

Proposed Fulbright Research Project 1984-85

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ORAL MEDIA ARABIC IN SYRIA

Goal

The goal of this research project is to investigate and describe the variation in style of the language used by Syrian radio and TV announcers in interview and talk shows. The value of this project lies in the great need for all teachers of Arabic to understand and appreciate the use of variation in speaking styles of Arabic which defines formal communication and sets it apart from informal conversation.

The choice of Syria for this project is based on the knowledge that literary Arabic is favored there as a style of oral communication in education and broadcasting. It is anticipated that variation in style will be less extreme than that encountered in a similar research project conducted in Egypt in 1973-74. Syrian Oral Media Arabic should be closer in style to that form of literary Arabic used by all Arabs in written communication. Egyptian Oral Media Arabic in 1973-74 displayed some literary Arabic features but when it was transcribed it clearly was too colloquial in form to be a close parallel to the Arabic which appears in print in Egypt.

As teachers of Arabic we are constantly searching for a consistent oral style of literary Arabic in which to conduct our classes. Ideally, this style should reflect actual usage in the contemporary Arab world. It is hoped that the results of this research project will aid in this search.

Background

In all Arabic speaking countries there is some use of oral literary Arabic in spontaneous speaking

situations. However, it has proven very difficult for linguists to record and describe this usage and, in particular, find consistent patterns of usage from one geographic region to another and even from one speaker to another in the same region. Samples have been selected at random, statistical analysis have been performed and labels have been placed on various «levels» with very little agreement over what these labels describe. (El-Hassan 1978-1977; Meiseles; Mitchell 1980, 1978; Sallam). This study will focus on one situation in which the participants are very «speech conscious» because of the presence of a microphone and there is a deliberate choice of a style of speech which might be labeled «educated», «cultured» or «sophisticated». Because of the growing influence of the oral media in the Arab world, this style, the style of broadcasters professionally trained for their role, is a model for other Arabs seeking to portray themselves as «educated», «cultured» and «sophisticated».

The interview show setting is chosen because it is not subject to complete preparation before the broadcast. Material that is read aloud is definitely a form of oral literary Arabic but because the announcer has no choice in the style, it is not interesting as an example of Oral Media Arabic as the term is used in this proposal.

I conducted this type of research with Egyptian radio and TV announcers in Cairo in 1973-74 and found that the samples of spoken Arabic that I recorded from interview shows were very good examples of the kind of blending of colloquial Arabic and literary Arabic features that characterizes «sophisticated» spoken Arabic in Egypt. However, this Egyptian style was too colloquial in its form to

be of much use to teachers of Arabic in the U.S. The variation in use of a literary feature such as the demonstrative pronoun is interesting to linguists but not of much help to the student of Arabic seeking to adjust to the facts of diglossia in the Arab world. I anticipate that Syrian Oral Media Arabic will be closer to the style of the printed form of the language and therefore students of Arabic in this country will profit from hearing and learning it without being overwhelmed by unfamiliar colloquial forms.

Research Methodology

In order to make valid generalizations from the recorded samples, it is important that a small number of announcers be recorded over a period of 6 months or so in order to factor out the idiosyncracies of one interview situation as against another. I expect to choose six announcers, three of each sex if possible, and record at least half an hour of six interviews for each. These segments will be transcribed twice before analysis begins. The first transcription will write out the segment in Arabic script and check the meaning. This is done by a local research assistant who has some training in linguistics. I will contact Dr. Mazen Al-Waer at the University of Damascus in order to find a good assistant. (Dr. Al-Waer was trained at Georgetown University and will be very helpful in seeing this project through any bureaucratic snarls.)

After this first transcription is complete, I will retranscribe the sample in phonetic-phonemic symbols and note the features which deviate from «read-aloud» Arabic. The transcription clearly show the spontaneous nature of the conversation of the interview as semi-grammatical and unfinished sentences frequently appear.

The sample chosen for transcription is usually in the middle of the interview when both guest and host are past the stage of memorized material and not yet at the point where closing cliches or for-

mulas appear. In addition to the six announcers studied in depth, four or five other broadcasters will be recorded in interviews so that a broader picture can validate my generalization. In particular, I will be looking for examples of colloquial intrusions in a basically literary Arabic style of speaking.

Dissemination of Results

The results of this study will be written up while I am still in Damascus and can check out points of uncertainty with Dr. Al-Waer or my research assistant. I intend to write it in monograph form and submit it for inclusion in the monograph series of the Library of Arabic Linguistics series which is being published in England.

Language Training

To prepare for this research project, I chose to attend a unique summer course in advanced Arabic given at Middlebury College in the summer of 1983. All students and staff in this program were pledged to speak nothing but literary Arabic for nine weeks of intense language study. My listening comprehension of literary Arabic improved considerably as did my fluency in speaking in that «bookish» manner. I now feel well prepared for the kind of discrimination of style that this study requires.

I intend during this academic year to begin work on Syrian colloquial Arabic as I really speak only Egyptian at present. With the help of a tutor and the textbook «Levantine Arabic» I should make good progress before September 1984. Obviously, this adjustment to Syrian Arabic will continue at a more rapid pace once I reach Damascus.

Special Expenses

I will need research funds in order to purchase cassettes tapes of good quality, a recorder for the use of the assistant and provide a salary that is reasonable for this assistant. I will also need to rent a TV.

