

**Arab–West Report, December 31, 2009**

**Title: Dealing with the sense of language in intercultural dialogue: meeting with Dr. Hassan Wagieh and Dr. Muqtadar Khan**

**Author: Vivien Molinengo, Sayyidah Fu'ād**

Brainstorming constitutes a prolific way to record impulsive as well as inspired reflections about very different topics and issues. The recent, improvised meeting at the Marriott Hotel in Cairo on December 18 between Cornelis Hulsman (accompanied by two interns, Mrs. Sayyidah Fu'ād and Mr. Vivien Molinengo), Dr. Muqtadar Khan, director of Islamic Studies and Associate Professor at the University of Delaware, and Dr. Hassan Wagieh, head of the English Language Department at the Azhar University, appears to be a good illustration of this phenomenon. Mainly tackling the role of the media in intercultural dialogue, this meeting was also an opportunity to delve into issues notably related to Islamophobia. Furthermore, the group developed their own thoughts on the way people deal with language to convey opinions and ideas through its substance and form, both of them carrying explicit as well as implicit meanings.

Hulsman asked the interns to write their reflections of this meeting without specifying the focus of this report. He found it interesting that we had followed two different approaches to reviewing this meeting. He then guided us to discuss the two different views with each other and write this short introduction to our two papers. French intern, Vivien Molinengo decided to opt for a theoretical study of the sense of language and the implementation of the notion of responsibility in the fields of politics and the

media. Egyptian intern, Sayyidah Fu'ād focused rather on the question of Islamophobia as a manifestation of the misuse of language and its harmful consequences. The distinct social experience of both the interns, as well as their own intellectual backgrounds, explains this significant difference. These diverging ways of dealing with this meeting constitute a real opportunity as they illustrate the importance of intercultural dialogue in order to grasp the numerous meanings of a same event. Because each of the interns viewed this meeting in a certain way and focused on specific elements, the juxtaposition of their particular ideas, which ultimately appear to be complementary, makes this report an insightful reflection about the universal question of the good use of language in everyday life.

### **Arab–West Report, December 31, 2009**

**Title: Dealing with the sense of language in intercultural dialogue: A theoretical framework**

**Author: Vivien Molinengo**

All communication is based on certain frames of reference, a kind of theoretical structure which gives communication its meaning. In other words, every person analyzes a particular event on the basis of his main convictions, experiences, feelings, and shared beliefs which, all together, help to form a scheme of interpretation. In this way, everyone deals with a social event with which he or she is confronted by sifting it through his or her own frame of reference. Furthermore, different groups may also share the same frames of reference, but apply them differently, according to their position in society and their different ways of thinking about particular social events. For instance, a particular group could paradoxically be described at

the same time as both the victim and the aggressor, due to contradictory perspectives held by two people involved in the same event. Using the example of the Yom Kippur War, Dr. Hassan Wagieh explained that this historical event is seen in Egypt as an Egyptian semi-victory, and even a success in first days of war. Israeli propaganda, however, lends credence to an Israeli victory, fueling the conviction that Israel would be able to reconquer its lost territories. This idea exemplifies the famous George Lakoff's one-liner "Metaphors can kill," quoted by Dr. Wagieh and with which Lakoff started a work about the First Gulf War written at the beginning of 1991. It is this danger, inherent in the use of language that requires attention. This is especially the case according to Dr. Wagieh's views about the way metaphors could be used to manage conflicts.

Two main sorts of discourse held by a group about itself or another group are distinguishable. The first comes close to being purely descriptive, which means that it only describes the characteristics and specific features of a group, without providing any value-judgment. This type of discourse constitutes a precondition to the development of any real dialogue based on tolerance, respect and responsibility between two interlocutors.

The second type of discourse, which is nowadays more widespread, appears to be more prescriptive. In other words, the discourse will focus on the features of a group by comparing them with the major norm, or at least with a norm which is recognized by the group describing the other. Three consequences appear to be noteworthy:

First, this idea that a preventive discourse could lead to a subsequent phenomenon aiming at the sanction of the deviant group compared to the

social norm. If the latter could have a legal translation, which appears so to be a formal regulation of the society, it also has a more informal facet, precisely because the main social codes or imperatives determine social behaviors and ways of thinking. In the case of formal regulations, a legal process is planned to sanction social misbehaviors by the implementation of law. Informal sanctions, whose manifestation could for instance be social exclusion or segregation, also exist concerning the violation of the main norms and the following gap existing between the particular behavior of the strange group and the social norms.

Secondly, the preventive discourse could easily be subject to an exclusionist process, according to which a group considers its own references, values and norm, as the only tolerable ones. A facet of this exclusionism appears to be what Dr. Hassan Wagieh calls “closed religious discourses”. In fact, closed religious discourses focus on non-negotiable identity dogmas, for example the notion of a creed for a religious community. Because the group refuses any refutation of its fundamental bedrocks, it simply denies the possibility of any dialogue dealing with this facet of its identity. The result of such an exclusionist stance could be the end of any potential dialogue. In fact, any real dialogue ideally needs the involvement of open-minded interlocutors who are willing to engage in communication without any strategic view or ambitions except the establishment of dialogue as a means to understand one another, not as an instrument of domination.

Finally, ignorance of the other plays a crucial role in negative characterization. Precisely due to the lack of purely descriptive discourses about unfamiliar groups, whether they may constitute a religious community,

a diaspora, or a particular linguistic group, there is a real lack of analytical thought which characterizes the relations between all these groups. Put simply, if members of one group could get accurate information about another, they would be able to discuss the characteristics of the latter, especially the negative facets. This could be a first step in the struggle against prejudices fuelled by abusive simplifications aimed at the defamation of unfamiliar groups. Beyond the major technical difficulties, which could nowadays prevent the effectiveness of his idea, Dr. Muqtadar Khan hopes to create a kind of giant call-center bringing together scholars from different countries and cultures in order to provide reliable information to users from all around the world attests to this will to struggle against a dangerous essentialism and simplifications that lead to racism and negative depictions.

Nonetheless, this distinction between descriptive and prescriptive discourses often appears to be vague, and language plays a crucial role in the process of moving from an informative and descriptive discourse to a deeply loaded one. Of course, every discourse carries explicit ideas, values and convictions, but implicit meanings appear to be at least as important as what is explicit in a description. The discrepancy, which exists between the signifier and the signified, constitutes the foundation of this interpretive ambiguity. Text, as well as pictures, often has underlying meanings. Concerning texts, Dr. Hassan Wageih emphasized the use of metaphors, and the way this stylistic device can lead to a degradation of the dialogue between different groups. Metaphors benefit from a wide range of influence, precisely thanks to their spirit-catching power, which makes them easy to understand and remember. In this way, metaphors can be used as a mass tool, targeting whole groups of people, and more precisely the ignorant part of a group. In this way, the public does not receive reliable and, most

importantly, objectively descriptive information about other groups. Furthermore, several researchers could have pointed out the use of negatively-connoted metaphors in order to dehumanize a given group, notably by representing its members as animals. In preventing its own group from any feeling of guilt, this constitutes the first step in the beginning of a sometimes violent process. Because of its seductive power, metaphor can become a dangerous tool when they are used to denigrate the identity of a group, catching the people's attention by offering appealing expressions.

Images also benefit, of course, from their eye-catching power, and it is extremely important to put stress the fact that a picture could be at least as meaningful as a text, and always carries implicit meaning. A recent example can be found in the campaign for the ban on minaret construction in Switzerland. In this case, we saw an illustration portraying the Swiss national flag dotted with minarets erected as missiles. Such a picture appears, of course, to be appealing to dangerous analogies by targeting the pathos of a population in order to persuade it of the potential threat to national identity or security represented by a group. The lack of knowledge about the reality of the other group fuels this phenomenon of negative portrayals, precisely because the people are unequipped to make their own analysis to process the images placed before him, and so can potentially accept them without any preliminary examination of them.

This process is still stronger when it goes beyond the individual to spread to a group, sharing the same frames of reference, ideas, convictions and values, and dealing with other groups through closed discourse. Each group tends to evaluate a text or a picture on the basis of its frame of reference, which depends itself on the social, political, economical and cultural position

of the group. Dr. Hassan Wagieh thus underlined the fact that even if some Copts view every picture depicting the Pope Shenouda and the Shaykh of Al-Azhar as proof of the unity of these two elements of the Egyptian nation, it could at least constitute a good start in giving effectiveness to this unity, precisely because this picture is, of course, hugely symbolic. Although some people denounce the latent hypocrisy of such a picture, arguing that it is essentially the result of government propaganda hiding deeper-laying tensions, one could claim that it constitutes at least a positive sign sent to the Egyptian people in general, and to the Coptic group in particular, even if the resentment aroused by this representation could also be understandable.

Finally, the discrepancy between the signifier and the signified should be analyzed in terms of the liberty of interpretation granted by media to the public. If the use of metaphors and incendiary pictures by journalists, politicians, and activists is sometimes deliberate in order to take a stand on a particular issue, it also seems that each group analyzes discourses through their own frames of reference, which means that there is always an interpretation of the raw material. This process of interpretation grows in what is left unsaid, the deliberate silences as well as the harmful impressions, and it is through this process that a kind of distortion between the obvious signifier and the subsequent signified can appear. This distortion can, of course, be the intent of the author of the text or picture, but it can also be the consequence of the way a group interprets a text or image. That is precisely why the accuracy of information should be the priority of every media outlet when they deal with emotive issues such as religion or identity. Objectivity would thus appear to be better-suited to press articles and pictures that do not allow for wide interpretation. This does not mean that no discussion or questioning concerning these articles and pictures should

be allowed, but rather that they would benefit from an accuracy that prevents any damaging interpretations. In other words, any article or picture should have boundaries, and these limits should be obvious, visible and clearly defined by its author. The issues should be clearly explained along with the actors involved and their particular stances, to prevent the generalization of ideas which, when not restricted to a particular field and context, could become the origin of ambiguity and misunderstanding. Transparency on the part of journalists and politicians regarding their information and sources would also go a long way to avoiding the spread of misinterpretation and confusion. Thus, the danger of interpretation can be avoided, as it no longer works as a tool acting on the people's mindset when the knowledge vacuum created by inaccurate, prescriptive texts is replaced by objective, accurate information. Coupled with moderation in the recounting of information, this narrowing of the space allowed for interpretation could constitute a way to resolve latent conflicts between particular groups.

Responsibility should nowadays be at the heart of arguments and thoughts about how the media deal with sensitive information. Because the media, thanks to their audience, possess the power to ease certain social tensions, they should try hard to provide accurate and reliable information, in order to prevent any sensationalism of social, cultural, political or historical events. Civil society surely also has a role to play in this process, seeing as its institutions could sometimes benefit from a certain independence. In the same way, Dr. Wagieh's desire to establish a publication delving into the sense of language and its different uses and manipulations, in particular in the case of conflicts, could appear to be a first step in the consecration of responsibility as a guiding notion. We should never forget that the field of mass media currently appears to be, above all



else, a business. This explains the profusion of eye-catching headlines and appealing pictures; it is a well-known fact that sensationalism is clearly profitable. The real question, then, is one of knowing how modern journalism can deal with the social reality of the identity issues and promote peace through responsible reporting.

**Arab-West Report, December 31, 2009**

**Title: Dealing with the sense of language in intercultural dialogue: Islamophobia**

**Author: Sayyidah Fu'ād**

After the fall of the Soviet empire, the only remaining ideology or belief system that stands in the way of total Western dominance—commercial, political, and to some extent religion, is Islam and Muslim communities. Another factor is the historical rivalry and competition between Islam and Christianity for geographical dominance and followers. Islam has now approximately 1.3 billion followers worldwide and is the majority religion in nearly sixty countries. It is also said to be the fastest growing faith in Africa, the USA, and Europe. Most of the oil resources are under the control of countries that profess to be Muslim.

In order to physically control the oil-rich Middle East or to start any future confrontation between Christianity and Islam, some political forces consider demonizing Islam and its followers a useful tool in their hands. They would need to win the majority of public support in the West to carry out "a clash of civilization"(1). In light of that, the question that arises is,

---

(1) [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article\\_C&cid=1203759272795&pagename=Zone-English-Euro\\_Muslims%2FEMELayout](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1203759272795&pagename=Zone-English-Euro_Muslims%2FEMELayout)

"Why is the West focusing on Islam?" All of these factors can shape suitable circumstances that push a researcher to discuss Islamophobia in articles, reports, researches, conferences or meetings, like this with Dr.Hassan Wageih. Consequently, this report discusses "Islamophobia" as discussed by Dr.Hassan Wagieh.

The term "Islamophobia" is one of the terms most frequently used in media and academic interactions related to intercultural dialogue and formal and informal relations between the Arab Muslim world and the West. The central problem today is that the usage of this terminology most closely follows the large events.

The phenomenon of Islamophobia is on the rise and a creative solution is needed to at least stop the escalation in the intensity of Islamophobic language and actions in the West. This can be achieved only through the development and implementation of an integrated strategy for negotiating across platforms. We need to understand the context in order to define the dimensions of Islamophobia.

#### **The two levels in using the term "Islamophobia":**

1) The first level of Islamophobia is hostility. These are unfair and aggressive descriptions that see Islam as a static religion that does not have features in common with other cultures.

2) The second level is represented in the refusal by fair-minded individuals and groups in the West on the hostile discourse of Islamophobia. Islamophobia, according to British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw's 1997

report, means fear without basis from Muslims resulting in practices characterized by discrimination against them and exclusion.

The term "Anti-Islam Propaganda":

Dr.Hassan Wagieh discussed the propaganda to clarify "Islamophobia" and the role of media in supporting it. He has referred to theories of propaganda—especially the theory by Azazeel and his perspective about this topic.

The management of the conflict:

During the meeting, Dr.Hassan Wagieh has discussed the issue of "Islamophobia" as an ongoing conflict. Hence, he has defined some logical ways to manage this conflict like (resources, target, and method).

**Conclusion:**

According to this meeting, a discussion of Islamophobia can enrich research on religion and politics on the theoretical side as well as the practical side, because it has combined between the conceptual framework and the practical examples. In spite of the previous lines, I can shape an opinion about the issue of "Islamophobia" as following:

As long as the term "Islamophobia" includes the perception that Islam has no values in common with other cultures, is inferior to the West, and is a violent political ideology rather than a religion, we should analyze this issue accordingly:

Firstly: This issue should be identified as a conflict between the Islamic values and the Western values.

Secondly: This is an unsolvable conflict because it is an ongoing conflict. Hence, it can only be managed by the following elements:

1. Target: The central target is peaceful coexistence between Muslims and the other religious and social groups, omitting any discrimination against Muslims.

2. Sources: The tools that can help us in management of this conflict.

3. Methods: The conflict can be managed by including Muslims as well as other religious groups in the economic, social, and public life of the nation without dealing with the non-Muslims as a minority.

THE CENTER FOR  
INTERCULTURAL  
DIALOGUE AND TRANSLATIONS

## General conclusion

Islamophobia exemplifies the dangers inherent to the misuse of language. Imprecision, emotions, and sensationalism threaten the neutrality of language, especially when people, due, in part, to a lack of education, do not benefit from the hindsight necessary to analyze the dangerous appealing discourses. Struggling against these misuses would necessitate the launch, or at least the reinforcement of the process of media responsibility. The civil society, through its network of NGOs and independent associations, could play a great role in this process, especially by providing sensible information hinged on the crossing of sources and the comparison of discourses. This plural presentation of the facts could lead to moderation. In this way, as well as they can fuel the religious quarrels, media could be the figurehead of the peacemaking process. The recurrent incidents originated from political, social, cultural or identity misunderstandings are the proof that the responsibilities of media as well as politicians and religious representatives' discourses should nowadays be a first-rate priority. This is surely a long-term endeavor, which should target in particular the future generations. Preventing any dialogical misunderstandings would thus become a way to appease the current social relations as well as a tool to educate children to the sensible exercise of language in a peaceful perspective.