Arrays of Egyptian and Tunisian Everyday Worlds

An update on the project

In 2016—How it felt to live in the Arab World five years after the “Arab Spring”

edited by

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(..) bridging the big gap that has emerged between our language of today and the essential works (ummahāt al-kutub) of literature, the heritage and the language and style they were written in (...) for the language not to be a monopoly for those who studied it and understand it (...) so that it is possible for a twelve or thirteen, or even younger boy or girl, to read one of the essential works and understand what is being said (...) that it is natural and happens in any language (...) personally I think that no awakening/revival/renaissance (nahḍa) will take place in the Arab countries unless we know how to understand our forefathers first. (al-Maʿarrī 2016: 7-8)

These points are listed as motivations for why the Egyptian scholar, translator and novelist Nārīmān al-Shāmīlī (b. 1983) chooses to translate Abū ʿl-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī’s Risālat al-ghufrān (“The Epistle of Forgiveness”) into Egyptian ʿāmmīyya (vernacular Arabic). It is most likely the only translation published this year from ǧušṭā (standard Arabic) to ʿāmmīyya. However, use of ʿāmmīyya in writing is not rare: billboards decorating buildings and roadsides are often in ʿāmmīyya, which is also frequently used on social media [↗Social Media]: Egyptians receive text messages from their telephone companies in ʿāmmīyya [↗Mobile Phones], and books are being published that are written fully or partly in ʿāmmīyya, or in a mix between ʿāmmīyya and ǧušṭā. Many of them belong to the adab sākhīr genre [↗Satire], such as Ghayr qābil liʾl-nashr (“Unpublishable”) by Sharīf Asʿād, or even self-help books [↗Self-help] such as Il-Khurāq ʿan il-nsāṣ (“Out of the Box”) by Egyptian psychiatrist Muhammad Ṭāhā [↗Psychiatrists]. Muhammad Ibrāhīm’s book Maṭlūb ʿalābīb (“Sweetheart Wanted”) is labelled iʿtirāfāt (“confessions”). As many writers before him, he raises the dilemma of which variety to write in:

I have grown up but I have not really grown up…I have grown up but I still write ʿāmmīyya next to ǧušṭā…I know that it is better if the book is all in ǧušṭā, but I prefer to express myself in ʿāmmīyya. I was born and raised in a country which speaks in a variety (lahgā) which is different from the official variety (lahgā) that is written in books and in education. I learned in one way and lived in another. I cannot define my identity closer to any of the varieties…both of them represent me…a variety closer to my intellect (ʿaql) and a variety closer to my heart and way of life…for this reason I decided to complete the book using both varieties” (Ibrāhīm 2016: 10).

Moreover, the Egyptian president [↗Father figures] gives formal speeches in ʿāmmīyya and uses several linguistic features that are not associated with the prestige register of ʿāmmīyya. On October 6, the Facebook page Asa7be Sarcasm Society posts a meme involving an image from a news broadcast showing al-Sīsī commemorating the 43rd anniversary of the October War together with the Sudanese President ʿUmār al-
Bashīr [Commemorations]. The caption reads iḍdīḥā wāḥda taḥyā Maṣr/Misr, which literally means “Give it a ‘Long live Egypt.’” The word for Egypt is spelled with the letter sīn instead of the correct sād, mocking the president’s ‘weak’ pronunciation. Imitation or mocking of specific pronunciations is often found when ‘āmīyā is written. On November 1, a meme posted on the same Facebook page targets certain women who speak in a flirty/childish/spoiled manner. This time it is an image from the movie ‘Asal iswid (“Black Honey”) from 2010. The original scene involves the protagonist, called Maṣrī (i.e., “Egyptian”), who has returned to Egypt after twenty years in the United States, his friend Saʿīd, and Mervat, the woman Saʿīd is in love with. Mervat is a primary school teacher of English, and Maṣrī is provoked by her faulty English: she pronounces /l/ for /l/, /bl/ for /p/ etc. The author of the meme turns the focus over to Egyptian ‘āmīyā, adding the following caption:

\[ \text{dī hīyā ʿillī biṭḥabbahā!! Dī bitʿāl māṭhī wa-thahlāna yā Saʿīd} \text{ (“Is this her that you love!! She says māṭhī and thahlāna, Saʿīd!”).} \]

Māṭhī is a variant of māṣhī (lit., “it goes”, i.e., “o.k.”), and thahlāna of zaʾlāna (the feminine form for “sad”). The post generates comments of which some contain new memes treating the same topic. One of these is an image from a different movie, in which a woman is portrayed as saying shhaʿīllak kita baqā zalhāna minak. This would, according to the conventions, be written mish haʿīllak kita baqā zaʾlāna minak (“I’m not going to tell you, I am angry with you”). Yet, this particular transcription points to specific linguistic features—those of flirty/childish/spoiled/lower class women—which are immediately recognized as communicating a social meaning. Such meanings are often linked to certain speech groups or strata of society [Affluence vs Destitution], or a specific person or character [Celebrities].

Related Entries
Arrays: Celebrities; Commemorations; Father figures; Mobile Phones; Psychiatrist; Satire; Self-help; Social Media ♦ Codes: Affluence vs Destitution

References
Print

Memes

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Notes

Introduction: From “Issues” to “Arrays” (S. Guth & A. Hofheinz)


4 Much of the material was collected in a shared researcher’s notebook, using *Evernote* (https://evernote.com).

5 The “special dossier” *Living 2016: Cultural Codes and Arrays in Arab Everyday Worlds Five Years After the “Arab Spring,“* edited by Stephan Guth and Elena Chiti, appeared as pages 221-388 of *JAIS*, 16 (2016), and is accessible both at *JAIS’s* previous website (http://www.jais.uio.no/jais/volume/vol16/v16_09_living2016.pdf) and at the new pool of open-access journals hosted by the University of Oslo, see <https://www.journals.uio.no/index.php/JAIS/article/view/4761>.

6 The list, processed from the data collected in our researcher’s notebook as well as from the studies contained in the *Living 2016* dossier (see previous note), is given on pp. 229-33 of Stephan Guth, “Introduction: Living 2016 and the In 2016 project,” *JAIS* 16 (2016): 224-33.

7 Gumbrecht 1997: 434.

8 Ibid. (our emphasis, S.G./A.H.).

9 Ibid. (d.to.).

10 Ibid. (d.to.).

11 Ibid. (d.to.).

ʿĀmmiyya (E. M. Håland)
1 My translation – E.M.H.

Clash (E. Chiti)


2 Fieldwork notes, January-February 2016.


Fieldwork notes, Round Table Al-thaqafa fil-muwajahah, Cairo Book-Fair, Main Hall, January 29, 2016.


6 “I was terribly wrong”—writers look back at the Arab spring five years on,” The Guardian, January 23, 2016: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/23/arab-spring-five-years-on-writers-look-back>.


9 <https://twitter.com/moezmasoud/status/730910281442971649>.

10 TV show Anā Masrī, ḥalqat “Film Muḥammad Diyyāb Ishthibāk, bi-nakha siyāsyya wa-thawriyya,” May 15, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvWQxmnP5WQ>, see also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkutupDCBAs>.


Conversions (M. Lindbekk)


4 Ibid.


8 Ibid.

Notes

Dual Identities / Masking (S. Guth)

1 English *mask* is from Middle French *masque* ‘covering to hide or guard the face’ (16c.), from Italian *maschera*, from Medieval Latin *masca* ‘mask, specter, nightmare,’ which is perhaps from Arabic *maskharah* ‘buffoon, mockery,’ from *sakhira* ‘be mocked, ridiculed’ – <etymonline.com> (as of 09Dec2017).


3 Khadijah is a traditional Islamic name in reverence for the Prophet’s first wife.

Satire (on YouTube Channels) (M. Mohamed)

1 *yiddish*, on the other hand, is the common term among Egyptian youth for all kinds of verbal practices that stimulate laughter, like puns, parody, and irony.