

## АКТУАЛЬНЫЕ ПРОБЛЕМЫ ВОСТОКОВЕДЕНИЯ И АФРИКАНИСТИКИ: ДИСКУССИЯ

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### Prospects of the Development of Arabic and Islamic Studies in the Digital Age

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The paper considers the key trends and prospects of Arabic and Islamic Studies in the context of information globalization of society. The dynamics of qualitative changes in the humanities in general and Arabic Studies in particular is traced with the reference to its historical context. The study analyses the compliance of the applied research methods with the challenges of the modern time on the example of a number of scholar areas such as dialectology, description of arabographic manuscripts and application of digital technologies in education. It also suggests solutions aimed at optimizing and increase the efficiency of research processes through the use of digital technologies. The development of interdisciplinary studies is discussed in the historical perspective; besides that, it provides specific examples of current researches of this kind as well as trends of the development in the humanities are identified. Special attention is paid to the changes of educational paradigm, meaning both the evolution of digital competence of students and the application of digital resources, including e-learning. The SPbU experience is presented as an example of successful interdisciplinary projects, and, namely, the results of joint projects implemented by Arabists and mathematicians. When specifying the development prospects for the Arabic studies the authors highlight the importance of the optimal balance of the traditional classical approach and innovative solutions for scholar and educational tasks. The authors also underline the significance of an interdisciplinary approaches and digital methods, which open new opportunities to conduct scholar researches and make it possible to face the challenges that are brought along by socio-political changes in society on the stage of its transition to the information-driven development.

*Keywords:* Arabic studies, interdisciplinarity, information and computer technologies, e-learning, dialectology, manuscripts.

## Introduction

The last decades have been characterized by the emergence of a new information-driven stage of the society's development and the formation of the basis of information economy. The specific feature of this period is the transition of social relationships to a qualitatively different level, which was caused by accelerated exchange of information, its assessment and analysis. This offers opportunities for personal and professional growth, development of science and industrial infrastructure, as well as for harmonization of interaction between the society and the environment. These qualitative and quantitative shifts in all spheres of life not only offer new opportunities and solutions, but also imply new challenges. All this is true in regard to Arabic Studies which is an integral part of classical Oriental Studies.

The history of systematic learning and teaching of the Arabic language, history and culture of the Middle East and North Africa in St. Petersburg spans over about two hundred years. This period saw the formation of an academic school and methodological basis for teaching of the main subjects which are traditionally covered by the concept of "Arabic Studies".

One of the distinctive features of the classical Oriental Studies carried out in St. Petersburg is the use of methodological and gnoseological approaches which facilitate understanding of variety and uniqueness of different cultures, going beyond the existing stereotypes and dogmata, typically espoused by proponents of Oriental Studies elsewhere. All this facilitates an adaptation to another picture of the world and makes it possible to feel comfortable in both "western" and "eastern" systems of values and behavioural models. Thorough work with the original sources both in Russian and in western and oriental languages, as well as with other artefacts for more than two hundred years has contributed to the uniqueness of Russia-based Oriental Studies and ensured its high position on the international level.

However, the obvious achievements notwithstanding, there is still a pressing need for an improvement of research methodology and its compliance with contemporary challenges and the requirements of the modern digital society. While discussing the development prospects for Arabic Studies, one might quote I. Y. Krachkovsky, who said more than eighty years ago: "To achieve further success, we need to have a relevant number of well-trained research staff, sometimes in new areas put forward by modern life. It is of greater importance to be at the top of the current scientific requirements in all spheres of Arabic Studies, to become an educated expert in Arabic Studies and to be ready to tackle all emerging challenges. Only such a specialist in Arabic Studies can fruitfully benefit his motherland who is aware with the entire heritage of the world science and takes it carefully and conscientiously" [1, p. 30]. These words are still relevant nowadays.

## Interdisciplinarity in the historic perspective and current trends in development of humanities

It is commonly accepted that something new is indeed something old which has long been forgotten. This statement fully applies to the interdisciplinary approach, which is defined as the use of toolkits and methodologies of different sciences for the analysis of diverse data required to make up a holistic picture of an object or a phenomenon. The

interdisciplinary approach dates back to the times of Antiquity, and since then different disciplines have diverged from or converged into it. The precondition for and the benefit of interdisciplinary studies is an opportunity of close collaboration between professionals of various fields, which ensures integrated assessment of an object, the search for the best solutions to problems, data exchange and analysis of the relevant information.

The history of the humanity shows that technological and scientific breakthroughs became possible when, apart from material resources there was the exchange of information, ideas and technologies required to create cultural values and to get knowledge of nature and society. The transition to sedentary agriculture ensured the growth of surplus production and as a result the increase of population density, the emergence of the first settlements and towns. The appearance of surplus production and trade development made towns not only the centres for trade in goods and services, but also the hubs for information exchange and the birthplace of new ideas and technologies. Thus the first agricultural civilizations in Mesopotamia and Egypt created conditions required for the development of intellectual potential of the society. This in turn gave birth to writing and development of architecture, science and art.

Having emerged in the ancient times as one of the most effective research methods, the interdisciplinary approach had remained in use for millennia. Thus, the studies of some scholars of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance had interdisciplinary nature; this method has been also employed by authors of the modern age and the contemporary world.

The methodology was given a new impetus in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading to the emergence of new interdisciplinary disciplines, such as psycholinguistics, mathematical linguistics, physical chemistry, etc. A bright example of interdisciplinary approach in Arabic and Islamic Studies was the activity of the Soviet-Yemeni complex expedition (SOYCE), which carried out field researches in Hadramawt in the south of Yemen in the 1980s — early 1990s. The objective of the expedition was a comprehensive study of the traditional society, i. e., its material and spiritual culture in context of its interaction with the environment, in both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. In light of that objective the expedition involved specialists representing different study areas – historians, experts in Islam, archaeologists, ethnographers, linguists, anthropologists, paleobotanists, and architects. Joint work and consideration of the previous research results allowed the expedition members to create a full and comprehensive picture of the studied object and to make important discoveries and conclusions.

One of the examples of interdisciplinary research in Islamic Studies is the so-called Islamic Banking, which is a type of Islamic economy meaning financial activities complying with the Sharia laws. The integrated study of the Islamic Banking requires the efforts not only of experts in Arabic and Islamic Studies, but also historians, linguists, economists and lawyers.

The interdisciplinary approach reaches its peak in the context of IT development. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the civilization entered a new information age which is characterized by the rapid distribution of information technologies and globalization of social processes. Digital economy, digital marketing, digital humanities and digital society in general are characteristics of the modern world and have, perforce, to have an impact on science and education.

The model of the modern society has reshaped itself so that it could facilitate an effective handling of information. Priorities are shifting from property and capital towards

science and information, the primary role belonging to the new complex methodology of scientific research based on the universal method of analysing the informative content [2].

Current trends, which inevitably produce an impact on scientific and educational activities, are characterized by structural changes occurring on the labour market, the emergence of global problems to be solved only through joint efforts of the international community, the expansion of intercultural intercommunion, the individual ability to adjust to rapidly changing conditions, increased competition where mobility is a priority, regular training and re-training.

All these factors create essentially new tasks for the development of humanities as a whole, and Arabic Studies in particular. However, the actual situation does not always correspond with the requirements of the time. World practice features the trend of establishing new organizations, laboratories, departments to solve new urgent tasks of the information society. Yet, it must be said, traditional organizational structures are less adapted to the current challenges.

It should be noted that mathematical sciences are rapidly developing today. New technologies cannot rely on the achievements of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The situation in the humanities is different. The objects of study and the applied methodologies in these areas have changed insignificantly. This can partly be explained by the nature of studies in humanities. The so-called traditional, classical approach lays the basis for the development of innovations forming the foundation which is also the starting point for diachronic and comparative studies. Therefore, the current model of research activity suggests an optimal combination of the innovative and the classical approaches.

Let us consider the current situation with the traditional areas of Arabic Studies to determine its contemporary state and to identify the tasks for further development.

### **The study of the arabographic manuscripts: new methods and approaches**

Classical Oriental Studies focus on working with texts. Not only the content itself is considered, but also the social and historical contexts at the time when the manuscript emerged, which must, perforce, have had an effect on its form and content. Here, it must be borne in mind, one is faced with a writing tradition encompassing 14 centuries.

The method used for textological or, to be more precise, codicological, analysis and the work with the originals is mainly known due to the book on Arabic manuscripts written by I. Y. Krachkovsky [3]. Another example of the same kind is the text of the Qur'an translated by the same scholar, which is supplied with detailed references and thorough analysis [4]. This translation, though incomplete when published, is justly considered the academic one.

The development of methods used for codicological analysis in the study of manuscripts at the current stage is marked by publications dedicated to non-verbal information of the Arabic manuscripts [5], including those implying technical means.

Nevertheless, analyses of texts based on principles of textology in some papers are often replaced with formalistic text descriptions, giving no explanation of causes for their origin, or their impact on the society development in synchrony and diachrony. As a result, data of this kind can only serve as a starting point for a further, wider study including contextual analysis.

The interdisciplinary approach involving both the methods of codicological study and current digital technologies can provide additional information wherewith to identify authorship, chronology and place of origin of a particular text.

At the moment, alongside the traditional approach, tools of other study areas are used to conduct codicological studies. First, these are the non-destructive methods of analysis used to obtain additional information related to the time and the place of a document's origin and its author and to classify and catalogue it. Thus, the composition of starch contained in the manuscript paper may indicate the origin and non-verbal characteristics of the manuscript, such as text density, identify its belonging to a certain writing tradition.

Despite the general positive changes, the range of technological advance has not been spread around well enough. In this respect, there is a vital need to carry out interdisciplinary study in the relevant field involving specialists in humanities and natural sciences.

It is essential to adopt common criteria to describe, evaluate, study, catalogue, mark and digitize the data on historical artefacts in the nearest future. Methods used for classification of ancient Arabic manuscripts differ from the normal processing of printed documents. This task focuses on digitization of documents aimed at the search of the best possible solutions for their recognition and at the creation of a tool which takes into consideration the characteristics related to a manuscript description (the so-called "digital passport of the manuscript").

Electronic collections of the arabographic manuscripts have been created and updated in the past decades. The most famous are: the electronic collection of Arabic manuscripts in the British Library [6], the digital library of Islamic manuscripts in Princeton University [7], collection of Islamic manuscripts in the University of Michigan [8], digital collection of Arabic manuscripts in Juma Al Majid Centre for Culture and Heritage in Dubai [9] available on-line. Each collection was created by original methods of digitization, cataloguing and search of manuscripts, which have both advantages and disadvantages.

Research of primary sources is not limited to studying the arabographic manuscript heritage, but also means the study of other artefacts including works of art, historical objects and numismatic collections. In this context we might refer to academician V.F. Fren and his numismatic and manuscript collections, which made the basis for the school of Arabic Studies and classical Islamic Studies in St. Petersburg [10, pp. 99–100].

## Arabic dialectology

The scope of themes of current research in the field of Arabic dialectology is a particular reflection of the dynamics of humanities development as a whole. To determine the level of topicality and methodology used in this field, the content of the 13<sup>th</sup> AIDA (*International Association of Arabic Dialectology*) International Conference was analysed [11]. The conference was held in Kutaisi on June 10–13, 2019 and was attended by more than a hundred representatives of scientific schools from different countries of the world.

In line with the expectations, the study of the same narrow disciplinary issues as decades ago continued. Alongside with this, the recent time has seen changes in the language world map as a whole and in the distribution of the Arabic dialects in particular, whereas the development of the Internet created a fundamentally new environment for e-communications. In addition, 80 % of research presented at the conference was still related to the peculiarities of local dialects, though their role has changed a lot in the modern world as

a result of intensive migration processes. This fact justifies the urgency of new approaches and the studies on speech characteristics of migrants from the Arab countries. Only one of the 107 papers presented at the conference deals with the current problems of evolution of the linguistic map of the Arab world using the example of inter-dialect communication among the speakers of different Maghreb idioms in Europe [12].

The analysis of topics of the papers on the Arabic dialectology did not reveal a direct dependence of accessibility of field work areas on the topic of dialectological studies. Less than 6% of the materials presented deal with the problems related to dialectology of the countries of the Persian Gulf, though a larger number (about 12% of the total scope) of papers was focused on dialects of Syria, Iraq and Yemen despite the fact that field work in these regions of the Arab world is difficult. The most popular areas for dialectological research are still Morocco and Egypt.

As far as the study of different levels of dialect structure is concerned, the greatest attention is paid to the problems of morphology, and to a lesser extent, to the problems of phonetics and lexicology. Fewer papers were devoted to the problems of dialectal syntax.

Despite the obvious relevance of the application of machine methods for the processing of dialect material, e. g. the acoustic speech recognition, only 3% of the whole list of the conducted research used digital technologies.

The changes in the linguistic situation in the Arab world are conditioned not only by the patterns of internal evolution of modern Arabic dialects at the levels of phonetics, syntax and morphology. Such factors, as the growth of infrastructure, the increase of migrant flows, mass media development, and the overall change of the demographic and socio-political situation in Middle East and North African countries occasioned a qualitatively new functional and territorial distribution of the Arabic dialects against the interfering impact of other languages.

Thus, the countries of the Persian Gulf, in addition to the dialects of their indigenous population and dialects of other Arab regions of the world, are facing a spread of languages of labour migrants from Southern and South-Eastern Asia, i.e., Hindi, Urdu, Farsi etc. The English language is widely distributed for functional purposes and is actually used as a *lingua franca*.

The fast evolution of Arabic dialects requires real-time monitoring and assessment of ongoing changes. It should be noted that the nature of the tasks faced by the Arabic dialectology determines the application of new research methods and technological solutions.

The study on dynamics of dialect development in diachrony also implies an analysis of the linguistic material collected for the past 150 years, which cannot be done without resorting to digital technologies.

In the recent years, digital research methods have opened up new vistas for the scientists and have put in the agenda the task of creating a dialectal atlas of the Arab world [13], which is impossible without new and online technologies and suggests the interdisciplinary and international nature of the project. To a certain extent, the Vienna Corpus of Arabic Varieties [14] can be considered as such a prototype. The main advantage of this resource is the optimal combination of the linguistic content and computer-aided solutions. This project will certainly develop and improve, due to its topicality the approaches applied therein.

There are other examples of digital applications in the Arabic dialectology, but they are mainly initiated by representatives of mathematical schools which aim at applicability of their technologies processing natural languages.

## ICT and educational process

Structural changes on the labour market, globalization of manufacturing process, mobility of capital and labour resources, the emergence of completely new challenges and the need to address them rapidly under changing conditions determine new requirements for and professional education and training of highly-qualified staff.

The current educational paradigm is to provide the target audiences with a set of skills to efficiently adapt their professional knowledge in research and practical activities. This is also true for the Oriental Studies, which has undergone major changes (trends, goals and objectives) determined by the socio-economic and geopolitical changes. This was reflected in the Order on the establishment of an extended group of higher educational programme "Oriental and African Studies"<sup>1</sup> that envisages use of digital technologies in research and educational activities.

This concerns not only linguistic and country-specific competences, but also the ability to retrieve and analyse enormous array of data, to use the available library and information resources and standard software in the work with sources in oriental languages.

Digital technologies gain wider application in the language teaching and other important components of the Oriental Studies educational paradigm. Thus, online courses in oriental languages and other disciplines aim to satisfy the growing public interest in various aspects of life of the Orient. More than 25,000 students have registered for the online course "Arabic language" [15] throughout the year. Intramural teaching of so many students is impossible and this makes another argument in favour of distance learning.

Online technologies enable overcoming quantitative limitations as well as uniting the groups from several educational institutions into one audience. An example of such interaction is a series of academic disciplines taught by video conferencing between SPbU and the University of Michigan (USA) [16], which is also an example of an efficient international cooperation.

Thus, key trends in Oriental Studies are focused on the best combination of classical foundations with achievements of the digital society. At the same time, the content of educational programmes allows flexible adaptation to ongoing changes in the society.

## Current trends in the development of Arabic Studies: SPbU experience

The modern methodological approaches in science are characterized by combining narrow scientific specialization and interdisciplinarity. The question of selecting a methodology is answered by the expediency of one or another approach to the solution of particular research problems.

Experience shows that to ensure effective cooperation between the specialists in different fields, getting comprehensive information on the subject should be complemented by the estimated relevance of every considered characteristic for the preset research goal, to identify the links and development vectors within the frame of a single system.

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<sup>1</sup> Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation dated April 11, 2017 No. 328 "On approval of the lists of areas of higher education included in the enlarged group of areas of higher education "Oriental and African Studies", establishment of conformity of areas of higher education included in the enlarged group of areas of higher education «Oriental and African Studies», areas of training included in the list of areas of preparation of higher education, approved by order of Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation on September 12, 2013 № 1061.

Classical universities provide a unique opportunity for interdisciplinary research, being a platform to unite representatives of different areas of knowledge who get a chance not only to cooperate but to find solutions to current scientific problems. Modern classical universities, for instance SPbU, are centres of educational activity and fundamental scientific research. Here, the efficiency of learning process to a great extent depends on using the results of the research carried out at the same university. Thus, the results of interdisciplinary research in Arabic and Islamic Studies are successfully integrated into the educational process. Lectures delivered by figures of culture, science and art in terms of the training programmes for specialists with advanced knowledge of Islamic culture and history often have interdisciplinary nature [17, p. 35].

An example of the interdisciplinary approach is the application of mathematical analysis methods in humanities, including Arabic and Islamic Studies (projects aimed at formalization of the Arabic language).

Processing of large volumes of Arabic language data facilitates the objective analysis of the arabographic material, in particular, compiling a frequency vocabulary, which is essential for reference books, textbooks and dictionaries, including those in electronic format.

SPbU specialists have developed algorithms for recognition of arabographic texts and have prepared a digital passport model for Arabic manuscripts. In addition, content-analysis of Arabic media language was carried out, as well as sentiment-analysis of Arabic texts.

The application of interdisciplinary approach and digital technologies is essential for both classical and modern arabographic texts, as this allows to perform a critical analysis and authenticity test of source documents (originals) and documents used frequently as arguments in contemporary Islamic discourse.

The methods of classical codicological and textological analyses applied to vast arrays of linguistic material in combination with tools of digital technology helped the authors to solve a number of fundamental objectives essential not only for Arabic and Islamic Studies, but for other humanities as well. These included attributing authorship of manuscripts, identifying the level of correlation between changes in implicit formal language markers and its stylistics depending on changes of extralinguistic context, e. g., socio-political transformations [18].

Using ICT not only improves the efficiency of humanitarian research, where results can be either of theoretical or practical importance, but can also be applied in education [19] and can be considered in improvement of software architecture [20].

Classical research methods combined with innovative technologies not only expanded the prospects of solution to a number of fundamental theoretical and practical tasks in the specified and related fields, but also developed the foundation for further interdisciplinary studies and made an ample contribution to the study of dialectic unity and interconnection between language, text, religion and society, as demonstrated by the example of the Arab Muslim civilization.

## Conclusions

The current stage of development of science and education requires the historical study patterns to be revisited as well as introducing new research methods to solve fun-

damental problems, which becomes possible through the combined use of both classical research tools and innovative digital technologies without being limited to any specific area of study.

Interdisciplinarity relies on a fuller description of an object or a phenomenon under consideration, allows to adequately process and analyse a larger volume of source data and thus provides relevant results for the solution of both specific and fundamental research tasks.

The mentioned above is true for the classical Oriental Studies, which is based upon analyses of original texts, studying the form and content of source documents, verifying their authenticity, identifying their date of origin, determining their role and place in the cultural and historical continuum of the civilization.

At the same time, despite the emergence of such sciences as digital humanities, corpus linguistics etc., the interdisciplinary approach in the humanities is not widely accepted. Here, empirical methods prevail, which do not always ensure a reliable result. The study of the current trends in the Arabic dialectology proves this.

Thus, Arabic dialectology should abandon static research of linguistic characteristics and the traditional approach to the description of Arabic language dialects based on the regional distribution, since it does not reflect the actual state of affairs due to blurring of the boundaries between the regional dialects.

Meanwhile, this research does not always fully and adequately reflect the current state of the dialect continuum, which has undergone significant transformations, ensuing from socio-economic changes in the region and the development of new technologies. Globalization and levelling off of the dialect differences, the spread of languages used for international communication will lead to the disappearance of small dialect groups and local languages, including those insufficiently described or known, which means they have to be studied with some urgency.

Another factor in favour of rethinking traditional principles for the dialect description is the emergence of a qualitatively new electronic media for inter-dialect communication and the formation of a heterogeneous idiom including the elements of both the standard language and the dialects. Development of a dialect atlas reflecting actual changes in the distribution and the linguistic structure of idioms remains another pressing task.

New requirements are put forward to graduate students under Oriental Studies programs. This primarily concerns the list of competences gained through the process of study. Here, not only linguistic and country-specific competences are meant, but also the abilities to retrieve and analyse large volumes of data, to use the available library and information resources, to have skills to work with standard software related to processing oriental language sources. As evidenced by courses in Arabic language and Islamic Studies, partial transition to online education has proved its efficiency for specific tasks, and this process will continue.

The current tasks of the global information society also include the intensification of international scientific cooperation. Joint publications with colleagues from different regions of the world and publications of scientists in Western languages form a valuable experience, demonstrate their achievements and make them accessible to the world's scholarly community, thus raising the level of science and education in the Russian Federation. We need to go beyond the entirely desktop-based mode of study and tradition-oriented limitations and use advanced methods, which require new methodological approaches to

be developed. In other words, there is a need for transition from monochrome 2D system of coordinates which is generally used to describe an object, to the three-dimensional model, taking into consideration the entire set of its particular details and studying the object from different angles.

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## Перспективы развития арабистики и исламоведения в цифровую эпоху

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В статье рассматриваются ключевые тенденции и перспективы развития арабистики и исламоведения в условиях информационной глобализации общества. С учетом исторического контекста прослеживается динамика качественных изменений, затрагивающих гуманитарные науки в целом и арабистику в частности. На примере ряда направлений, таких как диалектология, описание арабографических рукописей, применение информационно-компьютерных технологий в образовании, анализируется степень соответствия используемых сегодня научных методов требованиям современности, а также предлагаются решения, направленные на оптимизацию и повышение эффективности исследовательского процесса за счет использования цифровых технологий. Рассматривается развитие междисциплинарных исследований в исторической перспективе, а также приводятся конкретные примеры такого рода исследований на современном этапе, определяются тенденции развития гуманитарных наук. Отдельно рассматриваются изменения образовательной парадигмы, предполагающие как формирование информационных компетенций обучающихся, так и использование электронных ресурсов, в том числе онлайн-обучение. В качестве примера успешных междисциплинарных проектов приводится опыт Санкт-Петербургского государственного университета, в частности результаты реализации совместных проектов арабистов и математиков. Определяя перспективы развития арабистики, авторы подчеркивают важность оптимального сочетания традиционного классического подхода и инновационных решений научных и образовательных задач. При этом отмечается важность междисциплинарных подходов и цифровых методов, которые открывают новые возможности для проведения научных исследований, позволяют ответить на вызовы, которые ставят изменения в общественной и политической жизни на стадии перехода общества к информационному этапу развития.

**Ключевые слова:** арабистика, междисциплинарность, информационно-компьютерные технологии, онлайн-обучение, диалектология, рукописи.

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