TOWARDS AN INVENTORY OF MIDDLE AND MIXED ARABIC FEATURES: THE INSCRIPTIONS OF DEIR MAR MUSA (SYRIA) AS A CASE STUDY

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Summary: One of the most urgent desiderata in the study of Middle and Mixed Arabic is that of databases, or inventories (répertoires), of linguistic features. A major problem with regard to the development of such research tools is the overwhelming abundance of the material and the highly general, or even universal, nature of many of its features.

In order to address this situation, the present study offers some practical and methodological ideas on inventorying such data, with the focus on the issue of norms and standards. To this end, and by way of case study, an examination is made of a number of very common and widespread features taken from a limited corpus of texts Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi (Dayr Mār Mūsā al-Ḥabašī), in the Syrian Desert, near the town of Nabk.

Systematical references are limited to five brief accounts of the common denominators of neo-Arabic features in the domains of orthography and phonetics, morphology and syntax and, to a lesser extent, lexical and cultural items.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the first international conference on Middle and Mixed Arabic in 2004, a number of urgent desiderata were highlighted, one of which was that of databases, or inventories (répertoires), of linguistic features (Grand' Henry-Lentin 2008: XXII). Naturally, one can only subscribe to the statement that such inventories are dearly needed. Unfortunately, seven years and two more AIMA conferences later, and despite remarkable progress in both the exploration of specific texts or corpora and the analysis of important linguistic phenomena, it must be admitted that the preparation of such inventories has not even entered the phase of collective brainstorming about their scope, shape or structure.

This lacuna is now beginning to pose serious problems, because the study of Middle and Mixed Arabic has thus far produced so many relevant publications that exhaustiveness or even a global view, in embedding new remarks on the linguistic features of a given text within a larger research framework is no longer an option. More positively, though, we need to both develop practical ideas for the construction of a common frame of reference for further studies on specific texts, and provide a firm point of departure for more analytical research into specific phenomena. At the present time, however, some further diagnosis of the problem is appropriate.
On the one hand, in the field of (mostly pre-modern) written Middle Arabic (henceforth abbreviated to MA when appropriate), descriptions of the language of specific texts are so abundant in the introductions to text editions or in other formats that any attempt towards exhaustiveness in this regard is currently futile. This situation is particularly precarious in view of the highly general, or even universal, character of many of the features of such texts, which cover a time span of more than a millennium and a geographical area that extends from Morocco to Yemen and the Gulf. As a consequence, in any presentation or analysis of MA features in a particular text or corpus, the choice of studies to refer to in order to embed data within a wider research tradition is doomed to be arbitrary, or at best accidental. It is usually in this way that studies on written Middle Arabic texts tend to refer to an extremely varied number of studies on specific issues, as well as to a limited number of comprehensive studies that have rightfully obtained the status of classics (such as Blau 1966–1967, Blau 1982, Hopkins 1984, Blau 1988).

On the other hand, in studies of present day Mixed Arabic, the aim primarily seems to be to analyze, comment upon and interpret data against the sociolinguistic background of diglossia, code switching, and code mixing, rather than to inventory these data. As a result, such studies are usually excellent dissertations on fascinating facts and processes, but they are not always particularly easy to quickly consult if we want to compare our own data to theirs.\(^1\)

To be sure, the present contribution to this volume by no means purports to substantially help to resolve the problems just highlighted. However, as a mere temporary suggestion that could perhaps be emulated in the absence of proper inventories, albeit with the deeply unsatisfactory limitation of being restricted to written Middle Arabic, this study of a small group of short texts restrains its more or less systematical refer-

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\(^1\) Without overlooking either a forerunner like William Marçais, who introduced the notion of diglossia with regard to Arabic as early as 1930 (Marçais 1930, quoted by Kouloughli 1996: 287), or the observations on Arabic in the seminal work by Charles A. Ferguson (Ferguson 1959, cf. Bousofara-Omar 2006: 630–631), one can probably regard Werner Diem’s *Hochsprache und Dialekt im Arabischen* as the start of a slightly more corpus-oriented presentation of this phenomenon. Diem’s study (Diem 1974, surprisingly absent in Bousofara-Omar 2006) has the considerable merit of including systematic transcriptions and translations of recorded fragments of texts, which were selected for being expressed in a mix of Classical Arabic and Syrian, Lebanese or Egyptian Arabic, respectively. However, the number of cases actually commented upon remains rather modest. Based on more recent studies, Gunvor Mejdell’s observations in her contribution to the present volume can be read as a call for the systematic construction and analysis of text corpora in mixed Arabic.