

NILOOFAR HAERI, Sacred Language, Ordinary People. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. xvi + 184.

The book undergoing review, a valuable addition to the library of any linguist interested in Middle Eastern languages, asks what it means to “modernize a sacred language” (p. x). It may be characterized as a linguistic ethnography of Arabic. Examining the roles of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA) and Classical Arabic (CA) in Egypt, the most populous Arab state, the author rejects the well-established term Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) mainly because there is no equivalent term in Arabic. This goes too far! Basically, MSA and CA have more or less the same grammar; however, the case and mood endings may disappear in the oral rendition of the former but not in the latter (except in what are traditionally known as “pausal” forms). Of course, words such as ʔawlama ‘globalization’ and fiidiraalii ‘federal’ belong to MSA and not to CA since these concepts are of recent vintage. Haeri, Professor of Anthropology at John Hopkins and a trained Arabic linguist, illustrates the differences between CA (or MSA) and ECA with sentences and other data (pp. 4-8), such as CA ʔakala lwaladu ttaʔaam ‘the boy ate the food’ = ECA ilwalad kal ilʔakl (p. 4). Here one sees that CA is predominantly VSO, whereas ECA is SVO. Although different lexemes often mark the two languages (or varieties of the same language), CA can also use the word ʔakl ‘food’ -- the same word as in ECA (Cowan 1994:27). Thus, the portrayal on p. 4 that CA cannot use this lexeme to mean ‘food’ is erroneous. ECA also uses ʔakal for kal (Hinds and Badawi 1986:29), so the two aforementioned examples are really closer than are actually depicted. A better example showing how divergent these two languages are would be ‘this is very good’ = ECA da kuwayyis ʔawi = CA haaḏaa ḥasanun jiddan = MSA haaḏaa ḥasan(un) jiddan. Only the beginning words have a cognate element (‘this’ = da = ḏaa).

One of the most interesting areas discussed in Chapter 1, the introduction (pp. 1-24), touches on the firm belief held by many Egyptians that there is a difference between Modern CA (fushaa lʿasr) and “heritage CA” (fushaa tturaaθ) (p. 19). The former has a modern vocabulary, including many loanwords from European languages, such as film ‘film’, bank ‘bank’, and tilifuun ‘telephone’ (my examples:ASK). On the other hand, there is the view of other Egyptians that there is only one CA “because the language has changed so little” (*ibid.*). In my view, there can be little doubt that MSA exists and deserves a demarcation and separate designation from CA. As the author demonstrates in Chapter 4, “the syntax of some [modern MSA] sentences used elements that are either more common to Egyptian Arabic, or would be considered ‘bad’ Classical Arabic” (p. 89).

Chapter 2, “Humble custodians of the divine word: Classical Arabic in daily life”(pp. 25-51), examines the author’s ethnographic and ethnolinguistic fieldwork in Cairo. She spent numerous hours observing the extent to which CA permeated the lives of an informant named Nadia (and her family of four children). First, there is the matter of the Koran and daily prayers, both of which are in CA. Haeri transcribes the opening suurah of the Koran and gives an English translation. It is true that Egyptians, like Muslims everywhere, will most likely have memorized Al-Faatihah (the opening), but not in the form as transcribed. The transcription is most odd in that the last word is transcribed in a Persian phonological fashion (with a voiced sibilant). Since Haeri is a native speaker of Persian, she must have been thinking of her own Persian pronunciation here because the correct Egyptian pronunciation would be with a voiced emphatic denti-alveolar stop [d]. There are also other major phonetic errors: alhamdu lillaah ‘praise be to Allah’ should have a voiceless pharyngeal fricative [ħ] for the first [h], and there should be a genitival ending after the second word – [lillaahi]. The same holds true for the genitival ending for the second word at the

very beginning, and there are two pharyngeals missing on line three. However, there is a serious error in line four: it should read maaliki yawmi ddiin, and NOT maalik al-yowm al-diin 'owner of the Day of Judgment' (my translation for her 'the Master of the Day of Doom').

Chapter 3, "Text regulation and sites of ideology" (pp. 53-72), examines the role of the mus ahhih = text corrector (or regulator) working for the Arabic mass media or publishing houses. The author affirms that, in order to work in this profession, one has to major in CA in college (p. 60). Since Egypt is a predominantly Muslim nation, I was not surprised to learn that there are very few Copts and women who have positions as correctors (p. 60). One corrector told the author that he knew of no women who were in this line of work (*ibid.*).

One of the author's major conclusions in this chapter with which I am in agreement is as follows: "Both the very authority of Classical Arabic and lack of good public education hamper mass literacy in the official language. For most Egyptians, gaining enough proficiency in the language in order to acquire the authority to use it is an enormous investment" (p. 72).

Chapter 4, "Creating contemporaneity" (pp. 73-111), discusses the use of CA in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when in 1876 Al-Ahram, Egypt's leading newspaper (still operative today), began publishing. For the first time, the written language was confronting modern events. Scholars who have examined the language during this period of rapid innovation and change, such as Jaroslav Stetkevych and Nabil Abdelfattah, have seen MSA develop following in the footsteps of European languages, i.e., Arabic was Europeanized (p. 82). There is much evidence to support this accurate point of view.

Touching on the question of publishing in ECA, this is a rare phenomenon. Usually, when someone utters something in ECA, it is translated into MSA for purposes of written quotation. The author discusses an interview with Adel Imam, one of Egypt's most famous actors and comedians.

The questions were posed to him in MSA; outside of five phrases in MSA, the entire two-page published interview was in ECA (pp. 103-04). Haeri asserts that since the Egyptian masses know him as a comedian speaking only ECA, “it would probably be too much to represent the comedian as speaking anything other than his mother tongue, not only because that is how everyone knows him from movies and the media but also because it seems to be judged as appropriate for a comedian not to speak in Classical Arabic” (p. 104).

Chapter 5, “Persistent dilemmas” (pp. 113-141), examines the views of Egyptian writers, journalists, poets, and publishers interviewed by Haeri about MSA, CA, and ECA during 1995-96 in Cairo. Typical of the opinions expressed are those of Iman Mirsal, a poet and literary critic whose book of poetry (1995) received much attention in the press. She recounts her experiences that the worlds represented by CA and MSA, on the one hand, and ECA on the other, are completely different. She explains, talking about declaring one’s love for a man to whom one is not married, that “what seemed forbidden and shameful in [ECA] at least became a possibility in [MSA] – the possibility of a different world – a modern world not accessible in [ECA]” (p. 116). This is why Arab feminists have chosen to write in MSA, not to mention English and French.

Chapter 6, “Conclusion” (pp. 143-57), winds up admitting the existence of Contemporary CA (= MSA: ASK), about which she states that it may have a divine origin and, in addition to being pan-Arab, may also be pan-Muslim (p. 156). She further asserts: “Every aspect of this language variety sits on the proverbial fence: its origin, and hence its past and present, its relation to users, whether it can or cannot be tampered with, and whether it is a ‘new’ creation that is independent of Qur’anic Arabic” (pp. 155, 157). In my view, spoken MSA is a vibrant (though artificial) spoken language which one can often hear and appreciate on Al-Jazeera and Al-‘Aalam satellite television stations, e.g., as educated Arabs from all over the Arab world discuss political,

academic, economic, military, and intellectual events, for the most part. It is definitely independent of Qur'anic Arabic.

Let me conclude with three comments about the style of the tome. First, a number of items could have been deleted, since the reader would not need to be told that, e.g., "Hebrew went through a revitalization and is now spoken as a mother tongue" (p. 159, note 1). Second, there are dozens of errors in the Arabic transcriptions, some of which I have already dealt with. A few of these are: lahgat should have a regular [h], and ma'uul should be [ma'ʊul] (p. 38); mu'giza should be [mu'giza] and sa'b should be [sa'b] (p. 43); khatt should be [khatt] on p. 61; sa tadhhabu is correct for [sa tidhhab], and tadhhabu for [tidhhab] (p. 87); [almufaawadaat] is correct for al-mufawidaat (p. 103); and [mushaff] should have only one [f] (p. 165, note 11). In addition to the transcription for 'orange, the fruit' as [borti'aan] and [borti'aal] (p. 164, note 10), Hinds and Badawi (1986:61) disagree reporting only [burtu'aan].

Finally, a bibliographical correction and a note on an error in English. The book by the Egyptian professor at the American University in Cairo, El-Said Badawi (in Arabic), has fii misr (in Egypt) in the Arabic title (p. 172). Re English, I note: "... one has to search with a fine comb tooth" for "a fine-tooth comb" (p. 103).

#### REFERENCES

- Cowan, J Milton, Ed. 1994. The Hans Wehr dictionary of modern written Arabic. Ithaca: Spoken Language Services.
- Hinds, Martin and El-Said Badawi. 1986. A dictionary of Egyptian Arabic. Beirut: Librairie du Liban.

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