

## **The Effect of Arabic Dialects Variation on Communication: The Arabic word as an Example**

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The purpose of this research is to investigate a sociolinguistic phenomenon related to *diaglossia*. Lets first distinguish between this term and another overlapping one, *bilingualism*. The first refers to a linguistic dualism traceable to dialects and internal linguistic variation, as is the case with Arabic dialects. The second term means two languages of the same status for individuals or groups.

It is well known that Arabic comprised various dialects that once shared one fundamental element, but varied from each other. This variation was discussed at length by the ancients. One such variation was manifest in polysemy and homonyms. One dialect designated one referent with one word, while another dialect used the same word to refer to another object. This inconsistency leads to a certain degree of ambiguity and sometimes to misunderstanding in classical Arabic.

The basic gist of this argument falls into four major headings: first, an explication of the title of the paper and clarification of its topic; secondly, presentation of vocabulary items and speech events to show how the difference in dialect-based lexical meaning contributed to the emergence of ambiguity in classical Arabic; thirdly, the effect of the current dialectal differences on the vocabulary meaning of contemporary Arabic; Fourthly, an explanation of this variation between dialects.

The paper concludes with a suggested conceptual framework for this notion and a proposed solution for this sociolinguistic dilemma resulting from *diaglossia*.

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This research addresses a sociolinguistic phenomenon; its title shows the three main points to be discussed: dialectal variation, communication and limiting variation to lexis. It will be shown later that differences in meaning due to dialectal variation may lead to two problems: ambiguity and vagueness. This phenomenon is recurrent. To follow up this phenomenon, the author has amassed and investigated many examples of it in classical books (over 1000 years ago) to show how it hindered communication.

### **Historical Interpretation**

It is known that Arabic is a composite of various dialects which shared a common core in phonetics, morphology, syntax and lexis, but differed in linguistic phenomena thoroughly investigated by ancient linguists at the time when language rules began to be established (1). In fact variation was extensive and rules did not account for all dialects, as this would have been an impossible task to accomplish. Therefore, a selection of dialects to represent Arabic was made. Farabi in his dictionary *Al-Alfath wal Huroof* (vocabulary and letters) said: "Of those from whom Arabic was taken and who were followed as a model were the Arab tribes of Qays, Tameem and Asad. Those were the most frequently followed and on them scholars depended for grammatical inflection and morphological word formation. Then comes Huthayl and parts of Kananah and Tai'yyeen. Nothing was taken from the rest of Arab tribes (2).

I believe that the ancient linguists are justified in this restriction for two reasons. First, if a contemporary linguist were to prescribe the slang dialects today he would find great difficulty in doing that if at all. To what dialect should he /she refer? Should he base the prescription on North African Arab dialects or on those of the Orient, which comprise distinct dialects like the Sudanese, the Iraqi or the Jordanian? Even in Iraq there are various dialects different in linguistic features. The discussion above leads to a striking quote by Ma'arri who died over one thousand years ago. Ma'arri said: "It is impossible to comprehend all that the Arab tribes uttered...as this would have been an unachievable task (3). Similarly, Ibin Hazm who also died about one thousand years ago said that those who heard the dialect of the inhabitants of the old Spanish Andalusian village Fahs Elbaloot near Qordoba would likely to say that that was a language of its own, not that of Qordoba.

It should not be forgotten that the Qura'an had an obvious effect on guiding the ancient scholars in their efforts to establish language rules, yet despite all that, the Qura'anic recitation took into consideration the

dialectal differences between Arab tribes, and therefore the Qura'anic readings took various forms. Prophet Mohammad was sent to all nations yet the Arab tribes, in whose language the Qura'an was revealed, spoke different dialects. It was difficult for them to shift from their own dialect to another one. In fact some may not be able to do that at all, especially the elderly and the illiterate...If they were ordered to abandon their dialects, said Ibn Eljazri, they wouldn't be able to do that (4).

As for the variety of ancient dialects, it is a long story covering various linguistic levels: phonology, morphology, syntax, lexis and stylistics. For example, keeping the *alif* in the dual form in the three grammatical cases: *ja'a al waladan*(subjective case), *ra'aytul waladan*(objective case) and *marartu bilwaladan*(dative case), polarity in inflecting the **SIX NOUNS** by affixing three case endings: RAF' using the WAW in the subjective case, ALIF in the objective case and YAA' in the genitive/dative case. **Omission** is the second dialectal feature. This means deleting ALIF, WAW and YAA' and inflection by visible diacritical marks such as HATHA ABUHU, RA'AYTU ABAHU, MARARTU BIABIHI. The third feature **TAMAM** or ILZAMUHA ALIF(6). Examples of this dialectal variation KASR the first letter of present tenses in all Arab dialects except that of Hijaz in such expressions as ANTA TILAM, ANA I'LAM, HIYA TILAM(7).

In the context of discussing the dialects of Arabic, Ibin Faris raised this question from various aspects such as difference in vowels (MINHU NASTA'EEN, NISTA'EEN) and difference in diacritical marks, and differences in replacing sounds, differences in glotalization (*hamz*) or non-glotalization, and transposition, e.g. SA'EQAHA, SAQEA'A, and differences in omitting or keeping some voiced sounds and differences in vowel distortion (*imalah*), and differences in feminization, masculinization, assimilation, inflection and plural forms(8). In this context the **ANA'ANAT** of Tameem tribe in which the HAMZA is turned into A'YN or the **KASHKASHA** of Rabee'ah in which the KAF of the vocative (second person) is changed to SHEEN should be pointed out (9). It is also worth remembering that words were used for their semantic content. The tribes differed in nomenclature; the researcher can use the dialectal variation as an introduction to the study of certain semantic phenomena such as synonymy, **homonymy** (*mushtarak*), and antonymy. Ibin Jinni confirms that if more than one lexeme are used by one person to express one meaning (synonymy), this is better interpreted as several dialects learned by one person (10). The effect of dialects in creating antonyms can be seen in the words of Ibin el-Anbari: "If one letter has two opposite meanings, it is more logical to consider that the Arab

speaker was aware that the one meaning intended by one community was not necessarily shared by another tribe. It should not be held, however, that the same speaker thought both meanings equal". A more plausible interpretation of the phenomenon is that both communities heard and quoted each other (11)

### **Examples of ancient Dialects**

The word 'MU'SER in tribal dialects of Qys and Asad means the girl who is about to menstruate, while in the Azd dialect the word means the woman who has had a baby or a spinster (12). Similarly, the word MUQAWWAR means fat in the dialect of Hilaliyeen, but in other dialects, the word meant skinny. The word SAJID meant stooping for some tribes while it meant erect for the tribe of Tayyi' (13). QALT meant a great trench in the mountain where the water it collects is enough to drown a camel, but for Tameem and others it meant a hole in the mountain where water collects (14). LAMQ meant scribe for Bani Aqeel, but meant erase in the Qays dialect. The word SAMED is an example of **antonymy** because it meant "heedless" but meant "sad' in the dialect of Tayyie'. There are many examples of homonymy, (antonmy being one type of it). One example is the word ALFAT that meant "fool" in the language of Qays and "LEFT-HANDED" in Tameem dialect. For most Arabs, the word SALEET meant "COOKING OIL" but for the Yamanis it meant "sesame oil"(16). RABBAD is the "plasterer" in Yaman (17) and 'ENK means, "door" for them (18), thus ANAKA Al\_BAB means "closed the door"(19).

After this telling though brief demonstration it seems that the most likely candidate for creating the ambiguity resulting from dialect variation is how words acquire meanings because the agreement of two tribes on two opposite meanings for the same word is a phenomenon that produces various types of possible ambiguity, though one may find links between varying meanings coming from various dialects such as the word SALEET which simultaneously signifies "COOKING OIL" and "sesame oil" as mentioned above. Such links may bring the REFERENTS together but leave the door open for ambiguity.

### **The Effect of Dialects on Communication**

There is no doubt that dialectal variation may function to divert the receiver (listener) from the speaker's (interlocutor) intention. This may result in ambiguity or vagueness. An example of ambiguity as described by ancient Arab linguists can be seen in the following story. A man came to a Himyari (ancient Yamani) King while hunting in a towering mountain. The man greeted the king who ordered (asked) the man (his

guest) to THIB. The man said: You will find me such an obedient person. As he said this, the man leaped off the mountain cliff and broke his neck. The king inquired what was wrong with the man. The man's companions explained to the king the misunderstanding of the meaning of the word THIB, as it meant, "leap" in that man's dialect. The word still has this meaning in contemporary Arabic. In the dialect of the Yamani king, however, it meant "sit down" or "please be seated". It seems that belonging to two dialects with contrasting meanings, the word was behind a response (and thereby a resultant tragedy) never intended by the sender in the speech event.

A similar incident happened with prophet Mohammad (PBUH). A shivering war captive was brought to him. Seeing that the poor man was shivering with cold, the prophet ordered his companions to WARM him. In obedience to the commands of their prophet, the companions took the man away and killed him, for that was what the word WARM meant for the Yemeni companions. The prophet meant warm to signify heat, but they thought it meant kill. In their dialect, to WARM the wounded enemy at war meant to kill him. The prophet paid his blood money (*diyeh* in Islamic legal terminology)(20). Thus, the response to this speech event was an action, which led to the death of the captive. The cause of the sad event is that the word uttered by the prophet happened to coincide with another meaning common to the Yemenis, "killing" and diverted from the meaning intended by the prophet, "warmth". This speech event clearly shows the effect of ambiguity.

### **Dialects In the Qura'an**

Sayuti said "Qra'an contains fifty dialects: Quraysh, Kinana, Khatha'am, Khazraj, Asa'ar, Numair, qays, Aylan, Jurhum, Yemen, Azd, Shanooa'ah, Kinda, Tamee, Himyar, Madyan, Lakham, Sa'd El-Asheerah, Hadramout, Sadoos, Amaliqa, Anar, Ghassan, Muthhij, Khuza'a, Ghatafan, Saba', Oman, Bani Hanifah, Tha'labah, Tayyi', Amer ibnu Sa'sa'a, Aws, Muzainah, Thaqeef, Jutham, Baliy, Uthrah, Hawazin, Nimr, Yamama (21).

It has been confirmed that the Qura'an contains dialectal phenomena belonging to Arab tribes. It is divine wisdom that the Quraan has played a role in bringing the Arab dialects closer. In fact it has merged them into one dialect. Yet one can still find phonetic, morphological, syntactical, and semantic dialectal variation in the holy book. Qura'anic scholars were aware of this multiplicity of dialects. The strongest ambiguity occurs in the lexical domain. Several scholars wrote on this topic such as Harawi's *The Tribal Dialects in the Holy Qura'an*, Ibin Hasnoon's *Dialects in the*

*Qura'an* as narrated by Ibin Abbas. Following are some examples of this discussion.

1. When the ancient Qura'anic interpreters extrapolated the verse {**WA TADHAKOON WA LA TABKOON WA ANTU SAMIDOON**}(22), they found the word SAMIDOON ambiguous. Should they interpret the word to mean "heedless" or "sad and confused"? (23)
2. Likewise, the word YAYA"AS in the verse {**AFALAM YAYA"AS ALLATHEEN AMANOO**}(24) has a common well known meaning: "despair, frustration", but the context in which the word occurred does not allow such an interpretation. Some commentators interpreted the word to mean "know" based on Nakha' dialect. This verse shows the role of dialectal variation causing ambiguity. Many interpreters were careful with its meaning. One ancient commentator, Makey bin Abi Talib, in an attempt to resolve the ambiguity, mistakenly interpreted the word to mean the opposite of "hope"(25). My college students made the same mistake.
3. The underlined word in the verse FATHALTOM TAFAKAHOON means "regretful" in Ukl's dialect, while to other tribes it meant "laughing". The word was taken to mean both. Hence the dialectal effect and possible alternative interpretation (27).
4. There was some discrepancy in interpreting the last word in the verse KHULIKA AL INSANU MIN AJAL(28). Some thought it meant 'speed' (29), a plausible interpretation, but others understood it to mean 'mud" because AJAL is mud in Himyaric dialect (30). It seems then that this discrepancy is due to dialectal variation. I believe the two meanings to be incompatible because the verse clearly describes the frailty of man and his mortality as a species created out of mud. The fact that this word is common in two distant dialects lead to the HOMONYMY phenomenon. Thus its meaning has become divided even within the Qura'anic context.

### **Dialects in the Hadith (Prophetic Traditions)**

1. In addition to the previous discussion there is the issue of different dialects in the Hadith (Prophetic Traditions). The hadith contains several dialectal phenomena. The reason for this variety is the fact that the prophet was sent as a teacher and preacher around whom his disciples circle to listen to his answers to their questions about

this life and the after life. Also people reply to him individually and in groups. Sometimes he answered them in their own dialects which deviated from what was common. At other times it was the narrators' dialects that caused the variation in the hadith texts. The prophet talked to a mixture of people whose dialects differed from his. Some of them figured out the message of the hadith from context. Thus the wording of that narrator was in his own dialect. This led to the emergence of dialects in the hadith(31). An example of this can be found in the hadith in which the Persian King's (Kissra) messenger came to the prophet who gave him a MI'JAZAH. Apparently, this hadith is structurally unambiguous, but what is lexically ambiguous is the word MI'JAZAH. Such an ambiguity blocks the meaning; that is why this hadith was classified as GHAREEB(strange). This word has been interpreted as "scarf worn around the waist" In the Yemeni dialect(32).

Other examples of dialectal variations in the hadith and its effects on ambiguity is the prophet's address of the people of Hadramout about what they had there of property, palaces, MAZAHER, ORMAN, MILH, MAHJIR (33). Khatabi showed how interpreters differed in interpreting the highlighted words. Such disagreement is beyond the scope of this paper (34).

Another example the hadith narrated by Zayd bin Thabit in which he narrates that he was with the prophet who dictated a letter to him. Zayd inquired about certain words. As Zayd was writing down the prophet's words, a man came and the prophet said to Zayd: INTU, which means "pause/halt" in the Himyari dialect (35).

The question of dialectal variation in the prophetic hadiths is not confined to single vocabulary items, but may extend to phonetic phenomena like transposition, [such as in the word *jabatha* for *jathaba* (pulled/attracted)], vowel shortening or lengthening, replacing consonants, as in replacing the AYN by NOON in the prophetic saying: The upper hand is the MUNITIYAH and the lower hand is the MUNTAH instead of MU'TIYEH and MU"TAH (giver and taker respectively). Zamakhshari said this was the dialect of Bani Sa'ed

### **Variation in Modern Dialects**

Contemporary Arabic is not far from Classical Arabic in dialectal variation. In the Arab World there are a variety of dialects differing in phonetics, morphology, syntax, lexis and stylistics. The interesting paradox is that the best communication tool across this geographical area

between the Atlantic Ocean and the Arabian Gulf is a form of modified classical Arabic. I would like to point out three important paradoxes before listing some lexical dialects.

1. The more distant, the more divergent dialects will be and the more ambiguity there will be and vice versa. An example of this are the Palestinian and the Jordanian dialects, which to a large extent are close to one another in a similar way to the Lebanese and Syrian dialects. On the other hand, the Moroccan and Iraqi dialects are far apart.
2. The best communication tool between far geographical areas is modified and simplified classical Arabic. As it often happens, this will be the case when a Palestinian communicates with an Algerian.
3. The third paradox is that each dialect has its own sub-dialects. The Palestinian dialect, for instance has southern and northern sub-dialects; the latter has the dialects of Nablus, which is separate from those of Jenin or Tulakarem. The emphasis in this paper will be on the distant not on the close dialects. Examples of the distant dialects is that the word SHAHHATAH means 'match box' in Palestine while it signifies 'flip flop' in Syria. In Egypt, EISH is 'BREAD in Palestine, Jordan and Syria. The Egyptian SIKKA is the Palestinian TAREEK (road). The Iraqi TIMMAN is AROZ (rice) in Palestine ,Jordan and Syria in the same way that the Iraqi JAM is the Palestinian ZUJAJ(glass).

The word may acquire a negative connotation in one dialect but a positive one in another such as the word MABSOOT which in Palestine means 'happy, merry' while in Iraq it means 'beaten up'. Such discrepancy may lead to social embarrassment. This phenomenon was explained by the ancient scholar Ibin Al-Anbari who confirmed that a word cannot simultaneously have two opposite meanings like 'black and white', a phenomenon which may occur in two different dialects as seen in ancient classical Arabic. Thus when language scholars combined the various dialects in one standard dialect, some words each having simultaneous opposite meanings have been included (38).

Many speech events have been collected to show break of communication due to dialectal diversion and distance. Lets consider five examples observed by the author.



1. A Sudanese friend said to us: 'I have brought you delicious FOOL. I thought it was the familiar fool (lima beans). A third friend was surprised that the [cooked] FOOL did not rot having traveled a long way from Sudan. Not a single sign of surprise was expressed by any of the interlocutors until the FOOL was brought. It was the 'peanut' in the Palestinian dialect, [the boiled and spiced dry lima beans like Humos] in Egypt and the Sudanese FOOL, i.e. peanuts. Thus the word FOOL denoted three different referents to three dialect speakers.
2. Another example of possible dialectal misunderstanding is shown in the story of an Omani friend who was described as MUHTAM because he had a comprehensive exam. The author commented by saying this was a sign of interest on the part of the Omani student, but his interlocutor protested by saying: how can HAMM be a motivator for success? The author replied: there is a big difference HAMM and IHTIMAM. He realized the author did not understand what he meant. They were referring to the same concept. For the people of Oman, MUHTAMM means 'worried' as we understand it. The Omani interlocutor's understanding of the word is justified because IHTAMMA is after the pattern IFTA'ALA, acquired a portion of HAMM.
3. In a third speech event BATTEEKH was asked for, but melon was brought instead because that was what the word meant for the Moroccans, the Iraqis and the people of Emirates. The Syrian, Palestinian, Jordanian, and a Lebanese person demanding the fruit said that was not what he wanted, he wanted water melon. Thus BATTEEKH is a homonym.
4. Dialectal variation can also be seen in the word IZDIYAD in North Africa which corresponds to 'date of birth' in oriental part of the Arab world. When the author landed in a Moroccan airport, he was asked to fill out a form. One item on the form was the date of IZDIAD the meaning of which he did not know before asking a Moroccan. There is no doubt there is a connection between birth and IZDIYAD (increase) because births leads to increase in population. This word was mentioned in the Qura'anic verse No. 8 of Chapter 13: TAGEEDU AL ARHAMU WA MA TAZDAD (How much the wombs fall short or exceed).

The examples are abundant, but what I would like to draw attention to is that many ambiguities resulting from dialectal differences can be removed by acquired knowledge, travel, and neighborhood because the lexical balance will expand by these sources. Ibin Jinni has observed this phenomenon of communication despite dialectal variation when he said: " I knew thereby that one dialect speaker has condoned/tolerated the dialect of another because the Arabs, however spread they are, and however great in number they are, not crowded or rigid, they are like a group in one household because they live near and visit each other. Some observe their partner and condone their dialect in the same way they sanction the significant errand they come for (39).

### Endnotes:

- 1) al-Musa, Nhad 1990, al-Lughato al-Arabiyyato, p.19.
- 2) al-Soyooti, 911 AH, al- Mozhir, p.1/211.
- 3) al-Ma'arry 449 AH, 'Abath al-Waleed, p.528.
- 4) Ibn Aljazri 833 AH, al-Nnashr, p.1/22.
- 5) Ibn Jinny, 392 AH, al-Khasaes, p. 2/16.
- 6) Ibn Aqeel, Sharh Ibn Aqeel, p.1/48- 49.
- 7) Seebawaih, al-Kitab, p.4/110.
- 8) Ibn Fares 395 AH, al-Sahiby, p.50-54, & al-Soyooti,911 AH, al- Mozhir, p. 1/255.
- 9) Ibn Jinny, 392 AH, al-Khasaes, p. 2/13- 14.
- 10) Ibn Jinny, 392 AH, al-Khasaes, 1/374- 375.
- 11) Ibn al-Anbari 328 AH, al-Addad, p.3.
- 12) Ibn al-Anbari 328 AH, al-Addad, p.216.
- 13) Ibn al-Anbari 328 AH, al- Addad, p.294.
- 14) Ibn al-Anbari 328 AH, al- Addad, p.421.
- 15) Ibn al-Anbari 328 AH, al- Addad, p.35.
- 16) al-Soyooti, 911 AH, al- Mozhir, p.1/381.
- 17) al- Zzamakshary 538 AH, al- Faeq, p.2/128, & Ibn Manthor 711 AH, Lisan al Arab, root "rabada".
- 18) al- Zzamakshary 538 AH, al-Faeq, p.3/33.
- 19) Ibn Manthor 711 AH, Lisan al Arab, root ""anaka".
- 20) al- Zzamakshary 538 AH, al- Faeq, p.1/428.
- 21) al-Soyooti, 911 AH, al-Itqan, p.470.
- 22) see The Holy Qura'n, the verse 60-61 of al-Najm.
- 23) al-Soyooti, 911 AH, al-Itqan, p.43-45.
- 24) See The Holy Qura'n, the verse 31 of al-Rra'd.
- 25) Makky, al-O'mdah, p. 167.
- 26) See The Holy Qura'n, the verse 65 of al-Waqi'a.

- 27) Ibn Qutaiba, Tafseer Ghareeb al- Qur'an, p.45, al-Sijistani 330 AH, Nozhat al- Qolob, p.172, al Zzamakshari, al-Kashshaf, p.2/ 57.
- 28) see The Holly Qura'n, the verse al-Anbiya' 37.
- 29) al-Farra' 207 AH, Ma'anee al-Qura'n, p. 2/203.
- 30) al- Yazeedi, Ghjareeb al-Qura'n, p.119, Makky, al-'Omdah, 207.
- 31) al-Khattaby, Ghareeb al-Hadeeth, p. 1/69.
- 32) al- Zzamakshari, al-Kashshaf, p.2/397.
- 33) al-Khattaby, Ghareeb al-Hadeeth, p.1/148, & Ibn al-Atheer 606 AH, al-Nihaya, p. 1/344.
- 34) al-Khattaby, Ghareeb al-Hadeeth, p.1/150.
- 35) al- Zzamakshary 538 AH, al- Faeq, p.3/442.
- 36) Ibn al- Atheer 606 AH, al-Nihaya, p.1/234.
- 37) al- Zzamakshary 538 AH, al-Faeq, p.3/442.
- 38) Ibn al-Anbari 328 AH, al-Addad.
- 39) Ibn Jinny, 392 AH, al-Khasaes, p.2/17-18.

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