Is religious affiliation a key factor of language variation in Arabic-speaking countries?

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a state of the Arts of religious/sectarian dialectal differentiation and sociolinguistic variation in the Arabic-speaking countries. It is based on the studies that have been conducted so far in the fields of dialectology and sociolinguistics to investigate this issue. The first section reminds the reader of the diversity of sociolinguistic situations in the region in terms of the extent of religious differentiation within a city/area. The second section summarizes the trigger of situations of major religious/sectarian differentiation and the factors that led to their stability for many decades or centuries. It also presents three contemporary evolution processes observable in the areas with major differentiation and some contemporary loci of observation of sectarian/religious variation in areas of minor differentiation.

1. Introduction

The role of religious affiliation as a potential factor of variation and change in the Arabic speaking countries has been discussed in numerous dialectal and sociolinguistic studies. It remains a controversial issue mainly because the parameters for the definition of religious-based community languages are substantially subjective and pose boundary problems, as has been stated by Fishman (1981) for Jewish languages around the world (for an elaborated definition of religiolect, see Hary and Wien, 2013). In this paper, we intend to present a state of the art of the main findings and debates around the issue of language variation and religious affiliation in spoken Arabic vernaculars. We will present at first the main studies describing religious or sectarian variation in different cities, areas or countries of the Arab world, ranging from major to minor dialect differentiation, and we will discuss some of the reasons that led to different interpretations in instances where different interpretations of the same sociolinguistic situation (in terms of two varieties versus variation within one variety) have been proposed. We will then focus on the social and historical factors that have been advanced to explain the differences in the degrees of dialectal differentiation and we will address the issue of the diversity of diachronical evolutions, between leveling (usually via convergence) and maintenance of (or emergence of new) differences. Although writing is an important component of religious identification and affiliation, this paper will not consider the use of specific religious-sectarian written tradition involving specific script and literary genres (for references on this important domain, see Lentin, 2008 and 2012).

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2. Data from dialect descriptions: various degrees of religious or sectarian differentiation

Starting from the early 20th century, numerous dialectal studies have described dialect differences between Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities as well as between Muslim sects in a number of Arabic speaking communities. The first synthesis of this question is the seminal study of Blanc (1964) which remains the classic work on this topic. Particularly important is Blanc's distinction between cases of minor, intermediate and major dialectal differention. Other general syntheses may be found in Holes (1995) for the Middle East and in Taine-Cheikh (2012) and Walters (2006). Within the frame of religious based dialect descriptions, Arabic varieties spoken by Jewish groups [JA] have attracted a lot of attention. A general overview of JA is provided by Khan (2007) as well as by David Cohen (1981, 1985 for the English translation) and Bar-Asher (1996) for North Africa and by Jastrow (1990) for Iraq. Religious variation has been particularly emphasized in North Africa (between Jews and Muslims) and in Baghdad and Lower Iraq (between Jews, Christians and Muslims), while sectarian variation has been subjected to a particular focus in Bahrain (between Sunnis and Shiites). In the following section our aim will be to present, at the linguistic level, the various extents of dialectal differentiation between religious groups in North Africa (Section 2.1) and between sectarian and religious groups in the Middle East (Section 2.2) as it is pictured in the data available from dialect descriptions. In the last subsection (Section 2.3) we will focus on the two ways of interpreting religious and sectarian differentiation either in terms of distinct varieties or in terms of variation within a single variety and on the debates sometimes aroused by this issue.

2.1. Religious variation in North Africa

The Jewish population in North Africa has been demographically very important in many cities up to the 1950–1960s. It has a very old background and is very diverse. In Morocco, Jewish communities were found in rural and urban environments and were distributed at the dawn of the 20th century between Berber, Judeo-Spanish and Arabic speaking groups.[1] The cultural and linguistic diversity of the North African Jewish communities is partly due to different layers of migration and settlements. Whereas some Jewish groups were present since Antiquity and got arabized at an early stage, others arrived in North Africa around the 15th–16th centuries, fleeing the Christian Reconquista in Spain and Italy.

Studies of JA in linguistic and ethnographic materials date back to the early 20th century (cf. Marcel Cohen (1912) for Algiers, Cantineau (1940) for Oran, Marçais (1902) for Tlemcen, Mordekhai Cohen (1930) for Tripoli, Brunot (1936, Brunot and Malka (1939, 1940) for Fes, etc.). Since then, numerous other dialectal descriptions have continued to signal differences between JA and the dialects of neighboring Muslim communities on various linguistic levels. Among the main references,[2] Heath (2002) and Lévy (1990, 2009) provide systematic comparison of Muslim/Jewish dialects in several Moroccan cities, whereas Bensimon-Choukroun (1997), Stillman (1988), Heath and Bar-Asher (1982) cover respectively the cities of Fes, Sefrou and the region of Tafilalt (South Morocco). David Cohen (1964–1975) details Tunis, whereas Yoda (2005) covers Tripoli. Other sources are Benhstedt (1998–1999) for Djerba (Tunisia) and Rosenhouse (1993) for Bougie (Algeria). Many post-1970s dialectal studies on North-African JA have been done in Israel (like Yoda) and some have been published in Hebrew (Tirosh-Becker (1989) on Constantine, Algeria).

Differences between Muslim varieties and JA have been found, at various degrees, in all investigated North-African cities. They are/were usually observed on all linguistic levels (phonology, morpho-syntax and lexicon), as may be seen when comparing a selection of the many features that distinguish between the old urban Muslim dialect [MF] and the old Jewish dialect [JF][3] spoken in the city of Fes:

- Phonological features: (1) Realization of (dˤ)/merger (dˤ)-(tˤ): MF *dˤħək*, JF *tˤħək* 'to laugh'; (2) Distinction *vs* merger of (ʃ)-(s) and (ʒ)-(z): MF *ʃəmməm*, JF *səmməm* 'to let (someone) smell (something)'; (3) Absence *vs* presence of the diphtongues (aj) and (aw): MF *bēdˤ*, JF *bājdˤ* 'egg'; (4) Presence *vs* absence of short vowel *u* MF *skut*, JF *skət*, 'shut up'; (5) CCvC *vs* CvCC syllable types: MF *ktəb*, JF *kətb* 'to write';
- Morphosyntactical features: (1) Third person feminine singular perfective verbal form: MF *kətbət*, JF *ktəbt* 'she wrote' (identical to first and second persons); (2) Second person plural perfective verbal form: MF *ɣərbəltˁīw*, JF *ɣərbəlto* 'you (plural) sifted'; (3) First person perfective verbal form of weak verbs: MF *ħəbbīt*, JF *ħəbt*, 'I wanted'; (4) Futur verbal particle: MF *ɣadi*, JF *mase*; (5) Second-person pronoun absence *vs* presence of gender distinction: MF *nta* (masculine)/*nti* (feminine), JF *nte-ntēna* (masculine and feminine); (6) Relative particle: MF *lli*, JF *de*; (7) Conjunction 'in spite of' MF *bəlli*, JF *bajni;*
- Lexical items: 'to stand up': MF *nādˤ*, JF *ʔām*.

In the case of Fes, both old Muslim and Jewish dialects are classified as old urban sedentary dialects. These dialects appeared during the first wave of Arabization. In North African Arabic dialectology, they are also known as pre-Hilali dialects and are therefore opposed to the Hilali varieties that were brought by Beni Hilal Bedouin groups through the 12th and 13th centuries

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[1] According to Lévy (2009: 146), at the dawn of 20th century, among the 110 000 Moroccan Jews, 16 000 were Judeo-Spanish speaking, 8 000 were Berber-speaking and 77 000 were Arabic-speaking.

[2] Lack of space unfortunately prohibits us to mention all the references.

[3] The data have been selected from Lévy (2009: 163–252).