

# **Kalaam, Kalaarbaam: An Arabic Speech Disguise in Hadramaut\***

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*I document an Arabic-based language game of Hadramaut, Yemen which was briefly mentioned in the 1930s by Harold Ingrams. Ingrams comments on the social context of its use, but provides little description and no concrete examples. I present a description here obtained during recent fieldwork in Yemen and from Saudi Arabian sources (Bakalla, forthcoming). The phenomena described are found to be relevant to a recent proposal as to the phonological classification of language games (Botne & Davis, 2000). I also outline its current sociocultural significance and contrast this with its status in Ingrams' time, showing a historical development with respect to the status of the speakers using it and the goal for which they resorted to speech disguise.*

## **1. Introduction**

I begin this paper by motivating the study of language games in Section 2, then in Section 3 overview their status in the Arabic-speaking world as previously documented in the academic literature.

In Section 4 I present as an example a previously unknown speech disguise used in the coastal region of the governorate of Hadramaut, Yemen.

Phonologically, this speech disguise is noteworthy in falling under the rubric of a new category of language game posited by Botne and Davis (2000), the “imposition”-type. However, it differs in some ways from those examined in Botne and Davis’s typology.

Sociolinguistically, I trace the progression of the speech disguise: first physically, from Mecca to Hadramaut via the seiyid class, and also functionally, from its use as high-status in-group marker to a low-status market argot. In doing so, I give an account of how

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this functional progression could have occurred, given historical changes in Hadramaut society.

## **2. The Nature of Language Games**

Language games and speech disguises are important objects of study for social scientists for a variety of reasons. I speak here of linguistic media based on the normal speech of a language shared by a particular speech community, but involving some systematic alteration to it. Typically this alteration consists of either the addition, subtraction, substitution, or transposition of sounds. (Botne and Davis (2000) introduce the further classification of segment imposition versus segment insertion, discussed below in more detail). Such processes are widely attested among the world's languages, including such divergent ones as Hebrew, Japanese, Cantonese, Taiwanese, Khmu (Mon-Khmer), Adygei (Caucasus), and Mangbetu (Zaire).

Among those with which the reader is more likely to be familiar are the French language game *Verlan*, in which syllables are transposed to yield the game's name from the input *l'envers*; another French game called *Javanais*, in which the syllable *av* is inserted; and finally, the English language game *Pig Latin*, which involves both transposition (of the word-initial syllable onset to the end of the stem) and addition (of the syllable rime *ay* to the end of the word). This yields, for example, the phrase *igpay atinlay* from the game's name.

Such linguistic processes are frequently the object of phonological research. By creating alternations and linguistic contexts that either cannot or do not otherwise occur in a language, they often reveal crucial information about the structure of a language, or of language in general. Previous investigations of language games such as those mentioned above have led to insights concerning syllabification and the internal structure of the syllable, prosodic/metrical structure (the relevance of feet and/or moras), underlying representations, and autosegmentalism based on multiple tiers as a theory of phonology.

Thus language games have much of interest to offer in the realm of theoretical linguistics. But like all of language, they are not used in a vacuum. Language games and speech disguises constitute an important part of the oral culture of a community bound by a common language. As such, they merit the attention of anthropological and historical analysis.

Concerning the uses to which linguistic games and disguises are typically put, speakers most often employ them to mark a person's membership of a group, to provide a pastime, and to ensure secrecy when performing a particular activity.

## **3. Language Games in the Arabic Dialects**

Language games of the Arabic-speaking world have not gone unobserved in the linguistic and anthropological literature. Those from at least two different speech communities, Hijazi and Moroccan, have been extensively documented and used as evidence for the reality of the trilateral root to the Arabic speaker. This family of language games involving the permutation of root consonants is frequently adduced as evidence for the psychological reality of the Semitic root morpheme in Arabic (al-Mozainy, 1982). As shown below, the three root consonants of the classical root-and-template morphology of

Arabic are the only ones to participate in the permutation. Common infixational consonants such as /s/ and /t/, and the affixes /n/ and /m/, remain stationary.<sup>1</sup>

- |     |    |                       |    |              |    |             |
|-----|----|-----------------------|----|--------------|----|-------------|
| (1) | a. | difa <sup>c</sup> -na | b. | i□taram      | c. | darras-na   |
|     |    | da <sup>c</sup> af-na |    | i□timar      |    | dassar-na   |
|     |    | fida <sup>c</sup> -na |    | irta□am      |    | raddas-na   |
|     |    | fa <sup>c</sup> ad-na |    | irtima□      |    | rassad-na   |
|     |    | <sup>c</sup> afad-na  |    | imtara□      |    | saddar-na   |
|     |    | <sup>c</sup> adaf-na  |    | imta□ar      |    | sarrad-na   |
|     |    | 'we paid'             |    | 'to respect' |    | 'we taught' |

An identical process is attested in Moroccan Arabic, documented in Heath (1987:184-196).

In addition, Moroccan speakers make use of an additional speech game/disguise in which a certain consonant (usually /h/, /s/ or /ž/) replaces the first root consonant of the word. The lost consonant is then suffixed to the end of the word within an optional 'tag' *žinCa*, as shown below (Heath, 1987:197). [what's your font here? is that a barred h? if it's an SIL font, just tell us which one (and Mac or PC), and we'll download it.]

- (2) □mmam 'public bath' --> žmmam-žin□a

Moroccan Arabic is in fact quite well documented with respect to language games. In addition to the two games described above, root consonant permutation and root consonant substitution, Moroccan Qur'anic scholars employ a speech disguise based on numerical values ascribed to (consonantal) letters of the alphabet (Berjaoui, 1994). Speakers equate the phonemes of Moroccan Arabic to their correspondents in Classical Arabic (which as religious scholars, presumably literate, they are in a position to know), and then list numbers with pauses in the appropriate places to indicate word boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

Berjaoui claims that this process too discriminates root consonants from others, on the basis of verbal forms such as 3a, below. In 3a the final phoneme /u/, which indicates the inflectional category 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural and is orthographically represented as the glide /w/, is not preserved in the game's output.

- |     |    |            |                              |
|-----|----|------------|------------------------------|
| (3) | a. | xržu       | 'they went out'              |
|     |    | --> xrž    | ~ 600,200,3                  |
|     | b. | musaddasan | 'pistol (lit. six(shoot)er)' |
|     |    | --> msds   | ~ 40,300,4,300               |

However, further examination of Berjaoui's data demonstrates that in fact root status is not the determining factor of whether a segment is preserved in the game output, as

<sup>1</sup> Here and throughout, superscript /c/ indicates the voiced pharyngeal approximant, while barred /h/ represents the voiceless pharyngeal fricative.

<sup>2</sup> Due to the familiarity of the speakers with the Classical Arabic alphabet, it is unclear whether they are using some sort of consonantal similarity metric to establish the correspondences, as Berjaoui claims, or simply using their knowledge of Classical Arabic. An interesting test case would be a loanword containing the segment /p/, which does not exist in the native vocabulary of any variety of Arabic. Its adaptation could not, therefore, be dependent upon knowledge of etymological correspondences between Classical and Moroccan Arabic.

shown by 3b. In 3b the initial consonant /m/ is preserved, despite the fact that it is prefixal (indicating that it is participial) rather than belonging to the root. A more likely explanation for the omission of /u/ is its vocalic nature, with orthography serving only to mislead.

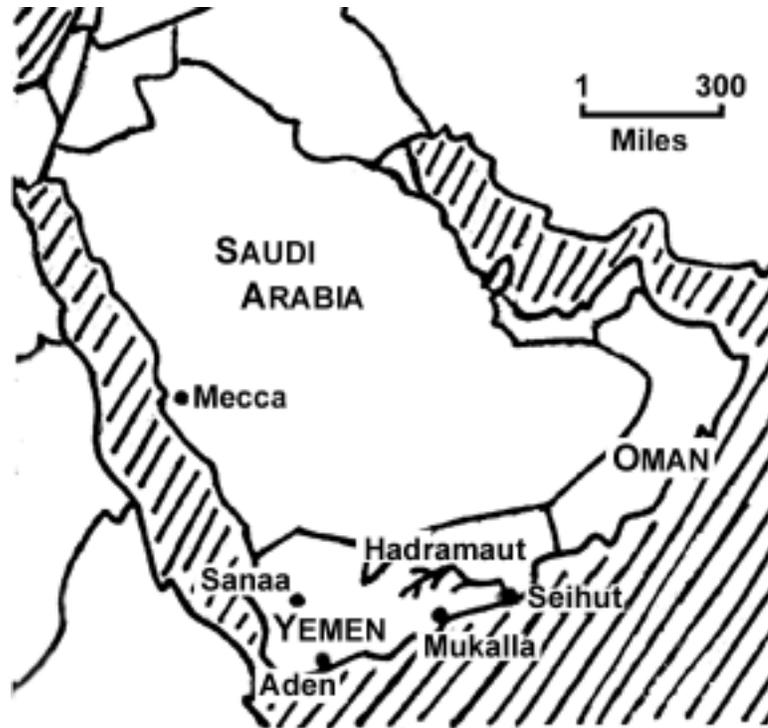
Chetrit (1994) also purports to describe a secret language of Morocco, used by Jewish former residents of the country. In fact, the language that he documents relies on lexical substitution rather than phonological alternations for its obfuscatory effect. Speakers disguise by means of using Hebrew-based words rather than Arabic ones. The same is true of a Moroccan secret language discussed in Youssi (1977), though the source language for him is not Hebrew, but Berber.

As for dialects other than Moroccan, Pound's (1963) survey of language games documents a Lebanese Arabic process that prefixes the syllable /za/ to the word. Iraqi Arabic has a similar process, prefixing /sV/ with the following syllable determining the vowel quality of the prefix, as well as a suffixation process involving the addition of the sequence /ks/. Cairene Arabic infixes the syllable /tin/ within the nucleus of the penultimate syllable (Burling, 1970). Finally, Walter (2002) documents a /k/-insertion language game used by speakers of Gulf Arabic.

#### **4. /aarb/-Insertion**

In this study I focus on two varieties of a certain insertion-style language game, spoken in coastal Hadramaut and the city of Mecca, respectively. The Meccan variety has been documented very recently in a study performed by a native speaker of it (Bakalla, forthcoming). The Hadrami data was gathered by the author in the course of extensive fieldwork in Hadramaut performed during the 2000-2001 academic year.

To my knowledge, based on a literature review and on personal communications with Arabs from the relevant regions, /aarb/-Insertion is not used elsewhere in the Arabian peninsula, or indeed in the Arabic-speaking world.



#### 4.1 Meccan /aarb/-Insertion: Form

Meccan /aarb/-Insertion (heretofore MI) is characterized descriptively by the infixation of the syllable /VVrb/ after the onset of the stressed syllable of a word. The vowel quality is not uniformly /aa/, as suggested by the section heading, but rather is determined by that of the (stressed) syllable into which it is inserted, as shown by the near-minimal triplet of 4a below.<sup>3</sup>

- |        |                   |                |     |                             |
|--------|-------------------|----------------|-----|-----------------------------|
| (4) a. | f <u>i</u> il     | ‘elephant’     | --> | f <u>i</u> irb <u>i</u> il  |
|        | f <u>u</u> ul     | ‘beans’        | --> | f <u>u</u> urb <u>u</u> ul  |
|        | g <u>a</u> al     | ‘he said’      | --> | g <u>a</u> arba <u>a</u> al |
| b.     | a□mad             | ‘Ahmad’        | --> | aarb <u>a</u> □mad          |
|        | qur?aa <u>n</u>   | ‘Koran’        | --> | qur?aarba <u>a</u> n        |
|        | hina              | ‘here’         | --> | hiirb <u>i</u> na           |
| c.     | a□t <u>a</u> ram  | ‘he respected’ | --> | a□taarb <u>a</u> ram        |
|        | altaga <u>a</u> h | ‘he found it’  | --> | altagaarba <u>a</u> h       |
|        | ga <u>a</u> balu  | ‘he met him’   | --> | gaarba <u>a</u> balu        |

Note that the stress of the output ‘game’ word always corresponds with that of the base word, even where straightforward application of the stress rules of Meccan Arabic (as

<sup>3</sup> The stress-bearing vowel is indicated with underlining.

formulated in Bakalla, forthcoming) would predict a different result.<sup>4</sup> This is the case, for example, in the word *hina* ‘here.’

#### 4.2 MI: Function

As to the social function that MI had in Meccan society, it is most appropriate to quote from Bakalla (forthcoming), as a native speaker. Bakalla states that MI (which he terms Misf, an abbreviation of the name of the area within Mecca in which it was spoken, ‘al-Misfalaawiyah’), “was in general vogue during the 30s and throughout the 60s....largely employed as a kind of secret language among the youngsters.”

He goes on to say that “in the 40s, Misf 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 cafes and meeting circles. For a time, *it was considered by many to be prestigious both to know and to use*” (my italics).

Finally, with respect to its origins, Bakalla states that the existence of MI “may reflect the cosmopolitan nature of life in Makkah and its multilingual interaction....The secret languages of Makkah, one can assume, might have been the results of this process of interaction and integration between the Makkans and the guests of God<sup>5</sup>....”

In sum, MI clearly functioned as an in-group speech disguise for Meccans. Not only did it serve to conceal the topic of conversation from the many pilgrims who transited the city, but it also (again according to Bakalla) “reflects an underlying social and generation[al] solidarity as well as group allegiance amongst the users.”

#### 4.3 Hadrami /aarb/-insertion: Form

Hadrami /aarb/-insertion (henceforth HI) differs from MI in two respects. Unlike the infix vowel of MI, which harmonizes with the quality of the following vowel, the HI inserted vowel is invariably /aa/. Secondly, the stress constancy exhibited by MI is not a feature of HI. In the latter, stress patterns regularly as in the rest of the language, and is not bound to that of the base form as in MI. The following two items exemplify both these distinctions:

(5)	sa <sup>ˈ</sup> iid	‘Said’	-->	sa <sup>ˈ</sup> aa <b>ri</b> id
	mukalla	‘Mukalla’	-->	Mukaa <b>ri</b> balla

#### 4.4 HI: Function

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<sup>4</sup> The stress rules given by Bakalla are as follows:

- 1) superheavy final syllable is stressed.
- 2) if none exists, heavy or superheavy penult is stressed (or initial light, if bisyllabic).
- 3) if none exists, the antepenult is stressed.

The inconsistency of this account with some of his examples (cf. 4c aṭṭaram ‘he respected’) is not addressed in his article.

<sup>5</sup> That is, Muslim pilgrims come to Mecca to fulfill the Hajj obligation.

#### 4.4.1 *Former Function*

The first, and previously only, attestation of HI occurs in Harold Ingrams' account of his time in Arabia, during part of which he served as the British Empire's first resident in Hadramaut, part of its Eastern Aden Protectorate. On a journey undertaken in the fall and winter of 1934 which took him from Mukalla, northeastward to Wadi Hadramaut, and back south via the wadi and west via the coast, Ingrams was briefly detained in the port town of Seihut (see map). There, at the home of the sultan's local representative, he witnessed the following encounter between his guide, Seiyid Muhsin, and a visitor:

"...Seiyid 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)

Ingrams does not subsequently reveal the subject of the conversation – doubtless because, as the two Seiyids intended, he never discovered it. Clearly the two men resorted to it in order to disguise their speech from their powerful foreign guest.

At this point a digression on the social structure of Hadramaut is in order.<sup>6</sup> Hadrami society stratifies into classes of seiyids, tribesmen, peasants and (former) slaves, in that order of relative prestige. While tribal chieftains traditionally ruled the region, and still exert considerable influence in local affairs, the seiyid class is highly respected by virtue of the fact that its members are descended from the prophet Muhammad himself. Unlike in other parts of the Arab world where the honor accorded them is purely a matter of personal respect, in Hadramaut the seiyid class has had an institutionalized role to play in mediating tribal disputes, establishing mosques and other public works, and so on. The seiyids were the only educated class, and as religious scholars were more widely travelled than other members of Hadrami society – far more likely, for instance, to have made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The high status of Seiyid Muhsin and his interlocutor is further apparent from the fact that the former was chosen as companion for the Ingrams, the British official, while the latter had free access to the home of the local governing authority.

#### 4.4.2 *Current Function*

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 in Mukalla by businessmen from the northern city of Taiz (well-known within Yemen for its entrepreneurial spirit), who have taken over the most profitable commercial arenas in many Yemeni cities. These Taizis attribute its use to a desire to conceal conversation from them personally.

#### 4.5 *A Comparison of MI and HI Form*

Language games such as MI and HI have traditionally been analyzed in terms of infixation of a CV-template (McCarthy 1982). Those of the type exemplified by MI and

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<sup>6</sup> Ingrams 1998, *passim*. For further information, especially pertaining to the seiyid class, see Serjeant 1957 and references therein.

HI are *syllable-disrupting*, in that they fracture the integrity of the syllable into which they are inserted. In the cases under discussion here, the inserted syllable is situated after the syllable onset, but before the syllable rime.

In a recent paper, Botne and Davis (2000) reanalyze the class of syllable-disrupting language games as consisting of two classes: insertion-type, and imposition-type. With MI and HI, we have one of each. HI is a straightforward case of insertion, with its stable vowel quality. It is nonetheless of some interest, since the fact that it is inserted into the *stressed* syllable of the base word fills a gap in the typology established by Botne and Davis. While one might plausibly expect insertion into stressed syllables, their corpus in fact finds it only in initial, final, or all syllables.

MI, on the other hand, seems to be a textbook example of an imposition-type process, as defined by Botne and Davis. That is, rather than insertion of a partially-specified CV-template, with autosegmental spreading from the base word to complete the specification of the inserted vowel, this type of game involves the imposition of a consonantal articulation on the vocalic gesture of the disrupted syllable. This both accounts for the context-dependent quality of the vowel and obviates the ambiguity that would otherwise be present as to whether the CV-template in the case of MI would be VVCC or VCCV.

The typologically frequent use of a labial consonant as this articulation, which also occurs in MI, is hypothesized to be due to the fact that it least disrupts the vocalic gesture.

A potential problem for the imposition analysis is the fact that the imposed consonantal articulation /rb/ of MI is always preceded by a long vowel, regardless of the vowel length of the disrupted syllable in the base word. Recall the following two data points from MI, and contrast these with two representative examples from the corpus of Botne and Davis (2000:324) (here underlining indicates the disrupted vocalic gesture under consideration, to highlight differences in length):

- (6) a. a□taram 'he respected' --> a□taarbaram  
 altagaah 'he found it' --> altagaarbaah  
 b. soha 'never, Hungarian' --> sovohava  
 k'oxob'aank 'to start it, Kekchi' --> k'opoxopob'apaank

Neither for short nor long vowels do we observe the VVCV(V) pattern evident in MI. This indicates that perhaps a template is still necessary to account for the presence of the "extra" vowel slot.

#### 4.6 *The Functional Development of HI*

As we have seen, MI was quite prestigious when used in Mecca. On this basis, one might expect /aarb/-Insertion to retain its prestigious status in Hadramaut, for two reasons. First, a Meccan pedigree is more than sufficient in the Muslim world to guarantee respect. 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. In fact, Islamic law considers the social practices of the two cities as one of the primary bases for legal decision-making (Williams, 1994:66).

Secondly, I hypothesize that the /aarb/-Insertion speech disguise was imported to coastal Hadramaut by members of the seiyyid class, who were by far the most likely to

travel to the holy cities. This is both because they were men of means compared to the rest of the citizenry of Hadramaut, and because as religious scholars they were the most likely to obey the learned Muslim injunction to “seek knowledge as far as China,” or travel in order to study with other prominent scholars (in this case, considerably closer to hand).

Given this conduit, /aarb/-Insertion, as eventually modified by Hadramaut speakers to HI, should have been doubly prestigious, both by virtue of its place of origin and because of the high status of its first Hadramaut speakers, the seiyids. And indeed this seems to have been the case at first. In the 1930s we see it used by seiyids, and in the high-status context of diplomatic negotiation.

As such, HI would naturally have been adopted by many sectors of society. Now the game is nearly extinct (in Mecca as in Hadramaut, *per* Bakalla). When it is used, it is by low-status “market people,” as observed above. Assuming that the game became widespread in coastal Hadramaut while still considered prestigious, what could account for its retention by only this low-status class?

The answer I propose lies in the recent political history of Yemen. As observed earlier, the speech disguise was used in Hadramaut, as in Mecca, to conceal conversations from outsiders. As port towns, the Hadramaut coastal cities of Mukalla and Seihut were home not only to British officials of Ingrams’ descriptions, but resident communities of Indians, Persians, East Africans, and other members of the Persian Gulf entrepot. After the Yemeni revolutions of the 1960s, however, these communities disappeared. In their place, and particularly after the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, came an influx of businessmen from the north – particularly from the city of Taiz. As stated previously, in cities throughout Yemen these Taizi businessmen now dominate many of the most profitable commercial arenas, such as hotel and restaurant ownership and import/export ventures.

Logically enough, the exclusionary force of the /aarb/-insertion speech disguise would primarily be directed against this new community of outsiders. As it happens, those most threatened by their presence are their local competitors – small-scale business operators, whose occupations happen to be low-prestige in the eyes of Hadramaut society.

## 5. Conclusion?

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