Proposal for an ESF Exploratory Workshop - Call 2012

**Section I:**

**Exploratory Workshop title:**
Breaking the grounds for an Arabic Etymological Dictionary (ETYMARAB)

**Proposed dates and location:**
University of Oslo, Norway; June 22-23, 2013

**Name and full coordinates of principal applicant(s):**
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**Keywords relating to the topic of the proposal:**
Arabic Etymology; Semantic History of Arabic; Conceptual History of Arabic; Arab cultural history; Etymology & Culture Studies

**Abstract of the proposal**
ETYMARAB is planned as an electronic database (website) that will highlight Arab cultural history through the etymology and semantic history of Arabic words and concepts, concentrating (in the start-up phase) on some 1000 terms of particular significance from various fields. The Workshop brings together experts from relevant disciplines and serves as a forum for brainstorming, taking principal decisions, designing a prototype version and outlining a (or several) follow-up programme(s).
Section II:
The case for an exploratory workshop

Although one of the major languages of the world, Arabic has still no etymological dictionary. It is the aim of the ETYMARAB project to lay the foundation stones for the creation of such a tool. Concentrating on a limited number of lexical items, the online dictionary is envisaged as a prototype that will set the standards and provide a model on which to build worldwide research in the etymology of Arabic in the future.

Time is ripe: While our knowledge about the history of Arabic and the Arabs has increased considerably in recent years, digital technology has also made it easier to access and process larger amounts of data and, for this purpose, to draw on worldwide experience and expertise. While political events (September 11, the “Arab Spring”) have contributed to creating an increased demand for knowledge about Arabic (and Islamic) culture and civilization in the West, collaboration with Arab researchers has become easier thanks to the removal of political and ideological constraints and because globalisation has brought the two worlds much closer to each other than they had been some 2-3 decades ago. A great deal of the obstacles that had made an etymological dictionary of Arabic appear as a megalomaniac vision in the past thus does not exist any longer.

Nevertheless, the major difficulty no doubt remains: the complexity of the subject matter itself, i.e., the richness and enormous multifacetedness of the Arabic lexicon, the diglossic situation, the huge regional diversity, resulting in polysemy, etc., not to speak of the scarcity of available sources for early stages of the language’s history and the unreliability of editions in many subfields. Yet, the overall situation is not too different from that of other languages that nevertheless do have good etymological dictionaries, and it should therefore in no way prevent us from laying the foundation stones for a similar tool for Arabic.

This will prove to be feasible all the more since ETYMARAB deliberately does not follow a “totalitarian” maximalist approach. As a pilot project, it is fully aware of the fact that it cannot be more than an etymological dictionary in a nutshell. It therefore contents itself with a limited number of lexical items (fuṣḥā only, although using relevant findings of dialectology): some 1000 words and roots of particular significance for the history of Arabic civilisation and key concepts of Arab(ic) thought, from the earliest to our times (but focussing on vocabulary in present-day use or of present-day relevance). The Exploratory Workshop will have to develop the criteria for the selection of these entries, bearing in mind also the fact that for many of the lexical items the project can draw, to a certain extent at least, on research that already exists (cf., e.g., the etymological dictionaries of other Semitic languages or of Afroasiatic which, in most cases, include Arabic cognates, as well as the numerous studies on the etymology and/or semantic history of single words or certain expressions, many of which also deal with the historical background of borrowing, shifts in meaning, etc.).

It is for the latter reason that one of the Workshop’s main tasks will consist in discussing the state of the art as well as possible synergies with ongoing projects that have to be seen as natural caterers to the ETYMARAB initiative, and to think of ways to make use of existing online databases, thesauri, etc.—cf., for instance, the Safaitic Database Online (SDO, Oxford), the Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions (CSAI, Pisa), the Arabic Papyrology Database (APD, Zurich/Munich), the Glossarium Graeco-arabicum (GALex, Bochum/Berlin), the Arabic and Latin Glossary (ALG, Würzburg), the Corpus Coranicum (Berlin), the Concordance of Early Arabic Poetry (Jerusalem), the Analytical Database of Early and Classical Arabic Poetry (St Andrews/Berlin), arabICorpus (Brigham Young Univ./US), as well as projects on Arabic conceptual history (e.g., on the language of the nahḍa period, Berlin)—to mention only a few of quite a number of extremely useful tools and exciting activities with a high potential of connectivity.

Given the heightened interest, both public and academic, in the cultural background and dimensions of information about everything Arabic (and Islamic), a characteristic feature of the ETYMARAB prototype dictionary, as envisaged by the applicants, should be its going beyond “traditional” etymol-
ogy in focusing also the *cultural historical* dimension of etymology and semantic history. It is crucial therefore to conceive of the project as a highly interdisciplinary joint venture in which expertise from various fields of research will be processed: Arabic lexicography, Semitic and Afroasian linguistics, epigraphy, archaeology, Arab political, social, economical, religious and cultural history (in the widest sense), the history of ideas, etc. The Workshop will account for this diversity both in its composition and in its discussing methods of dealing with the challenges of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Since most of the disciplines that will contribute to ETYMARAB have a much longer tradition in European countries than elsewhere and therefore are particularly rich in variety, and since philological studies are still stronger here than in other parts of the world, while at the same time the European scene has established a strong hold in contemporary cultural studies likewise, the European scientific landscape is an ideal environment for the ETYMARAB project. Cooperation on an all-European level is however not only an ideal but also indispensable, given the fact that, on the national levels, the personal coverage of ETYMARAB-related disciplines is far from being sufficient. However, while the Workshop will in the first place enhance and institutionalize all-European collaboration, it goes without saying that the ETYMARAB project also envisages to include researchers from other parts of the world, especially native speakers of Arabic.

Given also the technical challenges related to dealing with digitalized material and the digitalization of source material, the difficulties posed by incompatible software and/or operating systems etc., an important criterion for the choice of those invited to the Exploratory Workshop has also been the long-term expertise of a great number of the participants either as professional developers or as experienced users of digital equipment and IT. The convenors are convinced that the knowledge gathered in the group will find viable solutions to pressing technical problems and in this way pave the way for helping the ETYMARAB online prototype dictionary to become what it is meant to be: the ignition spark that will set into operation the networking power of a worldwide pool of experts who will feel stimulated to contribute to a long-desired instrument and forum of etymological research. It is to be expected that once the ETYMARAB prototype is in place, the community of users will steadily expand and in this way guarantee natural growth and improvement.

While all entries will have to pass rigorous quality control—to be ensured by an editorial board—all information shall be visible for everybody worldwide. The selection and design of the entries will bear this openness and publicity in mind. Accordingly, the entries will have ‘Etymology/Semantic history in a nutshell’ sections alongside with sections that show the underlying details. An exemplary entry may consist of an Arabic term or root, its etymology and semantic history in concise form (tracing it back to earlier forms and giving cognates in other languages, indicating changes of meaning etc.), then explaining the findings with reference to their background (historical and cultural context), e.g., the transfer of a Greek term via Aramaic in the course of the great translation movements, or the adoption of a cultural technique from the Persians, or the coining of a new term from an Arabic root under the conditions of a changed environment, or the modification of meaning of existing words in order to express new political concepts, etc. For all data, references will be given and the context of the original will be provided as a quote from the sources consulted (similar to the *Oxford English Dictionary*). The ‘Etymology/Semantic history in a nutshell’ sections will offer research-based, but “digestible” information and in this way be useable also for an interested “lay” public who in recent years is increasingly looking for reliable information about Arabic terminology that has become known, and is by now almost commonplace, in the West (cf., e.g., key concepts like *jihâd*, *sharî’â*, *fidâ’î* etc.) but is often misunderstood and interpreted out of context.

A time-schedule envisaging several scenarios will have to be sketched. For the moment, the following can be said: After the ESF Exploratory Workshop, the project should take up work later in 2013/14 on several smaller levels (the nature of which will be determined in the Workshop). If funding for M.A. and/or Ph.D. fellowships should be available by this time already, the project can be extended and deepened in certain fields (e.g., 18th/19th century, history of 20th/21st c. terms and concepts, etc.). Oth-
erwise work will concentrate on trying to supply further funding and meanwhile focus on, and go on with, the analysis of material that is already available but needs to be processed so as to fit the Arabic perspective (e.g., etymological dictionaries of Comparative Semitic and Afroasiatic studies, of single languages, of etymological studies limited to single words or word fields etc., cf. Bibliography).

Material that will be made available to the Workshop participants will include: a preliminary bibliography (to be expanded later by each specialist / group of specialists involved); an analytical survey of select samples of extant etymological studies (in order to discuss various approaches); access to a “zero version” of an internet platform including sample templates and a number of sample entries to be discussed by the participants. At the moment, one of the applicants is experimenting (mostly for teaching purposes) with a preliminary version in which have been entered: • all verbal roots (and a large number of other items) from WEHR’s Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic; • some 500 related entries from OREL/STOLBOVA’s Hamito-Semitic Etymological Dictionary (1994); • all items from BERGSTRÄSSER’s list (1928); • some 100 items from JEFFERY’s seminal study on The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’ân (1938) (with Jeffery’s full text); some 100 items from EHRET’s Reconstructing Proto-Afroasiatic (1995); • excerpts from a large number of articles on etymology in the Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics and the Encyclopedia of Islam; • information on a large number of items extracted from studies on Arabic vocabulary of the 19th and early 20th century (nahḍa period), such as MONTEIL 1960, LEWIS 1988 or REBHAN 1986. (For a select Bibliography see end of this application.)

Preliminary Workshop Programme:
The Workshop will have 4 major sessions:

- **Contents and general structure of ETYMARAB—the whole and its parts.** Participants will have received a general outline of the project and they will be asked their opinion about the internal consistency and completeness of the draft: What is missing, what should be altered etc., in general. Participants’ short statements, open discussion.

- **The state of the art in the fields of the participants’ specialisation.** This section is dedicated, on the one hand, to the assessment of research already done, i.e., the material which exists and “only” needs to be processed for ETYMARAB and, on the other hand, the identification of research lacunas and the description of technical challenges. Participants will give short reports about their field which include the mentioning of other related projects with which ETYMARAB could/should cooperate and some words on conditions and chances of fundraising and financing in their field.

- **Criteria for the choice and grouping of entries.** How to decide which word/root should become an entry? What is to be considered significant? Which fields to start from? Open discussion.

- **Designing the follow-up programme(s):** Assessment of sub-tasks, incl. M.A. / Ph.D. and other projects, e.g., the scanning of texts; assessment of manpower needed for sub-tasks and projects, amount of funding needed; setting up a time-schedule for further proceeding, esp. during the time between Workshop and start of follow-up programme(s); distribution of responsibilities for sub-tasks, suggestions for a future board of editors.

Total duration: 2 days (+ arrival & departure days)