DAMASCUS ARABIC ACCORDING TO THE COMPENDIO OF LUCAS CABALLERO (1709)

Otto Zwartjes and Manfred Woidich

Summary: The Compendio de los Rudimentos y Gramatica Araba en que se da suficiente notizia de la lengua Vernacula o Vulgar y algunas Reglas de la literal Iustamente, which was created by the Spanish Franciscan Lucas Caballero in 1709, is an unpublished missionary grammar which describes the spoken variety of Damascus, although it also contains some rules for literary Arabic. This work is important for two fields of study: 1) the history of linguistics; and 2) historical linguistics.

The article briefly describes the approaches of missionary-linguists towards language description in diglossic societies in Asia. It also offers a provisional linguistic analysis of a number of conspicuous features, comparing these to modern dialects spoken in the region. These features partly coincide with what we know from Modern Damascus Arabic, but also partly deviate from it, thus giving meaning to the question: from precisely whom did the missionaries obtain their linguistic data? Further thorough study, in particular with respect to scribal habits, will certainly reveal more details and lead to a better understanding of these sources, which could be a valuable source of information on the Levantine Arabic spoken 300 years ago.

1. Introduction

In this article, eighteenth-century Spanish grammars and Arabic dictionaries (both vernacular and classical) written by Franciscans in Damascus are the subject of our attention, in particular the work of Lucas Caballero and his teacher, Bernardino González (c. 1665–1735). A facsimile edition of the grammar and dictionary by the latter has been published recently (Lourido Díaz 2005), but the work of the former is still unpublished and has escaped the attention of scholars until today. In the Spanish Franciscan tradition, the authors made use of both local native teachers and written sources. They were also familiar with grammars and dictionaries published in Latin, such as those by Thomas van Erpen (Erpenius, 1585–1624) and Jacob Golius (1596–1667), as well as works produced in Italy.1 As the title of the grammar indicates: Compendio de los Rudimentos y Gramatica Araba en que se da suficiente notizia de la lengua Vernacula o Vulgar y algunas Reglas de la literal Iustamente, the vernacular spoken

in Damascus is described and analysed, and there is an appendix added to the end of the book, containing “some rules of the literary language”. This work is important for two fields of study: 1) the history of linguistics; and 2) historical linguistics. The manuscript contains some interesting material concerning the colloquial speech of the period. The impact of the literary register in the representation of the colloquial is often visible, while hybrid forms are sometimes provided as well, such as *antum faʿaltu*. However, classical elements can also be found, such as the use of the feminine plural in the verbal paradigms.

In the first place, we shall briefly describe the approaches taken by missionary-linguists to language description and teaching in diglossic societies in Asia in general. Secondly, we will analyse some phonological and morpho-syntactic features of the dialect spoken in Damascus according to the Franciscan Lucas Caballero.

### 2. Missionary Approaches to Diglossic Societies

Missionary grammarians generally followed the examples from traditional, classical grammars, and it is possible to see that the Greco-Latin based framework is often adapted in order to fit in with less common or hitherto unknown linguistic features. Sometimes, elements from non-Western traditions are integrated into this traditional model. Ideologically, missionaries often followed their classical examples. As in Antiquity, in Renaissance Europe there was a relative lack of interest among humanist scholars in the study of ‘exotic’ languages, since they were not considered to be useful for understanding the Bible. In the sixteenth century and later, scholarly interest in Aramaic (Syrian), Hebrew and Arabic began to grow significantly.

When ‘vulgar Latin’ was separated into local idioms, these were regarded as analogous with the Greek dialects (Diderichsen 1974: 282). However, vernaculars such as German and the Romance languages were generally all considered to be ‘barbarian’ languages and the study of them was never viewed as a serious intellectual challenge, although interest in ‘national’ languages and the production of dictionaries and grammars of the standard language increased gradually.2 We also see that in Muslim Spain, there was hardly any interest in the languages spoken in al-Andalus, other

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2 It is not a surprise to find a comparable attitude towards ‘exotic’ languages spoken by non-cultivated ‘savages’ in the New World. Grammars of European vernaculars were written in the context of the foundation of the modern nations, but grammars of the indigenous languages of America were not written with the same purposes.