FROM qǝltu TO gǝlǝt: DIACHRONIC NOTES ON LINGUISTIC ADAPTATION IN MUSLIM BAGHDAD ARABIC

Heikki Palva

1. Introduction

Since Haim Blanc’s Communal Dialects in Baghdad (1964), it is a well-known fact that the dialects spoken in Baghdad can be divided into three communal groups, corresponding to the speakers’ religious affiliation. The dialect of the Muslims (MB) belongs to the so-called gǝlǝt group of Mesopotamian Arabic, whereas the dialects of the Jews\(^1\) (JB) and the Christians (CB) belong to the qǝltu group. Historically, JB and CB are regarded as direct descendants of medieval Iraqi Arabic, whereas the present-day MB with its numerous Bedouin-type traits clearly diverges from it.

As a gǝlǝt dialect MB is often classified as a dialect of Bedouin type, or being of Bedouin provenance.\(^2\) These are of course rather impressionistic notions based on a number of linguistic variables the relative typological significance of which depends on the adopted standpoint.\(^3\) Thus, in comparison with qǝltu dialects, most differences displayed by MB are undeniably of Bedouin type, but if MB is compared

---

\(^1\) The Jewish community in Baghdad was relatively big: most Jews left Iraq in 1950-51 and are now settled in Israel. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Jews and Christians lived in their ancient quarters north and west of Sūq al-Ghazl respectively, while the population of al-Karkh was mainly Muslim Arabs (Duri 1960:907). In 1884 there were 30,000 Jews in Baghdad, by the beginning of the 20th century 50,000, and ca. 100,000 Jews after World War Two. http://www.bh.org.il/Communities/Archive/Baghdad.asp 15.11.2007.

\(^2\) “Bedouin-type dialects, such as are spoken in southern Iraq including Baghdad...” Holes 1995:57; “gǝlǝt Arabic is of Bedouin provenance, unlike Christian Baghdadi...” Abu-Haidar 2006a:222.

\(^3\) The relevance of all linguistic classifications depends on the aim as well as the criteria applied. If the interest is purely synchronic, the classifications can be made on the basis of an adequate selection of synchronically well-documented linguistic variables for each dialect or group of dialects, without consideration of diachronic and extralinguistic criteria. If the interest is focused on cultural and historical points of view, diachronic and comparative data play a crucial role (Palva 2006:604).
with Bedouin dialects of ʿAnazī or Šammarī, or even of the šāwiya type, its sedentary profile would become apparent (cf. Palva 1994: 460-465; id. 1997 passim).

The aim of this paper is, however, not to try to establish appropriate criteria for an adequate classification of MB. Here the approach is diachronic. It is my aim to examine the historical interaction of qǝltu and gǝlǝt dialects that has resulted in the present-day Muslim dialect of Baghdad. As the material I use a number of typologically prominent linguistic features in MB representing, on the one hand, the urban dialect type related to JB and CB, and on the other, the rural type related to Bedouin dialects spoken in southern Iraq and its neighbourhood. In a short paper the number of variables treated is necessarily restricted, and their relative weight in the argumentation may be questioned.

Because MB has not been documented before the twentieth century, its historical development can only be traced by using the present dialect as the starting-point and by considering its structure in the light of common rules of linguistic change, particularly in contact between dialects of Arabic. Although changes that have taken place hundreds of years ago have probably followed the same common rules as today, the diachronic conclusions drawn depend on many uncertain presumptions concerning matters such as communication patterns between different social and religious groups or language attitudes among them in different historical contexts, not to speak about varying fashionable or stigmatized linguistic features among different social groups. Yet, recent and ongoing developments in different dialects certainly are serviceable points of comparison. As to individual linguistic features, relatively reliable diachronic conclusions can also be drawn on the basis of past developments documented in other dialects.

2. qǝltu-type Features in the Muslim Dialect of Baghdad

2.1. Use of the Reflex q of *q in a Number of Items, Instead of the Main Reflex g

2.1.1. These include numerous lexical borrowings from Standard Arabic, e.g., qallad ‘to copy, imitate’, qarrar ‘to decide on’, ṭaqqaf ‘to impart education’, rāqab ‘to watch, observe’, ṭabbaq ‘to apply’, qtirah