

In his work on the art of Islamic calligraphy in Cape Town, Haron (2003) argues that the Arabic script assists in shaping a unique religious identity for Cape Muslims. For Muslims in Cape Town, the Arabic script adorns their homes and sacred places with the distinctive cultural emblem of Islam. Moreover, the reverence for Arabic script reflects how it 'permeates and impacts upon all aspects of Muslim culture' (*ibid.*: 43).

Furthermore, Haron (2003: 48) describes Achmat Soni, a prominent Muslim artist and Arabic calligrapher in Cape Town, as someone 'who does calligraphic art... for the love of it'. According to Haron, Achmat Soni began practicing Arabic calligraphy as a response to '[h]is yearning and desire for something spiritual' (*ibid.* : 47) and as part of the cultivation of a Muslim identity (*ibid.*: 48). As this example shows, Arabic calligraphy in Cape Town is deeply related to the practice of Islam. Like many Muslim artists, the Arabic calligraphers Haron describes seek to practice their art as a means of expressing and celebrating their Muslim identities (see also Alhourani 2018: 198-199). An artist like Soni reproduces Quranic verses in ornate calligraphic styles such as Kufi and Naskh and has embellished the inside of a local mosque with stylised Arabic script (Haron, 2003: 48). Though their creations may be less sizeable, and the calligraphic pieces they produce are more for personal use, the learners I

interviewed do calligraphy for the same reasons – as a devotional practice, or a means of drawing closer to God, and as part of cultivating their Muslimness (Alhourani 2018: 197).

In tracing the early practice of Arabic calligraphy, Schimmel's (1990) comprehensive overview is useful. Schimmel notes that the Kufic style was the first used to write the earliest Qurans, calling it the 'the liturgic script par excellence' (1990: 4). Schimmel further explains that the stylized script used in the oldest Qurans to appear in book form 'suggests that at least some of them were written *tabarrukan*, or for the sake of blessing, rather than for reading purposes' (*ibid.*: 4). Citing the Iranian philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Blair observes that Islamic calligraphy inspires 'the remembrance and contemplation of God' (2006: xxviii). This sentiment seems to be shared among several of the participants, namely, that doing Arabic calligraphy is an act of devotion.

Arabic learners' descriptions of what it means to do Arabic calligraphy are quite similar and echo the view that doing calligraphy is a sacred practice undertaken for spiritual merit and blessings. One of the first Arabic calligraphers I spoke to was Amal. We met up in the JK [abbreviated form of *Jama'ah Khana*, 'place of congregation'], the prayer room at the University of Cape Town. This room and its entrance are adorned with Islamic calligraphy signalling that it is a Muslim place of worship. I asked Amal to tell me more about her practice. Our conversation, like those with other Arabic learners, was inspiring in many respects, but most important is that I was able to get a deeper understanding of how the visual materiality of Arabic is experienced by someone who does calligraphy. Amal explained the devotional practice of calligraphy as follows:

When you write, it's also a form of *dhikr*, of remembrance of Allah, especially if you are writing *hadith* [teachings of the Prophet] and Quran. So, it [calligraphy] can be a form of *dhikr* as well.

Earlier in the interview, Amal explained that, for her, doing calligraphy should be meaningful. She has always enjoyed art, and she still paints and draws. Now, there is 'Arabic calligraphy and more Islam' included in her paintings and drawings. She said: 'I wanted it [Arabic calligraphy] to be an act of *ibadah* ['worship']'.

Arabic learners mostly write verses of Quran in their calligraphic works and the practice of writing assists in memorising the Quran. In an interview with Kamila (female, fifties), a self-taught Arabic calligrapher, she commented that her approach was to devote time to studying daily and it was through this daily practice that her love for Arabic calligraphy was sparked. At the time of the interview, she had been doing calligraphy for several years. She commented on her practice in the following words:

That's where the writing came in actually – the calligraphy – because when I started to read and recite, and when I wanted to memorise, then I find that if I was writing it, then the memorisation came easier.

Activities centred around the script of a religious language, such as reading and writing, can facilitate the experience of the divine (Keane, 1997: 48). In Coombes' (2013: 45) study, participants 'learnt to orient to the Arabic text as meaningful because [it is] Allah's literal words'. Similarly, Moore observes that her participants viewed engaging with the text of the Quran as a sign of respect and love for God (Moore 2006: 118). As Amal said, the writing of Arabic calligraphy can be, indeed, should be, a practice of *'ibādah* ('worship'), or *dhikr* ('remembrance of God'). And Kamila expressed that teaching herself to do calligraphy was a way for her to deepen her knowledge of Islam through deepening her understanding of Arabic and Quran. This echoes Moore's (2006: 121) observation that Quran learners become 'Muslim in part through her or his apprenticeship into the faithful reproduction of the sacred text'. Thus, through calligraphy of the Arabic script, through reproducing its visual materiality, learners cultivate the religious self – the self that orients to the divine in thought, word and deed. Their being and becoming Muslim is facilitated by their engagement with the materiality of the Arabic script.

### **5.3.2| Islamic calligraphy in the home and other spaces**

In the reception area of Saadiya's house, the names of God and the Prophet of Islam are celebrated in a triptych of images (also referred to as a *raqam*, 'figure') on the wall (Figure 5), announcing to visitors that this is a Muslim home. Powerfully, these figures invoke a sense of religiosity in the home. More particularly, they invoke Islam in a very deliberate manner, explicitly and distinctively depicting its essence in the calligraphy of the Arabic script and in the names of God and the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the Quranic verse in the centrepiece.



**Figure 5.** The image depicts three calligraphic prints in Saadiya’s home: the name ‘Allah’ with the phrase ‘the great and majestic’ (right), a verse from the Qur’an known as *ayat-ul-Kursi* (centre), and the name ‘Muhammad’ with the phrase ‘may the peace and blessings of God be upon him’ (left).

As noted above, Haron (2003: 34) suggests that the Arabic script displayed in Muslim homes and sacred places contributes to the cultivation of ‘a unique Muslim identity at the Cape’ (*ibid.*). In my data I observed something similar, namely that the very act of displaying these *raqams* in the home is an instance of expressing a Muslim identity to oneself and to visitors. This is discussed further in the examples below (see also the brief description of the JK in Section 5.3.1.).

To speak of the Arabic script in relation to Muslim identity and Muslim culture in Cape Town evokes a complex relationship. On the one hand, Arabic script is visible in Muslim spaces and is used in ways that allow viewers to relate it indexically and iconically to Muslimness. On the other hand, Arabic script is only rarely decipherable by the Muslim learners I consulted. Despite their attention to reproducing Arabic script in writing and calligraphy, these practices are not usually focused on learning the denotational meanings of the text. Rather, the emphasis is on the aesthetic and affective meanings that the script conveys. Further, through its aesthetic and affective meanings, the sacredness of Arabic script is underlined. In their journey of becoming Muslim, Arabic learners experience Arabic script as sacred and take the calligraphic script as an iconic representation of the divine. Therefore, not fully grasping the semantic content of Arabic calligraphy does not particularly detract from the meaningfulness of Arabic script for these learners. Rather, I suggest that the ambiguity in reception of Arabic script – that

is, not knowing the referential meaning and simultaneously infusing Arabic script with meaning for what it represents – allows Arabic learners to cultivate their Muslim identities.

In Saadiya’s home, their Muslimness is celebrated and announced in every room where Arabic calligraphy adorns the walls. In the kitchen, for example, there are two *raqams* on the wall above the door leading out to the backyard (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** The image depicts two calligraphic digital prints: (top) the names ‘Allah’ and ‘Muhammad’, and (bottom) the greeting/salutation: *as-salaamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuhu* in Arabic text, the Arabic transliteration and translation in English below the Arabic script.

I would like to draw the reader’s attention to the way Arabic script is used by learners. The visibility of Arabic script in the home is not only indexical and iconic of one’s Muslimness but the material presence of sacred text in Arabic script is also perceived as protective because it signals the presence of the divine (Keane 2013: 7-8). Coombes’ (2013: 41, 45) similarly found that Arabic learners did not need to know the meaning of the Quranic text, they only needed to know that it was meaningful (‘sacred’) in order for it to have protective effects.

Kashif discussed an example of someone’s perception of the sacredness of Arabic script in the following interview extract:

Kashif: This one lady she came back from Makkah, and then there was a packet, right? and, I wanted to use the packet for a dirt bin, dirt packet, and then she was like “no no no no no, daai sakkie kom uit die Makkah uit!” [‘no no no no no, that bag comes from Makkah’] [laughs] and then she folded it and put it back somewhere, I was like ‘but it’s a packet!’ [laughing]

Fatima: ya [laughs] ‘cos it had Arabic on it?

Kashif: [nods] *AlBaik*<sup>18</sup> [laughs], you know that?

Fatima: no

Kashif: That famous fast-food place that sells chicken, *AlBaik*, that was it, and I was like that- this is a chicken- it’s a fast-food place! [laughs]

Thus, the woman described by Kashif considered something ordinary and everyday, a plastic bag from a fast-food restaurant, as sacred, due to the material presence of Arabic script printed on it. Samira narrated a similar story about a time where someone told her husband not to put an Arabic text on the floor. In this case Samira’s husband was practicing Arabic grammar and the content of the text was not religious at all. Yet, by merely seeing Arabic script, the person immediately associated it with the Quran and instructed her husband to remove it from the floor because this is a sign of disrespect – namely, to have the Quran on the floor or anywhere below the waist area.

Displaying Arabic calligraphy is thus an example of invoking the presence of God. This is especially so in places of worship and at home for those who visit or frequent those places. In the following extract, Kamila discussed an example of Islamic calligraphy displayed in people’s homes which contains the expression *mashallah* meaning ‘what God has willed’. *Mashallah* is often used when offering praise, gratitude, admiration, and similar sentiments. I am quoting at length from her interview to show the complexity of her reflections, moving from a place of not knowing the meaning of the Arabic letters she was able to identify, such as *sheen* and *lam*, to a place where she wants ‘to understand exactly what [she] was writing ... [and] reading’. Her reflections also show the importance of social media in making images of written Arabic available and accessible.

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<sup>18</sup> AlBaik is one of the most popular fast food restaurants in Saudi Arabia – [https://www.tradearabia.com/news/MISC\\_273708.html](https://www.tradearabia.com/news/MISC_273708.html)

For example, there's a lot of people that have this in their homes on the walls, they have *mashallah* ['what God has willed']. Now, you can have *mashallah*, *ma-sha-Allah* in all [the] different ways there are writing [writing styles], and if you don't understand exactly what that means- for me in any case, I mean, I can't go and do the calligraphy of that in a different way, different style, you know. I'll show you different pictures of that on my phone [see e.g. Figure 7]. And if I didn't understand it- [inaudible] with the *ma* there and the *sheen* here and the *lam* there, it doesn't make sense. So you have to understand and that is why- that's what made me want to understand exactly what I was writing and what I was reading.<sup>19</sup> And then most of my- most of this things [her calligraphy pieces] is all based on what I found myself. I try to memorize a lot of *du'aas* [supplications] [...] I see these things come up on my Pinterest [Figure 6. below], and other things that I'll see. And I'd see these things and it looks lovely, it looks beautiful in Arabic. And then I can see it, 'cos it starts with *lam*, *ma* and then I want to know what that means! So I can't go and reference it in the Quran because it isn't *ayah Quran* [verses of the Quran]. *And then that is what makes me want to learn Arabic as a language.* [My emphasis]

Thus, for Kamila, it is important to have an idea of the meaning of what she is writing, especially as someone who engages with calligraphy regularly. Her practice of calligraphy is part of her practice as a Muslim, and it motivates her desire to learn Arabic 'as a language'; that is, to move beyond recitation and towards a fuller and more comprehensive competence in the language which would allow her to read Arabic script and understand the meaning immediately. For now, she memorises the meanings of Quranic verses and prayers. Moreover, her pieces are all inspired by Islamic texts such as the Quran and hadith (teachings of the Prophet), therefore, to learn Arabic would mean deepening her knowledge of religious texts and thereby deepening her connection to Islam and cultivating her Muslimness.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ma* [meem], *sheen*, and *lam* are consonants in the Arabic alphabet.



**Figure 7.** An image on Kamila’s phone which she saved from Pinterest.

Thus, for Muslims, the appearance of divine words in Arabic script takes on a special significance and is symbolic of the presence of the divine. In many cases, the materiality of linguistic form is meaningful in itself. As Keane (2013: 7) explains, in a semiotic ideology where language is viewed as ‘a divine emanation, then in itself it is *already* a divine presence, and its form is part of that presence’ (original emphasis). Similarly, Keane remarks that ‘once divine words are rendered into script, they possess a distinctively material quality and form’ (2013: 1). While many Muslims may not understand the referential meaning of a given text, its sacredness is nevertheless present in the form of the Arabic script. And it is through the sacred meaning of Arabic script (which functions iconically as representing the essence of Islam), that some learners, like Kamila, develop a desire to fully understand the texts they see and write. Their journey as Arabic learners develops from appreciating the form/materiality of Arabic and its inherent beauty and sanctity, and grows from this appreciation (which focuses on the non-referential meanings of Arabic) into a desire to understand its referential meanings.

In sum, Muslim Arabic learners show a distinctive engagement with religious language in their interactions with Arabic script, calligraphy, and writing. Their narratives are interspersed with references to the relationship between Arabic and the revelation of the Quran, but also include the aesthetic dimensions and sensory experiences that characterize their encounters. The

display of Arabic calligraphy in one of the learners' homes offered an opportunity to explore the presence of Arabic script in everyday spaces, and Kamila's reflections showed that this presence can create a desire to learn more (i.e. it serves as a motivating force for language learning). In what follows, I further explore learners' aesthetic orientations to Arabic script.

#### 5.4| Aesthetic orientations to Arabic script

One of the most common adjectives when describing Arabic script among learners is 'beautiful' (see Amal, Section 5.2.). The way learners speak about Arabic script shows their awareness of its visual aesthetic. Ultimately, attending to notions of aesthetics in sociolinguistic analysis means to make sense of how people are socialized into particular experiences of language; cultivated in and through the ideologies and practices of everyday life.

In the example below, Amal described Arabic as a source of joy for her. It sparks her curiosity and evokes aesthetic pleasure as an object of beauty. She asserted that Arabic script is 'more than just writing', that it is something 'so precise' that it requires many years of practice to master, thereby emphasizing its value and importance (see also Umar above, Section 5.2.). Participants noted that Arabic 'was created and chosen by Allah' (Amal, Aqilah and Halima). They also commented that Arabic calligraphy is 'beautiful to look at' (Kashif), and 'pleasing to the eye' because the letters are 'perfectly in proportion' and 'curve beautifully' (Amal). Thus, alongside its function as a means of cultivating one's commitment to Islam, doing Arabic calligraphy is also a means of cultivating an aesthetic sensibility towards the visuality of Arabic script.

Kashif spoke in-depth about calligraphy and Arabic script. In the interview, he offered an aesthetic perspective that focused on the graphic materiality of Arabic script. In his capacity as an organizer at a *madrasa*, Kashif would sometimes design posters in which he opted to use Thuluth script, a canonized style of Arabic calligraphy used as a display script (Blair, 2006: 494).<sup>20</sup> An example of Thuluth script appears in Figures 5 and 7 above.

Okay, so, this is *Thuluth* right? I know this because that's the one that I learned to write. I think it's very professional and very like- you know, like when you

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<sup>20</sup> For a detailed discussion of calligraphic styles, see Blair (2006) and Schimmel (1990).

want to do something and it needs to like- prim and proper. What's the word I'm looking for? You know what I'm talking about? That's what I think of that, whenever I see *Thuluth*. Whenever I see *Thuluth* written anywhere, like, it just gives this professional aspect to it

Kashif then compared Arabic scripts to fonts (or typefaces). He said:

[A] certain font does mean something. It depends on what you want to express, you know? And so, you'd use a certain font to express a certain meaning.

I then asked him what he found appealing about the Thuluth script. And he said:

The thickness of the line, whether it's tall and thin or whether it's short and fat, or even tall and fat, thick letters, or whether they take up a lot of space, right? And ja, just a whole lot of things. So, the same thing with these kind of things [calligraphy scripts]. I feel like this [Thuluth script] is [...] it's clear, it's beautiful to look at. *Ja, Thuluth, I really love Thuluth.*

Kashif has acquired a deep understanding of Arabic calligraphic styles and he appreciates the Thuluth style because of the way it appears visually. He described it as 'professional' looking, 'prim and proper', 'clear' and 'beautiful to look at'. As noted above, among the other participants there was a lot of discussion about the 'beauty' of Arabic script and calligraphy. In their view it is a form of art and something that requires skill to do well. Their comments point to a shared 'aesthetic sensibility' (Berleant 2010: 179) and 'everyday aesthetics' of Arabic script (Saito 2007: 8). Thus, Bushra commented in the interview as follows:

I like writing Arabic; writing in Arabic is also like, it's artsy. I like it, just like writing in- it's like doing art. It's because of the flow of the letters, it flows- it's like writing in cursive, I like that feeling. And it's also a lot quicker [...] I'm like sure that I wrote more Arabic in my life than I have ever written English.

Bushra's comments on the visuality of Arabic script are highlighted in her description of the experience of writing Arabic. She likened it to creating art, emphasizing the fluidity of the letters and the smooth transitions that are characteristic of cursive script. This suggests an

appreciation for the visual materiality of Arabic in a receptive state (looking) while also capturing the somatic, embodied experience involved in the productive act of writing.

Likewise, in the following excerpt, Aqilah expressed an appreciation for beautiful Arabic handwriting. She notes:

I remember also when they [the teachers] used to write in Arabic, and we had to copy from them and write it in our books, but we didn't know what we were writing. That's the thing so. And then I remember also this one girl Ilhaam, she was Somalian, she had such a beautiful Arabic handwriting, and so we used to like, we used to ask her to write our homework for us and things like that. Because the thing is you want to write it, but it comes out very scrawly and you can't write it properly.

I asked what it was about Ilhaam's writing that made her think it was a beautiful handwriting, and Aqilah replied:

It was almost like, just an elegant Arabic writing, you know what I mean? It looked elegant and you could make out what it was. You could make out the *Ra* [letter ر] or the *Ba* [letter ب] instead of the way we used to write it. She used to write it effortlessly also. She did that [demonstrated a round curve/wave gesture with right hand in one swoop] where we used to go like 'eh, uh' [vertical up and down gesture with right hand in multiple short strokes] you know what I mean? Like, write it slowly and whatever [...] and sometimes her writing would be even more legible and more graceful, [more] elegant than the actual *Shuyukhs*' [the teachers'] Arabic writing also.

In this embodied demonstration of how 'elegant' writing differs from 'scrawly' writing, Aqilah's gestures and sounds expressively reproduce an impression of the writing and enact the differences in the writing styles through the body. Aqilah demonstrated the embodiment of Arabic script in this moment, and it is another example of the somatic experience of Arabic materiality (see also section 5.2, Umar's embodied description and his comparison of writing Arabic to rock climbing).

In sum, these examples illustrate the ways in which Muslim learners orient aesthetically and affectively to the visuality of Arabic script. It shows how such orientations may be motivated by learners' personal engagement with Arabic calligraphy. When Kashif talked about a specific calligraphic style, he conveyed his knowledge of calligraphy as well as an aesthetic sensibility that prizes the appearance of certain qualities of Arabic script. The form of the script, as discussed by Amal and Kashif, reveals that the elements of precision and clarity contribute to its beauty. Likewise, the flow of the letters (Bushra) and the elegance and grace with which it is written (Aqilah), add to the somatic pleasure of writing and viewing Arabic script. Indeed, as Deumert (2018: 13) argues, more than a representation of speech, written texts are 'a form of visual art', highlighting the role of perception and experience in the aesthetics of writing. In the case of 'looking', Arabic writing is conceptualized as visually appealing, pleasurable to look at, and described in terms of its 'different script styles', the 'elegance', 'grace', and artfulness of calligraphy. On the other hand, 'doing' Arabic calligraphy is experienced as pleasurable, as Bushra said, 'I like that feeling', it is also 'an aid to memorization' of the Quran (Kamila), and importantly, it is experienced as 'an act of worship' (Amal). Accordingly, the interview extracts above show that learners' perceptions and experiences of Arabic script are rooted in an aesthetic sensibility that celebrates the precision and curvature of calligraphic scripts.

## **5.5| Conclusion**

This chapter aimed to answer the question: how do Muslim learners experience Arabic script aesthetically, and what might this reveal about their meaning-making practices? In Section 5.2, I introduced the ways in which learners see Arabic script as 'beautiful' and experience the act of writing as embodied. In Section 5.3, I showed how learners considered doing Arabic calligraphy an act of worship. This indicated that almost all lived experiences of Arabic among these Muslim learners are interwoven with the practice of Islam. In part two of this section, I examined everyday examples of Arabic script in Muslim learners' lives and showed the relation between Arabic script and Muslimness. Figures 5 and 6 showed images that are typically found in Muslim homes in Cape Town. I suggested that the presence of Arabic script evokes the presence of the divine and it is at once indexical of Islam and iconic of the divine. Displaying Islamic calligraphy in the home and elsewhere, while referentially conveying religious themes, contributes to an Islamic aesthetic and atmosphere therein. Further, the presence of the names of God and Quranic verses in Arabic script has a spiritual significance in that it is believed to

operate like an amulet, casting an aura of protection over the home it adorns or the individual who wears it. I also discussed how the constant presence of Arabic script in the everyday might inspire and motivate learners to improve their knowledge of Arabic. In the final Section, 5.4, I looked at Muslim learners' aesthetic reflections on Arabic script and the focus shifted to the ways that Arabic script may be a source of pleasure – both visually in the act of looking, and somatically in the act of writing. Also, the data showed that the aesthetic experience of Arabic script is interwoven with its sacredness and is therefore deeply emotional and spiritual.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

### **6.1| Introduction**

This research study employed ethnographic methods to investigate Muslim Arabic learners' experiences of Arabic in their practice of Islam. The relevant findings of the analysis are summarised below in Section 6.2. Following this, Section 6.3 discusses the aims and objectives of the study as well as its contribution to research on Muslim learners' Arabic language experiences. Section 6.4 discusses the limitations of the study and recommends future research directions. The chapter ends with a conclusion in Section 6.5.

### **6.2| Summary of the findings**

The linguistic experiences of ten learners from Cape Town were analysed with respect to their use of Arabic in everyday practices. The analysis of interviews, observations of Arabic script, as well as my own experiences, revealed that the aesthetic and affective experiences of Arabic materiality are a key part of the meaning-making process for these learners.

Chapters 1 through 3 provided background to the research study and explained the methodology involved in collecting and processing the data. In Chapter 4, I examined how ideological processes shape Muslim learners' experiences of Arabic sounds in their everyday lives. The semiotic processes of indexicality and iconicity link Arabic sounds to Muslimness as Arabic is the language of Islam. In other words, Arabic sounds are closely associated with Islam and Muslim identity, both in Cape Town and among Muslim communities globally. Through relations of intimacy and piety, learners engage with the referential and nonreferential meanings of Arabic to cultivate a shared Muslim identity. Additionally, they navigate ideologies of correct pronunciation and sacredness to express their lived experiences of Arabic through its sonic materiality.

Chapter 4 also demonstrated that meaning-making with Arabic's sonic materiality involves cultivating an aesthetic and affective experience with Arabic as the language of Islam. Since learners primarily engage with Arabic in religious contexts, their experiences are shaped by the ideological frameworks that inform these practices. Specifically, the Islamic ideologies of correct pronunciation (*tajweed*) and sacredness structure their understanding of Arabic sounds. The emphasis on correct pronunciation in learners' discussions reflects both the religious and

social significance of articulating Arabic accurately, as they draw on these meanings to construct an ideal of Muslim piety. Learners commented on correct and incorrect pronunciation in Quranic recitations, demonstrating their awareness of its religious significance. Beyond indexing Muslimness, Arabic sound is also ‘feelingfully iconic’ of Islam, contributing to the cultivation of Muslim identity in this context. Drawing on Webster’s (2010) use of the concept ‘feelingful iconicity’, I interpreted how Muslim learners develop an emotional and spiritual attachment to Arabic through its use in religious practices.

Chapter 5 explored the aesthetic dimensions of Muslim learners’ relationship with Arabic script, emphasising its beauty and embodied nature. Learners engaged with Arabic script both visually, in the act of looking, and somatically, in the act of writing, finding sensory and emotional pleasure in both. The fluidity of Arabic calligraphy, its flowing curves and intricate transitions, was described as an artistic and deeply immersive experience. These aesthetic encounters were not only about visual appreciation but also about the physical and tactile engagement with the script, highlighting the embodied dimension of Arabic writing. The ideology of sacredness permeated all learners’ interactions with Arabic script, with many describing it as essential to the cultivation of an Islamic atmosphere in homes and places of worship. More than its denotational meaning, the presence of Arabic script in these spaces functioned as a tangible manifestation of religious devotion, reinforcing its role as both a material and spiritual medium. The display of Arabic calligraphy in one learner’s home provided insight into how Arabic script inhabits everyday spaces, with Kamila’s reflections (Section 5.3.2) revealing that its presence can inspire a deeper engagement with the language. Her experience suggests that encountering Arabic script in familiar surroundings may serve as a motivating force for language learning, further entrenching its significance in both religious and personal domains.

The chapter also examined the role of Arabic script in devotional acts, demonstrating how its sacredness shapes learners’ affective and aesthetic experiences. Through Quranic recitation, the display of Islamic calligraphy, and the practice of writing in Arabic, learners orient to the script as both spiritually significant and visually captivating. In other words, they experience emotions of awe and wonder at the beauty of Islamic calligraphy and Arabic script. These affective resonances co-occur with an aesthetic sensibility that views Arabic as intimately connected with Islam and Muslimness.

### **6.3| The study contribution, aims and objectives**

The aim of this study was to understand learners' perceptions and experiences of Arabic, and particularly, to learn more about the material and aesthetic dimensions of their experiences. Thus, these discussions provided valuable insights into this group of Muslim learners' everyday lived experiences of Arabic. Moreover, their attention to the qualities of Arabic sounds and the intricacies of Arabic script contributed to an understanding of their orientation to Arabic as the language of Islam in this context and elsewhere in the Muslim world.

In addition, Muslim learners' views were interpreted in relation to traditional Islamic views of Arabic that form part of their socialisation as Muslims. The analysis and discussion of interview narratives as well as images of Arabic script captured during fieldwork showed that Arabic and Islam are deeply intertwined and informs the way these learners engaged with Arabic. In a context where some scholars note that Muslim learners lack the requisite linguistic knowledge for communication in Arabic despite devoting many years to learning the language (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3 and 2.4), these learners show that meaningful engagement is possible in the absence of such communicative competence. At the same time, learners experience and cultivate a deeply emotional and spiritual connection with Arabic as the language of Islam. Therefore, I suggest that language teachers and other stakeholders involved in Arabic language teaching among Muslims in Cape Town should acknowledge the multidimensionality of Muslim learners' experience and meaning-making practices as they evaluate Arabic teaching programs.

By prioritizing the acquisition of referential meaning and communicative competence in Arabic language classrooms, some of these educators may be overlooking the nonreferential meaning-making practices Muslim learners are engaged in. What this study showed is that referential and nonreferential meaning-making with Arabic is present in learners' lives, with non-referential meaning-making taking precedence in (at least some) contexts where the focus is on the sounds and visuality of Arabic. By attending to this dimension of Muslim learners' experiences, the teaching and learning of Arabic may be evolved to incorporate more learner-centred approaches that recognize the specifics of teaching a sacred language. Additionally, by attending to Muslim learners' lived experiences of Arabic, their linguistic ideologies come to the fore and become part and parcel of the way Arabic is experienced in daily life.

This thesis contributes to the study of sacred languages (Bennet 2018; Han 2018; Bassetti 2023). It connects with research that investigates the role of sacred languages in the lives of the religious practitioners who learn and use these languages in their daily lives (Bennett 2018; Bassetti & Reinboldt 2023). It thereby offers a sociolinguistic perspective on Muslim language practices and ideologies informing our understanding of how Muslim learners in Cape Town relate to and experience Arabic as a sacred language. In this context, language materiality (Shankar & Cavanaugh 2017) has been a useful lens which allowed me to capture the nature of this relationship theoretically.

In relation to the literature on Arabic in South Africa, the study offers insight into learners' experiences of Arabic as a sacred language (see also Coombes 2013). It builds on previous research that investigates the role of Arabic in the lives of Capetonian Muslims (Haron 1998, 2003; Mohamed 1998). Finally, as noted above, this study offers an important perspective which should be accounted for in the research on teaching Arabic in South Africa (Mohamed 1998; Mall & Nieman 2002; Dawood 2008).

In sum, the main contribution of this thesis is an exploration of the ways in which learners in Cape Town engage with Arabic in relation to their Muslim identity and religious belonging. In addition to this, two other points that are focal in this study are: (1) that the Arabic literacy *madrassa* students acquire is primarily 'liturgical' (Rosowsky 2008, 2019) akin to Classical Hebrew in the Jewish tradition, and (2) that learners' relation to and engagement with Arabic materiality takes precedence in their initial meaning-making with Arabic, and it can (as shown in Chapter 5) also inspire learners to seek a deeper understanding of Arabic. This perspective holds that Arabic is a language of Islam globally and as such Muslims will continue to use Arabic as a religious (liturgical) language. Arabic, in turn, will continue to carry the indexicality and iconicity of Islam and Muslimness and will be experienced as such. Further, experiences of Arabic as a religious language with an emphasis on its sonic and visual materiality informs the way Arabic exists in the communicative repertoire of Arabic learners and this must be accounted for in studies of Arabic among Muslims in contexts where Arabic is not widely spoken.

## **6.4| Limitations of the study and future research directions**

This study provides a qualitative analysis of some of the practices and ideologies of a group of Muslims in Cape Town. While the present study focused on a small group of ten Muslim Arabic learners, I would expect similar perspectives to hold in a larger participant cohort. Extending the present study to investigating groups of 50 or greater would be of considerable value to provide further evidence and corroboration of the views expressed by learners in this study. Yet, it is also possible, that studies of larger groups might reveal diversity in the ideologies and practices of learners and would therefore illustrate the particularity of the findings of this study while simultaneously adding to the available research in this area.

One limitation of this study is that a significant amount of collected data could not be included in the thesis due to the fact that the prescribed word count could not be exceeded. While many of these data were valuable, they also fell beyond the study's primary focus on materiality and thus remain unexplored. Additionally, the textual sources relied predominantly on Global North and Eurocentric scholarship, inadvertently excluding a vast body of knowledge from other intellectual traditions (see Chapter 1, Section 1.6). This limitation highlights the need for future research to engage with a more diverse range of scholarly perspectives. Expanding the scope in these ways would offer a more comprehensive understanding of Arabic learning experiences.

This study also demonstrates the need for further work on the varying levels of understanding Arabic – in relation to both referential and nonreferential meaning. Accordingly, with regard to the notion that there are multiple levels of meaning of the Quran which learners acquire as they progress (Coombes 2013; Moore 2006), future research might look into the meanings that learners access at different stages of their language learning trajectory. This means attending to the number of years of practice and their advancement in practice depending on the lessons they engage in and the frequency of their practices of recitation and writing/calligraphy.

Future research might also consider the roles of age and gender in religious language learning and practices, as these factors might offer more nuanced insights into learners' orientations toward religious language (Han 2018: 440; Rosowsky 2024: 420). Studies could benefit from analysing participants' experiences across different life stages and reflecting on how gender norms within Islam influence access to, and appreciation of, Arabic. Such an approach would

help to illuminate the ways in which religious identity is shaped by gender and life stage (Souza 2016: 195).

Furthermore, examining the material, aesthetic, and affective dimensions of experience has provided valuable insights into how learners engage with Arabic as a sacred language. This perspective highlights the sensory, emotional, and visual aspects of Arabic, revealing its significance beyond merely its referential function. Future studies adopting this approach would no doubt offer further generative insights into the deeply embodied and devotional ways learners experience Arabic.

## **6.5| Conclusion**

Among Muslim learners engaged in the study of Arabic in Cape Town, Arabic practices and ideologies are strongly linked to Islam and Muslim identity. Learners emphasise the materiality of Arabic sounds and script, highlighting the aesthetic and affective dimensions that shape their engagement with the language. These emotional and sensory experiences play a central role in their meaning-making with Arabic. Simultaneously, learners' successful use of Arabic is influenced by their ability to navigate its indexical connections to a global Muslim community. By attuning to traditional ideologies of Arabic and viewing it as a 'feelingful icon', learners engage with the language not only through its referential meanings but also through its nonreferential, affective significance. This research illustrates how learners' ideologies and practices are intricately connected to their lived experiences as Muslims in Cape Town, offering insight into the broader significance of Arabic in their daily lives.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Glossary of Arabic terms

**al-Fatihah:** ‘The Opening’, the first chapter of the Quran which is recited several times a day during the five obligatory prayers as well as at other times.

**Allah:** God.

**Ayat al-Kursi:** Verse 255 of the second chapter of the Quran (*Surah Al-Baqarah*); ‘tremendous virtues have been associated with it, for the authentic Hadith describes it as “the greatest Ayah [verse] in the Book of Allah.”’ (<https://quran.com/2:255/tafsirs/en-tafisr-ibn-kathir>)

**Bismillahi rahmani rahim:** In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful.

**Dhikr:** lit. ‘remembrance’, denotes the practice of repeating, in Arabic, the names of God or expressions of praise to God. This practice is similar to the Vedic and Buddhist practice of repeating a mantra, and Sikh simran.

**Du’ah:** supplication/prayer.

**Fuṣḥā:** refers to Classical Arabic, and is derived from *faṣāḥa*, whose lexical root conveys notions of purity, linguistic correctness, and eloquence (Suleiman, 2012: 203).

**Hadith:** prophetic traditions. ‘Ḥadīth reports [are] a source of legal rulings, second only to the Qur’ān, in Islamic jurisprudence’ (Suleiman, 2012: 205).

**Hifdh:** memoriation of the Quran. Considered a highly virtuous practice in Islam, undertaken by students in *madrasas*. Rarely, one may be taught at home privately by a qualified teacher/*hafidh* (one who has memorised the Quran and received permission to teach from their teacher).

**In sha Allah/ Inshallah:** God willing.

**Inshudah:** the plural of nasheed (lit. ‘chant’), which means something similar to ‘hymn’ in English. The lyrics of *inshudah* are praises to God and the Prophet Muhammad.

**Khutbah:** sermon.

**Madrasa:** designates an educational institution devoted to the instruction and study of Islamic disciplines, encompassing both elementary and advanced levels of learning.

**Mushaf:** copy of the text of the Quran.

**Qari:** one who recites the Quran.

**Rātib al-Haddād:** a well-known compilation of prayers. See Section 2.5, Chapter 2.

**Salaah:** obligatory prayer/s.

**Sunnah:** customary practice of the Prophet Muhammad.

**Surah:** chapter.

**Tajweed:** the stylised recitation of the Quran (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3).

**Wudhu:** can refer to the act of ablution to prepare for a ritual or it can refer to the state of ritual purity.

## Appendix B: Data, written materials

Data	Location
Political poster	On lamp post, Milnerton
Welcome LED sign	In barbershop window, Cape Town City Centre
Wedding invitation	Saadiya's home, Rondebosch
Arabic name 'Maryam'	On a key ring
Name of the Prophet	Embroidery on fabric, framed on wall in home
Name of God	Embroidery on fabric, framed on wall in home
Names of God and the Prophet and the Muslim greeting	Printed ink on paper, glued on wall above backyard door
Name of God	Printed ink on paper, glued on wall above kitchen window
Prayer for when one looks in the mirror	Printed ink on paper, glued on wall above kitchen window
<i>Ayat al-Kursi</i> prayer (centre of triptych)	Printed ink on paper, decorative, framed on wall in reception room in home
Name of God (right of triptych)	Printed ink on paper, decorative, framed on wall in reception room in home
Name of the Prophet (left of triptych)	Printed ink on paper, decorative, framed on wall in reception room in home
The 99 names of God	Printed ink on paper, decorative, framed on wall in reception room in home
Poster: 'Your du'a study buddy'	In hallway to the university prayer room
Poster: Dawah workshop	In hallway to the university prayer room
Poster: 'Conveying the message of Islam'	In hallway to the university prayer room
Poster: Weekly education classes	In hallway to the university prayer room
Poster: courses at Dar ul Anwar	In hallway to the university prayer room
Poster: courses at Madina institute	In hallway to the university prayer room

Poster: The Islamic Text Institute	In hallway to the university prayer room
Poster: courses Dar al Mahamid	In hallway to the university prayer room
Arabic name 'Barakah'	Handwritten blue ink on artist's paper
<i>Ayat al-Kursi</i> prayer	Handwritten gold ink on artist's paper, framed above desk in owner's office
Bag: Shop name 'Abu Ahmad'	Printed on plastic bag
Sign: Name and logo of madrasa 'Thaalith'	Printed white paint on wall of reception room at <i>madrasa</i>
Arabic alphabet worksheet and handwritten reproduction	On wall in classroom at <i>madrasa</i>
Card: <i>Ayat al-Kursi</i> prayer	Printed ink on pocket-size card behind mirror of driver's seat in car
Sticker: advert of Akhbar rehab centre	On window of minibus taxi, Main Road, Cape Town
Calendar: Ramadan	On fridge at Halima's house
Paper: Prayer for when approaching near a city	On fridge at Halima's house
Card: Supplications to read before cooking	Printed ink on pocket-size card on fridge in Halima's kitchen
Arabic name 'Azraa'	Handwritten with whiteboard marker on whiteboard
Calendar: Ramadan	Image sent via WhatsApp to researcher
Flyer: for madrasa 'Thaalith' classes	Collected from reception desk at madrasa 'Thaalith'

## Appendix C: Detailed biographies of the learners

### Halima<sup>21</sup>

#### a. Halima as a Classical Arabic Learner

Halima was a Capetonian woman in her late fifties (at the time of data collection) who attended a *madrasa* to learn Arabic and Islamic studies. She spent, on average, three to five hours a day reading religious texts, particularly the Quran. While telling her story, she said that after performing the *haj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) she understood why she had to learn Arabic: To understand the Quran. In her view, it is impossible to understand the Quran in English or Afrikaans. Halima said, referring to the English and Afrikaans versions of the Quran, that ‘it is not a translation, it’s a interpretation’ and ‘it doesn’t carry the same weight.’ In her experience, without studying Arabic and the Quran she felt empty, like there is something missing. Studying Classical Arabic was her passion and she said that she would probably continue to study for as long as she was alive and well to do so. She aspired to one day teach Classical Arabic to women like herself.

#### b. Halima’s Classical Arabic Practices and Ideologies

Halima used Classical Arabic every day especially when praying. The daily prayers are standard in that the same Quranic verses, formulaic expressions and litanies are recited from memory. Further, her daily Arabic practice included completing homework she received from her teacher. These included Classical Arabic to English translation exercises based on the religious text known as *hadith* – sayings and practices attributed to the prophet of Islam. She was also required to practice reciting Quranic verses which her teacher had selected for the week. In addition to this, Halima recited short prayers and affirmations of faith in Classical Arabic throughout the day.

Overall, Halima viewed Classical Arabic as a sacred language, the language of the revelation of the holy book of Islam. Indeed, she expressed that the Quran is ‘Allah’s speech’ and thus what she reads in the Quran are words directly from God. In addition to this dominant ideology that frames Classical Arabic as sacred, particularly Quranic Arabic, Halima also viewed Classical Arabic as the standard to which all who wish to learn Arabic should aspire. As I

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<sup>21</sup> All the given names that appear in this study are pseudonyms.

discuss in Chapter Four, this includes Arabic speakers who grow up speaking regional varieties of Arabic. Her ideologies are typical of Muslims globally (Kamusella 2017:118).

## **Bushra**

### **a. Bushra as a Classical Arabic Learner**

Bushra learned Classical Arabic by first doing *hifdh*, ‘memorization of Quran’, and then attended Muslim primary school as well as a high school where Arabic was taught as a subject. She was in her twenties and, at the time of the fieldwork, was in her third year of studying Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic at university. In her capacity as an undergraduate student of Arabic, she engaged with Arabic literature and other media in exercises with the aim of learning Arabic grammar and translation into English. Bushra spent most of her life learning Classical Arabic as a religious language and devoted much time to putting her knowledge into practice by performing the required and recommended Muslim devotional acts.

### **b. Bushra’s Classical Arabic Practices and Ideologies**

Bushra’s religious practices were essentially the same as those described for Halima and included: the obligatory prayer (*salaah*), reciting Quran (*qira’ah*), voluntary prayers, affirmations of faith, and participating in communal prayers and gatherings. Like Halima, she viewed Arabic as a sacred language, however since beginning her Arabic studies at university, she learned that there are varieties of spoken Arabic which differ considerably from the Classical Arabic of the Quran. In contrast to some of the other participants, she has completed *hifdh* and is thus considered as a custodian of the Quran, a *hafidha*. In Islamic theology, this means that she is favoured by God and receives numerous spiritual blessings. Moreover, her knowledge of Classical Arabic and particularly her recitation of Quran is perceived as authoritative because she has completed the training in *hifdh*.

## **Aqilah**

### **a. Aqilah as a Classical Arabic Learner**

Aqilah learned Classical Arabic at *madrasa* and in her Muslim primary school between the ages of six and eleven. She was in her early twenties at the time of data collection and stopped learning Arabic at school. She began learning by self-study and engaging with her housemates, one of whom has completed *hifdh*. Her motivation to continue learning was inspired by her housemates who are both devout Muslims and regularly recite Quran and perform the five daily

prayers together at home. She expressed a desire to enrol in a *hifdh* program after she completes her undergraduate degree at university.

### **b. Aqilah's Classical Arabic Practices and Ideologies**

Aqilah's practical use of Classical Arabic mirrored those of Halima and Bushra and involved daily prayers and other acts of individual worship, as well as group rituals and ceremonies that she attended weekly. Like the other participants, she viewed Arabic as a sacred language. However, Aqilah's ideology of Arabic as a sacred language differed somewhat from other participants in that she described Arabic as created by God and that therefore all other languages, as created by humans, must have been derived from Arabic.

## **Kashif**

### **a. Kashif as a Classical Arabic Learner**

Kashif was in his late twenties at the time of data collection and was involved in running a local *madrasa* for male and female students at varying levels, beginner to advanced, including young children as well as adults. Like Bushra, Kashif learned Arabic by first doing *hifdh* and then attending a Muslim primary school as well as high school where Arabic was taught as a subject. After graduating from high school, he began teaching elementary Arabic to beginners at a local *madrasa*. Soon thereafter, he went on to study Arabic literature (Classical and Modern Standard Arabic) at university. At the time of the fieldwork for this study, Kashif had completed his undergraduate studies and his Classical Arabic learning activities involved self-study as well as informal group study with fellow graduates from his high school. Kashif continues to improve his Arabic language skills by practicing what he has learned through teaching.

### **b. Kashif's Classical Arabic Practices and Ideologies**

Kashif was involved daily with learning and teaching Classical Arabic grammar and translation in English. Like all other participants, he performs all religious rituals and ceremonies including individual prayers and Quran recitation as well as congregational prayers and ceremonies. In this regard, because he had completed training in Islamic law, he is often responsible for leading congregational prayers and he reported that people sought his advice informally on matters of Islamic jurisprudence. Kashif also participated in a group where students like himself (who have progressed quite far in their Islamic studies) met and discussed relevant topics. These included the everyday practice of Islam, debating specific Islamic legal topics, and discussing esoteric topics that fall within the realm of Islamic mysticism. Since

these activities require the ability to access specialist terminology in Classical Arabic, Kashif's linguistic knowledge was quite advanced in comparison to the other participants. Despite this he maintained that he was not able to decode a piece of written Classical or Modern Standard Arabic text without the aid of a dictionary and other supplementary texts. Kashif practiced Arabic calligraphy privately whenever he had the chance to do so.

Kashif viewed Classical Arabic as a sacred language in a similar way to Bushra, and likewise acknowledged that spoken varieties of Arabic are distinct from Classical Arabic. He has attempted learning Jordanian Arabic from an urban Jordanian speaker.<sup>22</sup> However, this was short-lived and after a few months he discontinued with the hope of someday picking it up again. Overall, he viewed Classical Arabic as superior to all languages he has studied – this includes English, Afrikaans, elementary Spanish, and Jordanian Arabic. He expressed that it is more beautiful and complex than these languages which partly explains why it was chosen as the language of the Quran.

## **Samira**

### **a. Samira as a Classical Arabic Learner**

Samira learned Classical Arabic at Muslim primary school and high school where it was taught as a subject. She continued studying Arabic at university and attended a local *madrassa* concurrently where she studied Classical Arabic, the Quran, and Islamic studies. At the time of data collection, she was doing *hifdh* privately with her husband who taught at a local *madrassa*. Unique to her journey, Samira lived in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for a few years as a teenager and attended an international high school where she learned Modern Standard Arabic as a subject. At the time, she learned some vocabulary and expressions in Gulf Arabic, also known as *Khaleeji*. At the time of fieldwork, Samira taught Classical Arabic to beginners at the local *madrassa*.

### **b. Samira's Classical Arabic Practices and Ideologies**

Samira's practices were similar to those of the participants already described. She continued to learn Classical Arabic grammar, she practiced translation into English, and performed

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<sup>22</sup> Jordanian Arabic has three main varieties Fellahi (rural) which is mainly spoken by rural-dwelling people, a Bedouin variety spoken by the desert-dwelling people, and Madani (urban) spoken by the city-dwelling people, see Badarneh, Al-Momani & Migdadi (2018), also Abd-el-Jawad (1987) and Al-Wer (2020).

individual and congregational devotional acts where Classical Arabic is used, such as prayers, rituals, and ceremonies.

It was her experience in the UAE that challenged her perception of Arabic as sacred. She admitted that when she was younger all she knew about Arabic was the from Quran and religious texts, but after moving to the Gulf she learned that spoken Arabic there differed vastly from Classical Arabic. Not only that, but she explained that these experiences led to her understanding that some Arabic is sacred while other versions of Arabic are not. She mentioned that Muslim people in Cape Town who are not exposed to spoken Arabic rarely grasp this difference and the broader linguistic situation of Arabic.

## **Amal**

### **a. Amal as a Classical Arabic Learner**

Amal's learning experience is similar to Samira's in terms of the trajectory she followed: she learned Classical Arabic as a subject at primary school and high school, continued to study Arabic at university while attending *madrassa* to study Quran and Islamic studies. At the time of data collection, Amal was in her second year of Arabic studies at university and her fourth and final year at the local *madrassa*. She aspired to do *hifdh* once she graduated from university.

### **b. Amal's Classical Arabic Practices and Ideologies**

Amal would daily engage in learning Classical and Modern Standard Arabic grammar and translation to English. She performed all daily Islamic rituals and ceremonies individually as well as in congregations. In the years just prior to the fieldwork period (2017), she had taken up practicing Arabic calligraphy. She considered calligraphy to be an act of worship (discussed in Section 4.6). Her main ideologies of Arabic are that it is a sacred language and that the more one studies Arabic the deeper one's faith becomes. Unlike Kashif and Samira, Amal had not studied any of the spoken varieties of Arabic even though she acknowledged them. Like Kashif, she believed that the Classical Arabic of the Quran is superior to all languages and is the most beautiful language.

## **Umar**

### **a. Umar as a Classical Arabic Learner**

Umar learned Classical Arabic at a Muslim primary school as a young child, and as a young adult he continued studying at university while attending *madrassa* at the same time. During

high school he had no formal schooling in Classical Arabic, yet he retained what he learned as a child and used Arabic in his daily life as a practicing Muslim. After Umar graduated from his local *madrasa* a couple of years prior to the fieldwork, his teacher invited him to come and teach elementary Arabic to beginners. At the time of data collection, he was teaching part time at the *madrasa* and continued learning Arabic while studying Islamic studies on his own.

#### **b. Umar's Classical Arabic Practices and Ideologies**

Umar practices included: Classical Arabic grammar, Quran recitation, and translation into English. As with all practicing Muslims, he performs all Islamic rituals and ceremonies regularly by himself or in a congregation.

### **Saadiya**

#### **a. Saadiya as a Classical Arabic Learner**

Saadiya learned Classical Arabic at a local *madrasa* for one year and subsequently was taught recitation of Quran and other religious uses of Classical Arabic by her parents at home. In her early twenties she then learned Quran and Islamic studies from a tutor at home. At the time of fieldwork, in her late twenties, Saadiya continued learning Classical Arabic, specifically Quran recitation, at home by herself. She consulted textbooks and a Quranic Arabic glossary to find English equivalents of Arabic terms.

#### **b. Saadiya's Classical Arabic Practices and Ideologies**

Saadiya's Classical Arabic learning had not advanced along the same path as the other participants already described in that she did not attend a *madrasa* or an Islamic institute for more than a year. Saadiya did practice Classical Arabic grammar and translation into English privately, although it was still at an elementary level (at the time of data collection). As with all participants, she is a practicing Muslim, and thus performs daily prayers, rituals, and ceremonies individually and occasionally in congregation.

In Saadiya's view Classical Arabic is sacred and is the language chosen by God for Muslims. This view she shared with other participants. In addition, Saadiya admitted to having heard different spoken forms of Arabic from interacting with Arabs from various countries, and that spoken Arabic differs from the Arabic of the Quran.

### **Kamila**

### **a. Kamila as a Classical Arabic Learner**

Kamila was in her fifties when the data was collected and she had learned Classical Arabic with the help of a knowledgeable friend and by herself at home. She mainly focused on learning to recite Quran with *tajweed*. She had not learned any Arabic grammar and had not attended *madrasa* or school where Arabic is taught formally. In addition to her self-study, Kamila took up Arabic calligraphy and had been practicing calligraphy for several years. She also aspired to do *hifdh* one day. She expressed that learning to recite Quran inspires her to learn what the verses mean, and that she hopes to learn Classical Arabic at *madrasa* one day to deepen her knowledge of Quran and Islam.

### **b. Kamila's Classical Arabic Ideologies and Practices**

Kamila's practices and ideologies mirrored those of Saadiya except for the additional practice of Arabic calligraphy. Amongst her family and friends, she is known for her calligraphic arts and often is commissioned to do reproductions of their names or verses of the Quran in Arabic script. In Kamila's view, Arabic is the most beautiful language and is undoubtedly sacred.

## **Laeq**

### **a. Laeq as a Classical Arabic Learner**

Laeq attended the same *madrasa* as Amal and followed a similar learning journey as hers. However, one difference is that he had not learned Arabic calligraphy.

### **b. Laeq's Classical Arabic Practices and Ideologies**

At the time of data collection, Laeq's language practices involved Classical Arabic grammar exercises and translation into English. He studied Quran recitation by himself and sometimes informally with a group, and it formed part of his regular practice. Like all other Muslim learners, he performs the daily prayers, rituals, and ceremonies individually and often in congregation. Laeq viewed Classical Arabic as sacred in much the same way as all other participants. He was aware of spoken varieties of Arabic, but he had not learned any of them nor did he think he ever will. Laeq expressed an admiration for Classical Arabic sound and script, and since graduating from *madrasa* continued to keep what he has learned fresh through practicing regularly.

## Appendix D: Interview guide

### Notes to self:

Choose a quiet public place that is comfortable

Make sure recording device is charged and is working

Explain the project and ethics protocol

Ask for verbal consent to record conversation and record this consent

Make sure there is something for interviewee to drink

Listen and make notes throughout

### 1. Beginning of conversation

Begin with sharing my own story about how I started the research study about Arabic, how I came to learn Arabic, keeping it to three defining points: (i) how I learnt to read and write Arabic very young at home with my mother and at *madrasa*, (ii) how some years later the learning stopped and the only Arabic I was exposed to was the Quran, and (iii) finally, how much later I began to learn Arabic grammar at University but I still can't speak Arabic properly!

Q: This is my story, but I am interested in your story, so... please share your story with me, when did you start learning Arabic?

Ask any further questions about their background:

Q: Where did/do you attend *madrasa*? What is it like going to *madrasa*?

Q: How do you find learning Arabic?

### 2. Everyday uses of Arabic

Introduce the topic by saying that as a student of language and linguistics, I observed how Muslims use Arabic throughout the day with or without knowing the meaning. I want to ask about Arabic in everyday usage. Ask the participant to explain as though they were talking to someone who is not from Cape Town and who is not exposed to the same daily practices that we are.

Q: There are many Arabic phrases we use on a daily basis, like when we greet each other with *as-salamu 'alaikum*, what are some other phrases and sayings you can think of?

Follow up questions based on answer given:

Q: When would this phrase be used?

Q: Could you say it to anyone?

Q: Can you say it anywhere? Any place?

Q: If you say [this phrase] to someone, what is the feeling behind it? What is the mood it creates?

Follow up questions to explain or elaborate on any point mentioned in answer.

Q: So you said [the phrase] is used every day, what other Arabic sayings are there?

Follow up question about the context of use, can they recall when they first learnt to use it properly, did they ever use it at the wrong moment.

Q: Ask about the feeling behind the saying. What does it convey?

Q: I often hear people say *sallallahu 'alaihi wasallam* after the Prophet's name is mentioned, I also do it sometimes and I've wondered why we do this, I've never asked anyone yet. Have you ever wondered about it?

Follow up question (ask to clarify any point or elaborate on something)

Q: Those are some of the more common Arabic sayings and phrases, are there any other less common ones you can think of?

Follow up question about answer given (if a follow up question is appropriate at this point in the conversation).

Transition between topics, e.g. say 'I would like to ask something else now...' or something like that.

### **3. Sacredness of Arabic**

The focus of this topic is to talk about Arabic as a 'sacred' and religious language.

Q: I was reading a book called *Sacred Language, Ordinary People* by Niloofar Haeri an American scholar of Arabic. It is about the Arabic of the Quran, the author says Arabic is considered a ‘sacred language,’ what does it mean, do you think, for a language to be sacred?

Follow up questions to elaborate or clarify particular points, I expect that there will be more than one follow up question here.

The point is for the participant to talk about how they understand the idea of ‘sacred language,’ to facilitate a discussion of this notion, by paying attention to the language and terminology used, which stories are narrated, and how the concept is explained. Further questions could be asked on these elements.

Q: It is well known that someone has to be in *wudhu* (ritual purity) to read the Quran or touch the book. I feel like this is something we do that reminds us of its sacredness. I am interested in what people say. Are there things people say specifically about the sacredness of Arabic?

Follow up questions where appropriate and to explain or elaborate further.

Q: So we said being in *wudhu* and [this and that] are some of the things which make Arabic a sacred language. Can you think of other things that makes Arabic sacred?

Follow up questions where appropriate.

(Transition between topics)

#### **4. Audio aesthetic**

The focus here, and in the next topic, is talking about the aesthetic value attributed (or not) to Arabic as it is used in practice in the Muslim community.

Q: Some people admire the sound of Arabic, like the Quran recitation, and say that it is a very beautiful language. What do you think?

Follow up questions based on the answer, and to reflect on what about the sound makes it beautiful, why does the participant think it is beautiful.

\*-- If the participant thinks it is not beautiful, which is a possibility, then the questions can be adjusted accordingly.

Q: There is a Quran recitation which I enjoy listening to (play sound clip from phone or give the name of the person since he is internationally famous). Have you heard this one? Which ones do you enjoy listening to?

Q: Do you listen often?

Q: Where do you keep recordings? Would you share it with me?

Q: What do you like most about listening to Quran recitation?

Follow up question, especially about the way it sounds, the mood it brings, the experience of listening.

Q: When do you typically listen to Quran recitation?

Q: When you listen to it do you pay attention to the meaning of the Arabic?

Follow up questions if needed.

Q: You've mentioned that the Quran recitation is... Is there anything else that you would compare it with?

Follow up questions for elaboration, etc.

(Transition)

## **5. Visual aesthetic**

Q: If you look at any copy of the Quran, it is always decorated with floral motifs and some colorful designs. Have you noticed this? Which copy of Quran do you have? Could you describe it to me?

Q: How is the Arabic is printed? Can you describe the appearance of the Arabic?

Follow up questions for elaboration, etc.

Q: So you've mentioned that... How would you compare Arabic writing to another script?

Follow up questions about particular points if needed.

Q: Many people have *raqams* (pictures and prints of Arabic calligraphy) at home. Do you have any? Could you tell me about them?

\*-- If the person does not have any (very rare), then they will know someone who does or have seen it at some point in their lives. The question could be rephrased accordingly.

Q: Have you done any Arabic calligraphy yourself? Could you tell me about that?

\*-- If they have not done any calligraphy, the question can be rephrased to ask about any writing done using the Arabic script.

Follow up questions for details and elaboration, etc.

(Transition)

## **6. Arabic and Islamic knowledge**

Here the conversation focuses on the link between Arabic and Islamic knowledge. In particular, the idea is to talk about how Islamic knowledge is taught and learnt in/via Arabic.

Q: I am interested in the way that Arabic language is linked to Islamic knowledge. When we learn about Islam we automatically learn some Arabic. What do you think about this?

Follow up questions for elaboration and clarification of points mentioned.

Q: Islam in itself is an Arabic word and it is the name of the religion, most of what we learn about religion has Arabic names. Most of the practices are performed in Arabic like reciting Quran, *salaah*, and *du'aa*. How would you describe this connection between Arabic and religious practices?

Follow up questions for elaboration and clarification of points.

Q: Have you ever taught someone how to say something in Arabic? Can you explain how you went about it?

Follow up questions to explain points further, clarify, etc.

\*-- If the person has not taught someone, I could ask them to reflect on when they were taught by someone.

Q: If you were asked to teach someone that does not know how to perform *salaah* (pray), including what is said in Arabic, how would you go about it?

\*-- This question can be rephrased as: If you were asked to explain to someone who follows a different *madhhab* (school of thought), e.g. someone who follows the Maliki school, how would you describe the way you pray and what you say in Arabic?

Follow up questions to elaborate and explain particular points.

Q: So we have said that *salaah* is an example of a practice in which Arabic is used, and that this is something we are taught how to do and what to say when doing it. Are there other practices like this?

Follow up questions, elaboration, etc.

(Transition)

## **7. Arabic in *madrasa***

The last topic focuses on how Arabic is used in the place of Islamic knowledge, teaching and learning in the *madrasa*.

Q: I would like to ask about using Arabic in *madrasa*. Could you think about the classes you have attended? Can you describe the way the class usually runs from when it starts to when it ends?

Q: In the class, when does the teacher use Arabic? Can you give an example?

Follow up questions about the example given.

Q: Do the students ever use Arabic terms, phrases or Quranic quotes in class? Could you give an example?

Follow up questions if needed.

Q: When you attend *madrassa* do you use Arabic at all? Can you give an example of when you would use Arabic?

Q: So you have said that [this and that] is an example of Arabic used in the *madrassa* class. Are there any other examples that come to mind?

Follow up questions, if necessary.

Q: How does Arabic help or hinder the learning process, in your opinion?

Follow up questions, explanation, elaboration, etc.

### **Ending conversation**

Thank the person for taking the time to talk to me and for sharing their stories and teaching me things about Arabic I had not known. Ask if we could meet up again to discuss other things – once I have gone over my notes I am sure I will have more questions.

## Appendix E: Consent form



University of Cape Town  
Faculty of Humanities  
Consent Form

### **Title of research project:**

In Search of *‘Ilm*: A linguistic ethnography of Muslim Arabic literacy and knowledge-seeking practices in Cape Town

### **Name of principal researcher:**

Fatima Sadan

### **Department address:**

The AC Jordan Building, University Avenue, Upper Campus, University of Cape Town

### **Telephone:**

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[Researchers phone number provided]

### **Email:**

[linguistics@humanities.uct.ac.za](mailto:linguistics@humanities.uct.ac.za) (Linguistics)

[Researchers email provided]

### **Name of participant:**

### **Nature of the research:**

### **Participant's involvement**

What's involved: Participating in an interview about Arabic language and literacy practices

Risks: None identified for this activity

Potential Benefits: Taking part in a linguistic study about Arabic language and literacy in Cape Town

Costs: Participating in the interview will require that you devote approximately one to two hours to the activity

I agree to participate in this research project.

I have read this consent form and the information it contains and had the opportunity to ask questions about them.

I agree to my responses being used for education and research on condition that my privacy is respected, subject to the following:

I understand that my personal details will be used in aggregate form only, so that I will not be personally identifiable.

I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in this project.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this project at any stage.

I understand that this research might be published in a research journal or book. In the case of dissertation research, the document will be available to readers in a university library in printed form, and in electronic form as well.

Signature of participant / Guardian (if under 18):

Name of Participant / Guardian:

Signature of person who sought consent:

Name of person who sought consent:

Signatures of principal researcher:

Date: