CHAPTER THREE

A CASE FOR AN INTER-ARABIC GRAMMAR

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1 Organization of the Chapter

This chapter is organized in three parts. In Part 1, the basic assumptions and observational motivations to realize that an inter-Arabic grammar exists are laid down, as are the reasons for defining it. Part 2 has a preliminary attempt to explain this core grammar. The applications that may arise from specifying a core Arabic grammar are examined in Part 3, as are the author’s suggestions for further research along the same lines on other varieties of Arabic.

1.1 Underlying Assumptions

This research arises from the assumption that all varieties of Arabic have some common ground that need to be identified and described. Much effort has been made over the past fifty years to describe and delineate the differences that exist among colloquial dialects of Arabic and between spoken and Classical Arabic.

This also came as a result of the pioneering work of Ferguson (1959a) who correctly defined diglossia as two or more varieties of a language existing side by side with well defined functions for each. Arabic native speakers shift from the High variety to the Low variety and vice versa in well defined contexts. This indicates that native speakers not only have grammars of both varieties but that they also internalize the rules that govern the switch from one variety to the other.

Ferguson also showed that such a linguistic situation is not unique to Arabic, but also exists in different languages such as Greek. In another important paper (Ferguson 1959b), he argues that historically speaking, Arabic colloquials did not develop from Classical Arabic; they existed side by side with Classical Arabic from the beginning. To prove his point he cites fourteen linguistic features that all
Arabic dialects have and in which they all differ from Classical Arabic. Most of these differences involve phonological and morphological regular alternations such as the loss of the final glottal stop in words like سَلَّامِيْنَ ‘desert’, spreading of pausal forms, loss of most dual forms and of case endings, etc.

In this chapter, I would like to propose the initiation of a line of research aimed at defining what it is that constitutes Arabic. This in turn is based on the assumption that there is a single entity that is the Arabic language which has well defined phonological, morphological and syntactic properties.

This assumption rests on the proposal that all three main varieties of Arabic, Classical Arabic (CA), the colloquials and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), have a common core or an inter-Arabic grammar that this chapter seeks to identify and define. As a first step in this line of research, we begin with defining the core grammar of Egyptian Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic.

1.2 Significance and Implications

While the languages of ancient civilizations—Confucianism, Hinduism, Christianity—have undergone major structural and orthographic changes over time, Islam is the only one whose language has survived intact and is still in use as a national language serving as a symbol of ethnicity and as an official language for the press, governmental documents, education, law, constitutions, etc. in all Arab countries. Most sociolinguists are concerned with cases of variability, but when it comes to Arabic, what needs to be explained is not variability but rather the stability of a language that is not anyone’s mother tongue (Holt 1996) and the stability of a diglossic situation which is regarded by many as problematic and transient (Ferguson 1959a & 1996, Kaye 1970, and Mahmoud 1982 & 1986).

Holt’s statement about the need for an explanation of the stability of the Arabic language is extremely important. The common explanation for the relative stability of the Arabic language is the impact of the Qur'an, which, though it plays an important role in stabilizing the Arabic language, cannot be the sole explanation. 75% of world’s Moslems perform all Islamic rituals and prayers in Arabic though they speak languages other than Arabic both as official languages and for everyday communication.