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Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/ema/1947>
DOI : 10.4000/ema.1947
ISSN : 2090-7273

Éditeur

CEDEJ - Centre d'études et de documentation économiques juridiques et sociales

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 31 décembre 1996
Pagination : 301-315
ISSN : 1110-5097

Référence électronique

Niloofar Haeri, « Conceptualizing Heterogeneity in Arabic », *Égypte/Monde arabe* [En ligne], 27-28 | 1996, mis en ligne le 08 juillet 2008, consulté le 07 juillet 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ema/1947> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ema.1947>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 7 juillet 2022.

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Conceptualizing Heterogeneity in Arabic

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NOTE DE L'AUTEUR

I would like to thank Madiha Doss and Catherine Miller for their comments and their collegiality. I also thank the National Science Foundation, the Werner-Gren Foundation and the Institute for Intercultural Studies.

“I am and shall remain, unalterably opposed to those who regard the colloquial as a suitable instrument for mutual understanding and a method for realizing the various goals of our intellectual life because I simply cannot tolerate any squandering of the heritage, however slight, that classical Arabic has preserved for us. The colloquial lacks the qualities to make it worthy of the name of a language, **I look upon it as a dialect that has become corrupted in many respects**” (Taha Hussein, 1954, p. 86 [1944], emphasis added)

“The colloquial is one of the diseases from which the people are suffering and of which they are bound to rid themselves as they progress ; I consider the colloquial one of the failings of our society, exactly like ignorance, poverty and disease” (Duwwarah, 1965, p. 286, also quoted in Cachia, 1967, p. 20)

- ¹ Thus wrote two of the most important figures of the Egyptian intellectual and literary circles of this century. These surprisingly harsh sentiments were not directed towards

a formerly imposed colonial language, nor were they uttered by figures who could fairly be characterized as “religious conservatives”. Still, they both deemed the mother tongue of the majority of Egyptians as unworthy, impoverished and diseased. That they sought and initiated changes in just how “classical” Classical Arabic should be, does not diminish the significance and impact of their characterizations of “colloquial” Arabic.

- 2 Although such sentiments are certainly rare in the linguistic literature on Arabic, I will argue that underlying various analyses of heterogeneity in Arabic-speaking speech communities, we can find the influence of these long-standing views. Linguists, like others, are influenced by the intellectual heritage of the language and culture they study. It is in the practice of their analyses and not their explicit statements nor their intentions, that such influences can be seen. Put simply, the idea that non-classical languages are merely responsive to the mundane needs of everyday life, whereas Classical Arabic (and its varieties) fulfills the demands of Culture, has been passed on to generations of thinkers in a variety of fields.
- 3 A full treatment of the claim being made here would require the inclusion of works by linguists, literary figures, religious scholars and so many of the other intellectuals in the Arab world who have discussed the language situation (see Osman Sabri, 1967)¹. In this brief study, I take three different conceptualizations of heterogeneity proposed for Arabic speaking speech communities and analyze their shortcomings: diglossia, applications of the variationist paradigm and frameworks that argue for an analysis of several “levels” and the concomitant emergence of a linguistic entity called “Educated Spoken Arabic”.

Diglossia

- 4 The first uses of this term appeared in the 1980's with regard to Greece (Mackey, 1993) to characterize the co-existence of the linguistic varieties Katharevousa “puristic” and Dhimotiki “common”, “colloquial”. Marçais (1930) was the first to apply the concept to Arabic. According to Marçais, written Arabic is used in literary and scientific writings, in the press, judicial system, private letters and all that is written. Spoken Arabic, according to Marçais, is the only language of conversation in all domains, whether “popular” or “cultivated” (Marçais, 1930, p. 401). Ferguson (1959) modeled the term on the French “diglossie”.
- 5 It was with Ferguson's 1959 article that the notion caught the attention of a vast number of linguists. His famous definition of diglossia will be repeated here once again:

a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation (Ferguson, 1959, p. 336).
- 6 Ferguson provided a “sample listing of possible situations” that show “specialization of function” arguing that this is one of diglossia's most important features. For ease of reference, the list will be presented below:

	High	Low
Sermon in church or mosque	x	
Instruction to servant, waiters, workmen, clerks		x
Speech in parliament, political speech	x	
University lecture	x	
Conversation with family, friends, colleagues		x
News broadcast	x	
Radio "soap opera"		x
Newspaper editorial, News story, caption on picture	x	
Caption on political cartoon		x
Poetry	x	
Folk literature		x

(Ferguson, 1959, p.329)

- 7 Although at the time of its publication, this analysis was certainly an advance in several respects, it had a number of flaws, many of which have since been pointed out. Other shortcomings that have not received as much attention are as follows. First, this analysis implied an unchanging and timeless specialization of function. If, at the time, there was little overlap between the two varieties, by now this is no longer the case. There are sermons and poetry also in colloquial Arabic, for example. The notion of diglossia also contributes to the idea of Arabic speakers engaging routinely in code-switching between *'ammiyya* and *fusha* in order to fulfill the demands of "functional differentiation". Indeed, a number of textbooks for American universities make much of social cost situations in which speakers may make a mistake, so to speak and use the wrong variety for the occasion.
- 8 Fishman (1967, 1972) extended the application of diglossia to any sociolinguistic setting in which two or more languages, dialects, registers, or any "functionally differentiated language varieties of whatever kind" (1972, p. 92) are employed. He states that diglossia is the "social normification" (1967, p. 37) of bilingualism. Thus, diglossia came to signify in its essence functional differentiation of language use regardless of the conditions under which the superposed variety is acquired. Such an extension of the term accounts in part for the flood of publications on the topic between 1960 to the present, numbering more than 2 900 according to the latest bibliography on the subject (Fernandez, 1993). This annotated bibliography contains works in several languages on some 175 language situations around the world. An earlier bibliography concentrating more on works in English has 1 092 references (Hudson, 1992).

- 9 More importantly, Ferguson's account of heterogeneity in Arabic whereby function dictates the choice of linguistic variety misses one of the most interesting aspects of the sociolinguistic situation in Arabic-speaking speech communities. Namely, that in *oral* interactions, a majority of functions are served by "colloquial" Arabic. However, the same functions have to be served by Classical Arabic if writing is the medium of communication. Note, for example, the many books on cooking. If interaction is oral, instructions on how to cook particular dishes will most certainly be in "colloquial" Arabic. Cookbooks, however, are written in some version of the "High" language. Hence, the role of "function" is often subordinate to the norms governing written and oral communication. We will come back to this point.
- 10 Some scholars have attempted to apply the notion of functional differentiation to their linguistic data and found its dichotomous nature inadequate. Hence, the concept of a "continuum" (Rickford, 1987) was borrowed from Creole studies and applied to Arabic to allow for usages that "fall in between" Classical Arabic and non-classical Arabic. However, as Caton (1991) has argued, the merit of the concept of diglossia resides in its focusing on societal norms and the ways in which the superposed variety is acquired. Ferguson's analysis highlighted the "metapragmatic" norms of Arabic speech communities, but did not contribute greatly to an understanding of the actual linguistic practices of speakers.

Sociolinguistic studies

- 11 A large number of sociolinguistic studies of Arabic have been carried out within the variationist paradigm. We have, for example: Schmidt, 1974, and Schullz, 1981, on Cairene Arabic; Shorrab, 1981, on Palestinian Arabic; Abdel-Jawad, 1981, Owen and Bani-Yasin, 1987, on dialects of Jordanian Arabic; Bakir, 1986, on Basra, Iraq; Al-Jehani, 1985, on the city of Mecca; Al-Muhannadi, 1991, on Qatari Arabic in Doha City, And there are others. This paradigm (also known as empirical sociolinguistics) is most closely associated with the works of William Labov (1966, 1972) in the United States and Peter Trudgill (1974, 1983) in Britain.
- 12 The central question within the variationist paradigm is how and why languages change. Whereas Saussure had called for a separation of synchrony and diachrony and American structuralists had argued that language change cannot be observed while it is in progress, sociolinguistics established that change can indeed be observed. That is, variation in form - or "different ways of saying the same thing" - is potentially a stage on the road to an eventual change. While not all variation leads to permanent change, all change is preceded by a period of forms co-existing. One of the ways in which this variation is characterized is the categorization of the competing forms into older and newer forms, standard and non-standard forms. Usually, older forms are recognized by the speech community as standard forms. The use of the variants of such forms is then correlated with such sociological categories as social class, level of education, ethnic group and so on in order to locate the innovators of changes and the groups which resist change.
- 13 There are clear tensions in applying theories and methods with divergent ideologies and developed for speech communities like New York, to those such as Cairo (Haeri, 1996). The study of the vernacular occupies a privileged position in sociolinguistics. Labov has repeatedly spoken of the vernacular as "the most systematic data for

analysis" (Labov, 1984, .p. 29), defining it not as "illiterate or lower class speech", but as that most spontaneous style of each social group "relative to their careful and literary forms of speech" (Labov, 1971, p. 112). Arab linguists, on the other hand, following a tradition which takes historically privileged Classical Arabic as its legitimate focus, expresses ambivalence or strong disapproval towards the study of non-classical varieties².

- 14 Schmidt, Schultz, Shorrab, Abdel-Jawad and Bakir, for example, have all looked at variation between the *qaf* and the *hamza* or the glottal stop (*qalb*, '*alb*). Or that between [g] and [j], and [k] and [c], in Ammani Arabic. They have all attempted to discover correlations, but Schmidt is the most aware of the problems of this analysis -that for example the *qaf* is the older, "standard" form and the *hamza* is the newer and "non-standard" form. In this way stylistic variation has been defined in terms of standard and non-standard pairs, where the standard is always the form that belongs to Classical Arabic³.
- 15 The implication is that so long as people speak in "colloquial" Arabic their speech is "non-standard". Let us for the moment make only two observations: that the dynamics of a speech community such as Cairo, for example, cannot be captured by two-way divisions of standard and non-standard or the simple equation of Classical with standard and colloquial with non-standard; secondly and more generally, stylistic variation in Arabic-speaking speech communities is not limited to a choice of forms that co-vary between the Classical and the "colloquial". That is only one kind of variation. There are also many examples of variation that are outside this dichotomy; the palatalization (*mamci*), voice assimilation (*usbuu* ? vs *uzbuu* ?) and final gemination (*kunt* vs *kutt*) (Haeri, 1989, 1996)⁴ are some examples. If we take these pairs into account, there is a standard/non-standard division between them too. The question is why the above-mentioned studies do not concern themselves with variation that does not fall within the classical/colloquial dichotomy (Ibrahim, 1986; Haeri, 1987). I would argue that in part the answer lies in the original claim of this article, namely that if non-classical Arabic is not a full fledged language, then it cannot be a resource for style shifting independent of Classical Arabic.
- 16 Before moving on to the last framework addressed in this study, it should be stressed that both these bodies of research have made important contributions and advances over what came before. In fact it is with the benefit of these studies that the present critiques can be made and potential avenues for further research can be identified. In addition to the sociolinguistic studies cited above, Mitchell's studies of the grammar of Egyptian Arabic (1956,1990) and, in collaboration with El-Hassan, the recent study of modality, mood and aspect in spoken Arabic (1994) are invaluable contributions to the field.
- 17 In an attempt to meet linguistic realities that are non-dichotomous, Mitchell, El-Hassan and others speak of a linguistic entity called "Educated Spoken Arabic". Mitchell defines it as a "mixture of written and vernacular" (1990, p. 254-256), while El-Hassan, contradicting that claim, states that the forms of ESA are neither classical nor colloquial. (1977, p. 113). Others, such as Meiseles, propose the existence of "quadriglossia" (1980, p. 118) where it seems that if for the same form there are four different ways of saying it, then we have four different "glosses" languages or levels. Others have spoken of triglossia, etc.

- 18 At the same time, the social basis of ESA -who speaks it, under what circumstances and so on is said not to matter. More than three decades of research within the variationist paradigm has found that stylistic variation correlates with social structure. Yet, for Arabic, the situation is claimed to be radically different. Writing on “dimensions of style in a grammar of educated spoken Arabic”, Mitchell (1986) states:

No attempt will or need be made here to characterize variation in form or structure in terms of regional dialect, generation, religion, education, sex and similar variables, much less those of a socio-economically determined class structure - ESA [Educated Spoken Arabic] is better defined ostensibly by reference to *the practice of the overwhelming majority of the professional classes* whose representatives have provided the extensive corpus of data on which the Leeds project is based (Ibid:90, emphasis added).

- 19 The question is how can “practice” emerge in a seeming social vacuum where all the factors that influence and interact with aspects of the social behavior of people are rendered as irrelevant to their linguistic behavior? Furthermore, the extremeness of the claim is not helped by the circularity of the argument: “ESA” is the “practice” of the “professional classes” and who they are needs no definition since if they speak ESA then they are the professional classes. However the “professional classes” have heterogeneous backgrounds in type of education, ideology, sex, social class, religion and other factors. Those who have attended private language school and later receive their graduate degrees in specializations in which a foreign language served as the medium; and those who went to public schools and acquired higher degrees in areas where Classical Arabic served as the medium, are both “educated”. And both can become members of the professional classes. Were we to construct a category such as the “speech of the professional classes”, we would have to include not only Egyptian Arabic and Classical Arabic (and all their varieties), but also English, French, Italian, German and still other languages.
- 20 There is no doubt that educated speakers exhibit linguistic habits and practices that are at times different from those who are not educated. But their educational, class and occupational backgrounds, for example, are not so homogeneous as to form one clear-cut, distinct and stable linguistic variety. It may be that for Mitchell those in the “professional classes” include only speakers who have attended public school and have been educated to be literate in Classical Arabic. But this would not only be inaccurate and ahistorical, it would also lead to neglecting the kinds of dynamics within and between social groups that have a direct bearing on the sociolinguistic practices of the diverse members of the speech community. Indeed it would be hard to explain how any variability of interest could exist in this variety since all social factors that have been identified as underlying variation have been rendered as irrelevant (see also Abdel-Jawad, 1981).
- 21 That said, it is still true that the upper classes in Egypt, for example, attend private language schools whose languages of instruction are not Arabic. Hence, their level of education may be high. but their knowledge of Classical Arabic is often wanting (Haeri, 1966 and forthcoming). It is therefore not the case that the higher one's level of education, or one's social class, the higher one's knowledge of official language. Kind of school, occupation, source of wealth and so on mediate our linear expectations. However none of this makes class or education irrelevant. On the contrary, the fact that there are two main educational systems, public and private, with different media of

education and with clients from distinct social classes, in part accounts for the kind of heterogeneity that has been little studied.

- 22 The characterization of ESA as the language of the “professional classes” also assumes an unproblematic relation between knowledge and use: if one has the right degree of knowledge of the language(s), then one will speak ESA. But in this relation, another factor that plays a role is ideology. Speakers may have knowledge of a variety, but may not use it, or may not use it to the same degree. Studies of gender differences have shown that women who have equal levels of education to men, use features of Classical Arabic significantly less than men (Abdel-Jawad, 1981; Bakir, 1986; Haeri, 1991, among others).
- 23 Moreover, within this framework, the reasons for treating the speech of educated speakers as a distinct linguistic entity are not articulated. El-Hassan states that on “formal” grounds and “analytically”, ESA can be distinguished from both varieties (1977). Is there an implication then that some “new” entity is being formed? If so, through what kinds of processes? “Mixing” does take place, but it is not the fact of mixing that is unique to Arabic, but the fact that the language that dominates the written word, is used in a very restricted variety of oral registers; and the variety that appears in few written domains operates in all kinds of oral registers.
- 24 What is at issue is that to analyze the variety of the linguistic resources of speech communities in terms of arbitrary levels such that either we end up with colloquial, ESA and Classical, or with anywhere from three to seven (or more) levels (Badawi, 1973; Blanc, 1960), produces a rather mystifying situation. The proposal of Meiseles for a “quadriglottic approach to the hierarchization of language varieties in contemporary Arabic” (Meiseles, 1980, p. 118) demonstrates the problem rather acutely. Attempts to simply label levels as “Low”, “a level below L[ow]”, “plain colloquial”, “colloquial of the illiterate”, “Educated Colloquial”, “Educated Spoken Arabic” and so on, fail to provide a theoretically and empirically coherent picture of the sociolinguistic setting.
- 25 Badawi's (1973) levels are certainly an advance over dichotomous views and attempt to capture the dynamics of linguistic heterogeneity. It is quite likely that some of these levels are also meaningful to the speakers themselves. However, more research is required to explore which of these or other levels is meaningful within the speaker's own categorizations and hierarchization of linguistic varieties. Styles or levels are necessarily both linguistic and social phenomena so that they cannot be formulated only from the point of view of the linguist. That is, objective linguistic features are not enough for their definition (see also Parkinson, 1991). In my fieldwork, I have found that different speakers exposed to the same speech, say on the radio, may judge it as showing “correct” and “good” Arabic, while others may comment that it is full of “mistakes”. The extreme variation in the degree of knowledge of Classical Arabic on the part of the speakers, the kinds and frequencies of linguistic varieties that they get exposed to throughout their lives, etc., all contribute to non-uniform perceptions regarding the same “piece of language”.
- 26 The idea of sociolinguistic variation as essentially the product of competing norms between Classical and non-classical Arabic as the first studies cited earlier imply, and the proposal of one, two, seven, or more levels may be evaluated by a re-examination of assumptions underlying one of the most basic terms in Arabic linguistics: the “colloquial”. The term implies the existence of a monolithic linguistic variety. However much it may vary in form and feature, and regardless of all the registers in which it is

employed, it nevertheless remains “colloquial”. Thus the language of those playwrights and poets who write in Egyptian Arabic is “colloquial”; and the language of those who cannot read and write is also “colloquia”. It further implies that although Egyptian society has changed and transformed, its language has remained incapable of nuances, elevations and rhetorical devices unless the speaker moves in part at least, out of the “colloquial”. It is not enough to say that “colloquial” is merely a term, not denoting any particular ideology or implicit assumptions. Note how infrequently the term is used in relation to languages like French or English. What one chooses to study, to make one's object of inquiry, is not determined on purely “scientific” or objective grounds. Thus sociolinguistic studies of Arabic have in practice defined for all social groups identical means of style shifting that are provided by “Standard Arabic” - that is, Classical Arabic.

- 27 It may well be that originally the term “colloquial” was simply meant to denote “spoken Arabic”, or just non-classical Arabic. But various characterizations of “colloquial” Arabic in the last few decades imply more than that, as I have tried to demonstrate. This can also be seen in dictionary entries. For example Al-Mawrid's 1995 Arabic-English dictionary offers as the first meaning of “il ammiyya” in English, the word “slang” and as second and third choice, respectively “vernacular” and “colloquial” (Al-Mawrid, 1995, p. 746). On the other hand, Badawi and Hinds' *Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic*, with a different ideological stance towards this language (see the Introduction), offers the translation “the vernacular language” (Badawi and Hinds, 1986, p. 603).
- 28 To point out implicit assumptions or ideologies underlying analyses and the use of particular terms is not to dichotomize scholars into two camps - those who are “guilty” and those who are “innocent”. Every kind of analysis, including the present one, has its own explicit or implicit ideology. Linguistics in general, and Arabic linguistics in particular in my opinion, has suffered marginalization for not facing what other fields have long attempted to confront. Namely that the social sciences are not merely scientific attempts in search of the “truth”. My main goal in this argument is to stimulate others to undertake studies which will take non-classical varieties of Arabic seriously. To my knowledge, there has yet to appear a comprehensive grammar of a non-classical variety, let alone studies of the phonological, syntactic and lexical resources of non-classical Arabic for the purposes of style shifting.
- 29 We must be more explicit about exactly what is “colloquial” about non-classical Arabic. It would be difficult to argue that Classical Arabic (which saw a decline for at least five centuries) has *alone* served the needs of Arabic-speakers, Or to assume that throughout history whenever speakers needed to discuss topics other than the mundane matters of their daily life, they stepped out of the colloquial.
- 30 As social, cultural, occupational and economic change occurs, the “colloquial” also changes in response to the new demands put upon it. After all, this is one of the main ways in which languages change and develop. And if we agree that the non-classical varieties of Arabic are not monolithic, then why persist in calling them “colloquial” ?
- 31 Moreover, since elements from Classical Arabic can and do in time become integrated into non-classical varieties they should, as Holes (1987, p. 7) has argued, be “incorporated into dialectological description, since from the speaker's point of view it is every bit as much part of his speech behavior as the “dialect”.” Thus for every feature of Classical Arabic that is borrowed, we must examine its history and the degree of its integration. In this way many classical features that from the point of view of

linguistics can continue to be considered as “classical”, become part of a resource for speakers of Egyptian Arabic. A very good example of this integration is illustrated by the use of the verb *a'taqid*, “I believe”, and its negation *ma-a'taqidsh* - where the negation morphemes of Egyptian Arabic are used for a verb borrowed from Classical Arabic. The fact that forms and structures from classical (Arabic) and other languages maybe employed in conversations, does not serve to metamorphose Egyptian Arabic into another entity, but serves to *widen its scope of heterogeneity*.

- 32 Levels, like styles, in these analyses are most often based on the degree to which classical features are used in non-classical Arabic since the latter supposedly lacks its own resources. Or the idea is based on forms that according to some objective linguistic criteria and from the point of view of history, are said to be “in between”. But if such forms come to be widely used, then they will constitute a “style” (a level ?) of what we are used to thinking as “colloquial” Arabic. For so long as this conceptualization persists, linguists will identify and throw outside of this language whatever form does not fit their idea of “colloquial” Arabic - either due to its semantic domain and/or phonological form. The “new” or “in between” forms are then said to belong to some other linguistic entity.
- 33 In short, I argue that Egyptian Arabic is a language that has “colloquial” styles and uses, but is not in its entirety a “colloquial” language. Its stylistic resources depend on its contact with Classical Arabic, on its own sociolinguistic dynamics and on its contact with other languages. It is a language like other languages, in which sociolinguistic variation cannot be understood outside of the social differentiation that is its context of use. If it were to be accepted that non-classical varieties of Arabic are full fledged languages, then our analyses of styles and levels would become less mystifying.
- 34 I would like to conclude with a few thoughts on some of the issues that need to be investigated in order to better understand the nature of heterogeneity in Arabic-speaking speech communities. First we must admit that we know far too little about the many dynamics - social and linguistic- of style shifting, in particular where it does not involve borrowing the resources of Classical Arabic or any other language for that matter. Secondly, the boundaries between “colloquial” and Classical Arabic cannot be analyzed purely on the basis of objective criteria. The categorizations of speakers need to be taken into account (see Parkinson, 1991). Finally, there is a complex situation, as was mentioned earlier, in which non-Classical Arabic does not generally appear in written form except in limited domains such as plays, poetry and cartoons. Yet at the same time, it is used orally in a far wider variety of registers than Classical Arabic. On the other hand, Classical Arabic dominates written domains but, for many reasons, its oral use in terms of the variety of registers is far more limited. How do these two “struggles” for domains with different histories and institutional power bases affect the oral and written resources of speakers ?

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NOTES

1. *Rihla fi-l-Nil*, Maktabat El-Anglo El-Masriyya, Alexandria, 1967. See the introduction entitled *Il lugha il 'arabiyya il hadisa ow il lugha il masriyya (il 'ammiyya)*. The Introduction was reprinted in the March 1994 issue of the journal *Il garaad*. Sabri has also written another book entitled *Nahw abgadiyya gidiida*, 1964, probably published by the same publisher, though this is not stated on the cover. Throughout his essay on language, Sabri shows breadth of knowledge, depth of thinking, and a great deal of humor. For example, criticizing the view of someone who had claimed to be proud of the fact that even today "we" can read "*kalaam il awwaliin*" and understand it, Sabri retorts that if an enemy of the Arabic language had tried to insult and belittle it, he could not have done a better job. "Can a writer in the 20th century be proud of the fact that his people's language (*lughatu il qoomiyya*) - in which supposedly there is life and growth - has not moved from its place for 14 centuries" ? (p. 31)

2. Authors who have pointed out this ambivalence in various ways are (among others) : Altoma, 1969 ; Beeston, 1970 ; Ibrahim, 1983.

3. For an extended analysis of the *qaf/hamza* variation that offers changes to the variation paradigm as applied to Arabic speech communities, see Ch. 4 of Haeri, 1996.

4. An example of syntactic pairs would be : *awwil ma* versus *tawwi ma* as in *awwii ma daxalt* vs. *tawwimadaxalt*.

INDEX

Mots-clés : arabe (langue), linguistique, sociolinguistique

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