Are Old Urban Varieties Dying in Contemporary North Africa?

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This paper examines the sociolinguistic outcomes of contact between old and new Arabic urban dialects in North Africa. Specifically, it explores contact between native varieties of the old capital cities, which have defined urban and prestigious linguistic practice for centuries, and the new urban varieties which have emerged as a result of population mobility and urbanization in the 20th century. The paper questions one of dialectologists’ conventional wisdom: that old urban varieties in North Africa are dying out and are preserved mainly among old illiterate women.

The paper makes its argument by comparing the use and social meanings of several old urban forms in the contemporary North African speech communities of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Data for Morocco come from original quantitative and qualitative research conducted between 1999 and 2007 on dialect change and maintenance among 32 Fessis, the bona fide old urbanites in Morocco. Analysis considers in particular the effects of age and gender in the use of two phonological variables (q) and (r), a morphosyntactic variable (gender distinction vs. neutralization) and three lexical variables. Comparative data for Tunisia and Algeria are taken from Trabelsi (1991), Jabeur (1996), Gibson (2002) and Dendane (1994, 2006) among others.

Findings show that while some old urban variants are in fact dying in the sense that they are no longer found in the speech of young North Africans (e.g., the glottal stop variant of the qaf variable in Morocco and the diphthongs [aj] and [aw] in Tunisia), others—contrary to dialectologists’ generalizations—continue to be used among young, educated and mobile speakers (e.g. the glottal stop variant of qaf in Algeria and gender neutralization of the second person singular in verbs in Morocco). It is suggested that a dialect contact framework with its insights of leveling, simplification, interdialect formation (Trudgill 1986) and socio-stylistic reallocation (Britain and Trudgill 2005) is best able to account for the outcomes of contact between the old and new urban varieties in North Africa.

References