

VERNACULAR ARABIC AS REFLECTED BY MIDDLE ARABIC (INCLUDING JUDAEO-ARABIC)

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Middle Arabic texts are of great cultural significance, since some of the most important works of Medieval Islamic culture are written in Middle Arabic. They are, however, of great linguistic significance as well: Middle Arabic is characterized by the almost free alternation of classical, post-classical, pseudo-correct, and vernacular Neo-Arabic elements. It is this last set that we shall treat in this lecture.

The linguistic history of Arabic can conveniently be divided into two strata: Old Arabic, mainly represented by classical Arabic and its descendants, and Neo-Arabic, the modern representatives of which are the contemporary Arabic dialects. Between classical Arabic and the modern dialects there is a gap of about one thousand years. This gap can be filled by culling the Neo-Arabic elements from Middle Arabic texts, thus reconstructing this missing link in the history of Arabic: Judaeo-Arabic texts are mostly from the second millennium A.D., Ancient South Palestinian Christian Arabic works from the second half of the first millennium, and Arabic papyri take us back as far as 700 A.D.

As a matter of fact, almost all the structural characteristics of the modern dialects can be reconstructed from the Neo-Arabic elements contained in Middle Arabic texts. One has to bear in mind that Neo-Arabic, as reflected both by Middle Arabic and the modern dialects, is by no means merely Old Arabic minus the case and mood endings; Old Arabic and Neo-Arabic differ, indeed, in many other decisive features. The disappearance of short vowels in open unstressed syllables (as proven in Middle Arabic texts e.g. by the occurrence of prosthetic *alif* in cases like *itkallam* > *takallam*) attests to the emergence of a strongly centralizing stress system, which, contrary to the stress in classical Arabic, reduced short vowels in open unstressed syllables. Syllable structure changed, enabling the occurrence of long vowels in closed

syllables (as *yūqīm*, frequent in Middle Arabic, as against classical *yūqīm*). The phonemic system of the vowels has altered, and in some dialects the phonemic difference between *i* and *u* does not exist, in many dialects, the diphthongs *aw/ay* have been monophthongized. The glottal stop has been weakened, sometimes tending to disappear. Whereas classical Arabic has preserved the inventory of what we consider Proto-Semitic consonants almost intact, only *ś* wanting, it has been reduced in Neo-Arabic. In almost all the Neo-Arabic dialects *d* has disappeared, having merged with *z*; therefore in many Middle Arabic texts the two letters marking these two consonants alternate, in some of them *ض*, the more frequent letter, being used exclusively. In the dialects of the sedentary population interdental spirants have shifted to the corresponding occlusives, marginally attested in some Middle Arabic texts, e.g. by the rhyming of spirants with occlusives. *tā marbūta* has either shifted to *b* or disappeared in the absolute.

In the field of morphosyntax, many of the numerous differences between Old Arabic and Neo-Arabic may be reduced to a common denominator: Old Arabic tends to be more synthetic, i.e. to utilize more bound morphemes, whereas Neo-Arabic is more analytic, i.e. it relies less on bound morphemes. Thus, in Neo-Arabic, from its very beginnings, the case and mood endings have disappeared, triggering further changes. Because of the disappearance of the case endings word order has become more fixed. The marked tendency of Neo-Arabic is not to insert the direct object between verb and subject. Owing to the same propensity to mark the subject, as against the direct object, by fixed word order, the initial position of the subject before the verb becomes more frequent than in classical Arabic. Hence, as in this position the verb agrees with the subject, the congruence of the verb was extended even to verbs preceding their subjects. This was prompted also by the desire to avoid ambiguity, since the congruence of the verb preceding its subject with the subject made it possible to distinguish the subject, though no longer marked by case endings, from the direct object, if the two differed in gender and/or number. In some Neo-

Arabic dialects, as also reflected in Middle Arabic texts, analytic devices are used to mark direct object and the *nomen rectum* in a genitival construction. Because of the disappearance of both the case and mood endings, the functional differences between *an* and *anna* (as well as *inna*, because of the blurring of the differences between *a* and *i*) have become effaced and these particles merged.

A further aspect of the analytic trend in Neo-Arabic is the diminishing use of the dual, which, contrary to classical Arabic has completely disappeared in the verb, the adjective, and the pronoun, and has become limited even in the field of the substantive to cases in which the mentioning of "two" had communicative value. In the sedentary dialects, the traces of which prevail in Middle Arabic texts, the feminine plural of the pronoun, the verb, and the adjective has been superseded by the masculine. In Middle Arabic texts as well as in many dialects, the comparative may be expressed by the positive followed by the adverb "more". Moreover, Neo-Arabic exhibits a growing tendency of adding separate personal pronouns to the finite forms of the verb (though this propensity is not entirely absent from classical Arabic either). The relative pronoun has become invariable, no longer agreeing with its antecedent in number or gender (and, of course, in case, after the disappearance of the case system).

Yet the differences between the linguistic structures of Old Arabic and Neo-Arabic are not confined to the difference between synthetic versus analytic features. The fixed alternation of syndetic and asyndetic sentences, so characteristic of classical Arabic, no longer exists. In Neo-Arabic asyndetic sentences have become quite frequent, both in co-ordination and subordination. Co-ordinate asyndetic clauses are especially conspicuous after verbs denoting movement, subordinated ones in the function of object clauses. Profound changes have affected the numerals, changing their whole structure. The same applies to demonstrative pronouns, though perhaps to a smaller extent. In most dialects, the passive formed in classical Arabic by internal vowel change, has been replaced by the former reflexive verbal forms. The conjugation of the first and second persons of the perfect of *verba mediae geminatae*

has changed, as a rule exhibiting the "connecting vowel" *ay/ē*. There exists in Neo-Arabic a clear tendency to assign tenses according to the division of time. Consequently, the perfect (except in conditional clauses) is associated with the past only. Therefore, as a rule, it no longer denotes wishes in genuine living usage. *lam* 'not', which in classical Arabic governs the apocopate to mark the past, has disappeared in Neo-Arabic. *mā* has become the "basic" negative particle. Therefore, the functional load of *mā*, already rather significant in classical Arabic, has become so heavy that it has been supplanted in Neo-Arabic in the sense of 'what' by words like *ayy šay'/ēš/aš*. The relative pronoun tends to introduce substantive clauses as well. Indirect questions often take the form of conditional clauses.

These features, which one may easily multiply, illustrate the difference between classical Arabic and Neo-Arabic, which thus, with the help of the vernacular elements contained in Middle Arabic texts, can be traced back till the beginning of the eighth century A.D., giving it a span of life of almost 1300 years.

Yet not only almost all the structural characteristics of the modern dialects can be reconstructed from the Neo-Arabic elements contained in Middle Arabic texts. What surprises even more that also many restricted vocabulary items characteristic of the modern dialects, are present in Middle Arabic texts. Some few examples will suffice: *min kull budd* 'in any case, at any rate', is attested not only in modern dialects, from which it penetrated modern standard Arabic, but also in Judaeo-Arabic and even in Ancient South-Palestinian Christian Arabic. The well-known metathesis *ḡawz* < *zawḡ* 'pair' occurs in Judaeo-Arabic, as does *maysūm* < *maš'ūm* 'inauspicious', further *bass* in both the meanings 'enough' and 'only'. One has the impression that the Middle Arabic texts demonstrate that most elements characterizing modern dialects already existed in the early stratum of Neo-Arabic, as reflected in Middle Arabic texts, the later history of Neo-Arabic being limited to a different distribution of these elements. If further analysis will, indeed, confirm this impression, it will teach us an important lesson as to the development of Neo-Arabic.

Finally, a short remark on the way of reconstructing the ancient layer of Neo-Arabic from Middle Arabic texts will not be out of place, since it is completely different from the method of investigating modern dialects. The latter are, as a rule, simply recorded and analyzed, very often from a plethora of data, whereas ancient Neo-Arabic has painfully to be extracted from forms deviating from classical Arabic in Middle Arabic texts, painfully, because a feature differing from classical Arabic need not necessarily be Neo-Arabic: it can also be post-classical or pseudo-correct, or even a combination of both (as *lā zāl* 'he has not ceased, still', or *ilā* used for *li* e.g. for marking a direct object after nominal forms of the verb). In every case, it can only after careful consideration and comparison with the modern dialects be decided whether a feature represents genuine Neo-Arabic, and sometimes even then pitfalls can hardly be avoided.

To sum up: Careful analysis of the Neo-Arabic elements occurring in Middle Arabic texts enables us to trace Neo-Arabic back to the beginning of the eighth century A.D., thus making it possible to fill a gap of over one thousand years of its history. This early layer of Neo-Arabic reflects not only the structural characteristics of the modern dialects, but even many isolated lexicographical items, thus suggesting that most elements characterizing the modern dialects already existed 1300 years ago, the later history of Neo-Arabic being, in the main, limited to re-distribution of these features.