

In their own voices, in their own words: A sociolinguistically-informed corpus of Nigerian Arabic

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Introduction

The current webpages represent Nigerian Arabic in both audio and attendant transcriptional format. The data, whose collection was begun in 1989, was conceived of as a part of sociolinguistic studies on the variety (see bibliography). This was a pre-internet era, so at the time the idea of presenting the data directly for the public was hardly on the horizon. As technological developments turned out, however, it is now possible to make all the material available as open source information. This will be, to our knowledge, the first open-source sociolinguistically representative collection of spoken Arabic.

Arabic is well known as a language whose public face is rigidly guarded by those who would uphold its assumed unique identity. There is a widely-held school of thought in the Arabic world, and till today even among some western Arabicists and Orientalists, that only the Standard language is a legitimate object of attention among scholars. There should be no mistake made about it. This attitude has produced genuinely remarkable expressions of linguistic achievement in the realm of spoken Arabic. One need only tune into such television channels as Al-Jaziira or Al-Ṣarabiyya to appreciate and enjoy the facility with which their reporters master the intricacies of spoken Standard Arabic.

However, there is another school of thought, most clearly defined today by those trained in contemporary western linguistics, which sees the individual, his or her community or circle of individuals with whom they interact as the locus of linguistic interest. Norms come not from the authority of grammar books, but from the conventions of local usage.

The intellectual tradition associated with this perspective is well known, an inveterate empiricism as manifested in dialectology, descriptive linguistics, sociolinguistics, even historical linguistics. Indeed, this perspective is arguably one which was articulated in the early era of research in the Arabic grammatical tradition, most clearly in the work of Sibawaih, somewhat less so, but still discernible in the early *Maṣāaniy al-Qurʾān* literature.

There is, however, another aspect to this scholarly commitment, one in which the linguist himself or herself takes the role of a bystander, observing with admiration how individuals, many in this collection having only rudimentary or no formal education at all, represent their world: the travails of daily life, their struggles with an often difficult, dry environment, individual biographies ranging across lives spent as cattle nomads, as hard working tillers of the soil, as guards in Lagos, as successful businessmen and politicians in Maiduguri. A common link among them is an eloquent and fluent Arabic, which, to paraphrase the pre-Islamic poet Ṣantara, rivals the eloquence of the learned.¹

¹ wa la-ṭubkimanna balaayat al-fuṣahaa?, لأبكمن بلاغة الفصحاء, *Diwan*, p. 151.