INTEGRATING STABILITY INTO HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS:

ARABIC AND ITS PARADOXES

Jonathan Owens
Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies
University of Bayreuth

"Historical linguistics" as it is usually understood is arguably a misnomer. The basis of historical linguistics is not about history in the sense of defining the status of a language over a given period of time, but rather about identifying stages according to shared innovations/splits as defined by familiar linguistic criteria. In these terms, a language like English in its attested (ca. 600-present) era has undergone a considerable amount of historical linguistics, whereas Icelandic (ca. 900-present), hardly different from Old Norse, is largely devoid of historical linguistics.

In this talk I will discuss three case studies in Arabic illustrating two paradoxes. The first, minor paradox can be summarized as follows: classic changes characterizing splits do not necessarily define different languages. I illustrate this with two innovations which though of very different dimension illustrate a common point. The very distinctive palatalization of *k > č (e.g. *kiđa > čiđi 'like this') is an innovation which will be shown to have developed at least by the 8th century. The innovation, however, encompassed only a part of the Arabic-speaking world, so that this perceptually very obvious change now marks quite distinct dialectal differences, those varieties with palatalized /č/ and those without (= /k/). It does not define a difference between Arabic and other Semitic languages. A second change does serve to distinguish Arabic from other Semitic languages, but it is a change which itself is not a uniform one, and hence also serves as an internal differentiation marker. This change involves the so-called "deflected gender agreement" whereby plural entities take FSG agreement.

Cairene Arabic (Phase 3)
1. *il-buyuut   ʔidm-it*
DEF-houses   old-FSG
'The houses got old'

It will be shown that broadly speaking, three phases define the development of plural agreement. In the first, illustrated by Nigerian Arabic (and western Sudanic Arabic in general) plural agreement is generally plural.

Nigerian (Western Sudanic) Arabic
2. *il-buyuut   gidim-an*
DEF-houses   get old-FPL
'The houses got old'

This phase 1 type agreement is closest to the proto-Semitic inheritance. No other Semitic language has deflected agreement, a situation that is maintained in tact in Nigerian (and western Sudanic generally) Arabic, with one small but significant exception which will be a part of the presentation.

In the second phase, a dual perspective on gender agreement developed in which one and the same plural noun can take either PL or FSG agreement. A recent work (Fassi Fehri 2018) has aptly characterized the difference as one of PLURAL vs. PLURATIVE, the latter conceptualizing the plural entity as a group, not as individuals. Jordanian Arabic (and also Classical Arabic), for instance, allows both of:

Jordanian (Phase 2)
3. *il-buyuut   gidm-at*
DEF-house   old-FSG

and

4. *il-buyuut   gidm-in*
DEF-houses old-FPL

In the third phase the choice of plural vs. plurative of stage 2 is filtered out in favor of a unique agreement parameter, as in Cairene Arabic in (1) above. As described, the three "phases" exist today simultaneously.

These first two examples are illustrative of the lesser paradox: Arabic is characterized by easily identifiable changes, in the classic sense of historical linguistics. Nonetheless either Arabic as a whole cannot be said to have undergone a change, as in the case of palatalization, or it does so in only a very rudimentary fashion for some varieties (Phase 1) and more profoundly for others (Phase 2, 3). As far as deflected agreement goes, Phase 1 (2) for instance, in largely lacking deflected agreement is (nearly) identical with the situation in other Semitic languages, and hence in this respect is "closer" to its proto-Semitic origins than to its sister dialects.

The second paradox goes to the heart of historical linguistics. If historical linguistics is conceived of as identifying varieties on the basis of shared splits and mergers, languages may lack an historical linguistics over a large diachrony of its existence (see above). However, what if stability in linguistically interesting? I will discuss this on the basis of what I have termed the "magical paradigm". Both the imperfect and perfect verb paradigms in Arabic are virtually identical across all varieties. This stability, however, will be explained not because of a magic which endures in the paradigm qua paradigm, but rather because of its referent-tracking function in discourse, coupled with the injunction, "avoid overt subjects". The evidential basis of this analysis comes from a comparative corpus analysis of the distribution of null and overt subjects in two dialects, widely separated both by geography, and by time. Emirati and Nigerian Arabic can be presumed to have a common ancestor of some sort no later than 1000 CE, but probably considerably older. Standard discourse analytical methods (e.g. Prince 1981) and standard sociolinguistic statistical measures (multivariate analysis) are used to show that the factors governing the distribution of null and overt subjects in the two varieties are all but identical. The

historical linguistic interpretation from this is that the paradigm is maintained in tact across at least 1000 of chronological time, over vast geographical tracts, by inherited discourse-pragmatic parameters. Note, however, that in traditional historical linguistic terms this finding is not part of historical linguistics. No changes occur, no splits, no simplification, just stability.

While not unique in this respect, Arabic is a language whose size, expanse and historical attestation allows a wide geo- and diachronic panorama. From this perspective, stability is arguably a more prominent property than change. This suggests that historical linguistics is fruitfully conceived of as ascertaining what *happens* to a language in a given period (ca. 1500 years in the current case) and demands that not only change be accounted for, but also stability.