DOUBLETS IN ARABIC: NOTES TOWARDS
A DIACHRONIC PHONOLOGICAL STUDY

RADWAN S. MAHADIN

English Department
Yarmouk University
Irbid, Jordan

ABSTRACT

This article examines doublets in Arabic, discussing the alternations between the determinants in the doublets. Moreover, it shows that the alternations are the result of phonological changes. The directions of the phonological changes are suggested. The conclusion shows that the phonological changes are in agreement with the changes that have occurred in other Semitic languages and in modern Arabic dialects. Moreover, it shows that the Classical Arabic is a mixture of different pre-Islamic dialects and that modern dialects are an extension of the old Arabic dialects.

Finally, the article shows the advantage of using the present to explain the past.

This article examines doublets in Arabic, discussing the alternations between the determinants in the doublets. Moreover, it shows the alternations are the result of phonological changes, the specific process being dialect borrowing [5]. Doublets can be defined as two or more words in the same language, deriving from the same source and having similar meanings. They are phonemically identical except for one sound; that is, the stems share all sounds except one consonant. The differing consonant, called the determinant, could be any of the consonants in the root, but in a particular doublet, the determinant would have to appear in the same position, i.e., initial, medial, or final. The following examples illustrate the point:

1. (bakka) -- (makka) "Mecca"
2. (qunfuḍ) -- (qunfud) "hedgehog"
3. (tuṣṭrūr) -- (tuḥṭrūr) "thin cloud"

In these examples three alternations of the determinants occur.

1. (b) -- (m) The alternation is in the initial position. The determinants differ in the manner of articulation: (b) is an oral stop; (m) is a nasal stop.

2. (ṭ) -- (d) The alternation is in the final position. The determinants differ in both the place and manner of articulation: (ṭ) is an interdental fricative; (d) is a dental stop.

3. (x) -- (ḥ) The alternation is in the medial position. The determinants differ in the place of articulation: (x) is uvular; (ḥ) is pharyngeal.

Is it possible to determine the direction of the phonological change? To answer such a question, we need to examine the source of the doublets, for the source allows us the possibility of determining the direction of phonological change. If the two forms of a certain doublet were found in two different areas, tribes, or dialects, then we may say that the two forms were introduced into Classical Arabic by the Arab grammarians when they tried to systematize the Arabic language [8]. In other words, the Classical Arabic is a koine [3]. On the basis of this assumption, it is not easy to trace the development of the two forms, especially the phonological changes. On the other hand, we could assume that we have one form which was borrowed by another dialect or speaker and which then underwent the change. Or we could assume that the change happened within the same dialect due to the ease of articulation or to children’s mistakes in language learning or to some other causes of linguistic change [11].

For example, the deletion of a glottal stop in Arabic is a very common process (ṣ → ṛas “head”), and it is also common in all Semitic languages [1]. If this last process is the case, we could trace the change with a reasonable certainty. However, without denying the possibility of any or all of these processes occurring my judgment of the direction of the change.
is based on the following assumptions:
1. The Semitic languages have a tendency to change in the same direction. For example, dental fricatives have become either stops or alveolar fricatives in most Semitic languages [9]. Consequently, one could assume that similar changes could occur in Arabic.
2. Certain changes are more natural than others. For example, it is more natural for fricatives to become stops than for stops to become fricatives. For example, fricatives emerge after stops in child language [10]. Voiceless fricatives are more natural than voiced fricatives, and consonants with emphatic articulation tend toward plain articulation.
3. Certain assumptions could be deduced by comparing some forms in Modern Standard Arabic with other forms in Koranic-Colligual Arabic and, at the same time, with forms which existed in old dialects and in Classical Arabic before Islam. In other words, we can compare forms before Islam with forms after Islam. This can be done by examining written records, i.e., the scattered writings of the Arab grammarians in which they attributed certain forms for certain tribes or dialects. By weighing which dialect was more prestigious or which form was more common (the relative usage of the forms), we can determine the old form. However, this last method is not always reliable because many of these texts were reported on the authority of a number of grammarians and transmitters of poetry. However, we must be very cautious in our use of such testimony, for pre-Islamic literature is mainly poetry and is rather suspect in its authenticity [6].
4. By comparing the distribution of relative frequency of consonants, we can, with the help of other criteria, decide that the sound with a high frequency is more stable and less susceptible to change than the one used less frequently.

The following are some representative examples of doublets in Arabic:

| [s-]: [asbada]-[asada]  | (7) | "to linger" |
| [a]: [dabba]-[daffa]  | (b-f) | "to walk slowly" |
| [s-]: [asfafa]-[asaffa]  | (b-g) | "to go" |
| [a]: [nast][nasa]  | (b-h) | "to own" |
| [a]: [tastasa]-[rotama]  | (b-i) | "to utter" |
| [a]: [marasa]-[marrasa]  | (b-j) | "to observe" |
| [a]: [habala]-[hablal]  | (b-k) | "soul dogue from the earth" |
| [a]: [taqasa]-[taqala]  | (b-l) | "to stop" |
| [a]: [tisnial]-[tisnial]  | (b-m) | "Ishmael" |

On the basis of phonetic similarities and the alterations between consonants in the doublets and on the basis of the assumptions discussed above, the following phonological changes can be suggested:

I. Plain (non-emphatic) consonants:
1. Labial consonants:
   - [b] > [b] (7)
2. Front consonants:
   - [k] > [k] (8)
   - [s] > [s] (9)
   - [z] > [z] (10)
3. Alveolar resonants:
   - [t] > [n] (11)
4. Back consonants:
   - [x] > [x] (12)
   - [k] > [k] (13)
5. Emphatic consonants:
   - [t] > [t] (14)
   - [q] > [q] (15)
   - [g] > [g] (16)

The conclusion shows that the phonological changes are in agreement with the data that have occurred in other Semitic languages and in modern Arabic dialects [9, 10]. Moreover, it shows that the Classical Arabic is a mixture of different pre-Islamic dialects and that modern dialects are an extension of the old Arabic dialects.

REFERENCES: