

3

Syrian Protestant College
and the Exportation
of America

One goal of this chapter is to show how Syrian Protestant College's (SPC's) curricular and language policy decisions complicate rhetoric and writing studies' Harvard narrative, which I discuss in Chapter 1. A more important goal of this chapter is to reveal how transnational and translingual discourses circulating outside of SPC prompted within it specific curricular and policy changes rooted in specifically American nationalist and monolingual ideologies. The existence of transnational and translingual discourses—hidden in the majority of rhetoric and writing studies' disciplinary histories—highlights the colonial underpinnings of the history of writing instruction, not only outside of North America but also inside of it. Perhaps anticipating critiques such as mine, Horner and Trimbur (2002) called for the “develop[ment] [of] an internationalist perspective capable of understanding the study and teaching of written English in relation to other languages and the dynamics of globalization” (p. 624). In this chapter, I answer this call by examining SPC's evolving language policies, curriculum, and extracurriculum. The evidence I present illustrates, first, that colonial epistemology served as a foundation for multiple, seemingly contradictory justifications for the medium of instruction (which was initially Arabic and later changed to English).¹ Second, I offer a provocative complication of Horner and Trimbur's (2002) assertion that languages other than English were pushed aside during the shift to the modern liberal arts curriculum by showing that multiple languages remained at the heart of SPC's curriculum. I argue that English, even as it gained prominence in SPC's curriculum as the medium of instruction in the 1880s, did not carry universal or uniform power. Finally, I offer implications of this chapter's historical account that links to the work of contemporary writing instructors, program administrators, and researchers.

Spack's (2002) exploration of Indigenous students' use of English in U.S. government schools and beyond—which she labeled translingual a decade

1 Jimenez (2023) arrived at a similar conclusion in her analysis of two differing approaches toward language policy in Filipino educational contexts during colonization: The first approach, under Spanish colonization, favored the vernacular, whereas the later approach by the US. sought to eliminate the vernacular and instituted English-only education. Both approaches, Jimenez argued, are inherently colonial (p. 113).

earlier than the term gained popularity in rhetoric and writing scholarship (see Chapter 2)—demonstrates that language use, even in highly oppressive contexts, provokes multidirectional change. In the American context of settler colonialism, “English-language teaching served to reinforce the United States government’s linguistic, cultural, political, and territorial control over Native people” (Spack, 2002, p. 38). At the same time, Indigenous people “used English to speak for themselves and represent their own lives [They] manipulated the English language for their own purposes and played with it [They] took ownership of English to fashion a critique of a monolithic European American world view” (Spack, 2002, p. 112). In the context of SPC, where languages other than English remained a part of everyday communication as well as the curriculum, students and faculty alike continuously negotiated English and what it signified. As we can see here and in the chapters that follow, this negotiation changed students, administrators, faculty, and the institution itself.

The archives suggest that the issue of language(s)—including which language(s) should be taught and why, the effect of language(s) on students’ identities, and the power and cultural value attached to language and education—was of central concern to the college’s founders, ultimately determining the pedagogical approaches taken and curricular decisions made at SPC in its early years. Indeed, the founders’ attitudes about and personal experiences with language learning and its politics, particularly in relation to the multi-sectarian, multicultural, and multilingual context of the region, shaped language policies and curriculum at SPC.

This chapter denaturalizes the role that English has played in the history of rhetoric and writing studies. In other words, this historical account resists taking English as a “given” in the history of the discipline. Instead, I argue, study of SPC’s curriculum and language policy highlights the ways in which English has always interacted with multiple languages and transnational perspectives, even in seemingly monolingual contexts of writing pedagogy. This argument supports a larger claim: Language policy and curricular decisions within institutions have always been constructed in relation to transnational and translanguing discourses in or outside of those institutions, even when those discourses are suppressed. The constructed power of English, in other words, is deeply related to its positioning alongside other languages. This chapter takes up Cushman’s (2016) questioning of the discipline’s “presumption that *English* is the *only* language of knowledge making and learning” (p. 234). Ultimately, this chapter reveals the pluriversal understandings of our history, present, and future that become possible when English is made *visible* as one of many languages at work, both in and outside of the US.

Shifting from Arabic to English at SPC

At the college's inception, SPC's American missionary founders wrote and translated textbooks for and taught their courses in Arabic. But in 1880 for the Collegiate and Preparatory Departments and in 1887 for the Medical Department, the language of instruction at SPC officially shifted from Arabic to English. In 1902, at the end of his 35-year tenure as founder and president of SPC, Daniel Bliss remarked that, "[i]n the intellectual development of the College, the most important step was the change of the language of instruction from Arabic to English" (*Annual Reports*, p. 225). Examining the decisions of SPC to change the language of instruction in relation to the specific context in which the shift took place underlines You's (2010) critique that American rhetoric and writing scholars generally lack "cognizan[ce] of the geopolitical differences and stakes involved in the teaching of English writing" (p. xi). Indeed, the complex multilingual, multicultural, and sectarian context of Beirut and greater Syria suggests that there is much for rhetoric and writing scholars and practitioners to learn from SPC's decision to move from Arabic to English instruction in the 1880s about the colonial epistemology underlying literacy curriculum.

What is the significance of the region's sociopolitical history to SPC's decision to teach in English instead of in Arabic? In contrast to You's (2010) history of the teaching of English in China, which suggests that English was often disconnected from and irrelevant to larger Chinese culture, decisions to teach (in) any language, including English, at institutions of higher education in Syria were deeply intertwined with the ever-evolving political and cultural landscape of the Ottoman Empire around the turn of the 20th century. The language of English as the medium of instruction pointed to an imagining of the West that was deeply connected to empire and colonialism. Languages carry a different value, or weight, depending on where they are used and promoted, and by and for whom. In the context of Syria, where the British Empire had previously intervened (see Chapter 2), the language of English (like the language of French) would have signified for locals new routes of employment and emigration, access to new and valuable forms of knowledge—particularly scientific and medical knowledge—and potentially, a loss of ties to home, friends, and family. In the context of SPC, the language of English also created (new) ties between the language and American and Protestant ideals, including democracy and personal liberty. For SPC students, the stakes of acquiring English were high, and SPC's founders held the keys to this acquisition. In articulating these stakes—this "weight"—through a historical lens, scholars in rhetoric and writing studies can identify parallels between this history and the high stakes of literacy education, particularly in English, today.

It is useful to first examine SPC's decision to change the language of instruction in light of its ties to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). As discussed in Chapter 2, Rufus Anderson, who led the ABCFM's overseas work from 1832 until 1866, shifted the focus of the missions away from providing broad educational and civic opportunities to a focus on conversion only (Harris, 1999; Lindsay, 1965; Makdisi, 2011). This meant that most missions under the ABCFM offered education narrowly focused on religious matters in the local vernacular. The vernacular was prioritized as the language of instruction within the missions for several reasons: First, Anderson believed that the local language(s) could carry Christianity more directly and more effectively to potential converts. Additionally, Anderson believed that Christianity itself was enough to "civilize" potential converts—there was no need, therefore, for education in English or other subjects. And finally, Anderson worried that potential converts would take advantage of non-religious education and use it to obtain jobs outside of the mission or region, which would work against the "three-self" doctrine that sought to produce churches that would be self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating.

This decades-long approach to the work of missions was echoed when Syrian missionaries proposed the founding of SPC in the early 1860s to the ABCFM. One member of the Board argued that "a smattering of English fills men with conceit, makes them unwilling to labor in the villages, and [makes them] dissatisfied and heartless grumblers" (as cited in Jessup, 1910/2002, p. 301). In 1872, six years after the founding of SPC, President Daniel Bliss wrote, "Our experience thus far ... though short confirms us in the opinion that young men, educated in the country and through the vernacular tongue, will use their education for the good of the country" (*Annual Reports*, p. 24). Arabic, in other words, was seen as the best means through which Christianity's "seeds" could be planted and eventually grow. The college founders imagined that SPC-educated students would convert to Christianity, graduate, and become leaders who would further propagate the region in support of the mission's purpose.

SPC's founders, particularly those faculty who taught science and medicine, were fluent in the Arabic language because the majority of them had lived and worked in Syria as missionaries for the ABCFM prior to the establishment of SPC. These faculty translated their knowledge from West to East, from English into Arabic.² As such, the use of Arabic as the language of instruction during

2 What was considered Western or modern scientific knowledge was a construction that emerged during the 19th century and should not be understood as neatly divided between East and West. Historians of science see Arabic/Islamic, Greek, Roman, and Medieval European scientific traditions as largely interconnected. Marwa Elshakry (2010) pointed out that in the

SPC's early years played an important role in "the diffusion and translation of science For a moderate charge, students received instruction in all the latest scientific disciplines, from engineering and astronomy to medicine and natural science" (Elshakry, 2011, p. 180). Those faculty who were less experienced with Arabic were also required to receive training in the language. Even if teaching a foreign language such as English or French, before 1880 each faculty member studied Arabic, worked alongside local Syrian instructors, attended religious services in Arabic, and communicated in the vernacular with their students and within the local community daily.

The founders of the college initially supported providing education primarily in Arabic on the grounds that this would ensure that students (potential converts and future graduates) would stay in the region and, presumably, support the college and help it achieve its original self-sustaining goal. While English was taught as a language from the beginning, the founders' choice of Arabic as the medium of instruction rested on paternalistic views of what would serve the students of the region best—whether that meant students would avoid becoming "dissatisfied and heartless grumblers," as one Board member put it (as cited in Jessup, 1910/2002, p. 301), or would "use their education for the good of the country," as Daniel Bliss originally opined (*Annual Reports*, 1872, p. 24). For the founders, SPC had the potential to achieve what the ABCFM mission in the region did not—conversion of the masses. SPC offered an American-style education, supplemented with exposure to the "good word" through required religious services. Offering this education primarily in the Arabic language meant that, if local students converted at SPC, wider proselytization might be possible and the mission's vision of a "civilized" Middle East might be achieved. From the beginning, in other words, teaching in Arabic was rationalized as in the students' best interest, when in fact such an approach served the goals of the mission.

Although English eventually became the language of instruction for the college, the archives suggest that the faculty were split in the decision. The split emerged along the lines of those teaching science and medicine versus those who taught "literary" subjects such as rhetoric or foreign languages. The tension can be explained in part in practical terms: Newly hired English-speaking

19th century, missionaries in Beirut redefined terms such as علم ('ilm, as science), معرفة (*ma'arifa* as knowledge), and حكمة (*bikma*, as wisdom): "In this formulation, knowledge was equated with matters of fact; science represented a higher order of truth in that it was the systematization of these facts through the derivation of natural laws; and, finally, wisdom, which was established by suprarational means, involved the Ultimate Truth" (p. 103). Such a redefinition allowed missionaries to create clearer divisions between "facts" and "belief"—even though the original Quranic meaning of علم includes both. In both Arab and Chinese contexts at the time, local scholars also traced "modern" Western science to their own knowledge traditions (Elshakry 2010, p. 104).

professors required private tutoring in Arabic. Efforts were made to recruit new faculty who already had a background in Arabic, such as Edward Van Dyck in 1870, whose “birth in, and ... connection with [Lebanon], [whose] acquirements in the Arabic ... [and] abilities and studies in other directions” made him an ideal candidate to teach at the college, but these efforts were not sustainable (*Annual Reports*, 1869, p. 6). As the school and its curriculum grew, finding faculty with both the appropriate amount of education and a background in Arabic became impractical: English-speaking faculty who were hired had to engage in intensive study of Arabic, in addition to fulfilling their other duties, as can be seen in the examples of Harvey Porter and Edwin Lewis, who, according to the 1871 *Annual Report*, “since their arrival have assisted in giving instruction in English and Latin but the greater portion of their time has been devoted to the study of the Arabic language” (p. 18).

With Arabic as the language of instruction, SPC faculty were also responsible for the translation of textbooks from English to Arabic or for writing new textbooks in Arabic for their courses. These activities were time- and labor-intensive. As early as 1869, Daniel Bliss expressed concern about how Arabic-language instruction might be maintained as students progressed through the college curriculum, reporting that

the corps of teachers in the literary department is now barely able to carry out the programme of studies prescribed for the three first years. When these classes are advanced to more difficult studies, of which there are no text of books in the Arabic language, and another class enters, the present force of teachers will be inadequate. (*Annual Reports*, p. 6)

Even those prolific in Arabic and translation would have been burdened by the amount of time these activities required. Jessup (1910/2002) reflected that “Van Dyck and others had published in Arabic works on geography, arithmetic, pathology and the higher mathematics, but before a scientific text-book could be translated, printed and bound, it might be quite out of date, and the enormous expense of publishing Arabic books with their slow and limited sale made it impossible to keep up with the progress of science” (p. 304). Moreover, as Jessup’s remarks indicate, publishing textbooks in Arabic was costly. David Stuart Dodge, a professor in the Collegiate Department, expressed skepticism about the cost in a letter to Daniel Bliss in 1875: “If English is to be so large an element hereafter, is Dr. Wortabet’s *Physiology* in Arabic needed? Is it worthwhile to get out so expensive a book now? The plates and publishing cost heavily and the [publishing] fund may never see any return adequately” (Bliss, 1852–1956, D. S. Dodge to Bliss, April 12, 1875).

We can see in these materials how the rise of seemingly practical concerns—labor, time, and cost—pushed some administrators to advocate for a shift in the language of instruction at SPC. What does not seem to have been considered is how SPC had limited itself by creating narrow definitions of who could comprise the college’s faculty: First, all faculty members at SPC were required to be Protestants, and as Antoine Benjamin Zahlan (1962) explained, “since qualified Protestants were limited in Syria, teachers had to be imported in increasing numbers as the College grew. The need for a carefully planned program for the recruiting and language training of additional staff was never met” (p. 71). Second, for local graduates to acquire the level of education needed to hold professorships at SPC, they would need the privileges of time and mobility, which many were hard-pressed to find: A. L. Tibawi (1967) wrote that while “[w]ith the graduation of the first class in 1870 it became possible to take American-trained native teachers or to send promising graduates to America for further training with view to their future employment in the College ... it seems that this second method was too novel and expensive to have been even considered” (p. 283). And finally, while the college did allow Arabs to hold teaching positions, only foreigners held professorial-rank positions; in fact, Arab faculty were informally disallowed from the professorial ranks and did not hold any official power within the college until the 1920s (B. S. Anderson, 2011).³ Zahlan (1962) pointed out that

as late as 1897 six out of twenty teachers at SPC were Syrians and not one of these Syrian teachers had any voice in the affairs of the College. It seems quite possible that those faculty members who opposed the promotion of natives to professorial status desired the change to English in order that the linguistic ability of the Syrian teachers and the difficulty in recruiting sufficient British and American professors would not force the elevation of native teachers. (p. 84)

While SPC administrators created limitations on who could hold professorships, they did not explicitly deny the possibility that locals could hold such positions in the future. In fact, SPC could point to the goals set out by the college’s founders to thwart any criticisms of its actual practices.

SPC faculty began making the case for switching the language of instruction to English just a few years after the founding of the college, in part

3 Arab instructors were not given professorial-rank status until 1909 and did not receive voting rights or professional equity until the school changed its name and dropped its religious affiliation in 1920, when it became present-day American University of Beirut (B. S. Anderson, 2011, p. 48).

based on the idea that English would provide students with greater exposure to Western ideas and epistemology. Discussion about the topic is evident as early as 1873, when some argued that providing students with consistent instruction in English meant that students would have direct “access ... to nearly all that is valuable both old and new” (*Annual Reports*). In a letter to Daniel Bliss in 1874, Dodge wrote:

I consider English as the essential thing now. We are running sciences into the ground. A knowledge of one foreign language, so that it is really understood and can be used with comfort and pleasure, will be actually of more service to any of our graduates than the general and indistinct smattering of chemistry, geology, astronomy and zoology which they carry away or are able to retain for twelve months Making thorough Eng[lish] or Fr[ench] scholars would, I am convinced, be as much or more advantage than the present notion that we teach foreign sciences, [of] which we have little practical use and for which people care little and know nothing. (Bliss, 1866–1902, D. S. Dodge to Bliss, August 5, 1875)

Although the argument Dodge made never mentioned Arabic, it was rooted in the colonial belief that European languages are inherently valuable, over and above any curriculum that would require Arabic to communicate knowledge.

In 1878, the faculty voted to give up the college’s original mission and make the switch from Arabic to English (actual implementation would occur in the Collegiate Department in 1880, and in the Medical Department in 1887). They voiced reluctance to do so while at the same time articulating a belief that teaching in Arabic had not proven to be “the best means of Christianizing and civilizing the East” (*Annual Reports*, 1878, p. 45). For example, some faculty argued that students who

... lay aside their English studies have little access to the thoughts of the great men of our age; they are shut up to the worst part of the dead past. After entering upon their professions instead of reading in a language permeated with the spirit of progress in all departments of life, they either read not at all or are confined to books, saturated with errors in religion, morals law [sic], politics, medicine, and social life. (*Annual Reports*, 1878, p. 45)

Thus, SPC faculty drew on the rhetoric used by the pre-Anderson ABCFM in the early 19th century to justify providing instruction in English, not Arabic.

They argued that English was instrumental in not only Christianizing but also civilizing the region. Instead of being “shut up to the worst part of the dead past,” English would expose students to the “thoughts of the great men of our age.” Instruction in English, they insisted, would correct the “errors” of local cultures and ways of life and instead promote the “spirit of progress” that was celebrated as a universal good throughout the West.

What’s more, as other historians have pointed out and as discussed in Chapter 2, the missionaries continually failed in their efforts to convert the local population, and this also justified a switch to English as the medium of instruction. Zahlan (1962) explained that

By 1882 the missionaries had explored all possibilities as to means by which to attain their ends. They had translated the Bible into Arabic. They had opened schools for both boys and girls, established seminaries and founded SPC itself. They had supplied medical aid to the populace. They had established churches. None of these projects had brought about the great wave of conversion that they had dreamed of. There was one factor left to vary, however, and this was the language of instruction at the College. (p. 79)

Despite SPC President Bliss’ optimism about Arabic at the founding of the college, instruction in the language had not translated into an increased number of conversions. Therefore, the English language seemed to be the only path left if the college were to be successful in proselytization.

At SPC, English won out not only for its ability to “correct” and “civilize” but also because it provided a practical solution for the college in maintaining a balance of power that supported the college’s American faculty and administration. The justification for English as the language that would bring students closest to presumed universal (Western and Christian) truths seemed to contradict the administration’s (and the ABCFM’s) earlier stance on Arabic as the best medium of instruction for “civilizing” and “Christianizing” the locals. However, the justifications expressed for both languages ultimately relied on deeply colonial logics that centered and upheld Eurocentric ways of knowing: On the one hand, Arabic was seen as a more direct conduit to the hearts and minds of the local population and therefore was potentially more effective for the mission’s evangelism. On the other hand, English could more directly support and transmit the colonial epistemology that constituted the heart of the college.

What’s more, as the student population grew year after year, SPC’s need for more faculty grew—and this too became a justification for switching to

English as the language of instruction. Foreign hires were recruited because locals—who generally had not had access to the Western education so prized in the American college—were not seen as qualified enough to hold faculty positions. Most of these foreign hires, who primarily hailed from America, were not proficient in Arabic and would require years of language training before they would be ready to teach. College faculty argued that it was simply inefficient to wait for these native speakers of English to gain Arabic proficiency. And although the college had indicated a desire to eventually turn its leadership over to locals, it clearly did not see this transfer of power happening any time soon. We can see, therefore, that decisions about the language of instruction at the college served the needs of the college's American administrators and faculty rather than putting the local population at the center. The materials preserved in the archives also do not reveal consideration of students' needs or desires regarding the language(s) of instruction or the extra burden they were forced to take up after the switch to English took place. Faculty and administrators seemed to assume that students would agree that English carried with it a universal good and a higher value than students' native language.

Language and the SPC Curriculum

Despite the colonial epistemology that drove SPC administrators and faculty to make key decisions regarding the college's language of instruction, ultimately they could not wipe away the multiple languages that characterized everyday life for the local Syrian population. In fact, no matter the language of instruction, the college's curriculum was decidedly multilingual at its founding and throughout its history. The materials preserved in the archives provide evidence of a multilingual curriculum that complicates dominant disciplinary historical narratives in rhetoric and writing studies, which have ignored translingual practices or have focused on institutions, such as Harvard, that indeed minimized the value of multilingualism by shifting from a classical to liberal arts model of education (see Horner & Trimbur, 2002).

Before and after the shift from Arabic to English instruction at SPC, students studied Arabic, English, and French intensively, and in fact, for the students enrolled in the Collegiate Department, language study occupied much of their time at least until the turn of the 20th century. Latin and Greek were offered until the mid-1880s, and Turkish was offered as the college's first elective (to substitute for French) in 1898 (Syrian Protestant College, *Catalogue*). According to the details provided in the course catalogues, the central language-based courses—Arabic, French, and English—focused on

the consumption and production of texts at all levels. In every language, students read not only literary and rhetorical texts, studied grammar, and practiced penmanship, but they also wrote original essays—"extempore compositions"—gave performances of memorized texts, delivered "original orations," and practiced conversation in the target language. The examples of the curriculum that are available suggest that students were expected to be able to work across languages, an approach that scholars in rhetoric and writing studies might today call translingual.

Examples of end-of-year exams for all subjects and all years—including exams for Arabic, French, and English—were published in the course catalogues for academic years 1871 and 1872 (المدرسة الكلية السورية الإنجيلية [Syrian Protestant College]). While each English exam focuses, perhaps predictably, on providing definitions ("What is the meaning of vice versa?" Senior Year, 1871) and explaining grammar ("Into how many parts is English Grammar divided and what are they?" Freshman Year, 1872), students were also asked to translate short texts from English to Arabic, and from Arabic to English. At times, students were asked to translate a text and also provide examples of the correct usage of a particular word in the same passage. Take the following two questions from a Sophomore-level exam, published in the 1871 course catalogue:

Having no money I was obliged to beg.

- Translate this into Arabic; and give a few examples of this kind of construction.

No thank you I have one already.

- Translate th [sic] sentence and explain the ward [sic] *already* and give sentences showing how it is used.

Sample French exams required students to demonstrate similar kinds of knowledge, including the ability to translate, while exams in Arabic assumed a more complex understanding of the grammatical nuances of the language.

At least two interpretations can be made from the exams: On the one hand, the examinations appear to rely on a monolingual ideology, in that they focus primarily on surface-level concerns. Although translation is requested, the elements of a "good" or "correct" translation are not articulated—and understanding the expectations is imperative, as a literal, word-for-word translation is a different (and presumably simpler) kind of project than a meaning-based, or idiomatic, translation, which is focused on intelligibility for the recipient. What's more, the exams do not ask students to write anything beyond what is

required to answer each question. On the other hand, the exams can be understood as evidence of translanguaging practice: The exams demonstrate that, at least in the early years of the college, students were being asked to think and write in multiple languages simultaneously—even within the constraints of an exam.

While no other course materials from this period at SPC have been preserved, we do know that the curriculum required students, in addition to studying grammar and learning vocabulary, to actively engage with texts and produce their own, in multiple languages. Just as English-speaking faculty were forced to negotiate language, formally and informally, on a daily basis, Arabic-speaking students at SPC were also regularly working across language to make meaning as writers, readers, and speakers of multiple languages. However narrowly language norms may or may not have been presented and upheld in the classroom, students and faculty at SPC were likely aware of the “heterogene[ity], fluid[ity], and negotiab[ility]” of language as it was encountered in multiple contexts and used for multiple formal and informal purposes (Horner, Lu, et al., 2011, p. 305). For those living in multilingual contexts, it is impossible to ignore the malleability of language and the linguistic and extra-linguistic resources available to make meaning. This suggests that in practice if not in pedagogy, SPC represents an institutional location in which a translanguaging approach was fundamental, as Horner, Lu, et al. (2011) would characterize it. Importantly, as discussed earlier in this chapter, translanguaging practice was not neutral in this space: American faculty and administrators during this period ultimately created language policy that maintained the dominance of the English language. This dominance constructed a colonial educational space that delivered a clear message to students about the seemingly inherent value of English, while also working to construct a vision of America for which students, it was implied, should strive. At the same time, this dominance was troubled not only by the recognition of multiple languages in SPC’s curriculum, but also translanguaging practice in the context of the college’s extracurriculum.

Extracurricular activities at SPC, which I discuss here as well as in the next two chapters, suggest that students and faculty alike understood language as a rhetorical and evolving practice. Specifically, in 1871, the medical students formed a literary society, which the following year became two (one Arabic and one English), in which weekly “exercises were both oral and written upon literary[,] scientific[,] and moral subjects. The society celebrated its first anniversary meeting by an oration and a public debate” (Annual Reports, 1871, p. 21). One faculty member reflected that “the work of the year” for the Arabic literary society attracted the interest of the college and local community; the society’s activities “always culminated in a grand annual open meeting when

Assembly Hall was crowded to the doors with friends of the Society and with those from the city who wished to encourage activity in Arabic literary work” (*Founding*, n.d., p. 12). By 1878, the faculty saw the literary societies as so useful in their “contribut[ion] to the development of the minds of the students and their readiness in extempore speech” that they moved to require all students to participate in the activities of the societies (Syrian Protestant College, p. 323).

In February 1871, the faculty minutes report that the students enrolled in the Collegiate Department wished to start a journal—and although it is not clear whether the request was approved, students’ interest in pursuing such an activity did not wane (Syrian Protestant College, *Minutes of Faculty*; see also Chapter 5). For graduation in 1873, students gave orations in English, French, Turkish, and Arabic on subjects as varied as “Labor, Love of Country, The Immortality of the Soul, Advantages of History, The Sun, [and] Growth of Plants” (p. 162). According to historian Betty Anderson (2011), “students published a magazine or newspaper for part of almost every year between 1899 and [the present]” (p. 22)—student writing in these publications is the focus of Chapter 5. Also at the turn of the 20th century, a prize for writing was established and awarded annually for at least a few years.

While these extracurricular activities occurred in multiple languages, it is important to consider the place of Arabic in SPC’s curriculum, as it never disappeared, even after the switch to English as the language of instruction. It is difficult to make a causal connection between SPC’s initial and continued emphasis on Arabic and النهضة (*al-Nahda*, literally “the Awakening” but often referred to as the “Arab Renaissance”)—a pro-Arab and sometimes nationalist movement that aimed to revive the Arabic language and led to the translation and appropriation of Western knowledge, literature, and philosophy into Arab and Muslim contexts. However, most historians note that instruction in Arabic, at SPC and the mission schools, at least indirectly supported the larger movement occurring throughout the Arab world (see B. S. Anderson, 2011). Some of the first SPC instructors, as well as early graduates of SPC were active as professional writers and editors throughout the region.⁴

4 Nasif al-Yaziji (1800–1871), Butrus al-Bustani (1819–1883), Ahmed Faris al-Shidyaq (1805/6–1887), Ibrahim al-Yaziji (1847–1906, son of Nasif), and Rashid Rida (1865–1935)—all considered pioneers of *al-Nahda*—were born in Greater Syria. Nasif al-Yaziji and Butrus al-Bustani were both Protestant converts, and Nasif al-Yaziji was an instructor at SPC, as were Faris Nimr (1856–1951) and Ya’qub Sarruf (1852–1927), both of whom were also alumni of SPC. Bustani taught with the ABCFM and wrote Arabic and math textbooks. In 1863, he founded his own school in Beirut and started a daily newspaper. He and Nasif al-Yaziji founded the Syrian Society of Arts and Sciences and translated the Protestant Bible into Arabic with Eli Smith and Cornelius Van Dyck in the mid-19th century. Nimr and Sarruf founded the periodical *al-Muqtataf* in Beirut and Cairo, and Jurji Zeidan, who was a medical student at SPC

Zahlan (1962) pointed out, for example, that although the *al-Nahda's* roots were centered in Egypt, “the size and influence of the Syrian Arab contingent in Egyptian journalism”—including Arabic-educated graduates of SPC between 1866 and 1880—“was overwhelming” (p. 73). Zahlan and others have emphasized the importance of Arabic education at SPC in terms of performing a kind of cultural transfer. Elshakry (2011) noted that “historians have ... accord[ed] the missionaries a key role in the transformation of Syrian society and identity” (p. 168). At the same time, as discussed in Chapter 2, such transformation cannot be understood as determined solely by the missionaries—in other words, specific kinds of knowledge and resources were in demand throughout the Ottoman Empire, and whatever successes might be attributed to the mission, and later to SPC, is related to how the mission and SPC were able to fulfill the demands of the local population, most of which were not religious in nature. Missionaries were skilled at articulating justifications for the language and literacy education that they provided, and these justifications mostly followed the lines of colonial thought. However, the local population had their own reasons for taking advantage and making use of the linguistic resources offered through mission schools and SPC.

It is clear from the archives that the study of multiple languages—and the study of writing, oration, rhetoric, and literature within and across those languages—constituted the core of the school’s curriculum. No matter a student’s or teacher’s language background, at SPC, all were engaging in a translingual type of negotiation with the school’s official curriculum and policy toward language. We can only begin to imagine what those practices, and subsequent pedagogies, may have looked like on an everyday basis, but it would have been impossible for students or teachers to study grammar, oration, reading, or writing in one language without considering and negotiating others. The college’s transnational curriculum, perhaps unsurprisingly, highlights the important role that multiple languages played for students and faculty. Adding this account to the disciplinary history of rhetoric and writing studies requires a rethinking of the centrality of English in the discipline’s narratives. While the English language has undoubtedly defined the history of rhetoric and writing studies, it is the interaction of multiple languages (after all, one language cannot be prioritized without the existence of others) that has ultimately shaped approaches to literacy education, for better or worse. This history should push others to further account for how students and teachers of writing have engaged—and continue to engage—with language(s) and

but did not graduate, founded *al-Hilal* in Cairo and went on to write 23 novels. For more on Nimr, Sarruf, and Zeidan and their relationship to SPC, see Chapter 4.

translingual practices, even in seemingly monolingual contexts.

Conclusion

This chapter's account of SPC's language policies and curriculum substantiates a transnational and translingual narrative about the history of rhetoric and writing studies. At SPC, an imagined America—constructed through common, specifically American, assumptions about literacy—was exported across national, cultural, and linguistic borders. The college's policies on the language of instruction changed over time but were consistently rationalized through an Anglophone, colonial lens. The curriculum, too, was clearly influenced by the founders' own experiences as students at Yale, Harvard, and Amherst in the early and mid-19th century. As they developed SPC, the founders would have been aware of the recent changes that reduced the study of multiple languages at Harvard—and yet, perhaps because they could not assume a monolingual stance in the local context, multiple languages remained at the core of the college's curriculum. SPC's unique position as a fulcrum among languages, epistemologies, and cultures should encourage scholars to reexamine those American institutions of the past, where the intermingling of language, epistemology, and culture may have been less than explicit but must have been a force to be reckoned with, requiring negotiation within and across languages, a negotiation that remains active in the present.

Exposure of the (mostly American) faculty at SPC to multiple languages and the local population meant, in turn, exposure to the local culture, along with its complicated religious beliefs, politics, and epistemologies. As they negotiated these differences, no faculty member or student—foreign or domestic—would have been unchanged. Languages at SPC, therefore, acted as instruments whereby various kinds of knowledge, formal and informal, were exchanged multidirectionally—and this exchange undoubtedly had an influence far beyond the grounds of the college. In other words, although the language of English and the colonial epistemology attached to it was dominant at the college, it was not hegemonic.

Arabic and English at SPC, therefore, can be understood as epistemological conduits that were anything but unidirectional. Indeed, English at SPC was—and continues to be today at AUB—laden with “a whole different constellation of values and practices” than those that tend to be attached to English in the United States (You, 2010, p. xi; see also Arnold, 2021). What it meant to teach, study, and write in English for students and faculty at SPC can only be understood in relation to the region's geopolitical history. For many, English provided a route to a better life outside the country, or

it represented social or cultural privilege and power within the region. In contrast, for others, achieving fluency in English meant a break from distinct cultural and ethnic traditions, and perhaps irreparable departure from family and friends. At the same time, other languages, including Arabic and French, carried varied meanings in the same context. Languages, and in particular colonial *lingua francas* such as English and French, carry a value, or weight, that changes depending on the context.⁵ In Greater Syria during the late 19th century, English signified a gateway to the West, including emigration to the United States or work within the British Empire.⁶ At SPC, English shifted to represent America because it was used by the college's American administrators and taught by the American faculty. While the United States at the time was still a new nation and not yet the world power that it is considered today, the nation was represented in and through English at SPC.

This chapter reveals that SPC's decision-making about the language of instruction relied on deeply colonial logic. Like their students, college faculty and administrators understood that English provided knowledge and prospects that might not otherwise be available with Arabic alone. They initially withheld these resources in order to support their own belief that Arabic was the most direct route for conversion of the local population, and that English had the potential to move students away from the region rather than staying and spreading Christianity. Likewise, the decision to switch the language of instruction to English rested primarily on the basic premise that Western forms of knowledge were inherently superior to local ones. Instruction in English, college faculty and administrators believed, would allow students direct access to modern (Western) literature, science, and philosophy; as a result, students would surely leave behind "the worst part of the dead past," represented in and through Arabic, and move toward a more "civilized" future (*Annual Reports*, 1878, p. 45). A secondary rationale for the switch to English—that the college did not have time to train foreign faculty in Arabic—also relied on colonial epistemology, in that such a decision put the needs and interests of the college faculty and administrators above their students and assumed the superiority of foreigners over locals when it came to filling faculty positions (even though the founders had previously indicated that they intended for the college to eventually be turned over to local leadership).

5 For an extended discussion of the "weight" of English in the context of contemporary American University of Beirut (AUB), see my (2021) contribution to Silva and Wang's (2021) *Reconciling Translingualism and Second Language Writing*.

6 For more information on patterns of Arab immigration to the United States, particularly immigrants from Greater Syria during the same time period as this study, see Becky Little (2025).

The negotiations among college faculty and administrators about SPC's language of instruction, then, highlights the "weight" of English for those who have historically been identified as outsiders to the language through colonial epistemology. At SPC, English—and the Americans who represented it at the college—carried considerable weight for students. The language represented a kind of power valued at the college, and faculty members held it out as a kind of promise for students—a promise that many of them later learned was false (see Chapter 4). Even those who graduated early on from the college and were hired there as instructors did not gain status equal to their foreign counterparts. They learned that, in spite of their best efforts, they could never gain the kind of power implied by English at the college. In creating these contradictory conditions, the administration held an imagined America at bay for local instructors and students alike. In this context, English was more than a language—it also served as a gateway to certain kinds of (Western) knowledge and social rewards. The founders of the American college knew this, and the debate about whether English should be the medium of instruction revolved around the kind of power and access that they wanted to offer to students. SPC, in other words, was constructed as an institution that mimicked exactly what America really was and continues to be: a country that professes democracy, equality, and liberty for all but that in reality makes the attainment of these ideals largely contingent upon racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and/or cultural identity.

Studying SPC's negotiations about the language of instruction raises questions about some of the field of rhetoric and writing studies' contemporary "structuring tenets" (Cushman, 2016, p. 239), such as what language(s) are prioritized in programs and classrooms and why, and the ability to recognize the different power dynamics at play when it comes to writing in English or in other languages (see Gilyard, 2016). Taking a historical perspective on the question of language in rhetoric and writing studies curricula suggests that the weight of English is more complex and more deeply rooted in colonial history for students enrolled in college-level writing classes than program administrators, instructors, and students might expect. For writing scholars, administrators, and teachers living and working in Anglocentric contexts such as the US, recognizing that English *has* a weight shifts the understanding of historical narratives, such as the Harvard narrative described in Chapter 1, that have rendered English, and its interaction with translingual and transnational discourses, invisible. As a result, teachers, program leaders, and scholars in rhetoric and writing studies tend to see writing programs and classrooms as largely linguistically homogenous spaces (see Matsuda, 2006),

where translingual and transnational discourses are representative of difference rather than part of the norm and thus are treated separately.

Just as SPC students negotiated the complicated weight of English every day, so too do students today negotiate this weight, whether consciously or not. Writing program administrators and teachers should consider how to better adapt teaching to the reality of students' linguistic lives. Students today, particularly but not only multilingual and historically underrepresented students in the US, come into writing classrooms with different legacies of oppression that are often tied to language and language ideology. Their experiences and understandings of what English means, and has meant, can differ considerably from instructors' own experiences and understanding. The Indigenous languages of students' ancestors may have been violently suppressed through colonial educational practices or by withholding education altogether. Additionally, many students have faced teachers who hold onto harmful language ideologies that are deployed unpredictably in response to their writing. And some students face intense pressure from home to represent their family, culture, race, or ethnicity well in higher education. On account of their identities, these students are expected, and they expect of themselves, to achieve high levels of success, which oftentimes means adopting and staying within the bounds of dominant ways of thinking and being. How can writing programs and educators expect students to trust them when it comes to the deeply personal activity of writing? In the face of the power that literacy educators wield, while carrying weighty legacies and expectations of English, students cannot be blamed for resisting instructors' appeals to develop ideas, refusing to revise meaningfully, or keeping personal reflection to a minimum.

When multilingualism is understood as the historical norm (Yildiz, 2012)—as an always-already part of writing practices and pedagogies around the globe—writing program leaders, teachers, and scholars can better articulate the practical and problematic consequences of monolingualism in literacy classrooms. Just like the American missionary founders of SPC, writing programs in Anglocentric contexts are implicated in a monolingual and ultimately colonial framework that privileges English and mastery of it. Students of writing (in English) are always already working within and across languages; acknowledging that students have agency and desires in relation to language will enrich the writing classroom, enabling teachers to work with the “multiple origins, relations, and emotional investments [that] are possible and occur daily” for students, including those investments that do not align with our own (Yildiz, 2012, p. 205).

In addition, examining the history of language attitudes, policies,

pedagogies, and practices at SPC highlights that the problems faced by contemporary rhetoric and writing scholars and teachers are not new. The archival materials explored in this chapter suggest that the SPC founders struggled with difficult questions related to language and literacy similar to those we face today. These difficult questions include: How should different languages and/or language varieties be approached and valued in the college classroom? In what ways might teachers, scholars, and administrators negotiate the complex relations among specific educational contexts and policies on or about language, and what do these decisions mean for students, particularly student writers? And how can researchers, teachers, and administrators address the politics of language and language difference in ways that acknowledge the concerns and needs of all those who have a stake in higher education? These questions are highlighted in contemporary discussions about “professionalism” in writing and what students “need” from writing courses. These questions are undermined when programs and instructors do not recognize the language resources and language legacies of students in writing classrooms, or when writing programs, educators, and scholars frame students’ varied literacies as problems to be solved rather than resources to be valued.

Understanding the history, present, and future of rhetoric and writing studies as inherently transnational and translanguingual means recognizing that even seemingly monolingual students wrestle with what writing in English means. In every educational context, particular uses of English signify identification with and belonging to particular sociopolitical groups. Therefore, writing programs and teachers should take the opportunity to promote inter- and intra-language and cultural exchange. At the same time, instructors should always be aware that these opportunities will present risks as well as rewards for students depending on their (as well as their instructors’) experiences, values, and desires. In other words, every programmatic, curricular, and pedagogical decision related to language practices and standards represents beliefs and values outside of the classroom—including implied, perhaps unfulfilled, promises—and thus carry consequences that will be neither predictable nor smooth.

Perhaps most importantly, this historical account pushes us to ask: How can we make *all* language practices—including the language of English—visible? Recognizing English as a language that carries ideological power, rather than taking it for granted as a “given,” is one step we can take to delink the colonial legacy of English from the history of rhetoric and writing studies. The social justice goals that underlie much of rhetoric and writing studies scholarship will advance only if and when writing scholars,

program administrators, and teachers recognize and work to undo the ties that have bound English to colonial epistemology as well as to Anglocentric language policies and curriculum in higher education. Such delinking, in turn, can expand the scope of the discipline and push us to recognize and value the existence of pluriversal literacy practices and pedagogies in the discipline's history, present, and future.