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The Origin of North Mesopotamian Arabic

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Abstract

This research paper explores the origin and distinct characteristics of the North Mesopotamian Arabic dialect, specifically the Moslawi dialect spoken in Mosul, northern Iraq. The study begins with tracing the roots of the Arabic language within the Semitic language family tree and examines the emergence of Modern Arabic Dialects. It highlights Ferguson's theory that these dialects originated from a simplified Koine as the most plausible explanation. The paper then delves into the Mesopotamian dialect group, detailing the division into qeltu and gelet varieties through bedouinization. The phonological and lexical uniqueness of Moslawi is analyzed, emphasizing the persistent use of the phoneme /q/ by Moslawi speakers and the systematic vowel-raising rule that differentiates it from other dialects. Extensive language contact, with Persian, Turkish, Hindi, Kurdish, and English, is also discussed, which explains the numerous borrowed words in Moslawi.

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This research underscores the complex historical and sociolinguistic factors contributing to the distinctiveness of the Moslawi dialect within the broader context of Arabic dialects.

Keywords: Historical Linguistics, Mesopotamian Arabic, Iraqi Arabic, Moslawi Dialect, Language Contact, Borrowing.

أصل اللغة العربية الشمالية لبلاد ما بين النهرين

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ملخص البحث

يستكشف هذا البحث أصل اللهجة العربية الشمالية في بلاد ما بين النهرين وخصائصها المميزة، وتحديدا اللهجة الموصلية المحكية في الموصل، شمال العراق. تبدأ الدراسة بتتبع جذور اللغة العربية ضمن شجرة عائلة اللغة السامية وتدرس ظهور اللهجات العربية الحديثة. يتم تسليط الضوء على نظرية فيرغسون القائلة بأن هذه اللهجات نشأت من كوين مبسط باعتباره التفسير الأكثر منطقية. ثم تتعمق الورقة في مجموعة لهجات بلاد ما بين النهرين، وتوضح بالتفصيل التقسيم إلى أصناف قلتو وكلت من خلال البدونة. يتم تحليل التفرد الصوتي والمعجمي للهجة الموصلية، مع التركيز على الاستخدام المستمر للصوت /ق/ من قبل المتحدثين باللهجة الموصلية وقاعدة رفع حروف العلة المنهجية التي تميزها عن اللهجات الأخرى. كما تمت مناقشة الاتصال اللغوي المكثف مع الفارسية والتركية والهندية والكردية والإنجليزية، مما يفسر العديد من الكلمات المستعارة في اللهجة الموصلية. يؤكد هذا البحث على العوامل التاريخية والاجتماعية اللغوية المعقدة التي تساهم في تميز اللهجة الموصلية ضمن السياق الأوسع للهجات العربية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللسانيات التاريخية، العربية في بلاد ما بين النهرين، العربية العراقية، اللهجة الموصلية، الاتصال اللغوي، الاقتراض اللغوي

1. Introduction

The origin of modern Arabic dialects has been a subject of considerable debate, focusing on their descent from Classical Arabic or other Arabic varieties. This paper will examine the origins of the North Mesopotamian Arabic dialects, particularly the Moslawi dialect spoken in Mosul, Iraq. The analysis will highlight its phonological characteristics and lexical distinctions compared to neighboring dialects.

To trace the origins of the Moslawi dialect and its related group, it is essential to explore the broader origins of the Arabic language within the Semitic language family and understand the emergence of modern dialects. Owens (2013) discusses how various scholars have addressed this issue. Fück (1950) proposed that modern Arabic dialects emerged through a simplification process by non-native speakers of Classical Arabic. Conversely, Noldeke (1899) argued that these dialects are deteriorated forms of Classical Arabic. Ferguson (1957) suggested that these dialects originated from a simplified Koine used by Arabs in newly established urban centers (Owens, 2013).

Understanding the origins of the Arabic language and the development of modern Arabic dialects allows for a detailed exploration of the origins of the North Mesopotamian Arabic dialects, particularly what differentiates the Moslawi dialect from other contemporary Arabic dialects.

2. Hypothesis and Research Problem

It is hypothesized that the distinct characteristics of the Moslawi dialect result from historical bedouinization and extensive language contact. The primary research problem is identifying and analyzing these unique phonological and lexical features and their historical and sociolinguistic origins.

3. Study Type

This is a descriptive study that focuses on the detailed examination and analysis of phonological and lexical features of the Moslawi dialect. The descriptive nature of this research involves a thorough review of existing literature, studies, and scholarly works. By examining and describing the data collected by other researchers, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the Moslawi dialect as documented in various sources. The analysis includes synthesizing information on phonological patterns, lexical items, and historical influences, highlighting the distinctive features of the Moslawi dialect. The goal is to describe the current state and characteristics of the dialect based on the findings and observations of previous scholars.

4. Methodology

The methodology of this study involves a comprehensive review of existing research and scholarly findings on the Moslawi dialect. Data were gathered through an extensive examination of historical texts, linguistic studies, and previous research conducted by scholars in the field. This descriptive approach allowed for the identification and analysis of the unique phonological and lexical features of the Moslawi dialect. The study does not involve primary data collection through fieldwork but relies on secondary sources to support the analysis and conclusions.

5. Origin of Arabic within the Semitic languages

Faber (1997) posits that to establish a linguistic subgroup, it is essential to identify the commonalities and shared innovations among the languages within the group. She emphasizes that "the

question of genetic relationships among the Semitic languages cannot be treated in isolation from their subsequent patterns of contact. In other words, genetic models of linguistic relatedness and areal models of mutual linguistic influence are complementary rather than competitive. Some similarities are evidence of genetic relationship, while others are evidence of mutual influence" (Faber, 1998).

Furthermore, Faber (1998) presents two hypotheses concerning the subgrouping of Arabic within the Semitic language family tree. The first hypothesis is based on various Semitic languages' geographical distribution and cultural significance. The second hypothesis, proposed by Hetzron (1976), relies on morphological and phonological innovations. According to Faber (1998), scholars such as Bergstrasser (1983), Brockelmann (1961), Moscati (1969), and Ullendorff (1970) provided the traditional subgrouping of Semitic languages on a cultural and geographical basis as follows:

- East Semitic: Akkadian
- West Semitic:
    - Northwest Semitic:
        - Canaanite: Hebrew, Phoenician, Moabite
        - Aramaic
    - South Semitic:
        - Arabic
        - Southeast Semitic:
            - Modern South Arabian: Jibbali, Mehri, Harsusi, Soqotri
            - Ethio-Sabean
            - Old South Arabian (OSA): Sabean, Qatabanian, Hadramauti, Minean

        - Ethiopian Semitic

This model is grounded in the geographical distribution of languages. In contrast, a model based on shared innovations is proposed. Faber (1998) notes that Hetzron (1972, 1973, 1975, 1976) classified the internal structure of the Semitic language family based on shared morphological innovations. Rodgers (1991) and Huehnergard (1992) made further modifications to this grouping (Faber, 1998). The subgrouping based on shared innovations is as follows:

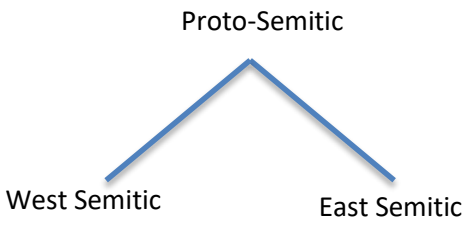
- East Semitic:
    - Akkadian
    - Eblaite
- West Semitic:
    - Central Semitic:
        - Arabic
    - Northwest Semitic:
        - Ugaritic
        - Canaanite: Hebrew, Phoenician, Moabite, Ammonite, El-Amarna
        - Aramaic
        - Deir Alla
    - South Semitic:
        - Eastern:
            - Soqotri
            - Mehri, Harsusi, Jibbali
        - Western:
            - Old South Arabian
            - Ethiopian Semitic

Arabic shares numerous features with both Northwest and Southeast Semitic languages, which allows it to be classified in

two ways: either as part of the South Semitic languages or as Central/Northwest Semitic (Faber, 1998).

Owens (2013) highlights that Arabic possesses a dual history as both a literary and a spoken language. The distinction between these two histories hinges on their usage contexts rather than historical linguistic categories. The literary language is employed by scientists, poets, and the societal elite, while the spoken language is used by the general populace. This phenomenon, where speakers alternate between the literary and spoken forms, is known as 'diglossia.' The use of literary language by poets' dates back to the pre-Islamic era, with evidence of diglossia existing at that time; however, the significant divergence between the two forms only occurred in the mid-2nd to the 8th century. This split resulted in the emergence of two distinct forms: a literary language and a spoken one.

Versteegh (1997) proposed a model for the family tree of Semitic languages, suggesting that around 3000 BC, a split occurred between the Northeast Semitic languages, including Akkadian, which later divided into Babylonian and Assyrian. Another split around 2000 BC in the West Semitic group led to the division into Northwest and Southwest Semitic languages. Subsequently, around 1000 BC, the Northwest Semitic languages were further divided into Canaanite and Aramaic, while the Southwest Semitic languages branched into Arabic, South Arabian, and Ethiopic (Versteegh, 1997).



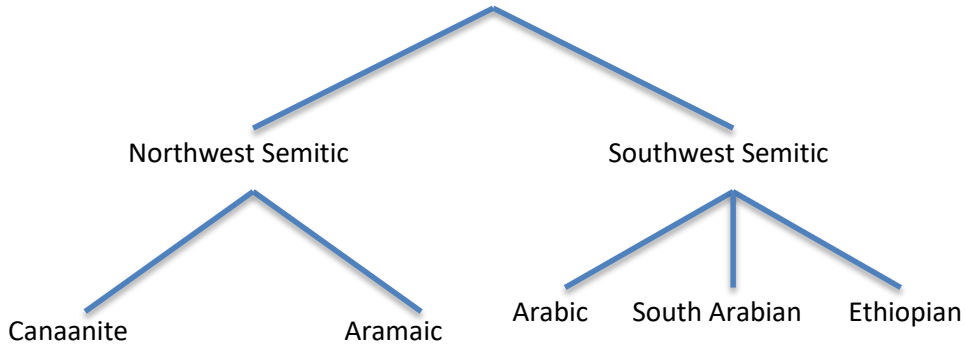


Fig. 1: The Traditional Classification of the Semitic Languages. Adopted from Versteegh (1997: P.12)

Proposing a family tree without considering the genetic classification among languages may result in inaccuracies. Languages are not isolated entities; they are in contact with one another and often engage in borrowing. Hetzron (1974, 1976) proposed a model based on genetic classification rather than shared innovations, arguing that while borrowing is common, morphological innovations are less likely to be borrowed. Hetzron suggested the existence of a group of Central Semitic languages to which Arabic belongs, thus repositioning Arabic within the Semitic language family from its traditional placement.

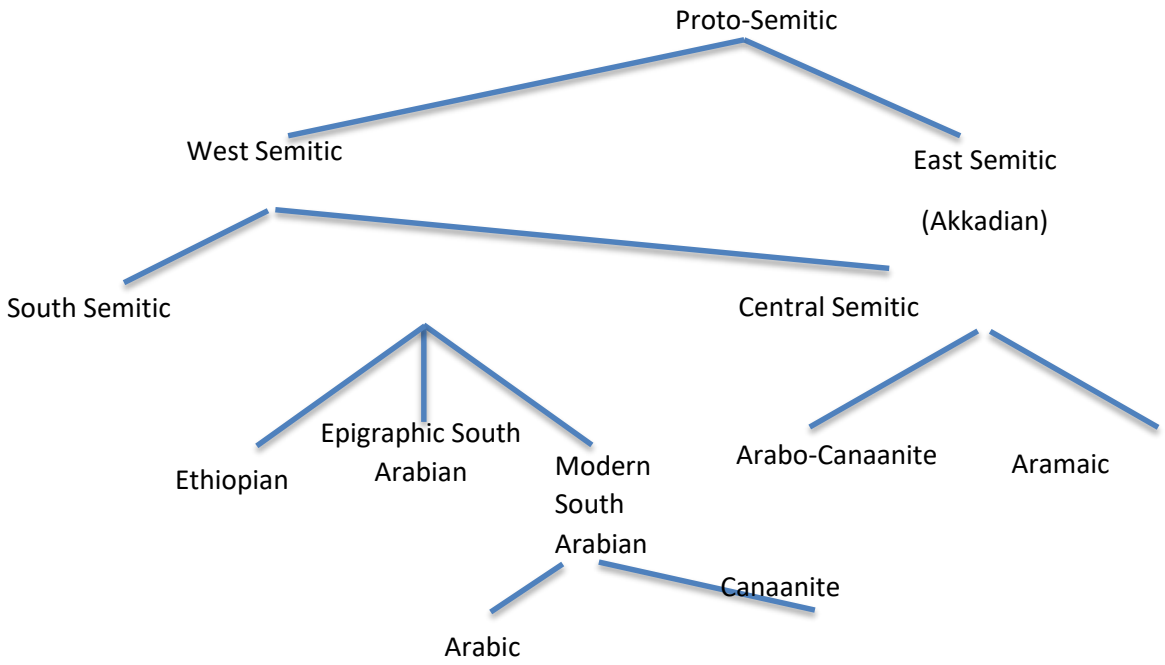


Fig. 2: The Genealogy of the Semitic Languages (According to Hetzron 1976). Adopted from Versteegh (1997, P.14)

6- Modern Arabic Dialects

The Arabic language encompasses a wide array of dialects that exhibit significant differences in phonology, syntax, and lexicon, rendering some dialects mutually unintelligible (Behnstedt & Woidich, 2013). Behnstedt and Woidich (2013) cite Owens (2006: 8), who asserts that "the modern dialects have an indispensable role in an account of Arabic language history." The relationship between modern Arabic dialects and Classical Arabic is pivotal in Arabic historical linguistics. To study these dialects effectively, fieldwork is essential rather than merely relying on theoretical approaches (Behnstedt & Woidich, 2013).

Various theories exist regarding the emergence of modern Arabic dialects. Owens (2013) notes that the orientalist Fleischer, in an 1854 article, proposed three historical periods of Arabic: Old Arabic, Middle Arabic, and Neo-Arabic. Owens (2013) also references other scholars, such as Noldeke (1899: 6), who argued that Classical Arabic underwent restructuring and subsequently deteriorated into multiple dialects. Fück (1950) suggested that Classical Arabic was initially spoken in Islamic centers, but the influx of non-native speakers led to the language's simplification and the development of modern dialects. Ferguson (1957) posited that Arabs, upon settling in new urban areas, spoke various dialects and formed a simplified Koine for communication, while Classical Arabic remained in use among Bedouin speakers. Ferguson (1975) further argued that modern dialects evolved from this simplified Koine, characterized by fourteen distinguishing features from classical Arabic. However, Ferguson did not systematically compare the dialects or identify features differentiating them from Classical Arabic to support his claims about their historical development (Owens, 2013).

Moreover, Ferguson (1959) hypothesized that modern Arabic dialects descended from Classical Arabic or a closely related variety. He suggested that the Koine from which modern dialects emerged resulted from mutual borrowing and leveling among different dialects and was distinct from both the individual dialects and Classical Arabic. This Koine was used alongside Classical Arabic during the early Muslim era. In pre-Islamic Arabia, various dialects coexisted with Classical Arabic, primarily used by poets and orators (Ferguson, 1959).

Newman (2013) notes that by the late eighteenth century, Classical Arabic was the written language among Muslim

scholars, while the general populace spoke colloquial forms, which differed significantly from the Classical language akin to the modern dialects today. There are notable differences between Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic, the latter being the official language in most Arab countries. Newman (2013) also highlights the challenges Muhammad Ali's translators faced in coining new scientific terms, leading them to use borrowing, transliteration, paraphrasing, semantic extension, derivation, and compounding.

Owens (2013) suggests that Yoda (2005) implies that Classical Arabic is the proto-language from which all modern dialects have emerged. As previously mentioned, Arabic has distinct literary and spoken forms. At some point, a divergence occurred, resulting in the coexistence of two varieties: one used by the societal elite and Muslim scholars and the other spoken by the general populace. The reasons for this split still need to be clarified. However, it is suggested that the language was corrupted by non-native speakers residing in urban areas where the literary language was used. The literary language, now the official language in Arab countries and used in education, is learned rather than acquired and is characterized by a fixed grammatical structure. On the other hand, the spoken language is naturally acquired and has native speakers (Owens, 2013).

6. **North Mesopotamian Arabic**

Dialects of Arabic are classified into several divisions: dialects of the Arabian Peninsula, Mesopotamian dialects, Syro-Lebanese dialects, Egyptian dialects, and Maghreb dialects (Versteegh, 1997). The Mesopotamian dialect group is spoken in Iraq, particularly in cities such as Mosul and Tikrit, extending into southern Turkey in Mardin and northeastern Syria. Within this

group, dialects are further classified into qeltu and gelet dialects, distinguished by the way speakers say "I said." The primary distinction between these dialects is using the phoneme /q/. The qeltu dialect is predominant in Mosul, and this paper will later explore its unique characteristics.

In Iraq and Syria, Bedouin and sedentary dialects have coexisted. Bedouin dialects, which are closer to Classical Arabic, were typically spoken in rural areas (Versteegh, 1997). Versteegh (1997) notes that Blanc (1964) argues that all dialects of Greater Mesopotamia belong to the same group. Blanc also identified three varieties spoken in Baghdad based on the speaker's religion: Muslim Baghdadi, Christian Baghdadi, and Jewish Baghdadi. The Muslim Baghdadi dialect belongs to the gelet group, whereas the Christian and Jewish Baghdadi dialects belong to the qeltu group. These dialectal divisions are found throughout Mesopotamia. Blanc further suggests that qeltu dialects originated from the vernaculars of sedentary centers in medieval Abbasid Iraq. In contrast, the gelet dialect of Muslim Baghdadis, initially similar to qeltu, underwent a process of bedouinization (Versteegh, 1997).

Palva (2009) concurs with Versteegh that there are three dialect groups in Baghdad: Muslim Baghdadi, which belongs to the gelet group, and Jewish and Christian Baghdadi, which belongs to the qeltu group. The Muslim Baghdadi dialect is a Bedouin dialect, while Jewish and Christian Baghdadi are urban dialects. Before the Mongol invasion in 1258, Muslims in Baghdad spoke the qeltu variety of Mesopotamian Arabic, the most prestigious dialect among Muslim speakers at the time. Post-invasion, rural Bedouin speakers began settling in Baghdad, mainly from northern Arabia. Many of these immigrants were

from the Zawiya tribes, whose language belonged to the Syro-Mesopotamian group, similar to the dialects spoken by earlier settled farmers. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the number of Bedouin immigrants increased as the Ottomans allowed them to stay and work as peasants.

Consequently, the linguistic landscape of Baghdad began to change, with Bedouin dialects becoming more prevalent among Muslim speakers. This led to the original qeltu-speaking Muslims adopting Bedouin dialects to distinguish themselves from Jewish and Christian communities. Hence, the division between qeltu and gelet groups emerged, with Jews and Christians migrating north while Muslims remained in Baghdad and southern Iraq (Palva, 2009).

Bateson (2003) adds that until the collapse of urban control, the area was dominated by qeltu and gelet dialects. The influx of nomadic dialect speakers influenced the sedentary Muslim populations, resulting in the bedouinization of Muslim dialects. The northern regions of Iraq experienced less devastation than Baghdad, allowing the original qeltu dialect to persist. In contrast, in southern Iraq, the qeltu dialect has survived predominantly among Jewish and Christian speakers (Bateson, 2003).

7. The Difference in Phonology in North Mesopotamian Arabic

Bateson (2003) notes that Mesopotamian Arabic, particularly the dialect spoken by the Muslim population of Baghdad, represents the primary dialect of Iraq. However, other dialects, such as North Mesopotamian Arabic, transcend political boundaries and are spoken in southern Turkey and northeastern Syria. This dialect features distinct phonemes such as /p/ and /tʃ/, borrowed from Turkish and Persian. In Mosul, speakers of the qeltu dialect pronounce /q/ as it is, unlike other dialects where /q/

is pronounced as /g/, as in southern Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula, or as a glottal stop, as in western Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt.

The Muslim Baghdadi dialect has acquired three notable features from Bedouin dialects: the pronunciation of /q/ as /g/, the substitution of /k/ with /k/ and /ch/, and the low vowel raising rule. Despite the general change from /q/ to /g/, this transformation does not occur in all words. For instance, the /q/ is retained in words denoting instruments, such as /qalam/ ('pen'), likely because the /q/ was used in technical terms in Muslim Baghdadi. Rural immigrants adopted these technical terms from the qeltu dialect and continued using them. The persistence of this phoneme in certain words indicates that Muslim Baghdadi speakers originally spoke the qeltu dialect, which was prestigious before the bedouinization process.

Unlike the change from /q/ to /g/, the vowel raising rule is a synchronic change affecting the syllable structure of nominal and verbal patterns without exceptions. The change from /q/ to /g/ was the initial step in the bedouinization process. As the Bedouin-speaking Muslim population grew, their influence on the original qeltu dialect increased. Consequently, the urban population began using /g/ instead of /q/ to distinguish themselves from the minority Jewish and Christian Baghdadi qeltu speakers (Bateson, 2003).

The vowel-raising change originating from Bedouin dialects affects stressed open syllables followed by another /a/ in the next syllable. In such cases, the first /a/ changes to /i/ and is realized as schwa or /u/ depending on the consonant environment. For example:

/samak/ □ /səmatʃ/ ‘fish’

/ dʒabal/ □ / dʒəbal/ ‘mountain’

/basal/ □ /busal/ ‘onion’

/qamar/ □ /gumar/ ‘moon’

It works on verbs as well, for example:
/katab/ □ /kətab/ ‘he wrote’

/baram/□ /buram/ ‘he twisted’

The vowel-raising phenomenon in Mesopotamian Arabic is a systematic phonetic change in contrast to the unsystematic change of /q/ to /g/. Moreover, the change from /q/ to /g/ does not influence the vowel-raising process. In Moslawi, a process known as imala or vowel raising occurs where /a/ shifts to /e/ or /i/ due to the umlauting influence of /i/. For example, /madrassa/ becomes /madrassi/ (‘school’). This feature is also present in the dialects of Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria (Palva, 2009).

Bateson (2003) notes another distinctive feature of the Moslawi dialect: the use of /o/ instead of /a/ in the third-person singular pronoun suffix of transitive verbs. For instance, in the Baghdadi dialect, one would say /ʔaħəba/ (‘I love him’), whereas, in Moslawi, it is /ʔaħəbo/ (‘I love him’) (Bateson, 2003).

Summarizing the phonetic differences between North Mesopotamian Arabic and other dialects, the qeltu variety uses /q/, while the gelet variety uses /g/. In North Mesopotamian Arabic, /k/ is not affricated, whereas in the Baghdadi dialect, it is affricated to /tʃ/. This affrication process was adopted by Muslim Baghdadi speakers as a feminine marker to distinguish themselves from Jewish and Christian Baghdadi speakers (Palva, 2009). The vowel-raising rule is a systematic change that has affected the Muslim Baghdadi dialect, differentiating it from the qeltu variety.

8. Differences in the Use of Lexical Items

The Moslawi dialect, or North Mesopotamian Arabic, significantly differs from surrounding dialects due to its isolated geographical location. Historically, people would only come to Mosul for trade or education, leading to its linguistic and political isolation from the capital city of the Abbasids. Over time, Mosul was ruled by various political forces, including the Alhamdanians, Albuehihians, Bani Aqeel, Seljuks, Atabegs, Alaakhanian, Tatars, Algelaarien, Timorese, Kara Qoinley, Aq Qoinley, Safavids, Ottomans, and finally the English (Aljoumard, 1988). This extensive contact with different rulers resulted in many borrowed words from Persian, Turkish, Hindi, Aramaic, and English.

Despite the myriad of borrowed terms, the Moslawi dialect has preserved certain words from various languages. Examples of Persian loanwords include /parda/ (‘curtain’), /taχət/ (‘bed’), /dʒəzdan/ (‘wallet’), /tʃartʃaf/ (‘bed sheet’), /tʃanaq/ (‘big bowl’), /χərda/ (‘change’), /dəgma/ (‘button’), /tˤarma/ (‘patio’), /ţˤapi/ (‘ball’), and /lawtʃa/ (‘stocker’). Although many of these Persian words are predominantly used by older generations, they remain an integral part of the dialect.

From English, numerous loanwords are used in Moslawi, especially those related to everyday objects and modern technology, such as ‘glass,’ ‘recorder,’ ‘light,’ ‘cup,’ ‘kettle,’ and ‘steel.’ Additionally, terms related to computers and auto parts are commonly borrowed from English.

Turkish loanwords in Moslawi include /ʔadabsəz/ (‘someone with no manners’), /ʔoda/ (‘room’), /baaɣa/ (‘plastic’), /balki/ (‘probably’), and /baltˤa/ (‘axe’). Kurdish loanwords, although fewer, include /katʃi/ (‘short’) and the expression /ja hara ja wara/, meaning ‘it will either be good or bad.’

Hindi contributions to the Moslawi dialect are primarily names of spices. However, an interesting word is /bibi matto/ (‘parrot’), used metaphorically to describe a person who repeats everything they hear, akin to a parrot (Almawsily, 1960).

Bateson (2003) notes additional unique lexical items in the Moslawi dialect, such as /fadd/ (an indefinite article), /faɣəd/ (another indefinite article), and /mal/ (‘belong to’). Iraq is often referred to as the land of /aku/ and /maku/ due to the ubiquitous use of these terms, similar to the American expression ‘what’s up?’. Other distinctive words in this dialect include /hassa/ (‘now’), /meez/ (‘table’), and /bazzuni/ (‘cat’).

9. Conclusion

To conclude the discussion on the origin of North Mesopotamian Arabic, particularly the variety spoken in the city of Mosul in northern Iraq, known as the Moslawi dialect, the roots of the Arabic language have been traced within the Semitic language family tree. We examined the origins of Modern Arabic Dialects, highlighting various researchers' perspectives, and emphasized Ferguson's theory that these modern dialects emerged from a Koine as the most plausible explanation.

We then focused on the Mesopotamian group of dialects, particularly those spoken in Iraq, and explored how Mesopotamian Arabic split into two varieties, qeltu, and gelet, through bedouinization. The distinctive speech patterns of Moslawi speakers result from the bedouinization of the same qeltu dialect found in Baghdad. Phonologically, the language spoken by Mosul residents has mainly remained consistent, with changes occurring in specific areas. The primary phonological difference is using the phoneme /q/ by Moslawi (qeltu) speakers and /g/ by gelet speakers. The systematic vowel-raising rule also

plays a significant role in differentiating Moslawi from other surrounding dialects.

Additionally, we discussed the lexical uniqueness of Moslawi, which results from extensive language contact with Persian, Turkish, Hindi, Kurdish, and English. This contact has introduced numerous words into Moslawi that are not found in other Arabic dialects, contributing to its distinctive vocabulary.

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