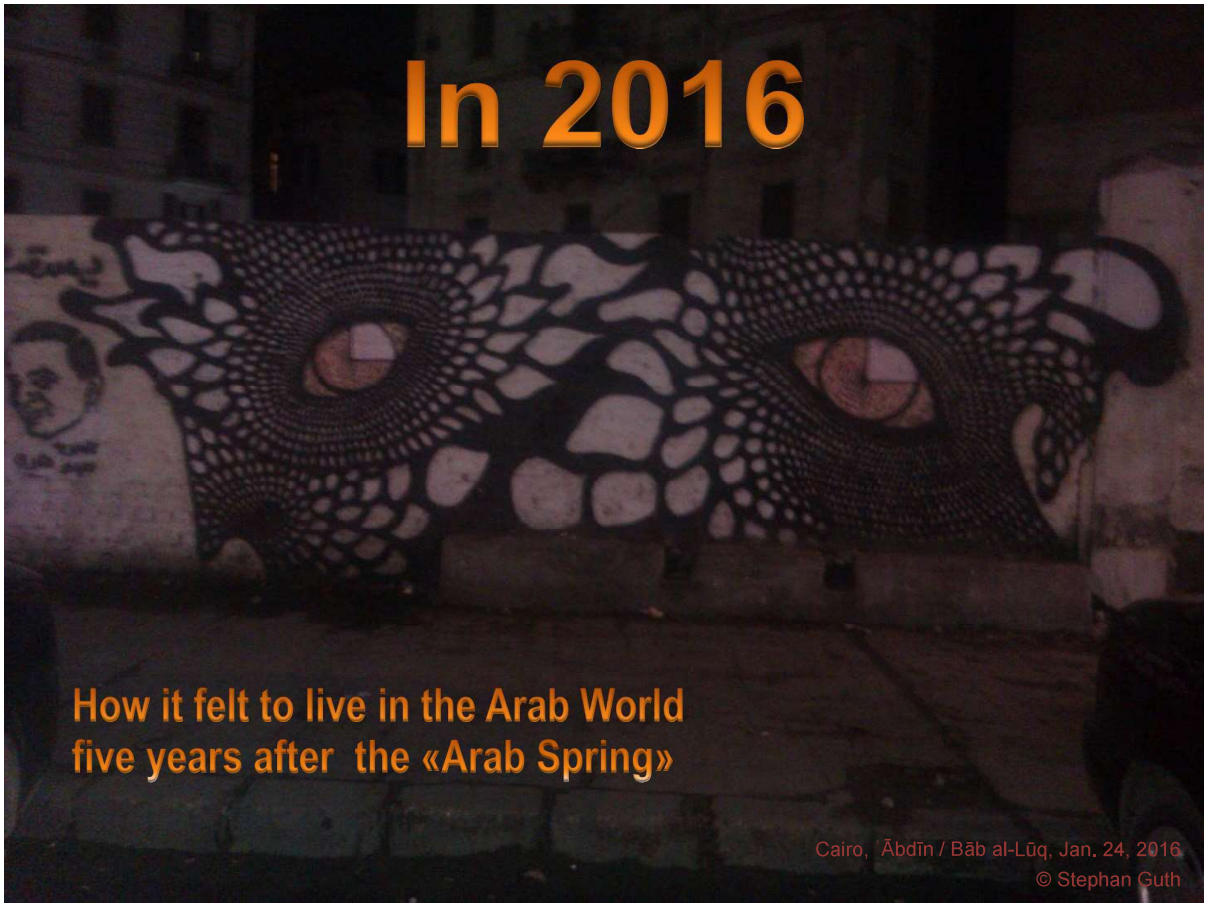

Themed section

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Contents

Codes

Codes Collapsed

Language*

By Myriam Achour Kallel, Mariem Guellouz, Eva Marie Håland, and Stephan Guth

Tunisian *dērja* and Egyptian *ʿāmmiyya*, the languages that traditionally used to be regarded as vernacular varieties of Arabic, can no longer be referred to as solely *spoken* varieties. Several social events mark the spread of Tunisian in the public sphere through different media. Azyz Amami, a cyberactivist in his early thirties who had participated in several demonstrations before the Revolution, now commits to supporting the diffusion of *tūnsī* by translating philosophical and literary classics (Gramsci, Barthes, Plato, etc.) into this language. His motivation for doing so seems to be similar to that of the Egyptian scholar, translator and novelist Nārīmān al-Shāmilī (b. 1983) who translates Abū ʾl-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī's *Risālat al-ghufrān* ("The Epistle of Forgiveness") into Egyptian *ʿāmmiyya*—and explains his effort as an attempt to

> bridge the big gap that has emerged between our language of today and the essential works (*ummahāt al-kutub*) of literature, the heritage and the language and style they were written in (...) for the language not to be a monopoly for those who studied it and understand it (...) so that it is possible for a twelve or thirteen, or even younger boy or girl, to read one of the essential works and understand what is being said (...) that it is natural and happens in any language (...) personally I think that no awakening/revival/renaissance (*nahḍa*) will take place in the Arab countries unless we know how to understand our forefathers first. (al-Shāmilī, 7-8) [↗**Past *vs.* Present**].

Risālat al-ghufrān is most likely the only translation published this year from *fuṣḥà* (standard Arabic) to *ʿāmmiyya*, but there are, like in Tunisia, translations from foreign languages into *ʿāmmiyya*. One example is William Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, translated by ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Yūsuf. Poetry written in Egyptian *ʿāmmiyya* is becoming more and more recognized. In December, Aḥmad Fu'ād Nigm's prize for poetry in Egyptian *ʿāmmiyya* is awarded for the third time. This includes prizes both for poetry written in Egyptian as well as literary criticism of poetry composed in this language (Sulaymān). Comic books are another genre in which *ʿāmmiyya* is frequently used. *Al-Waraqa 2* ("The paper 2") by Islām Ǧāwīsh is one such example, but also other types of books are being published that are written fully or partly in *ʿāmmiyya*, or in a mix of *ʿāmmiyya* and *fuṣḥà*. Many of them belong to the *adab sākhir* genre [↗**Inferiority = Superiority (Satire)**] and are known for their great use of ↗***ʔAlsh***. *Ghayr qābil lil-nashr* ("Unpublishable") by Sharīf Asʿad is apparently published in its 11,000th edition, *Shaklahā sāfrit* ("It looks like she travelled") by Suhā al-Fiqqī and Muṣṭafà Shuhayyib's *Kull al-ṭuruq tuʾaddī li-sittīn dāhiya* ("All roads lead to sixty calamities") are two other examples. Even ↗**Self-help** books in *ʿāmmiyya* are promoted at the Cairo International Book Fair. *Il-*

* This entry merges earlier country-specific versions, published as "ʿĀmmiyya" (Egypt), by Eva Marie Håland, and "Dérja" (Tunisia), by Myriam Achour Kallel and Mariem Guellouz, in *JAIS* 17 (2017): 463-65 and 482-83, respectively.

Khurūg ʿan il-naṣṣ ("Out of the Box") by Egyptian psychiatrist Muḥammad Ṭāhā [↗**Psychiatrists**] and *Il-tagriba il-fikriyya li-rūḥ ʾummuh* ("The Intellectual Experience of Mama's Boy") by Kīrullus Bahgat are both written completely in *ʿāmmiyya*, and both authors express their wish to make scientific thought available to 'everyone'. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm's book *Maṭlūb ḥabīb* ("Sweetheart Wanted") is labelled *iʿtirāfāt* ("confessions"). Like many other writers, he too addresses the dilemma of which language to write in [↗**Dual Identities / Masking**]:

> I have grown up but I have not really grown up…I have grown up but I still write *ʿāmmiyya* next to *fuṣḥà*...I know that it is better if the book is all in *fuṣḥà*, but I prefer to express myself in *ʿāmmiyya*, I was born and raised in a country which speaks in a variety (*lahga*) which is different from the official variety (*lahga*) that is written in books and in education. I learned in one way and lived in another. I cannot define my identity closer to any of the varieties…both of them represent me…a variety closer to my intellect (*ʿaql*) and a variety closer to my heart and way of life…for this reason I decided to complete the book using both varieties. (IBRĀHĪM, 10)

Ibrāhīm refers to *ʿāmmiyya* as a "*lahga*," a dialect or variety. However, like Tunisian *dērja*, Egyptian *ʿāmmiyya* is also seen by many as an independent language, a real "*lugha*." Al-Shāmilī, the translator of *Risālat al-ghufrān*, emphasizes that she sees *il-maṣriyya* as "a language and not a dialect" (*Al-Ittiḥād*). *Al-Lugha al-miṣriyya al-ḥāliyya* ("The current Egyptian language") is the title of a book by the Egyptian scholar ʿIṣām Stātī. It aims at tracing Old Egyptian and Coptic origins of the contemporary Egyptian *ʿāmmiyya* vocabulary.

The use of *ʿāmmiyya* in writing is frequent in other written domains: billboards decorating buildings and roadsides are often in this language; it is used frequently in ↗**Social Media**, and Egyptians receive text messages from their telephone companies in *ʿāmmiyya* [↗**Mobile Phones**]. Although the use of the *ʿāmmiyya* in printed books is more widespread in Egypt than that of the *dērja* in Tunisia, writing in Tunisian on social networks is also thriving. In addition, the newspaper *Medina* starts publishing in Tunisian to better represent the medina of Tunis where its head office is located (*Jdlm*). All of this points to a higher value of what previously was regarded merely as vernacular varieties in the respective countries, and it is not only noticed in writing, but also in TV and movie industry.

For the first time in their history, Tunisian TV stations begin to dub Turkish soap operas in Tunisian this year (al-MĀJIRĪ). Until then, Turkish films used to be broadcast with translations in Lebanese or Syrian Arabic. The first dubbing attempt is now made in the TV series *Qlūb er-Rommān* ("The Pomegranate Seeds"), a melodramatic story about an unmarried lower-class surrogate mother who falls in love with the main hero, the father of the child she is hired to carry to term, with typical soap-opera ingredients, like jealousy, rivalry among women, vengeance, and the gap between the rich and the poor [↗**Affluence *vs.* Destitution**].

The choice of *tūnsī* instead of Levantine Arabic is initially perceived negatively by some in the audience but appreciated thereafter. The series is broadcast on the private television channel *Nessma TV*. Like other television and radio channels, *Nessma TV* relies on the use of Tunisian, even in its news broadcast. Due to Egypt's longstanding history of movie and film production, Egyptians are accustomed to watching TV-series with Egyptian actors speaking *ʿāmmiyya*. Arabs born in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s have grown up

hearing Egyptian *ʿāmmiyya* from the tongues of the animated movie characters in Disney movies. However, four years ago, Disney decided to begin dubbing all their movies in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). People from all over the Arab world now mark their disregard for this decision through the twitter hashtag #Dīzney_lāzim_tirgaʿ_maṣrī ("Disney must be in Egyptian again"). YouTube videos are posted showing identical clips from Disney movies: once in *fuṣḥà*, once in Egyptian *ʿāmmiyya*, to emphasize the 'flatness' of the MSA versions of the movies.

The Egyptian president even gives formal speeches in *ʿāmmiyya* [↗**Father Figures**] and uses several linguistic features that are not associated with the prestige register of *ʿāmmiyya*. On October 6, the Facebook page *Asa7be Sarcasm Society* posts a meme involving an image from a news broadcast showing al-Sīsī commemorating the 43rd anniversary of the October War together with the Sudanese President ʿUmar al-Bashīr [↗**Commemoration / Memorial Days**]. The caption reads: *ʾiddīhā wāḥda "taḥyā Masr/Misr"*, which literally means "Give it a 'Long live Egypt'." The word for Egypt is spelled with the letter س *sīn* instead of the correct ص *ṣād*, mocking the president's 'weak' pronunciation. Imitation or mocking of specific pronunciations is often found when *ʿāmmiyya* is written (DURGHAM). On November 1, a meme posted on the same Facebook page targets certain women who speak in a flirty/childish/spoiled manner. This time it is an image from the movie *ʿAsal iswid* ("Black Honey") from 2010. The original scene involves the protagonist, called Maṣrī (i.e., "Egyptian"), who has returned to Egypt after twenty years in the United States, his friend Saʿīd, and Mervat, the woman Saʿīd is in love with. Mervat is a primary school teacher of English, and Maṣrī is provoked by her faulty English: she pronounces [f] for /v/, [b] for /p/ etc. The author of the meme turns the focus over to Egyptian *ʿāmmiyya*, adding the following caption:

> dī hiyya illī bitḥibbắhā?! Dī bitʾūl *māthī* wi-*thaḥlāna* yā Saʿīd ("Is this her that you love?! She says *māthī* and *thaḥlāna*, Saʿīd!"). (ʿĀṬIF)

Māthī is a variant of *māshī* (lit., "it goes," i.e., "o.k."), and *thaḥlāna* of *zaʿlāna* (the feminine form for "sad"). The post generates comments of which some contain new memes treating the same topic. One of these is an image from a different movie, in which a woman is portrayed as saying *shhaʾūllak kita baq̉ā, zaḥlāna minak*. This would, according to the conventions, be written *mish haʾūllak kida baq̉ā, zaʿlāna minak* ("I'm not going to tell you, I am angry with you"). Yet, this particular transcription points to specific linguistic features—those of flirty/childish/spoiled/lower class women—which are immediately recognized as communicating a social meaning. Such meanings are often linked to certain speech groups or strata of society [↗**Affluence *vs.* Destitution**], or a specific person or character [↗**Celebrities**]. That there are perceptions of which variants are correct and not, is clear. A post on *Al Tahrir–lāyf*'s Facebook community with the headline "Pronounce incorrectly," featuring twenty-two pictures of items and their "correct" and "incorrect" pronunciations, is shared thousands of times. According to this post, one should, for example, not say "*marākhīr"* for "nose," but "*manākhīr*."

While these attempts at 'standardizing' the spoken language in Egypt concern pronunciation (and its social connotation), lexical choices also trigger discussions. In Tunisia, *Annava*, a music band who define themselves as a "group of young Tunisians," release a song titled "Zaboubia" (*zabūbiyya*) which criticizes all kinds of authoritarianism in

Tunisian society—in politics, academia, and religion (*Annava*) [↗**Pop Music**]. The song's lyrics correspond to a poem written in Tunisian by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Kāfī, a communist poet who died in the early 1930s. The word he created, *zabūbiyya*, comes from the term *ez-zebb*, literally meaning "penis" and typically used as an interjection or an insult. The bold transgression of boundaries through the use of such an 'indecent, improper' word marks the group's opposition against the normativity of established hierarchies [↗**Inferiority = Superiority (Satire)**; ↗**Beautiful *vs.* Ugly**].

Due to lack of official recognition and absence from school curricula, both Tunisian *dērja* and Egyptian *ʿāmmiyya* are often placed in a marginal or at least ambivalent position. However, in Tunisia, the association DERJA this year asks for an authorization to start its activities to promote the recognition of *tūnsī* as official language through a process of standardization and normalization (*Derja*). Should we take this as an indication of an attitude that is more favourable to the 'people's language' in Tunisia than it is in Egypt?

Perhaps, but in Tunisia, the linguistic landscape is also more complex than in Egypt, due to the long Francophonic tradition and the presence in the country of a rather outspoken/articulate linguistic minority—the Amazigh. Their language (a Berber dialect), Tunisian, and Standard Arabic coexist side by side. They are used in different spheres, and each has a particular status, often marking its place in a hierarchy. The Amazigh language is one of the oldest languages in the country. Arabic is the language of the State, as stipulated in Article 1 of the Tunisian Constitution. French is taught in schools and represents the second language taught, followed by English. In daily interaction, *dērja* is used. Though not promoted officially, Tunisian is spreading as a written language. The Berber language is not better off than Tunisian, especially because of the limited number of Amazigh speakers—1% of the population according to official national statistics, 10% according to the Amazigh World Congress (Le Congrès Mondial Amazigh, *CMA*). In autumn, meetings take place in Geneva between members of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (*United Nations*), NGOs and Tunisian officials (the Tunisian delegation is represented by Mehdi Ben Gharbia, minister in charge of relations with constitutional bodies, civil society and human rights organizations) and two representatives of the Tunisian Amazigh.

As a reaction to the outcome of this meeting, an "alternative report" is presented by the Amazigh World Congress, entitled "Economic, Social and Cultural Exclusion of the Amazighs of Tunisia" (*CMA*), denouncing the precarious situation in which the Tunisian Amazighs are located from an economic, cultural, linguistic and human point of view. Echoing this report, the UN committee reacts by expressing its concern over the issue of cultural rights of the Amazigh and recommends to the State "to recognize the language and culture of the Amazigh indigenous people," to "take legislative and administrative measures to ensure the teaching of the Amazigh language at all levels," and to "repeal Decree No. 85 of 12 December 1962 and allow the registration of Amazigh first names in the registers of civil status" (*United Nations*).

Where cultural recognition of the Amazigh obviously is a slow process, it comes as a note of hope for some that this year also sees the release of a documentary film (accessible online) by Tunisian director Myriam Bou-Saha, entitled *Tunisia*: *The Art of Berber Tattoo*. It is broadcasted on the French-German channel *Arte* in September (YT, "Tunisie: l'art du tatouage berbère").

In Egypt, a similar tension between dominant Arabic and *maṣrī* and the language of a large minority—Nubian—is hardly observable. Nubian identity does not seem to be something that is felt in need of being underlined, promoted and fought for, neither linguistically nor culturally. The language is still widely spoken, and the Nubians, even when they have migrated from the Upper Egyptian South to Cairo, do stick to their cultural traditions. Evidently, however, their Nubian and Egyptian identities are complementary, not conflicting. Thus, there does not seem to be a movement promoting Nubian in Egypt that would be comparable to the movement promoting the case of the Amazigh language in Tunisia.

Neither Nubian nor the Amazigh language challenge the position Standard Arabic and *dērja* and *ʿāmmiyya* have in both countries. There is, however, in Tunisia, a serious competition between *French* and Arabic.

In November, Tunisia is chosen to host the Francophonie summit to be held in 2020 (BELLAMI). This distinction rehabilitates the country's status among the French-speaking nations. However, a month before this selection, Tunisian Minister of National Education Naji Jalloul announces his will to restore *English* in secondary education and to promote it *instead of* French—a move which is in line with the project "Connecting Classrooms" that intends to connect the United Kingdom with Tunisia by promoting English language skills. Considered as a tool for social promotion, English is presented in a second project, entitled "English for Employability" (DEVELEY).

These initiatives are not well received by the defenders of Francophonie [↗**Clash**] who highlight the long friendship and cultural alliance between France and Tunisia as well as the bilateral economic interests linking both countries. The Minister's declaration alarms several Francophone Tunisian intellectuals and opens the field of controversy around the position taken up by French in Tunisia. The defenders of Francophonie focus on the historical basis of the early establishment of French in the country [↗**Past *vs.* Present**], but also on the economic role of France as Tunisia's main economic partner. Other intellectuals express their fear of forgetting the French language which, according to them, is the only guarantor of modernity in Tunisia.

Protests notwithstanding, the Minister also encourages opening schools during the summer holidays and prioritizing Koran courses [↗**In Islam…**] in order to re-establish the teaching of Arabic. His proposal triggers strong reactions among the intellectual elite who consider this policy as a return to both Arabization and Islamization of the country. The Minister responds to these polemics by stating that

> there has been confusion on this subject: it is not learning the Koran but chanting the Koran. School has always held competitions of the kind. This was a false controversy: this activity is one of a hundred and it will be provided by teachers and not people outside the ministry. (*Babnet*, *Leaders*, al-ZARQĀṬĪ)

In the end, the Minister's plans did not materialize. But the issue of language learning remains a central element in the reform process announced by the Ministry of National Education. An alarming report concerning the language situation among young people incites those officials to rethink the learning of languages. The Minister announces his willingness to restore Arabic in order to emphasize "the rooting of the Arab-Muslim identity [at the student level], the nationalization of knowledge …" (*ibid.*)

Adding fuel to the discussion, journalist Fawzia Zouari writes an article in *Jeune Afrique* online, entitled "Francophonie or Daesh" (ZOUARI). The journalist defends Francophonie as a necessary weapon against obscurantism, and she links the absence of Francophonie in the South of the country (not supported by statistical or scientific facts) to the presence of terrorists in the region [↗**Center *vs.* Periphery**]. According to the author, Francophonie can save Tunisia from terrorist threats. With this attitude, Zouari's analysis mirrors the linguistic imagery of a part of Tunisian Francophone elites. For them, to be modern is synonymous with speaking French. They put aside the economic and social issues and the disparity of access to education. In December, Fawzia Zouari is declared winner of the Five Continents prize for Francophonie (*OIF*).

In contrast, the position of English in Egypt seems to be much less controversial than that of French in Tunisia. It is neither rejected as the language of the former colonizer nor promoted as a protector against the spread of religious fanatism, but rather accepted as an essential aspect of living in the world of today and therefore also as an indispensable part of one's educational portfolio [↗**High School Exams**]. What can be heard, however, are voices expressing their disapproval of the use of "Frānkō", i.e., Arabic written with Roman letters and numbers, also referred to as "Arabeasy" or "Arabīzi", which still occurs to some extent in social media and other written domains (BURAYK). In opinion articles and satirical memes, not a few Egyptians express their discontent with the practice which, according to some of them, "corrupts our identity" (ḤUSNĪ & BASHĪR; MIRJĀN; *al-Muwāṭin*; SĀMĪ). A more recent manner of mixing scripts occurs in names and logos, namely the use of both Arabic and Roman letters. Some examples are *كareem Bookstores*; *Diwaن Bookstore*; and the band name Wusṭ el-balad [↗**Pop Music**] which is often found written wuس t elب alad, including some diacritics, on for example concert posters.

Related Entries

ARRAYS – *?Alsh* ♦ Celebrities ♦ Clash ♦ Commemoration / Memorial Days ♦ Dual Identities / Masking ♦ Father Figures ♦ High School Exams ♦ In Islam… ♦ Mobile Phones ♦ Pop Music ♦ Psychiatrists ♦ Self-help ♦ Social Media

CODES – Affluence *vs.* Destitution ♦ Beautiful *vs.* Ugly ♦ Center *vs.* Periphery ♦ Past *vs.* Present

CODES COLLAPSED – Inferiority = Superiority (Satire)

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