Kalaam, Kalaarbaam: An Arabic Speech Disguise in Hadramaut

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1. Meccan /aarb/-Insertion (MI).

a. 
   fiil ‘elephant’ --> fiirbijj
   fuul ‘beans’ --> fuurbuu
   gaal ‘he said’ --> gaarbaal

b. 
   a mad ‘Ahmad’ --> aarba mad
   qur’aan ‘Koran’ --> qur’aarbaan
   hina ‘here’ --> hiirbina

c. 
   ta’ram ‘he respected’ --> taarba ram
   altagaa ‘he found it’ --> altagaarbaah
   gaabalu ‘he met him’ --> gaarbaaluu

i) Syllable inserted after onset of stressed syllable.
ii) Vowel quality determined by that of the following one.
iii) An “imposition”-type game, as defined by Botne & Davis (2000).

2. Hadramaut /aarb/-Insertion (HI).

a. 
   sa’iid ‘Said’ --> sa’aarbiid
   mukalla ‘Mukalla’ --> Mukaarballa

As above, except that:
   i) Vowel quality is invariant.
   ii) Stress may shift from that of the base word.
   iii) An “insertion”-type game per Botne & Davis (2000).


3.1. Meccan Context.

According to Bakalla (forthcoming), a native speaker, MI “was in general vogue during the 30s and throughout the 60s....largely employed as a kind of secret language....”

It then “developed into almost a major communicative vehicle, which was used in both the closed and open circles of the...community. Long conversations were held in this variety amongst school children, and adults in cafés and meeting circles....it was considered by many to be prestigious both to know and to use [my italics].”

As to its purpose, Bakalla speculates that it “may reflect the cosmopolitan nature of life in Makkah and its multilingual interaction....The secret languages of Makkah,

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1 Data from Bakalla (forthcoming).
2 Data collected by the author in March 2001 in Mukalla.
one can assume, might have been the results of this process of interaction and integration between the Makkans and the guests of God [that is, pilgrims].

In sum, MI was a prestigious, in-group speech disguise used by Meccans to evade the understanding of the many pilgrims transiting through the city.

3.2. Hadramaut Context.

3.2.1 Former.

“…Seiyid³ Muhsin and another Seiyid began speaking in a curious, half-familiar language. The unknown Seiyid…subsequently explained it to me. It is an enigmatical way of speaking Arabic. The words are disguised by having extra syllables inserted.” (Ingrams 1998:214)

The above encounter occurred in December of 1934, when Ingrams (a political officer of the British Empire, which then included the area as the Eastern Aden Protectorate), was detained on his way to Mukalla in Seihut, in the home of the Mukallan sultan’s local representative.

3.2.2 Current

HI is currently used as market argot by the low-status ahl as-suug “market people.” It is no longer widely used or known (the same is true of Mecca per Bakalla), and was first mentioned to me by local businessmen from the northern city of Taiz (well-known within Yemen for its entrepreneurial spirit), who have taken over the most profitable commercial arenas (i.e. hotel and restaurant ownership, import/export ventures) in many Yemeni cities.

4. Development.

i) As we have seen, MI was prestigious when used in Mecca.

ii) Its use in Hadramaut should have been prestigious, in part because of its Meccan origin, and in part because of its importation by members of the high-status seiyid class.

iii) This was indeed the case in the 1930s, when we see it used by seiyids, and in a high-status context (diplomatic negotiations). As such, it would naturally have been adopted by many sectors of society.

iv) The game is now nearly extinct in both Mecca and Hadramaut. In the latter, it is now used solely as an argot by the low-status ahl as-suug “market people.”

v) Since outsiders left after the Yemeni revolutions of the 1960s, most currently-resident “foreigners” are Taizi businessmen.

vi) The exclusionary force of the language game is now directed at them, and by those their presence threatens – small-scale business operators.

References


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³ The seiyid families in Hadramaut constitute the highest class of society. Descended from the prophet Muhammad, seiyids hold an institutionalized position of privilege and are deferred to in matters of tribal dispute resolution, establishment of mosques and public works, education, religion, and so on (see Serjeant 1957).

⁴ Because of their association with the prophet and the community he organized, the cities of Mecca and Medina are explicitly regarded as models for Muslims. Islamic law considers the social practices of the two cities as one of the primary bases for legal decision-making (Williams 1994:66).