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Towards a descriptive grammar of today's written Arabic

Whether we realize it more or less clearly, our teaching activities in Standard Arabic classes have certainly confronted us with some linguistic structures that differ from what we had learnt while we were ourselves students. Media Arabic, first and foremost, but also the Arabic of literature — just to mention the two spheres of use of Standard Arabic which are the most employed in language teaching— show significant variations which spark off questions by students. Nevertheless, resources at our disposal, notably grammars, do not record all of these variants (some of which are very common) and thus show some shortcomings in their language description. This is not surprising in itself, since, in every language, grammars tend to describe a state of language which can only be anterior to their compilation. However, what is more in the case of Arabic grammars (irrespective of whether written by Arabs and/or Arabists) is the strong influence exerted by the medieval Arabic grammatical tradition: the result is that Classical Arabic rules still seem to apply to contemporary Standard Arabic. Therefore, the impression we get is that the Arabic language has just little evolved, when we look at grammars written by Arabists, or even that it has not evolved at all, when we look at grammars compiled in the Arab world. This impression is even stronger, concerning these latter grammars, because of the «ideolinguistic» approach resulting from the perceived identity between Qur'anic Arabic and Classical Arabic: as Qur'anic Arabic is set, Classical Arabic also has to be eternal and immutable (see Larcher 2008). As a result, all these remarks give the feeling of a discrepancy between what grammars show and the reality of today's usages.

Following this assessment, it has become apparent the need to try and reduce such a mismatch by working on *corpora* and by proposing, in this way, not yet another normative grammar —some elements, such as the *sawfa lan* analysed by Sartori (2015), have not yet acquired the status to be included in a school grammar—, but rather a linguistically descriptive grammar of today's usages. The main objective, eventually, is to enable a more faithful description of the language as it occurs naturally. The results of such a work —necessarily a long-term project that this volume hopes to initiate— will contribute to a better understanding of the functioning of the Arabic language benefitting teachers and students, as well as researchers in the wider field of language sciences.

What is, therefore, the language of novels and newspapers that we use as basis for our *corpora*? If we ask an Arab speaker to define it in a single word, he will almost always tell us that it is *fushḥā* (Arabic). This term systematically refers to the high, prestigious variety of the language,

that is Classical Arabic yesterday and Standard Arabic today —which contributes to explain the feeling of invariability of the language, as the same term *fushḥā* is applied to both linguistic objects.¹ We thus want to focus on what Arabic speakers accept and/or perceive as being *fushḥā*, and this will a priori exclude dialect from the scope of our investigations. The border between the two, however, can be variable depending on the native speaker, which will necessarily lead us also to the inclusion of some sociolinguistic considerations.

This *fushḥā* is qualified as contemporary because, in order to address the issue and reduce the descriptive gap, this demarcation by definition leaves aside Classical and modern² Arabic from the object of our research, which is today's Arabic.

Finally, this contemporary *fushḥā* is written, which excludes a priori oral productions for methodological and epistemological reasons. As a matter of fact, contrary to the oral register where the usage of Arabic is often characterised by phenomena of code-mixing and code-switching —dialects and foreign languages are regularly brought into play, thus creating in many cases mixed varieties—, the written register is reputed to be the realm of the *controlled* expression, that is to say less spontaneous and subject to the application of one single norm. Whereas generally the written language, by its nature, does not account for real mixed varieties (*i.e.* genuinely and regularly produced), it remains nevertheless true that a real variation exists: the variation from the Classical grammatical norm. These linguistic usages diverging from the Classical norm gain even more value and importance as they occur precisely in written productions which are supposed to be controlled and normed. *Verba volant, scripta manent!*

In order to approach this Contemporary Written *Fushḥā* (CWF), the volume opens with some epistemological remarks by Gunvor Mejdell. Her study deals with the concepts of norm, boundary and variability for the making of descriptive grammars of what we have defined as CWF. The author examines which genres of texts can be used for the establishment of such grammars, and the notions of linguistic correctness and norms of acceptability. The question is, of course, the one underlying every codification and standardisation initiative and implied by the establishment of a grammar, that is to say the choice of boundaries between what is linguistically acceptable and what is not —even more so that the CWF project does not avoid, nor forbid, innovations by speakers or writers. Through very concrete examples, the author also deals with the question of the oral realisation of this contemporary *fushḥā*, more precisely the heterogeneity of

¹ We remind that Classical Arabic is conceived as timeless (see Larcher 2001, 605).

² Modern is to be intended here as referring to a historical period.

its oral representations which are normally concealed in the written form of the language: this discrepancy represents yet another challenge for the compilation of a grammar.

The analysis concerns all of the linguistic aspects of CWF, starting from syntax, to which the first three papers in particular are dedicated.

The first two articles discuss agreement patterns within the noun phrase. Ignacio Ferrando investigates agreement between a noun and its adjective in Yūsuf Zaydān's novels. He argues, at the same time, that the occurring agreement patterns do not correspond to those of Classical Arabic, but nonetheless they are not unfamiliar to Arabic in its entirety either, since they can be found in ancient Arabic (notably in pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'an). From this perspective, he sets out to analyse the reasons (stylistic, fashionable archaism or semantic) governing the choice of a pattern rather than another.

Marcin Michalski examines Arabic constructions with numerals (*viz.* noun phrases composed of a numeral and a counted object) over ten and the problem of identifying the agreement controller when such phrases are modified by an adjective, a participle or a relative clause. These constructions show a variation in agreement relations which are not accounted for in any grammar of Arabic, but which actually exhibit some regular patterns.

Still within the field of syntax, another important aspect is the functioning of the verbal system. Manuel Sartori discusses the emergence of two new verbal combinations, *kāna qad yaf'alu* and *qad sa-yaf'alu*, which convey very specific semantic values. This evolution is particularly significant because it reveals an exogenous influence for the first structure, and an endogenous innovation for the second one.

Syntax, however, is not the only field of innovation in CWF: semantics and lexicology-related questions also deserve special attention. That is the subject of the two following contributions.

In the first one, Catherine Pinon, after and in parallel with Sartori (2017), challenges an established grammatical distinction between near future (*sa-*) and far future (*sawfa*). Working on an extensive *corpus*, the author proves that indeed this distinction is not corroborated by linguistic facts, which is why she ends up raising the question of the relation between didactic approach and linguistic description.

In the second one, Marie Baize-Varin deals with issues of lexical non-synonymy, notably in relation to the two *maṣḍar*-s of stem III. Through a semantic, syntactic and diachronic analysis, she investigates the values of the two verbal nouns and their respective derived forms.

Finally, in all the fields of linguistic variation the sociolinguistic factor should not be neglected, as it contributes to defining the type of language (and hence the structures) that Arab speakers employ. That is exactly what Manuela E.B. Giolfo and Federico Salvaggio do in their analysis of eschatological blogs. Whereas it is widely admitted in Modern Standard Arabic grammars that *'in* has been supplanted by *'idā* in hypothetical constructions, the authors demonstrate that the hypothetical *'in* is still very much used in some specific contexts, notably the religious ones.

Here are gathered, to sum up, some first contributions which will help and promote thinking about the conception of a linguistically descriptive grammar of Contemporary Written *Fuṣḥā* as it is used and written today.

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