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Research on Language in Libya

The languages of Libya figure only infrequently in scholarship which addresses languages of the MENA region in general, be it in the areas of dialectology, sociolinguistics, language contact, language policy, discourse analysis, or nearly anything else. Although recent research is now slowly beginning to change this status for the better, there are only a few scholars currently working on languages of Libya, and the possibilities and potential of such work are often left out of discussions of research on Libya more generally. I thus have several goals in this roundtable contribution: to survey existing scholarship on languages and linguistics in Libya, to situate the discipline regionally, to point to ways scholars can contribute despite the current situation of the country, and to discuss some institutional and research politics.

As a Libyan-American, I am one of a small number of active scholars with personal and family ties to Libya, and one of even fewer based in a Western institution, who work on linguistics of a Libyan language. In the last decade or so, it is only those of us with such ties who have been able to carry out fieldwork in the country. When I first began research on Libyan Arabic, and then also Amazigh, now over a decade ago, it quickly became clear to me how few linguists were actively working on Libya in general, and how little information about Libyan languages was available in the scholarly literature. I have tried to remedy this by collaboration and communication between currently active scholars, and by sharing with the public a comprehensive bibliography I have been compiling and updating regularly for a few years.[1] But much more needs to be done, including forging closer links among scholars and language activists, in publishing in accessible ways, and

1 Adam Benkato, "Bibliography of Libyan Languages", https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BgFoItQrQqqqkpROTNmBFY0vwIC42DG59QOt-j4xs-5E/.

in mentoring new generations of scholars.

The total of my bibliography of Libyan languages is just under 400 items. This may sound like a lot, but its scope is quite broad, including materials such as colonial notices about language, self-published language manuals, travelogues containing language observations (many of which would not be viewed as typical scholarly sources, or prove all that useful for research), besides a number of unpublished PhD and MA theses. Even then, the total is only a fraction of that for any other northern African or Arabic-speaking country. And in fact, the vast majority of reliable linguistic work has come in the last decade or so and is due almost entirely, with a few exceptions, to a small number of scholars (including Libyan graduate students) working at Western institutions.

This piece cannot be comprehensive—readers are referred to the online bibliography for additional references—and so will attempt to give a broad overview by language before briefly examining the history of the scholarship on Libyan languages.

To begin, working our way from least-studied to most, there is firstly Tebu, specifically the Tedaga variety, spoken in southern Libya and extending into Chad and Niger. There had been no scholarly studies on Libyan Tebu (Tedaga) anywhere, until the last years, in which a few works have appeared in Arabic in Libya, published by Tebu scholars and activists.[2]

Tuareg then, often considered socio-politically as a separate language variety, is part of the Berber language family and spoken throughout southwestern Libya. It is part of a vast language area, stretching from its easternmost regions in Libya all the way west to Mali. A Libyan variety of Tuareg had not been studied since the 1800s, until a recent PhD dissertation by a Libyan student.[3]

2 For example, Ḥasan Badī Muḥammad Kadīno, *al-Tabu: Tarīkh-hum wa-luġat-hum wa-thaqāfat-hum* (Ṭarābulus: al-Jamʿiyya al-Lībiyya li-l-Thaqāfa al-Tibāwiyya, 2021); id., *Taʿallum al-luġa al-tibāwiyya / Ka tudaga-ã sihik* (Ṭarābulus: al-Jamʿiyya al-Lībiyya li-l-Thaqāfa al-Tibāwiyya, 2021); id., *Lisān al-tabu: Muʿjam tibāwī-ʿarabī / Tirmesu Tudaa-ã: Mêde Tûgi tudagaa araŋgaa* (Ṭarābulus: al-Jamʿiyya al-Lībiyya li-l-Thaqāfa al-Tibāwiyya, 2021).

3 Salah Adam, *A Sociolinguistic Investigation of Language Shift Among Libyan Tuareg: The Case of Ghat and Barkat* (University of Essex PhD Thesis, 2017).

The other varieties of Berber in Libya are as follows: an endangered variety is spoken in Awjila, probably extinct ones in Sokna, and El-Fogaha, and flourishing though threatened ones in the Jabal Nafusa, Zwara, and Ghadames. For all these, too, most studies are quite old, with recent studies based almost entirely on old texts, excepting a few unpublished studies by Libyan graduate students and the work of Libyan scholar-activists.

Arabic, the majority language of Libya, has benefited from many studies, though these are restricted geographically, socially, and in methodology. They cover mostly just the Arabic of Tripoli and to a lesser extent of Benghazi, with studies here and there on other locations, including some work in diaspora. In comparison with the Arabic varieties of its neighbors, Libya as a whole remains thinly researched.

The history of research on Libyan languages differs slightly from that of its neighbors. As elsewhere, it really began in the colonial era. Almost exclusively Italian scholars or colonial officers wrote descriptions of Arabic or Berber, often oriented at the colonial military and administration, though also for general 'scientific' purposes. After Libyan independence, linguistic research by Italian scholars continued only in a few isolated cases, in contrast to neighboring French-occupied northern Africa where French scholars have worked continuously until now. Interestingly, it was mostly work on Libyan Berber, not Arabic, that continued in Italian institutions, though that is now beginning to change a little. In terms of students, in fact, the majority of those who have carried out graduate-level work on a Libyan language have been Libyan. Of the 50 PhD theses written on a language-related topic between 1972 and 2021, 48 have been by Libyans. The percentage is similar for MA theses.[4] But, in most cases, these students have returned to Libya to teach at local institutions, and did not continue to publish their work.

All of Libya's major languages, in their current as well as their historical versions, exist beyond the modern nation-state. The study of languages in Libya, similarly to that of its neighbors, thus has the potential to contribute significantly to regional knowledge. But unlike its neighbors, Libya's uniqueness in not having a major colonial lan-

4 See Adam Benkato, "Dissertations on Libyan Languages," https://silphiumgatherer.com/2020/06/01/dissertations-on-libyan-languages/.

guage in continuous use means that language policy and multilingualism have followed—and can continue to follow—a different trajectory. Libya provides a complementary case study for the region, though one that has hardly been attended to.

The current situation in Libya—war, displacement, political stagnation, under-development—means that the usual form of Western-based linguistic research in the country is largely not possible, and not *necessarily* a priority from a Libyan perspective. As mentioned, only local scholars have been exceptions to this. In some of our work, though, gunshots or even bombs can be heard in the background of 'linguistic' recordings, in which participants discuss being affected by war. In an unfortunate parallel, many conversations in 'linguistic' recordings made in the 1940s are similarly about war, military training, or foreign intervention.

But "access" is not the solution, besides being a Western framing. Colonial-era scholarship had unfettered "access", but colonial linguistic research is still beset with problems: coherent with colonial discourse, if not explicitly in favor of colonization,[5] racial science, not to mention neglect of various other scholarly norms. And indeed, even then, a number of linguistic works were produced totally outside of the speech communities they studied.[6]

The fact that so many areas have been neglected means that scholars have a unique chance to shape fields of inquiry. Instead of trying to fill the "gaps" that Western knowledge production systems have identified, why not intentionally create new research paradigms, ask research questions of local relevance and concern, and make use of existing sources in new ways? Good and varied questions can only truly come about through imaginative collaboration between scholars, but there are plenty of places to begin.

Even without being able to access Libyan speech communities and archives, scholars have a wide range of invaluable existing material with historical linguistic and sociolinguistic potential. For example: the Arabic journal of 19th-century Tripolitanian notable Ḥasan al-Fagīh

5 Such as a 1933 work on eastern Libyan Arabic which provides as a sample dialect text a long dialect *qaṣīda* in praise of Mussolini.

6 See Adam Benkato, "Non-site fieldwork on Libyan languages", https://silphiumgatherer.com/2020/06/13/nonsite-fieldwork-libya/.

Ḥasan has the potential to shed a great deal of light on the dialect of Tripoli in the early modern period.[7] Or, a private collection of family mercantile documents in Arabic from 19th-century Ghadames would illuminate language practices among a multilingual and transregional Amazigh community on the eve of colonialism.[8] Both have been edited by Libyan scholars and available for many years, but have been neglected by linguists. Attentive analysis of such texts will provide perspectives on the social and historical linguistic landscapes of early modern and pre-colonial Libya, in addition to providing needed diachronic historical context for contemporary studies. As well, studies based on text corpora published by previous generations of (Western) linguists can still be productive, and indeed some recent such work has been able to make obscure data from Libyan Amazigh varieties more coherent and accessible.[9]

Scholars can also work on existing archival material and seek out hitherto unidentified archives. The copious oral history publications and documentation of the Libyan Studies Center are a prime example.

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7 Ḥasan al-Fagīh Ḥasan, *al-Yawmiyyāt al-Lībīya*, 2 vols., ed. Muḥammad al-Usṭa and ʻAmmār Jaḥaydar (Tripoli: Markaz Jihād al-Lībīyīn l-il-Dirāsāt al-Tārīkhīyah, 2001). Part of the text has been translated into Italian with philological comments, see Gioia Chiauzzi, "La spedizione di Napoli contro Tripoli d'occidente secondo il cronista tripolino Ḥasan al-Faqīh Ḥasan: Traduzione e osservasioni linguistiche," *Studi Magrebini* 15 (1983), 75–153, 16 (1984), 91–178, 17 (1985), 57–96, 18 (1986), 69–90.

8 Bashīr Qāsim Yūshaʻ, *Ghadāmis: Wathāʼiq tijāriyya ijtimāʻiyya 1228-1310 hijrī* (Ṭarābulus: Markaz Jihād al-Lībiyīn li-l-dirāsāt al-tārikhiyya, 1982). A German translation is available for some of these documents, see Ulrich Haarmann, *Briefe aus der Wüste: Die private Korrespondenz der in Ġadāmis ansässigen Yūšaʻ-Familie*, ed. Stephan Conermann (Hamburg: EB-Verlag, 2008).

9 The recent grammars of the languages of Ghadames and Awjila are both based on materials gathered and published more than fifty years ago by European linguists working in Libya, see Maarten Kossmann, *A Grammatical Sketch of Ghadames Berber (Libya)* (Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe, 2013) and Marijn van Putten, *A Grammar of Awjila Berber (Libya): Based on Paradisi's Work* (Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe, 2014). Most recently see also Anna Maria Di Tolla & Valentina Schiattarella, "A Literary and Linguistic Analysis of Nafusi Berber Based on Past Works," *Quaderni di Studi Berberi e Libico-Berberi* 7 (2020), 273–292.

In my own work, I recently tracked down a forgotten archive of voice recordings on 78rpm vinyl records made by British linguist T. F. Mitchell in Libya in 1948. My work on that archive has multiple dimensions, from its potential as the earliest corpus of Libyan dialect recordings to the light it sheds on the colonial and military power structures that enabled *in situ* research. The archives of other linguists from that era may still exist, particularly in Italy. Reaching back even further, the papers of a British traveller in the Sahara in the 1850s proved to contain the earliest external records of the Amazigh variety of Sokna and of a Libyan Tuareg variety.[10] Even existing media sources, including social media—though not necessarily substitutes for on-site fieldwork in a speech community—may be fruitful given the right approach.[11]

For the framing and situating of future work, however, the critical reanalysis of earlier research, particularly that produced in the colonial era, is essential.[12] We should investigate and critique the contexts and goals of colonial scholarship, while comparing the administrative and scholarly structures which enabled it with our own such structures. How did linguistic work serve colonial power? How did it reify or reinscribe colonial representations of the colonized populations? How have these representations gone unquestioned until now? Understanding such matters will no doubt help scholars, particularly Libyan ones, in understanding emerging forms of ethnic, cultural, and

10 Lameen Souag, "Sokna re-examined: Two unedited Sokna Berber vocabularies from 1850," *Quaderni di Studi Berberi e Libico-Berberi* 4 (2015), 179–206. See also Souag and Benkato, this issue.

11 Marijn Van Putten & Lameen Souag, "Attrition and revival in Awjila Berber: Facebook posts as a new data source for an endangered language," *Corpus* 14 (2015), 23–58. A recent study of Jewish Libyan Arabic varieties is based on social and private media recorded by community members in diaspora, Luca D'Anna, "The Judeo-Arabic Dialect of Yefren (Libya): Phonological and Morphological Notes," *Journal of Jewish Languages* 9 (2021), 1–31.

12 On the impact of colonial knowledge on Arabic dialectology, see Adam Benkato, "From Medieval Tribes to Modern Dialects: On the Afterlives of Colonial Knowledge in Arabic Dialectology," *Philological Encounters* 4/1-2 (2019), 2–25. On the production of Italian colonial knowledge generally, see Nicco A. La Mattina, "Writing Ottoman and Italian Colonial Libya: Intelligence Gathering and the Production of Colonial Knowledge," *Hespéris-Tamuda* 55/2 (2020), 123–153.

regional identity in Libya and how they manifest in or with reference to language.

Finally, it must be admitted that all these concerns are, in some real sense, merely academic. To a certain extent, it is possible to work towards a more self-aware and nuanced scholarship even while having little to do with the actual speech communities we study. Hence, an important area where scholars can potentially make a productive contribution to Libyan society is in the area of language planning and policy.[13] While scholars should follow the lead of activists, particularly those from minority communities, they can bring much comparative research and experience to this area.

More generally, Western institutions usually hold a near-monopoly on knowledge production, including in the realm of language, as this contribution being written in English demonstrates. We must intentionally break down this paradigm and work to collaborate with Libyan scholars in all areas. This involves using our institutional resources to invite both independent and institutionally-based scholars and activists to public forums,[14] or directly collaborating with them in publications, as for example in the case of a recent grammar of a Libyan Amazigh variety, the first based on new materials to be published in 50 years.[15] But we must also invest in training Libyan students and in maintaining scholarly contact with them after they return to Libyan

13 For two recent pieces outlining language policy in Libya since independence, see Anna Baldinetti, "Languages in Libya: building blocks of national identity and soft power tools," *The Journal of North African Studies* 23/3 (2018), 418–439, and Ines Kohl, "Libya's 'Major Minorities': Berber, Tuareg and Tebu: Multiple Narratives of Citizenship, Language and Border Control," *Middle East Critique* 23/4 (2014), 423–438. For a perspective from neighboring Algeria pleading for the embracing of language diversity as a way of promoting social dialogue, see Mohamed Benrabah, "Language-in-Education Planning in Algeria: Historical Development and Current Issues," *Language Policy* 6 (2007), 225–252.

14 For example, the conference *Libya between History and Revolution: Resilience and New Narrations of Berber Identity* convened at the University of Naples in 2018.

15 Anna Maria Di Tolla & Mohamed Shennib, *Grammatica di berbero nefusi: Fonetica, Morfologia e cenni di sintassi, testi, esercizi, vocabolario* (Milan: Hoepli, 2020).

institutions, since the fact remains that for many topics, Libyan scholars are the ones best placed to do the work. Even though a majority of Libyan scholars who have completed PhDs in linguistics have not continued to publish their research, their unpublished theses are still existing scholarship which can be potentially useful. Some, such as valuable collection of Ghadamsi oral literature, had never even been looked at.[16]

In Libya itself, one work on the language of Ghadames and several on Tebu language and culture, both in Arabic and published in Libya, are the first works based on new research to appear on either language in many decades.[17] While these works are hard to access outside of Libya for the time being, those of us in Western institutions must go to the trouble of searching them out, reading, and citing them. More broadly, we must also go to the trouble of connecting and working with language activists, particularly Amazigh and Tebu, who may not have published research in Western academic sense, but whose contributions to their own speech communities is invaluable.

16 Abdurahman M. Yedder, *The Oral Literature Associated with the Traditional Wedding Ceremony at Ghadames* (School of Oriental and African Studies PhD Thesis, 1982).

17 On Ghadames: Abu Bakr Hārūn, *Al-sahl wa al-masīr fī taʿallum al-luġa al-amāzīġiyya bi-lahjat ġadāmis* (Tripoli: Dār al-Firjānī, no date). The recent works on Tebu are cited above.