CHAPTER ONE

THE ECOLOGY OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

As previously mentioned, the spread of Arabic, its evolution and proliferation were a function of the ecology of this evolutionary process during its initial spread in the fledgling empire around the seventh century. Understanding this ecology is essential towards a better understanding of the synchronic structure of the varieties of Arabic and their diachronic development. Therefore, this chapter will begin by introducing how concepts “evolution” and “ecology” are used here.  

Both of these terms have been used with extensive vigour by historical linguists, as well as by several sociolinguists and creolists in the European and American traditions. It is, therefore, crucial to accurately define the scope and function of these key concepts and their relevance to the history of Arabic. Arabic is understood here as a cover term for a complex of sociolinguistic, geographic and functional varieties.

Understanding the functional and causal relationship between ecology and development, however, will not be complete without defining language functionally in such a way that presents the mechanisms with which the earlier affects the latter. The definitions presented in this chapter are purely theoretical. Detailed examples from the Arabic language are given in the following chapters, where the demographic, linguistic situation and structures of Arabic will be discussed with more detail.

1.1 Terminological Issues

Language evolution in the present work is a term used to convey the collection of long term structural changes a language endures in the process of its use (Mufwene 2008: 1 and Mufwene 2001: xi). The notion of evolution is not advanced here as a sign of progression from a simpler form to a more complex one. Rather, it denotes the reaction

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1 Defining key and premative concepts and re-defining already existing and stable ones operationally is traditional in studies of language change and development (Ritt 2004: 16). Definitions help establish the theoretical models to be discussed.
of languages, varieties and idiolects to certain linguistic and non-linguistic factors. This definition distinguishes itself from that used by Christiansen and Kirby (2003). Evolution to them is the emergence of language as a distinctive characteristic of the human race (Christiansen and Kirby 2003: 1–15). Their goal is determining the origin of language. This pursuit is frivolous as long as the state of research in several fields remains inconclusive (McMahon 1994: 315).

This analysis bases itself on a view that evolution is an equilibrium, a state of complex processes of continuous linguistic restructuring. Each stage presented is one of an infinite set that a given language reaches on a continuum, chosen in this context for its contrastive value. In the development of the dual system in Arabic, for example, the current evolutionary state (except in modern written Arabic) is that duals are functional only in some categories of nouns. Duals in pronouns, demonstratives and verbs are no longer productive. If the assumption that Classical Arabic now represents an older variety of Arabic than the modern dialects is acceptable, a quick comparative look at the dialects and Classical Arabic will show that the duals were productive in all categories of nouns, pronouns, demonstratives, and verbs in Classical Arabic. So, the contemporary evolutionary state is easily understood as one intermediate stage between a full morphological and syntactic usage of the dual system productively and a total obsoleteness of the system as a morphological category and syntactic function. In previous stages, one might presume the dual lost productivity in pronouns, demonstratives, verbs, and some categories of nouns gradually or at once.

One can speculate even further that the current evolutionary stage of the dual system is not the end of the development of this category. Judging by the difference between the Arabic dialect of Cairo and the urban dialects of Morocco, for example, shows that the dual system is falling to disuse. Ecological factors allow such a development to move from just being an innovation to a real development. The semantic categories of nouns that take the dual suffix in Moroccan Arabic are much less than those in the dialect of Cairo. Such simple comparisons show that the stage of duals now is only one point on the developmental route of this morphological category.

This understanding of evolution covers questions traditionally posited in the fields of historical genetic linguistics, pidgin and creole studies, second language acquisition and language change, utilizing their most recent advancements. If evolution is so multi-disciplinary and diversified, it is natural to object to the sufficiency of this analysis