CHAPTER 9

Some Remarks on the Phonology and the Verb Forms

9.1 Phonology

As this work is concerned with syntax, it does not seem necessary to me to give a detailed description of the Beirutian phonetic and phonological system. So I will confine myself to some remarks on the vowels that are necessary to understand my transcription.¹

Before I start to deal with the vowels, I have to say a few words on the language communities in Beirut. As outlined at the beginning of this work, there live members of different sects and religions in Beirut that speak Arabic, the vast majority being Christians, Sunnites and Shiites. Although there are districts in Beirut that are predominantly inhabited by Christians and Sunnites or Shiites respectively—the earstern part of the city is chiefly Christian, the western part Muslim—this does not mean that there are fixed borders between the religions and thus between the language communities.² Christians and Muslims meet at the workplace and in the street and may live in the same neighbourhood. My informants Fuad and Mustafa Hamidjou, for example, are Sunnites, but they grew up in a Christian quarter and accordingly speak the Christian dialect. There are some differences between Christian and Muslim Arabic at a phonological level, that will be dealt with below, but not, as far as I can see, at a grammatical level, and the dialects do surely not differ from each other with respect to the functions of the verb forms.

Beirutian Arabic has three short vocalic phonemes: a, u, i.

a: madrası ‘school’, katab ‘to write’.


i sometimes goes back to an old u: ’ixt ‘sister’ (< ’uxt), ’imm ‘mother’ (< ’umm), mixx ‘brain’ (< muxx), or an old a: kilmi ‘word’ (< kalima).

¹ For a description of the consonants, see Schukro, “Beirut,” 43–58; Mattsson, Études.
² An exception, of course, was the time of the civil war between 1975 and 1990. cf. Schukro, “Beirut,” 19.
Minimal pairs with i and u are chiefly found in unstressed final syllables:

baddi ‘ākul ‘I want to eat’ : ‘ana ‘ākil ‘I have eaten’
ktābak ‘your (mas.) book’ : ktābik ‘your (fem.) book’
‘ahlan ‘welcome’ : ‘ahlun ‘their family, relatives’
duhr ‘noon’ : dahr ‘back’
min ‘from’ : mīn ‘who’

According to Schukro (Beirut, 33), short i in stressed open or closed syllables and in unstressed closed syllables becomes ə, e.g. bint > bənt, miftāh > məftāh ‘key’. This statement, however, is in contradiction to both my language data and her own texts where the corresponding vowel is sometimes transcribed with i, sometimes with a: hizno (VI, 3) : həzno (VI, 3); kīl (VI, 11) : kəll (VI, 1); mnərža‘ (VIII, 17) : mnəržə‘ (VIII, 15); ‘yyām (VI, 4) : ‘yəyām (VI, 6); ‘bno (VI, 3) : əbno (VII, 7); ‘iddāmu (VI, 6) : əddāmu (VI, 3); ‘indo (VI, 16) : ‘indo (VI, 7); yəntur (VI, 15) : yəntur (VII, 14).

It is true that i is sometimes lowered, but this lowering is conditioned by the vicinity of pharyngeal and velar consonants, as for example in ‘iṣṣa ‘story’. In all other positions, however, i is pronounced—independently from the language community—as a short close front unrounded vowel. When I quote from Schukro’s texts, I will consequently substitute a in the corresponding positions by i. The same applies to u that is mostly transcribed with u in Schukro’s texts but sometimes with o: yə‘ud (VI, 15); tədxul (VII, 3); yətlub (VII, 7); yitrok (VI, 10); btə‘mol (VIII, 15); təhmol (VIII, 18); nəškor (VIII, 24). The vowel u is often lowered to o in word-final position, especially in pausa, but my informants pronounce it quite clearly as u in the middle of a word, and I think there are no doubts about its phonemic status. I will consequently replace o in her texts by u. Apart from this, I will leave her texts unchanged.

Furthermore, there are five long vocalic phonemes: ā, ī, ū, ê, ô.

Minimal pairs:

ā: kār ‘big (pl.)’ : kbīr ‘big (sg.)’
ū: tūm ‘garlic’ : təm ‘twins’
ō: dōr ‘turn’ (e.g. in: it is your turn) : dər ‘monastery’
ē: tēr ‘bird’ : tər ‘he flew’
i: rīḥ ‘wind’ : rūḥ ‘soul’

In the vicinity of pharyngeal and velar consonants, including r, ā is usually pronounced as [aː]: rāḥ ‘he went’, ṭabbāx ‘cook’. In the other cases, the allophone ā is used: šāf ‘he saw’, ktāb ‘book’, bāb ‘door’. At times ā is even raised