

Arab studies at the University of Bucharest

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The beginning of the study of Arabic at university level in Romania goes back to the sixth decade of the twentieth century, as the Arabic language department of the University of Bucharest was founded in 1957, against the backdrop of more far-reaching developments that Romania was witnessing at that time, out of which the most closely related to the decision of founding a department for the study and teaching of Arabic was the striving of the then Romanian authorities for strengthening the country's relations with states that seemed to them more in line with their own political orientations, such as those belonging to the Socialist Bloc or the Non-Aligned Movement, which the Arab states joined in that same period. All these factors had an important part to play in turning Romania's attention towards vast areas falling outside what was conventionally known as the Western world, and this in turn has led, in the sphere of education, to the creation of a chair of oriental languages within the Faculty of Letters which, besides the Arabic department, also comprises departments assigned for languages like Chinese, Turkish etc. Afterwards a faculty of foreign languages and literatures, separated from the Faculty of Letters, was created, and thus the Arabic department has acquired a new administrative umbrella. In both faculties, however, foreign languages have been taught according to a system requiring from each student to simultaneously study two languages as primary and secondary specializations, and Arabic has always been taught, with the exception of a period in the eighties of the last century, as a primary specialization.

The curriculum followed in the Arabic department is similar to those of other departments, the only differences in this respect arising from the languages being divided into two broad categories, based on whether they are taught in primary and secondary education or not, and since the teaching of Arabic in its department starts from zero and the overwhelming majority of its students is represented by those who have no previous knowledge of it, the department's curriculum stipulates that an additional amount of time be ascribed to practical courses, as is the case with the departments of other languages that are not taught before the

cycle of higher education. As for the books used for teaching, they all were, at the beginning, important reference works issued by reputable Western and Russian centers of Arab studies, alongside classical and modern Arab texts published in different Arab countries, to which handbooks and researches produced by the department's members were gradually added. The research activities conducted over time within the department varied according to the specializations and interests of its members, some of whom contributed to the enrichment of the record of Arab studies in Romania with valuable works published in the country and abroad.

The department's activities began under the guidance of Profs. Olga Nagy and Yves Goldenberg, the latter of whom also worked as its head and published the first Romanian handbook for teaching Arabic, and then they were joined by a second generation of teachers belonging to the first round of graduates, represented by Profs. Nadia Anghelescu and Nicolae Dobrișan. Prof. Anghelescu succeeded Yves Goldenberg as head of the department, working in this capacity up until the end of the first decade of the third millennium (between 1977 and 1994 she also headed the Chair of Oriental Languages), and she has had a highly important contribution to the development of Arab studies in Romania at all levels. She began her teaching career in 1962 and taught courses in the fields of Arab linguistics, semantics and cultural anthropology and other disciplines within the Arabic department, alongside courses in general linguistics at the level of the Chair of Oriental Languages. During different periods of the last twenty years, she worked as a visiting professor at the Pontifical Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies in Rome, the Collège de France and the École normale supérieure in Paris and as an associate professor at the University of Lyon. From the mid-seventies she gave lectures and took part in scientific colloquia on linguistics and Arab culture at Arab and European universities, and also organized a colloquium in Bucharest on Arab linguistics (in 1994) and another one about the Arab studies in South-Eastern European countries (in 2002), which was organized in cooperation with the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization. The list of Prof. Anghelescu's publications includes books and articles that have gained the appreciation of both the specialists' circles and the wider public of those interested in Arab affairs in Romania and other countries, treating subjects such as Arab grammar, Arab and Islamic cultures, language issues in the Arab civilization, orientalism, the teaching of Arabic and general linguistics.

Prof. Anghelescu has also invested tireless efforts, during many years, in the scientific and professional training of many of those who are currently working or have previously worked at the department of Arabic language and other departments of the Chair of Oriental Languages, by supervising, with extraordinary care and competence, their doctoral theses, or by enabling them to become acquainted with the last scientific developments in their fields of expertise, either by providing them with important and valuable reference works or by helping them to complete their studies at outstanding university centers in the field of Arab and oriental studies. She currently collaborates with the department's staff as a consulting professor.

As for Prof. Dobrișan, he began his teaching activity at the Arabic department in 1963 and taught courses in Arab language, civilization, lexicology and dialectology and Arabic classical and modern literature, focusing in his studies more or less on these same topics, together with other ones, like Arab folk literature, cultural relations between Romania and the Arab world. He published researches in specialized periodicals in Romania and a number of Arab countries. In 1996, he was elected a corresponding member of the Academy of the Arab Language in Cairo, and since then he has been regularly participating with papers in the Academy's yearly sessions. He also took part in international colloquia held in Romania and abroad, and a great number of his articles, translations and interviews appeared in the Romanian cultural press. To all this one must add two books, one about Arabic phonetics and morphology and the other about Arabic lexicology, that remain in use as teaching references to this day, and an Arab-Romanian dictionary he has written in collaboration with Prof. George Grigore. One of the most prominent and important activities by which Prof. Dobrișan has distinguished himself is his assiduous work on translating many books authored by great Arab writers of the modern and contemporary ages (one can mention, just to give some examples, Taha Hussein's *The Days* and Naguib Mahfouz's trilogy) - it is a fruitful activity that the Professor continues to undertake after his retirement, keeping up with the latest developments of the Arab literary scene (in recent years he has translated novels like Alaa al-Aswani's *The Yacoubian Building* and *Chicago*). Thanks to his prolific activity in this field, he has become a member of the Writers' Union of Romania.

The Arabic department is currently headed by Prof. George Grigore, who joined its teaching staff in 1997, after having worked as a translator for the local branches of a Romanian oil company in Libya and Iraq. He teaches courses in Arabic grammar (morphology and syntax)

and dialects and on Arab and Islamic civilizations, carrying out research on Arabic dialects, literary Arabic language and lexicology, Islamic civilization and Arab ethnography. Prof. Grigore has translated the Qur'an and studied in depth the issue of its translation into Romanian in a doctoral thesis published in 1997. In 2000 he launched, under the aegis of Kriterion publishing house, the *Bibliotheca Islamica* collection, wherein he and other specialists publish Romanian translations of some of the choicest Arabic, Turkish and Persian literary works, and afterwards came the *Alif* collection, which he launched in 2010 under the aegis of Ars Longa publishing house and includes translations from contemporary Arabic literature. He is also a member of the scientific committees of the *Biblioteca Medievală* collection of the Polirom Romanian publishing house and the *Arabeschi* collection of the Aracne Italian publishing house. He has given lectures in Arab and Western universities and took part in colloquia on Islam and Islamic civilization, and as of 2000 he has been participating in all the conferences of the International Association of Arabic Dialectology. Prof. Grigore has published a great number of works related to different fields of Arab and Islamic studies, among which one can find, besides a Romanian translation of the Qur'an and a previously mentioned Arab-Romanian dictionary written with Prof. Dobrișan, Romanian translations of texts authored by leading figures of Islamic thought and prominent representatives of classical Arabic literature, like al-Ġazālī, Ibn Ṭufayl, Ibn Rušd, Ibn ʿArabī and Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, and also works translated into Arabic belonging to some of the great contemporary Romanian writers, together with a monograph on the Arabic dialect spoken in the Turkish city of Mardin and its surroundings and many researches published in scientific periodicals in Romania and abroad. Prof. Grigore is a member of the International Association of Arabic Dialectology; he also heads the Center for Arab Studies of the University of Bucharest and is an honorary member of the Iraqi Writers' Union, an ambassador of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and a member of the Writers' Union of Romania and the Romanian Association of Religious Studies.

Associate Professor Laura Sitaru has been working at the department since 2002; she obtained her PhD in 2008 with a thesis on the fundamental concepts of Arab political thought, which was published in the same year and was highly appreciated by both specialists and the wider public. She teaches practical Arabic courses and theoretical courses on Arab and Islamic civilizations, the evolution of identities and affiliations in the Arab and Muslim worlds and on Arabic modern literature (in this last domain, she has launched in 2012 a new course on Arabic

travel literature). She carries out studies in all these fields, and also about questions concerning the history of the evolution of concepts, ideas and mentalities. Dr. Sitaru works at the Romanian Diplomatic Institute as well, contributing to its activities with lectures and researches. She has published many articles in scientific Romanian and foreign periodicals, has translated modern Arabic literary works and took part in scientific colloquia in Romania and abroad.

Lecturer Ovidiu Pietroreanu joined the teaching staff of the department in 2001; he teaches Arabic practical courses and theoretical courses in Arabic grammar (phonetics and morphology), Arabic classical literature and the linguistic interactions in the Arab and Muslim worlds and basic concepts and elements of traditional Arab grammarians' theories. He is interested in his studies in these same topics, as well as in semantics applied to the Arabic language and the place of Arabic within the family of Semitic languages. In 2012 he PhD degree with a thesis about the metaphorization of names of body parts in Arabic, in a Semitic context; he has published articles on some of the aforementioned topics and took part in colloquia organized in Romania and abroad.

Teaching assistant Gabriel Bițună began his activity as a member of the department's staff in 2013; he currently teaches practical courses and studies Arabic dialects, focusing on the dialects spoken in South-Eastern Turkey and Iraq, and in 2012 he began preparing his PhD thesis in the field of linguistics and Arabic dialects. He participated in many colloquia on Arabic dialects (and since 2011 he has been taking part in the activities of the International Association of Arabic Dialectology) and translation issues held in universities and cultural institutions in Romania and abroad. He has published a great number of articles on these subjects in Romanian and foreign periodicals and translated into Arabic two books for migrants – one for teaching Romanian and another containing facts and data about Romania. He has also published translations of works authored by contemporary Arab writers, along with a volume of his own poetry in both Arabic and Romanian, and some of his poems appeared in literary magazines and collections in Romania and a number of Arab countries, being appreciated by critics and readers alike (one proof in this regard came when he was awarded, in 2012, the prize of the Naji Naaman Foundation for Gratis Culture).

One of the former members of the Arabic department is Dr. Rodica Daniela Firănescu, who began working in it in 1991 and obtained her PhD with a thesis whereby she treated the

exclamation in Arabic from a pragmatic point of view. Dr. Firănescu taught practical courses and theoretical courses in grammar and literature, and published researches on the Arabic language, literature and dialects treating questions related to pragmatics and other linguistic disciplines.

She has translated poems and prose texts of classical and modern Arab writers, and participated with her research in the conferences of the International Association of Arabic Dialectology. She currently teaches Arabic at the Dalhousie University in Canada.

Another former member of the department's staff is Dr. Ioana Feodorov, who worked in it between 1994 and 2005, and specialized herself in Arab linguistics with a focus on lexicology, which is also the field of her PhD thesis, whereby she studied the different means of expressing gradation in Arabic. Dr. Feodorov conducts research in Middle Arabic, as it is the language of sources containing information about Romania's history which she herself has published and translated, and also studies Christian Arabic literature and the history of cultural relations between Romania and the Arab world. She currently works as a researcher at the Institute for South-East European Studies of the Romanian Academy.

In addition to the Arabic department, there is also the Center for Arab Studies of the University of Bucharest, which was founded in 1994 and whose inauguration took place under the auspices of the then rector of the university, Emil Constantinescu, who was to become Romania's president within two years, with a ceremony attended by the Secretary-General of the Arab league at that time Ahmed Asmat Abdel-Meguid, who praised in his speech the accomplishments of the Arabic department of the University of Bucharest, pointing to the handbooks, scientific publications and translations authored by members of its staff. The center conducts its activities and organizes its events in close cooperation with the Arabic language department, as its membership includes all the teaching staff of the department, together with other teachers and researchers belonging to institutions that have connections with the Arab world. The main purpose of the center is to develop and increase in depth the study of the Arabic language and Arab culture and civilization in Romania, and it aims to do so by collaborating with Arab and European countries. It has organized colloquia on different topics related to Arab culture, along with two colloquia on Arab linguistics held in 1994 and 2003 and a third one, held in 2007, about peripheral Arabic dialects. In 2001 it has resumed the publication of the *Romano-Arabica* journal (two numbers of which had appeared in the seventies of the last century), which

is distributed to numerous universities and libraries in Europe, the Arab world and the United States. The journal has a scientific board that includes some of the most prominent specialists in the world in the field of Arab studies, and it publishes articles authored by Romanian and foreign Arabists. The Center for Arab Studies cooperates with the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization and takes part in events that promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue, specifically between Europe and the Arab world and between Islam and Christianity, as its members have been participating in many activities of this kind. Since its foundation, it has been interacting with prominent personalities belonging to European and Arab cultural institutions and universities that were invited to give lectures, and it has a fruitful collaboration with the Council of Arab Ambassadors in Romania, some of whom delivered lectures for the Arabic department's students, and with the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.