Mixed Styles in Spoken Arabic in Egypt

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN ORDER AND CHAOS

BY

GUNVOR MEJDELL

BRILL

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PREFACE

This is a case study of language use in context. It is a study of spoken academic discourse in Egypt, more precisely the selection by some highly educated Egyptians of certain linguistic means from their verbal repertoires in response to a specific situation and genre: 'the panel presentation at a public seminar'.

The question I raise is a quite open one: How do they ('my speakers') do this? And do they do the same things—are their linguistic choices, their patterns of selection similar? different? very different? In which respects, to what degree?

Although the core and the main focus of this study represents descriptive (and contrastive) linguistics, the contextual framework and the interpretation of the data involved several interrelated sociolinguistic fields and approaches. First of all—how to situate this kind of spoken discourse in the larger setting of the linguistic and sociocultural situation in Egypt—specifically with regard to questions of standard language, standardization and (changing) language norms. It involves issues of 'diglossia revisited'—the representation of linguistic variation as a 'diglossic' dichotomy (H:L varieties), or as multilayered varieties, or as a sociolinguistic continuum. It draws on insights from spoken/written approaches, on issues of genres and styles, and on research conducted in the field of language contact and code interaction—the Arabic case ('diglossic' in the 'narrow' sense) presenting similarities to bilingual situations in some respects and to standard-with-dialects situations in other. Language norms, linguistic choice, and the concept of 'style' have been central to my attention all the way, as well as a strong commitment to real data, i.e. an empirical orientation.

Growing up in a country where linguistic issues have always been lively debated, leading to controversies that sometimes include arguments about national treason, I have been particularly attracted to and sensitive to the dilemmas and political underpinnings of linguistic issues also in the field of Arabic studies. At large, official Norwegian language policies represent the extreme contrast to the official Arabic position: language reforms in Norway have aimed at narrowing the gap between the standard norms and the spoken varieties, with the standard norms allowing for a variety of alternative morphophonological forms accommodating to spoken usage. The official purism of Egyptian (and Arab) language policies prescribes a language norm which shuns vernacular forms and which very few Egyptians feel at ease with for spoken functions. The use of verbal strategies which result in a kind of 'mixed' discourse, taking its linguistic means partly from the 'standard' and partly from the vernacular, has, however, long been acknowledged both by outside scholars and by language users themselves as an (unofficial) appropriate way of coping with more formal spoken settings. This study, then, is a contribution to the study of such language practice—aiming at a thorough investigation of a set of grammatical features as they occurred in the panel presentations I have recorded and used for this study.

I hope my study will shed new, or at least additional, light on the properties of 'mixed styles' in Egyptian Arabic, that the discussion of the features be found useful, and that the date be welcomed as an addition to the sparse transcribed oral data available. I also hope it will be considered a tribute to and appreciation of linguistic creativity and the rich linguistic resources of the entire repertoire of modern Arabic.

The investigation is organized into the following parts: Chapter One is an overview of the Egyptian language situation and the development of the status and functions of its language varieties—in the perspective of standard language typology, leading up to the phenomenon of intermediate spoken forms of the language. Chapter Two discusses some important former contributions to the issue of intermediate forms or 'mixed' styles, introduces the data under investigation, the research questions posed and the analytical procedures to be followed. Chapters Three to Seven treat separately the features selected for investigation. They follow the same structure: first, the feature is described in its two basic variants, Standard Arabic [SA] and Egyptian Arabic [EA]—based on descriptions in general grammars and more specialized studies, which are critically discussed and related to each other. Secondly, the occurrences of the feature with each single speaker are listed and commented. Thirdly, the occurrences of the feature are compared across speakers, patterns of usage established or discussed. Chapter Eight compares and discusses my findings on patterns of use of the various features. In Appendix 1 is found a table listing the occurrences of the variants as they enfold in the speakers' discourse, in Appendix 2 the transcribed data is to be found, followed by a rough translation of the data in Appendix 3.

Many persons have contributed with inspiration and help in the long process behind this book. I am deeply grateful to Professor Elsaid Badawi of the American University of Cairo, whose reflections on Egyptian language issues, and help with sources and contacts, has meant much to me academically and personally. I am similarly indebted to Professor Madiha Doss of Cairo University, who went through my tapes and transcriptions, and who always showed interest and care as a scholar and as a friend. Thanks to 'my speakers' Radwa Ashour, Sabry Hafez, Idwar al-Kharrat, Hamdi Sakkut, and Fuad Abu Hatab, who kindly shared their time with me to discuss their language use. I also thank my former supervisor, Professor Heikki Palva of Helsinki University, who first guided me in the terrain of 'mixed discourse', and who has since been a model of accurate linguistic description and careful comment.

At my home university, Professor Inger Moen at the Linguistics Department provided continuous encouragement and readiness to read and comment. Professor Even Hovdhaugen was a constructive reader of early drafts, and Professor Mike Carter supplied keen observations and comments along the way. Thanks to the Department of East European and Oriental studies, to Forskningsrådet and Nansenfondet for various kinds of support, and to other colleagues who assisted in various ways (morally, scholarly, and technically).

For the final stage (from dissertation to book), Professors Kees Versteegh of Nijmegen university and Jérôme Lentin of INALCO, Paris, provided invaluable support and suggestions.

And finally—loving thanks go to my family for endurance and care in repeatedly hectic periods.

CHAPTER ONE

ARABIC AND THE ISSUE OF STANDARD LANGUAGE

Arabic and the ‘diglossic continuum’

The most characteristic feature of the Arabic language situation is that the language community has as its written standard norm/variety a language form—*al-ʿarabiyya al-fuṣḥā* (“most eloquent Arabic”)—which is *not based on the ordinary/natural spoken variety of any segment of the population*, and which is *genetically related to, but highly divergent from*, the spoken varieties. I believe these two features of the standard variety to be the essential, key features in the original (‘narrow’ or ‘classical’) concept of diglossia (as outlined in Ferguson 1959), when it comes to understanding linguistic practice and development in diglossic language communities.[1] The Arabic case can be taken to represent a prototypical case of diglossia—as, in distinction to two of the other three cases Ferguson used to establish the diglossic type of situation, i.e. Swiss German and Haitian Creole, the High variety (H) in Arabic has *no* native speakers even outside the local speech community,[2] and in distinction to Greek, the written domain is

---

[1] ‘Functional differentiation’ of varieties, another defining criterium of diglossia, may be equally characteristic of other kinds of variety configurations—‘standard-with-dialect’-kind of styles and registers; bi- and multilingual code interaction. Cf. Fishman 1967 for a notion of diglossia based on this criterium. Hudson (1994:294) calls diglossia “a dramatic instance of the apparently universal opposition between formal and informal language use.” A thorough discussion of the significance of various criteria used in the literature to distinguish ‘diglossia’ from other sociolinguistic situations is found in the special issue on diglossia of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 157 (2002). Cf. Hudson 2002a and 2002b.

[2] Standard German (Hochsprache) is the normal (conversational) spoken variety of segments of the population in Germany; standard (acrolect) French likewise has native speakers in France, cf. Valdman (1968:313): “[…] the local variety of Standard French—which shows few divergences from the prestige Parisian variety”. In the following section (pp. 313–14), it appears that a certain segment of Haitian society also uses French for informal and private situations, which makes the Haitian case less prototypical diglossic than the Swiss German case. On the other hand, Valdman points to the fact that approx. 90% of the population are absolutely monolingual, have no access to the High variety, French. ‘Diglossic’ *individuals*, then, constitute a small minority—whereas the Swiss Germans, with their elevated level of education, more or less all participate in diglossia. In this (demographic) perspective, Swiss German would be rated as more diglossic than Arabic language communities with lower literacy rates.

(with minor modifications) exclusively the domain of H.[3] The Arabic H is a pure 'superposed variety'[4]—with only the Low variety (L) having native speakers in the sense of being a naturally acquired 'mother tongue'.[5] H has a long tradition of representing the sole codified orthoepic norm.[6] This orthoepic standard variety represents a *prescriptive* norm for writing and reading (written production and oral text reproduction), and as such it is officially sanctioned and generally accepted and uncontested (though not necessarily abided by, see below) in the language community. Real and potential users of the H variety have highly variable competence in both the theoretical (knowledge of the grammar) and practical (proficiency) aspects of it, largely as a function of level and kind of education users have had access to, but also depending on users' attitudes and motivation.

It is generally accepted in (socio)linguistics that *all* speakers have in their verbal repertoire a certain range of stylistic variation, that certain aspects of language use of groups and individuals are influenced by contextual factors and communicative functions. The crude, oversimplified (but hard-to-kill) version of diglossia has it that in diglossic language communities, speakers have two discrete varieties (H and L), and that the use of either one matches certain contextual and/or communicative functions according to society/sociocultural norms. Ferguson's model was, admittedly, largely dichotomous in essence, but he significantly mentioned the use of "unstable intermediate forms of the language" to resolve "communicative tensions which arise in the diglossia situation" (1959:332). And in his 1996 [1991] article "Diglossia revisited" he favours a stronger weight on register variation within and across H and L , which are to be seen as the two poles of a continuum with 'mixed' or 'in-between' varieties—as is also reflected in the metalinguistic labels of native language users: (*al-ʿarabiyya*) *al-fuṣḥā* vs. *al-ʿāmmiyya*[7] (or *al-dārija*)[8] and (*al-luġa*) *al-wusṭā* ("the medium/intermediate/middle (language)").[9]

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[3] Dhimotiki, the Greek L (low variety), has long been used for literary purposes, and today has even taken over the written domain as the dominant and official standard. The Greek case thus can be said to have entered into a 'post-diglossic' situation (Drettas 1981; Hawkins 1983; Frangoudaki 2002).

[4] Keeping in mind that "[t]otal superposition does not imply that every member of a diglossic community knows H and uses H, but merely that there is no portion of the community which actually knows H and uses H without also knowing L and using L [as everyday idiom]" (Britto, cited in Hudson 2002a:6).

[5] To repeat this crucial point: "In diglossia *no one* speaks the H variety as a mother tongue, only the L variety. In the standard with dialects situation, some speakers speak H as a mother tongue, while others speak L varieties as a mother tongue and acquire H as a second system" (Schiffman, cited in Hudson 2002a:7).

[6] For a recent survey of the early process of codification and the 'Forschungsstand' on this issue, see Versteegh 1997, chap. 5–6 and bibliography.

The concept of the Arabic 'language continuum' is approved by the near-totality of Arabists as reflecting the linguistic realities of Arabic language communities today. There have been proposed, however, various models of the continuum—most of them operating with a hierarchy of 'levels' which are structurally and functionally defined. The overarching functional dimension is generally taken to be the degree of formality of the situation/context—a continuum from *informal* to *formal* largely corresponding structurally to a continuum from predominantly *ʿāmmiyya* (L) to increasingly *fuṣḥā* (H) features. Linguistically intermediate 'varieties' or 'levels' are characterized by the presence of more or less H and L features: Blanc (1960): 5 levels (Blanc's model comprises interdialectal 'leveling' as well); Badawi (1973) 5 levels—each level sliding into the next as "the colors of the rainbow"; Meiseles (1980) 4 levels; Youssi (1983): 3 levels—with the notion 'triglossia', which has been adopted by several researchers and expanded to 'multiglossia' (Hary 1996) (or better) 'pluriglossia' (Kaye 1993; Dichy 1994).[10] In this matter of concepts and notions, however, I strongly agree with the view expressed by Ferguson 1996 [1991]:59—that 'diglossia' is still the most appropriate label since "the analyst finds two poles in terms of which the intermediate varieties can be described; there is no third pole".[11] It should be stressed that 'diglossia' applies to the dimension of linguistic variation correlating with occasions of use—not 'dialect' variation correlation with the (geographical or social) 'place' of the language users (ibid.:56). If the totality of Arabic speech communities are taken into account, however, and the perspective includes contacts across regional Ls, as in Blanc (1960) and Dichy (1994)—not to speak of bilingual contacts with linguistic minorities and major foreign languages—then 'pluriglossia' might be a relevant term. Suggestions to apply the (post)creole continuum model based on Jamaican data (Bickerton 1975) with its terminology of *basilect—mesolect—acrolect* to the current situation in Arabic (e.g. Hary 1996), are not, in my view, well founded. The creole continuum model presupposes that individual vernacular 'idiolects' are distributed along the whole range of the continuum, with the variants of variable features ordered in a systematic way (the implicational hierarchy). Whereas the vernacular 'idiolects' in Arabic will all cluster around the low ('basilect') end of the continuum. The model has been rejected for other creole cases (Lefebvre 1976 for Martinique) and finally left bleeding by Bickerton himself.[12]

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[7] In Cairo people would also refer to *il-ʿādi*, "the usual, normal" for *al-ʿāmmiyya*—and *il-faṣīḥ* or *in-naḥawi* for *al-fuṣḥā*—the masc. forms due to the (mostly) elided head noun *il-ʿarabi* "Arabic [language]". Cf. Parkinson 1991 for the use of '*fuṣḥā*'—which to many of his native informants meant 'high classical rhetorical style Arabic'—to the exclusion of ordinary, plain SA. His article is discussed below.

[8] The term used in the Levant and in the Maghrib.

[9] Also, confusingly, sometimes used for 'modernised', 'journalistic' form of SA.

[10] I shall return to some of these contributions in the following chapter, concerning what they say about the middle ranges of the continuum. For general critical surveys of the works mentioned I refer to Hary 1992, 1996; Walters 1996, Owens 2001, Van Mol 2003.

[11] This does not exclude, as Haeri (1996 and 1996b) seems to claim, that variable features which are not dichotomous in terms of H vs. L, but run across the continuum (or certain ranges of it) also be accounted for and be assigned social (or stylistic) meaning. This applies for the phonological features Haeri gives as examples: palatalization (which Haeri is to be credited for having brought to our attention)—a variable feature originating in the L range and affecting oral production even at very high levels of the continuum (cf. Skogseth 2000), final gemination, and voice assimilation—I would add examples as (non-)assimilation of 'sun letters' and (non-)elision of *hamzat al-waṣl*, both variable features appearing in middle and higher ranges of the continuum (cf. transcription of data in the appendix).

My preferred term to designate the situation in Arabic speech communities, in a comparative sociolinguistic (typological) framework, then, is the 'diglossic continuum'. The linguistic properties of this continuum—a product of the interaction of the basic varieties—may be correlated with dimensions of context and style—the informal-formal cline, the casual-careful cline; unplanned vs. planned discourse, and of mode/medium, i.e. spoken vs. written. The 'diglossic variables', i.e. those features with binary (or more) variants contrasting H and L, are potential markers of stylistic and functional differentiation and variation—although they are not the only socially significant features, as Haeri reminds us (cf. n. 11).

In what respect are the distinguishing features of diglossia, i.e. that the H variety has no native speakers and that the varieties H and L are genetically related, but highly divergent, essential for the understanding of linguistic practice and development in diglossic communities—as I claimed in the opening of this chapter? I shall address the first feature by discussing the status and functions of the Arabic H, *al-fuṣḥā*, in the framework of standard language theory/typology—in order to argue more precisely in what sense and to what degree the distinction between

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[12] Personal communication when in Oslo lecturing on the bio-programme in late 1980's.

'diglossia' and the 'standard-with-dialects' situation is relevant and even essential. The structural 'relatedness' feature is implied in that discussion, i.e. compared to standard-with-dialects, and underlies the analysis and further discussions as well as, without being explicitly compared to the bilingual situation, with coexistence of non-related varieties—which I believe involves a different dynamic significant for the sociocultural perceptions of and evolving relationship between varieties.[13]

Standard language/variety—concepts of status, norms, and functions

The literature on standard languages and standardization does not reflect a unified field of research. It appears to be a particular specialization of Central and East European linguistics[14]—due, maybe, to the highly complex nature and distribution of linguistic varieties and national and minority issues in these regions. And also, maybe, to the practical relevance of language planning policies in the context of strongly centralized and authoritarian state apparatuses typical of some of these countries until recently. While 'continental' scholars have had much data (languages and dialects) in their own back yard, North American (socio)linguists interested in standard language issues have been (mostly) comparative and oriented towards language typology (E. Haugen, Ch. Ferguson, P. Garvin—a mediator of Czech linguistic tradition), or treated language standardization as a case of development studies, often with focus on 'third world' countries where several indigenous varieties compete—or simply coexist—with each other and most often also with a superposed foreign language, usually a former colonial language, in various functional domains (represented e.g. by works of J. Gumperz and J. Fishman).

The concept and definitions of 'standard language/variety'[15] typically

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[13] This issue is discussed in various contributions to the IJSL special issue (2002) on diglossia, cf. note 1 above—most poignantly, perhaps, by Haas 2002:111.

[14] The denominations (more or less) equivalent to 'standard variety' varies somewhat in these traditions—Jedlička (1982:40–41) lists 'Literatursprache', 'Schriftsprache', 'Gemeinsprache', 'Standardsprache'.

[15] 'Language' and 'variety' are used without distinction in much of the literature. Some, however, reserve 'standard variety' for the language form itself, while 'standard language' covers the standard variety + its adjacent/subordinated dialects, i.e. like 'a language' in ordinary use, only that it is explicitly implied (!) that the language includes a standard variety... For the development of the concepts 'language' and 'dialect' since Greek antiquity and their uses in various modern contexts, cf. Haugen 1966.