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The Egyptian Dialect as an Expression of Linguistic Change in Arab Countries

Abstract

In this article I am going to present the ways in which the Egyptian dialect renders social norms which are illustrated by the examples of expressions regarding human-to-human interaction. This provides an outline of the existent system of values with special emphasis laid upon the values of collectivism and individualism (perceived in the categories of cross-cultural psychology). Within the framework of collectivism the expressions are shaped in the field of tribal and family life owing to mutual relationships, including the issues that are characteristic of Arabic culture, such as endogamic marriages or kinship relationships. Individual attitudes result in various expressions of emotions (astonishment, admiration, terror, etc.), exclamations, proverbs, idioms and religious phrases being found in Egyptian dialect.

In the Arab world the language has been in a blaze of glory since the 7th century, as it was used in Bedouin poetry writing, notation and recitation of the Koran. Nevertheless, in the areas where it is used, diglossia has taken place since the pre-Muslim time. Side by side with the literary language, which is primarily used as the language of literature, administration, press reports and which is also used in academic lectures and radio and television news reporting and commentary, dialects are spoken in everyday life. In the first half of the 20th century, when Arab countries were regaining independence after the colonial period, dialects began to be strongly opposed by the proponents of the common language of the region as a tool of unity. People started to take care of its development and to worry about it. The Arab people take pride in their language. At the same time, dialects continue to evolve and change. The most important dialect in the Arab world is the Egyptian dialect, since Egypt came to be the centre of the regions' cultural and

literary life, and then the dialect became popular especially thanks to the Egyptian film and television production. Today, owing to these factors (especially thanks to the popularity of the Egyptian serial drama) it has become a kind of pidgin language which can be understood all over the Arab world. The Egyptian dialect has been changing under the influence of Egypt's contacts with the outside world and with the West, as well as under the influence of the flow of Western culture. Changes taking place in the Egyptian dialect tend to enrich it as compared to the forms of literary language on the one hand, and to simplify these forms on the other hand.

The Alphabet and Phonetics

The tendency to simplify the dialect in relation to the literary language is expressed in the changes in phonetics and grammar.

In the Egyptian dialect, like in other Arabic dialects, in comparison with the standard language there occur changes in pronunciation.

Examples:

Arabic	Egyptian		Arabic	Egyptian	
bayt	bēt	– house	qāl	'āl	– to speak
ḡayb	ḡēb	– unknown	ṣayf	ṣēyf	– summer
yaum	yōm	– day	lawn	lōn	– colour
maut	mōt	– death	šauka	šōka	– fork
saṛīr	siṛīr	– bed	nazīf	niḏīf	– clean
ḏābil	zābil	– withered	ḏahab	dahab	– gold
‘amal	gamal	– camel	ḏābiṭ	zābiṭ	– officer
tawra	sawra	– revolution, uprising	ṭaum	tūm	– garlic

Grammar

In dialects verbs change and simplify themselves. For example, in the dialect under investigation literary verbs such as: *kataba* – to write, *darasa* – to learn, *fahima* – to understand, *šariba* – to drink, take the forms *katab*, *daras*, *fihim*, *širib* respectively.

The system of tenses is undergoing changes and to some extent it is being enriched and developed in comparison with the standard Arabic language. In the latter, there are simple and compound tenses, which resemble English tenses but do not end in their equivalents. Grammars that are available mention the tenses but they do not name or describe them; however, they discuss the functions of the auxiliary verb with the perfect tense *k,n*, and the imperfect form *yikūn*. They “illustrate the use of the verb */yikūn/* as

an auxiliary to other verbs to form compound tenses”¹. Nevertheless, the table of tenses in the Egyptian dialect appears in a very clear manner. The forms of tenses are enriched in comparison with their approximate equivalents in the literary language.

For example, in the dialect under investigation the present tense takes the consonant *bi* preceding the verb, which does not occur in the literary language. In the latter, there occurs the form *yaktubu* – he writes, which turns into *biyiktib* in the dialect. The consonant makes the meaning of the present tense more precise in the dialect.

Both in the literary language and in the dialect there occurs a tense which is similar to the English simple future tense; it consists of an auxiliary verb and the main verb, *yakūnu qad katab* – he will write; in the dialect, the same form will be simplified on the one hand, and it will become more complex on the other hand, and it will take the form *haykūn katab*. In the dialect, side by side with continuous tenses expressed by the participle, there also occurs a kind of the future tense – the uncompleted future tense *yikūn biyiktib*, which is not encountered in the literary language.

The Egyptian dialect enriches itself in comparison with the standard language by introducing the possessive particle *bitā’a*, which does not occur in it.

The Vocabulary

The vocabulary is an expression of particularly characteristic language changes taking place in Arab countries, which is confirmed by the Egyptian dialect.

The Egyptian dialect acquires loanwords derived from foreign languages, that is from the Turkish and from European languages (mainly from English). Most often they include words denoting objects or phenomena of everyday use, for which there is no precedence in the standard language. It happens so because during the period of revival in the Arab world there appeared new types of equipment, technical appliances, places, professions, parts of clothing, etc. The names of these phenomena are connected with their Turkish and European origin. The dictionary of the Egyptian dialect shows how under the influence of the British and French culture various domains of life develop in Egypt. To prove this, I am going to outline a basic classification of borrowings of which the denotations appeared in the Arabic world no sooner than the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. I think that most of these borrowings do not need to be translated. Changes taking place in the language are characteristic of cultural change.

Houses, Flats, Furniture and Equipment

Until the time of revival, the life in Arab households went on in a traditional way. Particularly characteristic were the parts assigned for women and men, that is to say

¹ See M. Salib, *Spoken Arabic of Cairo*, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo 1969, p. 122.

kinds of harems and interior yards resembling patios. While taking rest, having meals, and talking, the inhabitants sat down on the mats and sometimes they used not very high tables, usually made of copper. During the period of the establishing of relations with the West the furnishings of the house began to change. In addition to the rooms, kitchen and bathroom, there appears a square room in which the life is going on and which is called *šāla*² – hall; guests are received in the room called the sitting room – *iš-šalūn*³. In addition to the former terraces and small barred rooms there appear balconies – *balkūn* or *balakūna* – balcony⁴. Also, modern furnishings appear, including *kumudīnu* – commode, *kanaba* – sofa, *kanaba baladi* – domestic sofa, *butagāz* – gas range, *firiǰidēr* – refrigerator⁵. Showers (*dūš*)⁶ are introduced. Towards the close of the 20th century, luxury single-family houses in Egypt are called villas – *villāt* (sing. villa). The living place also encompasses the *bansiyūn*⁷ – lodging house.

Technical appliances. The Egyptians begin to live in a more and more comfortable and modern manner. Electricity enters into their lives, and although it has an Arabic name *kahrabā'*, it results in the appearance of the main lighting object called *lamba* – a lamp. Modernization of the technical sphere is represented by the terms such as: *abajūr*⁸ – a light bulb, *iryāl* – aerial, *lamba* – lamp *baṭiriyya*⁹ – battery, storage battery (accumulator).

Means of transport. Means of transportation are changing. In the early 20th century the Egyptians travelled by a kind of a chaise which they called *karēta*; then the carts took the name *kāru*¹⁰ which has been used until today. Somewhere around the late 1910s (during the First World War) the car entered into Egypt. Initially, it was an old-fashioned vehicle, which is also rendered by its name: *tumbīl* (automobile)¹¹; later on, the car became widespread and it was given the name 'arabiyya from the Arabic language. Western names, however, are given to more specific car-related names, including: *farmāla* – brake; *makana* – engine; *kawītš* – inner tube, *mutōr* – motor, *aksilatēr* – accelerator¹² *makana* – machine¹³ *kāmira* – camera¹⁴.

That life is undergoing modernization is evidenced by such terms as *ašanšēr* – elevator or *tilifūn* – telephone; there occurs the expression *mukalma tilifuniyya* – telephone call.

² See N. 'Āšūr, *Masrah Nu'mān 'Āšūr*, Al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-'Āmma li-al-Kitāb, Cairo 1974, p. 295.

³ Ibid., p. 109.

⁴ A. Zabor ski, *Rozmówki arabskie. Dialekt egipski*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1988, p. 178.

⁵ 'Āšūr, op. cit., p. 109.

⁶ T.F. Mitchell, *An Introduction to Egyptian Colloquial Arabic*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1978, pp. 251, 303.

⁷ M.B. Salib, op. cit., p. 331.

⁸ 'Āšūr, op. cit., p. 359.

⁹ Zabor ski, op. cit., p. 243.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 148, *Al-Maṣrawiyya*, director Ismā'il 'Abd al-Ḥāfiz.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Zabor ski, op. cit., pp. 140–144.

¹³ Salib, op. cit., 1987, p. 338.

¹⁴ Zabor ski, op. cit., pp. 139–139, 166.

Other means of transport that are becoming widespread include: *mutusīkl* – motorbike, *utubīs* – coach, bus¹⁵, *luri* – lorry¹⁶, and *taksi* – cab (the name which is also encountered in other Arab countries), *tiliḡrāf* – telegram, *buṣṭa*¹⁷ – post office.

Products resulting from the use of petroleum are becoming indispensable, first of all the *banzīn* – petrol¹⁸.

As the Western technology develops, the vocabulary of the Egyptian dialect acquires further borrowings.

Clothing. Until the modern time, *galabīyya* was the most common robe worn by the Egyptians; it resembled a full-length (often ankle-length) shirt and it is also very popular today. During that period Egyptians started willingly to wear trousers – *banṭalunāt* (sing. *banṭalūn*), jackets – *jakittāt* (sing. *jakitta*)¹⁹ as well as suits called *bidal* (sing. *bidla*) in Arabic; they also began to wear ties – *karavattāt* (sing. *karavatta*)²⁰, and pyjamas – *pijāmāt* (sing. *pijāma*).

Women started to wear the following kinds of clothing:

bilūza – blouse, *jiba* or *gunilla* – skirt, *bālṭu* – overcoat and *ṣurt* – shorts. Some parts of garments may be combined with the Egyptian adjectives, for example, *bilūza ḥadra*²¹ – a green blouse. Words like *mōda* or *mudēl* for example, *ṭirāz modern*²² – modern fashion, *aḥdas mudēl*²³ – the latest model, become widely used as popular terms. The word *mōda* functions as a noun and as an adjective, for instance, *bilūza muṣ mōda* – an unfashionable blouse.

During the time of revival dresses became popular among women but there was already an Arabic word *fustān* to denote them.

Professions. Old professions are given new names borrowed from Europe, for example, *ṣurṭa*, which means “police” in Arabic, in Egypt takes the name *bulīṣ*²⁴, and a man serving coffee, who is still known as *ahwagi*, becomes a waiter and is named *garsōn*. Small popular cafés continue to be called by the same name as coffee: *ahwa*. Modern coffee shops bear a name of *kafitēria*, while open-air cafés are called *kazīnu*²⁵.

In Egypt, the following professions are becoming more and more popular: *kumsāri* – ticket inspector, *mikanīki* – mechanic, *ṣufēr* – driver, side by side with the Egyptian term *sawwāq* which is still widely used, and secretary – *sikirtēra*²⁶ (for example, *il-maktab bitā' is-sikirtira* – the office of the secretary).

¹⁵ Ibid., p.136.

¹⁶ T.F. Mitchell, op. cit., p. 251.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁸ *Ibn Arandāli*, director Rāša Hiṣām Šurbaṭḡī, MBC 2010.

¹⁹ Salīb 1987, op. cit., p. 370.

²⁰ M. Salīb, *Spoken Arabic of Cairo*, The American University in Cairo Press, 1969, p. 28.

²¹ Ibid., p.28.

²² ‘Āšūr, op. cit., p. 359.

²³ Salīb 1969, p. 43.

²⁴ Zaboriski, op. cit., p. 114.

²⁵ Salīb 1969. pp. 27, 28.

²⁶ Zaboriski, op. cit., p. 114.

A very popular term is the *duktūr* meaning both a physician and a holder of an academic title. The word takes the Egyptian plural *dakatra*. A doctorate is called *dukturā*²⁷.

Institutions, abstract concepts and documents. During the period of revival Egypt came to be a country which aspired to become a modern state, therefore it acquired European organizational patterns, institutions, structures and types of documents modelled on European ones. The country established its own parliament which was called *barlamān*²⁸. An example of a new conceptual apparatus is the term of European origin *dimuqrāṭiyya* -democracy, which is now becoming widespread.

Nothing seems to be so much connected with modernity in the Arab world as banks. Since Islam bans usury, it also bans interest charges on loans, thus questioning the banking sphere, and yet banks are becoming more and more popular in Egypt. These are modern institutions which usually evade religious bans, and the European term *bank* is being widely used.

Other examples of modernity include also such place names as *warša* – workshop and *bufē* – buffet.

Egyptians use identity cards which in the singular number have an Arabic name *biṭāqit il-huwiyya*. However, when they travel abroad they need such documents as passport – *paspūr*²⁹; which is the term used synonymously with the expression *gawāz is-safar* derived from the Arabic. They also need a visa – in Egyptian *vīza*³⁰, having also an Arabic name *ta'sīra*.

Forms of education, culture and recreation. Europeanization can be observed in particular in the forms of modern culture and education in Egypt. In the 19th century, in Egypt, like in the whole Arab world, ended the classical period of culture and literature which had lasted from the 7th century A.D. During that period, poetry was the prevalent literary form; genres of prose writing, such as novel and short story, were not well known. In the classical period, the theatre based on the written dramatic text did not develop either. During the period of revival the Arabs borrowed a new type of theatre in which adaptations of both Shakespeare's dramas and Moliere's comedies were staged. Initially, it was called *tiyātru*³¹. This new culture evolved as a synthesis of alien and indigenous patterns and within the framework of this culture a traditional Arabic name of the theatre, i.e. *masrah*, returned. However, the European names of theatre genres were preserved: *kumidiyya* – comedy, and *dirāma* – drama. During the period of revival the press was also born, and the form of a daily entered into everyday circulation of Egypt's culture under the name of *gurnāl* or *gurnān*³². Egypt is a pioneer of the Egyptian cinema; the first feature film was emitted in this country in 1927. Like in all Arab countries, the cinema

²⁷ Salīb 1969, op. cit., pp. 43, 71.

²⁸ 'Āšūr, op. cit., p. 84.

²⁹ D. Berberi, *Arabic in a Nutshell*, Institute for Language Study, Funk & Wagnalls, New York 1976, p. 87.

³⁰ Zaborowski, op. cit., p. 114.

³¹ E. Elias, *Elias' Practical Dictionary of the Colloquial Arabic of the Middle East. English-Arabic*, Elias' Modern Press, Cairo, 1962, p. 221.

³² *Ibid.*, 107.

is popularized under one European name *is-sinimā*, just as the Arabic and Egyptian film enters into the vocabulary as *film*, even though it takes the Arabic plural *aflām*. One can also encounter the term *il-aflām is-sinimā'iyya* – cinema films³³. Television, which became widespread in the Arab world in the 1960s, in Egypt, like in many other countries, bears the name *tilivizyūn*, as compared, for example, to *talvaza*, which is a term used in Tunisia. Radio in the Arab world and in Egypt is called *rādyu*.

In addition, within the framework of development of education, culture and recreation the Egyptian vocabulary acquires such terms as: *ūbira* – opera, *urkistra* – orchestra *musīqa* – music, *sināryu*³⁴ – scenario, *albūm* – album, *galiriyya* – gallery, *tinis* – tennis (also *tinis iṭ-ṭawla* – table tennis)³⁵.

Food. With the advent of the revival, new kinds of food, foodstuffs and meals appear in Egypt. Here are the examples of such names: *baṭāṭis* – potatoes, *makarūna* – noodle, *sandawīṭṣ* – sandwich (for example, *sandawīṭṣ dīk rūmi* – a turkey sandwich), *sardīn* – sardines³⁶.

Quite evidently, Egyptians amuse themselves with sweets modelled on European sweets. There are widespread terms such as: *ṣukulaṭa* – chocolate, *jilāti* – ice cream, *baskawīt* – cookie, *gatō* – cake, *gazūza* – fizzy drink, *kunyāk* – cognac³⁷.

People commonly use the term “layer cake”, which is called *ṭurṭa* in Egyptian. It has nothing to do with heavy sweets eaten in the East; it is a product of recent days. It takes the same form as the European cakes. Eating of the cake is also part and parcel of celebration of all feasts, in particular of birthdays and weddings.

Many European terms which are acquired in Egypt are connected with **health, illness, medications and toilet sets**, for example, *ruṣitta* – prescription, *asbirīn* – aspirin, *vitamīn* – vitamin³⁸, *rumatizm* – rheumatism, *mallariyya* – malaria, *ṣampū* – shampoo – *riḡm* (‘*amla riḡm* – making a diet)³⁹.

One can encounter **sciences** such as: *gilyulugiyya* – geology, *mikānika* – mechanics, *ḡugrāfiya* – geography as well as **geographical names**, including *Ingiltirra* – England, *Almānya* – Germany, *Amrīka* – America⁴⁰, *Urūbba* – Europe and **adjectives**, e.g. *faransāwi*. They are used as compounds together with Arabic words: *ahwa turki* – Turkish coffee, *ahwa amrikāni* – American coffee⁴¹.

Polite expressions and forms of address derived from European languages are also becoming more and more popular. The Egyptian vocabulary acquires the words *pardon* and *merci* in their indigenous meanings. The latter forms a phrase with the Egyptian

³³ ‘Ā ṣ ū r, op. cit., p. 295.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 295, 442.

³⁵ Z a b o r s k i, op. cit., p. 321.

³⁶ S a l i b, op. cit., p. 47, Z a b o r s k i, p. 144.

³⁷ See Z a b o r s k i, op. cit., pp. 102–205.

³⁸ S a l i b, op. cit., pp. 287, 383.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 47, 287, 289, 294.

⁴⁰ E l i a s, op. cit., pp. 6, 66.

⁴¹ S a l i b 1969, p. 27.

adverb: *merci awi* – thank you very much, which is the most popular way of expressing thanks. The expressions like *madām* – madam, *madmuazīl* – miss, *tant* aunt, *unkl* – uncle⁴², are used as forms of address. Although in everyday life the expression *ṣabāḥ il-ḥēr* is used, which means “good morning”, very westernized milieus may say: *bunjūr*, *bunjūr alēkum*⁴³ – good morning, good morning to you. The vocabulary of the dialect continues to enrich itself, as it responds to the development of technics, technology and diverse forms of lifestyles. Borrowings which have appeared during the recent years include *mubāyil* or *mubāyin* – mobile, as well as *sidi* – CD *kumpiūtir*⁴⁴.

Changes in the Loanwords

Loanwords taken from Western languages enter into the Egyptian dialect and take a life of their own. They usually undergo changes which are presented below.

Consonant ‘l’ turns into ‘n’, as for example in the above-mentioned words *moubāyil* and *moubāyin*, *gurnāl* and *gurnān* – journal, *bourtuqāl* and *burtuqān* – orange.

The loanword inspires the emergence of new language structures formed at random, for example, *ṣīk*, *ṣyāka* – chic, *garāṣ*⁴⁵ –garage – *itgaraṣ* – to garage. Noun borrowings take the dialectal plurals: *sidi* – *sidihāt*; *karavatta* – *karavattāt*⁴⁶, *film* – *aflām*, *dulār* – *dularāt*⁴⁷. The meanings of some words undergo changes: *butagāz* is not a gas container (cylinder) but a gas cooker. The pronunciation of the loanwords changes as compared to the source language, in particular the sound corresponding to the letter ‘s’ is emphasized: *buṣṭa* – post office, *aṣanṣēr* – lift; *ṣāla* – hall. Loanwords form compounds with Arabic words, for example, *ṭurumbit il-banzīn* – gasoline pump, *‘agala stibn*⁴⁸ – spare wheel, *tarabizit bufē* – buffet table, *ṣina‘āt il-bitrāl* – petroleum industries. Borrowings taken from European languages show how much the Egyptian dialect adapts itself to cultural transformation, thus changing itself under its influence. It responds to the new forms of lifestyles more rapidly than the literary Arabic, which tries to search for the equivalents in its own linguistic resources. For example, a telephone, which is called *tilifūn* all over Egypt, in Arabic continues to be termed *ḥātif*, the word derived from the verb *hatafa* – to call. A computer is called *āla ḥāsiba*, even though the whole Arab world, and not only Egyptians, uses most willingly the word *computer*. One may expect that as globalization progresses, dialects will continue to be a source of language changes, while the literary language will be changing more slowly and it will be faithful in its adherence to cultural tradition of its region.

⁴² Eli a s, op. cit., pp. 122, 130.

⁴³ ‘Ā ṣ ū r, op. cit., p. 294.

⁴⁴ *Nustālḡiya, ḥānim wa-Ḥanān*, director Riyād Badr, Oman 2009.

⁴⁵ Z a b o r s k i, op. cit., p. 143.

⁴⁶ S a l i b, op. cit., 1987, pp. 36, 128.

⁴⁷ B e r b e r i, op. cit., p. 235.

⁴⁸ Z a b o r s k i, op. cit., p. 145.