al-Sharkawi Muhammad,
The Ecology of Arabic. A Study of Arabicization.

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The case for a theory of the emergence of the modern Arabic vernaculars interlocked with Arabicization has been building since Johann Fück's *'Arabīyah* (Berlin, 1950). In this framework, native speakers of Classical Arabic (CA) provide linguistic input who *mawālī*, which modify it in their process of informal second language acquisition, thus giving rise to the (ancestors of) modern Colloquial varieties (MCV). Such a model is spatially and temporally limited to some conquered urban milieu in Middle East around the 8th century CE. Sharkawi's book aims at offering a revised version of this theory, whereby CA native speakers are responsible for *both* providing linguistic input *and* modifying it, in order to facilitate communication to *mawālī* – a claim developing some hypotheses put forward in the literature by among others Vollers, Ferguson, Versteegh. Accordingly, this book will interest Arabic dialectologists and sociolinguists as well as scholars of diachronic and acquisitional linguistics with appreciable background in Arabic.

For convenience sake, the main aspects of the author's proposal can be summarized along the lines of Bühler's/Jakobson's model of communication. I. Code (p. 35, 76): Arabic was in pre-classical times a mono-variety, not a diglottic language, so that differences between Koran/pre-Islamic poetry and the layman's speech, such as declension or its lack thereof, are essentially stylistic; II. Sender (p. 173): he almost exclusively uses an informal style of Arabic, being a soldier or a relative of his, seconded or migrated to the conquered urban milieu; III. Receiver (181, 193, 202): a *mawlā* performing logistic duties in support of the Arab army. His adult age prevents him from attaining complete mastery of Arabic (e.g. in phonology); IV. Channel (p. 7-8): no didactic works and literacy policies enjoyed widespread diffusion in 700 CE, with the result that the second language input the Sender provides with the Receiver does not take the shape of a codified, written text but of spontaneous and spoken flow of conversation; V. Context – or 'ecological factors' (p. 161-3): the urban milieu is actually a garrison detached from the conquered towns, which ensures the demographic majority of Arabs, their high social rank and the subsequent supremacy of their language. Another consequence of these 'socio-demographic parameters of Arabicization' (to adopt Sharkawi's terminology) is that non-Arabs, *qua* minority, are permanently exposed to the majority language and, *qua* occupying low-ranking positions in society, tend to learn its everyday register rather than its administrative/formal one. VI. Message (p. 212-9): especially in light of (IV,V), the Sender-soldier, urged by practical communication needs, deliberately simplifies his native language both grammatically and lexically when interacting with the uneducated Receiver-*mawlā*. Cases in point are respectively the free state instead of the construct state and usage of a poor lexicon, limited to some core words.

In particular, (VI) is meant to refine Versteegh's idea that the ancestor of MCV is a pidgin, by stressing Schuchardt's and Ferguson's oft-forgotten remark that diachronically a conqueree's pidgin arises out of a *proto-pidgin created by the conqueror* – technically, the Foreigner Talk (FT) (1). Fossilized ideological convictions harking back to the19th century (how could a 'mentally superior' conqueror speak a 'poor' language?) concealed this important point, and indeed its revival and application to Arabic are the author's most original contribution to the debate about the origin of MCV.

The book has six chapters plus an Introduction and Conclusion. Introduction and Chapter One address diachronic issues: driving forces, conditions and stages of language change, both in general and specifically for Arabic. Chapter Two deals with the language stage prior to Arabicization of Middle East, construing Arabic as a mono-variety (cp. I, IV), *i.e.* as not intrinsically incorporating the ancestor(s) of MCV. This claim, which indirectly supports the idea of an external source of MCV (cp. VI) is chiefly based on two arguments found in the literature: old Arabic speeches were mutually intelligible (p. 35) and displayed variation only on the surface level – phonetically and lexically, not syntactically (p. 42). Chapter Three moves onto the language stage coextensive with Arabicization and consists of a critical review of the classical reference works in the field: Fück's, Ferguson's and so on (cp. II, III, V). In the remaining chapters, Sharkawi further - and originally - elaborates on the language stage in question in three steps. First, in Chapter Four, the author offers a case-study in the ecological (= speaker-*external*) factors that determined the shift from CA to MCV, focusing on the material, demographic and socio-cultural facets of Arabicization as it took place in Egypt according to some recent findings in archaeology, epigraphy, philology. Second, in Chapter Five, the author introduces the notion of FT and its key strategies, namely

(1) Cp. Ch. Ferguson, "Absence of Copula and the Notion of Simplicity", in D. Hymes (ed.) *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages*, Cambridge, 1971, p. 288: "foreigner talk of a speech community may serve as an incipient pidgin".

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simplification, regularization and elaboration (an umbrella term for paraphrases, analytic drift etc.), which he regards as the speaker-*internal* factors responsible for the shift CA > MCV (cp. VI). Finally, Chapter Six is an attempt to interpret the change of CA into MCV as a consequence of the emergence of the just mentioned FT strategies.

This is the theoretical core of the book that, while in principle attractive, seems not to be totally substantiated with empirical data: as Sharkawi himself recognizes (p. 225), FT data are drawn exclusively from MCV, with no mention of linguistic material from 8th century CE "due to the lack of linguistic or textual evidence as to the FT tendencies in historical times in Classical Arabic books". This is however too strong a statement, considering that it was already known to Fück (1950: 5) that the CA sources such as al-Ǧāḥiẓ and Ibn Qutayba do report examples of simplified Arabic in contexts of practical communication with foreigners (= FT).

A second problem concerns the diachronic underpinnings of the book. On p. 22 the author affirms that he is committed to a theory of (language) evolution different from the 20th century post-Darwinian evolutionism, but nonetheless he adopts two theoretical constructs belonging to this framework: non-teleology of (language) change and the presence of internal constraints on it (cp. the aforementioned FT strategies) along with external ones (cp. the environmental factors in V). The former construct, in fact, corresponds to the post-Darwinian notion of 'free rider' (a phenotypic trait performing *no* function, cp. J. Fodor and M. Piattelli Palmarini, *What Darwin Got Wrong*, London, 2010, p. 95-101), the latter to the post-Darwinian notion of 'laws of forms' (e.g. the Fibonacci series structuring the organism of florets, seashells etc., *Ibidem*, 72 ff.). It may be added in this connection that Sharkawi's analysis sometimes is not consistent with his theoretical assumptions: for instance, on p. 53 his assertion that "the Western dialects were moving towards a more balanced system" is clearly – and contradictorily – teleological.

A third difficulty seemingly lies in the fact that linguistic phenomena that do not fit into the author's theory of Arabic FT are ignored. Sharkawi says nothing about the absence of copula, in spite of its prominence in both the Arabic syntax and FTs attested worldwide (Ferguson 1971), probably because this phenomenon raises a paradox for his theory of Arabic FT: on one side, the zero copula is a key-feature of Arabic FT, English FT, etc., on the other side, it is a key-feature of CA and Semitic *prior* to emergence of Arabic FT. One expects the author at least to touch upon this problem, especially in light of the fact that on p. 198 and 215 he cites Ferguson's (1971) study on the absence of copula in Arabic syntax and world's FTs. Finally, it should be remarked that the transcription used in the book is not always accurate: using as illustration proper nouns, one finds al-Blāthurī (p. 162), al-Balāṯurī (p. 167, p. 170) instead of al-Balāḏurī. See also the oscillation between al-Balāḏurī (p. 251, 263) and al-Balādhurī (p. 163).

Notwithstanding these inaccuracies, *The Ecology of Arabic* marks an important advance in the understanding of the crucial role of Arabicization in shaping the MCVs. It opens a promising line of inquiry driven by the notion of FT, to be tested and expanded in a broader research program intended to collect and analyse the Arabic FT data recorded in the written sources from the time of Arabicization.

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