DIALECT LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY IN GADDAFI'S LIBYA: A CLAIM FOR PRESTIGE

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The present review article offers a discussion of the two issues of dialectal prestige and the use of colloquial Arabic in literature, based on the analysis of the volume Ḫarārīf lībiyyah *(Libyan Folktales). The collection of folktales, published in 2008 by the Libyan General Council of Culture, is preceded by an extremely interesting preface. Its author, Aḥmad Yūsuf ʿAqīlah (also the collector of the folktales), argues that Eastern Libyan Arabic should be regarded as a prestigious dialect due to its shared traits with different pre-Islamic varieties of Arabic, attested in the speech of the Prophet himself and in the dialect of the Banū Tamīm. In this way, he aims to demarginalize Eastern Libyan, which is not traditionally recognized as a prestige variety, and to justify its employment in literature (although he refers specifically to folk literature), overturning the traditional views concerning the employment of dialectal Arabic as a literary language.*

1. Introduction

Libyan literature has been, in recent years, the object of relatively few scholarly works, such as Ruocco (1997) and Diana (2008). After 2011, the emergence of a renewed translation movement, with Darf Publishers[1] at the forefront, has strived to make this somewhat neglected literature known to the great public. Apart from production in Modern Standard Arabic, Libya also features a body of dialect literature, often charged with ideological undertones, which this review article analyzes based on Aḥmad Yūsuf ʿAqīlah's *Ḫarārīf lībiyyah* (Libyan Folktales).

Ḫarārīf lībiyyah is a collection of 34 short stories from the Libyan folklore, followed by a short glossary and by concise biographical notes concerning the storytellers. The short stories are transcribed, using Arabic characters, in the Eastern Libyan dialect in which they were originally narrated, providing us with an interesting specimen of dialect literature for a variety of

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[1]   Darf Publishers, based in London, «was established in 1981 as an English imprint for the long-standing Arab publisher *Dar Fergiani* which was established by the late Mohamed Bashir Fergiani in 1952 in Libya». Nowadays, Darf Publishers focuses on the translation of literary works from lesser known countries, such as Libya, Sudan, Eritrea etc. See https://darfpublishers.co.uk/about/, last accessed on 03/25/2018.

Arabic that is usually off the radar. The book was published in 2008 in Sirt, Gaddafi's native town, by the General Council of Culture (*Maǧlis al-Ṯaqāfah al-ʿĀmm*), whose headquarters were located within the General Assembly of the Popular Council (*Maǧmaʿ al-Muʾtamarāt*). The volume, thus, was officially sanctioned by the Libyan Regime, and falls within the more general discourse of the Bedouin myth of origin on which Gaddafi (at least partially) built his legitimacy:

> A third element in Qadhafi's search for legitimacy focused on the social background of those who had led the revolution. Portraying the revolution as a reaction of the country's hinterland – where Qadhafi and most RCC members came from – against its exclusion during the monarchy, the systematic recruitment and emergence of members of the country's secondary tribes provided a powerful focus for the regime. […] the initial appeal to the hinterlands reflected once more an aspect of Qadhafi's populism: the fact that a new political community could be created that relied on the consultative mechanisms of a tribal system that had characterized the country before the Italian invasion (Vandewalle 2012: 86-87).

From this perspective, the Libyan Arabic dialect was given a special place in the cultural production of Gaddafi's Libya, especially in its more conservative and Bedouin varieties. This portrayed importance of Libyan Bedouin dialects, however, clashes with the general lack of recognition of such varieties within the Arabic-speaking world.

2. The Question of Prestige

The second half of the 20th century was marked, within the Arabic-speaking world, by a massive wave of urbanization, which had momentous consequences at the linguistic level. As Ferguson (1959: 340) had predicted, in fact, specific dialects rose to the status of national prestige varieties[2]. Ferguson had guessed the predictable rise of Cairene, Baghdadi and Damascene (although he was dubious on the last one), adding a possible North African variety (based on the dialect of Tunis or Rabat) and a possible Sudanese one. Subsequent events largely proved him right, and some of the varieties he mentioned, namely Cairene and Damascene (or, more generally, Syro-Lebanese), also rose to the status of supranational prestige varieties, due to the role of the media for Cairene and to the cultural importance of Syria and Lebanon. As evident from the varieties that Ferguson listed, Libyan did not (and still does not) enjoy any prestige at the supranational level, while the existence of a national prestige variety is itself dubious.

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[2]   Ferguson was wrong, however, in believing that the new prestige varieties would eventually replace MSA as national languages.

For this reason, the employment of Eastern Libyan Arabic for the transcription of Libyan folktales is extremely important from an ideological perspective, but it needs to be supported by facts that might help to establish a form of prestige for Libyan Bedouin dialects. The collector of the volume, thus, writes a preface (ʿAqīlah 2008: 34-41) in which he lists a series of linguistic facts that grant, at least in his opinion, undoubtable prestige to Eastern Libyan Arabic[3]. This procedure is, of course, completely artificial, since prestige cannot be bestowed on any given variety on the basis of a series of linguistic features, but it is worth investigating from both a literary and folk linguistics perspective[4]. The interest of the author's preface, finally, transcends the Libyan context in which it is written and tackles the more general debate on the acceptability of dialectal Arabic in the domain of literature. Aḥmad Yūsuf ʿAqīlah, in fact, builds his claim for prestige precisely on the eloquence (faṣāḥah) and purity (naqāʾ) of the dialectal variety under analysis, terms that are usually employed with reference to Classical or Modern Standard Arabic and not to dialects. The following paragraph will analyze in detail ʿAqīlah's preface, discussing its most interesting aspects.

3. A Claim for Prestige

The author's preface is almost hidden behind the harmless title «Norms of transcription» (Ḍawābiṭ al-kitābah), and starts with an extremely clear incipit: «The norm of transcription, here, is that the word should be transcribed as it is pronounced» (ʿAqīlah 2008: 34). The rest of the preface (ʿAqīlah 2008: 34-41) is reported below in English translation:

> - In the Eastern Bedouin dialect [of Libya], assimilation often happens with [third person] bound pronouns starting with hāʾ, resulting in a geminate consonant. For instance, raqabatu-hā [her neck] is pronounced rǝgbett-ā[5] and we write it as it is pronounced. This is eloquent speech (luġah faṣīḥah)[6] among

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[3] Bedouin dialects of Arabic enjoy, however, a sort of ambiguous prestige, which might be summarized in Ferguson's (1959: 79-80) famous quotation: «Sedentary Arabs generally feel that their own dialect is best, but on certain occasions or in certain contexts will maintain that the Bedouin dialects are better».

[4] For a concise description of Arabic folk linguistics, see Suleyman (2013).

[5] The original text has here رقبَنّا, in Arabic script. The author is, thus, signaling the assimilation of the hāʾ, but has no way to show the voiced realization of the etymological qāf. The transcription, consequently, reflects the standard realization of the word in Eastern Libyan Arabic.

[6] We chose, in this context, to translate luġah with "speech" and not "language", because it is clear that the author is here speaking of varieties of Arabic and not of different languages. As will be clear in the following pages, luġah was also the term employed by the early grammarians to describe pre-Islamic varieties of Arabic, in a way that resembles the contemporary usage of the word dialect.

some of the purest Arabs. It includes also the assimilation of *dāl* and *tāʾ* (or vice versa) due to the proximity of their points of articulation, as in our expression *ḍahətt-a*, i.e. *ḍahadta-hu* [You persecuted him]. The Prophet himself, peace and blessings be upon him, the most eloquent man (*afṣaḥ al-fuṣahāʾ*), spoke in this way. In *al-Muʿǧam al-kāmil fī lahaǧāt al-fuṣḥà* [The complete dictionary of the dialects of Classical Arabic] (Sallūm 1987: 89), [we read]: «It was reported that the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said: ʾWhich Muslim have I insulted, cursed or whipped (*ǧaladdu-hu*)?, i.e. *ǧaladtu-hu*ʾ», and he assimilated the *tāʾ* and the *dāl*. This assimilation does not occur in every word. Words ending in a *lām*, for instance, do not feature any assimilation, but are pronounced normally, for instance *ḏēl-hā* [her tail]. The same goes for those ending in a *mīm*, for instance *ʿilm-hā* [her science], or in a *nūn*, for instance *ʿēn-hā* [her eye] etc.

- The final *nūn* of the preposition *min* [from] is elided if the following word has a definite article *al*, and it is transcribed in this way: *m-əl-ḫōš* [from the house][7]. The same happens with *ʿalà* [on], which is transcribed *ʿa-l-gaṣər* [on the palace][8]. The tribe of Balḥāriṯ say *ʿa-l-arḍ* instead of *ʿalà ʾl-arḍ*. In *al-Muʿǧam al-kāmil fī lahaǧāt al-fuṣḥà* (Sallūm 1987: 432), [we read]: «Abū Isḥāq said: ʾIt is permitted to elide the *nūn* from *min* and *ʿan* due to the encounter of two quiescent letters (*li ʾltiqāʾ al-sākinayn*)ʾ».

After studying books of language, grammar and dictionaries, I found that the Eastern Libyan dialect (*lahǧah*) is closest to the speech (*luǧah*) of the Tamīm tribe. The Tamīm use the *kasrah* vowel on the first letter of any noun in the *faʿīl* form whose second letter is a guttural one. For instance, *šaʿīr* [barley] is pronounced *šiʿīr*, with a *kasrah* on the *šīn*. *Saʿīd* [happy] is pronounced *siʿīd*, with a *kasrah* on the *sīn*. In the same way, they say *tiʿrif* [you know], with a *kasrah* on the *tāʾ*, as we say in in our dialect. They pronounce *faʿlah* as *fiʿlah*, for instance pronouncing *kalimah* [word] as *kilmah*, with a *kasrah* on the *kāf* and a quiescent *lām*. In the same way, they pronounce *miʿdah* [stomach, Classical Arabic *maʿidah*] with a *kasrah* on the *mīm* and a quiescent *ʿayn*. They also say *miṣḥaf* [Quranic text], with a *kasrah* on the *mīm*, which is closest to our dialectal pronunciation.

They [also] say *al-ʿaṣir* [the afternoon], with a *kasrah* on the *ṣād*. It was reported that Abū ʿAmr bin al-ʿAlāʾ – he was a Tamīm – read: «wa tawāṣaw bi ʾl-ṣabiri» (and [they] advised each other to patience)[9], with a *kasrah* on the *bāʾ*.

They make the plural of the word *ḍān* [sheep] in *ḍayn*, which the same plural as in our dialect (*lahǧah*). They also say *ḍarabti-hi*, with a *kasrah* on the *tāʾ*, and some of the Arabs say *ḍarabtī-hi*, with a long *yāʾ*, as we pronounce it in our dialect. In *al-Muʿǧam al-kāmil fī lahaǧāt al-fuṣḥà* (Sallūm 1987: 506), [we read]: «Sībawayh said: ʾal-Ḫalīl told me that some of the Arabs say *ḍarabtī-hi*, adding a *yāʾ*ʾ». It is also reported that the Prophet himself, peace and blessings be upon him, said addressing a woman: «If you reconsider it (*law rāǧaʿtī-hi*)», with a long *yāʾ*.

In *waṣl* position, the Tamīm use *hāḏī* [this.F] instead of *hāḏihi*. They also say *madyūn* [indebted] and *mabyūʿ* [sold], not using *madīn* and *mabīʿ*. They also say *qabba al-tamar* [the date dried], and we use this verb in the same way. The examples of correspondence between the Eastern Libyan dialect (*lahǧah*) and the speech (*luġah*) of the Tamīm are countless, and this is not the place to expound them in detail. The reader who wants to inquire about them can consult Dr. Ġālib al-Muṭṭalibī's *Muʿǧam* [*lahǧat*] *Tamīm*, or one of the Tamīm poets: Ǧarīr, Ḏū al-Rummah, Aws bin Ḥiǧr, Ruʾbah bin al-ʿAǧǧāǧ. He can also consult the Quranic reading of Abū ʿAmr bin al-ʿAlāʾ, one of the seven readers of the Quran, who was a Tamīm. At the same time, Ḥafṣ [one of the transmitters of ʿĀṣim bin Abī al-Naǧūd's reading], who was a foreigner, was leaning toward the dialect (*lahǧah*)[10] of the Tamīm.

I appreciated the opinion of Dr. Muḥammad Muḥammad al-Muftī in his book *Hadrazah fī ʾl-sūq* (al-Muftī 2006: 184): «Barqah [the traditional name of Cyrenaica] was an isolated peninsula, by which the caravans did not pass. This is the secret of the purity of its people's dialect (*lahǧah*). The Eastern [Libyan] dialect is the closest thing we have to a linguistic museum, the speech (*luġah*) of the Arabs brought by the first conquerors».

The preface deserved to be reported and translated entirely, since it provides an extremely original contribution to the debate concerning the employment of dialectal Arabic in literature. The author, in fact, lists a series of linguistic features, although in a haphazard order, using them to justify the prominence of Eastern Libyan Arabic. The features listed by ʿAqīlah are, of course, all found in Eastern Libyan Arabic, although their interpretation leaves something to be desired. The assimilation of the bound pronoun *-hā* when preceded by a voiceless alveolar is rightly considered as a Bedouin trait (Benkato 2014: 59). However, the part concerning the frequent employment of the *kasrah* vowel, a shared trait with the Tamīm tribe according to the author, lists under the same denominator two distinct phenomena:

1. The raising of short low vowels in open syllables (**šaʿīr → šiʿīr* [barley] (Owens 1984: 12);
2. The breaking of consonantal clusters by means of an epenthetic vowel (*ʿaṣr → ʿaṣir* [afternoon], *ṣabr → ṣabir* "patience") (Owens 1984: 25-26).

Apart from this, the author, not a professional linguist, makes an interesting list of traits pertaining to different areas of the dialect (phonetics, morphology, lexicon). What is interesting, however, is that ʿAqīlah constantly tries to find a connection between Eastern Libyan Arabic and pre-Islamic or early Islamic Arabic. The phenomena of assimilation and the lengthening of the /i/ vowel in 2nd person feminine singular verbs in the past, for instance, are ascribed to the Prophet himself, while Sībawayh is also quoted as a source on the latter; for the breaking of consonantal clusters (*ṣabr* "patience"

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[10] This is the only occurrence where a pre-Islamic dialectal variety is designed with the term *lahǧah* and not with the usual *luġah*.

→ *ṣabir*), one of the seven Quranic readings is quoted; other traits, such as the employment of the *kasrah* instead of the *fatḥah*, are more generally regarded as a feature of the Tamīm dialect, considered as the closest to Eastern Libyan Arabic. One of the words here quoted, *kalimah / kilmah*, has been long used to highlight dialectal variation in pre-Islamic Arabic. The word apparently had three variants: *kalimah*, used in Ḥiǧāz, *kilmah* and *kalmah*, both used by the Banū Tamīm (which usually means by speakers of Eastern pre-Islamic dialects). Only the first variant made it to the dictionaries of Classical Arabic, but the other two are widely attested in different dialects and cannot be dismissed as later developments. On the contrary, they must be considered as ancient as the Classical *kalimah* (Larcher 2005: 261).

After this interesting linguistic excursus, thus, the conclusion of the preface is a bold claim for prestige. Eastern Libyan Arabic is a linguistic museum, a variety that retained its original purity due to its isolation and that, as a consequence, reflects Arabic as it was brought to Northern Africa from the Arabian Peninsula by the first conquerors in the 7th century. The author is here entering the domain of what might be called folk sociolinguistics, since no prestige variety in the Arab world owes its position to its alleged purity or ancientness. The main supranational varieties of Arabic are, as previously mentioned, Cairene and Syro-Lebanese. While Cairene owes its position to the omnipresence of Egyptian media products in the MENA region, Syro-Lebanese is renowned for the cultural prominence of Greater Syria in the intellectual market of the Middle East, and also used by a great number of artists, especially actors and singers. As times change, Gulf Arabic is nowadays acquiring a certain prestige, due to the economic power of Gulf states and to the spread of their media (Bassiouney 2015: 129). Local prestige varieties follow similar patterns: they are either the dialect of the capital, indexing all the lures of urban life, or the variety spoken by the most powerful social group, as happens in Bahrein (Holes 1995). It is clear that Easter Bedouin Libyan Arabic has no kind of supranational diffusion and is not the dialect of the socially dominant group in Libya, even though Gaddafi was born and raised in Sirt[11]. ʿAqīlah's linguistic and literary operation, on the other hand, aims to build an artificial prestige, based on the same traits, ancientness and purity, that are usually employed to describe and extol Classical Arabic and its contemporary offspring, Modern Standard Arabic.

4. al-Lahǧah al-lībiyyah al-fuṣḥà*? An Original Approach to the Employment of Dialect in Literature*

From a strictly linguistic point of view, thus, ʿAqīlah's preface remains a nice example of folk linguistics, in which a highly educated native speaker,

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[11] On dialectal variation in Gaddafi's speech and his prevalent accommodation to Tripoli Arabic, see Mazraani (1997).

not a professional linguist, offers his own interpretation of language facts. The preface, however, is placed within the context of a literary work, and should consequently be looked at also from a literary perspective. From this point of view, the contribution he makes to the debate concerning the employment of dialectal Arabic in literature (here, folk literature) is no less interesting.

The employment of dialectal Arabic in literary works is not, in itself, a recent phenomenon in Arabic literature. In al-Andalus, *zaǧal* poetry incorporated elements of the local colloquial since, at least, the 12th century (Cachia 1967: 12). Throughout all the pre-modern period, dialect continued to be used without drawing too much attention, mainly due to its being limited to satirical or humoristic works. In the 20th century, however, the debate concerning the legitimate use of Arabic dialects in literature was charged with political issues that took different tones in Egypt and Lebanon (Davies 2011: 601-603).

In Egypt, for instance, the socialist writer and activist Salāmah Mūsà (Camera d'Afflitto 2007: 214-215) branded literature in Classical Arabic as elitist and advocated the use of the Egyptian colloquial in literary works. At the other end of the spectrum, Naǧīb Maḥfūẓ considered dialectal Arabic as a disease from which the Arab society was suffering and had to get rid of through progress, thus reiterating the old idea that saw in the dialects a corruption of Classical Arabic (Cachia 1967: 20). Other prominent intellectuals, such as Naffūsah Zakariyyā, considered the employment of dialect in literature as a real conspiracy of Western powers and orientalists against the Arabic language and the unity of the Arab countries that it represents (Davies 2011: 602).

In Lebanon, on the other hand, Classical Arabic and the Lebanese dialect were used by pan-Arabists and nationalists in more or less subtle ways. A traditional view, often upheld by Christian writers, sees Arabism as irrevocably linked to Islam and thus adverse to Lebanese nationalism, even though Maronite Christians such as ʿAbd Allāh Lahhud denied such a link and highlighted the contribution made by Christian Lebanese to the process of Arabization in the 19th century (Suleyman 2003: 207). Nonetheless, this opinion has also reached extreme points, best represented by Saʿīd ʿAql and his idea of a Lebanese language detached from Arabic. Championing the idea (not grounded in any sound linguistic framework) that Lebanese derives directly from Phoenician and is not a dialect of Arabic, in fact, Saʿīd ʿAql devised a new script, based on the Latin alphabet, and used his journal "Lebnaan" as a platform from which to spread his linguistic revolution (Płonka 2006: 423, and 2004). His two poetic works *Yaara* (1961) and *Khumasiyyaat* (Cinquine,

1978) perfectly embody his idea of a Lebanese national language, expression of a national identity culturally distinct from the Arab one[12].

If we compare these ideas to the perspective expressed by ʿAqīlah in his preface, the difference is striking. ʿAqīlah, in fact, does not advocate the use of dialectal Arabic (in itself limited to the collection of folktales) because it is the actual everyday language of all Libyans. At the same time, the idea of a Libyan national identity detached from the Arab one couldn't be farther from him[13]. ʿAqīlah justifies the employment of Eastern Bedouin Libyan Arabic precisely because it shares with Classical Arabic those traits of an-cientness and purity that bestow on it the definition of a "linguistic museum" (*matḥaf luġawī*). ʿAqīlah goes back to a pre-Classical idea of Arabic, the "holistic language" (*Gesamtsprache*) first evoked by Fleischer (1854: 155) and recently resumed by Owens (2006: 40-43). Reading through his preface, in fact, the term usually translated in English with "dialect(s)" occurs in two different Arabic counterparts, namely *lahǧah* and *luġah*, which we translated as "speech". While *lahǧah* is one of the terms normally used to designate the dialects[14], the employment of *luġah*, which in contemporary Arabic means "language", is not ʿAqīlah's innovation. Quite to the contrary, it is the nor-mal term employed by Sībawayh and the early grammarians to designate di-alectal varieties of Arabic, especially in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic era, when Classical Arabic had not yet been codified and could not thus serve as a normative standard from which to measure deviation. From this point of view, Larcher (2005: 261) is right when he identifies Classical Arabic as a point of arrival of dialect development and not, as assumed by many non-lin-guists, as a point of departure from which dialects were born due to "corrup-tion". Starting from these premises, the quotation that closes ʿAqīlah's pref-ace is revolutionary for the debate concerning the employment of dialects in literature: «The Eastern Libyan dialect (*lahǧah*) *is* the speech (*luġah*) brought by the first [Arab] conquerors [emphasis mine]» (ʿAqīlah 2008: 37).

5. Conclusion

This review article presented a discussion of the original contribution made by ʿAqīlah (2008) to the debate concerning both dialectal prestige and

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[12] Lebanon also featured more moderate advocates of the use of dialect in literature. Mīšāl (Michel) Ṭrād, for instance, held a position closer to the Egyptian one and, without ever denying the link between Lebanese and Arabic, considered Classical Arabic as «[…] an old sclerotic Bostonian with a golden dental plate» (Davies 2011: 603).

[13] Such an idea, however, has been recently advanced by Berber activists after 2011.

[14] Other terms are ʿāmmiyyah (lit. popular) and dāriǧah (lit. current), the latter espe-cially in Morocco. Other terms, often used with a derogatory meaning, are *luġat al-šāriʿ* (language of the street) and *luġat al-sūq* (language of the market).

the employment of colloquial Arabic in literature. Although ʿAqīlah does not elaborate a comprehensive theory advocating the general use of dialectal Arabic in all kinds of literary works, he provides an original justification to his choice to transcribe the Eastern Libyan folktales he collected in their original variety of Arabic. The reasons cited by ʿAqīlah are diametrically different from those employed by other champions of dialect literature, both in Egypt and in Lebanon. Salāmah Mūsà considered Arabic dialects as an antidote to elitism in literature and Saʿīd ʿAql as a way to assert the Lebanese national identity (considering Lebanese as a separate language and not a dialect of Arabic). ʿAqīlah, on the contrary, lists a series of linguistic features in order to show that Eastern Bedouin Libyan Arabic is rooted in the same cultural tradition from which Classical Arabic first arose. Even more than that, that dialect, due to its isolation, is actually the language brought by the first conquerors during 7th century. It is not a chance, thus, that the author quotes, in support of his theory, authorities whose prestige cannot be questioned: the Prophet, the Quran, the author of the most famous treatise on Arabic grammar (Sībawayh) and the Banū Tamīm tribe. Under the general definition of Tamīm, the early grammarians often intended Eastern pre-Islamic Arabic, opposed to the Ḥiǧāzī type (Rabin 1951: 7). Different tribes belonging to the Tamīm confederation, moreover, were often referred to as *afṣaḥ al-ʿarab* (the most eloquent Arab) (Rabin 1951: 20), so that affiliation with the Tamīm dialect should be understood as a mark of prestige.

ʿAqīlah, thus, achieves a double goal: in line with Gaddafi's ideology of the Bedouin legitimacy, he claims prestige for the Eastern Bedouin dialects of Libya, based on widely shared religious and linguistic facts. At the same time, however, he enters the debate concerning the employment of colloquial Arabic in literature, justifying it on the basis of its eloquence (*faṣāḥah*) and thus completely overturning the views so far expressed by other Arab intellectuals.

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