

Arabic Sociophonetics: language contact in South Semitic Towards a typology of socio-based phonetic variations

At the southern springs of Arabic:

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

Jibbālī 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 Jibbālī 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 sources¹ one could remark how in many cases from the same Proto-Semitic lexical root the Arabic phonetic result seems to fit the Jibbālī one, as in the following scheme, that illustrates this particular shape of semantically-contiguous loanwords:

Arabic: [ʃajara], “tree” < Jibbālī: [ʃəʒər], “green”;

Demonstration:

1. The loaning from Jibbālī is evident because of the Arabic adaptation of Jibbālī 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 Jibbālī and Arabic is based on the existence of Arabic √ḥḍr: “green”/“vegetables”, the original and largely lexicalized Arabic root from Proto-Semitic: √šzr².
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 Jibbālī should probably also affect a restricted Arabic verbal group (š-group). The causative class in Jibbālī 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 [ʃajara] is penetrating the Jibbālī lexicon.

Typology of sociophonetic variations

The interesting thing is that although sound adaptation mostly works upside-down from Arabic to Jibbālī, something like [ʃajara] (meaning “tree”) could be found among Jibbālī 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 Jibbālī people compared with the Arabic majority and the increasing assimilation to the latter, the use of a very typical Jibbālī sound completely absent in Arabic³, 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 Jibbālī 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 Jibbālī material and spoke to his informants in their

1 Müller, D.H. 1907: Volume 3: Shauri Texte (Südarabische Expedition 7).Vienna: Hölder; Johnstone, T.M.,1975: “Contrasting articulations in Modern South Arabian languages” in *Hamito-Semitic*, pp. 155-159; *Id.*, 1981: *Jibbālī Lexicon*.

2 Bulakh, M. 2007: “Basic color terms from Proto-Semitic to Old Ethiopic”, *Anthropology of Colors*, Robert E. MacLaury, Galina V. Paramei, Don Dedrick (eds), pp.247-262.

3 I.e. "a good hosts for signaling sociolinguistic information". See Stuart-Smith, J. 2007: "Empirical evidence for gender speech production: /s/ in Glaswegian", *Laboratory Phonology 9*, Cole, Jennifer, José I. Hualde, pp. 65-86.

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

The para-etymological overextension of the typical Jibbālī sound *š* 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 [ʃajara] > [ʕajara] seems to hint at a partial restructuring of an original and still productive Jibbālī root. The presence in Jibbālī of words from the same root like [ʕǝǝr] "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 /ʃ/ and /ʕ/ are in Jibbālī two distinctive phonemes.

A look backwards from Sociophonetics to the History of languages

As seen above, the interaction with Jibbālī speakers in a very early stage of the Arabic language must have originated a secondary development of the Proto-Semitic root $\sqrt{\text{šzr}}$ 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 Jibbālī people must have played then, so that it could impose some phonetic and lexical features on Arabic.

4 Docherty, G.J. 2007, "Speech in its natural habitat: Accounting for social factors in phonetic variability", *Laboratory Phonology 9*, Cole, Jennifer, José I. Hualde, pp. 1-36.

5 Huffman, M. K. 2007, "Laboratory phonology and sociophonetics. Partners in a conversation whose time has come: Comments on Docherty, Moreton and Thomas, Stuart-Smith, and Warren, Hay and Thomas", *Laboratory Phonology 9*, Cole, Jennifer, José I. Hualde, pp. 1-36.pp.88-113.