At the southern springs of Arabic:

This contribution aims at focusing the Jibbali lexical influence on the formation of Arabic vocabulary on a socio-phonetic base.

Jibbali is a very interesting endangered language, today spoken in the southernmost part of the Arabian Peninsula by a few hundreds camel breeders and incense collectors.

The Jibbali phonetics shows both its conservation of the Proto-Semitic sound system and the local origin of the language. Arabic became the most spoken language of that area after the Islam diffusion and shows until nowadays different results of the same Proto-Semitic phonemes.

From dictionaries and other textual sources\(^1\) one could remark how in many cases from the same Proto-Semitic lexical root the Arabic phonetic result seems to fit the Jibbali one, as in the following scheme, that illustrates this particular shape of semantically-contiguous loanwords:

Arabic: ['šajara], “tree” < Jibbali: ['šɔźɔr], "green";

Demonstration:
1. The loaning from Jibbali is evident because of the Arabic adaptation of Jibbali phonetic rules and because of the scarce lexicalization of the root in Arabic itself.
2. The presence of two parallel and independent phonetic developments in Jibbali and Arabic is based on the existence of Arabic ɬħdr: “green”/“vegetables”, the original and largely lexicalized Arabic root from Proto-Semitic: ɬšẓr\(^2\).
3. The approximate adaptation of the lateral sound to the Arabic palatal one is due to the lack of the former in the Arabic phonetic inventory.
   - The same trend of Arabic loaning from Jibbali should probably also affect a restricted Arabic verbal group (š-group). The causative class in Jibbali is in fact inflected by adding the Proto-Semitic causative prefix š-, which, when existing, should have been the corresponding Arabic: *s-.
   - Today the loan direction seems to be reversed, being Arabic the prominent language, so that the Arabic ['šajara] is penetrating the Jibbali lexicon.

Typology of sociophonetic variations

The interesting thing is that although sound adaptation mostly works upside-down from Arabic to Jibbali, something like ['šajara] (meaning “tree”) could be found among Jibbali speakers especially in the last decades.

This shows a socio-based phonetic variation from the Arabic loaned word, whose meaning could be variously explained, for example:
1. Because of the subordinate situation of the Jibbali people compared with the Arabic majority and the increasing assimilation to the latter, the use of a very typical Jibbali sound completely absent in Arabic\(^3\), should indicate a will of demarcating the boundaries of their ethnicity;
2. Since loaning of words from the dominating language is becoming unavoidable, the use of a very typical Jibbali sound could keep foreign words closer to the sensibility of the native speakers.
3. This phonetic behaviour could be also be suggested by the presence of an observer, which was first of all interested in eliciting original Jibbali material and spoke to his informants in their


own language. They could simply have undergone the pressure of his expectations⁴.

The para-etymological overextension of the typical Jibbāli sound ś should however go back to intentional emphasis on the ethnicity. This special case represents an answer to the question raised by Marie Huffman on what types of variability are used to signal social information in other (i.e.: not only English) language communities⁵.

The influence of lexical information on phonemic categorization

The particular case of [ʼšajara] > [ʼṣajara] seems to hint at a partial restructuring of an original and still productive Jibbāli root. The presence in Jibbāli of words from the same root like [ʼṣɔźɔr] "green" could have attracted the lateral sound onto the cognate Arabic “tree”, at the same time guaranteeing the semantic transparency of the new word, although /š/ and /ś/ are in Jibbāli two distinctive phonemes.

A look backwards from Sociophonetics to the History of languages

As seen above, the interaction with Jibbāli speakers in a very early stage of the Arabic language must have originated a secondary development of the Proto-Semitic root √šźr and a secondary series of causative verbs, whose source would otherwise remain inexplicable.

Such an analysis does not only pertain to the language contact field, but to sociolinguistics as well, as far as it shows which historical and social importance Jibbāli people must have played then, so that it could impose some phonetic and lexical features on Arabic.

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