A Problem in Arabic Phonology

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the claim that the long vowels /ei/ and /ou/ found in the Arabic dialects including the Palestinian dialect are always realizations of the classical diphthongs /ai/ and /au/ respectively. The study analyzed some date and concluded that the claim is questionable and it, therefore, cannot account for all the cases of the vowels in this dialect.

I. Introduction

The long mid front vowel /ei/ and the long mid back vowel /ou/ are common in the Arabic dialects which spread from Oman in the east to Morocco in the west. These vowels are usually considered to be equivalents to classical Arabic diphthongs /ai/ and /au/ respectively. That is, it is believed that these vowels are derived from or variants of the standard diphthongs. Such a belief is based on a, somehow, controversial hypothesis which states that the Arabic dialects are descendant of classical Arabic (CA, henceforth). (Brockemann, 1916; Bergsträsser, 1928; O'Leary, 1969) or from what is known as a koine (Birkland, 1952; Ferguson, 1959). So, the dialectal vowels occurring in words such as /beit/ (2) "home" and /loun/ "color" correspond to the classical diphthongs occurring in the same words /bait/ and/laun/.

What is the relationship between these dialectal vowels and the classical diphthongs? Are all the occurrences of the vowels always derived from the classical diphthongs? It is the purpose of the present study to answer these questions and some other relevant questions, and to examine the relationship between these vowels and the diphthongs.

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The present study is not, generally speaking, quite new with regard to its subject matter. A number of scholars; Arabists and Semiticists, dealt with the vowels – diphthongs relationship and reported important result. For example, Cantineau (1956) made a description of the vowels in the Syrian dialect and concluded that the vowels /ei/ and /ou/ should be considered as "realization" of the classical diphthongs /ai/ and /au/. Ferguson (1957) analyzed these vowels and their relationship to the classical diphthongs. On the basic of a reasonable number of examples, demonstrated that the dialectal vowels should not be regarded as variants or reflexes of the classical diphthongs simply because both of them occur in Arabic dialects. Ferguson's argument is sound and convincing but inexhaustive because it failed to cover all the aspects of the problem. The present study will, however, adduce some new evidence which will contribute to the refining of the old view which has been adopted for a long time concerning the vowels-diphthongs relationship.

II. Modern Arabic Dialects :

The modern Arabic dialects vary from one region to another. However, there are Arabic dialects which have common linguistic characteristics which, therefore, make them distinct from the neighboring dialects. Some of these dialects are the Gulf dialects, the East Mediterranean dialects and the Moroccan dialects. The East Mediterranean dialects, known sometimes as the Syrian dialects, include the dialects of Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. How were these dialects and others formed?

In another work (Hamad,1996), I attempted to describe the origins of the modern Arabic dialects in general. So, I proposed six hypotheses to account for this issue and argued that the Arabic dialects are not the immediate descendants of CA. Rather, they emerged as a result of interaction of a number of sources or factors. The sources are : Ca, old tribal Arabic dialects, Semitic languages spoken in the region such as Aramic, Canaanite, Phoenician, and some other non-Semitic languages such as Persian, Roman, Greek, and Turkish (Garbell, 1958). In the present study a special reference will be made to the East Mediterranean dialects; specifically to the Palestinian dialect (PD, henceforth).

III. Discussion

It seems that the existence of the vowels /ei/ and /ou/ in the Arabic dialects may be attributed to more than one origin. The hypothesis which states that these vowels are realizations of the classical diphthongs /ai/ and /ou/ is not fully justified because of some good reasons that will be presented later. But before we elaborate more on this issue, it is useful to examine how the vowel system of the Semitic mother language looked like because such a diachronic investigation will shed more light on the relationship between the vowels and the diphthongs. One could limit the scope of the study to a synchronic level, but it will certainly be inadequate in this case.

There is a general agreement among the Semiticists that the vowel system of the Semitic mother language consisted of three short vowels and three long vowels typically manifested in the CA vowel system (Cantineau, 1966). However, one is tempted, on the basis of some characterizations and descriptions of the vowel system on the Semitic mother language such as the description made by Gray (1971) to advance the following claim:The Semitic vowel system did include, in addition to the aforereferred to vowels, two more long vowels, namely /ei/ and /ou/ which are largely considered universal by the phonological typologists. It is very likely that both he vowels and diphthongs coexisted in that system.

The above claim is not ill-founded. The phenomenon of the reduction of the diphthongs /ai/ and /au/ to the vowels /ei/ and /ou/ respectively in Hebrew, Phoenician, Ethiopic (Moscati, 1969) and partly in Akkadian and Ugaritic (Brockelmann, 1977) should not be viewed as accidental. This is just one type of evidence that there was a certain vowel system which either originally had these vowels or it developed them later especially before the split of the Semitic mother language. Furthermore, the behaviour of the vowel /ā/ in some Arabic words and its counterpart /ei/ in some Hebrew words led Bergsträsser (1982) to conclude that the vowel system of the Semetic mother language could very likely have had a fourth long vowel, namely /ei/ which later changed into /ā/ in CA.

In the light of the above discussion, it seems reasonable to believe that the existence of the vowels /ei/ and /ou/ in the vowel system of the Semitic mother language

was an old phenomenon and that the Semitic languages inherited that phenomenon later. That is, following the split of the mother language and the emergence of the Semitic languages, some of these languages retained the same vowel and diphthongal systems of the mother language, or, at least, some systems which are similar to them. As for CA, probably the earliest attested form of Arabic, it seems that it had retained the diphthongs and dropped the vowels /ei/ and /ou/. The Arabic dialects, however, developed their own systems of vowels and diphthongs.

One observation is worthmaking here, that is the fact that the occurrence of the diphthongs in the East Mediterranean dialects varies with regard to its approximation to the classical diphthongs, i.e whereas the Lebanese dialect includes a similar diphthongal system in which /ai/ and /au/ as in the words /bait/ and /laun/ are used, in other dialects such as the Palestinian and Syrian, these diphthongs have their own distributional occurrences. In fact, the case of the Lebanese dialect is unique among the Arabic dialects. But, it is important to point out that, in addition to the classical diphthongs found in this dialect, the vowels /ei/ and /ou/ are used instead to the excepted diphthongs. This shift or change could be attributed to the Arabic interdialectal pressure as well as to foreign linguistic pressure.

At any rate, two hypotheses may be proposed to account for the vowels and diphthongs relationship. Al – Ajami (1994) claims that the first hypothesis consists of two stage change. In the first stage, the old Semitic vowels /ei/ and /ou/ changed into the CA diphthongs /ai/ and /au/. Whereas in the second stage, these diphthongs changed into the dialectal vowels /ei/ and /ou/. Two observations may be made here. One is the assumption that the Semitic mother system had no diphthong such as /ai and /au/. However, the results of the comparative method construction done by the Semiticists such as the ones mentioned earlier seem to give little support to this hypothesis. And the other assumption, which is widely held, is that the dialectal vowels /ai/ and /ou/ are descendants of the classical diphthongs /ai/ and /au/. This recurrence is illustrated as follows :

Semitic Mother System	CA	Modern Arabic Dialects
/ei/	/ai/	/ei/
/ou/	/au/	/ou/

In fact, this phenomenon of recurrence was exclusively identified by Ferguson (1959:619) who stated that :

A language or group of related languages...often shows a "drift" or general direction of development consisting of a number of specific trends more or less integrated into a total pattern. Arabic is a good example of this : Certain trends continue or recur throughout the history of the Arabic language. Several of these trends are found also in other Semitic languages and may be regarded as part of the drift of the Semitic family as "whole", others are particularly Arabic.

Despite its limitation, this hypothesis seems reasonable, to some extent, in the sense that it recognizes the existence of the vowels /ei/ and /ou/ in the Semitic vowels system.

The second hypothesis which was proposed by Brockelmann (1908) and Gordon (1965) states that the existence of the diphthongs in classical Arabic is a Semitic phenomenon which persisted in Arabic but not in other Semitic languages. This hypothesis holds that the change of the classical diphthongs into dialectal vowels took place later. Therefore, this change in Arabic resembles that change which had taken place earlier in other Semitic languages. The change may be illustrated as follows.

Semitic Mother System	CA	Modern Arabic Dialects
/ai/	/ai/	/ei/
/au/	/au/	/ou/

This hypothesis recognizes the existence of diphthongs in the Semitic mother. system, but it ignores the existence of the vowels. The point to be asserted here is that it is not a matter of either the vowels or the diphthongs as being the original components in the general system, but it is the likelihood that both of them coexisted in that system in one way or another.

Relevant to this issue is the investigation of the status of the vowels /ei/ and /ou/ in the old tribal Arabic dialects. The significance of this investigation lies in the fact that some of these dialects constituted the basis of CA. Furthermore, these dialects which the Arabic tribes had carried to Syria played an important role in establishing the modern dialects later on.

It seems that the vowels /ei/ and /ou/ did exist in some tribal dialects especially in the Najd region as a result of a phonological phenomenon known as "Imalah". Imalah refers to the change of the long vowels /ā/ and /ū/ into the long vowels /ei/ and /ou/ respectively (Sibawaih, 1966) as in the words /eibId/ "worshipper" and /koun/ "being". The former type was more common. According to Al-Matlabi (1984), Imalah was not only an old Arabic phenomenon but a Semitic phenomenon too which existed in most of the Semitic languages. Anis (1974) claims that the Arabic / ā / was one day a result of either vowel, i.e /ei/ or /ou/.

Overall, the existence of the vowels /ei/ and /ou/ in modern Arabic dialects in general and the PD in particular is attributed to different origins such as Semitic languages, tribal dialects, non-Semitic languages and the CA. The claim that all the occurrences of the vowels in an Arabic dialect, say Palestinian, may be interpreted as reflexes of the classical diphthongs /ai/ and /ou/ lacks strong evidence simply because of the possibility of rejecting it on the basis of some counterevidence.

IV Counterevidence from Palestinian Dialect

A close examination of some Palestinian words reveals that both the vowels /ei/ and /ou/ along the classical diphthongs /ai/ and /au/ exist in the dialect. So, the vowel system in this dialect consists of two more long vowels, namely /ei/ and /ou/ in addition to the classical diphthongs /ai/ and /au/. In other words, the aforementioned vowels do not always correspond to the classical diphthongs in this dialect and they, therefore, should not be considered as mere realizations of these diphthongs. The following are some phonological facts found in the dialect.

1) in support of Ferguson's (1957) view about the retaining of the classical diphthongs in Arabic dialect the following additional examples are presented :

A. Proper Nouns	B. General Words
/aiman/ «Ayman »	/mai/ « water »
/mais ū n/ » Maysoon»	/hairān/ « puzzled » mas. Sing.
/fauzi/ » Fawzi»	/mau ,id/ « promise »
/auni/ » Awni»	/zauraq/ « boat »

2) The following minimal pairs are observed in the dialect.

/dūr/ "houses"	/dour/(3) "turn"
/zūr/ "visit"2 nd p.m.s.imp.v.	/zour/"throat"
/kif/ "how"	/keif/"pleasure"
/ruhi/ "to go" 2nd p.f.s	/rouhi/"my soul" /rauhi/ "rawhi"

3) The dialect replaces certain foreign vowels by the vowels as follows :

P D	Foreign	
/saloun/	/salun/	« saloon »
/kartoun/	/kartūn/	« cartoon »
/moudeil/	/madl/	« model »
/mil/	/mail/	« mile »

4) The dialectal vowel /ou/ corresponds to the classical vowels /ū/ and /a/.

      A.   To /ū/ Examples :

P D	C A	
/šourbah/	/šūrbah/	"soup"
/θoum/	/θūm/	"garlic"
/baraqouq/	/barqūq/	"plum "
/sarsour/	/sarsūr/	"cockroach"
/ĵoux/	/ĵūx/	"broadcloth"

    B. To /a/. Examples :

P D	C A	
/youqa /	/yaqa /	"to fall down" 3 rd p.m.s
/youkil/	/ya'kul/	"to eat" 3 rd p.m.s
/youqaf/	/yaqif/	"to stand up" 3 rd p.m.s

5) The dialect vowel /i/ correspond to the classical diphthongs /ai/.

Examples :

P D	C A	
/šitān/	/šaitān/	"devil"
/rihān/	/raihān/	"armactic plant"
/midān/	/maidān/	"field"

V. Conclusion :

On the basis of the above discussion, it may be concluded that there is no one-to-one relationship between the vowels and the diphthongs in the Palestinian dialect and the classical Arabic. There is some plausible evidence that the vowel system in this dialect differs, somehow, from its classical counterpart. The claim that the long vowels /ei/ and /ou/ are always realizations or reflexes of the classical diphthongs does not hold in the light of the given evidence.

Notes :

1) The vowels and diphthong symbols used in the study are as follows :

   /ei/   as in make

   /ou/   as in home

   /ai/   as in write

   /au/   as in now

   /i/   as in see

   /I/   as in hit

   /ā/   as in father

   /a/   the short counterpart of /ā/

   /ū/   as in moon

   /u/   as in put

2) Since the focus of the study is on the vowels and diphthongs, a broad or phonemic transcription may be sufficient.

3) In this case, the allophone / / may replace /ou/ here because of the /r/. but the study is primarily concerned with phonemic rather than phonetic or allophonic representations.

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