Chapter 15

Language Contact in Anatolia: The Case of Sason Arabic

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1 Introduction

The region of present-day Turkey, throughout history, has been the homeland of diverse peoples with different cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Thus, this geographical area of great linguistic diversity is fertile lands for linguistic research on language contact. This study aims to present a brief overview of Sason Arabic (SA), one of the least documented and understudied dialects of Arabic spoken in the multilingual and multi-cultural eastern Turkey, as a good case for a language contact study. The town of Sason, which is situated in the north of the mountainous province of Batman, has slightly more than thirty thousand inhabitants according to the 2014 census. SA is spoken in a multilingual environment where the main contact languages have been Armenian, Zazaki (Kurdish) and Turkish, but due to demographic changes that have taken place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries SA speakers are now diminishing in number. There is no diaglossia among SA speakers.

Jastrow (2006: 144-5) classifies the Arabic dialects spoken in Turkey into three major groups, and several sub-groups. SA is identified as sub-group of Mesopotamian Arabic:

i) Syrian sedentary Arabic
   - Hatay
   - Mersin, Adana

ii) Syrian Bedouin Arabic
    - Urfa

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1 See the appendix for the location of Batman and Sason on the map.
2 There isn’t a reliable source on the number of SA speakers today or in the past. The estimate given by our younger informant was about 5,000 to 6,000 people, though it is not clear what this estimate is based on.
iii) Mesopotemian Arabic (*qeltu*-dialects)³

Mardin
Siirt
Diyarbakır
Kozluk-Sason-Muş

Both Jastrow (2005, 2006) and Talay (2011) refer to Haim Blanc as the person who first introduced the term Mesopotemian Arabic in his monograph entitled Communal Dialects in Baghdad (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1964), in which he gives a description of the Muslim, Christian and Jewish dialects spoken in Baghdad until 1950. According to Haim Blanc, based on the pronunciation of the Classical Arabic *qultu* ‘I said’, the Jewish and Christian dialects comprised the *qəltu*-dialects and the Muslim *gilit* dialect.⁴ Haim Blanc also argued that the *qəltu*-dialects spoken by the Christians and Jews in Baghdad were an older variety spoken by the sedentary population in the time of the Abbasid caliphs, while the Muslims dialect was a much later development, introduced by the Bedouins who gradually moved into the country during the reign of the Ottoman Empire (Jastrow 2006: 157-8). This brief historical perspective indicates that the *qəltu*-dialects found in Anatolia must belong to the older linguistic stratum, which implies that the earlier settlers in the region must have been Christian and Jewish speakers of *qəltu*-dialects rather than speakers of the Muslim *gilit*-dialect. Indeed, our informants when asked about who their ancestors were, replied that the Arabic speaking population in the area was believed to have migrated from the Basra region, long time ago, and that SA was exclusively spoken by the Christian population until only recently. It should be recalled that, historically speaking, the whole area was the land of the Armenian people long before the Arabs and the Kurds appeared in the scene. However, due to the migrations of the non-Muslims from the area in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the remaining SA speakers today are now predominantly Muslims living in the surrounding villages.⁵ The contact languages in the area have basically been SA, Armenian and Zazaki, the variety of Kurdish spoken in that region. Turkish appeared in the lives of

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³ See Talay (2011) for a survey of the work done on the Mesopotemian dialects of Arabic spoken in Turkey.

⁴ The *qəltu* dialects preserve the Old Arabic *q* as a voiceless uvular stop /q/ while in the *gilit* dialects this sound surfaces as a voiced velar stop /g/ in most cases. Furthermore, in the *qəltu* dialects the 1.SG perfect is *-tu*, while it is *-it* in the *gilit* dialects, Jastrow (2005, 2006).

⁵ Some of the Muslim SA speakers of today might be Christians who have converted to Islam.