CHAPTER 7

Dialect with an Attitude
Language and Criticism in New Egyptian Print Media

Jacob Høigilt

Introduction

Recent years have seen some fresh winds blowing over the print media landscape in Egypt. Comics and monthly magazines have mushroomed, and the images and stories they convey are often unusual, to say the least: In a parody of superhero comics, a sex-crazed Santa Claus starts harassing women in Cairo and is challenged by the ridiculous figure ‘Super-Mac’; Sponge Bob puppets are used as a cover for a drugs mafia in an absurd criminal story involving a lost Chinese tourist; and the hostesses of a Salafi TV channel are interviewed about their policy of always wearing the niqāb (full face veil), complete with pictures of the black apparitions sitting at the news desk. These are some of the stories from Tūk-Tūk and Iḥnā, a comic series and monthly magazine that have been among the most visible on a rapidly evolving print media scene during the last few years.

A combination of two features stands out in these publications: a willingness to take on controversial social and political issues, and a tendency to do so in the vernacular (ʿāmmīyya) to a great extent. Thus, the story about the sex-crazed Santa Claus is a humorous take on the serious issue of sexual harassment in Egypt’s cities, and the interview with the niqāb-clad TV hostesses is an attempt at giving voice to a section of Egypt’s women who are often seen as simultaneously reactionary and oppressed. Many of these stories are written in ʿāmmīyya, and this is significant. According to the model of diglossia fuṣḥā is the default when writing. This fact raises the question of to what extent and for which purposes these publications use ʿāmmīyya.

This chapter examines the relation between content and language in Tūk-Tūk and Iḥnā. I ask: When is ʿāmmīyya used, and which social implications does it have?

The approach is informed by Heller’s (Heller 2008) focus on process and practice rather than autonomous structures in order to explain language change and the relationship between agency and structure. I argue that increasingly, individuals and print publications employ the low variety in writing, and that they do so intentionally and for specific purposes. Their aim is not
necessarily to subvert the linguistic and political order (Heller’s “structure”).
Instead, their writing betrays a strategy of carving out a “third space” for themselves (Bhabha 2004; Bhatt 2008) that makes it possible to engage critically with Egyptian politics and culture without signalling rejection and alienation from it.

Data was gathered in three ways. Having read İhnā on and off for some years, I chose three issues (September, October and November 2011) for a detailed analysis. This was an interesting period to investigate. First, the magazine had consolidated its profile by then and become part of a visible new trend on the cultural scene. Second, since after the Egyptian uprising in January–February 2011 a glossy magazine like İhnā could choose either to focus on entertainment and uncontroversial news, or it could jump headlong into politics. To a great extent, it chose the latter. These three issues comprised 76 articles all in all, which I coded for language variety, genre, and author. Selected articles were analysed in detail to discern the pattern of alternation between varieties and investigate the link between content, genre and language in more detail. Tūk-Tūk does not lend itself to a quantitative approach, since the magazine is shorter and the stories longer. Here I looked in detail at each of the four issues (4–7, 2012) I had managed to obtain, searching for consistent alternation patterns. In addition to text analysis, I have drawn on observations and reading of numerous publications from several longer and shorter periods of field work in Egypt between 2006–2012 – this was a period when the new, informal culture of writing seemed to explode in Cairo. During fieldwork, I also interviewed the editors of the publications studied here about their work and their thoughts on language and society. Finally, the findings are interpreted on the background of the Cairo survey about practices and attitudes to fuṣḥā and ʿāmmīyya among literate Cairenes, part of the Language Change in the Arab World research project (see Kindt and Kebede this volume). The survey offers valuable information about the language ideological climate in Egypt against which specific writing practices can be measured.

It needs to be noted at the outset how few Egyptians actually read magazines like these. Only two percent of the survey respondents had even heard about İhnā and Tūk-Tūk, and the number of people who read them was statistically insignificant (less than one percent). This extremely low figure must be seen relative to the very low percentage of Cairenes who read printed publications at all – in the same survey, only 16 percent answered that they read newspapers every day (among 18 to 34-year-olds the figure was ten percent – and keep in mind that this was in the midst of a revolutionary process where print publications proliferated to an unprecedented extent). In general, books and magazines are read by very few people in Egypt, so the print media field as