TAM in TMA (Traditional Muṯallaṯ Arabic): Documenting the Language of the Elderly after COVID-19

Muṯallaṯ Arabic (MA) is a rural Muslim Palestinian variety spoken in a cluster of twenty Israeli cities and villages between Umm il-Faḥm and Kufr Qāsim from north to south. Jastrow identified MA as an autonomous Palestinian variety (2004). With 250,000 speakers (Staff, 2020), MA is not considered endangered. Yet, the variety spoken by the elders over age seventy (Traditional Muṯallaṯ Arabic, TMA) is so different from that of speakers under age forty (Neo-Muṯallaṯ Arabic, NMA) as to often prevent mutual understanding, largely due to the effect of the socioeconomic and cultural changes that occurred over the past seventy years when MA speakers progressively integrated into the Israeli school system, receiving formal education in Hebrew and Standard Arabic. Neo-Palestinian dialects have also undergone a process of koinezation, becoming progressively similar to educated, written registers of Arabic. Considering COVID-19's negative impact on the elderly, TMA may be considered a minority variety threatened with extinction and in urgent need of intensive documentation. Unfortunately, the urge to protect the elders from contagion has made them less accessible to outside scholars, so the preservation of the dialect has become a community project, entrusted to young MA speakers suitably trained at the university. The Time-Aspect-Mood (TAM) system has never been described for TMA, while it is documented for other Arabic varieties (Cuvalay-Haak, 1997; Mitchell & El-Hassan, 1994). TAM systems (Bybee & Östen, 1989) are a core topic in Arabic dialectology. Like other Semitic languages, Arabic varieties show prefix conjugation(s), suffix conjugation, and participles (conjugated in active/passive diathesis for all forms; Goldenberg, 2013). Their temporal, aspectual, and modal uses vary across dialects. Suffix conjugation is usually associated with the past tense, accomplished aspect, and irrealis or counterfactual moods (Cuvalay-Haak, 1997). Nonetheless, preliminary observations show that TMA suffix conjugation (*faʕal*) expresses, in addition to irrealis and counterfactual moods, punctual (non-durative) actions in the recent or immediate past (independently of accomplishment or resultative implications), while durative/habitual past actions and punctual actions in the remote past are expressed by the prefix conjugation (*yifʕal*), which seems thus to preserve the original meaning of the proto-Semitic form *yaqtul*. The prefix conjugation with *b-* (*byifʕal*) expresses both punctual and durative present, unlike Syrian and Gulf varieties, where it has future meaning (Jarad, 2013; Persson, 2008). Present progressive and future actions are described by the periphrastic combination of *rāḥ+ yifʕal* conjugation. The wide semantic extension of the basic prefix conjugation unites TMA with Levantine Bedouin varieties, as does the use of the present active participle, which in TMA can express continuous, resultative, and evidential values, as in Negev Bedouin (Henkin, 1992). The tendencies observed should be confirmed by wider data collection, including different communicative situations: not only oral narrative prose, as collected so far, but also other folk literary genres, spontaneous interactions between elders and across generations, and direct and reported speech.

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