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Current Perspectives on Tunisian Sociolinguistics

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Introduction
Current perspectives on Tunisian sociolinguistics[1]

LOTFI SAYAHI

Despite its small size (63,170 sq miles) and a rather small population with a stable growth rate,[2] Tunisia represents a rich sociolinguistic laboratory with a long history of bilingualism and language contact. The delicate position of Berber, the diglossic situation of Arabic and the increasing efforts for Arabization, the regional and social variation in Tunisian Arabic, the presence of French, and the gradual spread of English, among other closely-related topics, constitute the core themes of research within Tunisian sociolinguistics. Since the publication of R. M. Payne's *Language in Tunisia* in 1983, no attempt has been made to reassess the situation from all its angles, except for some overview articles now and then (Laroussi 1999; Daoud 2001; Walters 2003; among others). This special issue aims at introducing the readers to these different themes and how they play out in shaping the present and the future of the language situation in the country. In the wider sense, findings about the sociolinguistic situation of Tunisia can complement what we already know about the other countries in the Maghreb and open the door for comparative research on common issues for a more complete understanding of the linguistic situation in the region.

As a member of the Western Arabic dialects group, Tunisian Arabic shares with the other Maghrebi dialects, and to a certain degree Maltese Arabic, a long list of features that distinguish this group from other Arabic dialect groups. The difference is, of course, considerable between Tunisian Arabic and the standard form of Arabic as well, given the long-standing diglossic situation in the Arabic-speaking world as a whole. Nevertheless, the gradual implementation of Arabization in the school system since the 1970's (Daoud, this issue) has boosted access to the standard variety by a large sector of the population. But, overall little research remains available on the dynamics of the co-existence of both varieties and their implications for the linguistic repertoire of educated Tunisians.

Since its development in the late 19th century, Modern Standard Arabic (henceforward, MSA) has exercised significant influence on the structure and stylistics of colloquial Arabic across the Arabic-speaking regions. Bateson

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(1967), Versteegh (1997) and Heath (1989) argued that the dialects have borrowed heavily from MSA as education and Arabization spread. The effect of mass media, especially in recent years with the emergence of pan-Arab satellite channels, has also been significant in increasing borrowing from MSA into the dialects. In Tunisia, although claims have been made towards the existence of a separate intermediate or educated variety of Arabic where more borrowing from MSA happens (Garmadi 1968; Maamouri 1973; Walters 1996a; Daoud this issue), many items from MSA may be found in natural conversations that are conducted in the vernacular with, in some instances, cases of diglossic code-switching between the two (Walters 1996b; Boussofara-Omar 2003). The policies of Arabization and their effect on the sociolinguistic situation in Tunisia are described in full detail in several places in this issue.

At the phonological level, Tunisian Arabic shows an opposition between rural and urban dialects, similar to the traditional sedentary and Bedouin distinction customarily used in Arabic linguistics (Kaye and Rosenhouse 1997; Versteegh 1997). This is clearly illustrated in the articulation of the uvular stop /q/, which tends to be voiced outside of the capital and the large coastal cities. Nevertheless, both /q/ and /g/ exist in all Tunisian varieties as there are examples of minimal pairs that set them apart, e.g., *garn* 'horn' vs. *qarn* 'century' (Baccouche and Mejri 2004; Mejri this issue). Particularly interesting about Tunisian Arabic is the fact that it maintains almost all sounds present in Literary Arabic. Unlike other dialects, including some other Maghrebi dialects, the interdental sounds did not merge, /ð, ðˤ/ are still articulated, and /ʒ/ did not merge with any other sound either. With regard to vowels, Cohen (1970) describes the dialect of Tunis as having three short vowels /ĭ, ă, ŭ/ and three long ones /ī, ā, ū/. Vowels, nevertheless, vary across the different Tunisian dialect regions and also depending on the pharyngealization of the flanking consonants, showing some alteration in quality that includes raising and fronting.[3]

At the morphosyntactic level, distinctive features of Tunisian Arabic include, in addition to the use of the *n-* form with the first person singular in the imperfective, the use of the genitive exponent *mtɛːʕ* to express possession and the use of pre-verbal markers to indicate the future, as part of an overall move towards more analytical forms. Second person singular pronouns have merged in urban dialects, particularly in Tunisois Arabic, where the feminine *inti* is used for both masculine and feminine second person singular. The opposite has happened with the verbal paradigm for the second person singular where the masculine form is the only one in use in the capital.

With the dramatic increase in urbanization and the democratization of education since Independence, the dialect of Tunis has been playing the role of the national model as it enjoys the highest degree of prestige even outside the capital (Gibson 2002). This is not surprising since as argued by Miller (2004:

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179), who examined the urban dialects of several Arab cities, "in the contemporary period, the urban vernacular of the main capital cities are often believed to play the role of regional or national standard". One of the informants I recently interviewed in Tunis, who had immigrated from the South as a teenager, described her experience with the difference between the dialects in this way: "illi iʒi yɛtkalim b-lahʒa ɣi:r maʕnitha l-lahʒa lɛhna fi tu:nis, maʕnitha ma yɛtkalimiʃ bil qa ki:ma iqu:lu: wil kul, yɛtʕib yɛsir . . . hɛði:ka aθθrit ʕlayya barʃa qʕat ak l-*retirée* ʃwayya, ma nɛħki mʕa ħatta ħad." [Anyone who speaks a dialect other than the dialect of Tunis, meaning without using the /q/ sound as they say, will suffer enormously. . . . That affected me a lot and I became more reserved. I didn't talk with anyone] (author's translation).

In addition to these processes of internal change as a result of dialect contact, urbanization, education and other factors, Tunisian Arabic has seen throughout its history a wide range of contact-induced changes. Since the introduction of Arabic in Tunisia in the 7th century, it entered in contact with several languages, starting with Berber and North African Late Latin (Heath 2002). But, Berber, being the original native language in the Maghreb, played a central role in the formation of Tunisian Arabic and the Maghrebi dialects in general. This was documented early on by Ibn Khaldun in *The Muqaddimah*, where he wrote:

> In Ifriqiyah [modern-day Tunisia] and the Maghreb, the Arabs had contact with non-Arab Berbers who constitute the bulk of the population of these countries. Hardly any city or group was without Berbers. Therefore, the non-Arab element there gained preponderance over the language of the Arabs. Thus, there originated another, mixed language in which the non-Arab element was preponderant, for the reasons mentioned. The language spoken there is more remote from the ancient language than other dialects. (Ibn Khaldun 1958 [1377]: 352)

Contact with Turkish, Spanish, and Italian contributed additional words to the lexical stock of Tunisian Arabic. After the mass departure of the Moriscos from Spain to North Africa, especially during the great exodus between 1609 and 1614 (Epalza 1992), tens of thousands of them settled in Tunisia, directly impacting the economic, cultural and linguistic landscape. Today, in addition to Andalusian last names, a few words remain from this immigration and from the occupation of Tunis and other Tunisian ports by the Spanish in the 16th century (Epalza and Gafsi Slama 1999; Zbiss 1990). Among the few words of Spanish origin that remain in Tunisian Arabic we find *duro* 'five milim', *sabbat* 'shoes', and the majority of the vocabulary items related to the *escoba* card game.

The establishment of the Ottoman control over Tunisia in late sixteenth century ended the short-lived Spanish presence and introduced the Turkish language into the area, mainly as the language of the government and the military. The Turkish linguistic domination was limited in that Ottoman Turkish was

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used at the higher governmental level with competence in the language not spreading among the native population. As a result, Procházka (2005) argues that the number of Turkish loanwords in MSA and the Eastern dialects of Arabic are higher than their number in Maghrebi Arabic given that, in the Middle East, the Turkish domination was more deep-rooted. He estimates the number of Turkicisms in North Africa to be between 200 and 500 words, some of which include items such as *burgol* 'burgol wheat' and *gomrug* 'tobacco store'. More interesting is the borrowing of the derivational morpheme *-aji* to form occupational nouns such as *qahwaji* 'waiter in a café', *kawarji* 'football player', *kubaji* 'locksmith' and *bollarji* 'glassmaker'.

With regard to Italian, it was more widespread in Tunisia than French was by the time of the declaration of the protectorate in 1881 (Alberti Russel 1977; Manzano this issue). The language continued to be used within the large Italian community, which reached 85,000 people in 1956, until the early years of Independence and the mass emigration of the European population. Cifoletti (2009) found that several words have made their way into Tunisian Arabic including *frishk* 'fresh', *kanulika* 'razor shell' and *dakurdu* 'OK', among others.

Finally, and as discussed extensively throughout this issue, there is the contact with French. The formation during the protectorate period of an elite that later governed the country with favorable policies towards the maintenance of French, the success of bilingual educational policies that increased literacy dramatically, and the continuous usage of French in most university majors and science subjects in high school continue to grant educated Tunisians direct access to this language. Although, initially, the situation of French in Tunisia fell under what Myers-Scotton (2002) describes as "elite closure", referring to an elite that has privileged access to the language with more value in the linguistic market, more recently, familiarity with French has become more extensive, although with sharply contrasting levels of competence. As a result of this contact, Tunisian Arabic/French code-switching is a common phenomenon among the educated population and hundreds of French words have entered Tunisian Arabic (Talmoudi 1986; Belazi 1992; Sayahi 2007).

The first article in this issue is a presentation of the language situation in Tunisia and an assessment of its future. Daoud provides an overview of the linguistic history of Tunisia and offers a critical evaluation of the nature of the co-existence of Tunisian Arabic, Standard Arabic, French and English. He also evaluates past and current language policies adopted in the country and their implications for education and the varying levels of linguistic competence. With the fairly extensive Arabic/French bilingualism and the gradual spread of English, Daoud expects that the future generations of educated Tunisians will have competence in these three languages and, thus, they will be taking part in a dynamic case of "accommodating multilingualism".

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The second article introduces the readers to the project of *L'atlas linguistique de Tunisie* [The Linguistic Atlas of Tunisia] and presents some of its early findings. Mejri details the data collection methods and the handling of the corpus and offers preliminary analysis regarding the lexicon and the structure of Tunisian Arabic. The project was completed by a team of researchers who, over a period of three years, collected data from some 1,000 informants in the different regions of the country. Although data analysis is still under way, Mejri discusses several findings including the variation between /q/ and /g/, the use of emphatic consonants, and cases of assimilation. At the morphosyntactic level, the paper confirms the reduction of the dual form and the above-mentioned spread of the second person singular form in some areas, including the capital region. In the final section, the author discusses examples of the extent of lexical variation across the sub-dialect regions of Tunisia.

The third article reviews the history and the present of French in Tunisia and the role this language has played in shaping the colonial and post-colonial Tunisian society. Manzano provides an analysis that compares the Tunisian case to that of Algeria and Morocco to argue that the historically lax linguistic environment has rooted the French language in Tunisia in such a way that it has become an intrinsic part of the national linguistic landscape. In spite of steady increase in Arabization and pressure from English, the author argues that French, at least for the foreseeable future, will continue to play a pivotal role in Tunisian education and Tunisian identity.

The fourth article analyzes gender as a perceived factor in the usage of the French language in Tunisia. Walters argues that the use of French in Tunisia is "gendered", in the sense that it is perceived as more associated with female speakers. His analysis takes into account the history of the introduction of French in Tunisia, the access that both genders have had to this language, and the local sociocultural forces which all led to gendered language ideologies about French, similar to those operating in speech communities elsewhere.

The fifth article is an analysis of the patterns of Tunisian Arabic/French code-switching and its implications for contact-induced change in the Tunisian dialect. In addition to showing the extensive presence of French loanwords in Tunisian Arabic, the paper shows that there are signs of structural imposition as well, including the borrowing of /p/ and /v/, the acceleration of the regularization process of the plural through the almost exclusive use of the regular Arabic inflection to construct the plural of French loanwords, and, at the syntactic level, an increase in the spread of the analytic form of attributive possession that is accelerated by the higher rates of usage of the genitive exponent with French loanwords.

The final article is an account of the situation of Tunisian Berber. Gabsi provides a detailed description of Shilha and includes extensive materials he collected in Southern Tunisia. He argues that the recurring claims that Tunisian

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Berber is an already dead language are not based on reliable evidence, especially in the absence of precise demographic information. His analysis of the dialect of Douiret shows that, despite a strong relexification, Tunisian Berber has not been restructured and efforts to maintain the language should start by its full description and official recognition.

While the preparation of this special issue was reaching its final stage, Tunisia went through a popular revolution that overthrew the autocratic regime that had governed it with an iron fist for almost a quarter of a century. The previous political regime's random actions directly affected language policy in Tunisia, as in the sudden decision to implement a complete Arabization of the administration in the year 2000 following a conflict with France over the content of some French TV programs. As the country moves towards a democratic system, there are reasons for optimism that more effective language planning policies will be introduced. Attention to Tunisian Arabic and Berber should be increasing as Tunisia leads the wave of deep sociopolitical change in the region. The publication of this issue is, then, a timely assessment of the current language situation in Tunisia at an important moment of its history.

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Notes

1. This special issue has benefitted greatly from the comments of two external reviewers to whom I express my deepest gratitude. I am also thankful to all contributors for their enthusiasm and dedication to the project.
2. According to the National Institute of Statistics (2010), the population of Tunisia is estimated to have reached 10,434,400 people in July 2009. The growth rate in 2008 was 1.19%.
3. Other studies on phonological variation in Tunisian Arabic include: Maamouri (1967); Saada (1984); Jabeur (1987); and Metoui (1989).

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