Ta'āruf

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MOST readers of this journal will not have seen this word before. How, then, can it claim a spot in this Keyword issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture*? How can a non-English word—not even a loan word in English—become an English keyword? *Ta'āruf*'s presence here can be justified through the now less-familiar definition of the term "keyword" itself: "a word that serves as the key to a cipher or code."[1] A loan word from Arabic, in Persian *ta'āruf* means pleasantries, greetings, and hospitality, on one hand, and gift-giving, on the other.[2] Conjoining a sense of linguistic surplus and gift exchange, *ta'āruf*, I argue, serves as a key to decipher some complications at the intersection of economic and linguistic exchange in Victorian literature and culture. As such, it also establishes that "Victorian" culture emerges out of transnational bargains of exchange and translation.

When in 1887 Edward Granville Browne—a major Orientalist and a leading Cambridge Persianist—was spending a year in Persia, he made an intriguing observation, ironically not about the Persians but about his fellow European travelers. Responding to volumes of travelogues written before his own, Browne notes that Europeans traveling in Persia had often complained that the Persians expect money in return for the gifts that they offer.[3] Of reference here is the wave of British travelers who went to Persia on diplomatic, commercial, and missionary duties on behalf of the British government or the East India Company throughout the nineteenth century. Responding to their recurrent complaint, Browne claims that the travelers have failed to understand that gifts offered from someone "of distinctly lower rank than oneself is merely tantamount to a declaration that he is willing to sell or exchange the article in question."[4] The confusion and hence the complaint are due to travelers' failure in distinguishing different modes of exchange, particularly gift exchange from commodity exchange. A confusion

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about which *ta'āruf* might provide a key, not for solving but for explaining it.

Browne defuses travelers' protests through an allusion to the Bible: Abraham's purchase of Ephron's cave, whose negotiations began with an offer of gifting—a "figure of speech," according to Browne—to kick off the bargaining. In use since the times of Abraham, such "euphemisms" in speech have been accompanying the act of exchange performed by all people.[5] Having established this long-standing and widespread—almost universal—linguistic surplus in economic exchange, Browne attends to the particularity of the case in the Persian language. He enumerates several words that refer to gift-giving in Persian and focuses on three: *ta'āruf, in'ām,* and *pish-kesh.*

Pish-kesh is defined as a gift offered to a traveler by "a peasant, servant, muleteer, gardener, or the like." Because of the difference in status, *pish-kesh* always entails an expectation of money in return, in Browne's evaluation. *In'ām* stands on the other end of the spectrum and is rendered as a gift given by a "superior" to an "inferior." The third term, *ta'āruf,* implies social parity: "a present given to some one of about the same social rank as the donor." "Sometimes, however," Browne introduces a caveat, "[*ta'āruf*] is used by one who, while desirous of receiving the monetary equivalent of that which he offers, does not wish to admit his social inferiority to the person to whom the present is offered by using the term *pish-kesh.*"[6] Travelers' confusion stems right here from *ta'āruf.* Because there are times when *ta'āruf* can expect a return despite what it expresses, it *always* occasions the possibility of both gift-giving and a polite form of (commodity) exchange. Those "times" that sometimes occur, though, cannot be excepted—as Browne intends to—because they remain essential to the definition of *ta'āruf.* Giving is not tantamount to a declaration, as Browne sought to render it, and the status of the giver does not always translate into a given category of exchange.

Signifying pleasantries as well as gift-giving, the notion of *ta'āruf* recognizes a linguistic surplus as integral to the act of gift-giving. The peculiarity of the Persian *ta'āruf* lies in that it actually names a long-standing and yet nameless "figure of speech." But if Browne refers us to the Bible to explain the travelers' confusion, it is in the Qur'ān that we can find a potent subtext for the term in its original Arabic: "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another [*li-ta'ārafū*]."[7] The verb *ta'ārafū* is related to the verbal noun *ta'āruf,* which in Arabic means "getting to know one another" and in Persian gains new meanings that

pertain to the components of that first encounter, namely pleasantries and gift-giving.[8]

Now let me turn back to the British context but a century before Browne. When Edmund Burke was preparing for Warren Hastings's impeachment in 1787, he, like Browne, encountered a confusion among British administrators, this time in colonial India. Here, though, the term *pish-kesh* draws the main attention. Burke tried to distinguish the Persian *pish-kesh* from *reshveh* (bribe) by means of their "correct" translations into English. If rendered accurately in English, he argued, it becomes clear that they are "as much distinguished from [one another] as, in the English language, a fine or acknowledgment is distinguished from a bribe."[9] Correct translations of these terms, with their rising currency in British India, Burke hoped, could reveal the systemic corruption of the East India Company. Burke rightly noted that the confusion about these forms of exchange rested in a linguistic/translational problem. What he missed, however, was that the linguistic problem is not contained in the names of those exchanges. It rather lies for the most part in the language that surrounds the exchange, in greetings and pleasantries, in figures of speech, in short, in *ta'āruf*. The problem that Burke sought to solve only deepens in the following century when terms of exchange are increasingly scrutinized for utmost transparency in the Victorian period. In such a context, *ta'āruf* provides a lens to read negotiations in exchange anew, not only in Victorian-era travelogues but also in novels such as Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), where gifts are prohibited because "everything was to be paid for," and yet they are given and taken between characters (between Louisa and Stephen, for example) hiding beneath a thick linguistic layer and intense bargaining over the names of exchange.[10]

While the intersection of the economic and the linguistic has been the subject of vibrant conversation in Victorian studies, *ta'āruf* helps us attend to a particular and yet explosive corner of that intersection: the relationship between pleasantries and exchange; euphemisms that might cast a loan as an act of charity, a commodity as a gift, a bribe as a legitimate exchange, rendering all those categories always and essentially blurred. *Ta'āruf* lends itself as a keyword on loan to decipher something about the fundamental confusion in loan, charity, gift, and commodity, all of which are keywords in their own right. It proposes that keywords in Victorian studies take shape in economic, cultural, and translational negotiations with keywords in other languages.

Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s. v. "Keyword," accessed January 7, 2023, www-oed-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/312961.
2. Moḥammad-ʿAli Dāʿi-al-Eslām, *Farhang-e Nezām* (Hyderabad, 1927–39), 240.
3. Edward Granville Browne, *A Year amongst the Persians* (1893; London: Century, 1984), 73.
4. Browne, *A Year amongst the Persians*, 73.
5. Browne, *A Year amongst the Persians*, 74.
6. Browne, *A Year amongst the Persians*, 74.
7. *Qurʾān* 49:13.
8. Tariff comes from the same Arabic root of *ʿarafa* (to know), which means "definition" in the original Arabic.
9. Peter James Marshalls, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 171.
10. Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854; New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 228, 130.