

# Nigerian Arabic: A Preliminary Sociolinguistics Investigation

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**Abstract** – Arabic, like other widespread languages, has many varieties mostly identified with regions they are spoken. Even the Standard variety, the *Fusha*, which cuts across all regions and periods, is not completely free from regional input. Attempt was made in this paper, to account for the spread of Arabic Language in Nigeria, and to discuss some deviations from Standard Arabic (SA) in the written language of Nigerian Educated Speakers of Arabic. It identified two grammatical and four vocabulary and expression areas where deviations can be found in the written Nigerian Arabic usage. The paper argued that those deviations should not be dismissed as mere mistakes requiring corrections, as usually done from the prescriptive grammatical perspective. They should rather be studied further to determine whether they provide nucleus for an emerging Nigerian Variety of Arabic.

**Keywords** – Arabic Language Varieties, Deviations, Nigerian Arabic, Sociolinguistics, Standard Arabic.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Arabic Language, in a very large part of what is today known as Nigeria, has a long history. It was once the language of correspondences and documentations in the Sokoto Caliphate. Learning and speaking Arabic language never ceased since then in Nigeria. Standard Arabic has always been the type or variety spoken and written in Nigeria; but certain “derivations” peculiar to Nigeria can be observed in the Arabic spoken/written, these deviations warrant investigation as to whether a form that may be referred to as Nigerian Arabic exists. The aim of this paper is to discuss and analyze samples of such linguistic deviations as found in written discourse of Educated Nigerian Speakers of Arabic in an attempt to describe some linguistic features of how the language is used in Nigerian.

## II. ARABIC LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA: INTRODUCTION AND SPREAD

Galadanchi in [18] was of the opinion that contact between Arabs and communities from what is known today as Nigeria dated back to 10<sup>th</sup> Century A.D., when Arab merchants on trade mission through the Sahara, came to Hausaland. Some of these Arab traders subsequently establish settlements there. However, the spread of Arabic language would only take a serious shape upon the conversion of the Hausa people to Islam. Muslims generally are required to use Arabic Language in some forms of worship/rituals. This, coupled with the emphasis Islam placed on knowledge, would make the Hausa Muslims to embark in the learning of Islam, the sources of which were in Arabic. Al-Iloriy opined that wherever Islam sets its foot, two types of schools sprang: Qur’anic school for children

and the beginners and *Ilm*-School (school for Islamic Sciences) for adults and advanced learners [2]. Thus the Hausa Muslims embarked on systematic learning of Arabic Language.

In the eastern part of Northern Nigeria was the ancient kingdom of Kanem Borno, which was said to have established contacts with the Arabs at almost the same time with Hausa land or much earlier. The relationship between the Arabs and the area grew beyond trade and exchange of goods to more social and religious ties. There is, today in Borno State, a community whose first language is Arabic. They are popularly known as Arab-Shuwa or Shuwa-Arab. Hunwick was of the view that the earliest Arabic learning centre in what is called today Nigeria was Gazargamu the capital of the Mais of Borno, followed by Katsina and Kano [12].

Arabic Language in Nigeria achieved its highest status in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when the then Sokoto Caliphate adopted it as its official language of documentation and correspondence. Although the status of Arabic language has declined thereafter; but by the second half of the twentieth century, as Hunwick would say: usage of Arabic as a literary language and as general language of written communication has become more widespread... the teaching of Arabic in primary and secondary schools in Muslim majority areas has become commonplace, while several of Nigeria's Universities offer undergraduate degrees and doctorates in Arabic Studies. [12].

There are, today in Nigeriatens of tertiary educational institutions where Arabic is vigorously studied. A good number of those institutions use Arabic as the medium through which instruction is given in subjects such as Islamic theology, shari’ah, (Islamic) History, and Education [10]. Kaura listed not less than (27) twenty seven of such institutions in one of the 6 geopolitical zones of Nigeria; the North-West zone, (NW). At least ten (10) of them are Universities [14]. As a result of the proliferation of these institutions of learning where Arabic Language is studied, there was a significant increase – especially from the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the number of Nigerians who use Arabic as a language of academic, literary and general communication [15]. Works in genres that were unknown in the past such as, novel and play became very common.

Therefore, despite the fact that Arabic is a foreign language in Nigeria, it is widely learnt and used by many Muslims, almost as a second language. It is also important to note here that the form or variety of Arabic language used by Educated Nigerian speakers of Arabic Language is the Standard Arabic, (SA), known as *Fusha*. Nevertheless, there are certain observable features, which for obvious reasons, characterize the use of Arabic Language by the majority of these Nigerian speakers. Galadanci [18]

accounted for distinctive features of Arabic Language used in Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

### III. VARIATIONS AND ARABIC LANGUAGE

Differences in the way and manner people use language are an observable phenomenon that affects almost all languages, especially the ones with wider spread. Different forms of spelling or pronunciation exists in different places with different people, for particular linguistic codes of the same language. Variation studies try to account for these differences in terms of factors that affect the use of language for communication. Gender, age, social status, geographical locations, ethnicity etc, were all studied by linguists as determining factors for variations in language. A variety of a particular language may refer to a peculiar pattern or form of that language which is characterized by certain distinctive linguistic features of pronunciation, grammar and / or vocabulary [11], [21].

Arabic is a Semitic language of the Afro-asiatic family which has spread widely beyond the Arabian peninsula into Asia and Africa [3], [5]. It was very strong in some areas of its spread that there was Arabization of people who were initially non-Arab, especially in the North and East Africa. This widespread provided a fertile ground for the emergence of varieties. Arabic was considered 'a macro language that consists of (30) thirty modern varieties including its standard form' (wiki/varieties of Arabic). Study of variations in Arabic language was influenced obviously by the particular history associated with the spread and development of the language. Islam is undoubtedly the most important factor in that; therefore the position of the Qur'an as not only a sacred source text for Islamic Shari'ah but also a literary masterpiece beyond imitation, influenced greatly the classification of varieties of Arabic language by early researchers. It was from this perspective that it was generally accepted that there exist one standard form, around which all other varieties revolve. Although early studies on variations were less judgmental in terms of purity or otherwise of a variety particularly in reference to earlier varieties, and that, whatever came from a native speaker was acceptable as long as the linguistic intuition of the speaker was not polluted by contact with other linguistic groups, it was generally accepted that the Quraishi Arabic which have the lion share of the Qur'an was the best variety[13], that subsequently became the standard variety by which all other emerging varieties are judged and accepted or rejected. Every emerging variety was accepted when it conforms to this standard variety and rejected and considered as deviation whenever it fails to conform to it. Thus variation studies in Arabic language were premised generally upon the feeling that there was a standard variety and other regional/colloquial varieties.

The standard variety is for obvious reason the one that spreads more quickly and widely, as it's the one that allows for the understanding of the Qur'an and the rich literary legacies of the early Muslims. The standard Arabic, although considered as one variety, manifests in different places/regions differently enough to allow for regional classification. For example, presence of French words or

expressions was considered a feature of the SA in French colonized North African countries, Abdussalam [7]. However, in their description of SA, scholars were particularly concerned with what is known as the Arab world; i.e. the countries and places where Arabic is the primary or native language.

Modern variation studies are mostly focused on colloquial or regional varieties found in the said territories. This might be influenced by the marked differences or distinctiveness that is observable between the varieties and SA on one hand, and between the colloquial varieties themselves on the other. Many of these varieties are so distinct that there is sometimes no mutual intelligibility between their speakers.

However, the existence of variations within SA, is enough in itself to call for the attention of researchers into investigation of the form of Arabic being used in places beyond the Arab world. Moreover, Arabic has been used in many of those places for centuries, and large volume of Arabic literature produced by scholars among whom were people who never met an Arab in their lives exist in some of those areas. The expanding concentric circle in the Kachru's model for describing regional varieties of English if modified can account for these areas.

### IV. NIGERIAN ARABIC

Standard Arabic (SA) has always been the variety used in Nigeria. But it has acquired overtime some distinctive features due to certain ethno-geo sociological factors. Scholars have a long time ago shown interest in those features. For example, section three of the fifth chapter of [18], (a work which was originally a Ph.D. thesis presented to University of Cairo, *Darul-Uloom* in February 1975) was titled: 'Some Characteristics of Arabic Language in Nigeria'. He was perhaps the first to use the term 'Nigerian Arabic'. In that section (p.193), he used the term 'Nigerian Arabic' probably for the first time. He identified four major areas through which Nigerian Arabic could be distinguished; they are orthography, pronunciation, construction and use and poetry. The inclusion of poetry here, although not a linguistic variable, might be informed by the author's overriding concern of presenting a general overview of the situation/condition of Arabic language in Nigeria within the period of his study.

Galadanchi adopted corrective approach of the prescriptive grammatical perspective toward those characteristics. He considered all forms of Arabic language found in Nigeria, which do not conform to SA as it is presented in standard books of Arabic grammar, mistakes which need to be corrected. His work may therefore be seen largely as an enumeration of common mistakes found in Nigerian Arabic in the period under review.

However, in this paper, I will attempt to explain some features that are found in Nigerian Arabic at the level of construction and use only. This is informed by the fact that pronunciation variations found in Nigeria were generally considered to be mistakes, and the speakers exert a lot of efforts in trying to correct them. This is true because Nigerians are not Arabs. With orthography one may claim

that technological advancement has almost united the whole world together.

My conception of Nigerian Arabic is in line with Galadanchi's opinion in [18]. It emanates from the feeling that there are in Nigeria people with higher level of proficiency in Arabic language by virtue of advanced studies they undergo in this language. They are capable of producing excellent academic and literary works in the language, comparable to what is produced in the Arab world. However, there are usages from this category of Nigerian Arabic speakers that don't conform to the SA as it is presented in standard books. These usages need not to be dismissed as mere errors, they should rather be seen as deviations characterizing the use of Arabic language in Nigeria. Therefore, Nigerian Arabic in this paper refers to the Arabic language used in both written and oral communication by educated Nigerian speakers (of Arabic).

By educated speakers, I am by no means subscribing to the popular concept as advanced by many writers such as Mitchel [20], Taha [22], and Karim [16]); nor do I adopt El-Hassan's [11] definition of educated speakers of Arabic, as quoted by Karim in [16]. This is so, because, in Nigeria as against Egypt and Levant, Arabic is largely a foreign language spoken only by people who labored to learn it as part of a large curriculum in either the (modern) formal system or the semi formal traditional one. By the time one attains a reasonable degree of proficiency in Arabic he must have been versed in many areas of Islamic education. Therefore Nigerian educated speakers of Arabic are the advanced level learners of Arabic language who possess a good level of proficiency in Arabic language through training, enough to allow them to, not only read understand and interpret Arabic texts, but also communicate intelligibly well in the language. These are, usually, people who possessed at least a University degree or studied in the semi formal system such advanced books of Arabic sciences usually prescribed in the curriculum of University and postgraduate Arabic education in Nigeria.

## V. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

As a preliminary study with the aim of investigating the probability of the existence of distinguishable features for Nigerian Arabic, emphasis is given in this paper to written as against the spoken language. This is informed by the fact that writing accords the opportunity for review and doing away with slips; therefore, the written discourse can safely be assumed to represent the authors' level of language use. And by the standard of education of the Nigerian educated speakers of Arabic, deviations coming from them shouldn't be dismissed as mere learning errors. Upon this, examples here are drawn from written literary and academic works.

Consequently, reference will not be made in the following discussion to aspects of pronunciation and spelling; since pronunciation manifests in spoken language only; and that computer based programmes and software have almost standardized Arabic orthography. Thus, only issues of vocabulary and grammar will feature.

### A. Grammar:

Grammatical deviations from the SA, (*fusha*) in the lan-

-guage of Educated Nigerian Speakers of Arabic mostly occur in two areas; transitivity and intransitivity of verbs and use of prepositions (*huruf al-jarr*). The two are actually interconnected since the intransitive verbs, normally, connects with their objects through the prepositions; and that the verbs determine the suitable preposition to be used.

Verbs like, *fataha* and *dakhala*, are transitive and do not require with them a preposition, while verbs such as *Kharaja* and *jalasa* are intransitive requiring a preposition. But '*dakhala*' is very often associated with 'fi' in Nigeria. Expressions like '*dakhala fi al-baiti*' in place of '*dakhala al-baita*', '*dakhala fi al-masjid*' in place of '*dakhala al-masjid*' are not un common in Nigerian Arabic. Although '*fi*' was used with '*dakhala*' in the Qur'an (ch.2:208), it wasn't in reference to a material place.

Similarly, I witnessed a Ph.D. viva voce where the examining Professor would say to the candidate '*iftah ila safhah...*' whenever he wanted to draw his attention to a particular page. He was doing that throughout the viva even though *fataha* is a transitive verb. Although this is not a common usage, the professor might probably had in mind the English expression '*go to page ...*', and was not comfortable with the use of "*idhhab*" in that context.

On prepositions; it is generally accepted in Arabic grammar that they pose a problem of usage. Some prepositions are used interchangeably without any problem while others are not, and that gives room for (over) generalization. Examples of deviations in the use of prepositions are:

Nigerian Arabic	Standard Arabic
1a. <i>Ajaba 'ala su'alihi</i>	1. <i>ajaba 'an su'alihi</i>
2a. <i>Ishadda 'alaihi al-marad</i> [7].	2. <i>ishtadda bihi al-marad</i>
3a. <i>Tawjihu al tullabi 'ala...</i> [1]	3. <i>Tawjihu at tullabi ila...</i>
4a. <i>Talaba al-binta min abiha...</i> (marriage)	4. <i>Talaba al- binta ila abiha</i>

The examples above are not suggestive of a particular pattern in the substitution. It is difficult to assume local languages influence from the meaning of the expressions. Sometimes, there is no consistency in the use of a particular preposition. Sani & Babikir use both the two varying forms above in the same work [1]. This practice if well established is suggestive of a phenomenon by which varieties are characterized, the phenomenon of disregard to a particular grammatical rule.

### B. Vocabulary and Expressions

Features of deviations in the language of Educated Nigerian Speakers of Arabic manifests more commonly and clearly in this area. Words and expressions unknown to SA are very often used. They are mostly taken from local languages through lexical borrowing in the case of words, or loan translations in the case of expressions. Arabic (SA) words and expressions are also used semantically with senses different to SA. This issue has been identified by Galadanci [18] as a characterizing feature of Nigerian Arabic. He viewed it an error that emanates from (over) generalization and (over) specification in the senses of words; and also from changing the domain of their usage. It is common in Nigeria to hear people using '*sami'a*' with the sense of '*fahima*', as in "*la asma'u al-arabiyah*"; or

'jalasa' with the sense of *aqama* or *sakana*. In both the two examples, the influence of local language is apparent. In Hausa 'Ji' is the word used for both hearing and understanding; and 'zama' denotes both 'sitting' and 'living' in a place [9]. Another example of overgeneralization of the sense of a vocabulary item is the use of *Talib*. It is common – although not only in Nigeria – to find expressions such as: '*huwa talibi*' and '*ana talibuka*'. This is in place of the SA expressions: '*huwa tilmidhiy*' and '*ana tilmidhuka*'. (Eng. 'He is my student' and 'I m your student'). 'Talib', the first part of the compound name '*talibu al-'ilm*' was overwhelmingly used separately to cover the sense of '*tilmidh*' which is normally done by the compound '*talibu al-'ilm*'.

The following are further examples of deviations usually found in Nigerian Arabic in vocabulary and expressions.

a. *Foreign Vocabularies*

1. *godogodo*- [8]. (source: Hausa)
2. *al-tanbul* – [8], [6]. (source: ?)
3. *ba laifi*-[6]. (source: Hausa)

b. *Misappropriation of Sense*

- *Fasada* –used in the sense of 'ta,attala'. E.g. *fasadat sayyaratuhu* (Eng. His car has broken)
- *A'ata* – used in the sense of 'manaha' [19].
- *A'ata* – used in the sense of 'kallafa', [19]. E.g. 'U'utiya 'amalun shaqqun' (Eng. He was given difficult job).
- *Bait* –used in the sense of 'ghurfa / hujrah', [4].

c. *Expressions from Loan Translations*

- *Laisa kullu ma yalma'u dhahaban* – source: English (not all that glitters is gold).
- *Akhraja saifahu min ghimdihi* – source: Hausa (he removed his sword from its sheath).
- *Rijlin tawilah* – source: Nig. Eng (long leg).

d. *Coined Expressions:*

- *At-tawqi'u fi daftari al-huduri* – i.e. 'tasjilu al-asma,i'
- *Yamshuna wara' al-'amidah* – i.e. 'khalifa al-'amidah'
- *Taraka lahu al-majal* – i.e. 'manahahu fursata al-kalam'

It should be noted here that all the expressions are syntactically all right; and that foreign vocabulary items used are assigned grammatical cases as if they are originally Arabic. e.g.

*Qaddama lahu qadra ma yashtari bihi ma'an au tanbunan.* [6].

(Eng. He gave him something enough to buy drinking water or *kolanut*).

## VI. CONCLUSION

Attempt was made in this paper to account for the spread of Arabic language in Nigeria and the presence of a category of people referred to as Educated Nigerian Speakers of Arabic who use Arabic not only for academic and literary activities but for general communication. It was established that SA was the variety in use in Nigeria. It was also established that deviations from the SA at certain grammatical and vocabulary level exist. It was argued that these deviations need to be investigated from a sociolinguistic perspective in order to account for the features of the Arabic language used in Nigeria and determine whether a variety that may be referred to as Nig-

-erian Arabic is in the making.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study as preliminary was able to raise some issues which call for further investigation. There is need for research into the nature and scope of the deviations that are observed in the language of Nigerian Speakers of Arabic. Efforts should be made by researchers to conduct extensive investigations into those deviations in the written academic and literary works of Educated Nigerian Speakers of Arabic (ENSA) and also their spoken language in radio talks, lectures and conversations, so as to determine whether differences exists between the two and account for the extent of those differences if they so exist.

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