

## **Egyptian Arabic and Dialect Variation: Critical Observations**

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### **An introduction**

More than thirty years have passed since the first attempt of stating the art on the Egyptian dialects was undertaken by Harrell (1962). Since then, there has been a considerable progress of linguistic research aiming at giving a linguistic description of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (henceforth ECA). Although most of the linguistic studies that have been carried out in Egypt were limited to small areas, and have not been national in scope, these studies have provided us with a different linguistic picture of ECA than what we have known before. The new picture have pointed out that there is a great social and regional linguistic variation. Therefore, exploring the general principles that govern such complex linguistic variation as it occurs in a diglossic community requires that we have a socio-geographical descriptive data file of ECA. Then, the first step to begin this work is to attempt to state the art in terms of what we know and what we do not know of ECA .

Since the early attempsts of presenting general linguistic descriptions of ECA were undertaken by Al- TanTaawiy 1848; Spitta 1880; Al- Sabbaagh 1886; Vollers 1890; Willmore 1905; Nallino 1913, and others. Until recently, with the exception of few studies, most of the linguistic research work written of ECA has been focussed on the Cairene dialect. Linguistic descriptions of other Egyptian dialects have been rather neglected. As a result, speaking of ECA, many people's attention goes to the Cairene dialect. The most common linguistic picture of ECA as has been pointed out in several linguistic studies, e.g. Tomiche (1962) reflects the existence of two main regional dialects: the Delta dialect and the Upper Egyptian dialect. However, these observations were made with a lack of detailed data.

In comparison with dialect studies published in Europe and The United States, such as The German Linguistic Atlas which was begun by G. Wenker in 1876; The French Linguistic Atlas made by J. Gillieron 1902; and Linguistic Atlas of New England by H. Kurath and others 1939-43, Dialect geography in Egypt is considered to be underdeveloped. It is true until a recent period of time, there has not been a complete description of CEA. In his overview of the Egyptian Arabic dialect studies, Zaborski (1983:18) has pointed out that " We shall have to wait rather long for a dialectological atlas of Egypt, for a comparative grammar of Egyptian dialects and a comparative dictionary."

Until the beginning of the sixties, characterizations of dialect areas of ECA were intuitive and casual. Only after returning many scholars from Europe and The United States, and realizing the striking advances in linguistics, it became apparent that such characterizations were inadequate. Although several studies have appeared before, such as Dawood's phonetic study on Al-Karnak dialect (1949), and Abu Farag's grammatical study on the dialect of Tahway in Minufiyya province (South-western part of Delta) (1960), we consider the year of (1961) as marking the real beginning of serious dialect research in Egypt. In that year, Fahmy Abul Fadl has finished his dissertation in Germany on the Sharqiyya province. In his study, he described the dialectal characteristics of more than 100 geographical sites, and supplemented it by 40 linguistic maps. His study which was written in German, was not published until now.

Abul Fadl's study was followed by several other studies attempting to describe different regions in Egypt, e.g. the Bedouin dialect of the north coast of Egypt, i.e. west of Alexandria, was described by A. Matar (1967); Khalafallah's study on the upper Egyptian dialect (1969); M. Doss's study on Il-Menya dialect (1981).

A new era began in the early seventies with the launching of the project of The Linguistic Atlas of Egypt by P. Behnstedt and M. Woidich. Aware of the many battles that have been fought in Egypt as well as in the Arab world, concerning the social position of the dialects as opposed to Classical Arabic, and the controversy of whether these dialects should be studied or not, Behnstedt and Woidich have intended to give a descriptive overview of the dialectal situation of Arabic in Egypt. The Atlas of Behnstedt and Woidich is considered as a major contribution to the field of Egyptian Dialectology. The results of their work provide us with an entirely different picture of the dialectal situation in Egypt that contradicts the traditional view. The most important result of such work is that it sheds light on the high degree of variation prevailed in the Egyptian dialects.

In fact, the state of research on Egyptian dialects has been presented previously by many scholars ( Al-Macluuf 1935-37; Harrell 1962; Abboud 1970; Bakalla 1975; Zaborski 1983; Woidich 1993). All of these accounts were very useful sources of data for the present work. Since there have been many studies that have been done recently, the present paper attempts the following: First, to give a brief critical overview on ECA in terms of the following: 1) Studies (references) available, and The data that we do know on ECA. 2) Diversity of Egyptian dialects: what criteria of classification and categorization? and what factors of explanation?; Second, to give a brief overview on the most recent studies in the field of Egyptian Dialectology, i.e. The Atlas of Behnstedt and Woidich 1985. We will examine their work, i.e. in terms of goal, method and achievements. Finally some questions will be raised.

### **Die ägyptisch-arabischen Dialekte (The Linguistic Atlas of The Egyptian Arabic Dialects)**

The Atlas of Behnstedt and Woidich ( henceforth B&W ) is considered as a part of

the TAVO ( Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients ou Atlas of Middle East ) maps, i.e. The general Linguistic Atlas of The Middle East. It was conceived at first, as a survey maps covering all Egypt, but for the lack of time, the Oasis was not included. The Atlas consists of four volumes: In the first one, the methodology is discussed in terms of : data collection, questionnaire, informants, linguistic maps and their interpretations; The second volume presents (561) linguistic maps; In the third and fourth volumes, the data collected are presented. B&W have used the pioneer work of Abu Fadl (1961) on Sharqiyya province, as a starting point for their work. They referred to some other studies as well, e.g. Khalafallah 1969; Woidich 1974.

By following the traditional dialectological approach, the two German scholars have based their study on collecting the speech of 800 rural sites in Egypt. The data judged by them to be fairly representative of rural Egypt as a whole, except for the Oasis.