

# SUBJECTIVE REACTIONS TOWARD DIFFERENT VARIETIES OF ARABIC

---

Riad F. Hussein & Nasr El-Ali  
Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan

---

## Introduction :

In accord with Ferguson's model, diglossia, the Arab World is characterized by the presence of two structurally and functionally contrastive varieties of the same language : Classical Arabic (often called Modern Standard Arabic) the superposed variety, and colloquial Arabic upon which the other is superposed. Each variety is appropriate for a set of situations, and to each is attached a sociocultural status and a host of socially-defined attitudes.

Ferguson's model holds true in the context of Jordan which is itself an Arab country. Alongside Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), believed to be used in formal situations, in the press, on the radio, and by enthusiastic defenders of the Arabic language, colloquial Arabic is the «genuine» mother tongue Arab children grow up speaking, and the medium through which they readily express themselves. All Arab children, regardless of their parents' social status or educational level, grow up speaking colloquial Arabic, and not until they go to school do they have any exposure to MSA. Colloquial Arabic is the only form of language available to the illiterate.

According to Cadora (1970/10) «there exist in the Middle East three major «culture types» : pastoral, rural and urban». These major culture types correspond neatly to the local linguistic situation which encompasses three mutually intelligible colloquial varieties which are Madani, Fallahi and Bedouin spoken on the West Bank and East Bank respectively.

The Madani variety is recognised as the medium of communication in the towns of the West Bank such as Jerusalem and Hebron. Besides, it is spoken in some linguistic enclaves on the East Bank consisting mainly of speakers who fled the West Bank and Palestine in the aftermath of the wars which inflicted the area. It is suggested by some linguists (Ibrahim, 1983) for instance, that the Palestinian Madani variety may be related in some way to a supraregional variety due to its sharing some common features with the urban varieties of Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt.

In accord with the suggestion put forward by Ibrahim (1983), we could argue for the presence of a chain of Madani subvarieties on the West Bank descending from a regional Palestinian Madani, which may be «genetically» related to a supraregional urban variety.

Respondents in an earlier study by Hussein (1980/67) were in complete agreement as to the presence of Madani subvarieties. It was documented that the Madani spoken in Jerusalem differs from that of Nablus, and this in turn differs from that spoken in Hebron, which was viewed with less favor. It has also been characterized as «funny and sweet», two attributes arising from the quality of long vowels and funny articulation.

The linguistic characterization of the Fallahi variety is similar to that of the Madani in the sense that numerous Fallahi subvarieties may be said to have descended

## NOTES

1. Philip K. Hitti : *History of the Arabs*. New York, Mcmillan St. Martin press. 10 th ed. 1970, p. 43 footnote 3.
2. Krachkovskii, I. IU : *Arabic Manuscripts ; memories of libraries and men*. tr. from the Russian by T. Mlinorsky. Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1953.
3. Khalil I. Semaan : *Arabic Phonetics : Ibn Sina' s Risalah on the points of Articulation of the speech-sounds*. Lahore, Sh. M. Ashraf, 1963 and 1967, pp. 1-10 ; and *Linguistics in the Middle Ages : Phonetic Studies in Early Islam*. Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1968.
4. Edward W. Said : *Orientalism*. New York, Pantheon, 1978 and vintage Books, 1979.
5. M. H. Bakalla : *Arabic Linguistics : An Introduction and Bibliography*. London, Mansell, 1983.
6. Numerous articles and his excellent *Arabic Linguistics : introductory classical text with translation and notes*, vol. 24 pf. *Amsterdam studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science*, Gal ed. E. G. Konrad Koerner. Amsterdam. J. Benjamins, 1981.
7. C. H. M. Versteegh : *Greek Elements in Arabic Linguistic Thinking*. Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1977.
8. 2 vols., ed. P. F. Abboud and E.N. McCarus. New York, Cambridge U. P., 1985.
9. Written in Cambridge, Mass., 1956, and published in *studies Presented to Joshua Whatmough*. The Hague, Mouton and Co., 1957, pp. 510-522.
10. M. H. Bakalla : *Op. cit.*, p. 161.
11. Vol. 14 for 1958, pp. 303-337. See Bakalla *Op. cit.* p. 161, entry n° 1616.

intercourse now ?» Surely, this so-called «pair» must have been provided by an informant who knew what the linguist was after...

Let me now turn to a historical reference to velarization versus velarized or the act of voluntarily and deliberately velarizing any speech-sound in any language ; I refer to the eleventh century A. D. phonetic work of none other than the great medieval savant, Abu Ali ibn Sina, known in the west as Avicenna, (980 - 1037 A. D.) : In his *Risālah fī Asbāb Hudūth al-Hurūf* (Bravmann's edition being unreliable) which I published in English translation in Pakistan, ARABIC PHONETICS, in my series « Arthur Jeffery Memorial Monographs, No. 2, » Lahore (Ashraf), 2d printing 1977, Avicenna describes the velarized sounds of Arabic as follows :

« (/ḍ/)»

The point of articulation of /ḍ/ is little more forward (in the mouth) than that (of the /sh/), and the obstruction (of the air-stream in the process of articulation of /ḍ/) is complete as in the case of /j/. It differs, however, (from the articulation of /j/ in two things, (namely), (1) in that the (process of) directing the air towards the narrow interstices of the teeth is not constrained, and (2) in that the area of yielding membrane at which the air is restricted after its release is greater so that the air restricted there pushes it from within until a bigger air bubble has been produced which then bursts forth, but it is not in the narrow passage nor with the stretching of the yielding membranes characteristic of /ḍghl/2. (It is thus that) the sound of /ḍ/ is produced.

(/ṣ/)

The production of /ṣ/ is similar to (that) of /s/ save that (in /ṣ/) the passage of the air requires (the use) of a larger surface of the tongue both in length and breadth. A sort of hollow is formed in the tongue (surface) to give the rolling of the air a certain resonance. There is no vibration of a yielding membrane nor vibration of skin surface in the (production of) /s/, /ṣ/, or /d/.

(/t/, /t/ and /d/)

The points of articulation of /t/, /t/ and /d/ are located in the fore part of the extended surface of the palate. (The formation of each of them) comes about by complete obstruction (of the air stream), forward, by an expulsion whereby the air is driven out explosively.

As for /t/, (the air) is restricted (at its articulation-point) by the larger part of the tip of the tongue and behind this (area) by the two sides of the tongue ; and

by a depression in the centre of the tongue behind the place where the air is being restricted. (This depression) is to bring about a resonance when the air is being driven out. There is an expulsion but the restriction (of the air must) be affected forcibly.

The production of /t/ is similar — in all things — to that of /t/save that the restriction (of the air) is effected by the tip of the tongue alone.

The (production of) /d/ is different from that of /t/ save that the restriction (of the air) is effected by the tip of the tongue alone.

The (production of) /d/ is different from that of /t/ for there is no covering of the palate with the centre of the tongue, i.e., velarization — /d/ also differs from both /t/ and /t/ in that, during its production, the restriction (of the air) is not strong, and it may be much.

(/z/)

(The point of articulation of /z/ is located further inward than those of /th/ and /dh/. (/z/) does not result from a complete obstruction (of the air stream) but rather from an obstruction like that of the *ishmām* caused by raising a small part of the centre of the tip of the tongue. What is aimed at in this (bringing upward of the tongue) is that the part which comes after the root of the tongue with its flexible membranes would be presented to the air stream. Then, after a slight restriction therein, the air passes along softly with very slight hissing, but also with the sound imparted to it by (the vibration of) the yielding membrane ».

A fascinating and original description of the velarized sounds in Arabic pp. 58-59, is given by our Medieval Arabic savant as follows :

« /ṣ/ from the bursting of a large bubble in viscous liquids ; and from the splitting open of leaves by their being hit in the centre so that the air comes through, yet without the ends thereof being pierced, save that by reason of the force (of the action) this may — and very often does — resemble the /t/.

/t/ from clapping the two hands so held that there is a shallow vault formed by the palms where the air may be held vibrating ».

To conclude then : our 11th Century Muslim phonetician (who was unaware of the exact function of the vocal cords) taught more and better about MUFAXXAMA than did our Harvard stars in the second half of the 20th Century.

tive and unreliable,<sup>3</sup> and Edward Said's reference to «The great discoveries in comparative grammar made by Lones, Franz Bopp, Jakob Grimm, and others» where two traits are apparent, «(1) a newly found scientific self-consciousness based on the linguistic importance of the Orient to Europe, and (2) a proclivity to divide, subdivide, and redivide its subject matter without ever changing its mind about the Orient as being always the same, unchanging, uniform, radically peculiar object..., [where] Friedrich Schlegel held... the Indo-European family [of languages] was artistically simple and satisfactory in a way the Semitic, for one, was not. [For Schlegel and his followers one might say to the present day] the Semites whose language was agglutinative, unaesthetic, and mechanical, were different, inferior, backward». Stranger than that, Schlegel's racialism became clear when he wrote that «the Muslims, however, espouse a «dead empty Theism, a merely negative unitarian faith»<sup>4</sup>.

This said, I must indicate that scholars such as M. Bakalla,<sup>(5)</sup> M. G. Carter,<sup>(6)</sup> Kees Versteegh,<sup>(7)</sup> to mention only three members of this and similar associations, are worthy of praise for attempting to serve the interest of learning by publishing studies and bibliographies of true scholarly value.

As Arabists know, Arabic, like all languages, has a number of spoken dialects which have been developing since time immemorial. These dialects vary from region to region and from a community of speakers to another.

The sounds of speech of Arabic contain four velarized phonemes, /d/, /t/, /s/, and /z/. Additionally, 'velarization', which is called *tafkīh* in Arabic, occurs in the pronunciation of the name of God, /Allah/, when the word occurs in either the nominative or the accusative case within the sentence : In such cases, correct reading of Arabic requires that the lateral /l/ be velarized.

Additionally, in certain dialectal instances in Arabic speech, the colloquial word for 'father' is pronounced (baba) with both (b) allophones velarized, and so is the case with the word (yaamma) 'mother' where the allophone (m) is equally velarized. Note that similarly, /b/ in ba : sa/ is also velarized and so are the words for 'now', (hal-la') and (no) (la) in the speech heard in the Mazra'a quarter of Beirut, but this remains to be discovered by western linguists...

As found in ELEMENTARY MODERN STANDARD ARABIC,<sup>(8)</sup> vol. I, a velarized sound is one of four Arabic sounds [d, s, t, z] produced with «the back part of the tongue... made tense (with some raising up toward the soft palate or velum) giving the sound a velar effect - p. 22». That is all there is to velarization and the quotation I read is the most pedestrian, linguistically produced, teaching manual, a work that brought together most of Charles Ferguson's students and followers who spend hundreds of thousands of tax-payers dollars to produce a work of unmentionable scholarly value !

The study of velarization in Arabic, however, did not come of age until after Roman Jakobson published his essay, «MUFAXXAMA : the Emphatic Phonemes in Arabic»<sup>(9)</sup>. Jakobson divides his above-mentioned study into eight parts of unequal length :

- 1) componential Analysis of Arabic Monosyllabic Phonemes.
- 2) Pharyngealized Nasals.
- 3) Velarization and Labialization.
- 4) Pharyngealized Labials.
- 5) Pharyngealized Nasals.
- 6) Pharyngealized velars.
- 7) Pharyngeals, and.
- 8) Some conclusions.

Obviously and realistically, then, what Roman Jakobson does with MUFAXXAMA is not at all typical of his superb and highly regarded work on Slavic linguistics. The late great Slavist was completely innocent of Arabic learning ; his reliance on secondary sources and informants made him look at least strange to Arabists who know their subject not withstanding his declaration that he relied on the Harvard Arabists, Ch. A. Ferguson and [the late] R. S. Harrell, and on the astute phonetician of Jerusalem University (sic), Irene Garbell<sup>(10)</sup>.

Now then, anyone who knows either Palestine or the Zionist state of Israel knows that there never been a «University of Jerusalem» ; as for the «astute» Irene Garbell, the only reference about her is in Bakalla's *ARABIC LINGUISTICS : an Introductory Bibliography*,<sup>11</sup> where he lists an essay she published in *WORD* a year after she seems to have met Roman Jakobson<sup>11</sup>.

But this is not the purpose of this essay's mention of Roman Jakobson's «contribution» to Arabic Linguistics. What I aim at is :

1) to correct only his understanding of what «the Harvard Arabists and the astute University of Jerusalem (sic) phonetician have told him about MUFAXXAMA, especially, his so-called minimal pairs /b/ and /m/. These are not phonemes but allophones of their respective phonemes, b/and/m/, with a rather very limited distribution for (baba) and (yaamma), and 2) to say that I didn't learn much from Roman Jakobson's MUFAXXAMA. One strange reference Jakobson has is to what he refers to as the phoneme /ŋ/ where he says, quoting Charles A. Ferguson, «The phoneme / ŋ / (sic) is an even rarer occurrence than / m / ; it appears only in a few Arabic dialects (sic), e. g., in Damascus, ... [in such a] pair as /na : yek/ 'having sexual intercourse' and /na : yek/ 'your (f.) flute,'» Need I say that this is not only non-sensical but also impossible even in Damascus ; for how would a person, in any system of communication or even «in Damascus ;», use the verbal noun, *ism al-fa* : 'il, /na : yek/, 'having sexual intercourse' in day-to-day communication or even in literature ? When in the course of a person's life-activity would one declare «X is having a sexual intercourse» or ask «Is X having a sexual