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Standardization and New Urban Vernaculars

Catherine Miller & Jacopo Falchetta¹

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1 Introduction

Studies on the development of national standard languages have shown that, in several cases, officially codified written standard languages have been elaborated on the basis of regional vernacular varieties, particularly the varieties spoken by the urban elite of the capital or important regional cities (Haugen 1966, Lodge 1993, Auer 2011). In this chapter we will not revisit these well-known cases, but will rather discuss the intricate relationship and fuzzy boundaries between standardization processes leading to the emergence of what we will call here ‘unofficial spoken standards’ on the one hand, and processes leading to the emergence and spread of (new) urban vernaculars on the other. By ‘unofficial spoken standard’ (henceforth USS) we mean here the outcome of a process by which an ensemble of converging trends is ‘spontaneously’ accepted as a supra-local shared linguistic norm (at least in certain contexts) while still being considered different from the official standard; a typical example is Estuary English, the ‘new accent’ of British English that was – and probably still is – spreading across South-Eastern England (some of its features even to other parts of the country) and imposing itself in the media at the turn of the millennium (Kerswill 2001). By ‘new urban vernacular’ (henceforth NUV) we instead mean a set of linguistic features that emerges from dialect or language contact following urbanization growth and migration, and is used by a varyingly identifiable group inhabiting a specific urban area or conglomeration; some well-known cases discussed in European urban sociolinguistics and dialect studies are Norwich and Milton Keynes in the UK, and Høyanger in Norway (Trudgill 1986, Kerswill 2006). The heteroglossic language practices that are now developing in Central and Northern Europe’s main cities – and which Rampton (2011) has suggested calling ‘contemporary urban vernaculars’ – fall within this kind of phenomena.² In both cases, we are dealing with dynamics of language spread that lead to processes of convergence, diffusion of certain features and avoidance of others, to the extent that both laymen and professional linguists may (and usually do) perceive that a “new variety” is making its way in the community’s linguistic repertoire.

After a brief review of the theoretical issues concerning the standard-versus-vernacular boundaries, as they are discussed in the literature on standardization and unofficial spoken standard varieties in Europe, we will present the language situation found in various Arabic cities. In the first part, we will address the following questions: How have unofficial spoken standards and new urban vernaculars been characterized in the sociolinguistic literature? On which basis and by whom do new urban vernaculars start being considered unofficial spoken standards? Is the traditional definition of standardization applicable to any of the linguistic dynamics emerging in the contemporary urban settings? Do new urban ways of speaking foster

¹ The authors thank the anonymous reviewers for their critical reading. Special thanks to Gunvor Mejdell, for providing us with many valuable constructive remarks during the writing of this paper.

² Cfr. also *infra* §1.2 for a short description of ‘contemporary urban vernaculars’.

destandardization processes? After that, we will consider the extent to which models of standardization/destandardization are applicable in the context of urbanization in the Arabic-speaking world. As mentioned by Ferguson in two of his seminal papers, Arabic-speaking communities had been considered typical contexts of ‘restricted diglossia’ up to the mid-twentieth century, with a classical written standard language functioning as the High variety in a limited number of domains (Ferguson 1959). With massive social changes having occurred since that time, the Arab world has then been perceived as a ‘fascinating field of observation of standardization in progress’ (Ferguson 1987). Moreover, the language policies that regulate the role and status of Arabic in the countries where this is the/an official language appear to exemplify what Milroy (2001) terms ‘standard language ideology’³ (cf. also Eisele 2003: 49-50), a fact that deeply affects both lay and scholarly representations of language norms.

2 Standardization and Urban Vernaculars in the European Modern and Late Modern Ages

2.1 Unofficial Spoken Standards and New Urban Vernaculars in Classical Representations of Standardization and Modernity

Einar Haugen’s seminal contribution to the definition(s) of ‘standardization’ delineated ‘four aspects of the language development’ that leads to a variety ‘taking the step [...] from vernacular to standard’ (Haugen 1966: 933). Haugen’s conception of standardization refers mainly to the process of institutionalization of a written standard undertaken by conscious language planners and reformers through ‘engineering acts’ such as a) selection of the forms to be promoted, b) formal codification, and c) elaboration and functional expansion. But the outcome of standardization does not exclusively depend on language planning. Beyond these easily identifiable, purely linguistic and technical processes, standardization requires its d) ‘acceptance’ by the community, a more ambiguous criterion that predominantly involves more subjective, psychological, symbolic, social and political factors. Among these, most authors (Auer 2011: 486; Ferguson 1987, Haugen 1966, Lane et al. 2018, Milroy 2001) mention: a) adherence to a larger national or regional collective entity beyond the individual’s ‘local’ place of belonging; b) acknowledgement by the members of the community of a common linguistic norm that also transcends their local or ethnic belonging, and is accepted as the correct and non-marked use in written and formal contexts. This common norm usually corresponds to the ‘prestigious’ high variety, and is often associated with the speech of the urban upper – or educated – class and with ‘modernity’ (by opposition to ‘tradition’, ‘old rural style’ or ‘old social order’), if the writing standard is based on a spoken vernacular (and not on a classical literary language). Standardization is therefore a highly political and social process that accompanies social and ideological changes and deeply affects language ideology. Modernity, industrialization, urbanization and nationalism are considered the main factors enhancing the

³ By ‘standard language ideology’, Milroy indicates that system of beliefs according to which ‘certain languages [...] exist in standardized forms’. The power of this ideology lies in the fact that ‘this kind of belief affects the way in which speakers think about their own language and about “language” in general’ (2001: 530). Milroy’s argument especially refers to cultures dominated by ‘widely used’, mainly Western languages.

development of standard languages, which started in Europe between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries (Lane et al. 2018: 3-4).

Ideological stances regarding social order and social norms play a crucial role in the definition of what is or should be a standard language/variety. The imposition of an institutionalized standard norm always implies a hierarchy of language authority, as well as (more often than not) a certain degree of diglossia, whatever structural proximity/divergence between the written standard and the spoken vernacular may be perceived by the speakers involved. This perception is highly subjective, depending on individuals' representations and ideologies. The same standard can be seen as endoglossic or exoglossic (Auer 2011: 489).⁴ In many countries, the hegemony of the 'standard language ideology' has made the existence of a dichotomy between the codified standard and the vernaculars be seen as a sort of objective 'fact', accepted by 'common sense' (Macaulay 1997; Milroy 2001: 536). However, the distinction between standard and vernacular varieties remains a highly debatable issue, particularly when dealing with non-officially codified, non-institutionalized spoken (regional) standards (see Coupland 2007, Kristiansen & Coupland 2011, Macaulay 1997 for critical reviews of the standard/non-standard boundaries). As mentioned by Macaulay (1997: 18), both standard and vernacular are concepts with wide and sometimes divergent meanings. Moreover, the notion of prestige, which is often associated with that of a normative standard, remains highly subjective and contextual (Milroy 2001). Sociolinguistic studies addressing this issue have repeatedly shown that the notions of prestige and norm are not universals: 'prestige' may be attributed to non-standard ('low') features indexing other social, political and cultural values, such as local loyalties, working-class culture, youth culture or urban 'coolness' or 'toughness' (cf. the distinction between overt and covert prestige in Trudgill 1972, Milroy 1980, Cheshire 1982, Eckert 2000)

Beyond the definition of official standard languages, the concepts of standardization and standard varieties/norms have been extended to very diverse contexts of language diffusion. In this respect, another influential definition of standardization is that of Ferguson:

By language standardization is meant the process of one variety of language becoming widely accepted throughout the speech community as a supradialectal norm – the 'best' form of the language – rated above regional and social dialects, although these may be felt to be appropriate in certain domains (Ferguson 1987: 69).

Ferguson identifies three main tendencies leading to 'the spread of a favored variety in standardization':

One tendency is "koineization" or the reduction of dialect differences, both by dialect leveling, i.e. the avoidance of salient markers of particular dialects, and by simplification, i.e. the reduction in inventory and regularization in alternations [...] A second tendency is "variety shifting", in which specific linguistic features came to be viewed as marking identity with particular groups ("dialect shifting") and particular communicative functions or occasions of use ("register shifting") and individuals adopt such features as

⁴ In Auer's terms, an endoglossic standard is 'considered by its users to be a variety which is structurally related to the vernaculars', whereas an exoglossic standard is not considered structurally related (487); '[w]hether a standard variety is endoglossic or exoglossic is largely an attitudinal (and ideological) issue, not a structural one' (489). Among the standards that can be alternatively perceived as endoglossic or exoglossic is German in Luxembourg or Russian in Belarus.

part of their “acts of identity” in producing utterances. When this variety shifting is tending toward the spread of a supradialectal norm, it is of course standardization par excellence; if it is tending toward fragmented norms it is dialect diversification. A third tendency is “classicization”, or the adoption of features considered to belong to an earlier prestige norm [...] (Ferguson 1987:70).

Therefore, the term ‘standardization’ may also be applied to any process of unofficial focusing, koinéization and conventionalization resulting from ‘spontaneous’ linguistic choices that operate at the spoken (and eventually written) level, without any direct institutional coerciveness. Ferguson’s broad definition may thus cover very different situations of emergence and spread of a supra-dialectal variety/norm, such as a formal standard, a USS or an expanding NUV. Analysing the impact of dialect contact in the cases of new towns or expanding cities, such as Høyanger in Norway, Norwich in the UK and Belfast in Northern Ireland, Trudgill (1986: 107-8) argues:

We suspect, in any case, a key role for koinéization in new-dialect formation. In dialect contact and dialect mixture situations there may be an enormous amount of linguistic variability in the early stages. However, as time passes, focusing takes place by means of a *reduction* of the forms available. This reduction takes place through the process of koinéization, which consists of the *levelling* out of minority and otherwise marked speech forms, and of *simplification*, which involves, crucially, a reduction in irregularities [...]. The result of the focusing associated with koinéization is a historically mixed but synchronically stable dialect which contains elements from the different dialects that went into the mixture, as well as interdialect forms that were present in none.⁵

So when does an urban vernacular come to be considered a USS? Does the notion of standard-versus-vernacular distance hold in the face of the emergence of a USS? Many properties/characteristics associated with spoken USSs can also be attributed to NUVs *vis-à-vis* traditional or local rural dialects, and this may be the reason why the concept of ‘standard’ is frequently referred to in studies on urban varieties. As was previously mentioned, at the structural level, both USSs and NUVs are described in the literature as the result of language spread through focusing, convergence and koinéization. At the social level, their use in public spaces is considered ‘neutral’, i.e. not indexing a specific social or communal belonging. Kerswill (2006: 2277) considers that ‘in Europe, initial urbanization, the loosening of individuals’ network ties following greater geographical mobility and the formation of new towns are thought to have resulted in regional dialect levelling or dialect supralocalisation, which can be understood as the rise of distinctiveness at the wider, regional level at the expense of local distinctiveness, as well as the emergence of regional versions of the standard’. Features of both USSs and NUVs act as emerging norms reflecting the social hegemony of the urban way of life (at least of some sections of the urban population). Among the main differences between USSs and NUVs is the type of levelling: USSs are perceived as the result of vertical levelling between the standard and the vernacular, whereas NUVs are perceived as the result of horizontal levelling between the local dialects (Auer 2011, Trudgill 1986). The difference in the type of levelling is an important factor that may imply different perceptions of their function

⁵ See also Kerswill (2002 & 2006) and Kerswill & Williams (2000) for an analysis of several European cases, including Milton Keynes in the UK.

as shared norms, different relationships with the official standard and different social actors (educated middle class versus popular urban youth, for example).

Numerous studies have looked into the relationship between standard languages and vernaculars in the European context with rather different approaches (see, for instance, Auer et al. 2005, Auer 2011, Berruto 2005, Cerruti & Riccardo 2014; Coupland 2007, Deumert & Vandebussche 2003; Kristiansen & Coupland 2011; Hinskens 1996; Macaulay 1997; Røyneland 2009, Trudgill 1986). From these works, it appears that the co-presence of three processes is considered important for a NUV to be perceived as an USS by both laymen and scholars: geographical diffusion, functional expansion and contact with the official standard. First of all, features of the urban vernacular must function as *the target of accommodation for speakers beyond the original city area*. The accommodation process ranges from the adoption of a limited set of traits to an entire switch to that urban dialect, and may spread to surrounding rural areas, other cities or the whole country, according to the economic, political and cultural influence of the group associated with these features. This geographical diffusion does not mean that the accommodation process is taking place in all communicative contexts, but at least in certain ones. Secondly, *the functional purposes of convergence* must go beyond the functions usually attributed to the non-standard varieties, so that an NUV may be accepted as an alternative to the standard. The use of the urban vernacular should expand into (formal) public situations/registers in which non-standard forms are not expected, such as academic talks, the media and eventually writing. This happens when the NUV fulfils expressive needs that are emerging in the community and cannot be satisfied by the official national standard, as it unites ease of expression (since it is basically vernacular) and acceptability in supra-local contexts of communication (since its prestige goes beyond the urban area where it originated). Finally, features of the official standard must be included in the NUV repertoire, as USSs normally imply *conventionalized standard-vernacular mixing and style 'raising'* towards the standard. This might result in the emergence of focused, intermediate varieties, or of mixed-styles characterised by different degrees of variable shifting between standard and vernacular features.

However, the distance between USSs and NUVs, i.e. between vertical and horizontal levelling, is extremely fluid and flexible. This is particularly true when there is structural proximity between the written standard, the regional standard and the urban vernacular, as seems to be the case between the Bokmål standard, the Eastern Norwegian spoken standard and the Oslo vernacular in Norway. Reviewing the Eastern Norwegian situation, Kerswill (2016: 123) comments: 'One difficulty in ascribing influences directly to a "standard" seems to me to be related to which features are admitted as "Oslo" and which "standard". We have already seen that it is mainly the low-prestige features of Oslo which have spread outside the city. Many of these low-prestige features, however, are also "standard", in the sense that they are permissible, and often used, within the variable Bokmål orthography: we cannot therefore easily distinguish the standard from the prestige of the city itself'. We might add that in many instances the distinction between them reflects normative ideological representations rather than established linguistic facts.

2.2 Beyond Standardization in Late Modernity

The classical representation in terms of ‘prestigious’ and ‘focused’ varieties that first-wave sociolinguistics applied to both standard and urban vernacular varieties (Eckert 2012) has been challenged by a) the evolution of sociolinguistic approaches; b) urbanization trends leading to the increase of language contact, multilingualism and new urban cultural styles; and c) the weakening of linguistic authority and standard language ideology.

- a) The representation in terms of discrete, focused varieties and speech communities that prevailed in the 1960s-1980s has been receding with the emergence of more contextualized and situational approaches based on such concepts as communities of practice, indexicalization and registers. These approaches go beyond linguistic structures, and include agency, practices and ideology among their objects of analysis (Agha 2004, Coupland 2007, Eckert 2000 & 2012, Milroy and Milroy 1999). The representation of ‘the norm’ and ‘the standard’ is becoming more polymorphic, fluid and open to variation (cfr internal variability and ‘downward convergence’ as processes that may lead to destandardization or demotisation; Røyneland 2009, Mattheier 1997, Cerruti & Ricardo 2014: 86, chapter X this volume). The assumption that the scale of prestige derives from the socio-economic class of the speakers, and is identical with the scale of ‘standard’ to ‘non-standard, has also been criticized (Milroy 2001: 533).
- b) The idea that urban elites or upper middle-class speakers represent the dominant cultural urban model is seriously challenged by alternative or countercultural urban models. In fact, the speech of the educated urban upper or middle class does not always represent the accepted shared norm, as seemed to be implied by first-wave sociolinguists. New urban vernaculars and cultures are often associated with the language practices and styles of the urban youth living in popular, multiethnic and multilingual districts, who favour features associated with lower-class vernaculars (Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou 2003). In the case of new towns or in cases of language change due to migration, children and youth are seen as the leaders of emerging NUVs, as they employ more non-standard features than their parents (Kerswill 2002, 2006; Kerswill & Williams 2000). In many cities, features associated with the upper classes no longer function as the target of new urban spoken standards, as they are perceived as ‘old-fashioned’ or too ‘posh’. According to Røyneland (2009: 20):

In Norway, as in other Scandinavian countries, we observe a development where traditional low status urban features appear to be spreading at the expense of traditional high status ones, both in the cities and in surrounding areas. The traditional low-status features are re-allocated from being working-class features to being modern urban features; that is, they do not index social class anymore but urbanity and lifestyle. Apparently young people prefer “urban” to “posh”. This supports the idea that we should differentiate the term “standard” – hence the traditional (high social class) standard and the urban standard.

She also finds out that the role of adolescents as initiators and transmitters of change is quite different in rural and peripheral areas:

Whereas adolescents in rural areas speak in a more standard-like way than their parents and grandparents (because of dialect levelling) adolescents in the cities typically talk in a less

standard-like way than older generations. They pick up features that go against the established standard norm and hence challenge the standard (Røyneland 2009: 24).

In multiethnic districts, youth tend to favour code-switching and crossing, i.e. language practices that do not correspond to the classical representation of norms. In the UK, features associated with young foreign migrants spread into the everyday English of ‘white youth’, and the cities become fertile ground for the development of ‘contemporary urban vernaculars’, i.e. speech practices that flexibly borrow and integrate into the host country’s standard language salient and/or stylized linguistic features (particularly lexemes and prosodic patterns) pertaining to the migrants’ native languages (Rampton 2011). Such practices – and the registers that they inform – tend to gradually cease being exclusively associated with a specific ethnic group, and increasingly acquire a social (usually working-class) connotation; connected to this, they may end up being maintained in certain adults’ communicational contexts beyond adolescence. Subsequently, vernacular features stylized by youth speech start being associated with certain kinds of urban attitudes and life-styles, also popularized by musical genres such as rap and hip-hop. Thanks to their symbolizing dissidence from adults’ norms and behaviour, they become ‘prestigious’ features that spread among young people from different rural and urban backgrounds (cf. Kristiansen 2003: 89 for the case of Danish; cf. also the various contributions published in Nortier & Svendsen 2015).

- c) As a consequence of the two previous points, the hegemony of the ‘standard language ideology’ – intended as the collective acceptance of a hierarchy of norms reflecting the hierarchy of an established social order – seems to be receding, particularly within globalized superdiverse multilingual urban centres (Jørgensen *et al.* 2011). Sociolinguists refer to the present age as ‘the late modern age’, i.e. a time in which the power of authority is being undermined (Coupland & Kristiansen 2011: 57). The rapid development of social media and internet (the so-called ‘digital revolution’) has also brought about important changes concerning the adherence to writing norms and the development of new writing practices. The establishment of the national endoglossic standards was once linked to the political ascent/rise of the urban European bourgeoisie and its ideological vision of social order. Today, the apparent decline of the ‘standard language ideology’ in many Western countries – at least as manifested in the media’s language use – might be due to different factors: the growing influence of an individualist, libertarian ideology that opposes submission to common norms; socio-cultural changes that have marginalized the former literate elite; the renewal of political establishments; the revival of communalism; the defence of multilingualism, etc.

In the next section, we will shift to a different vernacular-to-standard configuration, as we will focus on a world region (the Arabic-speaking one) in which the notion of linguistic authority remains extremely sensitive, due to the ideological importance of the historical standard language (Classical Arabic). Bearing in mind that the notions of standard and standardization are social and ideological constructs, we will not aim at describing an ‘objective reality’, but

will rather attempt to analyse how linguists have approached the vernacular-versus-standard configuration in this part of the world.

3 Standardization and New Urban Varieties in the Arab world

3.1 Standard Arabic, Diglossia and Regional Urban Standards

In all Arab countries, the official written standard language is based on the classical literary Arabic variety that was ultimately codified by the Arab grammarians between the eighth and the tenth centuries A.D. This variety is known as *al-‘arabiyya al-fuṣḥā*, ‘the pure Arabic’, and represents the ideal norm of written and oral eloquence (Eisele 2003, Ayoub 2006, Suleiman 2003, 2007). In the early times of its codification, this ideal written norm was only used by a restricted class of literate and religious scholars. It has never become an expanded oral standard, and many written documents dating from the tenth century onwards appear to mix between classical and vernacular Arabic, a register known as ‘Middle Arabic’ (Lentin & Grand’Henry 2008, Lentin 2012). In the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the emerging Arab nationalist movements militated in favour of the rebirth of the Arab language and culture. This period, known as the *nahḍa* (‘renaissance’), gave birth to numerous debates on how to make the language cope with the challenge of modernization, and which linguistic reforms were required to this purpose (Suleiman 2003). While a few Arab intellectuals favoured the idea that Arab countries, like Europe, should build their national languages on the basis of their respective national vernaculars (cf. see Doss 1995 and Suleiman 2003: 180-90 for Salama Musa in Egypt, and Plonka 2004 for Said Al-‘Aql in Lebanon), no Arab Dante entered the scene to launch his own educated vernacular as a full-fledged literary idiom (Mejdell 2008a).⁶ As a consequence, most prominent *nahḍa* thinkers, such as Sati’ al-Husri, opted for the revival and modernization of the old classical language, and campaigned for the establishment of a strong regime of normative authority (Mejdell 2017, Suleiman 2003:142-6). This ‘revived’ literary language was perceived as the main instrument with which Arabness and Arab unity could be strengthened *vis-à-vis* the divide-and-rule colonial policy of the time. Pejorative perceptions of Arabic vernaculars as dividing tools were reinforced by the fact that, in several Arab countries such as Egypt, Morocco or Algeria, some influential colonial administrators and linguists were promoting Arabic dialects by using them in writing, or by publishing grammars and dictionaries.⁷ At the eve of independence, all Arab countries chose the classical literary language (called *al-lughā al-‘arabiyya*, ‘the Arabic language’, in national constitutions) as their official language, and progressively made it the compulsory medium of instruction (with wide differences in legislation according to the language situation of each Arabic country). Through the development of mass-media, literacy and urbanization, it was thought that *al-lughā al-‘arabiyya* would progressively spread as the main medium of communication in the whole

⁶ Fahmy (2011) has showed that the vernacular literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries significantly contributed to the development of popular Egyptian nationalism. However, this did not lead to the adoption of Egyptian Arabic as the official national language.

⁷ A key figure among these colonial administrators was Sir William Willcocks in Egypt who, during a lecture delivered in Cairo in 1893, held the view that Egyptian colloquial Arabic was the ideal language for expressing the modern needs. of the Egyptians (Suleiman 2003: 185)

society at both the national and international levels (i.e. between speakers of the same country as well as between speakers from different Arab countries).

Al-lughā al-‘arabiyya (i.e. Classical Arabic, or CA) has many attributes of a standard language: established codification, high prestige due to its religious and literary heritage, strong association with Arabness and the advantage of being a neutral means of communication not attached to any particular social or regional belonging. However, as a formal literary variety with restricted domains of use, it lacks the relative polyfunctionality and flexibility of typical modern standard languages, and does not cover most spoken styles and registers (Mejdell 2008a). Moreover, the *nahḍa*’s project of modernizing the classical language never resulted in an officially institutionalized and codified modern standard norm in any Arab country, in spite of the numerous Arabic academies founded towards this end. Any official attempt to reform and simplify the Arabic grammar taught in schools was vetoed by conservative Arabic scholars and religious authorities. Consequently, even the written use – not to mention the oral ‘standard’ use – presents important divergences from the prescribed classical norm, as can be observed in the written press and audiovisual media (Parkinson 1991, Eid 2007, Effat & Versteegh 2008). We find here a rather common situation where the prescriptive norm is not identical to the actual use of the language (cf. the distinction between the ‘normative standard’ versus the ‘empirical standard’, the latter ‘consisting of a range of “standard oriented” speech’; Trudgill 1999 and Bartsch 1989 quoted in Mejdell 2008a: 46). This gap between the reality of written/oral practices on the one hand and the ideal of the pure classical norms on the other enhances a long tradition of complaint about the decay of Arabic (Mejdell 2008b, Brustad 2017), which again questions the type of ongoing standardization/destandardization taking place in the Arab world.

The Arabic situation has been described as an example of a restricted stable diglossia (Marçais 1930; Ferguson 1959) characterised by a functional distribution between the classical High written norm and the Low spoken vernaculars. However, as early as 1959, Ferguson indicated that the representation in terms of a stable diglossia did not reflect the reality of language and social changes that were affecting the Arab societies. He pointed out that the communicative tensions that arise in such diglossic situation are resolved by ‘relatively uncodified, unstable, intermediate forms of language’. He therefore suggested that some kinds of ‘low standard’ or intermediate forms of language were likely to emerge at the regional level. In his investigation of standardization as a process of language change and convergence, Ferguson concluded:

In the case of the Arab world, recent studies of such convergence agree in showing the dominant lines of convergence are toward **regional standards, namely, prestigious urban educated speech patterns of various communicative centers**, rather than toward a single unified prestige norm of the Arab world as a whole (Ferguson 1987: 75; our emphasis).

The characterization and geographical diffusion of these regional standards based on the ‘prestigious’ urban educated ways of speaking have raised many discussions among Arabic scholars. Predictions about the directions of change and the converged-to varieties have not reached a mutual consensus. Linguists working on diglossia tend to highlight processes of vertical levelling between *fuṣḥā* and the vernaculars, whereas urban sociolinguists point to

processes of horizontal levelling between the vernaculars, independently of the influence of *fushā*.

Following Ferguson's paper on diglossia, a number of studies went on to describe the systemic convergence between standard *fushā* and Arabic vernaculars. Several theories were advanced concerning a) the existence of one or several intermediate discrete focused variety/ies between the High and the Low versus b) the presence of a continuum characterized by various degrees of style-mixing/code-switching between H and L features.⁸ Whatever its conceptualization, this mixed form of speech – often labelled Educated Spoken Arabic (Mitchell 1986) – is associated with the elevated speech of the high and middle urban educated classes of each country. Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA) in its regional/national variants can thus be considered a sort of 'flexible empirical regional norm' – or Unofficial Spoken Standard (USS) – that functions as a vector of patriotic expression more efficiently than *fushā*, by virtue of its vertical convergence with local vernaculars.

However, urban sociolinguistic studies on Arabic have highlighted other types of regional spoken 'standards', based on expanding urban vernaculars, and involving horizontal levelling/convergence between dialects rather than vertical levelling towards the formal standard. For a number of scholars (Holes 1995, Al-Wer 1997), variation and changes in spoken Arabic involve the interplay between the local dialects and the emerging regional standards independently of Classical or Modern Standard Arabic. Talking about the Gulf countries, Holes (2011) states that:

What is quite certain is that the direction of change is not towards Modern Standard Arabic. MSA is a prestigious variety of Arabic, no one would deny that, but it does not carry the same type of prestige that matters in everyday interaction between ordinary Arabs, whatever their level of education. Prestige in this context comes from the status accorded to the dominant local variety (Holes 2011: 138).

For other scholars, the direction of change – especially at the lexical level – is towards regional forms of Modern Standard Arabic, due to the spread of education (Abu-Haidar 1992). For yet others, there is no linear and unidirectional development and several trends can be identified, one towards the influence of MSA and the other towards dialect convergence (Walters 1995). At this stage, the boundaries between 'Educated Spoken Arabic' and the 'dominant local varieties' as well as their normative indexicalities remain a matter of investigation.

3.2 Arabic Urban Vernaculars: Dialect Contact, Accommodation, Convergence and Prestige

In the late 1970s, variationist sociolinguistic studies started to explore language variation and change in Arab urban centres. Massive urbanization and intra-national migration occurring in the twentieth century had turned those centres into clusters of regional and ethnic/communal

⁸ See Mejdell 2006 for a state of the art of the different approaches to Arabic diglossia, triglossia, multiglossia, continuum, code-switching and mixed-styles.

dialects (Miller 2004, Miller 2007).⁹ From this perspective, most contemporary Arabic urban vernaculars can be considered New Urban Vernaculars, as they emerged due to dialect contact, convergence, variation and change. Arabic dialectology has described numerous cases of historical and contemporary communal or regional dialect contact and convergence in Arab cities (Blanc 1964, Holes 1995). Similarly, the idea that the dialects of the main cities are or will become some sort of national *koinés* or *lingua-francas* flourished in the literature on Arabic dialects in the first part of the twentieth century (see, for example, Colin 1939 for Morocco).¹⁰ On the other hand, variationist sociolinguistics has been aiming to provide a more accurate description of the processes of change by focusing on the individual's performance with respect to a given set of features.

The first variationist studies took for granted that standard/classical Arabic (CA) *de facto* enjoyed the greatest prestige, functioning as the target variety for most speakers, particularly the educated ones. Therefore, they postulated that change would be systematically directed towards the adoption of the CA 'prestigious' features. Nevertheless, it was discovered that, contrary to the 'general principles' of Labovian variationist sociolinguistics, young educated women were not the leaders of the change in progress, and that their use of the 'standard' features was relatively low (Abdel Jawad 1981, Bakir 1986, Schmidt 1974). This apparent divergence from the Labovian principles pushed scholars in the field to consider the case of Arabic as a sort of anomaly. Labov himself (2001: 270) considered it 'a widespread reversal of the positions of men and women predicted by Principle 2' (Al-Wer 2014: 396). This phenomenon was attributed to the cultural specificity of the Arab world, particularly regarding gender roles and statuses, as Arab women played a less prominent role in public life and had less access to education (Al-Wer 2014: 396)

However, a number of later studies criticizing this interpretation indicated that CA, in spite of its cultural and historical legitimacy, was not the locally 'prestigious' variety, at least at the spoken level and in informal settings (Abdel Jawad 1987, Al-Wer 1997, Haeri 1996, Holes 1995, Ibrahim 1986, Palva 1982, Walters 1995). In most contexts of dialect contact following urbanization and migration, processes of accommodation or dialect shifting were said to derive from horizontal (between dialects) rather than vertical levelling, and the most prestigious urban variety was usually found to be the dominant and converged-to variety. This was because CA has no native speakers, and therefore cannot derive its prestige from the social status of its native speakers (Al-Wer 1997). On the other hand, the urban dialectal variety was found to be locally prestigious because it was linked to social status and mobility, whereas the standard *fushā* was considered to lack social evaluative connotations (Ibrahim 1986).

Three phenomena appear to confirm the 'prestige' of urban features over CA features in cases of dialect contact and horizontal levelling/convergence in urban contexts. First, features (or at least some features) of the dominant urban group are adopted in public spaces by rural

⁹ The language diversity of the Arab world also includes several native languages that pre-existed the spread of Arabic, such as Berber, Kurdish, Nubian etc. and several former colonial languages (English, French, Spanish, Italian) that we will not take into consideration in this paper.

¹⁰ See also the numerous contributions on various Arabic urban vernaculars in the Encyclopedia of Arabic language and Linguistics ed. By K. Versteegh & al. (2006).

migrant groups or minority groups, even if these urban features are more deviant from CA than the rural/minority ones. Among the prototypical examples:

- People speaking a (q) dialect (/q/ also being the standard classical variant) producing the [ʔ] glottal stop instead of the uvular occlusive [q], which is characteristic of several Middle Eastern urban varieties such as those of Cairo, Damascus, Beirut or Jerusalem (Abdel-Jawad 1987) or Jewish/Christian (q)-speakers adopting the dominant Bedouin/Muslim [g] variant in Baghdad (Blanc 1964, Abu Haidar 1990¹¹);
- People speaking a (z) dialect (/z/ also being the standard classical variant) adopting the dominant Bedouin [j] variant in public spaces in Bahrain and in Kuwait, (Holes 1995 and also Holes 2011 quoting research from Mona Al Qouz 2009 and Hassan 2009);
- People shifting from interdental variants (/θ/ and /ð/) to non-CA [t], [s], [d] or [z] in Mecca and Jordan (Al-Wer 1997).
- Horizontal levelling in favour of urban features that diverge from the Classical norm also involves morphosyntactic features such as the neutralisation of the gender difference in 2nd and 3rd plural forms of personal pronouns and verb ending.

Second, young women from migrant/minority groups appear to favour urban dominant features that are more widely accepted at the regional level, whereas men are more prone to keep their covert prestige variants (Walters 1991). Moreover, in cases of internal systemic changes that have no relation with dialect contact, young urban women from middle classes appear to lead the change, as in the cases of palatalization and depharyngealization recorded by Haeri (1992) and Royal (1985) in Cairo.

Third, a higher level of education does not lead to a higher use of standard *fuṣḥā* features, but rather to a higher use of urban features, as revealed by several studies on Damascus, Tunis or Amman and other Jordanian cities (Al Wer 1997, 2002). Education enhances greater mobility and larger networks, exposure to different social values and the need to adopt common features shared by a wider number of people and not indexed with localness. Therefore, ‘educated speakers appear to be leading the changes, most often in the direction of urban and koinised regional standards’ (Al-Wer 1997: 259).

All the examples cited above emphasize the importance of horizontal dialect convergence and levelling as factors of language change within expanding Arab cities. A relatively common trend in the 1980s-1990s was to consider that dialect convergence had led, was leading, or would ultimately lead, to the emergence of new focused urban vernaculars functioning as supradialectal and supra-tribal – or supra-communal – neutral means of communication. In the late 1980s, numerous sociolinguistic studies also started considering that the Arabic urban vernaculars of the capital cities were *de facto* functioning as prestigious non-official national standards, and references to ‘standard urban features’ or ‘standard urban varieties’ began

¹¹However, Abu-Haidar (1992) asserts that this process of convergence was active until the 1960s and that, in the 1980s, it characterized the old members of the Christian communities, whereas young speakers of both Muslim and Christian background were shifting to Classical [q].

flourishing (Abdel Jawad 1987 for Jordan, Amara 2005 for Bethléhem, Gibson 2002 for Tunisia, etc.).

3.3 From Urban Prestige to Regional/National Standard?

The ‘prestige’ of the main urban vernaculars and their diffusion via the audio-visual media make them natural candidates to become supradialectal varieties, or ‘Low standards’ in Ferguson’s (1959) or Ibrahim’s (1986) terminology, thus raising issues such as: What is the degree of the geographical diffusion and functional expansion of each ‘standard’ urban vernacular? Are we witnessing a process of convergence between the various ‘standard’ urban vernaculars?

In the early 1980s, some scholars (such as Ibrahim 1986) believed in the emergence of a common Middle Eastern supra-dialectal variety based on the shared features of the established and focused vernaculars of the main Middle Eastern centres, such as Cairo and Damascus:

The strongest evidence of a standard Low, independently of the standard H, is what may be for the time being termed an interregional L. [...] there exists a thriving supradialectal L based on the speech of such urban centers as Cairo, Damascus and Jerusalem (Ibrahim 1986: 120).

Ibrahim’s hypothesis of a common Middle Eastern supra-dialectal low standard has not been confirmed in recent years. It thus remains an imaginary ideal of a shared Middle Eastern culture that mirrors the pan-Arab ideology. Implicitly, it postulates the overt prestige of Middle Eastern urban vernaculars over all other Arabic vernacular varieties. This language ideology is still rather dominant among Middle Eastern speakers, particularly *vis-à-vis* North African speakers (Hachimi 2013). However, this hierarchy is not leading to the emergence of a common spoken standard, even within pan-Arab satellite TVs and social media. On the contrary, it seems that dialectal diversity is increasingly marked in pan-Arab encounters. Soap operas, talk-shows and highly popular pan-Arab versions of ‘Star Academy’ all offer vivid examples of performances where dialectal varieties are used/stylized as the iconic branding of national and local belonging (Hachimi 2013; Schulthies 2015, Farrag 2019).

Generally speaking, the development of urban vernaculars into unofficial national or regional standards is far from presenting a homogeneous picture across the Arab world, as histories of urbanisation and national construction differ greatly (Miller 2004; 2007). Urban vernaculars are not always the prestigious converged-to varieties: in many historical and contemporary settings, former old-urban varieties associated with specific urban groups have receded in the face of new varieties spoken by social groups with a rural or Bedouin background (Blanc 1964, Holes 1995, Miller 2004). Ethnic and communal affiliation remains strong, and might be reinforced by ongoing civil wars in countries like Yemen, Iraq or Syria. In many cities like Sanaa in Yemen, Casablanca in Morocco or Amman in Jordan, it appears impossible to speak about a focused dominant urban variety that most speakers consider as the most appropriate way of speaking. A better approach would be to see focusing in the sense of structured variability, and to take into consideration the iconic values of each feature according to context and interlocutors (Al-Wer & Herin 2011). A good example is provided by Al-Wer and Hérin with the case of the (q) feature in Amman. The glottal variant [ʔ] of the (q) variable

(characteristic of the Palestinian urban variety) used to be considered ‘prestigious’ in the 1960s and 1970s. However, following the political fight of the Jordanian state against the Palestinian factions in 1979, the [g] variant of the (q) variable (characteristic of the Jordanian Bedouin variety) has come to symbolize Jordanian nationalism. Today, [g] is used by both Jordanian and Palestinian men in public space, whereas [ʔ] is mainly associated with female speech (Al-Wer & Hérin 2011).

Below are three examples highlighting the diversity of the Arab urban sociolinguistic situation: the Arabic of Cairo, the Gulf countries and Morocco. **Cairene Arabic** has been considered a typical example of an expanding urban vernacular, functioning as a supradialectal norm/standard at the national and international levels. At the national level, Cairene Arabic is equated with Egyptian Arabic. Its dominance is attributed to the historical political, cultural and economic weight that Cairo acquired following a strong, centuries-long centralization policy. Contemporary Cairene Arabic has been considered to be a stable focused variety since the mid-nineteenth century (Woidich 1994). It has not been deeply affected by dialect levelling or convergence since then, in spite of its important demographic growth due to several immigration waves in the 1960s and 1970s. The few existing studies on dialect contact and processes of accommodation among migrants in Cairo (Miller 2005) and urban centres outside Cairo (Sadiq 2017) indicate that Cairene Arabic is considered the most appropriate variety for communication in public spaces. Its marked features are indexed with urbanity, softness, education (Miller 2005) and, generally speaking, Egyptianness (Bassiouney & Muehlhaeusler 2018). This does not mean that other regional identities do not sometimes compete with Cairo’s dominance within Egypt (see, for example, Bassiouney 2014 for the case of Alexandria, Miller 2005 for Upper Egypt); nevertheless, Cairene Arabic has been symbolizing Egyptian nationalism and patriotism since the nineteenth century. In almost all formal public settings, Educated Spoken Cairene Arabic is preferred to normative *fuṣḥā*. Cairene Arabic has expanded its function far beyond those of a purely oral vernacular spoken in informal situations, and has been used in writing and formal settings for decades (Doss & Davies 2013). From this perspective, Cairene Arabic appears to perfectly fulfil the model of a national endoglossic urban-based spoken/written standard, even though it has never been officially recognized as such. At the Arab regional level, and until the early 2000s, its prestige was mainly due to the fact that Cairo had been an Arab cultural hub for decades, exporting its massive cultural production all around the Arab world (particularly movies, TV series and songs). In the inter-Arab communicative context involving Egyptian speakers, Cairene Arabic is often the converged-to variety (Abu-Melhim 1991, Bassiouney 2015). However, the overt prestige of Cairene Arabic in the Arab cultural and media scene started to recede in the face of the emergence of new cultural hubs such as Beirut and, more interestingly, the Gulf countries, which in the 1960s-1980s were never considered centres from which urban and regional standards could spread.

The Gulf countries are another area where a supradialectal ‘standard’ or koinéized Gulf variety is said to have been expanding quickly in the last three decades (Holes 2011). Since the 1970s, Gulf countries have witnessed important changes due to their oil-linked economic growth, turning from predominantly Bedouin communities to highly urbanized societies. The

traditional dialectal diversity – still prevalent in the 1980s – characterized by the coexistence of different types of tribal and sectarian dialects now tends to recede in the face of a homogenized form of ‘Gulf speech’, which cannot be identified with any particular Gulf community. This Gulf speech is based more on the ‘Arab’ Sunni Bedouin dialects than on the Shi’i sedentary ones (Holes 1986). The regional Gulf standard or prestige variety is characterized as ‘a homogenised form of the local dialects based on the speech of urban areas such as Kuwait City, Manama, Doha and Dubai’ (Holes 2011: 138). It is spoken from Kuwait in the north to the UAE in the south, and is heard on Gulf TV and radios in Gulf soap operas, talk-shows and vox-pop interviews. Based on former Bedouin dialects, Gulf Arabic does not share the typical ‘urban features’ of sedentary-based Middle Eastern dialects such as Cairo Arabic and Damascus Arabic. Unlike Cairene Arabic, the case of the Gulf countries shows that a regional standard is not necessarily based on an old established urban variety, but can develop from more recently urbanized varieties.

In Morocco, the existence of a common shared national norm remains rather hypothetical due to strong regional trends, particularly in the northern part of the country (Sanchez & Vicente 2012). Unlike Egypt or Syria, Morocco has never had one strong urban centre dominating the whole country. The city of Casablanca, the contemporary economic capital of the country, was largely developed at the beginning of the twentieth century during the French Protectorate, and its prestige lacks historical legitimacy *vis-à-vis* the old imperial cities like Fes or Rabat. Historically, the dialects of Morocco are divided into two main typological groups: sedentary pre-*hilāli* dialects (known as *mdīni* dialects), which are spoken in old cities such as Fes, Tangiers or Rabat, and rural *hilāli* dialects, which are spoken in the plains of the Atlantic countryside (known as *ārūbi* dialects). During the twentieth century, the former *mdīni* dialects of the old imperial cities have been receding due to the settlement of rural migrants and the diffusion of neo-urban mixed features (Messaoudi 2001). This led to a reassessment of the social values of linguistic features and to reallocation processes. In Casablanca, the features of the former ‘prestigious’ old-city dialect of Fes, associated with the Fassi elite, are perceived as posh and effeminate, whereas the popular Casablanca ‘urban’ features (partially based on rural speech, such as the [g] variant of the (q) variable) are associated with social values such as virility, urbanity and toughness (Hachimi 2011). Casablanca Arabic, however, has not yet succeeded in being recognized as the legitimate ‘representative’ of Moroccan Arabic, as it is often considered too popular, rural and somehow vulgar (Miller 2012). Nevertheless, the absence of a common dialect norm does not prevent Moroccan Arabic (*dārija*) from expanding its functions into various domains such as formal speech, audio-visual media, advertising, newspapers and novels. This expansion leads to passionate public controversies around the potential status of Moroccan Arabic *vis-à-vis* the official standard (Hall 2015, Caubet & Miller 2016, Miller 2017).

4 Conclusion

This brief and general outline of the status of Arabic urban vernaculars shows how no common pattern – or universal trend of change – towards the unofficial standardization of urban vernaculars may be identified. In some areas like Egypt or the Gulf, old or new-urban based varieties are becoming more or less prestigious spoken styles, a scenario that closely resembles

the standardization of urban vernaculars in many European countries in modern times. However, unlike Europe, the functional spread of urban vernaculars has not led to major official changes in language ideology and representations for the time being: as a consequence, there is a strong discrepancy between practices and ideology. Under several aspects, the contemporary sociolinguistic situation of the Arab world parallels that of Europe, also in relation to the above-mentioned issue of the undermining of linguistic authority; however, in other respects, the Arabic situation keeps its own specificities, including the strong emotional link between Islam, Arabic and Arabness (Haeri 2003).

Among the similarities between the contemporary Arabic urban setting and the European one is the growing public visibility of ‘youth speech’ and ‘youth culture’, particularly in countries like Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt. Urban lifestyles are increasingly associated with ‘toughness’, in opposition to the supposed sophistication of the old urban elite (Hachimi 2011, Barontini & Ziamari 2009). Like in Europe, a number of features associated with popular speech styles are frequently used by urban youth, and become markers of urban styles through their diffusion via songs, videos, movies and social networks (Rizk 2007, Woidich 2018). This is the case of the affricate [tʃ] in Morocco, a feature that has been extensively spreading among young urban speakers in recent years (Falchetta 2019). The second trend is towards the increasing use of code-switching (Arabic-French in North Africa, Arabic-English in the Middle East) in both spoken and informal written practices (Ziamari 2008, Albirini 2016).

The development of internet, SMS, blogs and social media has favoured a rapid, widespread and unprecedented use of the vernacular in writing, whatever the stage of diffusion and focusing of urban vernaculars (Høgilt & Mejdell 2017, Nordenson 2017, Caubet 2017). Arabic writing on the internet has developed both in the Roman script (known as Arabizi) and the Arabic script (Albirini 2016, Caubet 2012, Warschauer & al. 2007 Ramsay 2013). This development of the written vernacular coincides with a trend towards expressivity, humour and criticism of social and political conformism (Høgilt 2017) not only among teenagers (Palfreyman & Khalil 2003) but also sometimes among young Islamists on the blogosphere (Hirschkind 2010). This trend towards expressivity often leads to the overuse of youth slang and ‘crude’ taboo words. Writing in the vernacular is also spreading in other domains such as advertising and fiction, particularly in Egypt where vernacular is not restricted to dialogues but has also been spreading to narratives since the 1990s (Rosenbaum 2004). Minor digital literature is developing new literary styles and genres characterized by a mixing of standard Arabic, vernacular Arabic, English and youth slang (Pepe 2017). According to Pepe, ‘what brings together most young Arab writers is their tone of protest, and their rebellion against traditional literary culture’ (Pepe 2017: 390).

However, while this functional expansion and general change in written and spoken practices may indicate a trend towards new processes of unofficial standardization/destandardization, it does not seem to imply a change in language ideology and attitudes. In Egypt or Morocco, when explicitly asked about their view on language practices, most people express their admiration and love towards the official standard (classical *fushā*) Arabic (Kindt & Zebede 2017, de Ruiter & Ziamari 2014). Few support the idea that Arabic

vernaculars should become distinct and separate writing varieties taught in schools. The huge debates about whether or not the ‘vernaculars’ should be officially recognized as national languages in several Arab countries show that, even if many speakers mostly write and speak in the vernacular, they still consider their own practices as ‘bad’ and ‘incorrect’ compared to the prescriptive norm. In 1987, Ferguson had to admit that the Arab world lacked ‘great language reformers’ like Vuc Stefanovic Karazic for Serbian. Today, a few language reformers asking for the main vernacular to become the official national language are beginning to appear, such as the Egyptian psychoanalyst Mustafa Safwan or the Moroccan advertiser Nourredin Ayouch (Miller 2017), who militate for a rather conventional vision of a codified national standard high variety. It is possibly because of this conventional vision of standardization, so detached from the fluidity of the actual use of language, that figures such as these do not reach a large audience or enjoy much support in their home countries. In his analysis of the apparent contradiction between practices and attitudes within the Egyptian literary scene, Rosenbaum (2012) argues that most writers who use *‘āmmiyya* are no longer involved in the linguistic debate since, in their view, writing in *‘āmmiyya* is not an ideological stance any more. According to him, these writers feel that the contemporary criticism of the use of colloquial Arabic is a losing battle, as writing in *‘āmmiyya* or *dārija* does not actually threaten the status of standard Arabic as a prestigious language. On the other hand, this is not a zero-sum game as Brustad (2017: 65) and many other scholars point to: ‘More writing in *‘āmmiyya* does not necessarily mean less writing in *fushā* [...] What has kept *fushā* alive all these centuries is precisely its symbiotic relationship with *‘āmmiyya* which provides it with the stuff of social intercourse, human communication and emotion. *Fushā*, on the other hand, provides *‘āmmiyya* with a rich body of material that allows it to stretch beyond its everyday functions into the realm of the artistic, a process which in turn helps bind it with *fushā*’. Also, according to Mejdell (2017:85), “the validity of the normative standard as such is not a question, it is rather the *exclusive* validity of the standard which has been and is being challenged. [...] Plurality of expression is held to be a characteristic of late modern society – all over the world. The signs of destandardization we see in (parts of) the Arab world, opening new forms for writing, represents a process which, I believe, will not be reversed’.

The Arabic situation appears to show different layers of ‘standardization/destandardization’, with the classical standard, Educated Standard Arabic, urban vernaculars and youth urban features fulfilling different needs and functions: official and very formal speech, less formal and more patriotic styles, casual speech and expressions of new globalized urban cultures, etc. Therefore, vertical and horizontal levelling are concomitant processes, and there is no linear development from the urban vernaculars to the official standard and vice versa. In modern-age Europe, like today in the Arab world, several trends of standardization/destandardization were taking place at the same time. However, the presence of strong patriotic and nationalistic attitudes at the social and political levels in the Arab world has not led to any State’s recognition of a vernacular-based official language so far.

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