On the evening of Thursday 10 February I hurriedly left my home to join what I thought would be the celebrations of Mubarak’s resignation. I had spent the whole day in Tahrir Square and then gone home at about five in the evening. But after watching a series of news reports and predictions suggesting that Mubarak would shortly make a speech in which he would announce that he was relinquishing power, I decided to return to the square so I could celebrate with the revellers there, because even though the revolution had spread across the whole of Egypt, the square had become its most potent symbol and icon.

On my way there, I felt I was in a different Egypt from the one I knew. Even the air I was breathing seemed different, without the usual reek of exhaust fumes. Out in the streets, I no longer felt the spirit of dejection and hopelessness that had become so all-pervasive over the past few years. It seemed as if the old world had moved aside, making way for a new, different world. Everybody was in a state of joyful euphoria as they waited for Mubarak’s speech to be broadcast; they believed this speech would be the one that confirmed the revolution’s success. In the taxi, the country’s former national anthem “Be peaceful, O Egypt” flowed from the cassette recorder, reminding me of the liberal Egypt which existed before the military regime. From distant Tahrir Square, the rhythm of enthusiastic singing and chanting reached my ears. In the square itself, everyday life had been replaced by a mood of celebration; the atmosphere was relaxed, filled with the near-certainty that the efforts of the past few weeks would be crowned with success in a few minutes’ time. At this moment, it seemed that the revolution was turning into a holiday: the glow of spotlights gave the square a special lustre; the singing was festive and passionate, as were the many lively discussions in which people enthusiastically attempted to predict how matters would eventually end.

After nearly two hours we started to become restless; we mocked the poor sense of timing of Mubarak and his apathetic regime. Afraid we would be unable to hear the speech clearly amid the noise and bustle in the square, we decided to look for the nearest cafe, so we could return to the celebrations as soon as the speech was over. We gathered around a taxi: the driver had opened all four doors, so we could listen to the speech on the taxi radio – the speech which dashed our hopes. As the former President started to tell us about all the things he had done for the nation since his youth, one of the people standing in our group started to attack the speech, mocking it as “prattling about reminiscences”. About twenty people were gathered in our circle that evening – most of them strangers, but all nervously waiting to hear the one concrete sentence that would clearly acknowledge our demands. Instead, they heard nothing but foolish chatter and deceitful prattle which attempted to avoid all genuine meaning and subvert self-evident facts.

Next to me stood a young man in his early twenties, wearing American jeans and a leather jacket in the latest fashion. His head was covered by a Palestinian keffiyeh, which gave...
him a suggestively revolutionary appearance without necessarily implying that he belonged to an old-style nationalist revolutionary cadre. He was excited and impatient as he followed Mubarak’s foolish twittering, which seemed to all of us to be meaningless. “Get to the point”, he kept repeating, in growing agitation – and then he started to rephrase each sentence as it was uttered, changing it to its true meaning. It was as if he was translating the corrupt language of complicity into another language: a clear, confident language which called things by their true names – a new language, the language of the generation to which he belonged. Before the speech came to an end he shouted out, with a world’s worth of determination in his eyes: “We may die in the square, but now we advance on Oruba Palace”. He uttered his cry as if the decision to continue the revolution was his alone, but the end of his shout coincided with the end of the speech, and behind us, the whole of Tahrir Square burst into excited shouting, ringing out in response to the ousted President’s contempt and evident failure to take the revolutionaries’ demands seriously enough. Although spontaneous, the reaction showed almost total harmony – with astonishing speed, the crowd divided into groups, one to take up position in the square, a second to advance on Oruba Palace, and a third to encircle the radio and television building. As I observed this young man’s determination – his confidence and the way his reaction harmonized with the reaction of the rest of the crowd in the square – I realized, in some mysterious way, that the end of Mubarak’s regime was closer than we had ever imagined, and that a new language was being born out of the revolution itself.

A Revolution against Language
I described how the young man, who defied Mubarak with a determination I had never seen before, was translating – or rather, decoding – Mubarak’s language, distilling it into its true meaning, devoid of masks and untruths. And now it seems to me that this is what the whole revolution was doing. Alongside the demands for a civilian democracy based on social justice, the revolutionaries achieved another aim, an aim they articulated clearly and rationally – the liberation of the Egyptian language from the decades of corruption and decadence with which it had become associated.

The revolution of 25 January – the “Day of Anger”, as it is often called – was not just directed against a repressive and corrupt regime which had attempted to silence, marginalize and impoverish the people. It was also a revolution against a corrupt, artificial and equivocal language (where the true meaning is the opposite of the apparent meaning) which has prevailed for decades. The era of Abdul Nasser was dominated by a language consisting of slogans which not only bore no relation to reality, but were also charged with an overpowering certainty. This was followed by the era of Sadat, characterized by an exceptionally heavy use of religious discourse in politics. The supposedly devout President played skillfully on the language of religion: as a young man he had been an amateur actor, and he made maximum use of intonation and body language. But even before this he had succeeded in firmly establishing rural community values across society as a whole, replacing state institutions with the family as institution and transforming himself into the patriarchal “head of the Egyptian family”, the one who determines issues of honour and dishonor; effectively, he raised the ethics of the village above the rule of law.

As for Mubarak’s regime, which lasted for thirty years, it showed neither enough originality nor sufficient creativity to come
up with anything new. Mubarak simply took advantage of his predecessors’ legacy, taking it to new extremes in the process. This became especially apparent during the early days of the revolution prior to 25 January, when the pro-Mubarak media attempted to portray him as the patriarchal father of a great family, shocked by the disobedience of his children (the people in revolt) and wishing only to re-establish the “security and stability” of the family home (the Egyptian nation).

Just like Sadat, Mubarak sought inspiration in pseudo-democratic play-acting and sham political parties, and used his publicity machine to promote the notion that Egypt was living in a “Golden Age of Democracy”. The process of perverting language continued unabated, transforming the dominant discourse in Egypt into a language of corrupt collusion – but then, corruption had become the backbone of the state and its institutions. This culture of corruption dominated every aspect of daily life, so very few people were surprised when they learned of the many cases of corruption which leaked out once Mubarak was ousted.

The Mubarak era has proved beyond any reasonable doubt that language can become a partner in corruption, conniving with complicity and becoming persistently evasive, leaving the truth to flounder in darkness. Typically, language is not particularly vulnerable to rapid social change, but in the political and media-related discourse which prevailed in Egypt, there is ample evidence to demonstrate the impact of widespread corruption – especially in terms of linguistic fragmentation, where words are deliberately scrambled and acquire contradictory meanings. Sometimes the evidence is very clear, sometimes it is more elusive. For example, if we consider certain terms with opaque meanings, such as “debt rescheduling” or “investors delaying payments”, we find that they are terms which attempt to embellish or minimize corrupt activities. They are used most frequently to describe the thieving businessmen who stole millions – sometimes billions – from Egyptian banks and were subsequently described as “investors in arrears” rather than as thieves absconding with bank funds. Thus the prevailing culture of corruption invented its own language, which feigned objectivity whilst actually indulging in fraud and deceit.

The corruption of our language has taken place steadily and systematically by various means, including: giving new meanings to everyday expressions, blocking all discussion of language as a moral medium (with an implicit conscience); using words incorrectly; using deceptive wordplay, and using words in non-neutral contexts. These mechanisms were also used extensively during the days of the revolution, and combined with all the disruptions, tensions and predicaments of the regime which had been so forcibly exposed to the world, ultimately resulted in a babble of confused, broken-down pronouncements which appeared to mean one thing but actually meant precisely the opposite.

Two Discourses
The revolution of 25 January witnessed a conflict between two discourses. The first discourse was vigorous, modern and open to the world; the second was fabricated, self-contradictory and confused. The revolution exposed the huge gap yawning between the young people who started the revolution and the regime which, under Mubarak, quite simply failed to understand the language or mentality of these young people, submerging itself instead in accusations dug
up from the distant past, such as unrest in the labour force, treason, and foreign conspiracies aiming to undermine the nation. In the process, ridicule emerged as a primary weapon, used skillfully and mercilessly by the revolutionaries to refute all these accusations and make the accusers themselves look stupid – like primitive cavemen, far removed from the spirit of the times.

The regime and its media played on such concepts as fear for Egyptian stability and threats to national security – ideas that were heeded by a generation of middle-class parents. But the young people and those who joined them as time went on were not listening. The regime and its official media never woke up to the fact that the new generation had a fundamentally different image of Egypt and the nation as a whole. According to their image, the nation was not simply an idol upon whose altar dictatorial regimes could command us to sacrifice our freedom. This concept of Egypt – or more specifically, of Egypt’s security and stability – was used to oppress the people for decades, but in the end, those who resorted to these methods forgot that Egypt the nation is not just a plot of land in a fairy tale location, consisting entirely of history and ancient monuments. No, Egypt is a nation of people – Egypt is comprised of Egyptians who, as individuals, conceive and co-create the nation, both as an idea and as an actual physical place where people can live, for which it is worth making genuine sacrifices. The nation as a whole is an entity capable of providing its citizens with security, a decent life, and freedom – this, at least, is the view of Egypt held by the majority of the younger generation. As far as the revolutionaries were concerned, Egypt meant something different from what it meant to the regime and the regime’s spokesmen. Despite the differences between the various groups from which they were formed, the revolutionaries regarded the Egypt which they desired, of which they dreamed, as a modern, democratic state which respects its citizens – not as some kind of absolutist ideology which insists on keeping its citizens in chains. By contrast, all that the regime saw in Egypt was Mubarak, the much-needed Pharaoh, sincere and inspiring – or at least, this was the view they attempted to impose, by giving the nation the impression that the only choices were between Mubarak and his regime, or absolute chaos.

Throughout the days of the revolution, the regime succeeded neither in deciphering the language of young people, nor in understanding the key issues which might influence them, especially in the light of the disastrously negative impression made by all the violence and brutality which, despite all, failed to intimidate them. Meanwhile the revolutionaries were busily decoding the regime’s signals and the special terminology used in the regime’s “messages”, swiftly dismantling them and then making a mockery of them in a game which sometimes closely resembled the rituals whereby Egypt’s people had been humiliated by the regime in the past. Part of Tahrir Square was effectively converted into an alternative street theatre, a broad carnival ground for people who had, for so long, been denied ownership of the streets and squares of the city by the ever-present threat of the security forces.

Despite the differences between the various groups from which they were formed, the revolutionaries regarded the Egypt which they desired, of which they dreamed, as a modern, democratic state which respects its citizens.

Three Speeches, Increasing Rage
In his first speech, Mubarak seemed unable to appreciate the significance of what was happening. Unable to grasp its true scope, he wallowed in artificially constructed phrases lifted from previous speeches. Wearing a sullen, threatening expression, he described the revolution as riots jeopardizing the rule
of law – nor did he neglect to play variations on the already clichéd theme of the “Golden Age of Democracy”, claiming that these demonstrations could not have taken place were it not for the freedom of opinion and expression that characterized his reign. In contrast to Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who told his people “I have understood you” – a statement containing the implicit admission that he had previously failed to understand them – Mubarak displayed a much more pronounced degree of fecklessness and prevarication when he claimed that every hour of every day, he was aware of the people’s legitimate aspirations; that he had understood the people’s aspirations and concerns since first he came into office. In truth, this meant he deliberately ignored the significance of the revolution and the justification for it, stating instead that the revolutionaries would not achieve their demands by resorting to violence, just as if it was the people who had perpetrated the violence and killed the dozen who fell on that day (the “Friday of Anger”) and not his own regime which had attacked the people with unprecedented savagery.

The arrogance displayed in Mubarak’s speeches; his stubborn refusal to recognize his own mistakes; his adherence to clichés such as “the subversive minority” and “his regime’s support for the poor”; his failure to apologize for the martyrs who had fallen in the fighting – this arrogance was the fuel which fed and fanned the flame of revolution. Every time Mubarak or those symbolizing his regime made such an error, the revolutionaries extended and radicalized their demands still further. In his very first speech, Mubarak appeared like some tragic “hero”, a figure who had fallen behind the times and lost the ability to understand or listen to the demands of the present era. It was as if he was searching for friends among the faces of the angry revolutionaries challenging “his people” (by which he meant the people he knew). When Western leaders subsequently urged him to introduce more democracy, he told them “You do not know the Egyptian people as I do.”

In his second speech, perhaps because he had now realized that he did not speak the language of the revolutionaries – and they did not speak his – he concentrated instead on neutral groups and elements who, while they might sympathise with the revolution, were not yet demonstrating in the streets and squares. He played on their feelings using techniques of emotional blackmail – up to and including pleading, as he spoke of his wish to die and be buried in the soil of Egypt. He also played on what is, for Egyptians, a sensitive issue – respect for the elderly – presenting himself once again (expressing even greater anguish than before) as the father of the Egyptian family, the guarantor of safety and stability, the one who had been charged with this duty without having sought out this burden of his own accord. This speech succeeded in exerting a significant influence on a large section of the Egyptian population, who in that moment saw Mubarak as a defeated old man who had responded to his children’s demands – who had decided not to put himself up as a candidate at the end of his presidential term and was striving for a peaceful transfer of power.

“What more could you want?” was the question echoed by many people the morning after Mubarak’s second speech. But then they were obliged to observe the paradoxical truth – on the next day after each of Mubarak’s two speeches, the regime committed crimes that were even more heinous than before. After his first speech, following the abrupt withdrawal of
the police and security services, prisoners were released and the regime’s hired thugs carried out widespread robbery and looting, causing the people to lose their trust in Mubarak and his regime as never before. After his second speech, camels, horses and Molotov cocktails were used to carry out a barbaric attack on the demonstrators in Tahrir Square in an event subsequently referred to as Bloody Wednesday. It was as if we were being attacked by a gang in the literal sense of the word – a gang with more than one leader, all of them with different – even contradictory – agendas. Naturally enough, chaos was the inevitable result.

The events of Bloody Wednesday had the positive effect of neutralizing the emotional blackmail that Mubarak had successfully used on so many people in his second speech. But it was Wael Ghanim who most fully undermined the Mubarak’s influence. He was one of those who had been calling for a revolution from the very start, on his Facebook page entitled “We are all Khaled Said”. During an interview on popular TV programme Ten p.m., Ghanim’s tears and evident fragility were the talisman which broke the spell cast by Mubarak’s emotional blackmail, by means of which he had succeeded in turning some of the ordinary people against the revolutionaries. In his first appearance on television, Wael Ghanim presented us with a new model for heroism that is the very antithesis of the concept of heroism in the Arab tradition. And in doing so, gained our overwhelming sympathy.

But going back to Mubarak’s speeches: it was the third speech – the one described as “reminiscences” by the young man near Tahrir Square – which most grated on people’s nerves and provoked their rage, because the deposed President wallowed in folk-tale-inspired fantasies as he attempted to “remind” his audience of all that he had given Egypt and its people, while his listeners anxiously waited for the single sentence confirming that he would step down. In this speech, Mubarak appeared to lay aside his arrogance and pride and – as he himself put it – made the speech “which a father addresses to his sons and daughters”!

Once again he reverted to his strategy of acting as head of the Egyptian family, in a way which Sadat himself might have envied. Indeed, the promises made by Mubarak in this speech might have served to calm people down in the early days of the revolution. But as usual, his assessment of the situation and his timing were both wrong, so each speech he made reflecting such errors and misjudgments simply increased the protesters’ determination and fanned the flames of their anger. In the light of his many mistakes, and the way they all seemed to work to the benefit of the revolutionaries, it was only natural that after Mubarak’s fall, a popular joke suggested that “The revolution succeeded thanks to the President’s guidance!”, referring of course to his misjudgments…

**The Language of Revolution**

Mubarak’s speeches also shaped the way the official media treated the revolutionaries. After the first speech the regime’s media puppets echoed the ousted President, accusing the protesters of rioting, jeopardizing the country’s stability and spreading violence. After the second speech all the pro-regime media people – as well as Omar Suleiman – swung behind the theory of the “subversive minority”, claiming that although the revolution was started by honest people, they were subsequently exploited by saboteurs with foreign agendas, who had stolen the revolution out from under them.

This period saw the highest level of confusion and contradiction, in the sense that meaning was sacrificed and much of what was said was
transformed into sheer nonsense. Thus the President’s speech vilifying the revolution was incoherent, self-contradictory and alarmingly misleading. Typically, we would hear officials, media representatives and so-called “strategic experts” utter two consecutive but contradictory sentences, the first praising the young people who had started the revolution, extolling their enthusiasm and their concern for the nation’s welfare, the second accusing the revolution of following a foreign agenda and of being hijacked by “terrorists” who were conspiring against Egypt. Sometimes these speakers would express respect for the young revolutionaries and condemn the revolution in one and the same sentence, until their language gave listeners the strong impression that they were more or less blatantly pleading for respect. This in turn caused us to seek for true meanings and forced us to use our minds.

In official “communications”, the talk was all about the revolutionaries’ foreign agendas, about how they were agents of Iran, Hamas, Hizbollah, Israel and America – often at one and the same time! – and accusing them of betraying the “homeland” in exchange for a Kentucky Fried Chicken meal and a couple of hundred euros. Over and over again, the mouthpieces of the regime repeated these ingenuous accusations, as if they could turn lies and nonsense into facts by sheer repetition. Similarly, sheer absence of imagination called forth an arsenal of accusations based on worn-out fears from the past, while those who made them failed to recognize that they were confronting a genuine, nationwide revolution which expressed the will of every part of the people; failed, in fact, to understand that they should deal with the revolution on this basis rather than ignoring it and treating Egyptians as if they were a nation of mercenaries and traitors. Finally, sheer absence of moral conscience prompted them to fabricate lies or at best resort to half-truths in their efforts to deceive and turn ordinary people against the revolutionaries, even thought the latter were seeking a better tomorrow for all, no matter what the cost.

The language of the revolutionaries and protesters, on the other hand, was a young, confident language, simultaneously satirical and transparent, calling a spade a spade. As the revolution became a reality, so the revolutionary language took shape and demands matured in a way that surprised everybody, not least the revolutionaries themselves. I do remember that the preliminary list of demands, which made the rounds on Facebook a number of days before 25 January, never predicted all the things which subsequently took place. Although the planned event had been christened “The revolution of 25 January”, the written demands were modest compared to what the real-life revolution demanded and subsequently accomplished. One of the most prominent of them, for example, was that the minimum wage should be raised, provoking a friend of mine into republishing the statement on his own web page, this time preceded by the words “O you charitable people, revolutions do not ask for the minimum wage to be raised; rather they demand the return of power!”

But what we saw on 25 January in Tahrir Square – and Suez and other parts of Egypt – was truly remarkable. It epitomized the elegant but simple slogan “The people want to overthrow the regime” as well as the accompanying slogan “Peaceful… peaceful”, which together summed up the aim of the revolution and its moral message. There was a determination to act in a non-violent way and uphold civilised behavior no matter how brutal the regime might become: this is what happened, and it earned
the Egyptian revolution the world’s support and respect. On the day now known as Martyrs’ Friday, nearly five million demonstrators filled Tahrir Square and the surrounding streets. Their morale was very high, and the hearts and minds of all were with those who were advancing towards Oruba Palace. Yes, there was a tacit fear that the Republican Guard would retaliate violently against the demonstrators, resulting in a new massacre, but the scene turned into one of the most wonderful sights in the entire revolution as the revolutionaries threw the roses they had brought with them to the Republican Guards surrounding the palace. No sooner had they done this than the Guards returned the salute in an even more impressive manner – by turning their tanks’ gun muzzles away from the revolutionaries and towards the Palace!

But were the revolutionaries really unarmed? As a matter of fact, they were armed with the power of imagination, of language, and above all with the weapon of biting satire, which was both very sharp and very intelligent. Through clever, humorous songs, through sketches transferred from Tahrir Square directly to cyberspace, through witty banners and scathing jokes, the revolutionaries succeeded in caricaturing the figures who represented the regime, chief among them Mubarak. They played on the gaps and inconsistencies in the speeches made by those in power, swiftly composing and spreading songs and jokes about foreign agendas, subversive minorities and KFC meals – and the disconcerted regime had neither the ability nor the imagination to respond to them or deal with the situation. By playing the card of creativity and an imagination freed from nationalist prejudices and worn-out clichés, the children of globalization and cyberspace succeeded in formulating a message in their own likeness. The extreme quick-wittedness and originality of the message exposed the absurdity and inadequacy of official government communications as never before. Of course I know that the Egyptian revolution extended far beyond the original imaginings of those who planned it, stretching across the nation as a whole, reaching people of all religions, classes and inclinations. But the young people bore the greatest burden in terms of promoting the revolution and preserving its fresh, original language and voice.

The language of the regime revealed the contradictions and bewilderment of the regime, while the language of the revolutionaries was new and unprecedented, showing that they had moved beyond a number of basic concepts firmly rooted in Egyptian culture, such as family values and hierarchical structures – values associated with what might be termed a village morality. The language of the Egyptian army was initially vague and neutral, but day after day, the signals it sent out to the people steadily became more reassuring. The language of the army was entirely consistent with the gradual escalation of the army’s own position. In the early days of the revolution Egyptians became used to receiving short, ambiguous text messages on their mobile ‘phones from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, such as “We appeal to all honest citizens to combine their efforts to bring our homeland to a safe haven” and “We call upon the citizens to establish an appropriate climate for managing the country’s affairs”. These messages neither explained where the safe haven was, nor how it was to be reached amidst the gratuitous daily violence perpetrated by the authorities; neither did they explain what the appropriate climate was, nor why the citizens alone should be obliged to establish it.

As time passed, however, the language of the army abandoned its caution and became both clearer and more sympathetic to the people, although it maintained the same calm tone: “The Supreme Council has understood your demands and the authorities concerned have been instructed to satisfy them at the appropriate time.” This was the last message I received on my mobile, while I was writing these lines. Our “demands” are clear and well-known, because the revolution took place in order to establish a modern civilian state. The army was the first to recognize this because – to its credit – it was more in tune with the new
language created by the revolutionaries and, unlike Mubarak and his regime, made an effort to swiftly learn and understand this language. Otherwise how can we explain the fact that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces opened its own official Facebook page once the revolution had succeeded, with the aim of disseminating information and communicating with young people through Facebook?

… finally, far removed from the connivances, tricks and treacheries of language, the coming days continue to be the most significant, the most momentous, in the 25 January revolution, because they will make clear to us whether the army really has understood the language and demands of the revolutionaries, or whether it is simply procrastinating in order to preserve the last, discredited remnants of the regime.

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