Book Review


Reviewed by Nikolaos van Dam

Dr. Peter Behnstedt’s *Language Atlas of Syria* and its accompanying volumes contain an enormous wealth of information on Syrian Arabic dialects, which will be particularly enjoyed by connoisseurs. This monumental work uncovers a linguistic, social and cultural diversity of Syria, which is not generally known. Apart from the Arabic dialects of Syria, other spoken languages are dealt with in the linguistic maps as well. The Accompanying Volume (*Beiheft*) to the atlas provides explanatory notes to the linguistic maps. It also contains word lists on the various Arabic dialects, as well as on New West Aramaic, Turoyo, Assyrian, Kildani, Turkish, Kurdish, Circassian, Chechen, Armenian and Greek, the languages which Behnstedt came across during his research. The 518 large and highly detailed linguistic maps are of great benefit, even to those who have not mastered the German language. This is the first time that such a highly diverse collection of Syrian Arabic dialect materials has ever been published – and it may be the last. Various dialects may not survive the present generation of speakers and may have already begun to disappear.

Behnstedt identifies some twelve main dialect groups which can be sub-divided into more than 60 subtypes, all having their own specific combinations of phonological, morphological and lexicographical profiles. They are classified according to regions, cities, neighborhoods, villages, urban/rural, mountains, semi-deserts, Bedouin tribes (Shammar, Rwala, Baggara), Shawi, mixed Bedouin/sedentary, religious communities (Sunni, Christian, Alawi, Isma`ili, Druze, Shi`i), and so on.

This detailed division is the result of research conducted in 508 locations (including the 85 which Cantineau discussed in his earlier work, which was mainly in the Hawran). Research consisted of 1214-question questionnaires, of which 250 were purely lexical. This meticulous method has allowed Behnstedt to produce enormous amounts of data. To illustrate: he identified 49 different forms and pronunciations of the word for the fruit “orange” (*burtaqāl, burugdān, mirdaghān*, etc.); 66 for “peach” (*durrāq, dirro’en, dirray’ne*, etc.); 45 different forms for the imperative of *ktb* (“write”): *ktōb, ičtub, ukţbam*, etc.; 58 forms of the imperative of *‘kl* (“eat”): *kōl, čil, őklin*, etc.; 114 variants for “a piece of bread”: *khubza, laqam, shuqfi, kisra*, etc.; and 80 variants for the expression “last year”.

Behnstedt’s *Atlas* provides an interesting overview of the regions in which the *qaf* is really pronounced and where it has transformed into *hamza*, *g*, *k*, and so on (to mention just one of the 518 linguistic maps). The phoneme *qaf* is being appreciated differently among Syrians. According to Bernard Lewin (1969), the Alawis interviewed by him were *qaf*-speakers who ridiculed the “weak” *hamza*-speakers of Hama. Sami al-Jundi, writing his memoirs in the same period (1969), noted that after the Ba’thist takeover of power in 1963, “caravans of villagers started to leave the villages of the plains and mountains for Damascus”, where “the alarming *qaf* started to predominate the streets, coffee houses and the waiting rooms of the ministries…” (It should be noted here that the *qaf* is not so much a “sectarian” characteristic of Alawi, Druze or Isma`ili dialects, but rather a rural feature also present in the speech of Sunnis, Christians or anyone else living in

certain areas.) Behnstedt, on the other hand, noted an opposite trend in 1996, notably that the pronunciation of qaf as hamza was also seen as a prestige pronunciation, which was advancing in various areas and cities. He mentions Hama as a typical dialect island in this respect. Later generations of the above-mentioned “qaf villagers” have to a great extent adapted to a more Damascene type of Syrian Arabic without the qaf.

The Ethnographic Texts (Volkskundliche Texte) in Volume II are not only of great interest to linguists, but also for cultural anthropologists or anyone with a particular interest in fascinating intricacies of traditional Syrian society. They deal with a wide variety of topics such as folktales, magic and sorcery, traditional medicine, agricultural techniques and instruments, food, falcon hunting and hunting falcons, weddings, kidnapping of a prospective Christian bride, looking for truffles, camels, sheep, Bedouin traditions (dealt with extensively), blood revenge, and a whole range of other detailed subjects.

Each dialect type is introduced by a grammatical description, the length of which depends on whether it has been described extensively before and whether it is more or less well-known. For that reason dialect material from some of the more important dialects (taking their number of speakers into account) is not included in Volume II, such as the dialects of Damascus (described extensively by Bergsträsser, Grotzfeld and others), Hama (by Lewin), Deir al-Zor (by Jastrow), or other places such as Soukhne (described in a special monograph by Behnstedt himself). Many grammatical details about the Christian (and other) dialects of Aleppo and its surroundings have already been published by Behnstedt in the Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik (Journal of Arabic Linguistics) and are therefore not repeated here either. Texts from Aleppo, on the other hand, are relatively strongly represented in the Ethnographic Texts, because the phonology of the Aleppine dialect had, according to Behnstedt, not yet been adequately treated before, and because these texts contain interesting ethnographic material which would otherwise be lost. The Ethnographic Texts should be considered as complementary to Behnstedt’s other academic works. He does not like to repeat himself. Neither does he want to repeat or duplicate the research of others. Behnstedt, who is one of the most experienced researchers active in Arabic dialect geography in the world, has a strong preference for original work and the untrodden path. This makes his work special among the special.

The grammar of some of the more “eccentric” Syrian Arabic dialects (Extremdialekte), such as those of Palmyra, Soukhne, Taybet al-Imam and Mhardi (both near Hama), is dealt with in some detail. At times it turned out to be impossible, however, for Behnstedt or his assistants to record “authentic” speech. This happened among others with the dialect of Taybet al-Imam, which is described by Behnstedt as “one of the most ridiculed” in Syria, because of its radical transformation of verbal and pronominal forms, which has apparently been the result of sedentary and Bedouin dialects merging together. Instead of the 1st plural imperfect nākul (“we eat”) the vernacular of Taybet al-Imam produces nāka; instead of the more common 3rd plural hinne (“they”), it has masculine hinhan and feminine hinhin; instead of the 2nd plural feminine tishrabu (“you drink”), the local dialect produces tishrabni (which would normally mean “you drink me”), and so on. Something similar happened in Palmyra, where Behnstedt never really heard the Palmyra dialect being spoken as described by Cantineau (1934), and the recordings made for him locally only resulted in long texts of Honoratiorenpalmyrenisch (i.e. Palmyra Arabic having few dialectal elements). Some of those interviewed only produced long texts of almost completely neutral Syrian Arabic”, in which only the real expert could still detect some specific Palmyrene characteristics. The question remains, of course, whether such idiosyncratic dialects have survived at all.

One of the real tests to find out whether or not one is really able to understand pure colloquial Arabic is by listening to Arabs who use their own dialect when addressing one another while not being aware that they are being listened to by an outsider. As soon as such an awareness arises, however, there is the inclination to switch to a different type of spoken Arabic which goes more in the direction of a “neutral” koine or Syrian Arab lingua franca. This makes this type of linguistic research so difficult, as Behnstedt experienced time and again. Moreover, people speaking so-called “extreme dialects” are not only inclined to renounce their original vernaculars by speaking a variety containing fewer dialectal elements, at least in the presence of an outsider, but they also tend to make “hypercorrections” (qanam instead of ghanam; or astaqrūllāh, mīn ghallak hēc? instead of astaghfirullāh, mīn qallak hēc), and so on.

"Syrian Arabic" language courses offered to foreigners usually present a type of vernacular which is not really a pure dialect but rather a kind of general educated “Syrian Arabic”, which is close to one of the major types of Arabic spoken in Syria, usually that of Damascus. When a book or language course is described as being “based on the dialect of Damascus”, it usually means that it is not the original dialect itself but something which in various aspects is close to it. Over the last decades a certain kind of leveling and general “Syrianisation” has taken place with respect to various dialects, as a result of which a generally accepted kind of well educated urban Syrian Arabic has emerged, parallel to the original vernaculars.

For those who want to dig much deeper, and want to enjoy the linguistic intricacies of Syria beyond the more general “Syrian Arabic”, Behnstedt’s study is highly rewarding, and unveils the linguistic wealth of Syria, which is generally quite invisible to one who is only skimming the language’s surface.

Those who want to listen to some of the original sound recordings made by Behnstedt and others can download them on the internet from the highly interesting Semitic Sound Archives of the Ruprecht-Karls University in Heidelberg, Germany: http://www.semarch.uni-hd.de/index.php4.
