

The peculiarities of the Chadian Arabic

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Abstract: Chadian Arabic was introduced in Chad towards the end of the 14th century. It was brought by wandering Arabs and the Islamic religion, rather than by intellectuals, even though at the courts of the three Chadian kingdoms; namely, Kanem-Bornu Empire, the Wadday Kingdom and the Baguirmi Kingdom, were sitting some intellectuals whose duty was to write letters to the Arab sovereigns. Chadian Arabic has developed into a dialect with its proper linguistic system due to the influence of autochthonous languages with which it has mingled for centuries, in such a way that it ended up creating variants spread all over the Republic of Chad. Chadian Arabic has been adopted and adapted to the linguistic system of each region of Chad so that one is tempted to say that there are as many variants of the Chadian Arabic as there are regions. The aim of the present paper is to analyze the linguistic peculiarities of the dialectal Chadian Arabic in its phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic components and some sociolinguistic features such as code switching and code mixing as well.

Key words: *Chadian Arabic, peculiarities, varieties, characteristics linguistic components, code-switching, code-mixing.*

I - Sociolinguistic setting

1.1 - The standard Arabic

The Arabic language was introduced in Chad since the 14th century (Zeltner 1976). It had been first used by the kingdoms of Baguirmi, Kanem-Bornu and Ouaddaï for internal and external diplomatic relations between these kingdoms and the Arab world. It is a well-known fact that the Arabic language plays an important role in Chad, because of the geographic contiguity of Chad with Arab countries and the arrival of populations of Arabic origin in the course of the history of Chad. Prior to the French colonial rule, the Arabic language was known for its golden age and had imposed its supremacy on the region. However, it should be emphasized that, objectively the Arabic language could not be imposed and consequently could not expand because it would need

well organized infrastructures and well trained cadres, i.e., people who could master the language both on the linguistic as well as the pedagogical levels. Moreover, the objective of the sovereigns was not to create an administration intended to govern the country in order to develop it. Their objective was rather to conquer more space, more spoils, and more slaves. What they needed were therefore warriors but not brains. The idea of imposing the Arabic language was not part of their preoccupation.

Having reappeared with force at the dawn of the independence, the Arabic language is today *de facto* present but at the same time significantly absent. This is due to the combination of many factors; among these are the lack of encouragement of the teaching of Arabic, the negligent of the

teachers of Arabic themselves and the lack of a coherent language policy on the part of the government.

From the colonial period to the independence of Chad, the Arabic language was taught in the schools as an optional subject and in its Qur'anic form. The main objective of the administration was to attract or interest children of Islamic communities reluctant to attend the French school. But this resulted rather in the total isolation of the Arabic language. For instance, the first Arabic teachers were recruited among the 'Marabouts', i.e. Qur'anic teachers who had no adequate training. They could only give a religious teaching, because they hardly conceived that the Arabic language could be useful to any other thing than the Islamic religion. It is actually this restrictive view of the use of the Arabic language that has not allowed it to progress. To do justice to the Arabic language it has to be desacralized if it is to play its role as an instrument of a secular government.

The process of integration of the Arabic language in the Chadian administrative and educational system has been very long and difficult. When Chad attained independence, Arabic was introduced in the school system through the constitution of 1962. However, it was only optional.

Even though the Arabic language was declared official since 1978 and afterwards by subsequent provisional fundamental laws, it is only in 1996 that the Arabic language has been finally adopted as an official language, through a constitutional referendum. It should be mentioned that the Arabic language question generated heated and stormy debates during the National Sovereign Conference (CNS), which took place from January to April 1993 and whose objective was to lay down the foundation of Democracy in Chad.

1.2 - Chadian Arabic

Chadian Arabic has been nurtured mainly by the seasonal workers who go from Chad to the Sudan Republic. The Sudan was the first country of emigration of many Chadians. Therefore, there was pre- and postcolonial migration towards the Sudan. As a matter of fact, due to the inflexibility of the French colonial administration, people were tired of the multiple conscriptions and taxes and thought it was better to go to places other than French, less compelling than those under which they were living. They chose to go to the Sudan which is neighboring Chad and which has a different system of colonization. In the Sudan, the English have initiated construction works, such as

railway construction, sugar cane plantation, cotton, sesame, etc. These jobs were highly paid and required plenty of workers. This attracted many Chadians and has contributed to the development of the Chadian Arabic

The Chadians used to go there during the dry season after having harvested their crops and return home when the rainy season approaches so that they could resume with their farm works. If at the beginning the reasons for emigration were politically motivated, for instance protests against the abuses of the colonial administration, economic motives were later added to the political. When the seasonal workers return they bring along not only new objects but also the Arabic language and concepts designating these objects not existing locally. These workers come principally from the Chad Sahel zone and used to travel in big numbers. It should be mentioned that the youth of the villages were particularly fascinated by the utterance “*aaye*”, the Sudanese response for “**yes**”, which they usually hear from the new comers, i.e. those returning from the Sudan. Beside the opportunities they find in the plantations, going to the Sudan was for the young Chadian a « virile initiative » as mentioned earlier because it allowed them to bring to their families such

objects as fabrics, jewelry, clothes ‘*laffaaya*’ (a long sheet of cloth for women, *toob*), swords, turbans, ‘*djellabiya*’ (gown for (Sudanese) men), which give them prestige and became the main reason for emigrating and which attracted them and constituted the important source of emigration.

Chadian Arabic was first propagated in the rest of the Sahel zone, where native Arabs also settled and mingle with the local population. Later it disseminated also in the south of Chad due to the mobility of civil servants and traders. Due to its neighborhood with the autochthonous languages for centuries, the Arabic language developed in Chad to the extent that it created a dialectal form which in turn further diversified. The linguistic diversity in Chad has so to say transposed to the Arabic language, hence the multitude of its varieties. This transfer is brought about through the phenomenon of interference which manifests itself by the tendency of the speaker or the learner to realize in the second language, the features, the grammatical categories, the rules, etc. in the same manner as in his or her mother tongue or first language. Finally, one can definitely say that every region of Chad has its variety of Chadian Arabic. Let’s take the example of the verbal phrase “I want” which

is said in the east of Chad *ana daayir* ; in the center it is said *ana nidoor* and in the south it is rendered by *ana duuru*. The only identifiable elements of this verb is the root or the reflex *dr which actually is in standard Arabic *rd for it comes from the verb **raada** meaning *to like, wish or want*. It should be mentioned that there exists interintelligibility between these variant forms

Chadian Arabic in its various forms has been described by many authors, namely Carbou (1913), Hagège (1972), Roth Laly (1976), Kaye (1977), Decobert (1985) Poummerol (1997, 1999a, 1999b). One could talk of mutual influence, in that the Arabic language has adapted itself to the autochthonous languages that borrowed words from it, phonologically and grammatically. Chadian Arabic is called in Chad, in French “l’arabe dialectal tchadien” and in Arabic “kalam arab ad-daariji or al-mahalli”. The Arabic language spoken in northern Cameroon and northern Nigeria is called l’arabe choa and Shuwa Arabic respectively. It sounds like Chadian Arabic but with a local flavor.

2- The linguistic characteristics of the Chadian Arabic

The Chadian Arabic dialect was shaped out of its mingling with the autochthonous languages. It

behaves linguistically speaking as a black African language. As such it is considered on the official level as a national language. It has gained the status of a national language, i.e. an autochthonous language. Its vocabulary contains elements of the autochthonous languages. The initial Arabic language that was brought to Chad has been adopted and adapted to the linguistic system of each region of Chad so that one is tempted to say that there are as many variants of the Chadian Arabic as there are regions. For example in the east of Chad people speak a type of Chadian Arabic closer to the Sudanese or sometimes to western Sudanese Arabic. Chadians living in the far north speak a type similar to the Libyan one. But the “standard Chadian Arabic“ is that spoken in the capital N’Djamena and in the whole of the Sahel zone of Chad which goes from the Lake Chad region in the west to the Wadday in the east. This zone encompasses at least 10 regions. The south-west and the south proper have also developed their variants which are heavily influenced by the local languages.

2.2-The varieties of the Chadian Arabic

Within the varieties of the Chadian Arabic one can distinguish between the Arabic dialects of native Arabs, nomadic

or sedentary and the Arabic dialects of non Arabs, which developed as a language of interethnic communication. It is in fact the *lingua franca* whose spectrum ranges from dialects closer to those of the native Arabs to different forms of Arabic resembling pidgin. But each region has its specificity. Usually the Chadian Arabic has three forms; namely, the Arabic dialect spoken by the native Arabs as mentioned above, the Arabic dialect spoken by the

autochthonous of each region and finally the Arabic dialect spoken by the Iyal-Nas that could be roughly translated as “Everybody’s children”. These are groups of inhabitants descending from freed slaves but who are now fully integrated in the region of Guéra and Salamat. There is, of course, intelligibility between these three forms of dialectal Arabic. The linguistic characteristics of the Chadian Arabic are the following:

2.3 - The phonological

2.3.1 – The vowels

| | | |
|------|------|------|
| i/ii | | u/uu |
| e/ee | | o/oo |
| | a/aa | |

The vowel system of Chadian Arabic is triangular with five units with an opposition of quantity. There are five short vowels and five long vowels

These characteristics are similar to that of many Chadian languages, even though some Chadian languages possess more than five vowels.

2.3.2 – The consonants

| | Bilabial | dental | alveolar | palatal | Velar | glottal |
|----------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Plosives voiceless | p | t | | | k | - |
| Plosives voiced | b | d | | | g | - |
| Affricates voiceless | | | | c | - | h |
| affricates voiced | | | | j | | |
| Fricatives voiceless | | f | s | | x | |
| Fricatives voiced | | | z | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|-----------|----------|----------|--|----------|---|--|
| Nasals | m | n | | Ü | Ý | |
| Continues | w | | | y | | |
| sonorant | | r | | | | |

Out of the 29 consonants of the standard Arabic, it remains only 22 consonants which now characterize the consonantal system of the Chadian Arabic. The 7 emphatic consonants are reduced to 2 or 3. Chadian Arabic has adapted its

consonantal system to that of the other Chadian languages generally speaking, since the 22 consonants represent the consonantal system of most of the Chadian languages with few exceptions.

The consonants of the Chadian Arabic which don't exist in some Chadian languages are **S**, **f** and **x**. They are replaced by **s**, **p** and **k**

respectively. However, it should be emphasized that some native Arab dialects have preserved some of the emphatic consonants.

Examples: **x ----> k, g**

| | | |
|---------|------------------|----------------------|
| xanamay | kanamay, ganamay | <i>“sheep”</i> |
| xala | kala, gala | <i>« millet »</i> |
| xamis | kamis | <i>« thursday »</i> |
| xaali | kaali | <i>« expensive »</i> |
| xaatum | kaatum | <i>« ring »</i> |

S ----> s

| | | |
|--------|---------|---------------------------|
| Sarmut | sarmuut | <i>“dried meat”</i> |
| Suwal | suwal | <i>“sack, bag”</i> |
| Sen | sen | <i>“bad, ugly”</i> |
| Soxol | sokol | <i>“thing, something”</i> |
| Setan | setan | <i>“satan”</i> |

f ----> p

| | | |
|--------|--------|--------------------------|
| alfaki | alpaki | <i>“coranic teacher”</i> |
| fate | pate | <i>“marriage”</i> |
| fil | pil | <i>“elephant”</i> |
| fatis | patis | <i>“corpse”</i> |
| fok | pok | <i>“high, above”</i> |

2.4 – The gender aspect

Linguistically speaking Chad could be described as Africa in

miniature, since out of the 4 African language families three are spoken in Chad. And among

these three, only one family has a gender system: it is the Afro-Asiatic family. Of course speakers of this family have no problem in adapting to the gender system of the Chadian Arabic. Others have real difficulties in respecting the gender unless they have learnt Chadian Arabic language very well. The speakers

of non gender languages tend to mix the genders. For example, instead of saying **mara di** “*this woman*” they say **mara da**, to mean “*this woman*”. Of course, people understand them because they know what they want to say. But the particle **da** tends to replace even the feminine **di** so that one can hardly hear **di** either.

2.5 - The morphological system

The structure of the words is not affected as such compared to the phonological system. Words keep at least their radical. As far as the plural formation is concerned most of the types that exist in the

standard Arabic are maintained as shown in the following examples. Of course, in some instances there are even some innovations

| | | |
|-----------|----------------|---------------|
| toor | tiiraan | “ox” |
| xazoal | xuzlaan | “gazelle” |
| naadum | naas | “human being” |
| beet | buyuut | “house” |
| humaar | hamiir | “donkey” |
| kalib | kulaab | “dog” |
| bagaraaye | bagar | “cow” |
| xanamaaye | xanam | “sheep” |
| hooS | hiSaan | “compound” |
| juwad | jawawiid, xeel | “horse” |
| Saari | Sawaari | “road” |

2.6 - The syntactic aspect

The syntactic aspect, as already said, is similar to that of Chadian languages since Chadian Arabic itself is adapted to their linguistic systems. As far as the word order is concerned, there are different occurrences compared to standard Chadian Arabic. Even within Chad also one can sense

differences in the use of the syntax. The tendency that has been observed is that people translate Chadian Arabic into their own languages rather than speaking it. They use Arabic words and apply the syntax of their own language to build sentences.

The best illustration of this is presented at the national radio by a comedian group composed of people from the centre, north and

a native Arab, each of them speaking with a different variety of Chadian Arabic

Standard Chadian Arabic

kin maa ti door da amchi

“If you don’t like you go”

Ana nikalim leya lakin hu maa yasma ana gait kalim leu hu basma mafi

“I am talking to him but he doesn’t listen”

Iyaalat tarado le buubu, wo b buubu jara Iya da gait turda buubu, buubu da jara

“The children chased the monkey who fled away”

mara machat ti shiil almi lakin ligiyat le bir yabis mara machi fatuchu alme, ligiya bir da yabis

“The woman went to fetch water but she found the well dry”

alrarajil macha fiu zere wo bigi mardan rajil machi bukan zere mardan karaba

“The man went to the field and became sick”

Hu raasa gawi

“He is stubborn”

Other varieties of Chadian Arabic

intukum duuru mafi da machi

Iya da gait turda buubu,

Hu basma adan mafi

2.7 - The semantic aspect

Words have the tendency to expand their meaning even within a single language. In a multilingual environment where many languages are in contact, the likelihood of words changing meaning is greater. The linguistic configuration is a bit particular in that apart from the national languages or mother tongues, there are two official languages, French and Arabic which influence the local languages. Added to borrowing, change of meaning is a phenomenon that has been observed to occur in the history of languages. The meaning of some words in

Chadian Arabic has been changed compared to their initial meaning

3 – Sociolinguistic processes

Three aspects are being here treated; namely, Code switching and code mixing which imply bilingual speakers and borrowing. Only bilingual speakers are concerned with the first two sociolinguistic phenomena. The two codes are noticed to occur in any two languages in Chad, Arabic and French or Arabic and mother tongues. From historical and social factors will result linguistic factors. And as it has been mentioned above, the linguistic

situation of Chad is a complex one. This linguistic complexity gave rise to numerous language contacts phenomena. The speakers of these languages meet, mingle, communicate and exchange objects. When languages come into contact, particularly in a multilingual context, as is the case in Chad, languages influence each other. This reciprocal influence has been called by Haugen (1972) as an interlinguistic contagion which manifests itself by the following linguistic processes such as borrowing, interferences; code mixing, code switching, language change, pidginisation and diglossia illustrated in Chad by the cohabitation of both the standard and the dialectal Arabic. As noted above, in a multilingual environment where languages are permanently in contact, it is to be expected that exchanges take place. These exchanges are of different types: code mixing and code switching. Code mixing occurs when words or parts of sentences are taken from another language and used in order to replace words in the mother tongue or vice-versa. For example, when one speaks, he/she replaces words in the

Chadian Arabic contains many borrowed words due to the contacts with neighboring countries like Nigeria and the

language started by words taken from another language at his/her disposal. In this regard, it can be a mother tongue and one of the two *lingua francas*, Arabic or French. We talk of code switching, when during the discourse someone suddenly shifts from the language he/she started with to another language. Code mixing and code switching constitute other forms of bilingualism, for only bilinguals could perform this exercise. These phenomena are used to show acquaintance or kinship, a status or a position or to convey a message you don't want others to know. They are also used to fill in memory lapses.

3.1 - Code mixing

In Sara (Nilo- Saharan language)
nai kade **saria bas**
"It remains only to go to court »

3.2 – Borrowing

Linguistic borrowing is the first consequence of language contacts. Languages borrow words that don't exist in their own culture in order to fill gaps. Here again it is a question of a battle of economic, political or cultural wills. Languages resort to borrowing because of the urgent needs to communicate and the necessity to live together.

Sudan or as a result of colonization. So, these words come from different origins:

Borrowed words of French origin

| | | |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------|
| watir | “voiture” | ‘car’ |
| biskilet | « bicyclette | ‘bicycle’ » |
| lekkol | « école » | ‘school’ |
| labtan | « hôpital » | ‘hospital’ |
| lompo | « impôts » | ‘taxes’ |

Borrowed words of Hausa origin

| | |
|------------------|---------------------------------|
| kosei | “beans cake” |
| waaka | “insult term” (... your mother) |
| sanda | “straight” |
| talani | “ambulant seller” |
| dan waake | “cake” |
| kirkir | “turbulent” |
| rikiji | “dishonest” |

Borrowed words of Kanuri origin

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Lingi | “friendship link” |
| lungu | “corner” |
| kelesku | « young girl » |
| moskoro | « first day cooking of a newly married girl » |

Borrowed words of English origin

| | |
|--------------|---------------------------------|
| yarda | “yard for measuring clothes” |
| koota | “quarter of a meter of a cloth” |
| taSa | “car station” |

Conclusion

Chadian Arabic can be called as Arabic in an African milieu, here in a Chadian milieu. It grew out of its cohabitation with Chadian languages. Usually it is the dominant language that influences others. But it may happen that the dominant language be also influenced by other languages because of the linguistic dynamics. That is how the dialectal Chadian Arabic came into being. It has the characteristics of an African language, both in phonology, lexicon and grammar.

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