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Semistik

Mejdell, Gunvor: *Mixed Styles in Spoken Arabic in Egypt: Somewhere Between Order and Chaos*. Leiden, Boston: Brill 2006. XIII, 481 S. m. Tab. 8° = Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics, 48. Hartbd. 170.00 € ISBN 90-04-14986-4. – Bespr. von Caroline Roset, Amsterdam.

Empirical research in the field of Arabic linguistics has historically been dominated by German scholars. However, it was the French Arabist William Marçais who came up with the sociolinguistic term ‘*diglossie*’ and the American Charles A. Ferguson who introduced the English ‘*diglossia*’ in his famous article of the same title.¹

¹ Ferguson, Charles A. ‘Diglossia.’ In: *Word*. 15 (1959), pp. 325–340.

Linguists like Diem,² Schmidt,³ Schulz,⁴ Badawi,⁵ Blanc⁶ and Meiseles⁷ made valuable contributions to Arabic sociolinguistics, mostly in the 1970s. Between approximately the beginning of the 1980s and the end of the 1990s, however, the world of Arabic sociolinguistic research was comparatively silent.

Following Myers-Scotton's introduction in 1993 of her innovating matrix language frame (MLF) theory on code-switching, the silence was broken by new sociolinguistic research by Bassiouney,⁸ Boussofara-Omar⁹ and the work at issue. Haeri¹⁰ – who takes a more anthropological approach (which includes extensive fieldwork) than any of these other contemporary researchers on Arabic sociolinguistics – should not be left unmentioned. The most remarkable difference between the previous generation of Arabic sociolinguistics and this latest one is the stress that the latter puts on the social as well as the linguistic circumstances or environment in which code-switching, or rather code-mixing, takes place.

Arabic is one of the classical cases of diglossia, a situation in which there are two varieties of a language with different functions in society. In the case of Egypt, standard Arabic (SA) is the official, written language and Egyptian Arabic (EA, by which Mejdell refers to the dialectal variety of the capital) plays the role of the colloquial language or vernacular. The two varieties differ significantly on the lexical, syntactical, morphological and phonological scales. For example, 'and that did not

happen' is *u-da ma-ḥaṣālšī* (305 & 417) in EA, while it is *wa lam yaḥṣul dālika* in SA.

Arabic-speaking academics in Egypt generally use a mixture of EA and SA in conversation and even in their academic monologues, and this what the present study is about. This phenomenon – diglossic code-switching or code-mixing – also exists at other levels of society; accordingly, different levels of this kind of code-switching are recognized. Here, we arrive at the core as well as the problem of Arabic sociolinguistics: the search for Arabic language level definition. Although language levels between EA and SA have been linguistically described, their boundaries do not seem to be clear-cut; consequently, they cannot be defined. Therefore, Mejdell wisely prefers to designate the situation in Arabic speech communities as a 'diglossic continuum' (4). Nevertheless, Mejdell's main research question – namely whether 'there is a(n) emerging) norm of a mixed variety of SA and EA used by educated speakers' (74 & 77) – is part of this same search. Together with Bassiouney and Boussofara-Omar, Mejdell has come closer than ever, but her study, like the studies by the previous generation of linguists, does not result in a linguistically well-defined spoken language level.

In the first chapter of her book, Mejdell presents a coherent and thorough survey of the research that has been done in the field of Arabic sociolinguistics, especially the attempts that have been made to define the language levels. On the last pages of the first chapter, she argues convincingly that SA, despite the official policy of the authorities, is not the standard variety of the Arabic that is spoken in Egypt. In her second chapter, she states her aims, her research questions and the approach of her investigation. In the subsequent five chapters, she analyses against five linguistic features (complementizers, demonstratives, expressions of negation, relative phrases and pronoun suffixations) the two hours of academic discourses on higher education and on literature that she recorded in Cairo. Before analysing each feature, the author comprehensibly outlines the linguistic rules governing the feature in SA and EA and lists the criteria according to which the occurrences of the feature will be analysed, such as constraints of linguistic environment and patterns of preferences by the speaker. In the eighth and final chapter she summarizes and draws her conclusions. The three appendixes contain a chart of the varieties of the language features as analysed in her research, the result of the painstaking transcription of the recorded texts and, finally, their translation. The work ends with an index covering one and a half pages. Given the substantial amount of information contained in the book, a more extensive index should be considered for the reprint.

Mejdell's language is pleasantly clear and detailed. All the theories and studies that are relevant to her research – such as Badawi's language levels, Mitchell's Leeds Project and Holes' lexical hypothesis – are considered and the hypotheses upon which she builds are well grounded and highlighted. The organization of her investigation is substantial and systematic. It is regret-

² Diem, Werner. *Hochsprache und Dialekt im Arabischen: Untersuchungen zur heutigen arabischen Zweisprachigkeit*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1974.

³ Schmidt, Richard Wilbur. *Sociostylistic variation in spoken Egyptian Arabic: A re-examination of the concept of diglossia*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Brown University, 1974.

⁴ Schulz, David Eugene. *Diglossia and variation in formal spoken Arabic in Egypt*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1981.

⁵ Badawī, El-Sa'īd Muḥammad. *Mustawayāt al-luġa al-ʿarabiyya al-muʿāšira fī miṣr*. Cairo: dār al-maʿārif, 1973.

⁶ Blanc, Haim. 'Style variations in spoken Arabic: a sample of interdialectal educated conversation.' In: *Contributions to Arabic Linguistics*. Ferguson (ed.). Harvard/Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964, pp. 81–161.

⁷ Meiseles, Gustav. 'Educated spoken Arabic and the Arabic language continuum.' In: *Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts* 11 (1980) 2, p. 118–148.

⁸ Bassiouney, Reem. *Functions of code-switching in Egypt: evidence from monologues*. Leiden etc.: Brill, 2006.

⁹ Boussofara-Omar, Naima. 'Diglossia'. In: *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics (EALL)*. Kees Versteegh et al. (eds.). Leiden: Brill, 2006. Volume I, pp. 629–637.

— 'Neither third language nor middle varieties but diglossic switching.' In: *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 45 (2006) pp. 55–80.

— 'Revisiting Arabic diglossic switching in light of the MLF model and its sub-models: the 4-M model and the Abstract Level model.' In: *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 6 (2003) 1, 33–46.

¹⁰ Haeri, Niloofar. *The Sociolinguistic Market of Cairo*. Gender, class and education. London: Kegan Paul, 1996.

— *Sacred Language, Ordinary People. Dilemmas of culture and politics in Egypt*. New York etc.: Plagrave Macmillan, 2003.

table that 'the amount of data is (...) not great' (68), as the author admits. The reader should indeed wonder whether two hours of academic panel presentations represent spoken educated Arabic, not only because of the amount of data, but also with regard to the nature of the texts (to what extent does language spoken in monologues resemble language used in conversation?). However, the parameters of the corpus are stable and therefore a profound comparative analysis becomes possible, which the author makes in detail. Consequently, the study provides enough evidence to evaluate thoroughly the analyses of the seven texts.

Mejdell finds her analyses of the five language features on the dominant-language hypothesis (63), which states, to put it briefly, that while switching between two languages or language varieties, in this case SA and EA, the dominant language of the speaker (EA) provides the grammatical morphemes, while SA provides the lexical elements. Mejdell stresses that this formula is not the same as the matrix language frame theory (390 & 391), which is used as a basic theory in both Bassiouney's and Boussofara-Omar's approaches, although they are comparable. It is interesting to see that all three of these researchers conclude more or less the same with regard to these theories: although their studies provide evidence for the validity of these dominant or matrix language frame hypotheses, many exceptions remain. Neither theory seems to sufficiently explain code-switching in Arabic; in this case, the hypotheses need to be largely refined and adapted. So far, a watertight model for diglossic code-switching in Arabic has not been found, and indeed may not exist. The language style that an individual chooses apparently depends so much on a complex interplay of individual preferences and abilities, as well as on the given situation, that one might state that every single mixture of EA and SA is idiosyncratic.

In this solid, detailed and nuanced work, Mejdell has most certainly '[contributed] to the exploration of speakers' linguistic choices [and] their verbal strategies', which she states as her aim (68). The author does not explicitly answer her research question about the existence of 'a(n emerging) norm of a mixed variety of SA and EA used by educated speakers' until the very last pages of her book, which imparts some suspense to the work. However, the answer is not surprising if one has studied the analyses offered in the preceding chapters. Such utterances as 'constant codeshifting or mixing' (118), 'different styles, which are all considered appropriate' (229), 'a great diversity of use across users also for this feature' (271), 'no clear pattern (...) which rather suggests idiosyncrasies in preferences' (272), 'there are, again, great differences between speakers' (333) provide clues to answering this question. Apart from giving further evidence for the validity of the dominant language hypothesis and showing 'certain patterns of usage' and 'some general constraints' (395), 'the highly variable discourse in my data does not lend itself as a base for codification and standardization of a separate oral standard variety' (398). This conclusion might be disappointing for those who are still searching for a conventionalized

spoken educated EA, but it is the only valid and realistic conclusion of this empirical study. The author 'comforts' the reader (and herself?) by adding that the 'various mixed styles' are indeed 'fluctuating' and 'unfocused' yet 'flexible and dynamic' (397).

Mejdell implies in the research question itself and by assuming that SA is not the full target norm, that a standardized educated EA does exist or is at least undergoing a standardization process (37 & 70). This supposition is in accordance with Boussofara-Omar's statement that diglossic switching patterns are being conventionalized (2006b, 55), which 'may eventually give rise to a national spoken standard' (2003, 45). Thus, we are not there yet: we should continue to monitor and analyse developments in this standardization process. The search for language level definition must go on.

Mejdell does not make any concrete recommendations for future research, besides 'issues' that have been raised but could not be handled and 'loose threads' that should be picked up (396). Does Mejdell's approach have a future? After all, and despite this valuable work in which evidence for emerging patterns of code-switching in Arabic has been shown, language level definition has yet not proved to be feasible. In order to obtain more understanding of the language varieties spoken in Egypt, perhaps it is time to study not only code-switching patterns and strategies, but also language attitudes and the ways in which SA is acquired, taught, treated and perceived via education and in media.¹¹ This might perhaps account for occurrences in diglossic code-switching that are not explained by either the matrix or the dominant language theory.

¹¹ Woidich, Manfred. 'Einige Aspekte der Diglossie im heutigen Ägypten.' In: *Amsterdam Middle Eastern Studies*. Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1990, pp. 123–124.