REVISITING AL-QAWL AL-MATĪN: A SOCIOLINGUISTICALLY ENGINEERED ARABIC-AFRIKAANS TEXT

Muhammed Haron

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is to revisit *al-Qawl al-matīn*, a text that drew the attention of two South African scholars (i.e. Weiss and Davids) during the 1980s and that was scrutinized by Adrianus van Selms, a Dutch scholar, in the 1950s. It is not our intention to re-narrate and regurgitate the debate that took place between the two mentioned scholars, nor to address Van Selms’ study in any detail, but to summarize their views in the first part of the paper, and, more importantly, to review the sociolinguistic status of this manuscript within the larger set of religious manuscripts that employed ‘Arabic script’ at the Cape.

Throughout the apartheid era in South Africa (circa 1948–1994), the racist regime only recognized two official languages, namely English and Afrikaans. When the transition was underway in South African between 1990 and 1994, one of the important objectives was to devise a set of policies that would help shed and exorcise its racist image and legacy. One of the many policies that were designed was the adoption of a practical language policy; a policy that was inclusive rather than exclusive. This particular policy shifted from the previous apartheid policy that only recognized two official languages to one that identified eleven official languages (Alexander 1995; Mesthrie 2008). This commendable change clearly demonstrated that the democratically elected government was serious in providing sufficient space for each of the nine African languages that were previously permitted within the apartheid setting but that were marginalized and restricted to specific linguistic groups.

In fact, these restrictions were in line with the ‘divide and rule’ policy that the apartheid regime passionately designed and implemented in the 1950s. This enforced language policy was eventually challenged, in particular by African students during the mid-1970s in Soweto and surrounding areas. These youth specifically protested against the imposition of the Afrikaans
language into the school curriculum. They regarded Afrikaans as a language that not only represented oppression, but entrenched the apartheid philosophy through educational and other structures, which forced the disenfranchised communities to live their lives in separate geographical areas and to relate to one another in racist terms. Taking into account the painful outcomes of the past, the democratic government exercised its will to develop a new language policy; the aim of this new policy was to essentially rectify the wrongs of the past and give the nine neglected indigenous languages their rightful place alongside English and Afrikaans within the South African linguistic landscape.

While these linguistic developments had a positive impact upon the different South African speech communities, there is a need to retrace our steps into the distant past and reflect upon the language policies that were adopted and implemented at the turn of the 20th century. The purpose of this essay is to share general thoughts regarding how Afrikaans as a language was developed, constructed, and engineered by the growing Cape Muslim community in spite of their disadvantaged socio-political, economic and linguistic conditions (cf. Davids 2011). The Cape Muslim community’s contribution towards the Afrikaans language was unknown to the White Afrikaner Christian community, who laid sole claim to its invention and development. The second purpose is to re-examine one significant Arabic-Afrikaans manuscript, namely al-Qawl al-matīn, which forms part of a plethora of extant Afrikaans (religious) manuscripts; these were a set of uniquely Arabic scripted manuscripts, which effectively contributed towards the formation of Afrikaans as a language at the Cape. Before we proceed in discussing these issues, we wish to do two things; the first is to put in place a theoretical frame within which to comprehend these distinctive linguistic developments, and the second is to provide a brief sociolinguistic context within which the Afrikaans language developed and the exceptional contribution the Cape Muslim community made during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

2. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNITY: CONCEPTUAL TOOLS

Since this essay intends to consider how a small community such as the Cape Muslims at the foot of the African continent (unconsciously) participated in contributing towards the construction of a creolized form of the Dutch language, namely Afrikaans, we have to consider how the two concepts ‘community’ and ‘language’ relate to each other. While Wardhaugh