

# Preface

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To seek for knowledge is to strive for systematization. All scientific disciplines, from physics to biology, from philosophy to medicine, have always been haunted by the question of classification. That categorization constitutes such a fundamental prerequisite to the progress of science is made all the more problematic by the fact that reality is, ultimately, a slippery thing. The world that we explore through our senses is a unified whole, continuous and undivided; it comes to us as an uninterrupted stream of perception and experience, and in the midst of this flow, it is hard to decide where something ends, and something new begins.

No one, arguably, knows this better than a linguist. Languages are, by definition, classificatory systems. They are all shared by a community of speakers who have all agreed on the fact that the world is to be segmented in a certain way. Leaves rest on branches; branches stem from trees; trees congregate to form woods, or sometimes forests. The act of speaking allows us to put order into fractal chaos. Unfortunately, not all communities of speakers, and therefore not all languages, interpret reality in the same way. Some have looser boundaries, others stricter ones. The idea of a forearm is a different thing to different people (different speakers, that is); and where does an elbow belong, exactly? No one better than a linguist understands the frustration that comes with the impossibility of classification, and this is because to classify languages is to classify classifications; even worse, it is to classify self-classifying classifications (and the dangers implicit in recursive categorizations have been well-known at least since the formulation of Russell's famous paradox).

Arabic dialectology is but a minor sub-branch of the general field of linguistics. Yet, its scope is undeniably vast. Varieties of Arabic are legion: they are spoken by hundreds of millions of people, scattered over a territory remarkably larger than geographical Europe, spanning from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf, from southern Turkey to the southernmost tip of the Arabian Peninsula, and even making inroads into central Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and a number of Mediterranean islands. Arabic dialects represent the modern descendants of one of the language families with the longest history of written attestation in the world, and display an amazing variety of forms and structures at the typological level. To put order into so vast a matter is obviously no easy task, and it should come as no surprise that the different classifications currently available to scholars of Arabic dialectology are all somewhat unsatisfactory, and have been subject to heavy critiques over the course of the years. As Owens (2013) elegantly puts it, "If till today simple models for classifying Arabic dialects elude us [ . . . ], it is no doubt in large part because an originally diverse proto-situation has continued to diversify across the vast geographical region where Arabic is spoken".

We are not saying, of course, that classificatory systems for Arabic dialects do not exist: they do, and have been employed to some effect. Critiques to these systems, however, also abound. To make but a couple of examples, one can think of what is probably the most widely employed categorization in the field of Arabic dialectology, the one that distinguishes "Bedouin" varieties from "sedentary" ones. This bipartite subdivision has



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been put into question for conflating the synchronic and diachronic dimensions, together with sociolinguistic considerations, not always in a methodologically sound manner (for a critique, see, among many [Palva 2006](#), p. 605; [Watson 2011](#), p. 869; [Vicente 2019](#), p. 109; and also an interesting note in [Magidow 2016](#), p. 93). Even when we focus on systems of categorization that are narrower in scope, because they are concerned with specific areas within the Arab World, or specific subsets of phenomena, we still encounter problems. It is the case, for instance, of the traditional labels employed to classify Maghrebi varieties, which have recently been put into serious question by [Taine-Cheikh \(2017\)](#), [Mion \(2018\)](#), and [Benkato \(2019\)](#).

From all of the above, it should be clear that we are still far from finding unified and satisfactory solutions to many practical and terminological problems that have long been haunting the field of Arabic dialectology. We hope that the present volume can represent yet another, if minor, contribution to the vast collective effort of trying to better assess, organize and understand varieties of spoken Arabic. Obviously, the numerous papers that appear in the following pages differ greatly from one another in terms of scope and focus. This is no doubt because, as we have said, the subject of inquiry is vast, and exists simultaneously at both a local and supra-local, general scale. Both dimensions, we believe, are important, and both are represented among the studies presented here. Clear examples of the former are the article by Herin, Younes, Al-Wer, and Al-Srūr and the one by Torzullo. The two papers tackle similar issues, and put into question some of the categories which have historically been used to classify the dialects of Northern Arabia and the Southern Levant, with a focus on Jordan. In particular, they do so by also paying attention to the recent social developments of the area, which have involved great amounts of linguistic contact and consequent dialect levelling and mixing. Such attention to the socio-linguistic landscape of the area under investigation is also present in Leitner's discussion of the labels "rural", "urban", and "gələt" in contemporary Iraqi and Irani Arabic; here, these terms are re-examined in the light of recent phenomena of urbanization and population movement.

The dialectological situation of northern Africa, as noted above, is particularly complex, and several of the contributions that appear in this volume focus on this specific area. We start East, from the Egypto-Sudanic region, whose dialects are the object of Leedy-Cecere's inquiry. By also applying the methods of historical glottometry, Leedy-Cecere calls into question the validity of the traditional classification that claims a relationship to exist between the dialects of modern Egypt and Sudan. Sudanic Arabic is also treated in Manfredi's and Roset's study, whose focus, however, is broader, as it encompasses the whole "Baggara Belt", a strip of land more than 2500 km long that stretches from Sudan to Nigeria and is mostly inhabited by semi-nomadic and Arabic-speaking cattle herders. While examining the internal dialectal composition of Baggara Arabic, the two authors also provide new data for the refinement of the isoglosses commonly adopted for the identification of a West Sudanic dialect subtype. Finally, Sokhey's treatment of the palatalization of /n/ in Cairene Arabic suggests this specific trait to be sociolinguistically salient, and indexical of socioeconomic status, thus warranting further inquiries in the sociolinguistic situation of the Egyptian's capital.

If we move to the Maghreb proper, three of the articles presented here deal specifically with this region. Benkato and Pereira argue for broader inclusion of syntactic isoglosses in the classificatory systems of Arabic dialects, and offer a contribution in this sense by examining the emergence of a verbal copula in some dialects of Tunisia and northwestern Libya, a feature that appears to cut across the established isogloss lines of the area. Francisco proposes a re-examination of the categorization of southern Moroccan dialects in light of new data that have recently become available, questioning the validity of the labels "Bedouin", "Hilālī", and "Maʿqilī" when referred to these varieties. Finally, La Rosa offers a preliminary description of the dialect of the Mahdia area in Tunisia, in which Bedouin, rural and urban features seem to be conflated, an observation that could help to better assess the linguistic nature of the Tunisian Sahel.

Issues of classification, of course, do not only arise in relation to the diatopic distribution of linguistic features; diachrony plays an important role as well. In Iriarte Díez's article we find both dimensions being addressed at once: starting from a survey on the role of cognate infinitives in Lebanese Arabic, the author broadens the scope of her analysis by bringing data from the Semitic language family at large to bear. This comparison reveals the Lebanese data to be in line with what is known about other Semitic languages, with the possible (and curious) exception of Classical Arabic, whose descriptions have often adopted a dismissive attitude towards the topic of cognate infinitives. The question of diachrony, and, therefore, of origins and evolution, is more directly addressed by Al-Jallad, who isolates a number of features that appear to characterize both the modern dialects and the ancient pre-Islamic epigraphic inscriptions, to the exclusion of Classical Arabic. Stokes is also concerned with the historical developments of Arabic, when he argues that the vowels which appear before the pronominal suffixes in several modern dialects are actually derived from original case vowels, and subdivides dialects into two main groups depending on how these vowels developed. Magidow's paper, finally, takes issue with the possibility of reconstructing the linguistic history of the Arabic languages by directly relating it to attested population movements and settlement patterns, and proposes the application of a new heuristic approach, based on sociolinguistics and geography, to re-examine the extant categories of Arabic dialectology.

Yet, another approach to the problem of classification is that adopted by both Turner and Youssef, who employ the tools of linguistic typology to try and bring order into the variegated reality of spoken Arabic. Turner uses definiteness as a case study, which he investigates applying the Reference Hierarchy framework, thus showing the importance of using semantic typology as a metric for grouping dialects, rather than relying on the presence of forms alone. Youssef, on the other hand, laments how attempts at classifying Arabic varieties based on consonantal realizations have historically employed a mixture of both linguistic and non-linguistic parameters: as an alternative, he proposes to investigate the phonological nature of the dialects through the use of segmental typology. As with Turner's paper, Youssef also underlies how typological inquiry allows for different possible categorizations of the dialects, which can support, refine, or disprove already existing classificatory models, but also suggest new viable groupings, and provide insights into diachronic processes.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the systems that have been used to classify Arabic dialect up until this moment are not entirely satisfactory, and can be improved. What remains to be understood is what, of these systems, is there to be saved, what can be safely discarded, and what hitherto unexplored methodologies can be fruitfully applied to the field of inquiry. It seems to us that the articles that make up this volume are all relevant in this sense, and that they contain promising and interesting ideas worth exploring and expanding upon. We can only hope that the readers will share our views, and that in the following pages they will be able to find answers, new questions, and the inspiration to push the boundaries of their research even further.

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