

**Marianna Massa**

**THE INFLUENCE OF EUROPEAN PUNCTUATION  
ON MODERN STANDARD ARABIC**

**ABSTRACT.** In this article, after briefly reviewing the development of Arabic punctuation since antiquity, we add some remarks about later Arabic punctuation in printed texts in Italy and France. Finally, we sum up the main contributions of the Arabic intellectuals of the *nahḍa* to the introduction of modern French punctuation in the Arabic language.

The integration of a marking system into Arabic was emblematic of this deliberate modernization effort. Drawing inspiration from European languages, especially from French, Arab scholars and linguists (Al-Ṭuwayrānī, 1893; Fawwāz, 2014; Zakī, 2013b) carefully examined and adapted this feature to suit the unique characteristics of Arabic language. The borrowing of elements from other languages reflected a willingness to adapt and evolve, thereby ensuring the language continuing relevance in a changing world.

**KEYWORDS:** Diachronic linguistics. Punctuation. Arabic language. Language contact.

***Introduction***

In this article, after briefly reviewing the development of Arabic punctuation since antiquity, we add some remarks about late Arabic punctuation in printed texts in Italy and France. Finally, we sum up the main contributions of the Arabic intellectuals of the *nahḍa* to introducing modern French punctuation in Arabic.

One hallmark of the stagnation of the Arabic language in the 18th century was the need for a marking system in Arabic (Mostafa, 2022). This deficiency hindered its adaptability and versatility to keep up with the modernization of the world.

The integration of a marking system into Arabic was emblematic of this deliberate modernization effort. Drawing inspiration from European languages, especially from French, Arab scholars and linguists carefully examined and adapted this feature to suit the Arabic language's unique characteristics. The borrowing of elements from other languages reflected a willingness to adapt and evolve, thereby ensuring the language's continued relevance in a changing world.

In the bilingual documents of the French expedition to Egypt, French punctuation was not translated into Arabic, and it continued to be largely omitted even after the expedition when the French took their press back to France. Yet there is extensive evidence that the introduction of modern punctuation into the Arabic language was influenced by the contact with the French language.

The first Arab intellectual who discussed the importance of modern punctuation, the Lebanese resident in Egypt Zaynab Fawwāz (1860-1914), drew a direct comparison with French punctuation in an article published in *Al-Fatā* magazine in 1893 (Fawwāz, 2014). The first Arabic intellectual to openly demand

the introduction of ‘Frank’ punctuation in the Arabic language (Zakī, 2013b), the Egyptian Aḥmad Zakī (1867-1934), also known as ‘the dean of Arabhood’, had studied in France, spoke French and was directly influenced by French language and cultural in his own intellectual career.

While Arabic had its own system of punctuation dating back to medieval times, it was not well-suited to meet the demands of modern literature and scholarly discourse. The arrival of French translations in the Arab world was instrumental in reshaping Arabic writing practices. French, with its meticulous and versatile system of punctuation, offered a novel way of structuring texts. This influence was particularly pronounced in the realms of journalism, translation, and literary criticism. The adoption of French-style punctuation enhanced the readability of Arabic texts and facilitated the dissemination of Western ideas and knowledge throughout the region. One key aspect of this transformation was the recognition of the versatility of punctuation marks, such as the comma, semicolon, and parentheses. These marks, which were either absent or used sparingly in classical Arabic writing, found their way into the mainstream as Arabic writers sought to emulate the fluidity and organisation of French texts. As a result, Arabic sentences gained a more

structured and layered quality, allowing for nuanced expression and improved comprehension.

The influence of French translations on the introduction of modern punctuation in 19th-century Arabic was a pivotal moment in the evolution of the language. It not only enhanced the readability and structure of Arabic texts but also catalysed a broader cultural transformation. This period of linguistic exchange and innovation laid the foundation for the Arab Renaissance and the continued development of Arabic as a modern and adaptable language. The legacy of this influence can still be seen today in the clarity and precision with which Arabic texts are written and understood.

After briefly retracing the history of punctuation in the Arabic language, we expound the debate about the borrowing of French punctuation that developed between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, and we observe how the introduction of modern punctuation is a result of contact with the French language.

### *Early Arabic Punctuation*

Before modern punctuation, the Arabic language had a system to mark the points of the text where a reader should stop and those where he should restart. Ancient Arab rhetoricians called it علم الوصل والفصل *ilm al-faṣl wal-waṣl*, the science of separation and conjunction (Ḥalmūz, 1991: 10). Moreover, there was a specific discipline, علم الوقف والابتداء *ilm al-waqf wal-ibtidā'* (the science of pausing and starting) that Quran reciters should study in order to learn when to stop and when to start. Based on alphabetical signs, this system appeared at the end of a long evolution of Arabic calligraphy, an evolution which coincided with the appearance of Islam in Mecca in 610 (Al-Dālī, 1996: 50).

Signs to mark the end of verses and signs to mark the different sections of the Qur'ān were added after the compilation of the holy text of Islam in the 9th century A.D. Pause signs, that initially indicated where it was allowed to stop (according to grammatical, semantic and metric reasons), later to indicate where linking the phrase, not pausing, is preferred and vice versa (Awad, 2015).

Ibn Al-Jazri (1350-1432) defined this system in his work *Al-Naṣr fī Al-Qira'āt Al-'Aṣar* (The Publication and the Ten Readings) published in the 14th century:

“It is the pausing of the voice on a word for a very brief period, in order to catch the breath, and then resume reading from the next word or the word that advances it” (cited by Mostafa, 2022).

The pausing signs were superscribed on certain words, and they could indicate whether a pause was obligatory, optional, or prohibited. The letter *mīm* superscribed on a word designated a mandatory pause, the letter *gīm* corresponded to an optional pause. The acronym with the two letters *ṣād* and *lām* meant ‘*al-waṣl awlā*’, i.e. it’s better to continue (Déroche, 1998: 54, 55).

The word *lā* لا (no) prohibited the pause; and the two consecutive signs [∴ ∴] on two different words signalled that the reader should take a pause on either of the two words (Mostafa, 2022).

We find these signs still used in the Quran, and they are non-phonemic while they are, for the most part, alphabetic. They are written in isolation above the line, only to show the reader where he can take a break without introducing semantic errors.

Fatma Mostafa (2022) observes that alongside these pausal signs, ancient authors invented abbreviations to organise the semantic structure of their texts. These

abbreviations, which she quotes from Ḥalmūz (1991), had similar functions to French punctuation. For example:

- the expressions ما نصه *mā naṣṣuhu* which means ‘literally’ and انتهى *intahā* which means ‘finished’ have the same function of quotation marks because they are used to integrate a quotation into the text;

- the expressions هلمّ جرّا *halumma ġarra* and إلى آخره *ilā ‘ḥirihi* which mean ‘et cetera’ are used to indicate a cancelled passage of the text, as does the ellipsis in French;

- the expression ما معناه *mā ma ‘anāhu* which means ‘that means’ designates the explanation of a term, as does the colon in the French system;

- the circle [O] separates sentences or parts of sentences as do the point, the comma or the semicolon in the French system.

The usage of this system was optional; each author was free to utilise its symbols or create new ones that were unique to his writing, and he was also free to explain what each symbol meant at the opening of his work. With the proliferation of books following the invention of the printing press and the rise in individualised reading, this considerable freedom in the marking system’s application contributed to the anarchy in the written system.

Later forms of punctuation are found in the multilingual book of proverbs collected by Timoteo Agnellini *Il minimo fra i Vescovi della Mesopotamia* [The least of the Bishops of Mesopotamia] published at the Seminario Press in Padova in 1688. The book includes texts in Italian, Latin, Persian, Ottoman Turkish and Arabic. The Arabic texts include the full stop to mark the end of a sentence or of a hemistich. Another symbol is found with the same functions, it looks like a spiral surrounded by five dots that, if connected, would form an upside down pentagon. In the last thirty pages of the book, where we find an Arabic text with the title *Qānūn Muḥtaṣar*, we can also see commas and colons. The commas are all directed from the left to the right, not the other around, as is the case in MSA, which means that at that time a type with an inverted comma was not available. In this text, asterisks are used to mark glosses.

### ***Punctuation in printed Arabic texts between Italy, France, and Egypt***

By looking at the Arabic official documents of the French Army in Egypt, we see that Napoleon's translators 'killed' punctuation.

Could it be that, when in Rome, Napoleon's troops had forgotten to take the fonts of punctuation marks when they looted the press of the *Congregatio De Propaganda Fide* to make their own Arabic press? We don't know this for sure. What we know is that, soon after the Egyptian campaign, when Sylvestre de Sacy published his compendium of Arabic literature for Arabic learners, *La Chrestomathie Arabe* (1806), that version, printed in Paris, shows some punctuation marks, such as the comma in the prose texts and a flower with six hooked petals to indicate the end of each verse in poetic compositions, but it does not follow the modern punctuation system.

After Napoleon's campaign in Egypt the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* in Rome had already reacquired some Arabic fonts and restarted to print Arabic translations. In 1827 they printed the Arabic translation of *Le Glorie di Maria Santissima* by Alfonso Maria de' Liguori (1827), bishop of Sant'Agata de' Goti; the translation was made by Massimo Mazlum, the Greek Melkite Archbishop of Myra (Lebanon) and it shows the use of full stops, stars with a point in the centre to mark the end of paragraphs as well as titles and the beginning and the end of poetic verses. We can see also semicolons, while the comma and other modern punctuation marks are absent.

Three years later, in an Arabic grammar written by Massimo Mazlum and published in Rome at his own expense by Francesco Bourlié (1830), an Italian printer of French descent, the end of paragraphs is marked either by asterisks, or sun-like marks with a circle surrounded by rays, or a third symbol that looks like a daisy surrounded by four arrow ends. In this printing, we also see the semicolon, but other modern punctuation marks continue to be absent.

Meanwhile in Egypt, Muḥammad Alī Bāša had founded the Būlāq press which he had ordered to translate and print many books that would serve to instruct the new generations of doctors, architects, military leaders, craftsmen, and technicians. The Būlāq press included 905 movable characters representing all the different positions of the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet, but it had no fonts for punctuation (Mostafa, 2022). As a result, the first books issued by the Būlāq press had no punctuation, as was the case for the printed documents brought by the French during their campaign. Most likely the reason for the missing punctuation marks in the first Egyptian state-owned press is that Nicola Massabkī, the craftsman of Syrian descent who was sent by the Egyptian *wālī* to Milan in 1815 to forge Arabic types for the Būlāq press, had overlooked punctuation marks.

Punctuation continued to be absent from books published in Egypt for the rest of the 19th century, although the comparison with French and other European languages led to the sparking of a debate about the need for introducing modern punctuation into the Arabic language in the last decade of the 19th century. After some confused and individual attempts to introduce punctuation in newspapers, the first concrete results of this debate, built upon a seventy-year span of translation and printing activities, were to be seen at the beginning of the 20th century.

### *The Arabization of French Punctuation in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

The introduction of punctuation in the Arab countries was a slow process that began in Europe in the 19th century and ended in the second decade of the 20th century.

Zaynab Fawwāz, the Lebanese writer residing in Egypt, was inspired by French punctuation and, in an article published in the Egyptian magazine *Al-Fatā* in 1893,<sup>1</sup> she suggested including it in the Arabic language:

---

<sup>1</sup> The article was later included in a book called *Al-Rasā'il Al-Zaynabīya* (Zaynab's letters) with other essays and articles by the same author. The article about the punctuation marks is in the 16th letter of the book.

«فالفرنساويون إذا كتبوا جملة تظهر للقارئ بشخصيتها وإشاراتها الدقيقة، وذلك بوضع علامات تدل معان خفية لا تظهر من تركيب الحروف فقط، كوضع الصفرين : إشارة للإيضاح وزيادة البيان، والألف والصفر ! علامة للتعجب أو للانفعال من أمر للاندھاش منه، أو للاشمئزاز أو للنداء، ووضعهم أيضًا هذه العلامة ؟ للاستفهام، والقوسان لجملة إذا حذفت من الكلام لا تضر بالمعنى.»

*[When the French write a sentence, they make sure that its meaning is clear for the reader with signs that indicate hidden meanings that cannot be conveyed by the use of letters only. For instance, they use the two zeroes [ : ] for an explanation, and the alif with a zero [ ! ], the exclamation mark, to indicate excitement as a result of astonishment or repugnance, or as a vocative sign. They also use the mark [ ? ] for questions and the two parentheses ( ) for sentences that, if omitted, do not interfere with the overall meaning (Fawwāz, 2014: 73)].*

The semicolon is called by Zaynab Fawwāz as ‘the two zeroes’, because the cipher of zero in Arabic ‘٠’ is a dot; the exclamation mark is called ‘an alif with a zero’, because the exclamation mark is formed by two signs one of which looks like the Arabic *alif* [ / ] while the other looks like the Arabic zero.

Fawwāz wrote that punctuation allows readers to easily comprehend texts without having to cognitively repeat entire words. Her attention to the ‘hidden meanings’ of punctuation undoubtedly stems from the fact that she values literature. She would have recognised the significance of using these ‘hidden meanings’ to describe emotions in plays and novels (Awad, 2015). She listed the following marks, some of which she translated into Arabic:

1. The two points (*al-ṣifrayn*) serve to explain a word or phrase.
2. The exclamation mark (*al-‘alif wa-ṣifr*) is used to express surprise, disgust (*al-iṣmi’ zāz*) or the vocative (*an-nidā’*).
3. The question mark (she did not give a name to this sign) is placed at the end of a question.
4. Brackets (*al-qawsān*) are used to enclose a phrase that, if omitted, does not change the meaning.
5. Ellipsis (*‘aṣfār at-ta’līq*): Fawwāz claims that they can be used at the end of a sentence when the rest of the phrase is clear from the context and does not need to be written, they can also be used in the middle of a sentence for the same reason or to omit unpleasant parts of the text (Fawwāz, 2014: 74).

Zaynab Fawwāz wrote in her letter that, although certain newspapers (whose names she doesn't mention) currently employ punctuation marks, the Arabic reader does not understand their meaning. She consequently invited the Arab intellectuals to conduct research on the issue and incorporate punctuation into Arabic. Fawwāz looked upon the Arabic language as a superior language, in comparison with European languages. Nevertheless, she recognized the fact that punctuation was a European characteristic that made the written language easier to read and understand,

and as such it would bring great benefits to Arabic writers and readers. Her letter is very short and lacks a methodological apparatus, yet Zaynab Fawwāz was the first Arab intellectual to call for the introduction of punctuation.

Soon after the publication of Zaynab Fawwāz's letter, her teacher Ḥasan al-Ṭuwayrānī, founder and editor of the Egyptian newspaper *an-Nīl* wrote a book on punctuation entitled *Kitāb ḥaṭṭ al-‘iṣārāt* [*The book of putting marks*] (1830) and mentioned the letter of his student in his introduction. Al-Ṭuwayrānī invented punctuation marks with different features than those of European punctuation because he did not want to borrow anything from European languages.

Al-Ṭuwayrānī compared punctuation, or as he called it *fann ḥaṭṭ al-‘iṣārāt* (the art of putting marks), to musical signs written in a musical score to guide the musician (Al-Ṭuwayrānī, 1893: 7-8). The 54 *‘iṣārāt al-mafāhīm* or ‘marks of concepts’ were supposed to guide the silent reader by segmenting sentences and expressing emotions such as surprise or questioning. These signs are the equivalent of European punctuation. The 17 *‘iṣārāt al-‘aṣwāt* or ‘marks of tones’ were supposed to guide the reader who would read aloud a text to an audience. They indicated the pauses and the speed of the reading process. The 14 *‘iṣārāt al-‘af‘āl* or ‘marks of actions’ were supposed to guide the reader aloud and serve to control his body.

Although his system was very detailed, it was disregarded, probably because the marks that he invented were too many and too complicated (Awad, 2015).

In 1911 another Arab intellectual, Ğurġī Zaydān, observed that the ‘Franks’ separated the sentences with points or signs that indicate the purposes of the writer, such as pauses, exclamations, interrogations, or the like, and signs to limit the sentences in objection, or to distinguish some cases (2013: 1470). A year later the first methodological study of modern Arabic punctuation was published by Aḥmad Zakī, ‘the dean of Arabhood’.

Following his diplomatic mission to France, and inspired by the marvels that he witnessed at the Universal Exposition, the Egyptian linguist Aḥmad Zakī wrote his travelogue *Al-Dunyā fī Bārīs* [The World in Paris], first published in 1900. In his first official attempt to use French punctuation in Arabic written texts, he introduces his book with a disclaimer:

*[As writing and thinking develop in our time, I thought that Arabic speakers should be introduced to the marks used in most European languages to guide the reader and indicate where he should make pauses, or continue reading, as well as when he should use an exclaiming tone or a questioning one, and so on. There is no doubt that these marks are an important guide to reading properly in a loud voice and avoiding confusion in sentences, as now happens in Arab printed texts, where the reader must read over and over the same sentence in order to know where it starts and where it ends.*

*Here is a brief list of these marks:*

*(-) This mark is found at the beginning of a line and it indicates the exchange of discourse between a talker and listener, it is also found in the middle of a clause and it indicates an incidental clause that is not connected to the context of a sentence, although it clarifies it should be remarked.*

*(.) The dot indicates the end of a clause or the end of a topic.*

*(?) It's the question mark.*

*(!) This expresses astonishment, confusion, swearing, invocation, warning, and so on.*

*(,) This is the mark for a short pause within one clause.*

*(;) This mark indicates a long pause within one clause or the separation among successive long clauses that are connected by the same meaning or concern the same topic.*

*(...) These dots indicate the suspension of discourse, the omission of a clause, a stop or embarrassment.*

*(:) This indicates an utterance, a quotation, a statement, a detail, and so on.*

*(“”) Famous verses or sayings, common expressions, proverbs, and so on should be written between these brackets. Also arabized words, as well as vernacular words should be put within these brackets (2013a: 9-10)].*

After this practical attempt to use punctuation in a printed text in the Arabic language, in 1912 Aḥmad Zakī wrote a treaty about punctuation which he entitled

*‘Al-Tarqīm wa ‘Ilāmātuhu fī Al-Luġa Al-‘Arabīya* [Punctuation and its Marks in The Arabic Language]. In this book, he studies and compares the ancient Arabic punctuation system الوقف والابتداء *al-waqf wal-ibtidā’* with the European punctuation system, and he claims that, due to the similarities between the ancient Arabic system and the modern French system, the latter could be well integrated into the Arabic language.

Zakī preferred to borrow foreign punctuation, without inventing a new system, since students in Egyptian schools were already learning this system in their studies of European languages, which would make the introduction of the same system in Arabic very smooth. Zakī presented this attempt in a work written in Arabic and published in 1912 by the National Egyptian Press, *al-maṭba‘a l-amīriya*, previously known as the Būlāq Press.

In his book about punctuation authored in 1912 and called *Al-Tarqīm wa ‘Ilāmātuhu Fī Al-Luġa Al-‘Arabīya* Zakī relies on the same list of punctuation marks that he used in the introduction to his travelogue, authored in 1900, *Al-Dunyā fī Bārīs* (Zakī, 2013a), but he also adds a tenth mark, the parenthesis. The book discusses the uses of European punctuation marks in the Arabic language, and it provides a detailed explanation of the rules that govern them and how they should be used in Arabic.

The main objective of the book is to guide Arabic-speaking writers and authors on how to use punctuation correctly and effectively in texts, whether in literary works, official documents, or any other type of text.

The work is divided into two chapters: the first provides an overview of the stages of the ancient development of Arabic writing which culminated with the invention of the marking system; the second chapter expounds the decline of this marking system and proposes the insertion of French punctuation marks into the Arabic language; it also lays out a detailed explanation of the borrowed punctuation marks and the rules that should be followed.

Awad (2015) argues that what motivated Zakī to introduce French punctuation into the Arabic language, was his will to resist the French colonial power and safeguard the Arabic identity. The ‘dean of Arabhood’ believed that punctuation marks would have made reading and writing in Arabic much easier, and according to Awad’s views, he was afraid that if this punctuation system had not been added to the Arabic language, Arab intellectuals would have started to write in colonial languages, such as French and English. His call for introducing French punctuation was not a blind imitation of a colonial Western invention, but the humble recognition

of a fault of his own language, Arabic, and a call for protecting this language from extinction through evolution.

This book has the novelty of being the first official and methodological attempt to translate and transpose French punctuation into written Arabic, and Zakī has both the merit of establishing this new arabized punctuation system, giving it a name and giving Arabic names to all the punctuation marks.

For ‘punctuation’ he uses the Arabic word *tarqīm* which indicates the insertion of ‘marks, signs and inscriptions that are used for writing, as well as the embroidery of garments’ (2013b: 12). His definition is inspired by one of the entries for the article of the root *ra-qāf-mīm* of *Tāğ Al-‘Arūs Min Ğawāhir Al-Qāmūs* (1998, 32: 372) where Al-Zabīdī reports that the trilateral verb *raqama* means ‘putting the dots on the letters’ as well as ‘embroidering garments with lines and marks’; in the same entry the passive participle *marqūm* collocates with *tawb* to indicate ‘an embroidered garment’.

Zakī introduced ten signs of French punctuation into Arabic, and he divided them into two groups based on their uses: pausal marks and semantic and intonation marks.

**Table 1 Aḥmad Zakī's proposal for punctuation marks**

Pausal marks	
‘	الشولة (al-šawla)
؛	الشولة المنقوطة (al-šawla al-manqūṭa)
.	النقطة (al-nuqṭa)
...	الشولة المثناة (al-šawla al-muṭannā)
Intonation marks and marks with a semantic load	
?	علامة الاستفهام (‘ilāmat al-istifhām)
!	علامة الانفعال (‘ilāmat al-infi‘āl)
:	النقطتان (al-nuqṭatān)
...	نقط الحذف والإضمار (nuqṭ al-ḥaḍf wal-iḍmār)
-	الشرطة (al-šarṭa)
" "	علامات التصيب (‘ilāmat al-taḍbīb)
( )	الفوسان (al-qawsān)

Zakī divides the pausal marks into three classifications with three different degrees. The first degree is marked by the comma, whose shape is inverted and reverted upwards so as to fit the need of the Arabic writing direction from the right to the left [‘]. Zakī names the comma *šawla*, which means ‘the point of the tail of the scorpion’ and he explains the choice of this name because of the similarity between

the shapes of the two elements, the point of the tail of the scorpion and the comma, and also because the Arab astronomers chose it to indicate the tail of the homonymous zodiac sign. The term was later changed to *fāṣila*, a term whose plural form *fawāṣil* was already in use in the Middle Ages to indicate the signs that indicated the separation between the Quranic verses, the *ḥadīṭ* and profane statements (Awad, 2015; Jaouhari, 2009). The singular feminine *fāṣila* also indicates every jewel that is placed between two pearls in a necklace (Ibn Manẓūr, 1981, 7: 3422-3424).

The ‘separators’ (*fawāṣil*) existed in the Arabic script before the revelation of the Holy Quran (Awad, 2015) and they were associated with rhymes marking the end of a verse in poetry. Also, Al-Ġāḥiẓ (died 868 AD) wrote that the end of a sentence in Arabic writings was marked by rhyme, and by a *fāṣila* in the Quran (Ḥasnāwī, 1973: 139).

The second-degree pausal mark is the full stop [ . ], a longer pause that separates two independent sentences. The same sign is also placed after abbreviations. Zakī doesn’t call it a ‘zero’ as Fawwāz did before; he translates the French point with the equivalent Arabic word *nuqṭa*, a term that survives until today.

The third and final degree of pausal mark Zakī mentions is the inverted semicolon [ ؛ ], whose graphic he adapts to the Arabic right-to-left script. Once again

he names this mark after its French name, although he doesn't use a calque and he calls it *šawla manqūṭa*, which literally means 'pointed comma', and it is not the literal translation of the French *point-virgule*. This intermediate pausal mark allows the reader to take his breath between sentences and parts of clauses that relate only semantically and not syntactically. These joined segments can be juxtaposed propositions; coordinate terms having a relation of comparison, similarity, division, or description; or explanatory propositions that announce the reason for the foregoing.

Zakī also proposed the 'dual comma', a mark to indicate the pause in prose that is formed by a comma between two dots [ .∴. ], but this sign did not survive.

The marks for the semantical organisation of the discourse and for the intonation have similar functions to their French correspondents. The question mark [?] is transposed into Arabic exactly as it is in French [?].

Mostafa observes that although Aḥmad Zakī had started to use French punctuation in his works, he was still confused about how to use it correctly. For example, in his speech entitled *Ibn Zaydūn*, which he gave at the Club of State Employees in Alexandria in 1914 and was later published in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Bayān*, the full stop is missing at the end of a number of paragraphs; also, a

number of declarative sentences end with a question mark, while interrogative sentences end with a full stop (Mostafa, 2022: 38-40).

Clearly, the practice of French punctuation in written Arabic was not easy at the beginning: the application of the same marking system in two languages of totally different origins was not at all a smooth process. Even after the first attempts to arabize French punctuation, its application remained uncertain and doubtful.

Egyptian government officials, among whom was the second secretary of the Council of Ministers Aḥmad Zakī, worked together to improve the printing press in the latter half of the 19th century. This team's new movable types were developed after many years of diligent work until they became officially approved by the government. The new press contained 178 movable characters: 132 characters for Arabic letters, 9 for numbers, 24 for signs determining the pronunciation of words (*niqāṭ aš-šakl*), and finally, 13 characters for French punctuation marks. Following this reform, education officials in Egypt mobilized to standardise the marking system recognized by all users of Arabic. Immediately, Aḥmad Hišmat, Minister of Education and Teaching at the beginning of the 20th century, commissioned Aḥmad Zakī to take charge of finding an adequate marking system to be applied in the Arabic language (Mostafa, 2022).

Aḥmad Zakī Bāšā has the merit of being the first Arabic linguist who wrote a whole book suggesting the introduction of French punctuation marks in Arabic written texts. His effort must be considered not only for the impact it had on the syntactic structure of the written Arabic language, but also for the terminological enrichment with which he contributed to the punctuation terminology of MSA, by inventing new terms that will become fundamental for future Arab writers up to today. Except for the *šawla* (comma) which is now called the *faṣla*, the *‘ilāmat al-infi‘āl* (exclamation mark) which is now called *‘ilāmat al-ta‘ğğub*, and the *‘ila ‘ilāmat al-tadbīb* (quotation marks) which are now called *‘ilāmat al-tanṣīṣ*, the other names that he chose are still used today.

On March 29, 1932 the Egyptian Ministry, according to an order of King Fouad I, issued a decree for the standardization of French punctuation in Arabic. The decree also stated the introduction of capital letters (*ḥurūf al-tağ*) for the Arabic language.

The decree was the result of a series of sessions in which language scholars and intellectuals exchange their ideas to implement the king’s will. An explanatory document about this decree was written by Abd Al-Qādir ‘Ašūr, a teacher at the Naṣiriya Amiriya school, and it was published by the Al-Misaḥa Printing House. The capital letters gradually became obsolete, while punctuation marks survived.

‘Ašūr did not cite the previous efforts of Aḥmad Zakī and did not specify that the proposed Arabic punctuation had been borrowed from French. However, as Mostafa (2022) observes, the punctuation of the 1932 decree corresponds almost totally to the punctuation proposed by Aḥmad Zakī. The decree introduced the uses of the ten marks that Aḥmad Zakī had already proposed, the shapes proposed for the comma and the semicolon are the same as proposed by Zakī, while the question mark in the decree has an inverted shape so as to fit the Arabic writing system from right to left (؟). Another difference is that Zakī allowed the dash, the ellipsis, the opening quotation mark or the open parenthesis to be at the beginning of the sentence, but according to the decree, only the opening quotation mark or parenthesis can be at the beginning of the line. We also find an additional use for the single hyphen [-], to separate the number of elements in an enumeration. Moreover, the 1932 decree does not differentiate between direct interrogation, which should end with a question mark, and indirect interrogation, which is considered a declarative sentence and ends with a period or a comma. Beside Mostafa’s observations, we see that the 1932 decree also accepted the nomenclature of the punctuation marks proposed by Zakī. Other than the comma which the decree turned from *šawla* to *fašla*, the exclamation mark that turned from *‘ilāmat al-infi‘āl* (the excitement mark) to *‘ilāmat al-ta’attur*

(the emotion mark) – and today is called *‘ilāmat al-ta‘ağğub* (the amazement mark) – the quotation marks that the decree turned from *‘ilāmat al-taḍbīb* (the ‘holding’ marks) to *‘ilāmāt al-tanṣīṣ* (the text quotation marks), the other names of punctuation marks of the 1932 decree are the same that were proposed by Zakī.

### ***Conclusion***

In this study we have retraced the history of Arabic punctuation marks from antiquity to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We have seen how the ancient punctuation and intonation system used in manuscripts disappeared from the first Arabic texts printed in Egypt by the French army, although in earlier Arabic texts printed in Europe some forms of modern punctuation existed. The process of introducing French punctuation into the Arabic language during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is a testament to the evolving nature of linguistic and cultural exchange. From Zaynab Fawwāz’s pioneering proposal in 1893 to Aḥmad Zakī Bāšā’s decisive effort in 1932, this debate reflected not only the complexities of linguistic adaptation but also the broader socio-cultural dynamics of the time. It demonstrated the interplay between tradition and modernity, as well as the influence of foreign languages on indigenous systems. The introduction of modern punctuation into Arabic was not merely an act

of borrowing but a manifestation of the interconnectedness of global cultures. As we look back on this historical progression, we see that linguistic evolution is shaped by the context in which it occurs, and it is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of languages in the face of change.

The history of punctuation in the Arabic language is rich and varied, marked by different systems and methods employed over centuries. In its earliest forms, the Arabic script had limited punctuation, relying heavily on context and the skill of the reader to interpret the text accurately. This traditional system served well for many centuries, but as Arabic-speaking societies began to engage more extensively with Western cultures, a need for a standardised and modernized punctuation system arose. This was the backdrop against which the debate over the introduction of French punctuation unfolded.

Zaynab Fawwāz's proposal in 1893 was a groundbreaking step in this direction. Her idea was bold and innovative, drawing inspiration from the French system. However, it was met with scepticism and criticism from some quarters, most notably from her mentor, Ḥasan Al-Ṭuwayrānī. He believed that her proposal, while well-intentioned, was too closely aligned with the French model, risking the erosion of

Arabic identity. This initial debate underscored the tension between preserving linguistic heritage and embracing modernity.

As the decades rolled on, the discussion surrounding Arabic punctuation continued to evolve. Scholars and linguists engaged in debates, weighing the pros and cons of adopting foreign punctuation conventions. The trajectory of this discourse was not linear; it zigzagged through periods of fervent advocacy for modernization and resistance to perceived Westernization. Amidst these debates, Aḥmad Zakī Bāšā's proposal emerged as a turning point. Though the 1932 ministerial decree in Egypt marked a significant moment in the standardization of modern Arabic punctuation, it did not mention Zakī Bāšā's contribution, leaving his pivotal role in the shadows.

As we reflect on this historical narrative, it reminds us that languages are not static entities but living, evolving systems that respond to the needs and influences of their speakers. The introduction of French punctuation into the Arabic language stands as a milestone in this ongoing journey of linguistic transformation. It symbolizes a bridge between two worlds, a testament to the enduring power of human communication, and an example of how languages adapt and thrive in the face of change.

## REFERENCES

- Al-Dālī, ‘. A. (1996). *Al-Ḥiṭāta Al-Kitāba al-‘Arabiya*. Al-Ḥanḡī.
- Al-Ṭuwayrānī, Ḥ. Ḥ. (1893). *Kitāb Ḥaṭṭ Al-‘Iṣārāt*. Maṭba'a Al-Nīl.
- Al-Zabīdī, M. (1998). *Tāğ Al-‘Arūs min Ġawāhir Al-Qāmūs*. The National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (Kuweit).
- 'Āšūr, ‘. A. (1932). *Ḥurūf Al-tāg wa-‘Ialamāt Al-Tarqīm wa-Mawāqi’ Isti’mālha*. Maṭba'a Al-Misāḡa.
- Awad, D. (2015). The Evolution of Arabic Writing Due to European Influence: The case of punctuation. *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 15, 117-136. 10.5617/jais.4650
- Déroche, F. (1998). “Les études de paléographie des écritures livresques arabes: quelques observations”. *Al-Qantara* (Madrid), 19(2), 365-381. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1305409809>.
- de Sacy, S. (1806). *Chrestomathie arabe, ou Extraits de divers écrivains arabes, tant en prose qu'en vers, à l'usage des élèves de l'École royale et spéciale des langues orientales vivantes*. France: De l'Imprimerie impériale, M. DCCC.VI. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015094043018>
- Fawwāz, Z. (2014). *Al-Rasā'il Al-Zaynabiya*. Hindawi Foundation.
- Ḥalmūz, ‘. A. (1991). *Fan Al-Tarqīm*. Dār 'Ammār Lil-Našr.
- Ḥasnāwī, M. (1973). Awwal man sammā Al-fāšila. *Mağallat Mağma ‘Al-Luġa Al-‘Arabiyya*, (31), 137-147.
- Ibn Manzūr. (1981). *Lisān Al-‘Arab*. Vol. 7. Dār Al-Ma‘ārif.
- Jaouhari, M. (2009). Notes et documents sur la ponctuation dans les manuscrits arabes. *Arabica*, 56(4), 315-359. 10.1163/057053909X12475581297443
- Liguori, A. M. de’, Mazlūm, M. (1827). *Le Glorie di Maria Santissima. Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide. Trad. dalla lingua italiana nell'idioma*

*arabo dall'ill.mo e r.mo monsignor Massimo Mazlum arcivescovo di Mira. Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide.*

Mazlum, M. (1830). *Grammatica generale della lingua araba: intitolata Radici e regole delle conjugazioni e declinazioni*, Francesco Bourlié.

Mostafa, F. (2022). L'intégration de la ponctuation française dans la langue arabe. *Alsun Beni-Suef International Journal of Linguistics Translation and Literature*, 10.21608/abjltl.2022.130778.1000

Zakī, A. (2013)a. *Al-Dunyā Fī Bārīs* (1900 ed.). Hindawi Foundation.

Zakī, A. (2013)b. *Al-Tarqīm Wa 'Ilāmātuhu Fī Al-Luġa Al-'Arabiya* (1912 ed.). Hindawi Foundation.

Zaydān, Ğ. (2013). *Tārīḥ Ādāb Al-Luġa Al-'Arabīya* ((1899) ed.). Hindawi Foundation.