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Negev Arabic

Dialectal, Sociolinguistic,
and Stylistic Variation

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Preface and acknowledgements¹

Ever since I moved down to Kibbutz Beit-Kama in the Negev at the age of eighteen, I have been fascinated by the language and culture of the neighboring Bedouin. Long before I could speak Arabic or had any dreams of a career beyond picking oranges on the kibbutz, I found myself seizing every opportunity to visit the Bedouin neighbors under every possible pretext. When a notable from the Bedouin town Rahat asked us kibbutzniks to help him lay down a permanent water dripping system in his new garden, as in our kibbutz gardens and fruit orchards, I was in heaven, and regretted only that his small garden took up just one morning of work, including numerous tea breaks.

When the kibbutz needed an Arabic teacher I realized that this was my chance: I started studying Arabic at Tel-Aviv University and teaching it at the regional kibbutz high school in Shoval; but, paradoxically, I learnt much more Arabic by teaching English across the road, at the Bedouin high school in Rahat. Moreover, my daily forty-minute walk connecting those two work places was an additional source for enriching my Bedouin dialect and ties, as women on the way would invite me to their homes.

At that time, in the early 1980s, I was struck by the contrast between the well-equipped school in the Jewish sector and the Rahat school which had just recently been supplied with electricity—teachers would bring with them the light bulbs for the classrooms, as bulbs would disappear if left overnight; there were no panes in the window frames; donkeys were tied up around the fence to transport children who lived in remote locations; on rainy days the road would flood and the school would close down.

Finding that the girls had no physical education lessons at all, I did my best to give them occasional basketball, volleyball, and even some dance classes. Along with afternoon tutoring at homes and some school trips, I finally felt that I was getting to know the schoolgirls and their environment.

But the urban setting of Rahat was far removed from the lifestyle of at least half of the Negev Bedouin, living away from the towns in the so-called ‘diaspora’. As I was planning a dissertation on tense and aspect in Negev Arabic, I was aware that the most authentic dialect was out there, and out of my reach. I complained to my friend *Mḥammad Abū Jaybī*, who immediately responded: “Come to us!” From then on I had my very own adoptive family in the hills south of Beer-Sheva. I would wait impatiently for the school holidays to pack a bag with some clothes, a tape-recorder and

¹ This research was supported by THE ISRAEL SCIENCE FOUNDATION (grants nos. 810/03 and 804/06). The publishing subsidy was funded by Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

as many empty cassettes as I could carry, not forgetting a home-made cake and cookies which would always be met with much appreciation—and set out for an intensive, fascinating, and completely free course in authentic Bedouin life. Mḥammad, his wives and many adorable children cheerfully shared with me their humble home, food, and daily routine. They filled my cassettes with stories, songs, and jokes. Back home with the material I was voluntarily assisted in its interpretation, over very many grueling hours, by *ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm az-Ziyādniḥ* (better known on the kibbutz as Ḥamīd).

The present book originated in 1998 and has undergone several transformations over the years. It started, at the embryonic ‘caterpillar’ stage, as a collection of Bedouin Negev stories, which I intended to present in Arabic script, phonemic transcription, and Hebrew translation for both the Bedouin and the Jewish public to appreciate and enjoy, and also as a corpus for potential academic analysis. The primary aim of this enterprise was to ‘salvage’ fragments of local folklore and tribal history, as captured in oral narrative, before these cultural treasures evaporate forever from the rapidly modernizing scene; an additional goal was to expose Bedouin students to the fascinating raw materials that were lying around untouched in their homes, in their grandparents’ personal life stories and collective ethnic history. The students, as potential educators, were envisaged as a crucial link between the past generations and the future ones.

For the first two years, funding was provided by the *Center for Bedouin Studies and Development* at Ben-Gurion University (BGU) in Beer-Sheva, headed at the time by *Ismāʿīl Abū Saʿd*. The center grants scholarships to Bedouin students, mostly girls, who are expected to perform community service, such as activities for children in the Bedouin towns and villages, help at the hospital or, at Ismāʿīl’s initiative, participation in this project. The students who opted for this task, and performed it admirably, were *Najāḥ al-Ḥamāmdih*, *Yusṣa al-Ḥamāmdih*, *Suʿād al-Ḥamāmdih*, *Yūsuf al-Hawāšlih*, *Sihām Abū Badr*, *Zēnab aṣ-Ṣāniʿ*, *Maryam al-Gāḍiy* and *Ṛanda Abū Ḥāmid*. In addition, the student *ʿAbd aṛ-Raḥmān Abū Saʿd* served as my assistant throughout that period. His enthusiastic cooperation and warm personality were indispensable in those difficult first stages.

The participants were instructed to find ‘the best storytellers in the neighborhood’, preferably elderly relatives, and to record their stories in an informal domestic environment, at the narrator’s home or at the local guest-tent, preferably in the presence of some other family members or close friends. My insistence on these conditions stemmed from the well-known danger of ‘register raising’ or ‘elevation of style’, namely the tendency to speak ‘better’ or ‘proper’ language in a formal environment, especially in the presence of strangers and a tape recorder. I hoped that a familiar,

relaxed environment would dispel the inevitable initial self-consciousness faster, as would the presence of friends, who knew the stories and expected the authentic style.

The success of such a project is, of course, largely dependent on the narrators who shape the oral culture every time they formulate and transmit it in their own individual style. Fortunately, our narrators did indeed turn out to be excellent choices: *Šāliḥ al-Ḥamāmdih* and his sister *Amm Jābir*, *Ġanīmih al-Ḥamāmdih*, and *ʿAlyā al-Ḥamāmdih*, all from the town Šgēb as-salām; *ʿTayš al-Hawāšlih* and *Ibrāhīm al-Hawāšlih* from the unrecognized village Gaṣr as-sirr; *Mūsa Abū Saʿd*, *Aḥmad Abū Saʿd*, *Maḥmūd Abū Saʿd*, *Salāmih Abū Badr*, *Fāṭmih Abū Badr*, *Juddūʿ Abū Šulḍum*, and *Maryam aṣ-Šāniʿ* from the town al-Ligiyyih; and *Dalāl an-Naṣāṣrah* and *Ṛāygih Abū Ġalyūn* from Raḥaṭ. I am grateful to all for their willingness to give of their time and talent for this project.

At the next stage the students transcribed their texts in Arabic script, resisting the temptation to turn them to ‘good (i.e. Literary) Arabic’, as they have been trained to do at school for so many years. Moreover, each was responsible for understanding his texts, and that turned out to be more difficult than I had anticipated. Since all but two of the students were still in their very early twenties, their familiarity with some of the rare traditional terms and concepts was often insufficient, especially with regard to oral poetry.

I therefore had individual meetings set up with five of the narrators, each at his home. There, it was hoped, obscurities could be cleared up in keeping with the good old academic rule: if you don’t know, ask. In the case of oral narrative, however, direct questioning is not such a good policy. Here is how the meeting with Šāliḥ went, and the others were very similar.

Shortly after the first batch of recordings, I submitted one of Šāliḥ’s beautiful short stories for publication in the BGU Bedouin Newsletter, published by the Center for Bedouin Studies and Development. As the editor wished to take a photograph of Šāliḥ at his home with his student daughter, Najāḥ, I took the opportunity to invite myself to this mission. After all, here was a chance to clarify some points in another of Šāliḥ’s stories, a long, complex legend named ‘Jallāl’. Before taking the photo, we sat with Šāliḥ, Najāḥ and some children, while his wife came in and out serving us all the time. In my best dialect, I brought up the story of Jallāl. Šāliḥ seemed pleased that I was interested and was using the right vocabulary (which I had memorized very carefully); but he could not fathom my obstinate probing for specific details. At the first chance, he repeated a problematic phrase which I had inquired about, and navigated on skillfully from there to retell the story. This time, however, he adopted a more formal style—the ‘elevated outsider speech’ which I had wished to avoid. Moreover,

throughout the new story his eyes were fixed on a spot on the wall. I was a little disturbed till I realized that had Ṣāliḥ let his attention wander between his family members and his guests, one of whom did not speak Arabic at all, the other obviously an outsider, he would have been confused in his choice of style. The detached stare obviously helped him focus but—the story was not nearly as good as the original. The photo, too, was rather stilted.

This experience highlighted a basic problem at the interface of oral literature and academics: that direct linguistic questioning tends to be unproductive, mutually frustrating, and detrimental to the quality of the storytelling, especially if recorded and perceived as targeting an academic audience. I was reminded of the following testimony by M. Kurpershoek, regarding his ‘linguistic sessions’ with the phenomenal Najdiyy poet ad-Dindān:

Reciting poetry was easy for him. The verses flowed from his lips in an uninterrupted stream, hundreds of them, for great lengths of time, and yet he showed no visible signs of fatigue. But like most of the other illiterate poets and transmitters, the effort to explain his verses to a foreigner like me soon left him utterly exhausted. Though he agreed to undergo this ordeal patiently enough, it was never long before his forehead became beaded with sweat, his mind began to wander and his answers became incoherent. If pressed by repeated questions he clammed up completely, like an overheated engine. No amount of cajoling or entreaties would make him budge once he had reached that stage. (Kurpershoek 1994: 15)

My efforts to arrive at the meanings of obscure words through direct questioning were indeed rather futile. None of the narrators whom I met were able to supply linguistic information regarding obscure lexical meanings. Needless to say, grammatical inquiries were out of the question. The narrators were, however, perfectly happy to supply a new story instead of the old ‘problematic’ one. So I ended up with some more stories and, of course, many new questions in addition to the old unanswered ones.

Handling this material, I found myself plunging deeper and deeper into the complexities of Bedouin oral literature and its relation to the vernacular dialects. I watched helplessly as the original modest enterprise blew and grew and split to four manuscripts, each demanding my time and attention for its completion: the collection of thirty-five narratives which I called *Jimīl ve-Jimīlih* ‘Jimīl and Jimīlih’ (hence J and J), a monograph on dialect and style in Negev Arabic, a Negev Arabic grammar, and a Negev Arabic-Hebrew dictionary.

These four manuscripts share one frustrating problem: they are written in right-to-left Hebrew script and involve frequent and intensive direction

shifting for the left-to-right phonemic transcription. Now this situation is not extraordinary: most of my colleagues in Semitic linguistics have experienced difficulties of direction-shifting with their computers, and have overcome them. I have not. In a moment of professional despair, after years of battling with jumping letters, digits, and brackets, I put everything down and decided to write a single unidirectional monograph—this English summary of my research on dialectal and stylistic variation in Negev Arabic.

I selected just ten of the J and J stories to accompany the book. These texts comprise Part II and are referred to, throughout the book, by the number and name of the story, followed by the paragraph: [1:Jallāl/15] refers to paragraph 15 of Story 1, named Jallāl. The remaining J and J stories, that likewise contribute much material to the examples, are not presented in full in this book. As a secondary, external corpus, they are not specified by name: (J and J L28f) refers to story no. 28 from the external J and J corpus—a story recorded at al-Ligiyyih, narrated by a woman.

An inevitable result of the collection method was that it limited the corpus, rather arbitrarily, to the four locations where the nine participating students lived and recorded. Thus of the thirty-five J and J texts, seventeen are from al-Ligiyyih, ten from Šgēb as-salām, six from Raḥaṭ, and two from Gaṣr as-sirr. What about the other forty or so locations of the Negev Bedouin, I kept wondering, and an answer soon came.

In 2003 I was approached by the late *Rafael (Rafi) Talmon* to join a national project for the description of Palestinian dialects, which had started in the Galilee and was expanding steadily to the south. This large-scale project incorporated researchers from three universities: Haifa, the Hebrew University, and BGU, and was fully funded by the *Israel Science Foundation* (ISF grant no. 810/03). This generous support enabled me to employ two very competent research assistants, *Salmān Abū Kaff* and *Ḥamdih Abū Rabīʿah*, who have been with me ever since. Without them none of this work could have been accomplished. They handle the raw materials, transcribe them, arrange them for analysis, and help me in all my numerous questions. From this stage on, there is no more ‘I’, there is ‘we’.

Our aim is to sample and analyze the speech of as many groups as possible, venturing down to southern areas such as ʿAbdih (ʿOvdat). Again, the recordings are performed by students or other young relatives of the narrators.

When the original project terminated, due to the untimely death of Prof. Talmon, I applied for an independent ISF grant, and indeed the Negev project was awarded a new grant (no. 804/06).

The dialectal project has already yielded well over two hundred transcribed texts of Negev Arabic. These have proved invaluable in facilitating the completion of this present book, as they form the dialectal, social, and cultural backdrop against which I could check all the data from the texts.