

BEDOUIN DIALECTS AS THE LINGUISTIC IDEAL OF NARRATIVE STYLE

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The contemporary Bedouin poetry of Northern Arabia, often called *nabaṭī* poetry, continues an old tradition which harks back to the days of the *Ġābilyya* – how directly is hard to say, because there is a gap of many hundred years in our knowledge of this poetry. This tradition of mainly oral poetry was amazingly vigorous until this century, up to about the sixties. The recent socioeconomic changes have, however, not only weakened the tradition but even endangered its very existence.¹

It is the aim of this paper to call attention to the narratives associated with Bedouin poetry. These narratives, *sālfas*, are intended to give the listeners background information necessary for correct understanding of the poems. In some cases, the narratives make an invaluable source on the tribal history of Arabia and its peripheries during the past two hundred years. Even in cases in which the historical data are inaccurate or badly distorted, they are interesting from the historical point of view – not as historical documents, but rather as material which throws light upon the patterns of transformations that the poems and their narratives undergo during their migrations in place and time.²

The narratives have values other than the historical, however. The poem and the narrative are normally transmitted together, and thus they form an artistic whole. Of the two parts, the poem has a more or less fixed form, and it also is the primary creation, while the narrative is secondary to it and occurs in innumerable shapes, longer and shorter,

¹ For the continuity of the tradition, see Saad A. Sowayan, *Nabaṭī Poetry. The Oral Poetry of Arabia*. Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1985, pp. 147-182.

² Sowayan, p. 4.

with correct and incorrect information, and so on, depending on the familiarity of the narrator with the topics and different factors associated with the performance context.

In spite of the great diversity in form and contents of the *sālfa*, there are common traits characteristic enough to justify the designation Bedouin narrative style. I do not attempt to specify these characteristics in detail. Suffice it here to state that one of the essential components of the Bedouin narrative style is the language: not only the stock phrases, Bedouin lexical items, frequent use of concretizing particles, dramatic interruptions, rhetorical questions, short exchanges of words, and other stylistic devices of these kinds, but also the purely linguistic structure, i.e., the phonetics, morphology and syntax.

In areas where the linguistic form of the narrative style is practically identical with the conservative style of the local vernacular, it might not seem to be a matter worthy of consideration. This is the case in the core areas of the northern Arabian Bedouin poetry. But in the periphery the situation is substantially different, especially in areas where Bedouin and sedentary populations live as neighbours. It is not unusual that Bedouin poetry in such areas has a very strong tradition. One area well known to me is al-Balqā' in central Jordan. Much of the Bedouin poetry known among the tribes of the area comes from the inner parts of the Arabian Peninsula, but much – perhaps most – of it has been composed by local Bedouin poets. Thus, Nimr ibn 'Adwān, the principal chief of the 'Adwān at the beginning of the last century, is still well known among the tribes of northwestern Arabia. So poems sometimes migrate from the periphery towards the central areas of Bedouin culture.

It is illustrative of the situation that when Hans Spoer collected Nimr's poems in al-Balqā' during the first years of this century, the linguistic form of the *sālfas* transmitted by his informants clearly deviates from the local sedentary dialects of the area, but it is not identical with any Bedouin dialect either. Rather, it is a kind of imitation of Bedouin speech. This shows, in my opinion, that the *sālfa* is not regarded as a mere record of necessary background information. It also has a certain stylistic ideal, of which the linguistic structure is a

substantial part. A skillful narrator is expected to use Bedouin linguistic elements in his speech even when he and the audience are speakers of a sedentary dialect.

In the *sālfas* published by Hans Spoer and Elias Haddad³, there are several examples of such impression-based Bedouin traits with which Spoer's informants tried to give the narratives the proper Bedouin touch. The following passage is a typical example of such stylistic aspirations: *wahum bihāda wan bi'arab bini ṣaḥr mimriḥīnin arḍ aṣ-ṣawwān aṣ-ṣarḡiyya ḡaribatan min bilād naḡd* (or perhaps better: *w-hum bi-hāda, winn bi'arab bini ṣaḥar mimriḥīnin arḍ aṣ-ṣawwān aṣ-ṣarḡiyya ḡiribatin min bilād naḡd*) 'And on this occasion the Ṣḥūr Arab were dwelling in the land of Ṣawwān eṣ-ṣarḡiyya, which is near Nejd'⁴. Side by side with this kind of passable imitation of Bedouin speech, there are forms such as *gālūn*, *liḡūnu*, *rūḥūn*, *lifonahum*, *yiḥūn*, hyper-Bedouin forms which reveal the narrator as a *ḥadari*⁵. Because it is impossible to know the exact circumstances in which these poems and their narratives were collected, I prefer illustrating the issue with my own material from narratives recorded in the same area.

The following instances have been taken from 15 narratives which I recorded in al-Balqā' in 1965. The narrator is Yūsif Ṭarīf el-Maḥāmre (d. 1965), who was a locally well-known storyteller and reciter of Bedouin poetry from the Christian village of Ṣāfūt, about 17 km northwest of Amman.

³ Hans H. Spoer (ed.), "Four Poems by Nimr Ibn 'Adwān, as sung by 'Ode Abu Slīmān". *ZDMG* 66 (1912), pp. 189-203; H. H. Spoer and Elias Nasrallah Haddad, "Poems by Nimr ibn 'Adwān". *ZS* 7 (1929), pp. 29-62, 274-294; 9 (1933-34), pp. 93-133.

⁴ *ZS* 7, p. 275.

⁵ Similar pseudo-correct perfect forms occur in Middle Arabic texts, see Joshua Blau, *A Grammar of Christian Arabic, based mainly on South Palestinian texts from the first millennium*, Fasc. I. Louvain 1966; p. 146f. and references there; see also Joshua Blau, *On Pseudo-Corrections in Some Semitic Languages*. Jerusalem 1970, p. 68f. Pseudo-correct forms of the same kind are reported by Michel Feghali, *Syntaxe des parlers arabes actuels du Liban*. Paris 1928, p. 204f.

In the phonology, the most important distinctive feature in the area is the pronunciation of the reflexes of *qāf* and *kāf*. The reflex of *qāf* in the sedentary dialects of the area is /g/, whereas the neighbouring Bedouin dialects also have a phonetically-conditioned affricated variant (/ğ/ or /ǧ/). The narrator often uses the affricated variant in the recital of poetry (e.g. *tiğīl*, *miğīl*), but not in the narratives. There is one important exception: affricated Bedouin reflexes do occur in direct discourse. As to the reflexes of *kāf*, the older genuine sedentary dialects used to have phonetically conditioned /k/ and /č/, i.e., the system was identical with Bedouin dialects. Nowadays the affricated variant is a recessive feature in the sedentary dialects⁶. The narrator naturally follows the old genuine type, which cannot be distinguished from the Bedouin dialects of the area.

The typical Bedouin syllable patterns CVCVCV- > CCVCV- and the so-called *gabawa* syndrome are frequently used by the narrator. Thus, *bduwi*, *zlima*, *wlidi*, *fruso*, *ghawa/gaháwa*, *abálak*, *yháči* occur of the sedentary counterparts *badarwi*, *zalame*, *waladi*, *faraso*, *gabwa*, *ablak*, *yahki/yahči*.

The Bedouin-type forms of personal pronouns are as a rule used in direct discourse, e.g. *int*, negated *mint*, *hinna*, instead of the sedentary *inte*, *mante/mantiš*, *ihna*. Bedouin-type interrogative pronouns are readily used in direct discourse, e.g. *min*, *wiš/wuš*, the sedentary counterparts of which are *manu/m in* and *šū/ēš*. Sometimes the Bedouin marker is very conspicuous, e.g. *wušinhu hād* 'what's this?'. The phonetically-conditioned binary /-a/ - /-e/ pattern of feminine markers in nouns, a feature of the sedentary dialects, is not always followed by the narrator, but sometimes, especially in Bedouin lexical items, he uses markedly Bedouin forms, e.g. *zēna*, *ǧīza*, *madda*, even if many neighbouring Bedouin dialects have /-e/ here. Forms such as *nižīl*, *dibīḥa*, *dibāyih*, *mičān* are obvious results of efforts to use Bedouin-type nominal patterns. *Tanwīn* is one of the most prominent distinctive

⁶ See Heikki Palva, "Patterns of Koineization in Modern Colloquial Arabic". *Acta Orientalia* 43 (1982), pp. 13-32; p. 22.

features of northern Arabian Bedouin dialects. Therefore, it is somewhat surprising that it has not been used more than sporadically, then usually according to the genuine Bedouin patterns, e.g. in an indefinite noun followed by adjectival attribute (*wlēdin hilw*) and in the indefinite pronoun or article (*wāḥadin šarāri*). In an indefinite object followed by an adverbial (*atla'lo bētin hināka*), the *tanwīn* probably is a hyper-Bedouin feature. The Bedouin-type perfect pattern CiCaC has only been used in typical Bedouin items, e.g. *lifa*, *ǧiza*. Long imperfect forms occur sporadically, e.g. *yibgatūn*, *yāklūn*, *tidbahūn*⁷. Obviously analogous to these, pseudo-correct hyper-Bedouin forms also occur in the imperative: *sallmūn*, *ḥuṭṭūnhum*, *kirmūno*⁸, and, in close contact to the last-mentioned form, in the imperfect 1st p. pl.: *nikirmūno*.

The local sedentary dialect makes optional use of the bipartite negations *ma ... -š*, *a ... -š*, *la ... -š*, which do not occur in Bedouin dialects of northern Arabian type. Here the narrator's Bedouinizing efforts have not led to the suppression but only to a rather low frequency of this sedentary feature.

The narratives naturally abound in Bedouin lexical items used as technical terms. In addition to these, Bedouin synonyms are often substituted for their sedentary counterparts, e.g. *maṭabb* for *maḥall*, *widd-* for *bidd-/badd-*, *raǧl* for *riǧǧāl*, *gōṭar* for *rāḥ*, *nōba* for *marra*, and *ṭabb* for *wiṣil/aǧa*.

For a linguist who tries to classify different dialect types by using typologically pertinent distinctive features, the present indicative *b-* prefix in the imperfect is one of the most important morphological traits which distinguish the sedentary dialects from the Bedouin dialects

⁷ Some of these forms can be characterized as hypo-corrections, since the Bedouin dialects which have imperfect forms with *-n* usually have /a/ in the preformative, see e.g. Heikki Palva, "Characteristics of the Arabic Dialect of the Bani Ṣaxar Tribe". *Orientalia Suecana* 29 (1980), pp. 112-139; p. 125.

⁸ Similar pseudo-correct imperatives sometimes occur in Middle Arabic texts, see Blau, *Christian Arabic* I, p. 147 (perhaps due to attraction to the following imperfections).

in Greater Syria⁹. Therefore, it might seem surprising that the narrator does not make efforts to Bedouinize his language in this respect, but rather he uses the forms consistently according to the sedentary dialect patterns.

To sum up, transmitters of Bedouin poetry, when providing the audience with background information in the form of a *sālfā*, use their skills in order to create an atmosphere favourable to a successful performance of the poem. Thus there is a situation-conditioned artistic connection between the poem and its narrative. Even if the *sālfā* does not have any fixed form, as a rule it has a characteristic style of its own.

The linguistic structure is, of course, an inseparable part of the style. Although there are no exact rules for the linguistic form, there is still a stylistic ideal to be followed. As far as the purely linguistic structure is concerned, the stylistic ideal plays an important rôle only when the vernacular of the narrator clearly deviates from the Bedouin dialect type. In such cases an impressionistic imitation of Bedouin speech is most often used.

The instances given above show that the features regarded as hallmarks of Bedouin dialects are for the most part interrogatives, personal pronouns, and other words of high frequency, as well as a few phonetic traits. The differences in nominal and verbal morphology have not been ignored, but markedly Bedouin or hyper-Bedouin forms have been used only sporadically. In a similar way, the negation normally follows the rules of the narrator's idiolect.

⁹ Cf., however, a different situation in Sinai and the Negev, Judith Rosenhouse, "Towards a classification of Bedouin dialects in Israel". *BSOAS* 47:3 (1984), pp. 508-522; p. 512f.