

***Lexical Innovation in an Algerian Dialect of
Arabic : a case study***

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New lexical items are introduced each time the social environment requires it in all living languages. The new lexical forms are connected with innovated meanings, and have thus become concepts. These new concepts are fully assimilated into the recipient language, and so become part of the cultural load that the language bears. They also represent a system of values and common beliefs that operate in a society. As such, it is the dynamic aspect of the lexicon which enables us to create new words or forms.

This paper tries to bring forward an explanation to some issues in order to show how new lexical items come into existence on the basis of old ones. In particular, I would like to investigate some of the processes relevant to linguistic creativity through lexical innovations, mainly that of “la suppléance”.

“la suppléance” is a linguistic process by which a linguistic item is replaced or substituted by another item previously contextualized. Very often, this substitution takes place to reduce the use of what is known as taboo

words or to hide the intended meaning in a particular social situation. We confine ourselves here to look at the following cases that form part of language dynamics:

The process of taboo-contamination participates in one way or another in the disappearance of the innocent or non-taboo sense of a word. It is difficult to use the form /farχ/ (often used to refer to an illegitimate child) in an innocent way without conjuring-up to its association with a “swear word”. This word also bears the connotation for “a chick of a hen”, but through time it has acquired a taboo-load and thus, it has come to mean “son of a gun”.

/farχ/ is used now as a sign of insult. One might say /ʃaraak # t + diir # hna # ja # waħd-# l + farχ / meaning “what are you doing here, little rascal?”

The change of the original meaning of this word results not only in the creation of a new lexical item for “chick” but also in the emergence of a new expression that replaces it in non-permitted contexts such as /wuld # l + ħraam /. The new form for “chick” /wʕal/ coincides phonetically with /waʕl/ of the source language which means ‘antelope, a type of mountain goat’. Sometimes one semantic field seems to overshadow another one that shares with it common lexical features. As an instance, The use of the form [qoʔe] “a tin” is becoming

increasingly shocking in some areas like Mazouna, according to natives of this region. The originally dialectal meaning being “a tin” or “a vessel”, but it has acquired another connotation that makes it a rather tabooed word. The reluctance of the speakers of Mazouna Arabic to use this term necessitates recourse to other lexical forms such as /wullaal/ or /yurraaf/. Similarly, the forms /χurg/ and /guʕr/ have been scaled down in the same way. They have been substituted by forms like /θuqb/ “a hole” for the same reasons. Taboo words generally refer to swear words. It seems to us that they carry in themselves connotations of strength because they contain emphatic(ised) features or segments like [ɾ] and [z].

The semantic shift is one of the forces of change that leads to lexical creation / innovation and therefore new words are added to a particular dialectal use. For instance, the causative form /qallaaj/ which derives from the dialectal form /qɫa/ “he fried” has a different meaning from “to fry” when the social context is not related to “cooking” or “food”. It means “a big liar”. The deflection of this item from its original meaning provides it with semantic potentiality subject to variation. Thus, expressions like [qalja məl fo:r] “a very big lie” are attested, especially in youth repertoires.

The language of young people shows a considerable amount of lexical innovation. Young people tend to use new expressions on the basis of verbs like /faat/ and its derivatives, as in: “[futni] (Fr.) allée sans retour” which may be translated into English as “heck with it!” or into French as “dégage!, dégerpi!”. On the same line of thought, the expression [fa:tu:h saħra] which is typical of young urban speakers in Oran denotes attitudes through repertoires. It may be translated as: “They didn’t give a damn to him”.

Many expressions have acquired their meaning in the same way. Some of these expressions are:

a) [ʔərgud wəħna nɣɑt̪t̪o:k/ (Lit.) “sleep and we cover you”

b) [ʔæmmən wəlla t̪e:r] (Lit.) “believe or fly”

[ʔæmmən wəlla kri:pi ʃaʔrak] “believe it or leave it”

[ʔæmmən wəlla ħrag kwayt̪ɑk] “take it or leave it”

c) [laʔbu:læh əʃʂɑfra t̪ərbæħ] “they crooked him”

[laʔbu:læh əs si:s fəl kənz] “they took him for a goose”

[laʔbu:læh ʃa:la ba:la] “They were dishonest to him”

Sometimes we use indirect words or phrases in order to hide the more accurate and direct ones i.e, words are sometimes used euphemistically. Most speakers of Arabic in Algeria hesitate as to the use of lexical forms like [mma] “my Mummy” or [bba ~ bu:ja] “me Daddy”

outside home. The forms [əʃi:ba:nijja], [əʃi:ba:nɪ], [əʃi:ba:ni], [əʃi:ba:nɪ], [əʃi:ba:nɪ] are often used for “mother” and “father” respectively outside home. The latter are used even if the “mother” or “father” are still young people. We conclude that “la suppléance” (and most probably other factors of change) participate in a dynamic process of language variation. They may be interpreted as signs of the language richness and capacity to adapt and adopt. They may also be interpreted as characteristic of dialectal openness to accept new lexical forms in the absence of a Norm. Yet, the question remains as to how this lexical creation / innovation should be tackled by the linguist and sociolinguist and how it may reveal social attitudes and social classes.

References

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