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Book Review

LANGUAGE ATLAS OF SYRIA

Peter Behnstedt, *Sprachatlas von Syrien I, Kartenband & Beiheft*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997, 1037 & 242 pages. *Sprachatlas von Syrien II: Volkskundliche Texte*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000, 661 pages. [Language Atlas of Syria Part I: Maps & Accompanying Volume. Part II: Ethnographic Texts].

Reviewed by Nikolaos van Damⁱ

Dr. Peter Behnstedt's *Language Atlas of Syria* and its accompanying volumes contain an enormously rich wealth of information on Syrian Arabic dialects, to be enjoyed most particularly by the real connoisseur. 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, which are 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, the original language of this publication. This is the first and perhaps last time that such a highly diverse collection of Syrian Arabic dialect materials has ever been published. Various dialects may not survive the present generation of speakers and may have already begun to disappear.

After publishing the well-known *Atlas of Egyptian Arabic Dialects*ⁱⁱ together with Dr. Manfred Woidich – a project of some ten years of painstaking research - , it was originally Behnstedt's more "modest" intention to produce a "*Language Atlas on the Surroundings of Aleppo*". His new project eventually led to the publication of this impressive Language Atlas covering the whole of Syria, simply because he "could not resist" studying the entire country after all.

Arabic dialect research is not held in high esteem in Arab nationalist Syria, if only because dialects are generally seen as "degenerate" deviations from the classical standard language, *al-'Arabiya al-Fusha*, which is the unifying language of all Arabs. Nevertheless Behnstedt did not

encounter any problems in doing his field work in Syria, like he had before experienced continuously in Egypt (*fayditu ē?*). On the contrary, the atmospheric circumstances for his research were not only ideal, he was also able to freely interview Alawi, Christian or Isma'ili women in the coastal mountains without any problems, just as well as women in all of eastern Syria among the sedentarized Bedouin (*Beiheft*, pp. 9-10).

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, neighbourhoods, villages, urban/rural, mountains, semi-deserts, Bedouin tribes (Shammar, Rwala, Baggara), Shawi, mixed Bedouin/sedentary, religious communities (Sunni Muslim, 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, mainly in the Hawran).ⁱⁱⁱ Research was done on basis 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, ukātbam*, etc.; 58 forms of the imperative of ‘*kl* (“eat”): *kōl, čil, ōklin*, 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.^{iv} 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...”.^v (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*.

Mustafa Talas notes in his memoirs the use of “*hint*” (“you”) instead of *inte* by people from the mountainous regions of Lattakia, and quotes an Alawi officer as saying to him: “*wallah yahmik hint wa Hafiz al-Asad*” (“may God protect you and Hafiz al-Asad”). “It is the habit of the inhabitants of Lattakia, in particular in the mountains, to replace the ‘*alif*’ with *ha*’, which is permitted in the language of the Arabs”, according to Talas.^{vi} Behnstedt’s Atlas map 251 provides a detailed overview of the 17 different forms of the second person singular masculine and feminine and shows that in Syria “*hint*” is exclusively used in the coastal mountains and the rural areas around Hama.

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.

Behnstedt interestingly notes that the dialects in the semi arid areas and desert fringes of Palmyra, Soukhne and Qiryaten may well have retained an older Arabic pre-Islamic linguistic substratum (p. 204). Behnstedt also notes that among the Christians of Aleppo two different Arab dialects are being spoken. In an earlier publication^{vii} Behnstedt interpreted one of these vernaculars as a linguistic “relict island” (“*Reliktinsel*”), but he later concluded that the Christians in the *Harat al-Arba’in* of Aleppo are the descendants of forty Lebanese families from Bsharre, who settled in Aleppo in the seventeenth century.

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* (sic!); 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^{viii}, 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 *astagfirullāh, mīn ghallak hēč?* instead of *astaghfirullāh, mīn qallak hēč*), and so on.

When transcribing his sound recordings, Behnstedt generally prefers, where appropriate, to note the sound pairs *i - u* (*e, o*) phonetically, instead of the phonological representation of schwa *ə* (i.e. *e* and *o* are then only recognized as 'allophones' of the phoneme /ə/, and both sounds are represented only by *ə* in a purely phonological transcription). Behnstedt only notes the schwa *ə*

when he is really sure of having heard it (“ich schreibe was ich höre” – “I write down what I hear”). Sometimes it took him more than 33 hours to ascertain whether it should be *i* - *u* or schwa *ə*. (According to Professor Otto Jastrow 33 hours would be sufficient to make a basic analysis of an Arabic dialect). It is easier to afterwards substitute schwa *ə* for *i* or *u*, than the other way around. Various other scholars have often chosen the schwa *ə*, but it is difficult to know how one should exactly pronounce it, if one is unfamiliar with the precise conditioning that results in the different phonetic values of this phoneme. In this respect Professor Manfred Woidich has cynically noted that it is the dialectologist who makes the dialect” (*Beiheft*, p. 24). Behnstedt asks himself, by way of an example, how a student of “Syrian Arabic” should know how to pronounce “*kəll səne*“ (every year). As [kul sune], [kul səne], [kel sune], [kəl səne], [kil sune], [kil səne], [kul sine], [kil sine], [kel sone], or [kol sene]?

"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. (At the same time it may be noted that Syrians, and Arabs in general, do not attach much importance to this subject.)

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> .

ⁱ Dr. Nikolaos van Dam is Ambassador of the Netherlands in Indonesia and author of *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba’th Party* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996) (downloadable for free in Arabic: <http://www.democracy.org.nz/mideast/index.htm>).

ⁱⁱ Peter Behnstedt & Manfred Woidich, *Die ägyptisch-arabischen Dialekte*, 5 Vols, Wiesbaden, 1985-1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ J. Cantineau, *Les parlers arabes du Horan*, Paris, 1946.

^{iv} Bernard Lewin, *Notes on Cabali: The Arabic Dialect Spoken by the Alawis of "Jebel Ansariye"*, Göteborg, 1969, p. 8.

^v Sami al-Jundi, *al-Ba'th*, Beirut, 1969, pp. 136-7.

^{vi} Mustafa Talas, *Mir'at Hayati, Vol. 2*, Damascus 1995, p. 567.

^{vii} Peter Behnstedt, "Christlich-Aleppinische Texte", *Zeitschrift für arabische Linguistik*, Vol. 20, 1989, pp. 43-96.

^{viii} J. Cantineau, *Le dialecte arabe de Palmyre*, Beirut, 1934.