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Misrata dialect: a socio-phonological perspective

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ABSTRACT

The Libyan Arabic variety spoken in the city of Misrata, Libya, is witnessing noticeable phonological changes. For instance, disfavoured CCC sequences in onset position are beginning to show up. Epenthetic vowels are less frequently heard, rendering the words one syllable less. Moreover, vowel qualities of some words are undergoing change, e.g. *min**u*** → *min**i***, *ʕal**ee**ʃ* → *ʕl**aa**ʃ*. In addition, the moraic structures of some vowels are being affected. Thus, an otherwise monomoraic vowel may end up bimoraic, as in *ʔamta* → *ʔaamta*. Likewise, some assimilatory processes are less frequently heard. Finally, some lexical items are being replaced. Within a socio-phonological framework, this paper aims to highlight these changes, all of which result from the fact that some speakers of the dialect no longer use it and opt for Tripolitania Arabic instead.

الملخص

تشهد اللهجة الليبية المستخدمة في مصراتة-ليبيا- تغيرات صِوَاتِيِّة واضحة. فعلى سبيل المثال تسلسل ثلاثة سواكن غير محبذ في هذه اللهجة إلا أن هذا التسلسل بدأ مؤخرا في الظهور. الصوائت الإقحامية التي كانت تكثر في هذه اللهجة أخذت في التناقص، وهذا ينعكس على عدد المقاطع في الكلمة، إذ أنها أصبحت تنقص مقطعا عما كانت عليه، وعلى نفس المنوال فإن نوعية الأصوات الصائتة في بعض الكلمات بدأت تتغير. علاوة على ذلك طال التغيير التركيب الوزني (الموري) للأصوات الصائتة، فبعض الصوائت أصبحت ذات وحدتين وزنيتين بعد أن كانت ذات وحدة وزنية واحدة. ومن مثال ذلك أيضا فإن بعض عمليات التماثل الصوتي أصابها التغيير كذلك. وأخيرا فإن بعض المفردات أصبحت تُستبدل بمفردات أخرى جديدة على هذه اللهجة. تستخدم هذه الورقة إطارا اجتماعيا-صِواتيا لتسليط الضوء على هذه التغيرات اللغوية الناتجة عن إحجام بعض مستخدمي لهجة مصراتة (وخاصة الإناث) عن استخدامها والاستعاضة عنها باللهجة المستخدمة في طرابلس.

KEYWORDS: Libyan Arabic, socio-phonology, dialect change, epenthesis

Introduction

Arabic belongs to the Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic (Hamito-Semitic) family of languages. One of the distinctive features in the Arabic-speaking world is the existence of diglossia. This means that two varieties of the language are used, a formal (classical or standard) variety and an informal (colloquial, dialectal) one (Ryding 2014: 141). Predominantly, the formal variety is believed to be high (H), contrasted with the informal variety which is regarded as low (L). These two version of the language are "in complementary distribution with each other" (Freeman 1996: 1.). This means that where one variety is used the other variety is not expected to be found. Thus, since the informal variety does not have the prestige which its formal counterpart enjoys, the H variety is used in formal situations while the L variety is used in conversational situations. In the Arab world, Classical Arabic, and its recent form Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), is the prestigious H variety. Different dialectal forms derived from MSA are used across the Arab countries (for more on diglossia, see Ferguson 1959, who was the first to publicise the term).

Libya is part of the Arab world. The dialectal form used in this North African country branches into an array of sub-varieties. This paper sheds light on the sub-variety spoken in the city of Misrata, located in the northwest of the country, about two hundred kilometers east of the capital city, Tripoli. The Arabic version used here has features which distinguish it from the versions used in other parts of Libya. As we will see below, however, many of these distinctive features are gradually beginning to disappear because of the influence of the vernacular used in the capital, Tripoli.

Linguistic variation

In the introduction, I said that Standard Arabic is more prestigious than colloquial Arabic. It is also true that some vernacular forms are regarded as more prestigious than other vernacular forms. Dialects spoken in capital cities are often looked up to (Abd-el-Jawad 1986). In Libya, Tripolitanian Arabic (TA) seems to be more exalted than other varieties. The influence of TA over MLA manifests itself in the fact that some

speakers of the latter dialect (females in particular) frequently mimic linguistic forms exclusively used by speakers of the former dialect.

The dialect under scrutiny

We have just said that the Libyan Arabic variety used in Misrata, hereafter Misrata Libyan Arabic (MLA), has linguistic features which tell it apart from the rest of the Libyan Arabic varieties. For instance the syllable structure of MLA is not exactly the same as that of TA, the Libyan Arabic variety influencing the variety under investigation. Likewise, words may have vowels different from those found in in the same TA words.

Syllable patterns in MLA

The following syllable patterns occur in the dialect.

(1)	Syllable	Pattern	Gloss
a.	CV	**ṣa**.gir	‘falcon’
b.	CVV	**kaa**.mil	‘complete m. s.’
c.	CVC	**kal**.bi	‘my dog’
d.	CVCC	yadd	‘hand’
e.	CCVV	**graa**.ya	‘reading’
f.	CVVC	faaz	‘he won’
g.	CCV	xab.**bra**	‘inform him!’
h.	CCVVC	klaab	‘dogs’
i.	CCVCC	smint	‘cement’
j.	CCVC	grib	‘waterskins’

A fleeting look at these examples reveals that only vowels can be syllable heads. As is the case with all Arabic dialects, syllables cannot be vowel-initial. This means that the onset is obligatory. The coda, by contrast, is optional, in harmony with the most frequently occurring syllable structure CV(C).

Tripolitanian Arabic, on the other hand, has the following syllable patterns (Elgadi 1986: 57).[1]

(2)	a.	CV	ʒe	'to come'
	b.	CVC	min	'from'
	c.	CVV	laa	'no'
	d.	CVVC	baab	'door'
	e.	CVCC	tamr	'dates'
	f.	CCVC	xnab	'to steal'
	g.	CCV	ʃke	'to complain'
	h.	CCVCC	nʃall	'to become crippled'
	i.	CCCV	nkwe	'to be cauterised'
	j.	CCCVC	lt̪ham	'to be welded'

It is noteworthy that the syllables in (a, g, and i) should have been represented as CVV, CCVV and CCCVV, respectively. This is because the nucleus of these syllables is occupied by the long vowel [e], typically transcribed as [ee] in Arabic linguistic tradition. This vowel, though monophthongal, is bimoraic rather than monomoraic; long vowels and diphthongs have two moras. What's more pertinent to our discussion is the fact that some syllable patterns are shared by both dialects. Other types occur only in TA, not in MLA, namely CCCV.
As we will see below, however, such a syllable may find its way to the MLA inventory of syllables.

The tendency nowadays is for (mainly female) speakers to refrain from using MLA and to use TA instead. Now let's consider the following data set:

(3)

MLA form	TA form	gloss
təmaanya	tmaanya	eight
gəree	gree	he read
səmaʕ	smaʕ	he heard
təlaat	tlaat	Tuesday
dəhab	dhab	gold
səmee	smee	sky
nəbaħ	nbaħ	it m. barked
ħəmaam	ħmaam	pigeons

As these examples illustrate, onset CV forms are realized as CCV forms in the speech of those MLA speakers who use TA instead. The dialect investigated prefers to have CV syllables. CC clusters in onset position can also be found in the dialect. However, these are mainly the result of vowel deletion in avoidance of an impermissible syllable configuration. This configuration is the one known as a weak syllable. A syllable is categorized as weak in case it has the following attributes (McCarthy, 2007: 168): it is headed by a short high vowel; it is coda-less; it is not stressed; it is non-final. As a result, an otherwise bisyllabic word ends up monosyllabic, as shown by example (h) in (1) above, whose input form is /kilaab/[2]. This last example conforms to the Sonority Sequencing Principle, requiring segments closer to the syllable nucleus to be of higher sonority than peripheral segments. There are, however, examples which violate this principle, e.g. *rdee*, which is derived from *ridaaʔ* 'vestment'.

CC sequences are also found in the dialect across morpheme boundaries. For example, when a prefix is appended to a (consonant-initial) verb, two consonants will be juxtaposed, as can be seen through the following examples:

(4)	tsaafir	'you travel'
	traafig	'you accompany'
	tlaagi	'you meet'

Here the imperfective prefix /t-/ is attached to the verbs *saafir*, *raafig*, and *laagi* (originally *tusaafir*, *turaafiq*, and *tulaaqi*, with elision of the vowel /u/) producing two consonants in a row. Note that the co-occurrence of the two members of the cluster in (4) takes place across a morpheme boundary, unlike the juxtaposition of the two consonants in (3) where the cluster is word-internal. However, the common denominator between the two data sets (3 and 4) is that vowel deletion produces consonant clusters.

If we go back to Elgadi's examples, we can see that TA allows clusters comprising three consonants, cf. examples i. (nkwe) and j. (lt̪ham) in (2). Note in passing that these clusters result from morpheme concatenation. In (2 i), the stem[3] is *kwe* to which the prefix /n-/, used to derive pattern VII verbs, has been added. In (2 j), the verb pattern VIII infix /-t-/ has been inserted into the stem *lħam* (Wright 2007: 40). By contrast, the Libyan Arabic variety dealt with in this paper never permits such sequences. The same affixes and the resulting patterns (VII and VIII) exist here as well but speakers of the dialect epenthesise a vowel to break up the cluster.

MLA is not alone in eschewing the CCC cluster. Other vernaculars of Arabic, like Cairene and San'ani also shun this sequence within the word and across morpheme and word boundaries. The following are two of the examples Watson (2002: 64) gives (see also Broselow 1976: 1, who says that sequences of three consonants are anathema in Cairene Arabic):

(5)	/ʔult + lak/	ʔult[i]lak
	/kunt + hina/	kunt[i] hina

Watson also presents some San'ani examples, from which we choose two:

(6)	/ʔult + lak/	ʔult[i]lak

/kunt + hina/ kunt[i]hina

These examples illustrate that three-consonant clusters are broken up in Cairene and Sana'ni through vowel epenthesis. Watson adds that in fast speech sequences of three consonants can be witnessed in San'ani.

Vowel quality

In addition to the change of syllable types, vowel quality sometimes undergoes change. Consider the following examples:

(7)	MLA	TA	
a.	minu	mini	'who?'
b.	hina	hnee	'here'
c.	ʕaleeʃ	ʕlaaʃ	'why?'
d.	saaxin	sxuun	'hot s. m.s.'
e.	ʔamta	ʔaamta	'when?'

These examples indicate that the vowels of the listed forms are not identical in the two Libyan variants. The first example shows that the ultimate syllable in the TA form contains the high front vowel [i], which harmonizes with the vowel of the stem, unlike its counterpart in MLA, which displays no harmony with the stem vowel. In the next three examples, the initial vowel is elided in the TA forms, giving rise to the loss of a syllable and yielding a cluster of two consonants. The last example shows that the initial vowel is not lost. However, this vowel is lengthened, rendering it bimoraic, unlike the monomoraic vowel in the MLA example. This is similar to what happens to the second example *hina*, whose last vowel undergoes change both in quality and moraic structure.

Assimilatory change

Consider the following examples.

(8)	MLA	TA
yet- + ɣayyir	yetəɣayyir	yetɣayyir 'he changes'
yet- + ʕallim	yetəʕallim	yetʕallim 'he learns'
yet- + maada	yetəmaada	yetmaada 'he goes too far'
yet- + faahim	yetəfaahim	yetfaahim 'he understands'
yet- + nahhid	yetənahhid	yetnahhid 'he sighs'

What sets the two vernaculars apart is that a vowel is inserted in MLA but not in TA. Again, non-epenthetic forms are frequently articulated by the same speakers we have been referring to.

Lexical change

Lexical change is not as obvious and as ample as phonological change, simply because most of the lexical items used in the two versions of Libyan Arabic are identical. However, some of the words which have different forms in the two dialects are listed in (9):

(9)	MLA	TA
	a. minu	ʃkuun (cf example (7a) and note 4)
	b. baahi	gnayyin 'good .s.m.'
	c. waaʒid	halba 'plenty'
	d. ʔayyin	ʔaama 'which (one)?'
	e. maṭbix	kuʒiina 'kitchin'

As can be seen, the forms in the two variants are totally different. The TA form in (e) *kuʒiina* was in use in MLA as well but with a slightly different pronunciation; it was pronounced *kwiʒiina*, a direct borrowing from Italian. This was preceded by *nuwaala*. In fact, both *kwiʒiina* and *nuwaala* were in use at the same period of time. Later on *nuwaala* vanished and *kwiʒiina* took over. The same situation carried over to *kwiʒiina* and *maṭbix*, until the former form disappeared and the latter

survived. It is likely that *kwiʒiina,* or it can be *kuʒiina* (as pronounced in TA) will be resurrected into the dialect; thanks to MLA speakers who use TA. This is because many of those speakers are mothers or mothers-to-be. Their ways of speaking will naturally be picked up by their children during the children's language acquisition stage.

All the discussion above indicates that in the few decades to come MLA will witness dramatically conspicuous changes. This is at best; at worst, the dialect may be replaced by TA altogether.

Conclusion

This paper has shed light on the changes that the MLA is undergoing, because of the influence of TA over MLA. Previously unattested consonant clusters (CCC clusters in onset position, in particular) are appearing. Epenthetic vowels are becoming less common than they used to be. Vowel qualities in some words are no longer the same. /t/ of the prefix /yet-/ is less commonly assimilated to the following coronal obstruent of the stem. Some words are one syllable less, due to nonexistence of epenthetic vowels. The moraic structure of some syllables is no longer the same. Less commonly observed, but no less important, is the change in lexical items; some MLA words may disappear, leaving their place for words borrowed from TA.

To conclude, this means that MLA may lose many, if not all, of its distinctive features and disappear as a result. Psychologists and sociologists are invited to conduct further studies to find out the reasons behind the linguistic behaviour of some speakers of MLA.

Notes

1. Laradi (1983, 25-26) lists the structures VCC and VVC among the attested Libyan Arabic syllables. These two structures cannot occur in LA because they lack onsets. Onsetless syllables are impermissible in Arabic, as has already been mentioned.

2. Not only do speakers of MLA delete vowels to avoid a weak syllable; they sometimes resort to metathesis to get around such an impermissible syllable.
3. Morphologists distinguish between the terms *base*, *root*, and *stem*. Here, I am using *stem* as a cover term since the precise distinction between the three terms is beyond the scope of this paper (for details, see Katamba 1993; Bauer 2003; Aronoff and Fudeman 2011).
4. The form */kuun* is sometimes used instead of *mini*.

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