

## INFLUENCE OF OTHER SCRIPTS ON LATIN HANDWRITING

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**ABSTRACT:** In handwritings of persons originating from North African countries who learned to write in Arabic script first, a remarkable characteristic was found in the letters *l* and *h*. These letters did not have an upper loop, but instead retouched curved strokes which are placed next to the upper part of the staff of these letters. In order to determine whether and to what extent the characteristic can be considered typical of a certain group (or groups) of writers originating from Arab countries, the backgrounds of educational systems in some of these countries were investigated. The investigation was concentrated mainly on Moroccan writers.

Occasionally the same characteristic can be found in handwriting of Dutch people who never learned another script but the Latin script as well.

**KEY WORDS:** Arabic and Latin script; Educational systems; Characteristic in handwriting.

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Some time ago the NFI received a number of doctor's prescriptions for investigation. These prescriptions were submitted to a health insurance company for reimbursement and were said to originate in Morocco. A remarkable characteristic of the handwriting on these prescriptions was that the letters *h* and *l* did not have an upper loop, but that instead retouched curved strokes had been placed next to the upper part of the staff of these letters. This characteristic was also noticed in the reference material of the suspect.

Further investigation showed that this characteristic can also be found with writers from other North-African countries such as Algeria and Tunisia. As far as we can ascertain this characteristic has not yet been dealt with in the professional literature. Neither were colleagues abroad aware of any systematic study of this subject. There were colleagues, however, who had seen the characteristic in question, the retouched upper loop, in Latin script produced by writers who had originally learned another script.

In order to determine whether and to what extent the characteristic can be considered typical of a certain group (or groups) of writers originating from Arab countries, the backgrounds of educational systems in some of these countries were investigated. This investigation was concentrated



countryside this is often the only available form of education. Exceptional pupils are allowed to further their education by going to a secondary religious school. In Berber areas before the independence of Morocco in 1956 French was taught besides Berber. In some Berber areas teaching Arabic was even prohibited. Of the Moroccans originating from the cities and the South approximately 50 to 60% have learned French. This language is taught as of form three in primary schools. But before starting to learn French the pupils had of course to get acquainted with the Latin script.

Latin script is an alphabetic script in which there is more or less direct correspondence between graphemes and phonemes. The letters of the alphabet in Latin script are written from left to right.

In the Arabic alphabet not all phonemes are represented graphemically. Arabic, like Hebrew, uses a so-called consonantal alphabet, where the marking of the vowels (using dia-critics) is optional. Besides, the characters are written from right to left. Arabic script however does not have large loops as we have in Latin script with the letters *h*, *k* and *l*. Arabic script however does have little loops, which resemble the letter *e* of Latin script. These little loops are written clockwise contrary to the letters *e* of Latin script which are written counter-clockwise.

According to information provided by an education expert who taught writing in Morocco himself, it was common practise to show a French taught-handwriting style of the alphabet at the beginning of a course after which the pupils had to copy the letters. Usually these lessons were not very strict, according to the expert. The pupils were usually not taught the precise structure of the various letters and the correct way to write them. Many educational institutions considered a good control of Latin script of minor importance. Apart from being able to speak French the primary objective of this education was to be able to read printed French texts. Before independence education in Morocco was of course mostly focussed on French culture. Learning how to write did not get so much attention.

The characteristic retouched loops in the letters *h* and *l* are not found with every writer who learned to write in Morocco. There are writers who, despite the fact that they first learned to write Arabic and only later Latin script, can make large-loop letters without effort. Maybe they received better writing education than others. It could also be that they have a better visual perception.

There seems to be no relation with the level of education. The loose loop forms can be found in the handwriting of people with lower education as well as in that of people with higher education. This characteristic does not occur at all however in the handwriting of second or third generation Moroccan children in the Netherlands for whom Latin script was the basis of their writing skills. The presence of loose loops in someone's handwriting can

therefore indicate that this person learned how to write in another script (e.g. Arabic) and who subsequently was only basically taught how to write the letters of the Latin alphabet.

In the past few years a change in favour of Arabic has occurred in North-African countries. French has receded into the background, much to the regret of many teachers in secondary schools and universities in these countries. It is possible therefore that the handwriting feature discussed here will gradually disappear from the handwriting of people originating from these countries.

This characteristic can occasionally also be found in the handwriting of Dutch people who never learned another script but the Latin script. Possibly this characteristic is dysgraphical. The dysgraphical scale of the “Beknopte Beoordelingsmethode voor Kinderhandschriften – BHK” [1], mentions thirteen characteristics. One of these is the presence of “strange letter forms”. If in writing a letter certain parts appear which do not belong to the construction system of the letters of the alphabet we talk about “strange letter forms”. These letters deviate so much from the standard form that they no longer comply with the standard form.

Conclusions:

- The retouched loop forms can especially be expected in the writing of Moroccans born in Morocco who were first taught Arabic script (mainly originating from the South and the cities);
- It is reasonable to expect that the loop can also be found in texts written in Latin script by literate people in other former French colonies in North Africa and the Middle East;
- It is very well possible that the characteristic in question is also found with people who write Latin script but who originally were taught a script other than Arabic (and of course Latin);
- Finally, there is a small group of dysgraphical users of Latin script in whose handwriting the retouched loop forms can also be found. These people may originate in any country where Latin script is common. It appears that this group of writers can be distinguished from other groups due to other script characteristics.

References:

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